

Lietapis Vosienskaj Savany

The Annals Of
Autumn Savannah

a new translation

Richard Jefferis

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the
Writer

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aka Richard The Writer.

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› Druhaja Kazka ‹

~ The Second Tale ~

Chapter One

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn Savannah and her eyelids gave the merest of flickers. An early fly buzzed around her head and settled on her ear. She didn't move, despite the tickle. A cool breeze stirred her hair and lifted the edge of her robe. Nearby the stream tinkled happily as it made its way between the grassy banks and meandered towards the trees behind her. A butterfly, slow and lazy in the dawn, settled on her knee, its wings spread to catch the thin rays of Astauand's light. The fly grew bored and moved on. Autumn registered its departure by the tiny fan of its wings as it went but still she did not move. A tendril of wood smoke from the fire, borne on the breeze, teased her senses.

Autumn became aware of Logan stirring. The change in his breathing as he came awake, the faint movement of his limbs in the grass as he stretched. Then came the soft swishing as he pulled away his blanket and his faint footsteps as he disappeared behind a tree to greet the morning. Still she did not open her eyes. These were all familiar sounds and smells and she assimilated then dismissed them. Two birds chattered in the tree overhead and there was a faint thud as one of them dropped something, perhaps a snail, then a flurry of wings as whatever it was was retrieved. Logan's footsteps came back then continued to the stream. A faint click from his knee as he squatted beside the water then some splashes as he washed.

Some distance away a deer buck grunted harshly to claim his territory and, faintly, there was the soft call of his doe as she answered. An ant, braver or more curious than its fellows, left the line making its way along the soil and came over to investigate Autumn's knee. Hesitantly it tested the air then, as a fellow ant broke ranks to follow its lead, the first ant lifted itself up to explore this strange new anomaly. Midway around her kneecap, Autumn became aware of the ant, yet still she did not move. Encouraged by the stillness of the knee, the ant explored further and its colleague followed. Logan's footsteps came back and there was a faint sound as he put their two remaining roots into the embers of the fire to warm for breakfast. A sudden sharp intake of breath as Logan burnt his finger, or perhaps a thumb, on an ember then a sigh, perhaps as he warmed his hands.

Aware but uninvolved, Autumn continued her meditations. Three ants now on her knee, she could feel their separate movements. Then the fly came back, or perhaps another, and settled on her wrist, intrigued by her pulse rhythmically throbbing, slow but strong. The butterfly lazily folded its wings then reopened them, straining for Astauand's energising warmth. The ray of sunshine filtering through the trees slowly made its way across Autumn's face. The three ants lost interest and, one by one, they dropped to the ground to rejoin their fellows. A leaf fell from the branch overhead and brushed Autumn's hair on its way to the ground. The butterfly decided time was awasting and gracefully ascended, following the ray of light in lazy circles.

Autumn sighed then took a slow deep breath. She lifted her cupped hands from her lap and slowly raised them high above her head then brought them down as she exhaled then opened her eyes. Logan was sitting beside the fire, a root in his hand. He looked over.

"Did I disturb you?" he asked.

"No," said Autumn. "Is it not a beautiful day?"

"Aye," said Logan, then bit into the warm root.

Autumn lifted her ankle off her knee and stretched her leg then did the same with the other.

"Your breakfast is warming," said Logan. "Do you want it now or later?"

"You do not sound happy," said Autumn, rising to her feet.

"I am right enough," said Logan. He took another bite and chewed it.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked, stretching.

"I was a little cold," Logan admitted.

"The summer is over," said Autumn, "and we are heading North. It will be getting colder. Mayhap we will need to find some warmer clothing and perhaps another blanket."

“We have not seen any villages or homesteads these three days past,” said Logan.

“And we have no money to buy these things,” said Autumn. “Still, do not worry. I venture we will come across a solution.”

She started to bend and twist to loosen her muscles.

“You did not meditate as long as usual,” said Logan.

“My thoughts were slow and did not lead anywhere,” said Autumn. “That is the way of it. Sometimes thoughts come unbidden and crowd each other and other times but a single thought comes along and stays by itself.”

She stepped over to the fire and squatted.

“Do you want this root?” she asked, delicately picking it out of the embers.

“I have eaten,” said Logan, holding up the purple skin of his root.

“Mayhap it was not enough,” said Autumn, holding out the root for him. “You are a man and still growing. You need more food than I.”

“Thank you,” said Logan, “but you do not eat enough. I have seen you divide our food unequally. You eat the root.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn unconcernedly.

She slowly peeled the skin away from the end of the root and took a small bite.

“I like this place,” she said, looking around. “It is pleasant on the eye and ear and we cannot blame it if it is not as warm as we would want.”

“Do you want to stay for a while?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn. “It is a nice place but it is not my place. My place

is elsewhere and besides, there is much of this land I have yet to experience. We move on. Unless you want to tarry for a time?"

"I go where you go," said Logan.

He tossed the skin of his root into the undergrowth.

"What were you thinking on this morning?" he asked.

"I was thinking on my Esyup," said Autumn. "How every morning was the same there."

"What happened there in the mornings?" asked Logan.

He reached over for a waterskin and drank deeply then offered it to Autumn. She took it but did not drink.

"We all slept in the same room," said Autumn. "The men and boys in one and the women and girls in another. When each of us woke we went into the Garden of Guidance and there meditated."

"Do you remember that time fondly?" asked Logan.

"Yes," said Autumn then a small frown creased her brow. "It was safe there, the routine predictable. At times Noxu would try to break the routine but that was routine in itself."

"How would he break the routine?" asked Logan. "I do not see much scope in that from what you say."

"Oh, he would throw something at me," said Autumn. "A stone or a staff, perhaps, while I meditated to see how mindful I was for my surroundings. Sometimes he would attack me or send someone else to attack me."

"That seems a little harsh," said Logan. "Did you ever get hurt?"

"Sometimes," said Autumn, "but such is the training. That is why my thoughts went nowhere today. Little has changed. Even though I am no longer at the Esyup, I get up and mediate and mayhap may be

attacked during that. My only real thought was that outside the Esyup is in many ways similar to inside but there was no thought that followed on from that.”

“I daresay that in this world your attacker may try to kill you,” said Logan. “A wild animal looking for food or someone taking exception to your presence. I am certain Noxu would never have actually killed you.”

“I cannot be sure of that,” said Autumn. She paused to drink. “He often said that if he held back it would be doing me a disservice but who knows? For certain he would have punished me harshly if he ever thought I did not give my utmost so I had to assume he would have killed me. Had I held back believing him to be holding back we would have both failed in our duty.”

“Do you miss those days?” asked Logan.

“I have fond memories,” said Autumn, “and not fond memories but that is all they are, memories. I have moved on and they likewise and the here and now is all that matters. I am in a place that sits well with me and with company likewise. I have no desire to return. Do you miss Biasdo?”

“Yes and no,” said Logan. “I miss the familiarity of it but 'tis much pleasanter being here with you. I do not know what tomorrow will bring but in Biasdo I did not know what the next day would bring either.”

Autumn smiled. “Then we are both content, and what more can we ask of life than contentment?”

“Another blanket, perhaps,” said Logan.

“We will find you another blanket,” said Autumn. “I know not how but opportunities will arise. We must be ready to seize them when that happens. I shall do my exercises then we shall move on. I do not know what lies ahead but we can be sure that something does.”

* * *

“Did you hear that?” asked Autumn, late that afternoon.

“It sounded like a thump,” said Logan, cocking his head. “I think it came from over there.”

“Mayhap there be someone in these woods after all,” said Autumn. “There it is again.”

They veered off to the left, in the general direction of the thumps.

“That sounds like an axe,” said Logan after a short distance. “Maybe there is someone cutting down a tree?”

“It sounds more that way,” said Autumn, pointing slightly to the right.

The sound got louder and more distinct.

“It must be a gigantic tree,” said Logan. “Surely it must have fallen by now?”

“We are almost there, I wager,” said Autumn. “That one sounded very close.” She paused. “That sounds like someone whistling.”

“The other side of these bushes,” said Logan, lowering his voice.

She pushed through the bush to find a clearing. There was a man on the far side of the clearing with his back to them. He was whistling and using an axe to cut a fallen tree lengthwise. Logan pushed through behind her. At the sound, the man stopped whistling and looked around.

“Greetings,” said Autumn. “I am Autumn Savannah and this be Logan. We be travellers.”

“Oh aye,” said the man, hefting his axe. “I be Tolasy and this be my companion.”

He looked at them suspiciously.

“What be this place?” asked Autumn as the silence grew.

“This be Bae'e'yahkia Wood,” said Tolasy. “Why are you here?”

“We be travellers,” said Autumn. “We are heading north and heard the sound of your axe. We have not seen anyone for some days.”

“Aye, well,” said Tolasy. “So you've seen me now, what of it?”

Autumn looked at Logan then back at Tolasy.

“We are interrupting you,” said Autumn. “We apologise. We shall move on and disturb you no further. Pray, in what direction lies the nearest village or town? We are in need of supplies.”

Tolasy stared at her, his axe firmly in his hands and a scowl on his face.

“Ahtolgo be that way,” he said, pointing with the shaft of the axe. “Be but a short distance.”

“I thank you,” said Autumn. “Let us leave Tolasy to his work, Logan.”

She led the way around the clearing, giving Tolasy a wide berth, then headed back into the woods where he had pointed.

“He did not seem pleased to see us,” said Logan as the sound of the axe started up again.

“Mayhap that is his nature,” said Autumn. “Not everyone delights in meeting strangers.”

“It seemed more than that to me,” said Logan. “Tolasy seemed worried by our presence. If he simply did not like strangers he would have put the axe down or held it in one hand. He seemed ready to defend himself.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “although a young lad and a maid should not frighten him. He does not know you are a run-away Roinad. 'Tis not wise to read too much into a stranger's actions when you know not the man or the circumstances. Mayhap it just be the custom in these parts.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “Or mayhap there be some trouble in these parts and he thinks we are part of it.”

“’Tis possible,” said Autumn, “and mayhap he was cutting a tree that he should not be. We do not know.”

“We can speculate all day,” said Logan. “I wonder how far this Ahtolgo be? Mayhap we should be looking for food and somewhere for the night rather than venture on to a place that may dislike us more.”

“He did say it was but a short distance,” said Autumn, “although you may be right. If Ahtolgo be unfriendly it would be better to arrive in the morning with the day ahead rather than soon with the night ahead. Any dangers as may be there are best seen in the light. Let us find a place a little further on.”

“What about here?” said Logan a little while later. “There is no water but there is some ehc over there and I fancy there are some berries over yonder.”

“It is as good a place as any,” said Autumn, sliding her pack off and putting it on the ground. “You make a fire and I shall get the food.”

Logan busied himself making a fire and Autumn returned shortly with several ehc hearts and a bowlful of berries. She watched as Logan built the fire up.

“’Tis a shame we have no garlic,” he said, putting the ehc hearts on a flat stone he’d put in the centre of the fire.

“Appreciate what we have,” said Autumn. “That is the way of happiness. Missing what we do not have is the way of sadness.”

“I knew you were going to say something like that,” said Logan sitting back. “All I was saying was that it would be nice to have some garlic. I wasn’t complaining or not appreciating the ehc. I am happy we have something to eat. I was just saying I would be happier with a bit more flavour.”

“I apologise if you took it as a criticism, Logan,” said Autumn.

“But as always you are right,” said Logan. “The lack of garlic makes me sad even though I am happy we have the ehc. I need to think the right way about these things. How do I do that?”

“By concentrating on the benefits,” said Autumn, “and squashing any gloomy thoughts you may have as soon as they enter your mind.”

“But is there not a disadvantage to that?” said Logan.

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“If I squash any thoughts of garlic because we don't have any,” said Logan, “it will stop me looking for garlic which means we'll never have any unless it happens to be just where we are.”

“It is a fine line,” said Autumn. “But I did not say to not think of garlic, merely to block any bad thoughts about not having garlic. By all means think about garlic and look for some but block any sadness as soon as you feel it if you do not find any. Garlic of itself is not a bad thought but sadness is.”

“I think I see what you mean,” said Logan. “You're saying to look for garlic but if I do not find any then to be glad we have ehc instead.”

“Exactly,” said Autumn. “So are you going to look for garlic?”

“No,” said Logan. “I am happy we have the ehc.”

“Ahh, 'tis a shame,” said Autumn, pulling a bulb of garlic from the bowl of berries. “I found this and I know not what to do with it now. Perhaps I should put it back in the ground.”

“Don't you dare,” cried Logan, lurching forward to grab the garlic before Autumn could do anything with it.

He sniffed the garlic appreciatively then peeled it with his teeth and broke up the cloves. “They'll roast nicely,” he said, adding them to the stone in the fire.

“Does it make you happy?” asked Autumn.

“The ehc makes me happy,” said Logan, “and so does the garlic, but your cruel streak does not.”

“I did not know I had a cruel streak,” said Autumn in surprise. “Please explain.”

“You talked to me about being happy with what we have,” said Logan, “but did not tell me we have garlic. That was cruel.”

“For that I apologise,” said Autumn. “My intent was not to be cruel. I had hoped to surprise and please you but I failed.”

“I am teasing you,” said Logan. “I am surprised and very pleased about the garlic but the fault lies with me. I forgot you do not understand jokes.”

“That was a joke, then?” asked Autumn. “Explain to me why saying I am cruel is funny.”

“It is funny because you are not cruel,” said Logan. “A lot of humour comes from saying the opposite of what is true.”

“So there is humour in a false accusation?” asked Autumn.

“In the right circumstances,” said Logan. “Obviously when we were brought before the Roinad on false charges of treason that was not funny because the situation was dangerous but if I accidentally walk into a tree and you say that it was because I am too fat to get around it it would be funny because it is not true.”

“I would not say such a thing,” said Autumn. “You are not fat, and to say so would be a falsehood.”

“I am explaining this badly,” said Logan, “but I have just realised why you do not understand jokes.”

“And why is that?” asked Autumn.

“Because you cannot lie,” said Logan. “To be able to understand a joke you have to be able to see a lie and appreciate it for what it is,

rather than just as a lie. The humour comes from something being obviously not true.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn. “Are you saying there are different kinds of lies?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “There is the kind of lie people say so that they can gain from it, like at a market when someone says the food is fresh when it is not so that they can ask for more money, but there is another kind of lie which people use to make a joke. When something is clearly not true but they say it to be funny.”

Autumn stared at Logan in bemusement.

“You are the least cruel person I have ever met,” he said hurriedly. “That is why me saying you were cruel is funny.”

Autumn frowned.

“I do not think I am explaining this well,” said Logan, pursing his lips.

“No,” said Autumn. “You are not. I do not think it is funny that someone thinks I am cruel, least of all you, Logan. I would never harm you.”

“Now that I think about it, it was not funny,” said Logan. “I should not have said that you were cruel. It was wrong of me.”

“Language is a difficult tool to express ideas at the best of times,” said Autumn, “and you are right, I do not understand humour. Let us put that aside and concentrate on the central issue.”

“By all means,” said Logan. “What is that?”

“Am I cruel?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Logan. “Not in the least little bit.”

“I am glad to hear it,” said Tolasy, stepping out of the shadows.

Autumn leapt to her feet and grabbed her staff in one smooth movement and Tolasy raised his axe defensively.

“Why do you come upon us silently?” demanded Autumn.

“I must apologise for that,” said Tolasy. “I was returning to the village and saw your fire and heard your voices so I listened to find out who you are.”

Autumn slowly straightened up.

“And who are we?” she asked.

“If you spend your time arguing about humour,” said Tolasy, “then you are not who I thought you were, although I am worried about your cruelty.”

Chapter Two

The wood seemed to go very quiet. The usual rustling of leaves in the breeze, the twilight birdsong all seemed to fade away. Even the crackling of the fire hushed.

“Who did you think we were?” asked Autumn after a long pause. She did not put down her staff.

Tolasy looked at Logan then back at Autumn.

“In the employ of Foaumo,” he said shortly.

He scratched under his beard and rested the head of his axe on the ground.

“We be in the employ of no one,” said Logan. “We be travellers, just passing through.”

“Aye, reckon that be so,” said Tolasy. “Even Foaumo would give you better provisions than those ehc, tight fisted bastard that he is, and you would not be spending the night in the open.”

He spat on the ground to show his contempt for the man.

“Who be this Foaumo?” asked Autumn.

“He be a farmer nearby,” said Tolasy. “Sees himself as a Squire of sorts, no doubt. He owns over half the farmland round here and part of this wood. If you tarry here long you’ll be making his acquaintance, I be certain.”

“We are moving on tomorrow,” said Autumn. “Although we will be going into Ahtolgo for supplies. We have no bread nor cheese or even flour for the making.”

“Be that so?” said Tolasy. “If you happen upon my place, bid hello to Ymma. She be my almost era’owen and will find some bread to spare, or flour if not. Mayhap even a bit of cheese although we’ve not been making any since the cow were killed. Our dwelling be on the edge of

the wood.”

“That is most kind,” said Autumn, “although we would not wish to take from you if your circumstances are not the best.”

“None shall say we be lacking in hospitality,” said Tolasy, hefting his axe again. “You be strangers and not my enemies so you’ll not find us lacking. I shall bid you farewell for the night and if we should meet again I will welcome the opportunity to expand our friendship for I am sorely lacking in that respect.”

He gave a short derisive laugh and, with a nod of his head, disappeared into the deepening darkness of the woods. Autumn stayed standing, watching where he had been.

“Well now,” she said, laying down her staff and sitting beside it. “That were a right unusual conversation.”

“How so?” asked Logan. He picked up one of the ehc from the stone in the fire and squeezed it. “They seem about done. Here,” and he tossed it to Autumn. He selected one for himself.

“Once he realised we were not in the employ of this Foaumo he seemed friendly enough,” he said.

“He has enemies,” said Autumn, looking into the fire and not eating her ehc. “And few if any friends.”

“Maybe that be his nature,” said Logan. “Some people be not wanting friends and have a skill of making enemies.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, “but such people do not talk of it, I warrant, if they are happy with it. He did not seem overly happy about it.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, finishing his ehc and taking another.

Autumn slowly bit into hers. “Did you note his cow?” she asked. “It were killed.”

“Farmers always complain when their animals die,” said Logan. “Just

as they complain about the weather or insects.”

“I do not have your acquaintance with farmers,” said Autumn, “so mayhap you have the right of it.”

“Do you want another?” asked Logan. Autumn nodded and he plucked an ehc from the fire and tossed it to her. “Some garlic?” That went the same way.

“I know not why farmers call on Aloidia endlessly,” he continued. “As deities go, Aloidia seems to let them down more than most or so they’ll have you believe. You would think the deity of farmers was Sploop not Aloidia. Dealing with misfortune seems to be a large part of the art of farming.”

“I take your word on that, Logan,” said Autumn. “As I do in matters of cooking. This garlic makes the ehc much tastier. But why did he say ‘killed’?”

“Most like the cow died of something,” said Logan. “As you keep reminding me death is part of the cycle of life.”

“And so it is,” said Autumn, “but ‘tis his choice of words I be thinking on, not the beast itself. ‘Killed’ has different meanings to ‘died’.”

“True,” said Logan, taking a third ehc, “but there be no call to be thinking deeply on his meaning. He be but a passing stranger and we know not his skill with words. Mayhap he just uses ‘killed’ for everything that has died. You think too much.”

“It is not possible to think too much,” said Autumn, reaching over to take another ehc for herself.

“You contradict yourself,” said Logan. “Have you not oft times told me that when fighting you need to react without thinking?”

Autumn threw her half eaten ehc at Logan and it bounced off his cheek and fell in his lap. He grinned and ate it.

“Not being a Krisana,” he said, “I cannot match you in debate but it

seems to me that there are times when you simply have to accept something and not think too deeply on it.”

“You are right again,” said Autumn. “And in the spirit of this new found knowledge I shall simply accept this bowl of berries by my side and not think about sharing them.”

She picked up the bowl and started to eat the berries.

“That is the right of it,” said Logan, reaching over and grabbing a handful of the berries. “And best you accept that some have disappeared and not dwell over long on their absence.”

“As you say, Logan Philosopher,” said Autumn. “But please do not eat the bowl as well.”

* * *

“That be Ahtolgo, I venture,” said Autumn as they emerged from the woods the following morning.

A small, drab looking village of mud huts lay ahead.

“It does not look the sort of place to have a market,” remarked Logan.

“We cannot be certain,” said Autumn. “I wager that dwelling over there be Tolasy's. It be the only structure on the edge of the wood.”

“I would hope not,” said Logan. “The cowshed in Biasdo where I lived was bigger and better made.”

“You do it an injustice,” said Autumn. “Mayhap your cowshed grows fond in your memory in your absence. Small it may be but this place would appear well looked after and no doubt is sufficient for their needs. The field around it looks amiss however. I am no farmer but I thought enmern be harvested not burnt in the field unless Tolasy be baking the bread directly on the stalk.”

“Tis not a good sign to see burnt fields until after the harvest,” said Logan. “This enmern be burnt with the heads still on.”

“Why do they burn the stalks?” asked Autumn as they walked through the gap in the low fence and along the narrow track through the emern.

“I know not the reason,” said Logan, “but some farmers burn the stalks every few summers. Mayhap it rids the fields of persistent weeds.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn, tapping on the door with the end of her staff.

“It be not nightfall yet,” screamed a woman's voice from inside. “Leave us alone!”

Autumn and Logan looked at each other in puzzlement. Again Autumn tapped on the door. This time it flew open and an angry, upset woman glowered at them.

“Oh,” she said looking from one to another. “You be the strangers Tolasy talked of. I forgot you might be coming here.”

“I be Autumn and this be Logan,” said Autumn. “You are Ymma?”

“Yes,” said Ymma tiredly. She brushed some hair out of her eyes. “You'd better come in, I suppose.”

She turned and the size of her belly became very apparent.

“You are with child?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Ymma, putting a hand to her belly. “You think I always look like this?”

“My apologies,” said Autumn. “I did not mean to be rude, I was just curious. My knowledge of these things is limited and I sought only clarification.”

“Sought only clarification,” muttered Ymma. “You do talk strange. Where are you from where they do not have pregnant women?”

"I am from an Esyup, far to the East," said Autumn. "Pregnancies there were rare and there were none in my time. My ignorance in these matters is great. Umm, when is the babe due?"

"Well, come in anyway," said Ymma. "Tolasy is away at the moment. I am mid way through the fifth quintile so mayhap the babe will be here any day soon."

Inside was a single room with a hearth on one side, a low bed on the other and little in between save a small table and two stools and a number of cloth wrapped bundles.

"I have some left over porridge if you would like it," said Ymma, hovering beside the hearth.

"Thank you, no," said Autumn. "You seem to have little to spare, we will trespass on your hospitality no more."

"As you wish," said Ymma. She moved away from the hearth and sat heavily on a stool. "Tolasy said you wanted to buy bread and cheese. I have no cheese to spare but I can sell you some bread."

"Alas we have no money," said Autumn.

"Then how do you expect to buy bread?" asked Ymma. "'Twould seem a foolish prospect."

Autumn smiled. "Indeed," she said. "But oft times we are given bread and mayhap if there be some assistance we can give you then you may gave us bread in return."

Ymma sat there looking at them. The wood smoke lingering in the air.

"Sit," she said after a while. "Bide a time. 'Twould be a help to me for you to finish packing our belongings and load the cart."

"Willingly," said Autumn sitting on the other stool. Logan looked around then sat on the bed. "Where is your cart? We did not see one outside."

“Tolasy has it,” she said. “He will return shortly and then we shall leave this place.”

She looked around sadly.

“We shall be glad to assist,” said Autumn. “Are you going far?”

“Nay,” said Ymma. “Tolasy has been building us a hut in the woods. It is not finished yet but he can do that after we have moved.”

“Ah, we met him in a clearing yesterday,” said Logan. “Is that where you are moving?”

“Yes,” said Ymma, “although Liddoden alone knows how we shall survive without any land to farm. Tolasy says he can hunt but what is there to hunt in Winter and Winter is nearly upon us?”

Autumn looked at Logan and quietly nodded.

“There is something amiss,” she said gently to Ymma. “Tolasy and you both have said things that only make sense if there is much trouble in your lives.”

Ymma stiffened and looked at her suspiciously.

“Why be strangers interested in our business?” she asked harshly.

Autumn glanced at Logan again then back at Ymma.

“Mayhap because you have no friends who will help you,” she said softly.

Ymma stared at her then grimaced and put her hand to her belly.

“I be right glad when this be over,” she said. “When first I knew I were right glad of a babe but it drags on too long.”

“Be this your first?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” she said. “And last if I have anything to do with it.”

"I remember women in my village," said Logan. "They used to say that later pregnancies were easier than the first."

"That is good to know," said Ymma. "Knowing my Tolasy I expect there will be more."

She paused and shifted on her stool as though her back ached.

"You may as well know the truth of it," she said. "We be being forced off our land and we ain't no place else to go 'cept hide in the woods like outlaws."

"Who be forcing you off?" asked Logan in surprise. "Foaumo?"

"And how do strangers know that name?" demanded Ymma sharply. "Tell the truth mind."

"Tolasy spoke ill of him yesterday," said Autumn. "He did not give details save that Foaumo be a tight fisted bastard."

"He be that all right," said Ymma, "and more."

She got up and went to a bucket beside the hearth and drank a ladle of water. She proffered the ladle to Autumn and Logan but both declined and she went back to her stool.

"Tolasy owns half or more of the land around Ahtolgo," she said. "Fancies himself a Squire these days. Still, he wants our little piece of land and now he going to get it."

"Did he kill your cow?" asked Autumn.

"You know too much to be strangers here," growled Ymma. "Explain yourself or get out."

"Tolasy said yesterday your cow had been killed," said Autumn. "It seemed a strange thing to say at the time but you tell us that you are being forced off your land so I venture the killing of your cow is part of that."

“That Tolasy has a big mouth all right,” said Ymma, “but your thinking be right. Someone did kill the cow although we can't rightly prove it was Foaumo to the Sheriff. Same as our crop which was burned two days past. Can't prove it was Foaumo but it serves his interest whoever did it. A sennight past Foaumo told us to be gone by tonight else we'd find ourselves reunited with our cow. Tolasy wanted to fight him but he could not. If he were still a single man he would but I am weighing him down.”

“Is there none around who will help you?” asked Logan.

“Nay, lad,” said Ymma disgustedly. “Them as ain't in hock with Foaumo already be either browbeaten by his bully boys or be in league with him. Them as stands against him stands alone.”

“But you still have your horse, that is some advantage, is it not?” said Autumn.

“We ain't never had no horse,” said Ymma frowning. “You think if we be rich enough to have a horse we be living in a hovel like this?”

“I'm sorry,” said Autumn. “You said Tolasy was away with the cart so I ...”

“It be a hand cart,” said Ymma. “That be all. Tolasy took a load of our things to the woods in the hand cart. He be back soon to take the rest.”

“Then we shall help you,” said Autumn standing up. “What remains to go?”

“Everything that is moveable,” said Ymma tiredly.

“Come, Logan,” said Autumn, “let us stack everything outside ready for Tolasy for his return. Whatever will not fit in the cart we shall carry.”

“What about the chickens?” asked Logan. “I saw some chickens outside.”

“Them too,” said Ymma. “It would be a kindness, thank you.”

They carried the few remaining bundles, the table, bed and stools out.

“Here be Tolasy now,” said Ymma, “just coming out of the wood yonder.”

She waved and Tolasy waved back.

“Shall I catch the chickens or will you?” asked Logan.

“You,” said Autumn. “Best I explain what we are doing to Tolasy else he gets the wrong idea. There be a lot of tension and mistrust here, I fancy.”

She waited with Ymma, watching while Logan started to chase the chickens which squawked and ran in all directions, their wings flapping. Ymma laughed.

“Be good practice for your agility,” called Autumn as Logan jumped all over the place in hot pursuit.

Ymma watched for a few moments.

“He be a right bundle of energy,” she said to Autumn then called over to Logan. “Nay lad, there be a skill to it. Come.”

Logan came over, red faced from exertion, while Ymma took a stick propped against the mud wall.

“Get a handful of grain,” she said getting a handful from a sack, “and scatter it for the chickens and let them come to eat then while they're eating, catch a leg with the stick so you can pick the chicken up. Like this, see.”

She deftly snagged a chicken round its ankle and pulled it up into her arms. The chicken squawked then lay still on her arm.

“That be right impressive,” said Logan admiringly.

“We’ll make a farmer of you yet,” said Autumn.

“What be Logan doing with my chickens?” asked Tolasy, leaving the cart beside the meagre collection of belongings beside the door and joining them.

“He be learning the skill of farming,” said Autumn as Logan snagged a chicken and proudly held it aloft.

“Much good it will do him,” said Tolasy. “So you found us, then?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “And we will help you move the remainder of your belongings to your new dwelling.”

“That be right kind of you,” said Tolasy, looking at Ymma. “Can’t say as how there be a lot of help in these parts.”

He put an arm around Ymma and gave her a hug.

“We’ll give them some bread,” said Ymma.

“Aye and mayhap a chicken,” said Tolasy. “Logan seems right attached to that one.”

Logan was still holding the chicken he’d caught and was feeding it some pieces of grain.

“Reckon we can get the last of it in the cart,” said Tolasy. “Then if you three carry two chickens each we can come back for the other four later.”

* * *

The clearing was empty when they got back to it, save a layer of wood chippings where Tolasy had been splitting the tree.

“Where be the dwelling you are building?” asked Logan, a chicken under each arm.

“Through the trees,” said Tolasy, “so it be out of sight from the path.”

He led them through a gap in the undergrowth to a small structure made from upright split trunks with no roof.

"It be not finished," he said apologetically. "I had hoped to have a roof on but I ran out of time."

"We shall help you in this as well," said Autumn. "Logan be good at weaving branches and making roofs."

"Twould be best with reeds," said Logan. "Use branches to fashion a roof then lay reeds on top to keep out the rain. Be there any reeds in these parts?"

"There be a goodly supply on the other side of the village," said Tolasy. "I can do that in the next few days on my own but it will be a kindness if you help with the branches. 'Tis easier with more than one person."

"Where shall we put the chickens?" asked Autumn.

"On the ground," said Ymma. "They will not stray once they know where there is food."

She put her two chickens down and scattered some grain from the sack on the cart. Autumn and Logan put theirs down as well and they ran over to peck the grain.

"This be a grim place," whispered Logan to Autumn. "One storm and this dwelling will collapse, I wager."

"I know," whispered Autumn back, "and how they will survive the winter, I know not. But let us fashion them a roof and see what the rest of the day brings."

It took much of the day to weave branches into a shape large enough to rest on the walls and all four of them to lift it into place and lash it down.

"We shall go back and fetch the other chickens," said Autumn when it was done.

"I'll come with you," said Tolasy. "Foaumo may be there and 'twould be best if you were not alone if he is."

"No," said Autumn. "I am desirous of speaking with this Foaumo. Mayhap I will be able to persuade him to a different path in life."

"Or mayhap you be planning to join with him and farm our land," said Ymma, resignedly. "Mayhap that be why you helped us so you could take the land sooner."

Autumn reached over and put her hand on Ymma's arm.

"There is much mistrust and suspicion here," she said gently, "but you cannot go through life trusting no one. Come with us if you desire but stay in the trees and watch and do not go to your farm. Things may happen and with your time near it is best you stay safe."

Ymma looked over at Tolasy and he came to stand with her.

"Seems to me," he said, putting his arm around her, "that we ain't got nothing more to lose. Let Autumn and Logan talk with Foaumo. I know not what may come of it but we may as well give them our trust. They have done nothing to deserve otherwise."

Chapter Three

“What are you planning?” asked Logan as they walked back to Tolasy and Ymma’s little farm.

“I have no plans,” said Autumn, “beyond perhaps talking with Foaumo. Mayhap he has a different perspective on the situation.”

“But how can he be in the right if he forces others off their lands and makes it difficult for them to survive?” asked Logan puzzled.

“I agree it does seem wrong on the face of it, Logan,” said Autumn, “but who knows what suffering Foaumo and his family may go through if they do not follow this course of action. Mayhap Tolasy’s family will suffer the less. As yet we only know Tolasy’s version of things.”

“I suppose so,” said Logan reluctantly. “It does seem harsh though.”

“Life can be harsh,” said Autumn. “It has been said that to live is to suffer and death is the only solution but as we know there can be much suffering after death as well.”

“What if Foaumo does not come?” asked Logan.

“Then he does not come,” said Autumn. “If the fates contrive it so then we shall meet and if they say otherwise we shall not. Neither I nor you have control over such things. If Foaumo comes we shall talk and if he does not then you and I will take the chickens to Tolasy and continue our travels.”

“We could try to find Foaumo in the village,” said Logan.

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and if that is how the fates want it that shall be the case. Come, you worry yourself too much. Accept that life has many twists and turns and accept them and make the best of them.”

“Did you not say only last night that thinking is good?” asked Logan. “That we should not just blindly act without thought?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “And you countered me well. There are times

when thought is best and times when action is best.”

“How do you know which path to follow?” asked Logan. “What if we think when we should be acting or act when we should be thinking?”

“Another fine question, Logan,” said Autumn. “I do not have a precise answer. All I can suggest is that the circumstances oft times dictate the reaction. Mayhap if Foaumo arrives we will need to think to help him see an alternative path but mayhap the circumstances will be in need of actions. I have not the gift of prophecy. We are at the edge of the wood and not far from the farm. Astauand be low in the sky so I fancy we will not be long in finding how this business goes.”

“And yet you made Ymma stay a safe distance,” said Logan. “Is that not an act of prophecy?”

“I do not say she will need to stay at a safe distance,” said Autumn turning onto the track through the burnt enmern. “I merely suggested it in case things become unpleasant. That is not prophecy.”

“But you expect things to get nasty?” asked Logan.

“I expect Astauand to sink out of sight and Plakill and Plifal to show their faces,” said Autumn. “Beyond that I have no expectations. The chickens may have disappeared, Ymma may have no bread for us, a soska may appear in the night and carry us off to meet Yammoe again. I know not.

“But you expect trouble with Foaumo more than you expect a soska,” said Logan.

“You are wise beyond your years,” said Autumn reaching the hut and peering inside. “Ahh, there are the chickens. Good.”

“You do not answer me,” said Logan.

“You already know the answer,” said Autumn. “We might have a greater expectation of a particular thing happening than of another but either, both or neither may happen. An expectation of a happening is not the same as the happening.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, “but you know the meaning of my question and you choose to play word games with me. You expect trouble with Foaumo, do you not?”

“Let us hope that it does not come to that,” said Autumn, “regardless of what you may think of my expectations.”

“You can be very frustrating sometimes, Autumn,” said Logan, throwing himself to the ground to sit with his back to the mud wall.

“Aye,” said Autumn, retrieving her staff from inside the hut and sitting down beside him. “Noxu used to say that as well.”

“So why did you get your staff?” asked Logan.

“I venture whoever occupies this dwelling after this night shall not want it,” said Autumn.

“Pah,” said Logan, sitting up straight. “You’re expecting a fight, aren’t you.”

* * *

Astauand’s orb was touching the distant horizon when a figure appeared at the end of the track through the field. Logan nudged Autumn and pointed.

“I see him,” said Autumn.

“I am surprised he is alone,” said Logan.

“He is not alone,” said Autumn. “I can hear others in the field behind us. There is a crackling of the burnt enmern that has no obvious explanation.”

“How many?” asked Logan, restraining the urge to jump up and look behind the hut.

“I know not,” said Autumn. “More than one I venture but less than an army.”

“I wish I still had my knife,” said Logan. “I feel helpless without it.”

“Give it no thought,” said Autumn, watching the figure coming closer. “You are not a fighter so it would be of little use if we are attacked.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, “but I would feel better if I did.”

“I’d venture three,” said Autumn. “One approaching from each side. The sounds have become more distinct.”

She got up and Logan got up as well. The man paused when he saw them then smiled and waved.

“He seems friendly enough,” said Autumn and waved back.

“Greetings,” said the man when he came closer. “You are not Tolasy and Ymma. Who are you?”

The man was entirely ordinary in appearance and his voice and manner were in keeping but he wore his loneliness like a shield.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, “and my companion Logan. We welcome you here in peace. What be your name?”

“Ahh, peace,” said the man, smiling broadly, his eyes untouched. “A wonderful thing, is it not? My name is Foaumo, a neighbour of Tolasy. Might I enquire your business here? Where are you from?”

“I am from a place of fairness and justice,” said Autumn, “and my business is the same.”

“A wonderful place,” said Foaumo. “I journey there myself oft times.”

“And are you on that journey now?” asked Autumn.

“Indeed,” said Foaumo. “Be Tolasy or Ymma here?”

“Nay, they be elsewhere,” said Autumn. “Pray tell me, Foaumo. For whom do you journey to this place of fairness and justice?”

“I like to think for everyone,” said Foaumo surveying the field around the hut, “but if that is not possible then for myself at least. Might I ask, if I am not being too bold, if yonder dwelling be empty or be there still the belongings of Tolasy and Ymma inside?”

“There be but four chickens,” said Autumn, picking up her staff, “and my pack besides.”

“Ahh, your pack,” said Foaumo, nodding. He turned to look at Astauand then back at Autumn.

“So am I to understand that your pack is by way of a claim to possession?” he asked.

“Logan and I are travellers,” said Autumn, her attention on Foaumo although her hearing was focused behind her. “We head to the North and do not desire to dally here longer than we need.”

“Indeed?” asked Foaumo. “There is much of interest to the North, or so I am told for I am not a well travelled man. Let me not delay you here a moment longer than necessary.”

“You are most thoughtful,” said Autumn, hearing someone approach the corner of the hut to her right. “Might I enquire your business here?”

“This is a vacant dwelling,” said Foaumo. “I am here to claim possession. A minor local matter that need not concern those passing through although you are welcome to pass the night here if you seek my permission.”

“We have no desire to tarry here,” said Autumn. “My companion and I both like Plakill and Plifal watching over us as we sleep. Pray tell me, friend Foaumo, where you slept these nights past if you have such need of this place?”

She heard someone reach the left corner of the hut and a third person join the one to the right and sensed Logan step backwards to be closer to the mud wall.

“Oh I have another dwelling,” said Foaumo. “The other side of Ahtolgo. Perhaps you would do me the honour of dining with me there? I am a great believer in giving hospitality to travellers where I can.”

His slight emphasis on 'travellers' was unmistakable.

“You are most kind,” said Autumn, adjusting her stance slightly and shifting the staff to her right hand. “Am I to understand that you do not offer hospitality to those who do not travel?”

“I do not follow your meaning,” said Foaumo, his smile fading.

“Then allow me to clarify,” said Autumn, “so that you may correct me if I am in error. Is it not so that Tolasy and Ymma did live here?”

“They did,” said Foaumo, “but they are gone. What of it?”

“And is it not so that you have a dwelling and much land besides?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Foaumo, “and this one too if you'll step aside. I ask again, what of it?”

“So am I right in thinking that you are not in great need of a place to live and land to sustain you and yours?” asked Autumn.

“I grow weary of this futile debate,” said Foaumo. “This place be unoccupied and I have as much right to claim it as any other.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, “but I hear that a cow did die here recently and the crop was burned.”

“Sploop has certainly visited this place,” said Foaumo, “and I venture Sploop may well pay you and your companion a visit if you tarry here much longer.”

“It does not bother you that Sploop is familiar with this place?” asked Autumn. “Mayhap it was the hand of a mortal behind those occurrences than Sploop Itself.”

“Are you laying those charges at my feet?” said Foaumo, his friendly demeanour disappearing rapidly.

“No,” said Autumn, “although I have heard it said that you did tell Tolasy and Ymma to be gone from this place by this evening and, no doubt by sheer chance, you come this same evening to lay claim to a vacant dwelling.”

“You attach a significance to this that is not there,” said Foaumo. “I merely suggested to Tolasy and his maid that their fortunes may change for the better if they left this place. It was said in the spirit of neighbourliness.”

“Ahh, that same hospitality that you offer us as travellers,” said Autumn. “I understand now. So you would be willing to extend your hospitality to Tolasy and Ymma as new travellers? They have been forced to leave their home and face great hardships in the winter to come. A hospitable neighbour would no doubt be happy for a vacant dwelling to be made available to them.”

“I would,” said Foaumo, “but alas I have other plans for this place. The soil of this farm is good and will grow many crops.”

“But their need is great,” said Autumn, hearing one of the people at the right corner of the hut move quietly around to the left corner. She transferred her staff to her left hand.

“Mayhap,” said Foaumo, “but they are people of no consequence. Mere peasants. No doubt they will scabble a subsistence as befits their station. 'Tis no concern of mine how they fare.”

“So you do not agree that it is best for all if neighbours respect each others rights and attend their welfare in times of need?” asked Autumn.

“Every man has to take responsibility for himself,” said Foaumo. “It is not for me to support every shiftless wastrel in the neighbourhood.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “Yes, I can follow your argument. Now, I freely confess that I have no skills as a farmer but you say this soil is good

and it would seem that there was a goodly crop before it got burnt. I would venture that Tolasy is no wastrel.”

“You try my patience,” said Foaumo. “If he were not a wastrel, he would be here now, would he not? Tending to his farm and not off making merry in the woods or wherever he may be.”

“Is a man a wastrel if he has been forced from his dwelling by threats and violence?” asked Autumn.

“Indeed,” said Foaumo. “Only a wastrel would not defend his property. Come, girl, this has gone on long enough. Are you going to leave and let me attend to my business or not?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I shall not leave here until Tolasy and Ymma return to what is rightfully theirs and you swear an oath that you will uphold their rights and those of everyone else in the village.”

“Rights?” spat Foaumo. “You speak of rights? What about my rights, hey? This is a vacant dwelling and I have every right to take possession. Who are you to deny me my rights yet insist the rights of everyone else be enforced?”

Astauand's orb was half way over the horizon and the sky to the West was glowing red.

“I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup,” said Autumn clearly. “I say you have no right of possession. This property was vacated because of your misdeeds and thus you forfeited any rights.”

“That's not how the law sees it,” said Foaumo. “This dwelling is vacant and I claim it.”

“It is not vacant,” said Autumn. “I have already claimed it and my pack lies inside to mark that claim.”

“I knew you were a treacherous little vixen the moment I saw you,” said Foaumo. “Kill her lads.”

Autumn reacted faster than Foaumo's henchmen and her staff whistled through empty air to clatter against the wall. One of the men swung his club at Logan and the other at Autumn's head while the one from the left corner aimed his club at her knees. Autumn somersaulted as Logan ducked and charged at the man, grabbing him around the waist. They fell to the ground, punching and biting each other. Autumn landed and twisted to face the two men advancing on her. She backed away and one of the men charged her, his club held high. She whirled and landed a foot on his shoulder, sending him crashing to the ground. The other moved in more cautiously, watching her every move. The one wrestling Logan managed to twist over, pinning Logan to the ground. He punched Logan hard and Logan lost consciousness.

Autumn glanced over at Logan and the man advancing on her swung his club and she spun, grabbing his arm and threw him to the ground while punching the base of his skull so he landed already unconscious. The first man picked himself up and launched himself at her only to receive a whirling foot in his throat. He fell, clutching his throat and struggling for breath. The man who had fought Logan circled then picked up a fallen club. Warily he continued to circle. Logan groaned and rolled over and the man glanced at him. Instantly Autumn scissor-kicked him in the head and he, too, slumped to the ground.

Foaumo pulled out his sword and backed away. Autumn lunged to one side and retrieved her staff, holding it in one hand with the end under her armpit. She advanced towards him.

"Give me your oath, Foaumo," she said calmly, "and you will live."

"Very well," said Foaumo, stopping and straightening up. "Come here and we will shake hands on it."

He transferred his sword to his left hand and held out his right.

"Swear your oath," said Autumn, "then we will shake hands."

"As you wish," said Foaumo, viciously stabbing at her with his sword.

Autumn leapt backwards and swung the staff around hard. Foaumo

parried it with his sword and she discarded it while dropping to swing a low kick at his legs. Foaumo staggered but regained his balance and slashed at Autumn's head, missing by a hair's breadth. She twirled and caught Foaumo in the belly with her foot. Winded he doubled over and her knee caught him in the face, breaking his nose.

“Rrraaahhhhhh,” he roared and back-sliced with his sword at Autumn's neck. She twisted and grabbed his wrist with both hands and threw him over her shoulder. He crashed to the ground, dropping his sword. Instantly Autumn leapt onto his chest, her knees pinning his shoulders to the ground.

There was a pounding of feet on the track and she glanced up to see what new threat this was. It was Tolasy running as fast as he could towards them.

“I came to help,” he panted, “but I can see none was needed.”

“Would you help Logan?” asked Autumn, “while I attend to this man.”

“Surely,” he said, going over to help Logan sit up.

“There is a pressure point just here,” said Autumn, putting her finger to Foaumo's temple. “If I press moderately hard it is very painful. You see?”

Foaumo screamed as Autumn pressed her finger to his temple.

“And the same the other side,” she said, doing it again with her other hand.

Foaumo whimpered and kicked his feet trying to shake her off.

“I beg your forgiveness,” she said. “I do not wish to hurt you but it is necessary that you believe me when I tell you that if I press very hard on those spots you will die. Do you believe me?”

Foaumo wouldn't look at her and tried to kick her off again. With a sigh Autumn pressed one of his temples again.

“Do you believe me?” she asked when he'd stopped screaming.

“Y-y-yes,” he said in a shaky voice.

Autumn glanced over to where Tolasy was helping Logan to his feet. Logan was pale and looking weak but seemed unharmed.

“That one needs attention,” she called, spotting one of the unconscious men sitting up.

Tolasy grabbed one of the clubs and knocked him unconscious again.

“I am sorry,” said Autumn to Foaumo, “my attention was elsewhere. Do you believe me?”

“Yes,” said Foaumo.

“What do you believe?” asked Autumn, a finger against each of his temples.

“I believe you can kill me with your fingers,” said Foaumo weakly, struggling to breath properly with Autumn's weight on his chest.

“Good,” said Autumn. “I want you to also believe that I will kill you unless you swear the oath.”

“I swear,” said Foaumo.

“What do you swear?” asked Autumn.

“I swear on my oath that I will uphold the rights of everyone else in the village.” said Foaumo.

“Tolasy, did you hear that?” called Autumn.

“Aye, I did,” called back Tolasy.

“And will you tell everyone in the village of this swearing?” asked Autumn, her eyes boring into Foaumo's.

“I shall, at dawn tomorrow,” said Tolasy.

“Very good,” said Autumn. “You can go now, Foaumo.”

She climbed off him and helped him to his feet and retrieved his sword.

“Take your friends with you,” she said, handing him his sword.

He hefted it in his hand, looking speculatively at her.

“You can if you must,” she said, “but I will only best you again and this time I will not be merciful.”

Foaumo sheathed his sword.

“Come on, lads,” he said resignedly. “We’re done here.”

“Your throat will stop hurting in a day or two,” said Autumn sympathetically to the man whose throat she’d wrecked as he passed.

“Gramph,” he croaked and kept going, both hands nursing his neck.

Some distance away Foaumo stopped and turned.

“Much good this’ll do you, Tolasy,” he called. “That bitch has claimed right of vacant possession.”

“Is this true?” asked Tolasy, hard faced as Foaumo made his way up the track in the fading light.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I had to, to block his claim.”

Tolasy stared at her, his face unreadable, then his nostrils flared.

“Aye,” he said gruffly. “I’d best be going, Ymma needs me.”

He turned.

“Wait,” said Autumn. “This place is yours, I gift it to you.”

“What?” barked Tolasy, scowling at her. “What joke be this?”

“Autumn never jokes,” said Logan, joining them. “She does not know how to.”

“This is not my place,” said Autumn. “It is yours.”

“Mine?” said Tolasy. “Be you serious?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “We will help you bring your things back in the morning then we will be on our travels again. Foaumo should not give you any more problems, not once the whole village knows of his oath.”

Tolasy stared at her again, his mind a whirl.

“I thank you,” he said slowly. “Me and Ymma alike. We will never forget you. With your leave, if the babe be a girl we’ll name her Autumn.”

“That be your choice,” said Autumn, “although mayhap Ymma has different ideas.”

“I be certain she’ll agree,” said Tolasy as a scream rent the gloom.

“That were from the woods,” he said going white faced. “Ymma! What have those bastards done to her?”

Chapter Four

Tolasy ran off up the track through the field with Autumn in hot pursuit, Logan a little way behind, still groggy from being knocked unconscious.

They found Ymma at the treeline, bent over and clutching a tree. Even in the last of Astauand's final rays they could see her face was white and sweating.

"Ymma!" cried Tolasy, running up to her, "did they attack you?"

"The babe," she gasped, her knuckles white as she gripped a low branch, "it comes."

"Voqev!" cried Tolasy, freezing in shock. "What do I do? What do I do?"

"It is not Voqev's hand in this," said Autumn, joining him, "but Feandra. I know not what to do either. This is no ordinary injury."

She stood there watching Ymma for a few moments while Tolasy wrung his hands and muttered.

"You are of Feandra," he suddenly said, turning to Autumn. "Do something!"

"I have never attended a birthing," said Autumn. "You are a farmer, you must have seen cattle and pigs give birth."

"Nay, I grow crops," said Tolasy, reaching out nervously to touch Ymma's shoulder. "This be new to me."

Ymma's scream shattered the air again and she hugged her belly.

"You are a woman," cried Tolasy, "you must know what to do!"

"Umm," said Autumn.

"Lie her down," panted Logan, stumbling up. "I have seen a birthing

before. You must lie her down and pull up her garments so her legs be free.”

“Right,” said Autumn. “Tolasy, clear the ground of rocks and sticks over there. I shall assist Ymma.”

“Is there no one in the village who helps at times like this?” gasped Logan, bent double himself with his hands on his knees. “And we need some light.”

Tolasy paused from tossing stones around. “There be Old Jeren,” he said. “She ..., Voqev, I’ll go get her. Right now.”

He threw down the branch he’d picked up and started running towards the village.

“We need light as well,” shouted Logan. “Do you have any torches?”

“At the farm,” called back Tolasy. “I’ll get one as I pass.”

“Stop!” shouted Autumn, one arm around Ymma as she stumbled towards the cleared area. “The farm is empty, there is nothing there.”

“What?” shouted Tolasy. “Oh Voqev, everything’s in the woods!”

He stopped and looked back at the woods then at the village then the woods again, indecision written all over his body.

“Get a torch first,” shouted Logan, “then go to the village.”

“Yes,” shouted Tolasy, “I’ll get a torch,” and he hurried off into the woods.

“Let us lay her down,” said Logan and between them they laid Ymma on the ground.

“Help me get her garments up,” said Logan, kneeling beside Ymma. “What are you doing?”

“I am looking for something for her to rest her head on,” said

Autumn.

“Argggghhhhhh,” cried Ymma, clenching her face and claspings her belly.

“She’s not going to sleep,” said Logan forcefully. “Come here and help me!”

“Ahh, yes,” said Autumn, going over to kneel the other side. “Yes, lift her garments.”

They pulled the lower hem of Ymma’s loose fitting tunic up to her hips.

“We need to pull her legs apart,” said Logan, “and bend her knees.”

“Why?” asked Autumn.

“So the babe can come out,” said Logan.

“Indeed?” asked Autumn. “Where does it come out?”

“There,” said Logan, pointing.

“Urgghhhh!” cried Ymma.

“Take my hand,” said Logan, reaching out for Ymma’s hand. “It will soon be over. We are with you.”

“There?” said Autumn, staring in morbid fascination. “But babes be big and that is so ... small.”

“That’s why it hurts so much,” said Logan. “Do we have any water?”

“I did not think to bring any,” said Autumn. “Shall I fetch some?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “We will need to wash the babe when it comes. It will be covered in crud.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, standing up, “I’ll go ...”

Tolasy hurtled past and something solid flew out of the twilight gloom and landed nearby.

“Mayhap that be a torch,” said Logan. “Damned fool didn’t think to light it though.”

“’Tis fortunate he did not hit Ymma,” said Autumn going over to pick it up.

“We’ll have to do without,” said Logan. “I think it is about to arrive. Arghhhhh.”

His face contorted in pain as Ymma squeezed his hand tightly.

“They say to push,” said Logan to Ymma when she relaxed her grip. “I know not what they mean by that but if it helps, push.”

“Gn-nn-nn-nn,” said Ymma, gasping.

“I think I see something,” said Autumn, kneeling down again.

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan. “Well, whatever is going to happen is happening. May Aloidia smile on us all.”

“Plakill is rising,” said Autumn. “We will have some light shortly. ’Tis fortunate it is a cloudless night.”

“Gn-nn-nn-nn,” said Ymma between gasps, “arghhhhh.”

“Be strong, Ymma,” said Logan. “I fancy this will be all over very very soon. I pray Tolasy is back soon with Old Jeren.”

It took a little while.

“Be she still alive?” asked Autumn, horrified.

“Yes,” said Logan, “and so is the babe.”

“It is a most unusual colour,” said Autumn. “Even by the light of Plakill. Is it supposed to be like that or is Yammoe back to haunt us?”

"I know not," said Logan, "but it is moving."

"Should it not be crying?" asked Autumn. "I know little of babes but they always seem to be crying."

"I think you are supposed to hit it," said Logan. "At least that's what they did at the birthing I saw. Someone hit it on its bottom."

"I wonder why," said Autumn.

"I know not," said Logan, "but you'd better do it soon as it does not seem to be breathing."

"I?" said Autumn, shuffling backwards a short distance on her knees. "I'm not hitting that. You do it. You are the one who saw it done."

"But," said Logan, "umm, I ..., oh very well."

He reached over and gently tapped the baby on its bottom.

"That didn't seem to do much," said Autumn. "Try again."

"They held it upside-down, I seem to remember," said Logan.

"Then hold it upside-down," said Autumn.

Logan hesitated then picked up the child.

"It seems to be attached to something," he said. "There is a cord here."

"Mayhap that be to stop it falling out," said Autumn, shuffling back to get a closer look. "Can you untie it?"

"That will have to wait," said Logan. "It bothers me how quiet the babe is."

He lifted the child by its ankles and slapped its bottom. A choking wail split the air.

“That sounds better,” said Autumn. “Well done!”

“Thanks,” said Logan, inspecting the child hanging from his hand.

“Should you not turn it the right way up?” asked Autumn.

“Is that my babe?” said Ymma weakly.

“Yes,” said Logan, rapidly turning the baby the right way up.

Autumn hesitantly reached out to touch it.

“It is all slimy,” she muttered.

“I told you it would be covered in crud,” said Logan. “Like the insides of a fish when you gut it.”

“Can I have my babe?” asked Ymma, holding out a hand.

“It needs cleaning,” said Logan, “But here you ..., oh. It will not reach, the cord is not long enough. Umm, here, I’ll lay it on your belly.”

Gently he laid the baby on Ymma’s belly and guided her hands to it.

“Hello baby,” she muttered, stroking it.

Logan sat back on his heels.

“So now what do we do?” asked Autumn. “Mayhap it be hungry. Shall I fetch some bread or meat?”

“No, it needs the tit,” said Logan, “but I know not how it can reach. The cord is not long enough.”

“’Twould appear to be a bad design,” said Autumn.

“Ahh, I remember,” said Logan. “I think you have to cut the cord.”

“’Twould make sense,” said Autumn. “’Tis not normal for people to stay attached to their mothers.”

“Do you have your knife with you?” asked Logan.

“It is in my pack,” said Autumn. “At the farm. Mayhap you could bite through it?”

“I daresay I could,” said Logan thoughtfully. “It feels soft and I definitely remember that it was cut. The woman at the birthing had done it many times so there must be a good reason for it. What should I do?”

“Can it wait until Old Jeren gets here?” asked Autumn.

“I think they did it very soon after the birth,” said Logan. “Ummm, oh Sploop. It will have to be cut sooner or later and Old Jeren may not be here for some time. The babe needs to be fed and washed.”

He bent forward and put the cord between his teeth and bit hard then spat.

“I should not have done that,” he said jerking back. “It be bleeding.”

“Hold it tight,” said Autumn urgently. “Stop the blood flowing.”

“The other side is bleeding too,” said Logan, panic in his voice.

“Give it to me,” said Autumn and she held the end attached to Ymma tightly.

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan worriedly, “now what do we do?”

“Blood clots,” said Autumn. “This I do know. We hold the ends of the cord until it does.”

“I suppose so,” said Logan. “At least Ymma and the babe did not notice. Here, Ymma, here is your babe.” He edged the baby further up Ymma's chest without letting go of the end of the cord. “Try to feed the babe.”

Ymma fumbled with the top of her tunic and Logan left her to it.

“Look,” he said, pointing with his other hand. “There be lights on the path.”

“I pray that is Tolasy and Old Jeren,” said Autumn, turning to look. “This be more exhausting than any fight I have ever been in.”

Very soon Tolasy and Old Jeren were by their side, the flaming torches casting a flickering red pallor.

“The babe is born I see,” said Old Jeren. “Be it alive?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “I slapped it and it screamed but ...”

“That is good,” said Old Jeren. “But what?”

“I remembered this cord being cut,” said Logan miserably, “but we did not have a knife so I bit it and now it is bleeding.”

“Did you clamp it with your fingers?” demanded Old Jeren.

“Yes,” said Autumn, “both ends.”

“Then all be well,” said Old Jeren. “The cord stops bleeding all by itself soon enough. Let me check the babe.”

She prised the child away from Ymma's grasp.

“Bring that damned torch closer,” she demanded and Tolasy leant forward.

“Be you unhurt?” he whispered to Ymma.

“Yes,” she whispered back, “I just be right tired.”

“She needs to sleep,” said Old Jeren, checking the baby had the right number of arms and legs and that none were misshapen. “Best we get her to a bed soon enough. See, the bleeding be stopped. In a day or two the cord will fall off.”

“What is it for?” asked Autumn.

"It feeds the babe inside the mother," said Old Jeren, putting the child back in Ymma's arms.

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

"You have none of your own?" asked Old Jeren.

"No," said Autumn.

"Then you did well to bring this one into the world," said Old Jeren.

"'Twas not me," said Autumn. "I only watched. 'Twas Logan who did what needed doing."

"Did I do right?" asked Logan anxiously.

"The babe lives and is not deformed," said Old Jeren. "You did right enough."

"Ahh, good," said Logan, much relieved. "I wanted to wash the babe as well but we had no water."

"'Tis not of great urgency," said Old Jeren. "The crud dries and comes off soon enough. The most important thing is to get it out of the babe's mouth and nose."

"Oh Sploop, I did not do that!" cried Logan. "I'll do it now."

"Stop," commanded Old Jeren. "Yes, you did. When you smacked it did it wail?"

"Yes," said Logan. "Very loudly."

"Then you cleared its airways," said Old Jeren. "That's why we do it. Has the afterbirth come out?"

"The what?" asked Logan.

"Then it has not," said Old Jeren briskly, "else you would know. It needs to come out."

She leaned over Ymma and started to gently massage her belly.

“What is the afterbirth?” asked Autumn, curiously.

“I know not,” said Old Jeren, “but it has to come out. If it does not it rots and will kill the mother. Usually it comes out soon after the babe but not always. When it does we will know there is no other babe yet to come.”

“There can be more than one?” asked Autumn.

“Twins,” said Old Jeren, continuing to massage Ymma's belly, “or triplets even. The afterbirth is always last. Ahh, here we go.”

“And what do we do with that?” asked Autumn when the afterbirth was out.

“We bury it and say a prayer to Feandra,” said Old Jeren. “Good, all is well here. Best we get these two to their bed. We don't want them catching a chill.”

“Be it a boy or a girl?” asked Tolasy.

“A boy,” said Old Jeren. “What be you naming him?”

“We were thinking of naming a boy after Ymma's ...” began Tolasy.

“Logan,” said Ymma, craning her neck to look at Tolasy. “I want to name him Logan, if that be agreeable with you, Logan?”

“Umm,” said Logan, taken aback, “well, Logan be a fine name.”

“It be a small token of thanks for all your help,” said Ymma.

“Umm, well, you did all the hard part,” said Logan. “I just held your hand.”

“Oft times that is all that is needed,” said Old Jeren, “and can be a hard thing to do. Did she break any of your fingers?”

“Nearly,” said Logan grinning. “I would be honoured if you name your babe after me, Ymma.”

“Then Logan it is,” said Tolasy. “If it were a girl I wanted to name her Autumn but no matter.”

“Why?” asked Ymma.

“Autumn saved our farm,” said Tolasy in surprise. “Ohh, I forgot you were not there. I will tell you all about it after you have slept. You need to get your strength back.”

“Yes,” said Old Jeren. “You two men carry her to your home and this lass and I will clean up here.”

* * *

“Can you not sleep?” whispered Logan.

They were lying on the ground beside their fire outside Tolasy and Ymma's temporary dwelling in the woods.

“No,” whispered Autumn.

“Is something bothering you?” he asked.

“I keep thinking about Ymma,” said Autumn after a while. “It was a terrible experience.”

“That is the nature of childbirth,” said Logan, sitting up.

The fire was getting low so he got up and added some more wood before wrapping himself in the blanket and sitting down again.

“I pray to Feandra it never happens to me,” said Autumn with a shudder.

“I venture it never will,” said Logan. “You have made a vow of chastity.”

“What is that to do with childbirth?” asked Autumn.

“I am not certain,” said Logan, “but for a woman to be with child she must first lie with a man.”

“Is that so?” asked Autumn. “I did not know that. I thought my vow of chastity was to deny the seeking of pleasure for its own sake. It must be a very great pleasure to warrant such pain and suffering later.”

“I know not,” said Logan. “My chastity is intact also even though I have made no vow. Mayhap women do not know the consequences.”

“That may be the case the first time,” said Autumn, “but I am all astonishment that women go through such more than once. And willingly too it would seem. If ever I find my vow put to the test I have only to remember this night.”

“I understand your meaning,” said Logan, “although I cannot know what drives a woman. There must be a powerful urge else there would be few children. Neither you nor I would be here, I warrant, if there were not.”

“Aye, you may well be right,” said Autumn. “Do you remember your mother?”

“But dimly,” said Logan. “I was ten summers when my parents were killed and the trials of my life since have made them fade in my memory. My father was a farmer like Tolasy. Do you remember yours?”

“I have no memory before the Esyup,” said Autumn. “I know not if I even had a mother or father nor anything about them. I do not even know my name before Noxu named me. Did you not have brothers or sisters?”

“I had a sister,” said Logan. “She went to live with her almost era-owen a summer before. I know not where they went. I tried to find them after but no one knew.”

“How did your parents die?” asked Autumn.

“My mother died of a fever,” said Logan. “My father died of the same two days later. I buried them both and offered up prayers for their safe admission to the Land of the Dead.”

“Do you miss them?” asked Autumn.

“I did for a time,” he said, hugging his knees. Autumn, as always, sat cross-legged. “I mourned for them both but I had to learn to fend for myself and mourning does not fill the belly. I venture you do not miss your parents as you have no memory of them.”

“The only father I ever knew was Noxu,” said Autumn, “and I miss him sometimes but this is the life I have chosen and regret is no more filling than mourning.”

“Do you think he misses you?” asked Logan.

“I think not,” said Autumn. “Noxu was never one to dwell on the past. He saw no profit in it other than as an opportunity for learning. ‘Learn from your successes and your mistakes,’ he would often say, ‘but do not dwell on them for you cannot change the past, only the future.’”

“Ahh, well,” said Logan. “I venture you are his greatest success even if he does not dwell on you but this is sad talk. As Noxu said, the past cannot be changed. We must look to the future.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “What say you we aid Ymma and Tolasy return to their farm tomorrow then continue our travels?”

“That sounds like a good plan,” said Logan. “There is no need for us to linger, unless ...”

“Unless what?” asked Autumn.

“Umm, I was only going to say that Foaumo may have taken the opportunity of your absence to take possession of the farm,” said Logan.

“It will not bode well for him if he has,” said Autumn. “Besides, he

swore an oath.”

“I fancy he did not swear that oath willingly,” said Logan. “Mayhap he will come to believe it is not a binding oath for that reason.”

“Yes, I had thought of that myself,” said Autumn. She sighed. “Sadly there is little we can do save stay with Ymma and Tolasy forever which does not sit well with me. I hoped that by his swearing that oath and the village knowing would break his spell over them. Oft times knowing someone can be bested is sufficient to make besting possible. If you believe someone to be invincible then you are immediately the weaker.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “As you say, we cannot stay here forever. Happy that I am for there to be another Logan in this land, I do not wish to stay with him and when he be full grown we will be too old to be of great help besides. It be a shame that there can be no permanent remedy.”

“I know little of the ways of men and women outside the teachings of the Esyup,” said Autumn reflectively, “but I had heard that there are them as are full of greed and them as are full of the pleasure of the suffering of others and I wager Foaumo be one of those. Of greed at any rate, I know not if he takes pleasure in suffering.”

“Did the Esyup have any solutions?” asked Logan. “Or was it that being of Morath their only solution was fighting?”

“Fighting is never a solution,” said Autumn. “Sometimes it be a tool and a useful one at that but any solution fighting appears to give is only temporary. Had I killed Foaumo it would have solved that problem but another would take his place. My Esyup argued that the only permanent solution was the law and a just enforcement of it. If there be laws to protect the vulnerable and those with the power to enforce those laws then them as seek to take the place of Foaumo and others like him will not be able to.”

“I see the sense in that,” said Logan. “But when the rich and powerful make the laws they make them for their own benefit.”

“Mayhap that be true,” said Autumn. “I have not yet the experience of the world to argue otherwise, but it would seem to me that if the poor and weak made the laws they would be different but not greatly so.”

“That I do not see,” said Logan. “Surely a poor person would create laws that protect the poor?”

“I am certain they would,” said Autumn, “but whosoever makes a law does so to protect and you can only protect what you believe needs protecting. I wager the rich and powerful have many vulnerabilities that they would see as in need of protection but which a poor person would not.”

“So you are saying that if the poor made the laws then the rich would suffer in their place?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Mayhap there be a way to create laws to protect that which the lawmakers do not know needs protection but I know not how that can be done.”

Chapter Five

The morning rain fell lightly on the head of Autumn Savannah and dripped off her nose. She ignored it and focused her mind on the gentle pattering of raindrops on the leaves and the damp freshness of the air. Birds called to each other but they were subdued, seemingly reluctant to leave their nests and venture out into a new day. A bird landed and strutted, cocking its head this way and that as it tried to decide if Autumn or Logan was a threat. A sudden hiss from the fire as a raindrop landed on a burning branch dispelled all doubts and the bird disappeared in a flurry of wings, wormless. Its cries of alarm caused a furor as unseen birds flocked into the air, the branches and leaves shaking and loosening more droplets. As Astauand rose and spread its light upon the world the thin clouds dispersed and the sounds of the woods increased. The fine rain passed and the fire continued to burn.

"It is definitely getting colder," said Autumn when she had completed her morning routine. "How fared you in the night?"

"It was not easy to sleep," Logan admitted. "I woke several times from shivering and had to add wood to the fire."

"Aye, I noticed," said Autumn. "I wager my robe be warmer than your blanket but not by much for I too did shiver and my robe is damp. With these and just our tunics I venture we have a choice to make."

"If it gets much colder I reckon there will be no choice," said Logan. "We will die and that be the end of it."

"Mayhap we should end our travels here," said Autumn. "We could turn back and head South where it is warm, even in a winter's night."

"I thought you wanted to find the water that is as hard as stone," said Logan.

"I do but not at the cost of our lives," said Autumn. "To experience and to know is a goodly thing but I question whether such knowledge is worth dying for."

“But we can build fires on our journey to keep us warm,” said Logan. “It is simply a matter of having enough wood to last the night.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “but have you noticed the trees on our travels? As we first headed North they got bigger and taller but are now smaller and thinner than ever. I fear as we go further North we may find trees no longer grow or are so small that they do not burn with enough warmth. Mayhap when we find the place where the water is hard we will find that wood does not burn and other strangenesses.”

“I had noticed,” said Logan. “And it be raining more as we go further North as well. Mayhap the time will come when it rains all the time and we cannot find any wood dry enough to burn. Oh Sploop!”

“What?” asked Autumn.

“I have just thought,” said Logan looking perplexed. “In the place where the water is like stone, what is the rain like? Does it rain pebbles and rocks? That be right painful, I venture.”

“Aye, that is a notion and one that I had not thought of,” said Autumn, looking thoughtful. “For certain we cannot be sure that water in rain and water in streams be different kinds of water and only one kind is hard. Mayhap it would be best if we abandon this journey and head back South, mayhap to the East or West and see what unfolds for us there.”

“Perhaps there is a middle ground,” said Logan. “Here the water is soft and flows. In the North the water is hard like stone. Mayhap in between there lies a place where the water is also in between. Where it is not soft but not yet hard like rock, mayhap like honey or thick mud.”

“You just make me more curious, Logan,” said Autumn. “Alone I would continue North and endure the cold and the pebbles falling from the sky but I am concerned for your safety. 'Twould be wrong of me to lead you into danger.”

“As with all danger, we can turn and run when it appears,” said Logan. “What say you we continue North until we first catch sight of

water that is almost hard? When we do we will know it will be harder further North and so our curiosity will be satisfied and we can turn back then.”

“And what about the cold?” asked Autumn. “What if it continues to get colder?”

“That is easily solved,” said Logan. “We simply get warmer clothes. You saw the tunics Tolasy and Ymma wore. They were thicker than ours and they wore another underneath. On their bed I saw several blankets. There be a town somewhere ahead. Let us just get more clothes and blankets. Mayhap even some of those garments Tolasy and Ymma wore on their feet.”

“Yes, those were strange,” said Autumn. “Noxu used to put his feet in a bag when he slept but he was old and said his blood was thin. ’Tis always a good idea to learn from those with knowledge. I can foresee one difficulty however.”

“And what, pray, is that?” asked Logan, his damp blanket steaming gently in the sunlight.

“We have no money,” said Autumn.

“A minor matter,” said Logan. “I am a thief. I can take whatever cloth we need, just as I did for the robe you now wear.”

“Aye, perhaps,” said Autumn. “But ’twould be best if you do not. People seem to get upset if you take things without leaving paraks and while the produce of nature is there for all there is much labour in the making of cloth. I would not see them as do that labour suffer for our gain. They should be compensated for their labours. You forget that we met because you chose exile from your village over hanging for thievery.”

“Yes, I had forgotten,” said Logan. “So much has changed in my life since then that I barely remember such a time existed.” He sighed and poked the fire with a stick. “I venture we will have to find paid work.”

“Work?” said Autumn in surprise.

“Yes,” said Logan. “As when Ymma offered us bread in exchange for our help loading her cart. Mayhap we can find someone as will give us paraks instead.”

“I know what work is,” said Autumn. “We spent many hours talking about it at the Esyup. I venture we have between us few skills that any will find useful. You are a thief and I am a Krisana, what other qualities do we have to offer?”

“We have our bodies,” said Logan. “Mayhap someone is in need of people to fetch and carry or some such. I wager them as wants a thief will be few and far between and them as wants an argument even fewer but them as wants an easier life are many.”

“Well, we can but try,” said Autumn. “I wager we will not be finding a bag of paraks beside the path. Loath as I am to put myself in thrall to another, the thought of being warm and dry has consolations. Come, put out the fire and let us be on our way.”

Logan obediently started to scrape soil over the fire and Autumn folded the blanket before reaching for her pack. She hissed in surprise.

“Did you put this here?” she asked, holding up a staff.

“No,” said Logan, glancing over at it. “Why? Where did you leave it?”

“Tis not my staff,” she said. “This is mine. This one be similar but mine has the nick where Foaumo caught it with his sword.” She held up her staff and waved it at him.

“Mayhap someone left it here,” said Logan, stamping down on the soil to make sure the fire was fully covered. “I will have it if you do not want a second.”

“How strange,” said Autumn. “Hmmm, this one is destined for you. You have an admirer, it seems.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan coming over.

“This staff has a piece of parchment attached,” said Autumn, handing

him the staff.

“Logan, you may find this of some use, MM,” he read aloud. “What be MM?”

“I fancy that be Mother Midcarn,” said Autumn, “unless you know someone else with the initials MM.”

“Well, that be right kind of her,” said Logan. “This be a fine staff. I wonder what use she wants me to put it to?”

“Knowing Mother Midcarn it will not be for walking,” said Autumn. touching the staff. “You realise what this means?”

“Umm, that she is still watching us through her Window?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “And do you not wonder why she is still watching us?”

“She surely cannot want me to go back to being the Roinad again?” said Logan. “I would not like that one little bit.”

“I doubt it,” said Autumn. “She would not leave you something that may be useful if 'twere so, or at least something more useful to being the Roinad. I wager there is some trouble on our road ahead and this staff will be of assistance.”

“I do hope I am not going to die again,” said Logan apprehensively. “I did not like it the last time.”

“Oh I am certain you will die again one day,” said Autumn. “Mayhap not even Mother Midcarn can give you the gift of immortality, at least not in this Land.”

“That is a cheery notion,” said Logan. “Thoughts of my second death will be with me all day now.”

“You are being foolish, Logan,” said Autumn. “Her other gift to you had nothing to do with death. It expanded your life through greater

understanding.”¹

“True,” said Logan, “and hers to you did save your life and allow you to walk in the Land of the Undead unharmed. Although now I think on it, that arrow that passed through you did kill me so mayhap it portends my second death in some indirect way.”

“You are determined to be morbid, are you not,” said Autumn. “Come, take this staff and use it as a staff until such time as it shows you another use.”

“I have another thought,” said Logan, offering the staff to Autumn. “I take yours and you have this one. After all, your robe no doubt will protect you from any harm it may bring.”

“The staff is for you, Logan, “ said Autumn. “Mother Midcarn was very clear on that. The parchment is addressed to you not me or us. It is yours and I wager she will keep giving it back to you if you try to lose it somewhere.”

“Oh well,” said Logan reluctantly, “if I must, I must. Which way up does it go?”

“Whichever way feels most comfortable in your hand,” said Autumn.

Logan walked around their camp for a few moments trying the staff both ways up.

“This way definitely feels better,” he said. “The thickness is just right for my hand.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “Let us be on our way.”

“Mayhap you could teach me to fight with this,” said Logan, hefting the staff then giving it an experimental swing. “That may be the use she intended.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, jumping out of the way hastily. “Or perhaps

1 Mother Midcarn's gifts of silver ribbon to Autumn and a black stone to Logan are detailed in the First Tale of The Annals of Autumn Savannah.

you should leave any fighting to me.”

* * *

“This be an interesting sign,” said Autumn the next day.

It was mid afternoon and they were on the edge of a small town.

“How so?” asked Logan, pausing to lean on his staff. “Is it not just a sign giving the name of the town?”

“It says more than that,” said Autumn, “and implies even greater. The first part, 'Welcome to Saiwoc' tells us the name of the town and does so in a friendly welcoming way but yet the second, 'the last place' is somehow contradictory and threatening.”

“I am guessing it is the last town in this direction,” said Logan. “How is that unfriendly?”

“It is more a warning, I venture,” said Autumn. “It warns us that there is nowhere further North which I find unlikely. Surely it cannot be that we are at the edge of the world? I see mountains beyond so that is contradictory and makes me wonder why they lie to us.”

“I think you take it too literally,” said Logan. “I wager they simply mean that this is the last place of any size.”

“Then why do they not say that?” asked Autumn. “But there is another meaning which is last in some form of contest. Mayhap there be other places in the North that were best or second best by some judgement and this place did poorly.”

Logan waggled his hand to show he didn't necessarily agree with that interpretation.

“And yet there be more,” said Autumn, tapping the sign with her staff. “'Last' here could mean that this is the last place we visit. Mayhap the sign welcomes us to our final ending.”

“Or perhaps it is because they think this town be so nice we will not

want to leave,” said Logan, tapping the sign with his staff as well.

“Indeed, that is possible,” said Autumn. “But you see the inherent contradiction between the Welcome and the possible interpretation of threat?”

“I think you have been travelling too long,” said Logan, “and that you are in need of distractions to your mind.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, “but I also wonder why someone felt a need for a sign in the first place. Few other places we have been have had such a sign.”

“Let us go into the town and see what delights it has to offer,” said Logan. “With Aloidia's favour there is somewhere that weaves warm cloth and is in need of someone to assist in exchange. For certain it is a busy little place.”

“And a lucky place,” he added a little further up the track. He bent swiftly and retrieved a coin from the ground. “’Tis a two pec coin. I wonder how much cloth that will buy? Let us keep our eyes on the ground for there may be other coins left abandoned.”

“We shall enquire when we find the weaver,” said Autumn. “’Tis a small place, mayhap there is none. Your pardon, lady.”

The woman stopped and looked at Autumn then at Logan then backed away a pace.

“Be there a weaver in this town?” asked Autumn, “or a seller of cloth?”

The woman pulled the edges of her cloak closer.

“Aye,” she said, “up there a way, beside the river, but I doubt he be there. Most everyone is at the fair.”

“Will the weaver be back tomorrow?” asked Autumn.

“Perhaps,” said the woman. “It be the last fair before winter and goes for three days. He may attend the fair everyday. I know not. If you will

excuse me, I must be on my way.”

She turned and hurried off up the road.

“Shall we go to the fair?” asked Logan. “They are great fun.”

“I have never been to a fair,” said Autumn. “What are they?”

“They are like markets,” said Logan, “but they have entertainments as well. Jugglers and fire eaters and such.”

“What is a fire eater?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“Someone who eats fire,” said Logan with a small laugh.

“And that is entertainment?” asked Autumn.

“I’m sure there will be something there you find entertaining,” said Logan, “although I venture you would not like the bear baiting if there is one.”

“What is bear baiting?” asked Autumn.

“It be where they set dogs on a bear to fight to the death,” said Logan, “and people wager how long it lasts and how many dogs it kills first.”

“That seems most cruel,” said Autumn. “And people find this entertaining?”

“Some do,” said Logan, “but I do not. The few fairs as I have been to, I avoided the baitings. Jugglers be fun, they have great skill and once I saw some people doing somersaults.”

“This all sounds strange to me,” said Autumn. “Perhaps it would be best if we found the weaver’s place and waited for him.”

“We may have to wait a long time,” said Logan. “Come to the fair. You never know, you might actually have some fun and if nothing else you will gain knowledge of people.”

Autumn looked up the road to where the woman had pointed then back at Logan.

“Indeed,” she said. “I must take every opportunity to gain knowledge, particularly about people. I am sorely lacking in that area.”

“Aloidia,” said Logan happily. “You’re going to enjoy this!”

* * *

“Ohh, look!” said Logan excitedly. “There be fortune teller over there, let us go over and listen.”

“How do they tell fortunes?” asked Autumn, following him but he didn’t reply.

There were several people standing watching an old woman who was studying the palm of a young man.

“... crossed in love,” she was saying, “but you will soon meet another and be blessed with many sons and live a long life.”

“Do it really say that?” he asked.

“Aye, the palms never lie,” said the old woman, patting his hand. “Next!”

She scanned the group for a prospective client. Two girls were giggling and pushing each other but neither seemed willing to take the plunge.

“‘Allo, dearie,” she said to Autumn. “Gi’ us yer ‘and,” and she snatched Autumn’s left hand up.

“Ohhhhh,” she said excitedly, “I can see how you’s going to meet a tall, dark handsome stranger.”

She held Autumn’s hand tightly and looked into her eyes.

“Gi’ us a pec an’ I’ll tell you’s how many kids you’s going to have,” she added.

Autumn snatched her hand away.

“Why would I want to meet a handsome stranger?” said Autumn primly. “I have taken a vow of chastity and will never have children.”

“Well, you're no bleedin' fun then, is ya'?” said the old woman in disgust, glowering at her. She turned away and grabbed a young lad's hand. “Ohhh, you's going to meet a fair maid, maybe two. A half parak an' I'll tell you who they be.”

Autumn looked at Logan with a raised eyebrow.

“Let us see what's further along,” he said diplomatically.

They walked on and stopped to watched a juggler juggling apples.

“'Allo darlin',” he said, taking a quick bite of an apple while they were all moving through the air. “Fancy a bite, do ya?”

“No, thank you,” said Autumn. She watched carefully as the man added another apple to the three he was juggling.

“Catch,” said the juggler, tossing one in Autumn's direction. She caught it and looked at him.

“Toss it in the air and catch it,” he said, taking another apple.

Autumn tossed it in the air and caught it.

“You're a natural,” he said, tossing her a second. “Try with two, like this.”

Autumn tossed both apples in the air and caught them.

“That's very good,” said the man, adding a fifth apple to the ones he was juggling, “now hold them both in one hand.”

“Like this?” said Autumn, holding both apples in one hand.

“Perfect,” said the man, juggling away. “Now, what do you think I will

do when you hold my two apples in your hand, my lovely?"

"I have no idea," said Autumn. "What will you do?"

"Anything you want me to!" said the man leering at her.

The other people watching laughed.

"I do not understand," said Autumn and the watchers laughed some more.

"Reckon yer wastin' yer time with this one, son," said the man to Logan, without stopping juggling.

"What is he talking about?" asked Autumn, turning to Logan.

"I am not sure," said Logan going red.

"You gonna keep playin' with me apples then, love?" called the man. "I can stop jugglin' if you want."

"No, you can have them back," said Autumn, tossing them to him.

He deftly caught them and continued juggling with seven apples.

"Aww, don't you love me no more, sweetie," he called.

"Mayhap your apples be not big enough for her," called one of the men watching.

"Want me to juggle your oranges then, sweetie?" called the juggler. "Any time, any place, you just say the word."

Autumn frowned at him then turned away.

"Aww, you scared 'er off," said the man watching.

"Story of my life, mate," said the juggler, tossing the apples over a shoulder and catching them.

“He is most skilled,” said Autumn walking away, “but to what end?”

“Are you any good at throwing things?” asked Logan, catching her up.

“Fair enough,” said Autumn. “Why?”

“There be a coconut shy over there,” he said. “Knock all five coconuts off and you win a half parak. Reckon you could do that?”

Chapter Six

"'Twould seem easy enough," said Autumn as they went to the coconut shy. "They are large coconuts and not far away."

"It be a pec for five balls," said Logan. "We have enough for you to try twice."

"But if I miss we lose the money," said Autumn, watching intently as a young lad threw his wooden balls. He missed with three and hit with two but the coconuts did not fall. The lad seemed embarrassed but the girl he was trying to impress didn't seem to mind.

"But you could win a half parak," said Logan excitedly, "and if you be not getting all five then we be no worse off than before. What have we got to lose?"

"I cannot fault your thinking," said Autumn, watching as another lad tried his hand. "That is interesting. That boy hit with three balls but none of the coconuts fell off."

She went over to the man taking the money and handing out balls.

"Your pardon," she said, "but are those coconuts free to fall from their supports?"

"You thinking I be fixing them?" demanded the man hotly.

"Mayhap," said Autumn. "I have seen several balls hit but no coconuts fell off."

"Voqev!" said the man. "You be right untrusting for such a pretty maid. Look," and he lifted each coconut to show they were not fixed in place.

"Thank you most kindly," said Autumn and retreated a couple of paces.

"So ain't you gonna 'ave a go after all that?" demanded the man.

“I must talk with my companion,” said Autumn. “He has the money.”

The man dismissed her with a contemptuous look and turned to someone else.

“I have the understanding of this now,” whispered Autumn. “The cup in which each coconut sits is high. It will be difficult to dislodge the nut even if struck. I must aim for the top not the centre and throw overhard.”

“So you think you can do it?” asked Logan

“I know not the outcome,” said Autumn, watching the next hopeful closely, “but we must recognise the challenges and possibilities of the present moment and embrace them with courage and hope.”

“So is that yes or no?” asked Logan.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “But should I fail be not disappointed. Success and failure are but different sides of the same coin. Please hold my staff and pack.”

“Over here,” called Logan to the man.

“So the lass finally made up her mind then, did she?” he said with a smile. “Reckon she not be knowing how to have fun, hah! Mayhap she be fun in other ways, eh?” and he nudged Logan and sniggered.

“Here is the money,” said Logan, handing over the coin.

The man gave him a pec and handed the five balls to Autumn. She put them on the ground in front of her.

“Ere, yer s'posed to throw 'em not dance on 'em, luvvie,” said the man.

“I know,” said Autumn, selecting one.

She scanned the row of coconuts then turned to look at Logan then whirled fast and hurled a ball at the first coconut. It hit near the top

of the nut and the nut fell to the ground.

"Let's hear it for the maid," shouted the man. "One coconut be down and four balls remaining."

A couple stopped to watch. Autumn selected another ball and a second coconut fell.

"A lucky shot," cried the man, applauding. "Come one, come all and try your luck!"

The same happened with the third ball and this time the man frowned.

"You're supposed to stand still," he complained.

"No she ain't," shouted someone in the small crowd that had gathered. "So long as she be behind the line. Don't you go changing the rules on her."

"It says behind the line only," said Logan pointing to the sign. "There be nothing there about standing still."

"You ain't s'posed to be able to read, boy," growled the man. "Sign only be there for show."

"I will stand still if you wish," said Autumn. "I am just more used to moving."

She chose one of the two remaining balls and stood sideways on to the coconuts. With a sudden blur her arm hurled the ball with unerring accuracy and the fourth coconut fell.

"Reckon as how you'll want her with her back to the last one," shouted a voice and the crowd laughed.

The man glowered at the crowd generally then stepped over to Autumn and grabbed her hand. As he lifted it high in the air he stepped on the last ball.

“Give the lass your applause,” he shouted squeezing Autumn's throwing hand hard. “She has felled four coconuts! A new record!”

Smiling as the crowd cheered her on, he dropped Autumn's hand and she rubbed it.

“Take your time, lass,” he said to her. “There be a lot riding on this last one. You don't want to mess it up, do you.”

He went back and stood behind the cord pegged on the ground.

“What be the matter with your hand?” asked Logan.

“A slight cramp, nothing more,” said Autumn, giving her hand a shake. “Where be the last ball?”

“And there ain't no balls left,” cried the coconut man, flinging up his hands. “Tis a great shame there be still one coconut standing. Better luck next time, missy. Who wants to try their hand? Come on, come on, five goes for a pec.”

“There it be,” cried Logan, digging feverishly at the ground. “Someone stood on it.”

“That ain't one of my balls,” said the man desperately. “She has to use my balls.”

The crowd jeered at him.

“You stood on it, you cheating bastard,” cried a woman.

“Cheat, cheat, cheat,” the others started to chant.

Logan rubbed the ball clean on his tunic then gave it to Autumn.

“Thank you,” she said then turned to the coconut man who was edging over towards the last coconut. “I venture you should stand clear. I may miss with this one and I would not wish to harm you.”

The man backed away and the fifth coconut fell to the ground. He

gave her a filthy look as the crowd cheered and Logan started jumping up and down in his excitement.

“You did it, you did it,” he cried giving her a hug.

“And we have a winner!” roared the coconut man. “Let's hear it for the little lady! First winner today!”

He gathered up the balls and handed them to Autumn.

“What are these for?” she asked.

“Winner gets another five balls for free!” cried the man.

“What about the half parak?” demanded Logan. “That's what the sign be saying.”

“Give her the money,” shouted someone in the crowd.

“She bested you, you cheat,” shouted someone else.

There were ominous grumblings and a large man stepped forward.

“I done watched the maid fell five coconuts,” he growled, towering over the coconut man, “fair an' square like. Give 'er the money.”

The coconut man went white and fumbled in his money bag with a trembling hand.

“Here,” he said to Autumn, “there's your winnings.”

“Can we have another five balls, please?” asked Logan, holding out the one pec coin.

“Get outta here,” said the coconut man hoarsely, “an' don't come back.”

“Give her the balls,” cried someone.

“More, more,” chanted the crowd, happy now that Autumn had been

paid.

“No,” said Autumn, loudly. “This be a poor entertainment. It brings out the bad in us all. I will not be the cause of any more disharmony,” and she stalked away as the crowd muttered and grumbled.

Logan stared after her for a few moments then ran to catch her up.

“Here, take this,” she said, handing him the half parak. “Did you see what happened there?”

“I saw you knock five coconuts off when no one else could manage one,” said Logan.

“But it brought out the badness in people,” she said. “The coconut man tried to cheat us, the watchers became aggressive. How can an entertainment create such ill feeling?”

“The watchers only became that way because that man tried to cheat you,” said Logan. “If he had been honest they would have shown pleasure instead.”

“It does not sit well with me,” said Autumn. “I do not like such entertainment. 'Tis much nicer to sit in the woods in the rain and listen to its ceaseless chatter among the leaves and branches or feel a storm in the distance as it vents its rage. I do not like the emotions of competition.”

“I do not know how to answer you on that score,” said Logan, “but we have the half parak and one pec. Mayhap that will buy us some warmer clothing. We could have more but no matter.”

“You think the ends justify the means?” asked Autumn.

“We are at a fair,” said Logan, “and there are crowds of people and much noise. This is a discussion best left for when we are back in the quiet and calm of the woods. Come, I see a cake stall yonder, let me buy you a honey cake and restore the sweetness to your thoughts.”

“But what about the money?” asked Autumn. “Pah!” and she spat on

the ground and grimaced. "I have been involved with money for but the shortest of times and already it begins to control me. Noxu was right, money is the destroyer of the spirit. You offer me a honey cake freely and from your generosity of spirit and I should accept your generosity in the same way. Thank you, yes, a honey cake would sweeten my mood but your kindness sweetens it more."

* * *

"What do you think of these?" asked Autumn inspecting a selection of knives after they had wandered for a time eating their honey cakes.

"Some look to be fine," said Logan, "and others of poor quality. Why?"

"Your knife was taken some time past," she said. "Twould be good if you had another. Mayhap we could trap some prey and eat meat for a time and use the skins for clothing. My small knife is not up to the task and I know you feel the lack."

"Aye, I do," said Logan. "Even if I did not use it its presence was a reassurance."

"This one be much like yours," said Autumn, holding up a short bladed hunting knife. "What think you?"

"It has a solid feel and fits my hand," said Logan, hefting it. He tapped it on the table and listened to its tone. "It has a clear tone," he added. "'Tis good quality."

"Best bronze in the land," said the stall keeper, coming over. "Keeps an edge as well."

"How much do you want for it?" asked Autumn.

"Four paraks," said the man. "That be my best price."

"Another time," said Logan, laying down the knife.

"As you wish," said the man disinterestedly, "although it most like be

sold next time you come back.”

Logan held up a hand and they wandered off.

“I wonder what that crowd over there is watching?” said Autumn.

“There is only one way to find out,” said Logan. “Let us go and see for ourselves.”

They made their way over and wriggled through to stand at a rope barrier. Behind the barrier sat a giant of a man, sitting on a low stool. He was wearing nothing but a loincloth and his skin glistened despite the chill in the air.

A young man, almost of a size as the giant, was climbing over the rope further round the ring.

“What be your name, lad?” asked a small man in a grease stained tunic.

“Zik,” said the lad, grinning. There were a couple of cheers from the onlookers.

“Zik here offers the challenge,” the small man shouted, holding up Zik’s arm. “If he lasts against Bear Barrup until the bell he be getting two paraks and if he be besting the Bear he be getting ten. A goodly amount even Morath would be pleased to get if It could but best Bear Barrup!”

There were a few more cheers but Logan got the feeling Zik was not overly liked and that the crowd was on the Bear’s side in this contest.

“What say you, Bear Barrup? Do you accept the challenge?” shouted the small man.

The giant grunted.

“The contest be on!” shouted the small man. “Make yourself ready, Zik.”

Zik grinned and removed his shirt to reveal a body of indolence rather than toil.

“When the bell sounds, come out fighting!” shouted the small man and quickly jumped over the rope.

The fight, such as it was, did not last long and the Bear growled as he strode back to his stool. A couple of men helped Zik away.

“Do we have another challenger?” shouted the small man, jumping over the rope. “It only be a half parak to make the challenge and them as bests the Bear be walking away with ten paraks! Any takers?”

“Is he any good?” asked Logan. “He seemed most impressive to me but I have not the skill to judge.”

“He relies on his size and weight,” said Autumn, watching the Bear closely. “And I fancy he glistens so from oil not sweat so he be difficult to grip but he shows no skill.”

“Could you best him?” asked Logan.

“Yes,” said Autumn, “but I will not. Let us see if there be a cloth seller here and enquire what our half parak will get in exchange.”

“You say you could best that brute?” asked an older man standing behind her.

Autumn turned to look at him. He was well formed but with a belly and his beard was streaked with grey.

“Aye,” she said. “His size is a disadvantage for it makes him slow and he does not have the skill to counter that. ’Twould be a simple matter.”

“So why don't you challenge?” asked the man. “If you don't have the half parak I will stake you and we split the winnings equally.”

“We have the money,” said Autumn, “but I do not choose to fight this man.”

“Why not?” the man asked. “If you be as skilled as you claim then it be easy money.”

“I have my reasons,” said Autumn. “Come, Logan, let us leave this place.”

“I trust I have not offended you,” said the man. “I be Yofa Bewelc. Mayhap I can invite you to sample a beverage with me? I have a fancy that your reasons would interest me.”

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, “and this be Logan, my companion. We thank you for your offer but we are in need of a weaver or seller of cloth.”

“I am a trader,” said Yofa, “and have some cloth. Mayhap if you join me we can discuss your needs further.”

“Then we thank you, Yofa Bewelc,” said Autumn. “Lead on.”

“You are strangers in these parts?” asked Yofa as they made their way to another stall.

“Aye,” said Logan. “We be travellers heading North.”

“There be little to the North,” said Yofa. “Why do you go that way or are those reasons secret as well?”

“No secret,” said Autumn. “We simply desire to learn more of this land.”

“A noble cause,” said Yofa. “Many do have that curiosity but lack the courage. But you are new to this town, have you sampled our local speciality? 'Tis called kino and is made from milk.”

“We have not had that pleasure,” said Autumn.

“Then allow me to remedy that immediately,” said Yofa. “Find somewhere to sit in the sun and I will fetch us some.”

He waved in the general direction of a sunlit area nearby and headed

off towards a stall.

"I wonder what manner of cloth he has," said Logan sitting on the ground.

"No doubt we shall find out soon enough," said Autumn.

"I know I should not bring this up," said Logan hesitantly, "but if you could beat that Bear so easily, would it not be good to gain us ten paraks?"

Autumn sighed and gazed absently into the distance, weaving her fingers through the blades of grass.

"I am a Krisana," she said slowly. "I am trained to fight and my training and my belief is to only fight for necessity when there is no other option."

"I know this is a wrong question but I am not certain of your answer," said Logan. "Is not a plentiful amount of money to buy us clothes a goodly reason?"

"You should be able to see the answer to that easily enough, Logan," said Autumn. "Yes, money to buy clothes would be good and I would also like to get you a new knife but there are other options as yet. We have not sought any work nor considered other alternatives." She gave a long sigh. "But there is yet another reason and one that I must face squarely."

"Can I ask what it is?" asked Logan, trying to sit cross-legged as Autumn did but he could only get one ankle on a knee.

"In the throwing of the balls," said Autumn, "I found that I experienced pleasure at the besting of that man. It was a prideful thing to defeat all five coconuts and I deeply regret permitting myself to feel that way. That is why I will not challenge that Bear Barrup for I know I can best him easily and there is no need to best him. If for some reason he attacks you or I then so be it but a challenge at a fair? No, that would be for the pride of it and that I will not permit. Vanity is a fault that comes easily to me and I must dominate it else someone

gets hurt needlessly at my hand.”

Logan nodded thoughtfully.

“I can understand that,” he said after a few moments. “I too am full of pride at your skills.”

“What skills do you talk of?” asked Yofa joining them. He passed over two thin clay pots of kino and sat beside Autumn.

“The skills of life and knowledge of one's self,” said Autumn. “Tell us of this cloth you have.”

“Oh there be no rush,” said Yofa. “What do you think of the kino?”

Autumn sipped hers and coughed.

“That be like no milk I have every tasted,” she said, looking at it. “What animal be it from?”

“It is cow milk,” said Yofa, “but fermented.”

“Like beer and wine are fermented?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Yofa, “but this is not as strong. You will be sick from the milk before you lose your senses from the fermenting but it gives a pleasant flavour, does it not?”

“Aye,” said Logan, taking a gulp of his. “It is very refreshing as well.”

“That be the sweet berries added in the fermenting,” said Yofa. “Tell me of your reasons for not challenging Bear Barrup. Your talk suggests you are a fighter of some skill yet your appearance says otherwise. 'Tis my experience that those who look as you profess no fighting skills and would never presume to comment so methinks your appearance may be deceptive and your staff is incongruous for one so young. I wager you have no need of aid while walking.”

“I have some skill in that direction,” said Autumn, “but I only fight when there is no alternative and I refuse to do so for the pleasure or

entertainment of myself or others.”

“Ahh,” said Yofa, sipping his kino. “I have met one such as you before although he was not as comely as you in appearance and some summers past me. He was a Krisana of some Esyup or other, I forget which. Be you a Krisana as well?”

“Aye,” she said, “I am.”

“And you, Logan?” asked Yofa. “I notice you carry a similar staff.”

“Oh no,” said Logan, peering inside his empty pot in case there was any hidden kino. “I’m just an ordinary person.”

Yofa laughed. “Which Esyup are you from, Autumn?” he asked.

Autumn gave him a slow look.

“Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup,” she said after a while. “I am a Krisana of Morath and Vallume.”

“I know it not,” said Yofa, “but Morath, eh? You must be a skilled fighter if you are a Krisana of War.”

“I survive,” said Autumn, “unless it be Morath’s Will that I do not.”

“And women?” asked Yofa. “How does Vallume reckon in this beyond the demands of Feandra?”

“Why do you probe so deeply into these things?” asked Autumn.

“Oh, no reason beyond curiosity,” said Yofa, “but if you do not wish to talk of these things let us talk of other matters. What manner of cloth do you desire?”

“We are from the South,” said Autumn, “and accustomed to a warmer climate. Here we feel the cold. We desire clothing that will protect us from the cold.”

“How far North do you intend to go?” asked Yofa. “I have clothes that

would suit for this weather but if you go far North you will need furs and several layers of underclothes. and they are expensive.”

“How expensive?” asked Logan.

“Clothing for this place in winter for you both,” said Yofa, “oh, seven to ten paraks depending on what ornamentation you desire. For the far North, at least thirty.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “We only have a half parak for us both.”

“Then perhaps you would be best advised to return to the South,” said Yofa.

“We are considering it,” said Autumn, “but there is another option we have yet to try.”

“Indeed?” asked Yofa, draining his kino. “Would that be a secret as well?”

“Nay,” said Autumn. “You might even be able to help us there. Do you know anyone who would pay us for our labour for a time?”

“You are looking for work?” asked Yofa. “Well now, would you like some more kino?”

Chapter Seven

Logan watched Autumn.

She sat cross-legged, her eyes closed, her face calm and relaxed. Her arms loosely clasped in her lap, her breathing slow. She sat on an outcrop of rock part way up a hill. Nearby the fire burned low. To the West the edge of Plakill was below the horizon with Plifal close behind, its orb half gone. To the East Astauand's glow was brightening the sky. Behind, the hill rose, carpeted with grass and bushes and scattered with thin trees. To the South lay Ahtolgo.

Logan sat with his back to a small tree. Beyond Autumn lay the field of the fair and beyond that the quiet dwellings of the townsfolk. A rooster crowed, its call distant and plaintive. A dog answered then fell silent. Logan closed his eyes.

When he opened them again Astauand's orb was half present. Thin spirals of smoke rose from chimneys. Birds chattered as they told of their dreams. A door slammed in the distance and, moments later, a man strode away from a small row of dwellings, heading towards a distant field. A cow lowed, then another. A fox paused near the bottom of the hill, something limp in its mouth, and looked up the hill. It tested the air then went on its way, alert but unafraid. Autumn sat, unmoving.

A shrieking brought Logan's eyes open again and he leaned forward, searching for the cause. Two large black birds, ravens perhaps but indistinct, were fighting over scraps in the fair field, somewhere near the cake and pie stall as far as Logan could remember. Astauand was fully an orb above the horizon, perhaps more. People were moving about the town. Faint snatches of voices carried up the hill. The fire was nearly out. A maid emerged from a cowshed with two wooden pails. Autumn still sat, unmoving. Close enough to touch, a rabbit sat in the grass beside her, chewing on green stalks. Two others did the same a little further away. Astauand was warm on Logan's face, chasing away the chills of the night.

He stood up and drank from the water skin then bent to Autumn's pack beside the fire. He broke off some cheese and a handful of the

coarse flat bread but left the remains of the large honey and berry cake Yofa had pressed on them the evening before. Returning to his tree he sat and resumed watching, slowly chewing the bread and cheese.

Astauand was halfway up its climb when the first figure appeared in the fair field. It pulled a hand cart and stopped by a table. Slowly the figure started to unload the cart. After a while a second figure appeared and the first abandoned the unloading to go and discuss the business of the day before or the business of other townsfolk, there was no way of knowing as their voices could be heard but their words indistinct. High overhead a bird of prey watched, circling, then, as a bark of laughter rose and one figure clapped the other on the shoulder, the bird slowly headed off to the North West. A scattering of other figures appeared in the fair field as the stall holders began to prepare for a new day. Autumn still sat, unmoving.

Logan shifted over to sit beside his tree, facing it. Finding a twig, he scratched a I in the soil at its base where no grasses grew.

“One,” he muttered then scratched another beside it. “Two.”

After four he drew a line across them, IIII, and muttered “five”, then started again, counting higher. He had reached IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII before he ran out of space. “Forty three,” he muttered then glanced over at Autumn. Still she had not moved.

“I have eight groups of five,” he said to himself. “I know that be forty for I have counted the strokes but why can I not count direct from that? Why do I have to count the strokes? If someone were to say to me they had eight groups of five I should not have to draw eight groups of five and count them to get forty. Surely there is a better way?”

Irritably he smoothed the soil and slowly scribed IIII III G IIII and stared at it. Something was nibbling at his mind but it was slippery and wriggled out of his grip.

He heard a long drawn sigh and glanced over at Autumn. She had her palms pressed together in front of her face.

“Mizule,” she said softly. “I need counsel.”

She stayed like that for several heartbeats then relaxed and opened her eyes.

“Welcome back,” called Logan.

She twisted round to see him then smiled.

“Tis a beautiful day,” she said. “How be you?”

“I am well,” said Logan. “You were a long time today. Is all well with you?”

Autumn unwound herself and got up and stretched.

“I am troubled,” she said, coming over. “What are you doing?”

“I was playing with the tallying you showed me,” said Logan. “It bothers me but I know not why.”

“So, we both have troubles,” said Autumn. “This is not good. Life should be for living and experiencing the present as it is, not worrying over troubles. Worry is the mind’s worst enemy.”

“I do not think that I am worried,” said Logan, “but there is something about this manner of tallying that does not sit well with me. Still, no matter. What be your troubles? Mayhap I can help?”

“Mayhap you can,” said Autumn, reaching for the water skin. “I shall do my exercises then discuss my troubles with you, for you are part of those troubles.”

“Sploop,” said Logan, looking up anxiously. “What have I done now?”

“Nothing,” said Autumn, smiling. “It is what you may do. Nay, not even that. What I may do but you may have some involvement.”

“Now I have worry when I did not before,” said Logan.

“Do not worry, Logan,” said Autumn. “I spent much time thinking and I shall shorten my exercises in recompense then we shall talk. What is happening in the field yonder?”

“They seem to be getting ready for another day of the fair,” said Logan. “Yofa said there was one more day of it. I saved you the rest of the honey and berry cake.”

“You have it, Logan,” said Autumn, starting to do some stretches.

“Do you not like it?” asked Logan.

“I like it too much,” said Autumn.

“Ahh,” said Logan. “And you won’t let yourself enjoy it.”

“That be right,” she said. “If I allow myself to enjoy the cake too much I will begin to crave it and that be as bad as worry.”

She suddenly jumped into a backward somersault, landing on her feet then leapt to kick a branch overhead. Logan watched for a while then leaned against the tree. Autumn’s exercises always made him feel exhausted.

Astauand was almost at its peak when Autumn stopped and wandered across the hillside looking among the shrubs.

“What are you looking for?” called Logan.

“Caradace,” she called back then stooped to pluck a leaf.

“Are you hurt?” called Logan, standing up.

“A minor cut,” she called back. “Tis only a scratch.”

“You do not need caradace for a scratch,” said Logan striding down the hill. “Show me.”

Autumn pulled up the hem of her tunic to show Logan the blood welling out of a small tear in the side of her calf. Half her calf was red

and wet.

“Tis not big but it is deep,” she said. “I will wash it then bind it. It will heal soon enough.”

“How did you do it?” asked Logan.

“When I side kicked that tree,” she said striding up the hill with only a slight limp. “I did not see a small twig protruding and it stabbed me.”

“I will get the waterskin,” said Logan, running past her.

She sat down beside the now dead fire and Logan poured water over her calf and scrubbed it with grass to clean her leg then he wrapped the caradace leaf around the injury and tied it with several grass stalks.

“Does it hurt?” he asked.

“Of course,” said Autumn, “but I choose not to suffer from it. The pain is merely an opportunity to reflect on my over confidence and failure to see the consequences of that kick.”

“If you say so,” said Logan, giving the caradace leaf a gentle pat. “Have the honey cake, it will make you feel better.”

“You seek to reward my failings?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Logan, fetching the honey cake. “I am asking you to aid my suffering.”

“How will me having the honey cake aid your suffering?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“I do not want to crave it,” said Logan, “yet all the time it is uneaten I do crave it. If you have it you will ease my burden.”

Autumn laughed.

“You play word games with me,” she said. “You seek to twist my

beliefs and use them against me.”

Logan sighed. “Why is it such an issue for you to eat some cake?” he asked. “It’s only cake! Sploop!”

Autumn inspected her leg then Logan’s face.

“Indeed,” she said, “it is only cake. I thank you, Logan Philosopher, for teaching me a lesson and for the cake.”

“I dare not ask,” said Logan, going to get her pack.

“Dare not ask what?” asked Autumn.

“Here is the bread and cheese,” said Logan, “and the last of the cake. I am not going to ask you what lesson I have taught you. It is going to be one of those everyday things that you turn into a profound truth about something.”

“And that is why I call you a philosopher, Logan Philosopher,” said Autumn. “For it is the everyday things that we take for granted that are the most profound like the sun that gives us life or the friendship that brings us joy.”

“I am not listening,” said Logan, sitting down.

“Come, let us share the cake,” said Autumn, breaking it in half.

“Thank you,” said Logan, taking the piece she offered him and watching as she made a big show of eating her piece. “So what are the troubles you talked of earlier?”

“Ahh,” she said. “Yes, I meditated long and found no resolution. You recall the offer Yofa made yesterday?”

“The offer of work?” asked Logan. “Yes, it seemed quite reasonable to me. He is a trader and has to deliver two cartloads of supplies to a mine in the mountains beyond the hills and he needs another driver and a guard. Why does that trouble you?”

“What troubles me is the need of the guard,” she said.

“Yofa said there are bandits in the hills that may seek to take the supplies,” said Logan. “Mayhap you think we should ask for more than the two paraks a day he be offering?”

“I would not know the value of such work,” said Autumn. “No, what concerns me is that I may have to kill to protect his carts and that would be at odds with my beliefs. In effect I would be killing for money.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “I see.” He thought for a moment. “If the supplies on the cart were yours would you not kill to protect them?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I can live without whatever those supplies are so if these bandits desire them I would give the supplies to them and wish them well.”

“Yes,” said Logan. “We have talked about that before. But surely if you are guarding the supplies you have a responsibility to prevent their being taken?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Therein lies my trouble. On the one hand I have that responsibility yet on the other I see no reason to kill unless mine or another's life is in immediate threat. I think we have to turn down the offer.”

“I understand your point,” said Logan. “But two thoughts come immediately to mind. One is that you have been in many fights but have not yet killed anyone. Is it not likely that anyone who attacks us seeking to take the supplies will run away or at least be defeated before they let you kill them?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I have thought on that. But what if the attacker insists on death rather than give up the fight?”

“Well,” said Logan, “that was my other thought. You have said to me many times that you can only deal with what is happening in the moment. It be likely that we deliver the supplies and return without being attacked but it would be wrong of you to say that it will be so.

There are many possibilities for the future and we know not how they will eventuate. In the same manner, if we are attacked there are many possible outcomes, and only one of which will mean the death of the attacker. I hear what you say but it seems to me that you are being inconsistent. Indeed, now I think on it, you have used that reason for letting someone go. I said they might attack us or another in the future and you said that they may not. What may happen in the future is no reason to kill someone now.”

Autumn stared down at the increasing activity in the fair field below.

“There is that Bear Barrup,” she said after a while, pointing. “I would not fight him yesterday because I would not fight for the entertainment or others nor of myself. It seems to me that fighting for money is as bad.”

Logan plucked a grass stalk and started to chew it.

“You also said,” he said, taking the soggy chewed end from his mouth and inspecting it, “that if Bear Barrup attacked us you would not hesitate to fight him and, if bad fortune should happen, kill him. Yofa does not want you to entertain him, he wants you to protect the supplies if they are attacked. If they are not attacked, just as with Bear Barrup not attacking us, there is be no need to fight and no need to kill anyone.”

“A fair point,” said Autumn, reaching for the bread and breaking off a piece, “but if Bear Barrup attacked us I would be fighting for our lives, not for some supplies that could be easily replaced.”

“But if we were attacked by these people in the mountains,” said Logan, tossing away his stalk and selecting another, “would we not be fighting for our lives?”

“It seems to me,” said Autumn, “that there are two aspects to that. The first is that by taking this offer of work we are actively looking for a fight rather than having one chance upon us through ill fortune. The other is that if we are approached by those wanting the supplies we will be required to fight rather than simply give them the supplies.”

"I confess I did wonder why you did not immediately accept Yofa's offer," said Logan. "I now begin to see your reasons. It appeared simple to me at first. We need paraks to pay for clothes and Yofa wanted to give us paraks. 'Twas not as simple as I thought."

"And that be why I was so long meditating today," Autumn said, "and the reason why I am troubled for I do not see either accepting or rejecting as simple and clear."

"You surprise me," said Logan, scratching his leg. "What reasons do you have to accept? From what you have been saying it would seem rejecting is the only option."

"These supplies are for a mine some days distant," said Autumn. "What if the lives of those that work the mine depend on these supplies? By not aiding their safe delivery would I not be in some way responsible for their deaths? My earlier argument was based on the supplies being easily replaced but in this case they are not. If the supplies are lost it will take many days to gather more supplies and deliver them and they may again be taken."

"I had not thought of that," said Logan. "Indeed it may take far longer as Yofa did say that some of the supplies have to be collected from the port for they have come from a far off place. Mayhap word would need to be sent to send more and the delivery could be a long time coming."

"There is yet more," said Autumn. "Yofa be a trader and depends for his livelihood and that of his family on the doing of trade. What if his life and those of his family are at risk if this trade with the mine fails?"

"I do not think we can be responsible for that," said Logan. "He accepted this trade knowing the risks and it is his responsibility to take such measures as he needs to take to safeguard himself and his family. If we reject the offer then he should find another to do the protecting."

"He explained that last night," said Autumn. "I think it may have been when you went to be sick from all the kino you drank. Yofa has had a number of attacks on his carts in the past and no one in the town will

now aid his deliveries. If we do not it is likely that he will not be able to continue trading and the mine will not get deliveries.”

“Yes, it was a tasty drink,” said Logan. “I did like it right well but I may have had too much. For certain it did help me sleep though. There is another thought that comes to me. If we do not accept his offer we put ourselves at risk of attack and possible death from cold as we will be unable to buy warm clothing.”

“That is a baseless argument,” said Autumn. “If we do not accept this offer we can try to find other means to get the clothing and if none succeed we simply go back South. If it were as simple as killing for clothing then I would reject it immediately. No amount of clothing is worth the taking of a human life.”

“You are right,” said Logan. “I did not think before saying that. Ayah, this is a thorny question. Perhaps it would be best if we reject the offer. It seems to me that if we do not know what to do then we should do nothing, at least until we reach the point where we do know what to do.”

“I am saddened to hear that, Logan,” said Autumn, “for it puts us at odds and I do not like it when we are at odds.”

“How so?” asked Logan, puzzled. “I thought you did not know what to do?”

“I did not when I was meditating,” said Autumn, “but you told me what to do when we talked of the cake.”

“You mean that lesson you think I taught you?” asked Logan.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “The one you did not want to hear about.”

“Oh,” said Logan, his expression changing from puzzled to perplexed. “So what have you decided?”

“To accept,” said Autumn.

“And risk killing someone?” asked Logan. “How did the cake lead you

to that? Surely you are not giving in to craving?”

“Absolutely not,” said Autumn, “although if you are not going to have that piece of cake, can I have it?”

Logan laughed and handed it over.

“When you got upset because I rejected the cake,” Autumn said when she’d finished it, “I realised that your friendship is real whereas my concerns about the cake were abstract. Yes it is good not to be in thrall to cravings but it is an ideal not a reality whereas your friendship is a reality.”

“So you are saying my friendship is not ideal?” asked Logan innocently.

“Is that another of your attempts at humour?” asked Autumn, curling her lip.

“Sorry,” said Logan. “Please continue.”

“Noxu once said that purely theoretical considerations are pointless and potentially misleading,” said Autumn, gazing out over the town and the people going about their lives. “I am only now beginning to understand what he meant. I had not realised but until I left the Esyup the only consideration I could give to any matter could only be theoretical because I knew nothing other than life in the Esyup. Mayhap I understood that without thought and that is what lead me to leave but no matter. I did leave and I begin to see that the purely theoretical has little to offer in the real world, regardless of how one chooses to think of reality. We have a need in the real world. Yofa has a need in the real world. The mine has a need in the real world. These bandits seek to disrupt that which Yofa, the mine and we should be free to do.”

“Even if it means killing them?” asked Logan.

“I will do everything in my power to avoid that,” said Autumn, “but it is as you say. By attacking us they are creating the situation.”

“Mayhap there be a flaw in your thinking,” said Logan after thinking for a while.

“Assuredly,” said Autumn. “I am not perfect.”

“Well, that's arguable,” said Logan, “but do not the bandits have needs as well? Should we not take their needs into consideration?”

“Everyone has needs,” said Autumn, lying back in the grass, “and everyone has a choice of some kind. Yes, the bandits have needs but they do not have to choose to attack us. They could choose some other course of action.”

Chapter Eight

Yofa spat on his hand and proffered it to Autumn.

“To a profitable journey,” he said.

Autumn looked at his hand then at Logan then back at Yofa.

“My concern is with safety,” she said, “I care naught for profit.”

“Then you do not wish to be paid?” asked Yofa with a broad grin, wagging his hand in the air.

“Yes, we wish to be paid,” butted in Logan quickly in case Autumn turned down the paraks. He spat on his hand and grasped Yofa's.

Yofa hesitated then spat on his hand again and proffered it to Autumn, again.

“To a safe journey,” he said.

“Aye,” said Autumn and spat on her hand before grasping his.

“Good, said Yofa briskly. “To business. We head West to start, for the port at Cape Shugsuo where we pick up some things what be coming in by boat from Wase then head North East across the Mapdil Mountains to the mine. 'Twill take a day to reach the sea, mayhap half a day to transact my business.”

“How long will it take to get to the mine after that?” asked Autumn.

“Four or five days, mayhap longer if the weather be bad or there are delays,” said Yofa.

“And how many will be journeying?” she asked.

“Just four,” he replied. “Me and Esogar, my son, and you two.”

“That does not seem many,” said Logan.

“We have two wagons,” said Yofa. “Two people for each wagon. I be fair with a sword and Esogar be a tolerable archer. With four, things bode well.”

“How many bandits are there in the mountains?” asked Autumn.

Yofa grimaced. “Do not worry about hordes,” he said. “If we be meeting bandits they be small in number. I will share the word around town that a Krisana be with us and that should spread. With Aloidia’s aid that alone may suffice to keep them away. When we return to Ahtolgo we shall tally the number of days and you will be paid.”

“Do we need to take food and water with us?” asked Logan.

“Nay, lad,” said Yofa. “We carry supplies and Esogar will keep us in meat on the way. There be streams aplenty and we will carry skins. Meet us at the crossroad at dawn tomorrow for the journey start. Now, with your pardon, I have much to do.”

He gave a nod then strode away.

“We appear to have work,” said Logan, watching him depart. “The thought should cheer me but in truth I find I am a little sad. I know not why though.”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I too. Methinks I know the reason however. We have this day lost our freedom and independence. We are in thrall to another and it does not sit over well with me.”

“It be only for a few days,” mused Logan. “Then we have our freedom back and paraks too.”

“I left the Esyup to find knowledge and experience the world,” said Autumn, turning away. “I wonder in what manner this experience of the world will change us?”

“How would it change us?” asked Logan, following her.”

“I know not,” said Autumn, “but there may come a time when I or we disagree with Yofa on some matter and instead of debate and

persuasion he may try to withhold payment to make us do his bidding.”

“I do not see that path would aid him much with you,” said Logan. “You are open to debate but paraks? I think not.”

“It will be interesting if and when that time comes,” said Autumn. “If it does then it will be a time of great learning for me for I seek to know myself and at that time I will learn more about myself. My vanity says I shall refuse to do what I believe to be wrong but what vanity thinks and the self does oft times be very different things.”

* * *

“This be Esogar,” said Yofa when Autumn and Logan came out of the light mist.

“Greetings, friend Esogar,” said Autumn. “I be Autumn and this be Logan.”

Esogar was a slightly smaller version of his father, with a shorter beard and more hair on his head. He nodded and smiled amiably.

“And these be Ronnus and Malkia,” said Yofa, nodding at the two horses between the shafts of the large, flat wagons.

“Hello,” said Logan to Malkia who turned to look curiously at him. Her eyes were level with his. She snorted and tried to nibble his hair so Logan scratched her forehead.

“I be taking the lead wagon,” said Yofa, “and Esogar the other. Autumn rides with me and you, lad, with Esogar.”

“No,” said Autumn. “I ride with Logan.”

Yofa frowned at her.

“The most valuable goods be on this wagon,” he said. “I want you by me if we be attacked.”

“If we are attacked the length of a wagon will make little difference,” relied Autumn evenly, “and I can watch both wagons from the second. Besides, I venture you will find my company irksome for I spend much time in inward contemplation and Logan knows my ways.”

Yofa scowled.

“That be an order,” he growled. “And I do not take kindly to them as do not do what they are told.”

“Our agreement was that I shall protect you and your wagons,” said Autumn, “but my understanding is clearly in error. I shall bid you good day, Yofa Bewelc,”

She nodded politely and started to walk into the mist. Logan hesitated then followed and Malkia turned her head to watch. Ronnus whinnied and swished his tail. Yofa stared after them and Esogar gave a half smile and turned to check something on the wagon.

“Yammoe,” swore Yofa.

“What be we doing now, Da?” asked Esogar.

“I knew that maid would be trouble,” said Yofa tiredly. “Go bring her back. Tell her she can ride with the lad.”

Esogar hurried after the two figures half hidden in the mist.

“Da says you ride together,” he said, catching up with them.

Autumn stopped and looked back at the two wagons.

“What do you think, Logan?” she asked.

“You have made your point, I venture,” said Logan.

“Mayhap,” said Autumn and marched back to Yofa.

“We need to clarify a matter,” she said.

“Oh aye?” said Yofa. “I reckon as how I be paying you so you be a doing as I bids. It be right simple.”

“No,” said Autumn. “You be paying us to perform a task and nothing more. Your paraks do not buy my obedience, merely my protection. I am a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume and I will be in thrall to no one.”

“You be a Krisana of pride and contrariness,” said Yofa. “But needs must and I am flexible even as you are not. I will pay you one parak each day for protection and for nothing else.”

“We agreed two paraks,” said Autumn, “and sealed the agreement. Would you show your dishonour before your son by breaking it now?”

Yofa stared at her then screwed up his nose and scratched his bald head.

“Very well,” he said. “Two paraks a day, but we leave now else we take this as a half day.”

“Agreed,” said Autumn. “Come, Logan, let us get on the wagon.”

She climbed onto the wagon and sat on the narrow wooden bench. Logan climbed beside her.

“So which of you be driving?” asked Yofa, watching them sit there.

“He is,” said Autumn, pointing to Logan.

“Me?” said Logan surprised. “I have never driven a horse and cart before.”

“Nor I,” said Autumn. “Umm, is it difficult?”

“Oh, Yammoe take us all,” said Yofa testily.

He marched over to the wagon and picked up the reins.

“Take these,” he said, thrusting them at Autumn who took them and passed them to Logan. “To make the horse go forward, flick the reins.

To make her stop pull them backwards and to go to one side pull the rein that side. Got it?"

"Umm, I think so," said Logan, nervously.

"See that bit of wood, there?" said Yofa pointing to a piece of wood sticking up at the front of the wagon.

"This?" asked Logan, leaning forward to touch it.

"Aye," said Yofa. "That be the brake. If we stop on a slope, and that be most of the time as we be travelling in the mountains, use your foot on that to stop the wagon rolling."

"Ahh," said Logan, "my foot, yes," and he put his foot on it experimentally.

Malkia twisted her head round to look at him and whinnied and Ronnus pawed the ground. Esogar leaned against the side of the front wagon, picking his teeth with a fingernail.

"Best you tell him about going downhill as well, Da," he said. "It be downhill most of the way to the Cape."

"I be a coming to that," growled Yofa. "Going downhill you need to use the brake so the wagon do not push the horse. You need to keep the wagon under control."

"Under control, yes," said Logan. "Umm, yes."

"But best to give the horse her head," said Yofa. "She be knowing what she be doing."

"Give the horse her head, right," said Logan.

Yofa scowled again then stalked off to climb onto the lead wagon. Esogar climbed up beside him then, after a mutter from his Da, turned round to sit facing backwards. He smiled and waved at Autumn and Logan.

“What do you suppose 'give the horse her head' means?” Logan asked.

“’Tis probably something to do with feeding her,” said Autumn, “but I venture we will find out by keeping a close eye on Yofa.”

Logan watched Yofa closely as he flicked the reins and Ronnus moved away, pulling the lead wagon behind him.

“I venture Yofa will not be best pleased if we arrive a day behind him,” said Autumn after a few moments.

“What?” asked Logan. “Oh, you mean we should be going?”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

Nervously Logan flicked the reins and the wagon jerked as Malkia took the strain.

“Why are we not moving?” asked Logan, flicking the reins again.

“Mayhap you are not flicking right,” said Autumn, “although the horse seems to be wanting to move.”

“Take your foot off the brake,” called Esogar.

“What did he say?” asked Logan.

“He said to take your foot off the brake,” said Autumn.

Logan quickly slid his foot off the brake and the wagon lurched forward making him fall over backwards onto the sacks piled behind him. Esogar laughed and said something to Yofa who turned and glowered at them. Logan climbed back onto the bench.

“Where are the reins?” he asked.

“I though you had them,” said Autumn.

“I let go when I fell backwards,” he said.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. She looked around then pointed between the shafts to where the reins now dragged along the ground behind Malkia. “I think they are down there.”

“Ahh,” said Logan.

He stared around helplessly for a few moments then knelt on the edge of the wagon. Cautiously putting one hand on one of the shafts to steady himself he tried to grab the end of the reins, very conscious of Malkia's hooves. He didn't notice Esogar watching in fascination.

“I be not reaching them,” he panted.

“Mayhap with your staff?” asked Autumn.

The wagon lurched as it hit a pothole in the track and Logan nearly fell between the shafts. He pushed himself upright.

“I do not see how to grasp the reins with the staff,” he said then lurched to the side as Malkia followed Ronnus around a bend.

“Perhaps if you climbed down between the shafts you could reach the reins with your foot,” suggested Autumn.

“Down there?” said Logan, aghast, “the horse will step on me!”

Esogar jumped off the lead wagon and waited beside the track. As Malkia drew level he grabbed the rein attached to her bridle and let it run through his hand as she walked past.

“There you are,” he said with a smile as Logan drew level.

“Thank you,” said Logan, taking the reins.

“It be easier if you do not let go,” said Esogar.

He walked back to the lead wagon and climbed back on. Autumn watched him.

“It seems a lot faster up here,” she remarked. “Why are your knuckles

white?”

* * *

“Stop!” called Yofa holding up his arm.

Malkia brought the wagon to a halt before Logan found the brake with his foot.

“We be resting the horses before the descent,” said Yofa, getting off his wagon and fetching a feed bag from the back.

“Ahh,” whispered Autumn. “It appears Yofa be giving his horse its head. Do we have one, I wonder?”

She jumped off the wagon and scanned the back and found a feed bag. She took it round to Malkia and held it while she ate. In the distance, the blue grey sea glittered in the sunlight and the track they were following snaked down the side of the ridge and across a narrow plain to a small town on a promontory. Coarse grasses and scrubby bushes covered the land but gave way to fields as the land flattened.

“Be that Cape Shugsuo?” she asked.

“Aye,” said Yofa coming over.

“It is a strange colour,” said Autumn. “We have seen the sea before, in the South, but it is much bluer there. Be this the Looncan Sea?”

“It be the Azour Sea,” said Yofa. “At least that be what it is called while the coast goes South. When the coast turns East it be the Looncan Sea. Tie the strap on the feed bag over the horse's head. Save you standing there like a billy-up.”

“What is a billy-up?” asked Autumn, tying the strap around Malkia's head.

“’Tis a shiftless fool,” said Yofa.

“I see,” said Autumn. “What is on the other side of this sea?”

“A land called Sassese'lte,” said Yofa.

“I have not been there,” said Autumn, “I have only once left Aferraron and that be to Neander and 'twas but for a short time. You say this place be a port? Be the vessels coming from Wase as well?”

“But rarely,” said Yofa. “Wase be far to the East. Mostly what comes here be from Sassese'lte although some be coming up from Neander. The Cape be a good port for boats. You see where the town be lying?”

They moved further along the ridge so Yofa could point out features of the Cape and the port that nestled along its edge.

Logan had wandered along the ridge in the other direction to ease the tension in his legs.

“How be the driving, Logan?” asked Esogar, joining him.

“It be a skill, no doubt about it,” said Logan.

“You will need to be careful,” said Esogar. “We be following the track downhill from now on. You will need to use the brake all the time else the wagon will try to go faster than Malkia and she will get exhausted holding it back.”

“Ahh, thank you for the warning,” said Logan.

“Twill take a little practice,” said Esogar. “You need to use the brake to slow the wagon to Malkia's pace but not stop it but I am sure you will get the knack of it.”

“I had not realised it was a skill,” said Logan. “I have seen people drive horses and carts and it looks so easy.”

“Ahh, yes,” said Esogar, “umm, tell me, Logan. Are you and Autumn together?”

“We are companions,” said Logan. “We travel together.”

“No, I mean, umm, together,” said Esogar, putting his hands together

to illustrate his meaning.

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

"Are you joined?" asked Esogar.

"Oh, you mean ...," said Logan and Esogar nodded. "No, we merely travel together as companions."

"So she is available?" asked Esogar.

Logan laughed. "No," he said. "Definitely not."

"She has an era'owen elsewhere?" asked Esogar. "'Tis most strange she be travelling with you then."

"No, she has no era'owen," said Logan. "Umm, she is a Krisana and she has made a vow about that sort of thing."

"What sort of vow?" asked Esogar, looking puzzled.

"A vow of chastity," said Logan.

"Chastity?" said Esogar. "You mean she does not ...?"

"No," said Logan.

Esogar gave a low whistle. "What a waste," he muttered, looking over at Autumn talking to Yofa. He grinned suddenly. "Mayhap I can persuade her to break her vow," he said.

"I would caution you against that," said Logan. "Autumn be a right skilled fighter."

"So you say," sniffed Esogar. "Seems to me she be too small to put up much of a fight. I be saying that to Da but he disagrees for some reason."

"Did you not see her practising beside the wagon after the mist had risen?" asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Esogar, “she can run and jump. No matter. I was not planning to fight with her.”

“I am pleased to hear that,” said Logan. “I venture also your father would not take kindly to you distracting his protection.”

“Yes, there is that,” said Esogar thoughtfully. “Still, when this trip be ended she be a free agent again. Mayhap I shall bide my time for now.”

* * *

“I was talking with Esogar,” said Logan when they resumed their travel.

He kept his foot lightly on the brake and watched Malkia closely for signs she was being pushed by the wagon.

“I saw you,” said Autumn. “Tis good that you are finding a friend.”

“I do not think we will become friends,” said Logan. “He was asking me about you.”

“Mayhap his father now doubts my skills,” said Autumn. “I was over harsh with him this morning but the point needed to be made.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan. “But Esogar was not asking about your fighting skills.”

“What then?” asked Autumn, giving Logan an indecipherable glance.

“He wanted to know about you and men,” said Logan. “I told him of your vow but he did not seem impressed.”

“Ah,” said Autumn. She thought for a few moments. “He is not the first with such thoughts and no doubt will not be the last. How did the conversation end?”

“I venture he will do nothing until this journey is over,” said Logan. “He fears his father more than you, but 'twould be good to have a care

before that.”

She reached over and squeezed his hand. “Thank you, friend Logan. It lightens my humour to know you watch over my welfare.”

Logan went slightly pink and did not speak for a while.

“Do you know what goods we are collecting from this port?” he asked.

“Yofa told me that a vessel has arrived from Wase with spices, perfumes, incense and other rarities,” she said. “I know not what use a mine has for such things but that is the way of the world. Who knows what burrowing underground all day does to the one burrowing but it is not for me to judge. I venture many find my manner of living not to their taste.”

Chapter Nine

Astauand lay straight ahead, a faint glow behind the grey cloud that stretched all the way to the horizon. The sea, now more grey than blue, moved sluggishly and slithered greasily up the pebbled beach, hissing as it fell back. The shore was littered with broken wooden slats, shards of glass, rotten food, tattered strips of cloth, human waste and, occasionally, isolated clumps of seaweed. More floated in on the swell. Tied to the low wooden jetty two large boats rose and fell with the water, their sails furled. Further out something floated that looked suspiciously like a dead body. There was a pervasive smell that was not pleasant.

“We will stop here for the night,” said Yofa. “We will get some food from yonder hostelry and sleep by the wagons. Every man, woman and child in this place be a thief or cut-throat what will take anything they can and like as not kill us while we sleep.”

“Why then do we stay here?” asked Autumn. “Would it not be prudent to spend the night in a secluded place outside the town?”

“There be safety in numbers,” said Yofa, nodding towards the half dozen or so other wagons lined up on the shore. “Outside town we be prey to rovers looking for a quick profit but here we all look out for each other. Esogar, you attend to the horses and I will seek out my agent and find my goods that be here somewhere. Stay with the wagons 'till I return.”

“Aye, Da,” said Esogar and he laconically moved to start untying Ronnus. Logan started to do the same with Malkia.

Autumn surveyed the shore then turned to inspect the town behind. The buildings lining the shore were ill-kempt and the road in front of them rutted and muddy. Some of the buildings had wooden slats laid in the mud outside their doors. Indistinct voices could be heard coming from them all and occasionally a burst of song. A group of men, three or four and all ill dressed and downcast, came round the corner and disappeared into the first building, unspeaking as though it were pre-arranged. A chill wind blew in off the sea, carrying the thick smoke from their chimneys inland.

Two wagons further along someone had made a fire and several of the drivers sat around it, talking amongst themselves. Some gulls swooped and cried around the jetty, their cries like the screams of children in the Land of the Undead. The air felt damp.

“Tie Malkia to the wagon,” called Esogar. “No grass round here for ‘em so put her feed bag on.”

Obediently Logan walked Malkia to the back of the head wagon and tied her next to Ronnus then returned for her feed.

“It is quieter here than I expected,” said Autumn, going over to join them.

“It be close to dark,” said Esogar. “Boats what isn’t here by dark stay out to sea for the night and them as is on land be in their houses or a hostelry where it be warm and the ale flows.”

“Where are the hostelries?” asked Logan.

“There,” said Esogar, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “They all be hostelries.”

“All of them?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Esogar. “There be a lot of people here what works loading and unloading the boats and they spends their time and money there. Be a few fights as the night progresses, I warrant.”

Esogar busied himself checking the straps holding the multifarious bundles and sacks on the backs of the carts.

“I do not like this place,” whispered Logan.

“Mayhap the people be kind,” whispered Autumn back, “but I agree. This place does not nourish the spirit. Them as live here are neglectful of it. Let us make a fire for a bright fire in a dark place is a cheerful thing.”

* * *

“Good, you've made a fire,” said Yofa coming back some time later.

“All well, Da?” asked Esogar.

“The boat be late,” said Yofa, squatting by the fire to warm his hands. “Were due yesterday but has not arrived. Mayhap it be arriving tomorrow.”

“Do we wait until it arrives?” asked Autumn.

“Can't rightly say,” said Yofa. “We have all the other things to deliver so we cannot wait here forever for a boat that never arrives, but there is always the risk it comes in the day after we leave. 'Tis late in the season and storms take many a boat. The man tells me a boat that left Uli-Rratha the day after ours arrived yesterday but we know not what stops on the way our boat be making. We will wait tomorrow at any rate, I'll decide after that.”

“It seems an uncertain business, being a trader,” remarked Autumn.

“That be the truth of it,” said Yofa. He cleared his throat and spat in the fire then stood up. “Right, time to get some food, methinks. 'Tis getting chill and food and some ale will warm us.”

Esogar stood up and Autumn and Logan remained sitting by the fire.

“You two not eating with us?” asked Yofa.

“We have some roots, bread and cheese,” said Autumn. “We will pass the time here.”

“As you wish,” said Yofa and started across the road, then he came back.

“You do understand that I be supplying the food for this journey, do you not?” he asked. “That be usual practice. If you be eating your own food because that is what you like, that be good but you be welcome to join us in The Anchor.”

“What about guarding the wagons?” asked Autumn.

“Them over there will keep an eye,” said Yofa. “Just as we do when they be away.”

“In that case we thank you most kindly, Yofa,” said Autumn, getting up. “I did not wish you to think I was shirking my responsibility.”

“I do not know you well, Autumn Savannah,” said Yofa, “but that thought had not crossed my mind.”

Inside, The Anchor was full of smoke and noise and was lit only by the roaring fire at the far end. A large woman sweated profusely as she cooked great trays of fish and chopped roots over the flames. Three large barrels occupied most of another wall and simple, rough trestle tables filled most of the available space. Shouts and raucous laughter filled the air. At one table near the fire a group of men were playing some sort of game with dice that involved much cursing and praying to various gods. Further back, where there was less light other men sat morosely, hunched over pots and exchanging gloomy prophecies with their companions. A few women moved around from table to table.

“You be back then, Yofa,” said a fat, harried looking man with a greasy beard and greasier hair. He did not appear overly pleased to see Yofa.

“Aye,” said Yofa, “for my sins. Fish and ale for four, if you please, Gough.”

“Be but a short time,” said Gough. “’Tis quiet in here tonight.”

“What must it be like when it be busy?” whispered Autumn to Logan.

“We shall sit over there,” said Yofa, pointing to a table nearer the darker end of the room. Two men were making their way away from it, dragging a third between them.

“Hello handsome,” said a woman as Logan brushed past her. She smiled encouragingly.

“Hello,” said Logan, smiling back.

"You be a fine looking lad," she said, "Staying the night in town, are you?"

"Yes," said Logan, "mayhap two."

"Ohhhh," said the woman, following him to the table. "Full of energy, I like that. What be your name?"

"Umm, Logan" said Logan, sitting down beside Autumn on the bench. "What's yours?"

"Susui," she said sitting on his lap. "Why don't you come back to my place? We can get to know each other." She started stroking his hair.

"Oh Sploop," said Logan, looking at Autumn with the air of a frightened rabbit.

"Try somewhere else, Susui," laughed Yofa. "This lad be besotted with the maid."

Susui stopped playing with Logan's hair and looked enquiringly at Esogar who shook his head.

"Pah," she said, and got up.

"Susui seemed very friendly," said Autumn. "I did not expect the people in this place to be so welcoming."

"Oh, Susie be a very friendly girl," said Yofa, "if you've got a half parak handy."

"I do not understand," said Autumn.

"Best you keep it that way," said Yofa. "There be things in this world it be best you don't enquire too deeply into."

"Do you know what he means, Logan?" asked Autumn.

"Oh, what?" asked Logan, jerking round. He'd been watching Susui get instantly engrossed in a deep conversation with a man at another

table. "Sorry, I wasn't listening."

"Yofa was saying that ..."

"Here be your ales," said Gough, thumping four foaming pots of ale on the table and splashing them all. "Fish be coming. A parak if you please."

"I'm not besotted with anyone," said Logan, indignantly, suddenly realising what Yofa had said.

Yofa tossed a parak to Gough who caught it and bit it. He nodded and pocketed the coin.

"Just said that to get rid of Susui," said Yofa with a grin.

"Oh," said Logan, his eyes straying back to Susui. "How old do you think she is?"

"Mayhap eighteen summers," said Yofa, "going on fifty. Don't you go getting yourself involved with a girl like that, lad. She be spitting you out for breakfast."

Esogar sniggered into his ale.

"What do you mean?" asked Autumn as Susui got off the other man's lap and walked away.

"Ahhh," said Yofa, taking a gulp of his ale. "I be saying that Susie be as tough as you, 'cepting in a different way. Young Logan here wouldn't stand a chance. She'd make mincemeat of him."

"She be a Krisana?" asked Autumn, perhaps a little incredulously.

"Mayhap in her own way," said Yofa. "Where's that fish? I am hungry."

He stood up and glared at the woman slaving over the hot fire. She ignored him so he sat down again. The men playing dice started cheering and called for more ale. In a dark corner, someone started to sing, a sad, slow ballad that was quickly drowned out by jeers. Susui

reappeared and sat beside a man sitting alone on a bench nearby.

“Four fish,” said Gough reappearing. He had two pots of ale in one hand and four flat plates of fish balanced precariously along his other arm. He slammed the pots down, splashing more ale on the table, then rapidly threw down the plates and scooped up the pots again in a single swift move before disappearing again.

“Ahhh, smell that,” said Yofa delightedly inhaling deeply. “Best fish in Aferraron.”

He and Esogar pulled out their small knives and started to eat and Logan used his fingers.

“This does not smell like fish,” said Autumn, sniffing hers.

“That be the herbs,” said Esogar. “They make the fish taste better.”

Autumn broke off some fish with her fingers and slowly chewed it.

“Aye,” she said, “it be strange but not unpleasant.”

A man stumbled as he passed behind Logan, knocking him forward then grabbed Susui’s arm.

“Oy,” he said roughly, “come with me,” and started to drag her away.

“Get off me,” she shouted and slapped the man’s face. He slapped her back and Autumn’s hand grabbed his arm as he drew back for another blow.

“Hold!” she commanded.

Susui kicked the man’s shin and he cursed and danced for a moment on one leg before letting go of Susui’s arm. He gave her a hard shove and she fell back onto the man she’d been sitting with. The man bent to rub his leg and Autumn released him and jumped to her feet. The man grabbed Susui as she struggled to get off the other man.

“Hold, I said,” said Autumn, catching the man’s arm again as he

raised it to punch Susui.

The man lurched and swung around angrily, his other fist flailing in Autumn's direction. Logan ducked instinctively and Yofa sat back and watched with interest. Autumn dodged the man's fist and pulled him off balance, throwing him into another man who was turning around to see what was happening.

Susui's attacker climbed to his feet and a broad bladed knife appeared in his hand. Instantly the people nearby pulled away and a small empty space appeared around the man and Autumn.

"Five paraks on the maid," called someone.

"Taken," came another voice.

"Two on the man," cried a third.

The man lunged at Autumn and she sidestepped and stumbled over a bench and fell onto the table. The man crashed into a different table and a couple of men who were sitting there threw him off. Susui laughed and clapped. The man picked himself off the ground and Autumn jumped to her feet, still on top of the table. The man slashed wildly at her ankles and she jumped above the blade bringing a foot down on his arm and kicking his knife hand with the other foot. The knife went flying. Quietly Logan picked it up and slid it inside his tunic. The man shouted something unintelligible and tried to grab Autumn's ankle with his other hand but managed only to hit her calf. Autumn grimaced then kicked him in the face with her heel and he fell to the ground, blood spurting from his nose.

"Wayyyy," shouted Susui, "that'll learn ya!" and she spat at him.

The man climbed to his feet again and wiped the back of his hand across his face then stared at the blood.

"Two paraks on the maid," shouted a voice but no one answered to take the bet.

The man stared at Autumn who watched him calmly.

“Get down here,” he shouted, pointing to the floor.

Autumn lightly jumped off the table to land in front of him.

“Do you yield?” she asked.

The man stared at her then suddenly snatched a pot of ale from the table and threw the contents at her face, soaking the man behind her as her face was no longer there. Her foot landed in the man's belly and he doubled over, sprawling unconscious on the floor as the side of her hand caught him at the base of his skull.

“He does now, the shit,” shouted Susui and cackled.

Gouph appeared with another man, even bigger than he was.

“Are you done?” he asked Autumn, staying out of arm's reach.

“’Twould appear so,” she said.

“Then sit you back down while we clear up the mess,” said Gouph.

“Where is Susui?” asked Autumn. “Is she uninjured?”

Gouph laughed expressionlessly and jerked his head towards the fire. Susui was already talking to another man.

“Take more than a grab to put her out of business,” he said. “Come on.”

He and the other man grabbed an arm each and dragged Susui's unconscious attacker away.

“I saw you grimace,” said Logan. “Did he hurt you?”

“It was nothing,” said Autumn, sitting back down beside him. “He merely hit my leg where I injured it yesterday. ’Tis a trifle sore. Where be Yofa?”

“He has gone to collect his winnings,” said Esogar. “Do you want

another ale? He threw yours at you.”

“No, thank you,” said Autumn, “although some water would be a kindness.”

“In here?” said Esogar with a bark of laughter. “They be not knowing what that stuff is. Ale, wine or spirits be your choice, or fish juices from the cook. That were a good fight, most impressive.”

“I shall return in a moment,” said Autumn, getting up again.

She made her way over to Susui who looked up as she approached, a happy smile on her face.

“Ayah, that were a delight to see,” said Susui. “What be your name?”

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn. “Are you unhurt?”

“Oh, take more than a little slap to hurt me,” said Susui, “but thank you all the same.”

“Why did that man attack you?” asked Autumn.

“Vahaj knows,” said Susui. “Why do any men do what they do? Mayhap he had too much ale, I know not and care less.”

She giggled as the man she was sitting on whispered something in her ear.

Autumn studied her face then nodded. “As long as you are uninjured,” she said. “I bid you farewell.”

“Thank you again,” said Suzie, focussing her attention again.

“Ahh, there you are,” said Yofa when Autumn returned to the table. “This were a right profitable evening! I am five paraks the richer. We should go into business together.”

“I do not fight for money,” said Autumn.

“And that be a crying shame,” said Yofa. “We could make a fortune. So why did you fight this evening?”

“I made a vow,” said Autumn.

“Your chastity was not threatened,” said Yofa.

“Another vow,” said Autumn. “As a disciple of Vallume I have vowed to protect the sanctity of women and Susui was attacked by that man.”

Yofa stared at her then burst out laughing.

“The sanctity of Susui?” he spluttered. “Oh, that be rich. That Susui sells her sanctity to the highest bidder!”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn, frowning.

“Ayah,” said Yofa, glancing at Esogar. “That Susui, she, umm, lies with men for paraks. That be her business, so to speak.”

“Oh,” said Autumn.

She stared at the half eaten fish congealing on the plate.

“But that be no reason to mistreat her,” she said, looking up. “Who she lies with is her choice and no reason to strike her.”

“Aye, well,” said Yofa, “that be as maybe, but 'tis always going to be a risk for women in that profession.”

“Profession?” said Autumn, startled. “You mean many women do this?”

“I would not say many,” said Yofa, “but a fair few.”

Autumn looked over at Susui who was kissing the man she was sitting on.

“I know little of the real world,” she said. “Do such women do this for pleasure?”

“Why does anyone do anything for money?” asked Yofa. “Them as enjoys what they do and gets paid for it be the lucky ones. Most be not so fortunate.”

“You have given me much to think on, Yofa,” said Autumn. “I thank you for broadening my knowledge, if not my understanding.”

“Are you going to finish your fish?” asked Logan.

“It is yours,” said Autumn, pushing the plate over.

“Thank you,” said Logan, beaming happily.

Yofa watched him eat then finished his ale.

“Best be getting back to the wagons,” he said. “We have been gone over long.”

He got up and the others followed him.

“Until next time,” he called to Gough who gave him a cursory wave.

“Surly bugger,” he muttered pushing open the door.

“There be the bitch,” called a voice and four men appeared, three with swords drawn and one with blood smeared over his face.

“Well now,” said Yofa. “Seems we be invited to a party in your honour, Autumn. There be only four of them, do we all go or be you going alone?”

“I venture this be a private matter,” said Autumn, “and of no concern to you nor Esogar. Your wagons be not at risk.”

“As you wish,” said Yofa, “although we will be close if you should need assistance. Come Esogar, we shall return to the wagons.”

He and Esogar slipped away towards the fires on the sea front. Logan, coming through the door last, leapt to Autumn's side, brandishing his newly acquired knife.

“Stand clear, Logan,” said Autumn, testing the mud of the road with a foot. He backed away one pace.

“How do you want to die?” sneered the man with the bloodied face. “Quick and painful or slow and painful?”

“I do not wish to die as yet,” said Autumn, “but I hope your nose does not pain you too much.”

“It hurts like Yammoe,” snarled the man. “Get her!”

Three swords hacked at Autumn who was already out of reach before they were fully lifted. One of the men went sprawling from a foot in his throat. A second man lunged at Autumn and she sidestepped and chopped down on his wrist with her hand. He dropped the sword and fell as her other hand found the back of his neck. The third man circled warily as the man with the bloodied face picked up the first man's sword behind Autumn.

“Behind you,” shouted Logan and she whirled, her foot lashing out, as a sudden whoosh swept through the night air.

“Oh, good shot!” came Yofa's voice as the man with the bloodied face dropped the sword and arched backwards, clutching at the arrow protruding from his buttock. The third man raised his sword to strike Autumn only to receive a foot in the chest and a knife in his arm from Logan. He screamed and dropped the sword then ran off clutching his arm. The man with the arrow in his bottom backed away then limped as fast as he could up the road.

“No it wasn't, Da,” came Esogar's voice from the darkness. “I was aiming for the bugger's heart.”

“Never mind,” came Yofa's voice. “Collect those swords before someone steals them. We can get a good price for them. They ain't hardly been used,” and he laughed, a deep rich belly laugh.

Chapter Ten

“I be right glad to be gone from that town,” said Autumn as Malkia pulled them up the ridge. “Three nights be long enough.”

“Yes, it was a depressing place,” said Logan. “Villages and towns be not as pleasant as the countryside.”

“I wager there 'tis more than that to it,” said Autumn. “I fancy it be the nature of the people as well. Cape Shugsuo be home to almost no one. It be a place where others just pass through so they do not care and make no effort to put back in to the place.”

“But them as do live there, surely they would have more pride in the place?” said Logan. “That Gough neglected his hostelry. I venture in time to come it will fall down.”

“Aye, 'tis a puzzle,” said Autumn. “Mayhap some would say that we are the same as we travel but we have a care to leave each place as we find it. Such waste as we leave behind we bury so it feeds back into the cycle of life but there they just toss it away to accumulate and care not about the consequences so all do share in suffering. With small effort the place could be kept as somewhere that delights the spirit.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “but on the bright side we did find those two discarded blankets and the blood washed out easily enough. We will be warmer now at night. Yofa said it will be colder in the mountains.”

“Yes,” said Autumn, “and that be a puzzle too. Why would it be colder the higher we get? I would think we be nearer to Astauand and should be warmer.”

“That be a mystery to me too,” said Logan. “Mayhap it be because we will be closer to the clouds.”

“But you would think it would be warmer when there are no clouds,” said Autumn, “and colder when there are clouds.”

“Mayhap he be wrong,” said Logan. “We are higher than the town now and it is warmer.”

“That could just be because there is no cloud,” said Autumn.

Logan nodded. He wasn't inclined to argue as Astauand was warm and the chill breeze off the sea had dropped. Malkia's hooves clip-clopped steadily along, exchanging the occasional whinny with Ronnus, the uphill climb gentle enough to present no strain. Yofa and Esogar on the wagon ahead barely spoke, each lost in their own thoughts. Autumn perched on the narrow bench, her legs crossed as usual and her head bent forward. As the track zigzagged up the ridge every now and then Ronnus and the lead wagon would follow the sharp turn and they'd come face to face with Logan and Autumn for a few moments. Each time, Yofa would nod and smile then Malkia would take the turn and they would be behind again. Slowly the top got closer.

“I have a thought,” said Logan suddenly.

Autumn lifted her head and blinked. “What be that?” she asked, coming out of her reverie.

“About tallying,” said Logan. “A different way to do it. Umm, what can I write with?”

He turned and scanned the back of the wagon but no writing materials suddenly appeared. He frowned then thrust the reins at Autumn.

“Take these,” he said and jumped off the wagon without waiting for a reply.

He grabbed one of the many shovels on the back of the wagon and walked off over the hillside, testing the ground here and there. When he found what he was looking for he got a shovelful of the fine sandy soil and jogged back to the wagon.

“Mind your feet,” he said and scattered the soil on the floor of the wagon in front of the bench then tossed the shovel on the back and jogged off, heading for one of the scattered trees. He came back with a twig in his hand and climbed back on the wagon. As Ronnus did an about face, Yofa and Esogar looked puzzled and Esogar said

something to Yofa which made him laugh, then Malkia was behind them again.

Logan smoothed the soil with his foot.

“Look,” he said and rapidly scribed $\text{III} \text{ III} \text{ III} \text{ III}$. “That is the tally for twenty, yes?”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“I was thinking about this a few days past,” he said. “It seemed to me that since there are four groups of five it would be easier to write twenty as IIII G III ,” and he scribed that in the dirt too.

“Well, yes,” said Autumn. “It is a little shorter I suppose.”

“That be because twenty is small,” said Logan. “When I was playing with the thought before I used forty.”

He smoothed out what he'd written and quickly scribed $\text{III} \text{ III} \text{ III} \text{ III}$
 $\text{III} \text{ III} \text{ III} \text{ III}$.

“If you count the groups of five,” he said, “there are eight so I could rewrite it this way,” and underneath he wrote III III G III .

“Yes, I can see that that is a lot shorter,” said Autumn. “It is clever but to what benefit?”

“I do not know,” said Logan, “but the way we write numbers seems to be wrong to me. Either we write endless lines or we write the words, but either way it is difficult to do things with the numbers.”

Idly he wrote 'eight' under the III III and 'five' under the III .

“What do you want to do with the numbers?” asked Autumn.

“Mayhap put them together,” said Logan. “Umm. Look, suppose we have seventeen sacks on this wagon and thirteen on the other wagon, how many sacks do we have all together?”

"I would have to draw the tallies," said Autumn.

"That be right," said Logan.

He smoothed the dirt again and wrote IIII IIII IIII II then IIII IIII III next to it then scrubbed out the II and put a I next to the III and crossed that group through so he ended up with IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII.

"So we would have thirty sacks in all but it be a right pain to join them," he said, staring at what he'd written. "I be certain there be a better way. What if we have hundreds of sacks on many wagons? We could spend all day drawing tally lines and joining them and 'twould be easy to make a mistake."

"It would be the same with taking away," said Autumn, thoughtfully. "If we have thirty sacks and give some away how many do we have left? Or if the wind takes some in the night, how many did we lose?"

"Aye," said Logan. "It be a puzzle but one that makes me think."

He smoothed out the soil and wrote IIII III G IIII again then 'eight' and 'five' underneath.

"Pah," he said after staring at it for a while and scrubbed it all out. Yofa smiled and nodded at them again then Malkia went round the bend.

"We be nearly at the top," said Autumn, "one more bend. Yofa will rest the horses, I venture. Do you want to take over driving again after or shall I stay?"

"Hmmm?" asked Logan.

Distractedly he wrote 'eight' in the dirt then 'five' underneath it.

"Shall I stay driving the wagon?" asked Autumn.

"At the top," said Logan, frowning at his dirt.

"Yes," said Autumn, patiently.

Logan scrubbed out the 'five' and rewrote it on top of the 'eight'.

“At the top,” he muttered.

Autumn look at him for several heartbeats but stayed silent. She knew he was in another world, a world of thoughts and ideas and barely aware of this world of wagons and horses.

“Eight groups of five be forty,” he muttered, “and three be forty three.”

He smoothed out everything he'd written and wrote HHH III III then drew a line between the two sets of III.

“Forty three,” he muttered studying the HHH III | III he'd written. “Eight groups of five and three be forty three. Hmm.”

He stared at the writing, unaware that the wagon was going round the last bend.

“One group of five,” he muttered, thinking deeply.

He leaned over and brushed the HHH away and replaced it with a I then slowly drew a line beside it,
 I | III | III .

“One group of five fives,” he muttered, “and three groups of five and three.”

Underneath he quickly wrote $\text{HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH}$ and muttered “one group of five fives,” then he wrote HHH HHH HHH while muttering “three groups of five” then III muttering “three”. Then he counted them all up.

“That be forty three,” he muttered. “One three three be forty three.”²

2 Intriguingly, Logan at this point was 'inventing' the base 5 numbering system, whereby each column takes a place value of five times the one to the right, in contrast with our own base 10 system where the place values are ten times. What makes this intriguing is that when arithmetic and mathematics became fairly widespread in Aferraron it was using base 12, presumably because this gave more scope with fractions, as 12 has 2, 3, 4 and 6 as factors whereas 5 is prime and consequently has no factors, rendering the simplification of fractions impossible. The fact that there are sixteen peks to the parak at that time would have given Aferraron accountants (when the profession did eventually arise) similar issues as pounds, shillings and pence did to British

He stared at the writing again.

“Five groups of five be twenty five,” he muttered, “so twenty seven be two more than that.”

He wrote I || II and muttered “twenty seven” to himself, “five of five and two be twenty seven.”

“Autumn,” he said staring at his work, “look at this,” and gave her a nudge.

He looked up in surprise when his elbow met nothing. They were at the top of the ridge and Autumn was standing talking with Yofa and Esogar while the horses roamed freely, nibbling the grass. He jumped down and joined them.

“I was telling Yofa you are inventing a new method of counting,” said Autumn.

“Oh,” said Logan, feeling self conscious.

“He said it be about time someone did,” she said.

“Aye,” said Yofa. “I have nigh on four thousand paraks of goods on these wagons. It be a right pain in the arse writing that down.³ It be even worse when I sell part and have to work out the value of what be left so I do not sell it too cheaply. Profit be good but oft times I know not how much profit I have made. Paying import duties be more a matter of guesswork than anything. I be most interested to learn your method.”

“Umm,” said Logan, “I, erm, do not have a method as yet. I still be thinking about it.”

accountants. In the context of *The Annals of Autumn Savannah*, this point does suggest that, although popular, the *Annals* may not have been overly influential on Aferraron culture. It can be argued, however, that later mathematicians developed Logan's original concept into the more usable base 12 format which subsequently achieved an element of popularity.

3 To illustrate the problem, 4000 using tallying would require some eight hundred HHH groups. In Logan's system, 4000 could be written as 112000, or 1||1||1|| as his system stands at this point in the text.

“Well, hurry up with it, lad,” said Yofa. “You get it finished afore this journey be over so you can be teaching me and Esogar.”

“Umm, I will try,” said Logan, “but I know not what I be doing. I just have ideas and play with them.”

“Play harder,” said Yofa. “Mayhap when you be done we can sell your method to them as needs a way of reckoning. Hah!” He laughed heartily. “We can use your method to reckon the profits on that, and the sharing of it.”

“Umm, mayhap,” said Logan, looking helplessly at Autumn.

“Do not be counting your chickens before they be hatched,” she said. “Logan be thinking thoughts no one has thought before. There be no telling where he be going with this and mayhap it be of no use for profit reckoning.”

“Well, it might be,” said Logan. “All I have at the moment is a different way of writing numbers but mayhap that may make it easier to reckon the adding and taking away.”

“Good for you, lad,” said Yofa, clapping him on the shoulder, then he turned to Esogar. “Why do you not invent something useful for your old Da?” he demanded.

“’Twould not be possible, Da,” said Esogar with a grin. “Not with the brains I inherited from you.”

“Pah, what brains you have came from your Ma not me,” retorted Yofa then he glanced hastily at Autumn. “No offence intended, like, I just be joking.”

“None taken,” said Autumn with a slight frown. “Where be we heading next? Do we stay on this track?”

“You see them mountains yonder?” said Yofa, turning to point to the North East. “Them be the Mapdil Mountains, and you see that there big one? We head for that then skirt round its base. There be a low pass ’tween that and the one to the right which be making the journey

easier. Sauizuxu mine be the far side. The track heads East so we leave it here and go across country.”

“What do they mine there?” asked Logan.

“Copper,” said Yofa. “Be in great demand to make bronze for swords, nails, hammers and the like.”

“What is copper?” asked Autumn.

“It be a metal,” said Yofa, scratching his belly. “It be found in the ground and has to have the crud taken out of it then it be mixed with tin to make bronze.”

“That is interesting,” said Autumn. “I did not know bronze was made. I confess I had not even thought to wonder where it comes from.”

“Why do they mix copper and tin to make bronze?” asked Logan. “Could not swords and things be made from copper since it is a metal?”

“Nay, lad,” said Yofa. “Copper be too soft. A sword made from copper would just bend when you stab someone. Adding a bit of tin makes it hard and it will take a goodly edge so the blade slides through them easy.”

“Is tin hard?” asked Autumn.

“Nay, tin be soft too,” said Yofa.

“So why does the mixing of two soft metals make a hard one?” asked Logan.

“Mayhap you be working that out when you be finished with your numbers,” said Yofa. “No one knows why bronze be harder but it is.”

“That be right strange,” said Logan.

“Mayhap not,” said Autumn. “If you take flour and mix it with water and heat it on a stone you get bread. Bread is stronger than flour or

water.”

“That be right true,” said Logan. “I never thought on that. I wonder who first thought to mix copper with tin.”

“Mayhap the same person as thought to grind enmern and mix it with water and cook it,” said Yofa. “There be some people who do strange things in this world and sometimes those things turn out right useful. Bloody fools we think of them while they be fiddling. Ever stopped to wonder what people thought of the first person to grind grass seeds and add water? I wager his era'owen thought she be with a right shiftless dreamer.”

“Mayhap it be the woman who did the thinking,” said Autumn.

“Nay, lass,” said Yofa. “Women have more sense than to do foolish things like that. Only a man be stupid enough to grind up seed and pour water on it hoping it will grow some. It be rare but sometimes them as is stupid be lucky too and something good comes out of it.”

He turned to look back the way they had come, back out over the sea past Cape Shugsuo.

“I do not like the look of that,” he said, pointing to a broad dark smudge on the far horizon. “There be a storm heading this way and a big one too, I venture. Let us get the horses and be on our way. 'Twould be good to at least reach the trees before it hits.”

* * *

The wind howled like a enraged banshee and the rain hurtled like spears as Yofa and Logan urged the horses faster towards the tree line. Malkia foamed at the mouth, tossing her head and snorting, her eyes wide with panic. Autumn ran beside her, trying to calm and reassure. Thick black clouds roiled overhead. A crack of thunder shook the air and the ground trembled as jagged lightning slashed and stabbed. It got darker and the wind screamed louder. Malkia tried to gallop but the wagon held her back.

Yofa spotted something and veered off to the side and Autumn pushed

Malkia's head to make her follow. Ronnus plunged between some trees, the wagon scraping one as it passed, the sound lost as Chaahk's anger raged. Malkia, blind with fear, fought Autumn's push and Autumn dragged her, crying out with the effort, then suddenly they were among the trees and the force of the rain dropped.

"Get her undone," yelled Yofa, his voice snatched and hurled by the wind into the woods. Faintly Autumn heard him and looked over. He and Esogar were frantically untying Ronnus who twisted and turned, desperate to run.

"Logan, help me," screamed Autumn, even as Logan leapt from the wagon, her numb and wet fingers scrabbling at the straps that held the wagon's shafts to Malkia's sides.

"... gully, there," came faintly from Yofa then he appeared at her side. "Get her into the gully over there," he shouted at Autumn. "Leave the wagons. Logan, go help Esogar."

Logan ran to help Esogar lead Ronnus, shaking and trembling, down the steep side of the gully into the relative calm. Moments later Yofa appeared, dragging Malkia who bucked and lashed out with her front hooves. One narrowly missed Yofa's head and Logan leapt to grip her bridle.

"Tis I," he called into her ear and rubbed her forehead. "Tis only I, do not be afraid."

Malkia rolled her eyes at him and calmed slightly, enough to lead her over the edge of the gully and down its slope.

"There be some overhanging trees over there, Da," called Esogar, "they'll give us a bit of shelter."

He urged Ronnus along the gully and Yofa lead Malkia in his wake.

"Where be Autumn?" screamed Logan, looking round wildly.

He scrambled up the side of the gully and saw her, beyond the wagons. She was standing at the edge of the tree line, staring back

over the plain.

“Autumn!” screamed Logan but she did not hear, his cry lost in the howl of the wind.

He lurched towards her, fighting the force of the wind pushing him back, his head bowed against the lashing rain and grabbed the sleeve of her robe.

“Autumn, come,” he shouted, “we have shelter.”

He pulled on her sleeve and she snatched it away.

“I have never seen such power,” she said, twisting to look at him, her eyes bright with wonder.

“We have to get to shelter,” cried Logan, pulling her arm.

“Yes,” she said then twisted back to face the storm.

“MIZULE!” she shouted defiantly, raising both arms to the sky. “MI - ZU - LEEEEEE.”

Chaahk answered with a deafening crack of thunder and lightening snaked out from the black clouds, shattering the tree behind her. In horror Logan looked up as the tree fell and a branch pinned him to the ground, the heavy weight of its trunk directly on top of Autumn.

Chapter Eleven

“Logan!” shouted Autumn, leaping to aid him.

He was pinned to the soggy ground, a branch across his chest and his head covered with leaves. She scrambled to get a grip on the branch, trying to lift and break it but could not. Logan did not move.

“Aloidia, you are unhurt,” cried Yofa as he and Esogar skidded to a halt beside her. “We saw the tree fall and you ...”

“Logan is underneath this branch,” she shouted over the howl of the wind, the rain beating incessantly down. “Help me!”

Esogar jumped over the branch and between the three of them they pulled it back far enough that it snapped.

“Urghhh,” moaned Logan and half rolled over.

Esogar shook the water from his eyes and grabbed Logan under his armpits. Yofa and Autumn grabbed his feet and they carried him to the gully.

“Have a care,” cried Esogar as Yofa slipped at the edge and slid halfway down, dropping Logan and pulling Esogar off balance.

“Let me go,” wheezed Logan, struggling, his backside and one leg on the ground and his arms and the other leg held aloft.

They dropped him unceremoniously and he lay for a few moments then rolled over and got to his feet, clutching his chest.

“Down here,” called Yofa, beckoning from the relative calm of the gully.

Esogar jumped, landing part way down and stumbling the rest of the way.

“Do not jump,” cautioned Autumn. “Slide down on your backside. You may have chest injuries.”

She helped Logan to sit at the edge of the gully and he slid down the bank, using his feet as brakes. Autumn jumped and landed lightly beside Yofa and turned to watch Logan's descent.

“Get to the shelter,” said Yofa, wiping the rain from his face. “I’ll help the lad.”

Autumn hesitated then followed Esogar as Yofa hauled Logan to his feet and half carried him along the gully to the patch of trees and bushes. It was by no means dry there but most of the rain did not penetrate. Instead it slid off the leaves and added to the trickle of water running along the bottom of the gully.

Yofa laid Logan on the side of the bank and Autumn carefully ran her hands over his chest.

“I do not think you have broken any ribs,” she said. “How do you feel?”

“My chest is sore,” said Logan, “and it hurts to breathe. My head hurts too. What happened?”

“Cough,” said Autumn, so Logan dutifully coughed then groaned.

“Do you taste blood?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Logan, “I think I have split my lip.”

“But not in your throat?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Logan.

“Good,” said Autumn. “I venture you are not hurt inside, but you have a gash on your head. You will have a lump there tomorrow but nothing more. All this rain has washed it clean.”

“What happened?” asked Logan again.

“Lightning hit a tree and it fell on you,” said Yofa. “You were pinned under a branch but I know not how Autumn escaped. From where we

stood it looked as though she was right underneath it.”

“The tree fell on you?” asked Logan, anxiously. “Are you hurt?”

“I be unharmed,” said Autumn. “The tree fell beside me, between Logan and I. I was merely brushed by leaves and no more.”

“Well, that be right fortunate,” said Esogar as thunder crashed again, but this time some way distant. Lightning lit the sky several moments later.

“Storm be passing,” said Esogar. “Wind seems to be dropping. The rain is starting to come down and no longer be going sideways. If we bide here a while, mayhap the worst of it will be over and we can get back to the wagons and get out the awnings. Mayhap even build a fire to dry our clothes if we can find any dry wood.”

“It comes back to me now,” said Logan. “How did the tree miss you? You were right next to me.”

“Try to rest,” said Autumn, wiping Logan's face with the wet sleeve of her robe. “I am unharmed and that be the end of it.”

“True enough,” he muttered.

Some while later, Yofa climbed the bank of the gully to investigate.

“The wind be just a breeze now,” he reported, “the rain be much lighter and I ain't seen lightning for some time. I reckon as we can go back to the wagons. Be you able to walk, lad, or do you need carrying?”

“I can walk,” said Logan and slowly and painfully climbed the bank on all fours.

Esogar and Yofa guided the horses up and the four of them walked back to the wagons.

“Will your goods be ruined?” asked Autumn.

"I doubt it," said Yofa. "They be covered with cloth steeped in wax and sheep fat."

"That keeps out the water?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Yofa. "Help me lay out the awnings."

Yofa, Esogar and Autumn unrolled the heavy cloths from one side of each wagon and put stones on the edges to hold them to the ground. The other sides were nailed to the wagons and they formed rudimentary shelters. There was just room under each for two to lie, the cloth a scant distance from their noses.

"Why is not clothing made from this cloth?" asked Autumn when she and Logan were under their awning.

"It be too stiff," replied Yofa from under his, "and too expensive for clothes. It takes many coatings to keep the rain out but it be worth it to cover a wagon. It melts if you take it too close to a fire as well."

"Why did we not lay out the awning when the storm first appeared?" asked Autumn.

"The wind were too strong," said Yofa. "It would have got underneath and ripped the awnings away. The awnings be good for light rain but in a storm nothing beats a brick dwelling with a roaring fire, a good meal and a warm bed. Ain't no two ways about it, Autumn. If you be a travelling in a storm then you are going to get cold and wet and that be the end of it."

Slowly the rain grew lighter and the drumming of the rain on the awnings slowly changed to a pattering. The ground was sodden and rivulets of water trickled through. Their clothes were soaked and the night grew colder. Frogs croaked loudly in the gully.

"Be you asleep?" whispered Logan, his head a hands breadth from hers.

"No," whispered Autumn. "It be too cold and wet for sleep. Mayhap we will all catch chills from this night."

“Aye, the dawn cannot come too soon,” whispered Logan. “With Aloidia’s help Astauand will be hot and we can get dry or at the least we can build a fire.”

“It would be a blessing,” whispered Autumn. “Much as I accept my circumstances these do try my patience. Why are we whispering?”

“I wanted to ask you something,” whispered Logan, “and I fancy you do not want the others to know your answer.”

Autumn did not reply.

“Are you asleep?” whispered Logan after a while.

“No,” whispered Autumn.

“I was lying here, remembering,” whispered Logan. “You were right beside me. The tree could not have fallen in between us.”

“It did fall on top of me,” whispered Autumn. “I twisted at the sound but did not move in time. It were a very strange feeling.”

“So the ribbon still protects you from danger,”⁴ whispered Logan.

“So it would appear,” whispered Autumn.

“That is good to know,” whispered Logan.

“Good and bad,” whispered Autumn. “It is good that the tree did not harm me but I can never know if the ribbon will protect me so I cannot rely on it. Mayhap one day its power will fade or its magic is set to end. ’Twould be foolish to put myself in a dire situation only to find it has stopped working.”

“Ahh,” whispered Logan. “So that is why you do not want Yofa and Esogar to know, for worry they might expect you to face a dire situation and then find the ribbon no longer works.”

⁴ In the *First Tale* from the *Annals of Autumn Savannah*, Autumn is given a ribbon by Mother Midcarn to sew to the hem of her robe. This ribbon allowed arrows to pass through her without injury and also prevented Yammoe from harming her while she was in the Land of the Undead.

“Aye,” whispered Autumn, “or mayhap they might try to use my robe for their own purposes.”

“This be a long discussion you be having,” said Yofa from under the other awning. “What be you debating? Mayhap we can all join in and 'twill help pass the night.”

“We were just exchanging views on how miserable this night is,” said Autumn. “’Tis of little interest even to ourselves.”

“Aye, reckon it be a piss poor night,” joined in Esogar. “I remember when I were but a young lad we had a storm that raged for a sennight. We slept in water up to our necks.”

“Take no notice of the boy,” said Yofa. “He has told this tale before but it be all in his mind. ’Tweren’t no storm. When he were a babe he fell into his Ma’s washing bucket, that be all. We fished him out right quick but seems the experience has left a scar on his mind like a sword through his belly.”

“Don’t talk rot, Da,” said Esogar. “I can remember the clouds, clear as day. All white and fluffy.”

“Them weren’t no clouds,” said Yofa. “If it be a storm the clouds be black and heavy not white and fluffy. What you be remembering be the soap suds.”

“So you keeps saying, Da,” replied Esogar. “But I knows what I saw and I knows what I remember.”

They growled about it to each other for a little longer then fell silent again. The rain had stopped and only drops falling from the trees now landed on the awnings.

“Are you asleep?” whispered Logan.

“No,” whispered Autumn.

“So what did it feel like?” whispered Logan. “The tree.”

“Right strange,” whispered Autumn. “When those arrows went through me I felt nothing, mayhap they were too quick but with the tree it was much slower and I felt it travel through my head and down through my body like a feeling of great coldness and emptiness. When it hit the ground it was still on my feet and I had to pull them out of it. The skin of my ankles and feet felt all tingly and shivery.”

* * *

The morning sun rose warm in a cloudless sky. Wisps of steam rose from Autumn's tunic as she sat cross legged on the edge of the plain beside the fire Yofa had built at first light. Her robe was spread across some low branches in the sunlight. Around her the men were inspecting all the goods on the wagons for water damage and laying out what was wet to dry. Behind them, the gully gurgled as water collected and ran along it, a new stream in the making.

“How be your chest this morning?” asked Autumn when Logan came to join her when she had finished her meditations.

“Sore,” he said, “and there be a big lump on my head but I am alive so all is good. Are you not doing your exercises today?”

“No,” said Autumn, then hesitated. “My leg pains me. I shall rest it for a day or two.”

“Did you hurt it when the tree fell on us?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn. “’Twas at Saiwoc. You recall the tree that stabbed me when I was exercising? That cut is not healing right.”

“But that was days ago,” said Logan.

“I have been wrapping it with caradace and other herbs when I find them,” she said. “But it gets worse and last night's soaking did not help.”

“Show me,” said Logan. “It must be quite painful if you cannot do your routines.”

Autumn pulled up the hem of her tunic and unwrapped the caradace leaf tied around her calf.

“Ugh,” said Logan, peering over to look at it. “I’ve never seen grey-green pus before and it looks very red and angry around the edges. It looks swollen too.”

“Aye, it is,” said Autumn. “And for some reason the swelling is going up the inside of my leg. I can feel it above my knee. Can you feel it?”

She laid Logan's hand on the inside of her knee and he gently probed, unable to totally submerge his hormones but trying hard none the less.

“Oh yes,” he said. “It be like there is a lump there or something. Umm, have you tried to squeeze the pus out?”

“Yes,” said Autumn gazing sadly at her leg. “It comes out but there is always more.”

“It must hurt,” said Logan, sitting back on his heels. “Why have you not spoken of this before?”

“Twas just a scratch,” said Autumn. “I have had such scratches before and they have always healed.”

“Aloidia, looks like the lad's luck be changing,” exclaimed Yofa, glancing over. He nudged Esogar. “He be having his hand up the lass's tunic.”

“Lucky old bugger,” said Esogar with a jealous edge to his voice.

“It be not what you think,” said Autumn, pulling down the hem of her tunic.

“Aye, it never is,” laughed Yofa. “Besides you have made a vow, I know. So what be the fuss?”

“Autumn has hurt her leg,” said Logan. “It looks nasty.”

“That be not a nice thing to say about a lass's legs,” said Yofa coming over with Esogar in tow.

“The wound, not her leg,” said Logan.

“Show me,” said Esogar.

Autumn pursed her lips thoughtfully then pulled up the hem again.

“You go and finish the porridge,” said Yofa giving Esogar a thump on the shoulder. “Ain't nothing here for you to look at. Go on.”

Esogar curled his lip and gave Autumn's leg another lingering look then slouched off to the wagons.

“That be right nasty looking,” said Yofa, kneeling down to inspect the wound. “Ain't never seen anything like that before, neither on man nor beast and horses get some funny old scratches. Pus usually be yellow, sometimes with red in but green? Not even a healthy looking green neither. How did you do it?”

“I was exercising and kicked a tree some days past and stabbed my leg with a small twig on the tree.” said Autumn. “I cleaned it and wrapped it in caradace leaves but it has not healed.”

Yofa prodded the edge of the wound with his finger and Autumn winced.

“Just caradace?” he asked.

“I found some hamamielis before we arrived at Cape Shugsuo,” said Autumn, “so I used some of that as well.”

“Hmm,” said Yofa, frowning. “I have some mecatonia which I uses on the horses when they get cuts that go bad. Mayhap that would help.”

“I do not know what it is,” said Autumn.

Yofa went over to his wagon and pulled an earthenware jar from a small box fitted behind the bench and brought it over. Autumn took

the jar and sniffed it suspiciously.

"It does not have much of a smell," said Yofa, taking back the jar, "but it is a pretty colour."

He poured a drop of a vivid violet liquid on his hand.

"It works well on horses?" asked Logan. "Have you used it on yourself?"

"Aye, once or twice," he said. "Stings a bit but seems to work."

"Nothing I have tried seems to cure it," said Autumn. "Mayhap this will. What do I do, drink it?"

"Nay," said Yofa keeping a tight grip on the jar. "I will pour a little on the wound then we will wrap it in another leaf. If it works it will be obvious in a day or two. Umm, I warn you though, it do sting a trifle."

"It does more than sting now," said Autumn. "Put your liquid on."

She bent her knee so the wound on the inside of her calf was more or less flat and Yofa poured a generous amount of mecatonia on to the grey green pussy inflamed area. Autumn gasped and gritted her teeth, then clenched her eyes.

"Mizule," she said grimly, sitting absolutely rigid then she thumped the ground with her hand and her eyes started to water as her compressed lips started to go white.

"Aye," said Yofa. "Stings a bit. 'Twill pass in a few moments."

Logan reached out to take Autumn's hand to comfort her but she shook it off. Then she forced herself to take a deep breath and held it.

"I feel no pain," she muttered, closing her eyes. "I feel no pain."

Slowly her body relaxed and she opened her eyes again.

"That be powerful stuff," she said and wiped the sweat from her

forehead.

“If it seems to work we will put some more on tomorrow,” said Yofa.

Autumn raised an eyebrow but did not say anything. Yofa picked up the old caradace leaf and tossed it into the fire.

“You need a fresh one,” he said. “I shall find you another. Esogar is making porridge to warm us up so you just sit here and eat that until I return.”

“I’ll get you some,” said Logan, jumping up. “Do you want some salt in it?”

* * *

Yofa returned a few minutes later with a handful of caradace leaves.

“Best we change them every day,” he said squatting down beside her again. “Mayhap even more often. How does it feel?”

“It feels good,” said Autumn, putting down her porridge.

“Say the truth,” said Yofa, wryly, “do not be putting on a false face for heroics.”

“Then it be hurting like fire,” said Autumn. “But that is the nature of things. Either it will get better and stop hurting or it will get worse and I lose the leg or die and mayhap it will stop hurting then too. If you be worried about your protection I am still able.”

“I fancy you on one leg will still out-fight them as is on two or four,” said Yofa with a smile. “I will bind this and we will see what tomorrow brings.”

Deftly he bound her wound with a fresh caradace leaf and tied it with grass stalks.

“Still,” he said, sitting back and admiring his handiwork, “’tis a strange place for a fighting injury. You kicked a tree, you say?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, standing up and testing her weight on her leg. “Like this.”

She lifted her leg in the air and moved it sideways to demonstrate.

“And where was the tree?” asked Yofa, looking puzzled.

“There,” said Autumn, “I kicked sideways into it.”

“That makes no sense,” he said. “How did you stab the inside of your leg when you hit the tree with the outside?”

Autumn looked at him thoughtfully.

“Now you talk on it,” she said slowly, “I know not. At the time I was more thinking of the wound and stopping the bleeding but as you say, it is the wrong side. Mayhap the twig was pointing the other way and I did the stab after hitting the tree not before.”

“Perhaps,” said Yofa, “but twigs grow from trees not to them. Still, the injury is done and the how and why of it matters not.”

He paused to eat some porridge while gazing out across the plain towards the distant sliver of sea that touched the horizon.

“I venture none of us slept in the night and we are still drying,” he said. “We shall stay here for a time and sleep then move on when Astauand is at its highest. We can still put in a little distance today and make a proper camp for the night.”

“Sounds good to me, Da,” said Esogar. “Mayhap I can find some meat for the pot on the way. I be not seeing any game around here.”

High in a tree not far away but out of sight, the squat figure nodded to itself then ran along the branch, its muscular legs and feet gripping securely before it launched silently into the air. Its stubby wings lifted it over the tree tops and it leisurely made its way to the North East.

Chapter Twelve

“Well, that be a right bugger,” said Yofa. He stood up at the front of the lead wagon and stared in dismay.

“Where be the ford, Da?” asked Esogar. “Did someone move the trail?”

“What be the matter?” called Logan from behind.

“The ford be gone,” called back Yofa.

He turned and looked back along the faint trail they'd been following then around at the river banks.

“Aye, reckon this be the right place,” he said. “That be the same shaped rocks over yonder and the trail carries on the other side.”

Logan got off the wagon and went over to look. Autumn got down and limped over as well. The river ran deep and fast and foamed as it roared past. A small tree trunk flew by, tossed from side to side.

“Last time I were here this were quiet and shallow,” said Yofa. “Water barely came to the wheel shafts of the wagons which I venture be why there is a trail here even though it be faint. Further up and further down there be steep sides but here was an easy crossing. Ain't going to be so easy now. Water's edge used to be down there a-ways. I reckon water be over the top of the wagons now.”

“So what we going to do, Da?” asked Esogar.

“It be right simple, Eso me lad,” said Yofa, scratching his bald head. “You fix up a fire and get some tea brewing while we thinks on this. Ain't no problem can't be solved without a little tea and thinking.”

Esogar spat on the ground and gave the river a foul look then went to start a fire.

“Why do you think the river has changed so?” asked Autumn.

“It be that storm night before last, I reckon,” said Esogar continuing to

stare at the river. “Must have carried on raining after it left us and all that water that came down further up be coming off the land and into the river.”

“Will the river drop back down again?” asked Logan.

“’Reckon it will,” said Yofa. “Lulerain know when though. Could be days and mayhap there be another storm before it does.”

Esogar fumbled his cauldron and Autumn twirled at the sound, her arms up and ready, then relaxed.

“Sorry,” said Esogar. He picked it up and squatted at the river's edge to fill it with water.

“You are edgy today,” said Logan. “Is your leg painin you?”

“Yes,” said Autumn tersely.

“’Twould seem the mecatonia be not working,” said Yofa. “That be a worry. Can you cope with it for two more days, lass, or shall I put a brand to it? Mayhap we can burn out whatever poisons you.”

“What happens in two days?” asked Logan, looking worriedly at Autumn. Her face was drawn.

“Once we be across the river it be two more days to the mine,” said Yofa. “Mayhap Cymogene will have some thoughts on the wound.”

“Who is Cymogene?” asked Autumn.

“Cymogene Hirao Sastruga,” said Yofa. “She be owner of Sauizuxu mine and tends the hurts of them as works there, and mining be a dangerous business, especially this far from civilisation. She be a right clever woman. Mayhap she has seen the likes of this before and knows how to cure it.”

Autumn nodded thoughtfully.

“And the brand?” she asked. “Be that what I think it be?”

“We have a fire,” said Yofa, nodding to where Esogar was making tea. “’Twould be a matter of moments to put a burning stick to your leg and burn out all that foulness.”

“Would that sort it?” asked Logan.

“I know not,” said Yofa, “but I fancy not. The swelling is going up the leg and mayhap we must burn the entire leg but I have no other suggestions.”

“We wait,” said Autumn firmly. “If the leg must come off then so be it but I desire to explore all other possibles first. Two days be not a long time.”

“That be once we are across the river,” said Yofa. “Sploop knows how long that will take and we may not be able to.”

“Then let us put our minds to this problem,” said Autumn, “and have no more talk of legs.”

“Aye,” said Yofa, taking the wooden cup that Esogar proffered. He sat on the ground facing the river. Esogar gave Autumn and Logan mugs as well then sat down with them.

“Way I see it,” said Yofa after a few sips, “we be having three choices. First be to find a way to cross, second be going back home and third be finding a way around the river.”

“The second seems a waste of time,” said Autumn. “What about the third?”

“Mayhap there be a way,” said Yofa, “but I know it not. I wager if we went higher we could cross the river where it be smaller, mayhap even where it still be a stream, but we will have to go a fair way.”

“If we cross this river are there any others before the mine?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Yofa, “but this be the biggest. Beyond here a day distant lies the pass then the mine be but a day beyond that.”

“So we need to think of a way to cross the river,” said Autumn. “Can either of you swim?”

“I cannot,” said Yofa, “but the lad can.”

Autumn nodded thoughtfully.

“If Esogar could get across with a line,” she said, “mayhap he could fix it to a tree and we could use it to hold on to to get ourselves across and carry the goods. What about the horses?”

“They be big and strong,” said Yofa. “Mayhap if they be tied to the line they can get across and not be washed away. The wagons though?”

“They be a problem,” said Autumn. “They be too big and heavy to take on a line. Mayhap we could pull them through the water?”

“If we got the horses across first,” said Logan, “they could both pull a wagon across, could they not?”

“Mayhap they would float, Da,” said Esogar. “You know, like rafts.”

“That be a thought,” said Yofa. “I have never tried to float a wagon before. What say you we find out first? If they be floating it would make our lives a lot easier.”

“How do we find out?” asked Esogar.

“Take the goods off one and put it in the water and see what happens,” said Yofa. “If it floats then we can try to get a line across the river and if it doesn’t there be no point trying.”

“And if it does float,” said Logan, “mayhap it will float with some or all the goods on it which would make life easier still.”

“See?” said Yofa smiling. “A bit of tea and a sit down helps the thinking.”

“Don’t help much with swimming across though, Da,” said Esogar.

“Mayhap we can think of a better way to get a line across?”

“Aye, that be a point as well,” said Yofa. “Pain in the arse though he be his Ma be right upset if I don't bring him home. Let's try to float the wagon first. Maybe he can float across instead.”

* * *

“What are you doing?” asked Autumn after they'd unloaded one of the wagons.

“Tying the wagon to a tree,” said Yofa, “in case it be washed downriver.”

“I see that,” said Autumn, “but what are the two branches for?”

Yofa had tied one end of the line around a stout tree near the river and laid out the line towards the wagon. He had then found two long fallen branches and laid them on the ground with the line looped around them.

“Just taking precautions,” he said with a grin. “Now then, Eso, you tie this line to the back of the wagon and go upriver a bit.”

“Right, Da,” said Esogar and went to do as bid.

“That be if the wagon do float,” he said to Autumn's enquiring look. “We have no control over it from here but Eso can guide it from up there.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “That be right smart thinking.”

“Don't you be falling in,” called Yofa to Esogar. “Keep a firm grip, mind.”

“Yes, Da,” called back Esogar.

Yofa crawled under the wagon and tied the line to the front wheel shaft then crawled back out.

“Right,” he said. “Let’s be seeing what happens. Ready?”

Autumn and Logan stood beside the tow shafts of the wagon, ready to push it into the water.

“Nay, lass,” said Yofa, “Not with that leg of yours, you stand back. Stay clear of the rope as well, if the wagon gets away from us the line could solve that leg problem right smart.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn and went upriver towards Esogar a short way.

“Ready, lad?” called Yofa to Esogar.

“Ready, Da,” called back Esogar. He braced his feet against a convenient rock then spat on his hands and picked up the line, looping it around his back.

“Right then, Logan, let’s give this old wagon a push,” said Yofa and slowly they pushed the wagon backwards towards the river.

Ronnus and Malkia paused in their grazing of the grass to watch in fascination as the wagon slowly moved until the bank dropped down to the fast moving water then it rolled in of its own accord. For a few moments the wheels lifted off the river bed then there was a sudden cry from Esogar as the river took the wagon and hurled it downstream. The line to the tree instantly went taut with a sharp zinging sound and the branches looped in the line slammed into the ground. The tree quivered and groaned in protest.

“Esogarrrrr!” cried Autumn and launched herself unthinkingly into the river.

“Voqev!” shouted Yofa, wading into the water as Esogar hurtled past, Autumn close behind, thrashing and fighting to keep her head above the water.

“Stop!” cried Logan, grabbing the back of Yofa’s tunic. “Stay out of the water! This way!”

He half dragged Yofa back and down the river bank to where the wagon was wedged tight against the bank, held only by the line and the tree. The river foamed and boiled around the wagon and, a way further down, Esogar was clinging onto his line for dear life.

"I can't see Autumn," cried Logan desperately scanning the river.

"I think that be her, there," said Yofa, pointing to a fallen tree some way beyond that lay partially submerged, half in and half out of the water. "You go see, I'll fetch Eso out."

He ran to get a branch long enough to reach Esogar and Logan hurtled along the bank, desperate to reach Autumn before she was swept away from the fallen tree.

"Hang on," he shouted, "I am coming!"

It was definitely Autumn. The silver ribbon on the hem of her robe sparkled in the sunlight as it fanned out behind her while she clung to the tree with one hand and scrabbled to find another grip further along with the other. Without thinking Logan jumped onto the trunk and ran out along it into the water. The river surged over Autumn's head then she reappeared gasping and spitting,

"Give me your hand," cried Logan throwing himself flat on top of the submerged branches, his hand stretching out to reach hers.

Another surge of water engulfed Autumn and her hand disappeared, then she reappeared again further along the branch. Desperately Logan crawled forward, the tree sinking lower under his weight. He reached out and Autumn managed to lock a finger over his hand then another and then her strong grip took a firm hold.

"I have you," he gasped, "hang on," and he heaved and Autumn lurched towards him and grabbed his upper arm.

"Again," he cried and again he heaved and Autumn was firmly against the tree trunk.

She took a couple of deep breaths then hauled herself out of the water

and onto the trunk behind Logan. Suddenly hands were grabbing her and Yofa and Esogar hauled her off the trunk and threw her on the bank.

“Come on, Logan, take my hand,” called Esogar and Logan reached backwards and was unceremoniously dumped on the bank beside Autumn, gasping and retching.

“Well, that were a right bit of fun,” said Yofa. “You be well, lass?”

Autumn rolled over and threw up a fair amount of water.

“Aye,” she said weakly.

“Good work, lad,” said Yofa hauling Logan to his feet then he bent to help Autumn stand.

“Thank you, Logan,” she said and gave him a hug.

“Can you walk back to the wagon?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Autumn and squelched back upriver.

“She be a tough bugger,” said Esogar, watching her go.

“You be not knowing the half of it,” said Logan and squelched after her.

“How are we going to get the wagon back out of the river?” asked Autumn, when they caught up with her.

“That be why I took precautions,” said Yofa. “You two sit and watch. Come on, Eso, lad.”

The line to the wagon was stretched tightly and the two branches were tangled up in it. Yofa lifted one of the branches and laid it neatly in line with the line then he moved the other so it crossed in an L shape.

“Hold it steady, lad,” said Yofa and Esogar put his foot firmly on the crossing branch.

Yofa bent to pick up the free end of the other branch and walked it over the crossing branch which rotated under Esogar's foot.

"Now you," said Yofa and Esogar picked up his end of the crossing branch and walked it over Yofa's branch.

Autumn and Logan watched in fascination as the two men kept repeating this and the wagon was slowly winched out of the water as the line wrapped around the branch.

"Looks like a shaft be broken," said Yofa, going over to peer at the wagon when it was half out of the water. "It be a nuisance but we can fix that."

He went back to the branches and they carried on.

"Logan," called Yofa when the wagon was fully out of the water, "put a log under the wheel to stop it rolling back."

Logan grabbed a log and rammed it under a wheel then Yofa carefully shifted the crossing branch until a coil of the line slipped off then he unlooped the line.

"That was very cleverly done," said Autumn.

"Aye," smiled Yofa. "A neat trick my Da taught me. Wagons keep getting stuck in the mud. He called it a flip-flop winch. You use one branch to wind the line around the other and it drags the wagon back. Saves exhausting the horses for it be easier to lift a branch than haul a wagon that be stuck."

"What do we do now?" asked Logan.

"Not much point in doing anything now," said Yofa. "It be getting dark soon. We camp here for the night then fix the wagon in the morning. If the river be dropped a lot by then we try again. If not we will head North and try to find another path. I be right tired of getting soaked to the skin. 'Tis good we have a fire and can dry out. Best we get out of these wet clothes and build up the fire."

Tiredly Autumn stood up and stripped off her sopping robe. She wrung it out and draped it over a bush near the fire. Logan fetched their blankets from the other wagon and handed her one.

“Are you all right?” asked Logan anxiously. “You do not look at all well.”

“I am good,” said Autumn. “I am just wet and cold.”

“We will be eating soon,” said Logan. “Some hot food will make you feel better and some sleep.”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

She started to struggle out of her wet tunic.

“Logan,” she said, stopping and looking at him strangely, “I ...,” then she collapsed.

“Voqev,” cried Logan leaping towards her.

“What happened?” said Yofa as he and Esogar ran over.

“She just fell,” said Logan, dropping to his knees and stroking Autumn's face. “She was taking off her wet clothes and she fell. Autumn, Autumn?”

He patted her face and she groaned but did not open her eyes. Yofa knelt down and felt her arm, then her forehead.

“She be cold as anything,” he said. “We'd best get her out of those wet things, and bed her down by the fire.”

He started to lift the hem of Autumn's tunic but Logan stopped him.

“I will do it,” he said.

“As you like,” said Yofa. “Eso, be there any of that rabbit left?”

“Aye, Da,” said Esogar.

“Then make a broth with it,” said Yofa. “The lass needs some food that be easy on the stomach. I will get more wood for the fire and plenty to spare. She needs warming up as well.”

As they busied themselves Logan stripped off Autumn's tunic and started to dry her wet skin with a blanket then he stiffened and hissed.

“Yofa,” he called. “Look at this.”

He wrapped Autumn in the other blanket as Yofa came over, leaving only Autumn's leg exposed.

“Oh my word,” said Yofa coming over with an armful of wood.

He dumped the wood by the fire then came back.

“That would be twice the size,” he said despondently, “and it be turning black.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “and look at this.”

He gently twisted Autumn's leg so Yofa could see the thick blue-black swelling running up it. It was the thickness of a thumb.

“It be going halfway up her thigh,” he said. “What do we do?”

“Not a damned thing we can do until morning,” said Yofa. “Not sure what we can do then either. Best bring her over to the fire and try to get her warm.”

Autumn groaned again and her eyes opened then she jerked in fear when she saw two figures bending over her.

“It be only me and Yofa,” said Logan gently. “Fear not.”

“Ahh, Logan,” said Autumn weakly. She struggled to get up but Logan pushed her back down. “I be so cold.”

“You lie still,” he said. “I am going to finish drying you then I will wrap you in the blankets and make you comfortable. Esogar is making

some broth. Do you think you can take some?"

Autumn shook her head.

"Well, try anyway," said Logan.

Gently he finished drying Autumn then wrapped her in both their blankets then carried her the few paces to the fire and laid her on the ground.

"Here be some broth," said Esogar quietly, putting a bowl beside her.

Logan cradled Autumn's head on his knees then took a spoonful and blew on it to cool it.

"Drink this," he said and touched the spoon to her lips.

Obediently Autumn let him tip the broth in her mouth and she swallowed.

"Again," he said and she had another mouthful.

"Thank you, Logan, my friend," she said in a faint whisper and closed her eyes. "I am going to sleep now."

Logan sat with her all night in the hope that she would wake, but she did not.

Chapter Thirteen

“How be Autumn?” asked Yofa when he awoke a little past first light as was his custom. He liked to use the time before Esogar woke to think through his day ahead and plan.

“She has not woken all night,” said Logan. “She has cried out a few times and became restless for a time but did not wake.”

“Have you slept?” asked Yofa.

“A little,” said Logan, “but I be too worried to sleep contented.”

“Aye, that I understand,” said Yofa.

He disappeared into the bushes for a few moments then returned and stirred the embers of the fire with a stick to liven it up. He added some more wood and put the cauldron on to make more tea. Logan watched him but his eyes kept returning to Autumn.

“Drink this, lad,” said Yofa, proffering a steaming cup.

“Thank you,” said Logan.

Yofa sat on the ground beside Logan, his stocky legs stretched out before him and a cup of tea in his hand.

“I be thinking,” he said then took a few sips of tea. “Afore I went to sleep and I be thinking the same now so 'twould seem a goodly idea.”

“And what be that?” asked Logan.

“Ahh,” said Yofa, letting out a mighty belch. “Damned if that hasn't been trying to get out all night. Must have been all that there exercise yesterday. What were I saying?”

“You were thinking in the night,” said Logan.

Autumn groaned and her body went rigid then she relaxed again. Logan reached over and tucked her blankets around her where they

had been disturbed.

"Ahh, yes," said Yofa. "Yonder wagon," and he gestured with his cup. "Wheel shaft be broken. We can fix it, me and the boy, but it will take time. We have to find a stout branch then cut and shape it to fit then take out the old one and put the wheels back on. Take a day or so, maybe more and the river don't show no sign of going down yet. Mayhap it ain't come up further but it ain't going down. No telling how long 'twill be before that happens."

"So what do we do about Autumn?" asked Logan anxiously. He had plucked a stem of grass and was shredding it nervously.

"That be what I be coming to," said Yofa. "Seems to me that we be having to find another way to the mine, which be closer than going back to Cape Shugsuo. Ain't no-one in Cape Shugsuo who has the skills anyway. Mayhap Cymogene do. Anyway, since that be what we be having to do it makes no sense you staying here waiting for us when you could be finding another way yourself and mayhap get there quicker."

"You mean go on without you?" asked Logan, startled. "But I know not the way."

"None of us do, lad," said Yofa. "I only knows this way across the ford but I be showing you where the pass is and I'll give you a map for where to go the other side. You head off up the river and where you can, you cross over and head for the gap between the mountains. That be where the pass is. We be coming along after you when we can. Mayhap we catch you up but mayhap you be getting to the mine sooner."

"So you think Cymogene will come out to help us?" asked Logan. "How will I find you again if you have not caught up?"

"You be not understanding me, Logan," said Yofa, finishing his tea. "You take the other wagon with Autumn and you find a way to the mine. When Esogar and me fix the wheel we be following what trail you leave behind."

“Take Autumn?” asked Logan, confused. “You mean I take Autumn on my own to the mine?”

“Aye,” said Yofa. “We make some space on the wagon for her to lie then you take the wagon. Mayhap you be getting there sooner and give her a better chance of living.”

“But what about your protection?” stammered Logan.

“Can't say as how she being giving much protection as she is, lad,” said Yofa. “And by splitting up there be a better chance one of my wagons be getting through.” He sighed and looked hard at Logan. “And I be trusting you to not be running off with my wagon and things which be not something I take lightly.”

“But, but, ...” said Logan, looking around unseeingly. “But what if I be attacked?”

“Do the best you can, lad,” said Yofa, “that be all I can say. I be giving you some of the food and firewood and feed for Malkia and when you get to the mine, wait for me and Esogar.”

“But, ...” said Logan.

“And I fancy you will not be wanting to sit here all day watching me and Eso fix the wheel,” said Yofa. “You be fretting either way so best you be fretting doing something productive.”

“But, ...” said Logan.

“Come on, lad,” said Yofa. “You be putting Malkia 'tween the shafts and clear a space for Autumn and I be making you a map. You can be off right now.”

Once Logan's brain grasped what Yofa was telling him he wasted no time. Within minutes Malkia was firmly hitched to the wagon and space made behind the bench for Autumn to lie. Using a burnt twig from the fire, Yofa sketched a crude map on the side of a sack and explained to Logan how to follow it once he was through the pass.

“Remember, lad,” said Yofa after they had lifted Autumn onto the wagon, “we be following your trail through the woods and undergrowth. If you find a trail leave some sign to show which way you went. A bit of sackcloth or something, just so we know and if you hear someone coming up behind you find out who it be afore you tries to kill us.”

“That be not likely,” said Logan, anxious to be underway. “I be not a fighter.”

“Mayhap not,” said Yofa, “but I reckon as how you might be scared and desperate and them as is scared and desperate do funny things. Stay safe, lad, stay safe and may Chershoe and Aloidia smile on your both.”

* * *

Much as Logan wanted to hurry he could not. Though the woods beside the river were not heavy and dense there were trees enough to keep Malkia and the wagon weaving and hollows and tussocks aplenty that needed a watchful eye. Despite his anxiety, Logan had to be alert to the possibility of getting the wagon entrapped for there was no one who could help if it became bogged in the damp soil or snagged on a tree stump. It did not help that he stopped often to check on Autumn when she cried out or tossed and turned. On two occasions Logan paused to investigate possible fords across the river but neither he felt confident enough to try and pressed on, following the river valley.

At length Logan became aware of Malkia's tiredness and decided to stop. Astauand was sinking lower in the sky and night was not far away. He untied Malkia from the wagon and tethered her near the river so she could drink then built a fire.

“Autumn,” he whispered, when he had warmed some rabbit broth, “Autumn.”

She shivered at his touch on her hand but her eyes did not open.

“Autumn,” he whispered again, “come, you must drink this, it is warm and will help you.”

He touched the wooden spoon to her lips but her head twisted way. He tried again but again she twisted away.

“Autumn, please,” he pleaded, “you need to have something, please.”

Her hand snaked out and grabbed his with a painful grip and her eyes flashed open.

“Noxu?” she whispered, “Noxu, is that you?”

“Tis I, Logan,” whispered Logan. “Please have some broth.”

He touched the spoon to her lips again and she let him give her some broth. She swallowed and closed her eyes so he gave her some more.

“Sing to me, Noxu,” whispered Autumn, releasing Logan's hand. “Sing to me so I can sleep.”

“Have some more broth, Autumn,” whispered Logan, “two spoons is not enough.”

He managed to get another spoonful in then Autumn began to sing, in a slow, weak voice

*Vosien lialka
Z pryhozymi rukami.
Jana myje malienki tvar
Z vadoj i krychu myla*

and her hand reached out for Logan's again.

“I am going to sleep now,” she said and her face relaxed and her breathing went quiet and slow.

“Please do not die,” said Logan helplessly. He held her hand and tears began to roll down his cheeks. “Please do not die.”

High in the tree overhead the squat shape perched, listening and watching. Something that might be said to have passed for a smile crossed its ugly face and it stretched out its stumpy wings.

“Twill not be long coming,” it muttered happily to itself.

Then it dropped off the branch and glided away.

* * *

Plifal had almost crossed the night sky before Logan finally dozed. He half woke as a leaf gently brushed his face. He scratched his cheek and dozed off again. Another leaf brushed his cheek.

“Graummmph,” he muttered and flapped his hand.

He rolled over and curled up.

“Who calls me?” whispered the breeze.

“Phreew,” muttered Logan and scratched his face as another leaf fell.

“Who calls me?” sighed the river nearby.

Logan scratched his head and drifted back to sleep. Another leaf fell, then another, tickling his nose.

“Who calls me?” breathed the night.

“Wha’?” said Logan blearily.

“Who calls me?” murmured the leaves in the tree overhead.

“Autumn!” cried Logan, his eyes jerking open.

He jumped up and bent over the wagon, but Autumn lay there, oblivious. He smoothed the rumpled blankets and tucked them back around her. There was a worried frown on her face and her lips moved. He put his ear to her lips but heard nothing, save the softest of breathing.

“We will be moving on soon,” he said quietly. “With Aloidia’s aid we will find a crossing soon. Stay strong.”

He looked down at her leg but there was nothing to see as it was covered by the blankets. The fire had burnt low so Logan added a couple of branches then lay back down.

“That be strange,” he thought. “The fire has burnt low and there be little moonlight. Plakill be not risen yet and Plifal be low in the sky. Why is it so light?”

He sat up again and looked around. There was a glow to the woods. Not as bright as day but definitely a glow, enough to see Autumn's face.

“Who calls me?” came a faint, indistinct voice from nowhere in particular.

“Who is that?” cried Logan, his heart suddenly thumping.

He jumped to his feet and peered around, twisting this way and that. The glow grew perceptibly brighter.

Logan backed protectively against the wagon, his hand scrambling blindly for his staff. Malkia whinnied softly, her breath misting around her nose.

“Who calls me?” said the tree.

“Show yourself,” said Logan, holding his staff defensively in both hands and trying to sound fierce.

The tree shivered and blurred then a shadowy form came away from it.

“Why do you call me?” the shadow said, in a thin quivery voice.

“We need your aid,” said Logan's staff, its voice also thin and quivery.

Logan dropped the staff and back stepped into the side of the wagon.

“Oh Sploop,” muttered Logan. “Surely we be not back in the Land of the Undead?”

“This is the Land of Havildar,” said the shadow. “You need have no fear if you are here with good intent.”

Logan's staff shivered and blurred then a shadowy form came away from it.

“I am Fiau,” it said in its thin quivery voice. “I am of Havildar.”

The shadowy form from the tree began to coalesce into a human shape.

“I am Awendene,” it breathed. “You are of this place but you are not one of us.”

“I am of a tree of Havildar,” Fiau sighed back, also coalescing.

“Ahhhhhhh,” sighed Awendene.

Logan stared in blank astonishment at the tall slender woman that stood before him. She was clad in green leaves and her hair hung in long mossy braids.

“And who are these?” asked Awendene.

“These three be mortals,” said Fiau, herself now clearly visible. She too was slender but not as tall and her mossy braids were short. She was clad in a silvery bark. “They come with good intent and will not stay long.”

“Have they mianuski?” asked Awendene.

“This one's mianuska is Logan, my keeper,” said Fiau, lifting a long thin arm to point to Logan with a long, thin finger. “That be Malkia and there be Autumn.”

Malkia shook her head and resumed her grazing.

“Greetings to you Logan, Malkia and Autumn,” said Awendene. “Autumn' is a good mianuska for one who sleeps so soundly.”

“Umm,” said Logan, “who are you?”

“I am Awendene,” said Awendene. “By what right are you Fiau’s keeper?”

“Umm,” said Logan, “I did not know I was.”

“Indeed?” sighed Awendene.

She raised what looked like an eyebrow and her leaves rustled.

“What is going on here?” asked Logan.

“You are the stranger in Havildar,” said Awendene. “If you know not why, you should not be here and you should not have called me.”

“I did not call you,” said Logan. “We are but passing through, trying to find a way across the river. I am sorry if we, umm, woke you.”

“It was I that called you, Awendene,” said Fiau. “The one who sleeps needs your aid.”

“What manner of aid can one such as I give a mortal?” asked Awendene.

She sounded puzzled although her long thin face remained expressionless.

“There is much lore and learning in Havildar,” said Fiau. “This much I know even though I know little of that lore myself.”

“Perhaps,” said Awendene. “But why should I give my aid to this mortal if, indeed, I can be of any aid?”

“I do not know, Awendene,” said Fiau. “I am but a fallen branch and disconnected but the one who found me and fashioned me put me in the keeping of Logan to give aid to both Autumn and Logan where I can. I know not the reason why but I am enjoined to do so with the knowledge that these mortals will be of great assistance to all in Havildar.”

“What manner of assistance?” asked Awendene.

“I know not,” said Fiau, “only that Havildar will benefit greatly in time to come.”

“Hmmm,” said Awendene. “And who is the one who found and fashioned you?”

“I know the mortal only as Mother Midcarn,” said Fiau. “I do not know if that mianuska has any significance to you or Havildar.”

Awendene shivered and rustled.

“I know that mianuska,” she said. “This mortal is a good friend of Havildar. I must think on this.”

She started to dissolve and slowly merged back into the tree.

“Umm,” muttered Logan turning to Fiau, “I did not know you were a whatever you are. I thought you were just a staff.”

“Nothing is ever just what it appears to be,” said Fiau, her thin quivery voice getting thinner and more quivery as she, too, dissolved.

“But, ...” said Logan then realised she had gone.

He picked up his staff and stared at it and felt it all over but it was just a staff. He tapped it on the side of the wagon and it thunked the way a wooden staff does when tapped against a wooden wagon.

“This be a right funny old dream,” he said and bent to check on Autumn.

She still lay there, silent and unmoving, lines of pain clearly etched in her face and visible in the fading silvery grey glow from the trees around them. A swelling, too, could be seen along the full length of her leg under the blankets, pulsing and throbbing.

* * *

Plakill was high in the sky when Logan half woke again as a leaf gently brushed his face. He scratched his cheek and started to dozed off again then lurched awake.

“Am I dreaming again?” he asked aloud.

The trees were glowing.

Malkia was asleep, her legs curled up underneath her and her nose touching the ground. Autumn moaned. Logan got up and went to check her. She was sweating in the chill pre-dawn air.

“Loogaaan,” whispered a thin quivery voice behind him.

Logan whirled and Awendene stood behind him.

“You are back,” he said. “Am I dreaming?”

“All life is but a dream,” said Awendene, “and what are dreams beyond illusion?”

“Oh, you sound just like Autumn,” said Logan. “This must be a dream and I must be dreaming about her. Can you speak in the Old Tongue as well?”

“My stvaryli Stary Jazyk,”⁵ said Awendene.

“I suppose that was a ‘yes’,” said Logan, “but I know not why I asked as I know nothing of the Old Tongue.”

Awendene just looked at him, gravely

“I be sorry,” said Logan after a while. “I have barely slept in two nights and my mind be addled. Umm, if you are not a dream, why have you come back?”

“I offer what aid I can to the one who sleeps,” said Awendene.

“Oh, good,” said Logan. “Umm, do we need my staff?”

5 “We created the Old Tongue.”

“If it brings you comfort,” said Awendene. “What ails the one who sleeps?”

“It be her leg,” said Logan, pulling back the blankets over Autumn's leg. “She cut it on a tree branch and it be all nasty and there is a big swelling that goes up her leg and grey-green ...”

“Be still,” said Awendene, conveying much authority despite her thin quivery voice.

Her long thin fingers gently undid the grass stalks binding the caradace leaf to Autumn's calf and Awendene stiffly bent to inspect the wound. She studied it for a long time then slowly ran a long thin finger nail along the swelling that ran up the inside of Autumn's leg. Autumn's flesh quivered and twitched and she moaned and tossed her head from side to side.

“Be gentle, I beg you,” said Logan, reaching out to grasp Awendene's hand. It was dry and slightly rough.

“This was no tree that did this,” said Awendene, withdrawing her hand. “There is much evil here and no evil of this world. I venture this be the evil of a minion of Voqev itself.”

“But can you aid Autumn?” asked Fiau, appearing from Logan's staff.

Awendene stepped back from the wagon and Logan gently rearranged the blankets again.

“No,” said Awendene. “This hurt is beyond my skills.”

Chapter Fourteen

Malkia scrambled to her feet and stood there, twin plumes of fogged breath coming from her nose. Her head drooped in tiredness and she regarded Logan and the others with a faint air of annoyance.

Despite still half thinking this was a dream, Logan felt deflated and empty inside at Awendene's admission. How was it possible that even in a dream Autumn could not be saved?

"Oh," he said, then stopped. What else was there to say?

Awendene reached out and grasped Autumn's face in her hand and studied it in the silvery glow from the surrounding trees. Logan and Fiau silently watched her while the river, untrammelled by the affairs of mortals, chattered and swooshed its turbulent passage not far away, unceasing and uncaring.

Awendene peeled back the blankets covering Autumn then she hissed and crackled like a burning log.

"There is strong magic here," she whispered, waving both her hands slowly over Autumn's robe. "Perhaps this is why the mortal yet lives."

She placed her hand over Autumn's heart and Autumn went rigid and stopped breathing.

"What are you doing?" exclaimed Logan. He jumped forward and snatched Awendene's hand from Autumn's chest. "Leave her alone! You said you cannot help her so leave her alone."

Awendene grasped Logan by the scruff of his tunic and lifted him effortlessly off the ground so his eyes were level with hers. They were pale golden and had multiple rings.

"There is yet hope," she said, her voice shimmering like a chill wind through a forest, "but you must trust us."

Autumn relaxed and started to breathe again, short ragged breaths.

"I thought you said you could not help her," wheezed Logan, struggling to breathe with the front of his tunic cutting into his neck.

"I cannot," said Awendene, "but there is another who may have the skill."

"Please put me down," asked Logan, his face starting to turn red.

Awendene let go of his tunic and he fell to the ground.

"Thank you," he said, rubbing his throat. "Who is this other and where is she?"

"I shall call Khimera," said Awendene, "but Khimera may not come. This is a time of much business."

"You have to make Khimera come," said Logan urgently, picking himself up.

"Khimera does what Khimera will do," said Awendene. "We can but ask."

"Then ask, for Sploop's sake," said Logan, starting to get angry. "Autumn is dying!"

Awendene's gold ringed eyes looked steadily at him.

"Contain yourself, mortal," she said. "Life and death are but stages in the endless cycle. Do not fixate upon any one stage."

"This really must be a dream," said Logan, backing away. "Where else would a tree talk Autumn's philosophy to me?"

Awendene ignored him. Instead she went over to the river and, not without some difficulty, stepped off the bank and into its shallows. She bent forward and dipped her hands in the river and stayed there, silent. Malkia followed and rubbed the side of her neck against Awendene to relieve an itch then went over to a patch of grass she had not yet sampled.

“So now what do we do?” asked Logan, going over to stand beside Fiau.

“You wait,” said Fiau. “Beyond that I do not know,” and she merged back into the staff again.

So he waited.

As Astauand rose in the sky, Logan stirred the embers of the fire and added more dry sticks and warmed the remains of the rabbit broth for Autumn. At his urging she tried to drink some but brought it back up. Her face sweated freely and her skin was clammy. Still Awendene stood, her hands and feet in the water. Two brightly coloured birds flew upriver, weaving in figures of eight then paused to sit in her hair, chattering and watching Logan and the river with rapid glances. Suddenly one launched itself and dived at the water, skimming the surface and snatching a silver brown fish in its talons. The other gave chase and they disappeared up river, squabbling incessantly.

Still they waited.

Every now and then Logan dipped a cloth in the cold clear water and bathed Autumn's face and hands. Despite her sweating her skin was cold and she would break into bouts of shivering then lie still again. Occasionally she would moan or cry out and once she beat her fists on the wooden floor of the wagon, causing Logan much alarm, but Awendene did not move.

A few creatures came to the camp, perhaps to drink from the river, but none had the courage and, after staring and sniffing nervously for a time, they left. Malkia finished the grass in the patch she had been grazing and wandered over to stand by Logan. He scratched her forehead and she affectionately pushed him then wandered off to another patch to graze some more. Logan tried to eat some cheese but his stomach was too knotted and constricted.

Astauand was low in the sky again when Awendene stirred. The faint crescent of Plifal hung far to the East.

“Khimera comes,” said Awendene, climbing out of the river.

“Oh, good,” said Logan, sitting up from where he was slouched despondently against a wheel of the wagon. He looked around expectantly.

“Umm, where is ...?” he asked.

“Khimera comes,” said Awendene.

“When?” asked Logan.

“Wait,” said Awendene.

“I wish they would acquire a sense of urgency,” muttered Logan under his breath.

He got up and checked Autumn. She was not getting better on her own and her face was grimy from sweat and the midges that had just appeared in a small swarm. Logan picked up the cloth and went to the river to rinse it. Kneeling on the bank he wiped his face with the cloth then dipped it in the water again.

“What's that?” he muttered, seeing what looked like a single eye looking at him.

As he looked at the eye, another eye appeared beside it then slowly the water bulged and rose up. Logan dropped the cloth and scrambled backwards on his knees.

“What the Sloop?” he muttered, watching in fascination from what seemed to be a safe distance.

The bulge grew to become a column of water, sparkling and iridescent like a waterfall. Up it rose, thickening and taking substance until it was as high as Logan. The two shimmering water grey eyes observed him steadily. A mouth appeared, stern set but suggestive of a willingness to smile. The eyes shifted to Malkia then to Awendene.

“You called me, Awendene?” said the mouth in a voice like a mountain stream leaping and frolicking over pebbles.

The column took on the form of a mortal female, its dress a continuous cascade of water, its hair flashing with phosphorescence.

"I called you, Khimera," agreed Awendene.

Khimera looked back at Logan.

"This is yours," she said, holding out the cloth he had dropped.

"Umm," said Logan. "Thank you."

He took the cloth. It was soaking wet.

"Why do you call me?" asked Khimera after a lengthy pause.

"There is a mortal here with a sickness of great evil," said Awendene. "It is beyond my skills."

Khimera turned her eyes back on Logan.

"This mortal appears no more evil than any other," she said. "Why do you waste my time with it?"

"Not me," stammered Logan, "Autumn."

"Autumn is not mortal," said Khimera. "Autumn is a season and nearly ended. I cannot save the seasons."

"No," said Logan, getting to his feet and pointing to the wagon. "Autumn be my friend and she is in the wagon. She is dying."

"Sssssss," said Khimera like water pulling back over a sandy shore. "Bring this mortal to me."

Awendene bent over the wagon and gathered Autumn in her arms. Autumn struggled weakly and the blankets fell away. She laid Autumn on the bank beside the river. Logan hovered protectively.

Khimera flowed to the edge of the water and leaned over Autumn.

“Sssssss,” she hissed and fine droplets of water sprayed everywhere. “Remove the garments.”

Between them Awendene and Logan removed Autumn's robe then her tunic. She lay on the river bank, small and naked, her normally olive skin pale from sickness and damp from the spray. A purple-violet swelling stretched up her leg and reached half way up her flat, muscled belly. The hole in her calf now the size of Logan's fist and grey-green pus oozed and dripped slowly on the grass.

Khimera pulled back and a wave of foaming water washed down her. Then she came forward again and reached out a glistening finger to touch the swelling on Autumn's belly. There was a sharp hiss and steam rose. She ran her finger along the length of the swelling to the wound in Autumn's calf.

“I have seen this before,” she said. “Twice only and both an eternity ago when the world was still young.”

“Can you help her?” asked Logan.

Khimera paused and studied Autumn.

“Perhaps,” she said. “There is a thorn inside her. It went in there,” and she pointed to the wound, “and is working its way up to the heart, but it is no ordinary thorn. There is evil attached to the thorn and it is burning and poisoning this mortal inside. 'Tis good you called me in time. A few scant hours and the thorn will reach the heart.”

“Would she die if that happens?” asked Logan.

“Perhaps,” said Khimera. “But likely not. If death were the intent there are other ways, faster and more effective. The evil on this thorn is destined for other malevolence than a simple killing.”

“What being did this deed to this mortal?” asked Awendene.

“Has this mortal enemies beyond other mortals?” asked Khimera.

“I know not,” said Logan, his brow furrowed. “Although she did best

Yammoe in the Land of the Undead.”⁶

“This is not the work of Yammoe,” said Khimera. “Yammoe can be cruel but It is not evil. I venture this may be Voqev or one in league with It. Still, that be for another time. Our first task is to remove the thorn and then extinguish the evil. Awendene, you will assist me?”

“Within my powers, Khimera,” said Awendene.

“I need a seed from a Salodkaja tree,” said Khimera, “if there be one willing to make that sacrifice.”

“There are some near here, Khimera,” said Awendene. “A single seed?”

“Yes,” said Khimera, laying a cool, wet hand on Autumn's forehead. “Sleep, little one, your time of reckoning is near.”

“What do you mean, 'time of reckoning'?” asked Logan as Awendene started to rub her arms and hands together to make loud rustling booming sounds.

“The thorn is here,” said Khimera, laying a droplet of water at the edge of the swelling, “and the mortal's heart is here.” She laid another droplet over Autumn's heart then let a trickle of water run from the first to the second droplet. “When the thorn reaches the heart this mortal will be beyond any aid.”

With obscene timing the droplet on the swelling ran off to one side as the swelling visibly moved closer to Autumn's heart.

“I venture the thorn can sense the heart directly,” said Khimera conversationally. “See how eager it becomes.”

“Can you not stop its progress at least?” asked Logan, his face going pale.

“That is why I need a Salodkaja seed,” said Khimera. “When one arrives I will use its spikes to fence in the thorn and bar its progress.

6 This is covered in the First Tale in The Annals of Autumn Savannah.

That will at least give us time to remove the thorn.”

“Can the thorn not be removed now?” asked Logan, staring in morbid fascination as the thorn again moved forward a fraction. “Can we not cut it out with a knife?”

“No,” said Khimera. “There is evil magic attached. The thorn will only grip and bury itself deeper. To cut it out will require the shredding of this mortal’s body which will not aid the mortal.”

“So we can do nothing?” asked Logan.

“We wait,” said Khimera. “That is doing something.”

Logan glowered at her.

The thorn had moved forward several times before there came the distant sound of thundering feet.

“Mizule!” cried Logan, reaching for his staff and finding he had the lithe figure of Fiau in his hand. “Can we be not left in peace!” He let go of her waist and grabbed Autumn’s staff from the wagon.

The thundering got louder then a young wild boar broke through the bushes, snorting heavily and brandishing its tusks. It lurched to a halt and stared suspiciously around with small bloodshot eyes. Logan leapt between it and Autumn, staff at the ready, prepared to fight as best he could.

Awendene reached down and plucked something from its bristly hind quarter.

“We thank you, friend,” she said, “for your speed and determination.”

The boar grunted fiercely then turned and ran back the way it had come.

“One Salodkaja seed,” said Awendene, bringing it over. She handed it to Khimera.

Logan relaxed and knelt beside Autumn again, her staff in easy reach. Khimera carefully broke off the five dart-like spikes and laid them in a neat row below Autumn's ribs. She held the central seed in her hand for a few moments then passed it to Awendene who pressed it into the damp ground near the river.

"May you grow tall and strong," she said.

Khimera laid one hand on the row of seed spikes and the other on the edge of the swelling then both hands dissolved and merged in a miniature whirlpool then separated and became hands again. The five spikes were now embedded in Autumn's skin in a U around the end of the swelling where the thorn was.

"Is that it?" asked Logan incredulously.

"No," said Khimera. "Now we wait."

"Oh, not again," complained Logan. "Why do you people always have to wait?"

"The thorn will try to go underneath the Salodkaja seed spikes," said Khimera, "but the sap of the spikes will seep into the mortal's body. We wait to see which wins."

"How long before we know?" asked Logan.

"Not long," said Khimera. "See how the swelling is subsiding? That means the thorn is going deeper into the body to get underneath the spikes."

Logan shuddered.

"If it does?" he asked.

"Your friend will live forever in your memories," said Khimera.

"Oh," said Logan flatly. He stared at the subsiding swelling. "And if the spikes work?"

“The thorn may try to go over the spikes,” said Khimera, “which will be a blessing for it will break through the surface and can be easily caught and destroyed.”

“And if it does not?” asked Logan.

“Then it will go back the way it came,” said Khimera, “and we will have to wait until it comes out where it went in.”

* * *

“Ssssss,” said Khimera some time later.

Astauand had set and Plifal was now directly overhead but barely visible for the glow of the woods.

“What is happening?” asked Logan.

“The swelling is growing again,” said Khimera. “This is most excellent.”

“Why?” asked Logan.

“The thorn cannot get underneath the Salodkaja seed spikes,” said Khimera. “It is returning and soon we will see which way it goes. Your friend will continue in this world, for now at least.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

“I know not this mortal’s destiny,” said Khimera, “save that this mortal be mortal and inevitably will one day cease to be.”

“But not from this damned thorn thing?” said Logan, anxious to clarify the point.

“Likely not,” said Khimera, “although there may be other magic upon it. We must move quickly to destroy it when it does emerge. Any delay could allow that magic to do something unexpected.”

She leaned forward and peered at the edge of the swelling, the

phosphorescence in her hair shimmering and lighting Autumn's skin.

"Sssssss," she said, "this is most encouraging. See how the end of the swelling is getting bigger than it was before?"

"Yes," said Logan studying it closely. "What does that mean?"

"It likely means the thorn is coming out here and will try to jump over the spikes," said Khimera. "See how it starts to form a point? It is near the surface."

She put her hands on Autumn's chest and belly and let the water flow and merge.

"I will catch it," she said. "Then we can counter the magic then burn the thorn."

Logan stared in sick horror as the tiny point on the end of the swelling on Autumn's belly got longer and protruded upwards the length of his thumbnail. Suddenly, with a revolting gush of grey-green pus, Autumn's skin split and the thorn leapt out.

"Arggggh!" shouted Logan, falling backwards and clutching his face.

Awendene leaned forward and pulled Logan's hand away then plucked the black thorn from his cheek. She studied it then handed it to Khimera who laid it on a smooth wet rock on the edge of the river bank. The phosphorescence in her hair faded as she muttered incantations in the Old Tongue and made signs over the thorn. Then she smote the thorn with her clenched fist. It glowed red then returned to its dull blackness again.

She muttered more incantations and made more signs then smote the thorn again. This time it glowed green briefly.

"This be strong magic," she whispered and leaned back, contemplating the thorn. It twitched and quivered.

Again she muttered incantations and made signs and again smote the thorn. It stayed black and stopped twitching.

“The thorn be cleansed,” she announced. “Burn it now.”

Awendene leaned forward to pick up the thorn but Logan snatched it.

“I will burn this accursed thing,” he said and thrust it deep into the embers of the fire.

It started to shrivel then caught alight and a shrill, unworldly scream rent the air then faded as the thorn burned to ash.

“Show me your face,” said Khimera. “Ahh, 'tis but a small scratch. The thing did not have time to enmesh. That is good.”

“How is Autumn?” asked Logan. “Will she live?”

“Yes,” said Khimera, “although we need to cleanse this mortal of the evil that remains. The swelling will go down and the wound to the limb will now heal.”

“And what of the Salodkaja spikes?” asked Logan. “How do we get them out?”

“We do not,” said Awendene. “Their sap is now part of her life essence.”

Chapter Fifteen

“Where am I?” asked Autumn.

Logan jerked awake and tripped over his feet trying to get to the wagon and banged his head on one of the wheels.

“Owwww,” he replied on his knees and one hand while rubbing his forehead with the other.

Autumn leaned over the side of the wagon to look at him.

“Did you hurt yourself?” she asked, concerned.

“It is nothing,” he said climbing to his feet with the aid of the wheel. “But you, how are you feeling?”

“I must have just been very tired,” said Autumn, stretching luxuriously. “I feel so much better now I have had a good sleep.”

“How is your leg?” asked Logan, checking his hand for the blood he imagined he felt pouring out of his forehead. There wasn't any.

“Much better,” said Autumn. “There is a slight ache but it doesn't hurt anymore. Yofa's mecatonia would seem to have worked.”

She sat up properly and pulled up the hem of her tunic to inspect her leg.

“See?” she said, holding it up for Logan to look at. “The swelling has almost completely gone and the wound is healing well. It be just a little red around the edges and is scabbing nicely.”

“Yes,” said Logan, his heart bubbling over with the sight of Autumn sitting happily and talking. He felt a little light-headed but that was undoubtedly due to hitting his head on the wagon.

Autumn picked at the edges of the scab then ran her hand up the inside of her leg to check there was no more swelling then she looked around.

“Where are Yofa and Esogar?” she asked, frowning. “Where is the other wagon and Ronnus? Surely you did not let them go on ahead while I slept? You should not have let them do that. How can I protect them if we separate? How long have I been asleep anyway? Astauand is high in the sky so they must be some hours ahead by now. We need to catch them up. Come, you get Malkia and I will wash then we’ll get started.”

“No,” said Logan. “We bide here for a while longer until Awendene says you are fit to travel. Are you hungry?”

“I could eat a horse,” said Autumn then glanced apologetically at Malkia who affected not to have heard. “Who is Awendene?”

“Awendene has been helping me tend you while you slept,” said Logan.

“Where is she?” asked Autumn, twisting around.

“I am not entirely sure,” said Logan.

“Does she live near here?” asked Autumn. “Where are we? This is not the ford in the river. Did I sleep while you drove the wagon? I must have as it seems I have slept the night and near half a day.”

“You have slept for four days,” said Logan, “almost five.”

“Is this another one of your jokes?” asked Autumn, scratching her leg vigorously.

“I am not joking,” said Logan, “and if you will stop asking questions for a while I will tell you all. But first let me get you some food. You have eaten nothing but some broth these days past and you need to thicken your blood. I caught a fish earlier this morning and it is cooked and waiting for you and there is the last of the bread and there is hot tea as well. Awendene left a root for me to chop finely and put in the tea which will help restore you as well.”

“I will help you,” said Autumn, swinging her legs over the side of the wagon.

“No,” said Logan firmly, pushing her legs back. “You stay right there until Awendene says you can get up.”

“This Awendene would seem to have taken control of you,” said Autumn, swinging her legs back over the side of the wagon again. “I feel very well and I need to go behind the bushes.”

“Oh, very well,” said Logan and Autumn jumped off the wagon and collapsed on the ground.

“Vallume!” she muttered, looking confused. “Who moved the ground?”

“Awendene said you would be very weak,” said Logan, hoisting her to her feet.

He half carried her to the bushes then helped her back on to the wagon. She lay down facing the other way so she could watch him by the fire. Logan shifted a sack of grain for her to prop her back against then he wrapped the blankets around her again.

“My robe,” she said suddenly, “where is my robe?”

“Tis under the bench,” said Logan, pulling out the neatly folded robe.

He handed it to her and she stroked it then put it on the wagon beside her. Logan went to the fire and got her a cup of tea. She sipped it while he busied himself warming the fish and toasting the bread.

“It has a most unusual flavour,” she said. “It is a warm, earth yet lemony taste. What is it?”

“Awendene calls it ginger,” said Logan, bringing her mashed fish and herbs on toast.

“Now tell me of this Awendene and what has been happening while I slept,” said Autumn, gazing unexcitedly at the fish.

“Eat something first,” said Logan.

Autumn sighed and bit off a mouthful then quickly finished it all.

“That was very nice,” she said. “Is there any more?”

“Aye,” said Logan and went to fetch the rest.

“Thank you,” said Autumn, taking it. “Now tell me.”

Logan told her of how she collapsed after their attempt to float the wagon and Yofa's decision to send Logan ahead with Autumn while he and Esogar repaired the wheel. He told her of his trip through the woods and how they had glowed and of how Awendene came out of the tree. He told her of his staff and Fiau and of how the swelling had gone up to her belly. He paused while Autumn felt her belly for signs of any swelling then he told her of how Awendene had called on Khimera who had risen from the river and how she had got the thorn out and dispersed the evil that was on it.

Autumn ate during the early part of his tale then the fish and bread was forgotten as he told her of the events in Havildar. She sat silently when he finished, staring at him while propped against the sack then threw back the blankets and wriggled out of her tunic to inspect her belly. There, midway between her belly button and bottom rib, were five star-shaped marks on her skin, arranged in a U. She contemplated the marks and ran her fingers over them then down her belly and over her hip.

“Put your tunic back on,” said Logan as she leaned back against the sack again, both hands on the star marks. “You will catch your death from the chill air.”

Slowly Autumn put her tunic back on and allowed Logan to wrap her in the blankets again and fetch some more tea.

“I remember the ford,” she said slowly, “and I remember great pain in my leg and I think I remember you lying me beside a fire in the dark but that is all. No, wait, it comes back to me now, ahh, but I thought it was dream.”

“What did you dream?” asked Logan, propping himself on top of some other sacks.

“I dreamt that my legs and arms had withered,” said Autumn, closing her eyes to look within. “They were misshapen and deformed and I could not walk properly. And everything was dark but I could sense a lot of creatures around me, suffering and in pain and strange cries filled the air.”

She shuddered involuntarily and pulled the blankets more tightly around herself.

“And there was something else,” she said, her face screwing up as she confronted her memories. “It was dark and I could not see it but it was reaching out for me. I could feel it, searching and groping, trying to find me. Ohhhh!”

Her entire body shook then she calmed again.

“There was a dim light,” she said. “It lit only a small patch in front of me and there was nothing there in the light then a hand appeared. I think it was a hand, but it was like no hand I had seen before. A little like a human hand but with five fingers instead of four and a thumb and each had a long hooked claw, like a bird, but fleshy like a human hand and the claws were thick and very sharp. It was horrible and it was reaching out for me and then the light went out and I was afraid, so afraid. I wanted to fight but my limbs would not work properly and I felt the hand on my belly and then its claws were stabbing me, deep inside me then all the strange creatures around me disappeared and all went quiet.”

She lay there silently, reliving that scene and Logan wanted to hold her and comfort her but was afraid so he sat and watched her, trying to send waves of comfort instead.

Then her face cleared and she looked at him and smiled.

“I venture the claws were the spikes that the river creature put in my belly,” she said. “They saved me which is why all the other horrible things went away. What seed were they from?”

“Awendene did say,” said Logan, “but I remember not. I was too consumed with worry to pay close attention.”

Autumn leaned forward and looked at him gravely.

"I be right sorry to be the cause of your suffering," she said, "but I thank you from the depths of my mind and spirit for your concern and for caring for me."

She hugged Logan tightly for a long time and Logan joked about how her strength was returning to cover his embarrassment. Then he fetched more hot tea while Autumn finished the cold mashed fish.

"I have questions," said Autumn, sipping her tea.

"I would be all astonishment if you did not," said Logan, making himself comfortable for what he expected would be a long conversation.

"When will I meet Awendene?" asked Autumn.

"I know not," he replied. "She comes and goes as she wishes, as do the others."

"What others?" asked Autumn.

"The other tree things," he said. "Every tree here seems to have one of the things although only Awendene has spoken to me."

"How interesting," said Autumn, frowning. "You say this place is called Havildar?"

"The Land of Havildar," said Logan. "At least that be what Awendene called it. I know not if Havildar be the name of the place or of some being that rules it."

"I have not heard the name before," said Autumn. "Which tree be Awendene's?"

"That one," said Logan, pointing.

Autumn studied it from her spot on the wagon.

“And Khimera?” she asked at length.

“I have not seen Khimera since the thorn,” said Logan. “I know not where she be.”

“But she came from the water of the river?” asked Autumn.

“I fancy she was water,” said Logan, “but I know not. I was racked with worry and did not pay as close attention as perhaps I should have.”

Autumn smiled understandingly and patted his hand.

“And what of Fiau?” asked Autumn. “Which tree is hers?”

“She is my staff,” said Logan, “not a tree.”

“Where is your staff now?” asked Autumn.

Logan got off the wagon and fetched his staff from beside the fire. Autumn examined it closely.

“It would seem to be just a staff,” she said at length. “Has Fiau come back since?”

“No,” said Logan. “I have called her name but she has not appeared again.”

“You say she appeared two times?” asked Autumn. “When she called Awendene and when the boar came charging?”

“Yes,” said Logan.

“And she said she was found and fashioned by Mother Midcarn?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Logan.

Autumn nodded slowly.

"I venture Mother Midcarn has so arranged it that Fiau only appears when you have great need of her," she said.

Logan thought about this.

"No," he said. "I did not need her when the boar charged. It was bringing the seed and was no danger."

"Mayhap," said Autumn, "but then again, you thought there was great need. 'Tis a puzzle though."

"Aye," said Logan, "but there is a bigger puzzle."

"Yes," said Autumn leaning her head back and closing her eyes, "and I have been reluctant to ask the question."

"Who stabbed you with the thorn?" asked Logan, "And why?"

Autumn nodded, her eyes still closed.

"If it were just a thorn," she said, "mayhap it came from the tree I kicked when I did the injury, but why would a thorn on a tree be imbued with evil magic? Was it meant for me or was it destined for any poor unfortunate who happened upon it?"

"I have been thinking about that these two days past," said Logan. "I have had little else to do while watching you sleep. I would venture that the thorn be some unfortunate chance but for one thing."

"The staff from Mother Midcarn?" asked Autumn, opening her eyes again.

"Aye," said Logan. "It would seem to be a most unusual coincidence, does it not?"

"Indeed," said Autumn. "'Twould seem highly unusual for one such as she to give you a staff which has the power to call for aid for my injury if it was only by great mischance that I sustained it. Would it not have been better for Mother Midcarn to have destroyed the thorn in the tree directly if others were at risk? I venture she saw in her

Window that I would suffer such an injury but did not know where or how so she gave you the staff for when the need arose.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “Which makes me wonder why she still watches you through her Window.”

“That is a worthy question,” said Autumn, “but if the thorn was not part of the tree I kicked, then someone or something else put it in me and I venture that someone or something also put the evil on it.”

“I told Khimera you bested Yammoe,” said Logan, “but she said Yammoe was not evil and likely It did not send the thorn. She were of the mind that it might be Voqev. Have you offended Voqev?”

“Not that I know of,” said Autumn, “and you would know as I had no dealings with any deities before I went to get you back from the Land of the Undead. Mayhap it be you who has offended Voqev.”

“Me?” exclaimed Logan. “I were just a humble thief and outcast from my village when I met you. I be merely your companion. 'Tis you who goes around besting deities and the like. If anyone has offended Voqev it be you, not I.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “Certainly I have had some strange encounters and none expected. Here is a thought, you are the Roinad. Mayhap Voqev be offended because you ran away.”

Logan wrinkled his nose and shook his head. “More like Kizerain Qerrassa because you foiled his plans to be Roinad himself.”

“Or Hysleria,” said Autumn, “although I venture he has so arranged it that no one has become Roinad in your place so that he can rule in your absence.”

“A thought,” said Logan, then he frowned. “If I am nowhere to be found then how can someone challenge me?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Which means Hysleria will be able to rule in you name as long as no one knows if you are dead or alive. Besides, how would Kizerain or Hysleria garner such magic and arrange for it to be

stuck into me? I fancy the odds of that be impossible.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “And we be no nearer answering that question. Who and why? Oh, I forgot to tell you something. Before Awendene appeared you were talking to Noxu in your sleep.”

“Noxu?” said Autumn, puzzled. “Was he here too?”

“No,” said Logan, “you were asleep but mayhap he was in your mind. You wanted him to sing to you and then you started to sing yourself.”

“Oh,” said Autumn, trying to remember. “What song did I sing?”

“I do not know,” said Logan. “I think it was in the Old Tongue. It was something like this, ummm, vosen lika zee prosmi rukki, or something like that.”

Autumn frowned then laughed. “Vosien lialka Z pryhozymi rukami?” she asked.

“That sounds right,” said Logan. “What song is it?”

“It was a song Noxu used to sing to me when I was very small,” she said. “It was to help me sleep.”

“What does it mean?” asked Logan.

*Autumn is a doll with pretty little hands.
She washes her little face, with some water and some soap.*

*She untangles her hair, with an ivory comb,
And although she doesn't like it, she neither cries or rubs her eyes.*

*Autumn give me your hand, with a hearty grip.
I want to be your friend, Autumn, Autumn, Autumn.*

*And when the stars start to come out,
Autumn goes to bed, Autumn goes to sleep.*

sang Autumn softly. “Vosień zasynaje, Autumn goes to sleep.” She

sighed. "I loved it when Noxu sang that song to me although he has not for many many summers now. Ayah, mayhap I sang that because I felt I was falling asleep, starting to die."

"You sang that song because your mind was going back to when you were but a seedling," came a thin quivery voice.

"Hello Awendene," said Logan turning to greet her as Autumn jerked upright.

Awendene bent stiffly in greeting.

"You were seeking a protection you could not find for yourself," said Awendene. "This Noxu was a protector in times past?"

"I greet you, Awendene," said Autumn, climbing off the wagon and bowing formally. "I give you my heartfelt thanks for your aid in my time of need. Noxu found me, lost and abandoned, when I was but a babe, a sapling if you wish. He nurtured me and protected me."

Awendene gazed at her thoughtfully, the rings in her golden eyes gently pulsating.

"How do you feel within yourself?" she asked after a while.

"Strong yet weak," said Autumn. "I feel I can do anything but as yet my limbs do not fully agree."

The strands of moss in Awendene's hair fluttered in the light breeze.

"The weakness will pass," she said. "You need to rest and gather as much sustenance as you can."

Autumn nodded. "Can I ask what is Havildar?"

"Havildar is where we are," said Awendene.

"So Havildar is a place?" asked Autumn.

"As you see," said Awendene with an unmistakable shrug even though

she did not have shoulders.

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Please do not consider me rude for asking, but what are you? Are you a tree? Logan said you were that tree over there.”

“I am of a tree,” said Awendene, “as are we all but the tree you see is but my physical manifestation in your world.”

“I see,” said Autumn, leaning weakly back against the side of the wagon. “So as distinct from the physical tree over there, you are ... what?”

“The essence of the tree,” said Awendene. “That part of the tree that is not the physical.”

“And Khimera?” asked Autumn. “Is Khimera the essence of the river?”

“You understand,” said Awendene. “I see now why Mother Midcarn aids you.”

“If I may ask without offence,” asked Autumn, “what, pray, is Mother Midcarn to you?”

“Mother Midcarn is a friend to the woods and the rivers,” said Awendene, “and to animals and mountains and more besides. That is why Khimera and I gave you what aid we could. But enough on this. You are still weak and I desire to hear how you bested Yammoe in the Land of the Undead. Please stand with me a while and grow in strength for I fancy you will need it all and mayhap more against the tribulations that have yet to befall you.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Awendene said you should not do anything arduous for a day or two,” said Logan, watching Autumn do her morning exercises.

“This is not arduous,” said Autumn lying on the ground.

She put her hands behind her shoulders and kicked her body off the ground while pushing with her arms so that she landed on her feet on one swift move.

“Merely some stretching and limbering,” she said, aiming a kick at Logan's head and stopping a finger's width from his nose then following through with a handstand and a cartwheel onto the back of the wagon. Her injured leg gave out and she fell underneath it instead, her head narrowly missing the solid wood.

“My leg needs strengthening,” she said, crawling out from underneath the wagon. “I must focus on that for a while.”

She nimbly jumped onto the back of the wagon and balanced with her heels hanging over the end and proceeded to raise and lower her body to exercise her calves.

“Your thoughts on where to go now I can travel?” she asked and bent to pick up a sack of grain to increase the effort in her calf exercises.

“I suppose we keep going upriver,” said Logan. “The river has dropped some but I fear it is still too deep and fast to ford on our own. Mayhap further up it will be shallower.”

“We should go downriver,” said Autumn.

She started lifting the sack above her head repeatedly to give her arms something to do.

“Why?” asked Logan.

“We must rejoin Yofa,” she said. “He was supposed to be following but we have been in this spot for three full days and he has not arrived.”

Mayhap he has run into difficulties or he found another way to cross the river. We should go back and look for him.”

“I confess I have given him no thought,” said Logan. “’Tis strange he has not caught up with us. Mayhap he found another trail although I did not see one.”

Autumn tossed the sack back onto the wagon and somersaulted off to land on her feet.

“Them sacks be half the weight of a man,” said Logan. “Is that not arduous?”

“Is that so?” asked Autumn. She looked over at the sacks. “It did not feel that heavy.”

“I confess I do not see the need to return to where we left Yofa,” said Logan. “It is now the fifth day and he will be long gone from there. He reckoned a day to fix the wheel so if he spent another day crossing the river he will most likely be at the mine by now, waiting for us. He did say the mine was but two days beyond the river. Would it not be better to find a way to cross ourselves and head for the pass? Mayhap we will pick up a sign he has gone before.”

“A good point,” said Autumn, fetching herself a cup of tea. “’Tis not an easy choice.”

She sat beside Logan and sipped her tea.

“How is your leg?” he asked.

“The wound be healed,” she said, “save a bit of scabbing but it is still a little weak. Whichever way we go I shall walk beside the wagon and exercise it some more. I feel full of vigour and have a need to be active.”

“That is good,” said Logan.

He sighed. “If we go back to where we last saw Yofa we will use up the day and be no further forward and will still be this side of the river. I

see no benefit to that path.”

“A good argument, Logan,” said Autumn. “But I have a duty to Yofa and have an urge to find him quickly but mayhap it be best to find a way across and head for the pass as you say. If we see no sign we can return and look for them.”

She gazed at the river which leapt and tumbled, showing no concern for their predicament.

“I have a thought,” she said suddenly. “Mayhap if we can talk with Khimera she would be able to carry us across the river or perhaps stem its flow for a time while we pass.”

“’Tis a notion,” said Logan, “but she has not returned and Awendene said she be right busy. I venture she would not take kindly to such a request.”

He tossed the dregs of his tea on the fire and got up. He emptied the cauldron onto the fire which hissed and sizzled in protest then started to scrape earth over it to make sure it was fully out. Then he fetched Malkia and backed her between the shafts of the wagon. Autumn collected up their few possessions and put them on the wagon.

“Mayhap if we asked Awendene,” said Logan, pausing in tying her straps. “This place be full of trees. Mayhap she knows a way to make a bridge to get us across without felling trees. ’Twould save us a journey in either direction.”

“I can do that,” said Fiau, stiffly sitting up on the wagon where Logan’s staff was lying. “That is within my power.”

Autumn stared at her in surprise.

“This be your staff, Logan?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Logan. “Umm, ’tis nice to see you again, Fiau.”

“I am at your service,” said Fiau. “If you tell me what you desire and it is within my small power then it shall be so.”

“We need to cross the river,” said Logan. “We were wondering if Awendene could somehow arrange for some trees to make a bridge or some such to let us cross.”

“That be within my power,” said Fiau. “The one who found and fashioned me gave me the ability to change my shape.”

“You are the staff, are you not?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Fiau. “That is my substance.”

“Sadly we will need many such staffs,” said Autumn. “The river be several times your length and your width be less than one wheel of the wagon.”

Fiau smiled and Autumn noticed her eyes were multi-ringed like Awendene's but green in colour not golden.

“Put me where you want the bridge,” said Fiau, “and hold me steady. It will take but a moment.”

Logan and Autumn looked at each other expressionlessly then Logan picked up his staff.

“This be right strange,” he said going over to a low patch of the bank. “Here will do, I suppose.”

Fiau followed him and merged back into the staff. Logan stood there, looking at Autumn, with one end of the staff on the ground and the other in his hand.

“Nothing is happening,” he said, glancing at the staff. “How long do I wait, I wonder?”

Then he stared at the staff. “It be shaking,” he said.

“And growing,” said Autumn coming over.

Logan quickly grabbed the staff with his other hand as it rapidly grew too tall to be held with one hand then he planted one foot at its base

to stop it from sliding and toppling.

“Sploop,” he muttered, craning his head upwards as the staff soared overhead. “Help me, it be starting to topple.”

Autumn grasped the staff with both hands as well but its height had become unmanageable and it started to fall, slowly at first then faster until its top crashed down on the far bank of the river. It bounced a few times then lay still.

“I have seen many strange things in my time with you,” said Logan, staring at the pole across the river, “but this be the strangest.”

“I venture it not be done yet,” said Autumn. “Look.”

The staff which had been no thicker than Logan's wrist was getting thicker and losing its roundness. It creaked a few times and a small buttercup which had as yet been untrampled was squashed as the pole became the width of Logan's shoulders and continued to widen.

“That be a right useful skill,” remarked Autumn as they watched in fascination. A wave in the river, higher than others, splashed over the staff leaving it to glint wetly in the morning sun.

Steadily the staff got wider, then Autumn nudged Logan and pointed to a large rock on the far bank.

“That rock be in the way,” she said. “Do you think I should run across and move it?”

“Is it safe to step on?” wondered Logan. “It looks very thin.”

Autumn stepped on to the end of what was now clearly a platform and no longer a long staff.

“’Twould seem solid enough,” she said and took another step forward. She bounced up and down a couple of times.

“The need is gone,” said Logan. “Look.”

Autumn looked and saw that the platform had widened past the rock and had neatly shaped itself around it.

“That be clever,” she said as another wave broke across the platform.

With a final creak the platform stopped widening.

“Do you think it be finished?” asked Logan, stepping on the platform to join Autumn. “Only it don’t seem wide enough for the wagon.”

Autumn measured the width of the platform using her feet then strode over to compare with the width of the wagon.

“It be too short by three foot lengths at least,” she called back.

Logan stumbled as the platform obligingly widened appreciably.

“Oh Sploop,” he muttered and took a deep breath.

Autumn came back and checked the width and pronounced it sufficient.

“You think it be strong enough for Malkia and the wagon?” she asked.

Logan slowly made his way to the centre of the platform.

“As I recall,” he said, turning slowly and looking upriver then down, “it is central to your philosophy to accept that which cannot be changed.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “What of it?”

“We have here a staff which knows how to make itself into a bridge,” said Logan. “I know not how it knows this nor by what manner it does it but I venture that it does know what it is doing and is doing so to aid us. It be beyond my mind to grasp but I say let us accept it for what it is and put our trust in it.”

“Well said,” said Autumn. “I shall fetch the wagon, you go to the other side and wait.”

"I'll take Malkia," said Logan, "she knows me. You go to the other side."

He quickly ran over to the wagon and jumped up and urged Malkia forward. She cautiously moved forward but stopped at the edge of the platform and would not step onto it.

Logan jumped down from the wagon and went to stand beside Malkia's head.

"You are a wise horse," he said gravely, stroking Malkia's forehead, "and a brave one. Will you cross this river with me?"

Malkia shook her head vigorously and refused to budge when Logan gently pulled on one of the straps.

"What is the matter?" called Autumn from the far side.

"Malkia is not as trusting as us," called back Logan. "Wait a few moments."

He untied Malkia's straps so she was free of the wagon.

"Will you follow me now?" he asked. "If you should fall in the river the wagon will not hold you down."

He stepped on to the platform and gently pulled Malkia's mane and nervously Malkia stepped onto the platform and stood there swinging her head from side to side. Logan patted her neck and whispered soothing words then urged Malkia forward. Filled with trepidation Malkia took a step then another then another then urgently trotted forward until she was on the far bank.

"There," said Autumn, stroking her forehead, "that was not too awful after all."

"Umm, how do we get the wagon across?" asked Logan.

"Malkia can pull it," said Autumn.

“So you are going to take her back across?” asked Logan.

“I am no expert in horses and wagons,” said Autumn, “but I venture it is not an absolute necessity that the horse be between the shafts. There be rope on the wagon so you go and tie the rope to a shaft and Malkia can pull it from dry land.”

“That be right good thinking,” said Logan, looking admiringly at her.

“Sooner rather than later,” said Autumn. “Mayhap Fiau be getting tired. We know not what strain this shape shifting be putting on her.”

“Sploop!” exclaimed Logan and dashed across the platform.

He snatched the rope from the wagon and hastily tied one end to the wheel shaft then ran back and handed the coil to Autumn to tie to Malkia's harness then hurried back again to get onto the driver's bench.

“Ready,” he called, reaching for the reins.

He frowned when he realised that the reins were the other side of the river with Malkia, then he jumped off and stood beside the front wheels.

“What are you doing?” called Autumn.

“I will need to push on the wheels to steer,” he called back. “Malkia be not steering from over there.”

“Ahh!,” called back Autumn and gave him an acknowledging wave. “Ready?”

“Ready,” called Logan and Autumn urged Malkia slowly forward.

The wagon lurched towards the side of the platform and Logan yelled “Stop!”. The wagon stopped with its front wheel half over the edge of the platform.

“I venture 'twould be easier if I steered from the shafts,” he called. “It

be impossible to steer the wheel directly.”

He climbed onto the wagon and dropped down between the shafts and leaned on one, pushing it away from the platform's edge.

“Try again,” he called, his back to Autumn.

Autumn urged Malkia forward and the wagon lurched again, this time moving into the middle of the platform, heading for the opposite side. Logan yelped and leaned hard on the other shaft to force the wagon the other way. The wagon was almost at the far side before he fully got the knack of steering with the shafts while walking backwards.

“Almost there,” called Autumn then looked ahead of her to guide Malkia between two trees.

There was a cry from Logan and she quickly turned to see him trip as he unexpected stepped backwards off the platform and the wagon rolled forward over him.

“Mizule!” she cried and dashed back to the wagon, “Logan!”

“I am all right,” came his voice from under the wagon. “Tis a good thing that I be skinny though. This wagon be not far off the ground.”

He wriggled out from underneath.

“Tis of sturdy build,” he said, rubbing his knee.

“Did it roll on top of you?” asked Autumn, looking him up and down anxiously.

“No,” he said, “I fell between the wheels, but I clipped my knee as I fell.”

“Can you walk?” she asked.

“Yes,” he admitted, “but I had hoped for more sympathy.”

Autumn laughed and slapped his shoulder. “Come,” she said, “let us

get the wagon fully off the platform and get Malkia back. This be a right difficult way to pull a wagon.”

The platform started to creak again and Autumn urged Malkia forward as the platform started to get narrower again, then she came to stand by Logan to watch.

“Tis an intriguing sight,” she said as the platform returned to the width of the staff.

It started to contract and the far end slid off the bank and splashed into the water. With a sudden cry Logan jumped in the river as the staff swung out and headed off downstream. He managed to grab the end and dragged it back.

“Nearly lost it,” he said, looking at the staff. It looked exactly like the staff he had had earlier with no sign of its recent experience, save being wet. “Umm, and thank you, Fiau.”

The staff quivered in his hand briefly then went still and inert.

“We forgot to say goodbye to Awendene,” said Autumn.

“Let us say goodbye now,” said Logan. “Mayhap she will hear us across the river.”

They both formally bowed and gave their thanks to both Awendene and Khimera and Malkia whinnied and nodded her head.

“So,” said Autumn, “which way do we go now?”

“Yofa said the pass be between that peak and the one over there,” said Logan, pointing.

“Let us go then,” said Autumn. “You can drive.”

* * *

“There is a trail of sorts ahead,” said Autumn coming back. “It seems to head in the direction of the pass but it is not overly well defined.”

She had raced ahead for some distance to exercise her leg while Malkia and Logan followed more sedately behind.

“Shall we follow it?” asked Logan.

“Twould be faster, I venture,” said Autumn, climbing onto the wagon. “I know not where the trail comes from but it is from further downriver than us. Mayhap Yofa has followed that trail and left a sign.”

“If it goes in the right direction that will be well enough,” said Logan. “Have you given any thought to the tribulations Awendene prophesied?”

“It is fruitless,” said Autumn. “She would not divulge more and the possibilities are endless and, besides, life is full of tribulations so she may have meant those not anything greater.”

“How is it you do not let your mind dwell on such things?” asked Logan.

“You have answered yourself,” said Autumn, lifting the water skin from behind the bench.

“Have I?” asked Logan. “What did I say?”

Autumn drank from the skin then rested it on her knees.

“Let,” said Autumn. “You said ‘let’. That is the important word. A mind that is allowed to roam freely will come up with all kinds of mischief. I heard what Awendene said and I heard her refuse to give more details. Until I have more knowledge I refuse to let my mind dwell on the matter.”

“So you do not think a mind should be allowed to be free to think new thoughts?” asked Logan.

Autumn dropped the waterskin behind her.

“I know where you are going with this,” she said. “You are about to

argue that creativity needs a mind free to think new thoughts unrestrained.”

“Well, it did cross my mind,” said Logan. “It seemed to me that if you control your mind it must stay with known thoughts since what would be new might be mischievous.”

“To the unpractised, perhaps,” said Autumn, twisting round to find the food bag.

She rummaged through it and pulled out some cheese and began to nibble on it.

“I am hungry,” she said when Logan glanced over, “I have been since I awoke in spite of all the broth you made me drink.”

“I will cook some bread when we stop for the night,” he said, “and there are roots as well, although they be uncooked as yet. So explain about the unpractised.”

“The skill be in knowing what be worth thinking about and what be not,” said Autumn. “A new thought should be followed until you can decide if it be worth following further or dropping. Like this trail. We follow it not knowing where it may lead but if after some time we find it is not going anywhere we would like then we should abandon the trail and head off somewhere else. So it be with thoughts. Follow your new thoughts by all means but do not let yourself be carried away by them if the direction becomes not good. With Awendene’s tribulations there is no direction that my idle speculation can take me that will be good so I do not dwell on it.”

“I see,” said Logan, nodding. “So you are not saying that new thoughts are bad in themselves, only if they lead somewhere not good.”

“Exactly,” said Autumn. She stood up and gathered her robe more closely around her then sat down again.

“But what if you do not know if where your thoughts are going is good or bad?” asked Logan.

“Then keep thinking them until you can decide,” said Autumn.

Logan nodded thoughtfully again.

“I venture there is something behind this exchange,” said Autumn.

Logan smiled sheepishly.

“Mayhap,” he said. “Mayhap not. Is this the trail?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “You can see where the pass is through the trees up there.”

Logan guided Malkia onto the trail and they sat in silence for a short distance.

“See up ahead?” said Logan, pointing. “’Tis the remains of a fire. What say you we camp here for the night? We can cook extra food for tomorrow’s journey.”

“That be a right good idea,” said Autumn and jumped off the wagon and started to collect fallen wood for the fire.

Logan guided Malkia over to the spot and untied her from the wagon. Autumn came over with an armful of branches and soon a fire was going. Logan found a stone with a fairly flat top and brushed it clean before putting it in the centre of the fire to heat. While Autumn selected some roots and put them in the fire as well, Logan mixed the flour with some water in the cauldron.

“So tell me your new thoughts,” said Autumn, sitting back.

“Ayah,” said Logan, “they are as yet not fully formed and I know not where they are leading me.”

He scooped a handful of the dough from the cauldron and flattened it between his palms then dropped it on the hot stone.

“Tell me anyway,” said Autumn. “The telling may help to put form to your thoughts.”

Logan watched the bread baking on the stone then reached over and quickly flipped the flat bread.

“You remember the thoughts I had on a new way of counting?” he said.

“Aye,” said Autumn.

“I thought some more on it these days past while you were asleep,” said Logan.

He deftly pulled the bread from the stone and passed it to Autumn then flattened another handful of dough and put it on the stone.

“It seems to me,” he said hesitantly, “that I need to invent three new shapes for writing.”

Chapter Seventeen

“Are not the fifty writing shapes we have now sufficient?”⁷ asked Autumn. “I have not felt a lack in them.”

“Yes and no,” said Logan. “Obviously they are enough for what we do at the moment else more would have been invented but it seems to me that three more would make writing numbers easier.”

“Would there not be shapes for writing numbers if there was a need?” asked Autumn.

“Aye, so you would think,” said Logan, “which be why I dismissed the idea to start with.”

He slowly chewed on his bread while watching another piece cook on the stone.

“You may laugh at me for this,” he said slowly, “but I was sitting watching you, two nights past. ’Twas a cloudy night and neither Plakill nor Plifal could be seen but the woods glowed and I could dimly see Awendene and the others moving around but I just sat there. Just watching you, waiting for you to awaken and I was toying with my stone, you know the one Mother Midcarn gave me?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, watching him intently. “And I would never laugh at you or your ideas.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, flipping the bread. “You do not laugh at my jokes so why would you laugh at anything else I say?”

“You were telling me of your idea,” said Autumn quietly.

“Ahh,” said Logan. He checked the underside of the bread but it wasn’t quite browned enough yet. “It struck me that we have no need for a better way to write numbers because writing them with words the way we do means we cannot do anything more with them.”

7 At this point in their language development, the Onaman language had 23 letters, in each of two cases, and four punctuation marks. Numbers had no special symbols; when the need arose to write a number it was written as a word, such as 'nine'.

“What more can we do with them?” asked Autumn.

“I do not know,” confessed Logan. “But mayhap if there be a better way to write numbers we could find more things we could do with them.”

He took the bread off the stone and put another flat piece of dough in its place.

“Look,” he said, picking up a small stick and scraping clear a patch of earth.

He wrote the word 'three'.

“There be three,” he said, “and that be the end of it.”

He then wrote 'two' underneath it. “And there be two. Now they are written I can do no more. Mayhap if there were a better way of writing numbers we could do more. Umm, now I know that if I have three piece of bread and make two more then I will have five but I know that from living. If I look at the 'three' and 'two' I have written I have no way of putting them together to get five,” and he wrote 'five' under the other two words.

“Why do you want to when you know that together they are five?” asked Autumn.

Logan brushed away the words he'd written.

“What about this then?” he asked and wrote 'eighty seven' and 'nineteen'. “If I have eighty seven pieces of bread and make nineteen more how many do I have?”

“I would have to do the tallying,” said Autumn.

“That be right,” said Logan, “and that be a right lot of tallying too. What if the numbers be a lot bigger? Yofa said the goods on these wagons be four thousand paraks. What if he brought a third wagon worth one thousand four hundred paraks? What would the three wagons be worth? How do we do all that tallying without making a

mistake?”

“You think you have found a better way?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Logan, “or at least a different way. I know not if it be better.”

“Show me,” said Autumn. “Mayhap the explaining will help you with your thoughts.”

Logan flipped the bread on the stone and tutted because it had burnt a little then wiped his patch of soil clear.

“Well, my thinking be that we tally like this,” he said, rapidly writing I then II, then III then IIII, “then we stop at five,” and drew a line through the marks to give HHH. “More than that and we just have endless groups of five.”

“I remember,” said Autumn. “You wanted to have a tally of the fives rather than do the fives, so seven would be ...” and she took Logan's stick and wrote I | II.

“Yes,” said Logan, “and thirty one would be ...” and he wrote I | I | I. “So that would mean a twenty five, a five and a one.”

Autumn quickly tallied up thirty one and checked that there were indeed six groups of HHH and a I.

“I follow you,” she said. “So why do you want more shapes?”

“This way gets messy,” he said. “Take twenty four. If we write it my way it would be IIII | IIII which be a lot of lines and not easy to understand. One hundred and twenty four be even worse,” and he wrote IIII | IIII | IIII to illustrate his point.

“So the new shapes?” prompted Autumn after she had gazed at this for a while.

“I thought to have a single shape for each of II, III and IIII,” said Logan, “and it struck me that since one line is one, why not have a shape with

two lines for two, three lines for three and four lines for four, like this,” and he carefully drew 7, 3 and 4.

“I do not follow,” said Autumn.

“Take twenty four,” said Logan. “Instead of llll | llll it could be written as 4 | 4 and one hundred and twenty four as 4 | 4 | 4 which is much easier. And seven would be 1 | 7.”

Autumn pondered this then traced the 1 | 7 with her finger.

“So that means one group of five and two, which be seven,” she said then nodded. “So eight would be 1 | 3?”

“Yes,” said Logan, “and nine 1 | 4.”

“But if I add a one to this nine to get ten, would I not need a new shape for that?” asked Autumn.

“No!” said Logan excitedly. “That is the beauty of this. Ten is two groups of five so it would be written as 7 |.”

“But is that not two?” asked Autumn.

“That be what the extra line be for,” said Logan, tapping the |. “It be meaning that the 7 be groups of five not ones.”

“Humphh,” said Autumn and thought for a few moments while Logan studied the completely burnt piece of bread then tossed it into the bushes before putting some fresh dough on the stone.

“If I be understanding you right,” said Autumn after a while, “this be fifty,” and she inscribed 7 ||.

“Yes,” said Logan happily. “See, you have the knack of it already.”

“But what makes it different to 7 | 1?” asked Autumn. “Which be, umm, eleven.”

“The length of the separating lines,” said Logan. “| be longer than 1.”

“That be confusing,” said Autumn, drawing lines of different lengths. “Seems to me that it be easy to confuse fifty and eleven and in getting confused there could be great mischief.”

“Aye, mayhap you are right,” said Logan. He flipped the piece of bread on the stone. “As I said, I be thinking these new thoughts and know not where they be going yet.”

“I like what you are doing,” said Autumn. “Twould seem a big improvement in the writing of numbers but this confusion be a problem. I venture you should have another shape and get rid of the separating lines altogether.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

“Umm, well, if you write twenty six it would be $1 \mid \mid 1$, would it not?” said Autumn.

“Indeed,” said Logan.

“So you need two lines to show the absence of one thing, which seems inefficient,” said Autumn.

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

“Well, here we have one group of five fives,” said Autumn, “and a one but you have the two separating lines to show there are no groups of five. Why not have one new shape for the absence and use it to get rid of the two separating lines. In fact, I venture we could get rid of all the separating lines.”

Logan pondered this so Autumn removed the mildly overcooked bread from the stone and put on a fresh piece of dough.

“What sort of new shape?” he asked at length.

“One that has no lines in it,” said Autumn, “so that it is not confusing.”

“So not a \backslash or a $/$?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn. “They could just be a badly drawn l. How about O?”

She rubbed out the || in the l || l and replaced them with O to get l O l.

“So that means one group of five fives,” muttered Logan, “no groups of five and a one, and that be twenty six.”

“And 7 O be ten,” said Autumn. “Two groups of five and no ones.”

Logan stared at this thoughtfully so Autumn took off the bread and put on more dough.

“I like this,” he said after a long pause. “It does make it less confusing, does it not?”

“’Twould seem to be,” said Autumn.

“So what do you think of my numbers?” asked Logan.

“I think they are interesting,” said Autumn, flipping the bread. “I have no idea where this thinking will lead you but I venture it would be possible to write any possible number with just your five shapes and in the doing would be easier to write than using the words. That would seem a benefit at the very least and ’twould seem to me that there be a way of taking it further.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

Autumn wrote a l and another l.

“One and one be two,” she said, writing 7 next to them, “and another l be 3 so it be easy to tally by just adding lines to the shape already there, so 7 and 7 be 14. In the same way l and 3 be 4 as well. I just do not see what to do after 14.”

“Nor I,” said Logan, then he smiled. “But I be not done thinking yet.”

* * *

Far to the North West a thin faint spiral of smoke rose in the clear sky, straight at first then twisting into fainter disorder before disappearing. Someone was out there, far from civilisation, perhaps a recluse or a trapper or a seeker of wisdom or perhaps an outlaw or two, choosing a solitary life in the high mountains. Or perhaps it was the final remnant of a storm, a tree hit by lightning, the last of its body being consumed by fire. Three vultures circled, some way distant from the plume of smoke so if there was life there it was still alive. Their interest was in death somewhere else.

The trail through the woods had got steeper and harder going and the trees thinner and sparser. Mid afternoon, the wagon emerged from the last of the trees into a harsh landscape of scrubby vegetation and rock. To their right a vast unnamed bluff soared into the sky, its top jagged and white. To their left the Mapdil Mountain soared even higher, its top lost in a circle of cloud. Outcrops of grey rock thrust through the thin soil and they had to go around boulders, the fallen victims of some endless war, caught in the valley between the two giants. It was cold and the wind was piercing.

“Yofa said to spend the night in the pass,” said Logan studying the crude map sketched on the side of a sack. “Then it be a day downhill to the mine and easy going.”

“Would be best to go a bit further,” said Autumn, walking briskly alongside the wagon. “Mayhap there be bigger rocks which we can get behind, out of this wind. It be right cold up here.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “I know not if it be just my imagination but it feels as if the air be thinner. I am a little out of breath even though I be just sitting still.”

Autumn stopped walking and stared at him.

“What?” he asked as she fell behind.

“I have been wondering,” she said, “and you may have hit on the answer.”

“You do not call me Logan Philosopher for nothing,” said Logan as

she caught up. "I must be gifted if I be able to answer questions I have not been asked."

"We have talked on this before," said Autumn, "so do not rate yourself too highly."

She jumped on the wagon and sat next to him, pulling her robe tight around her.

"I too am short of breath but I put it down to my injury," she said. "I believe you are right, the air be thinner up here and it has a sharpness. Mayhap this be why it is colder even though we are closer to Astauand."

"Because the air is thin?" asked Logan.

"If you are in cool water does not your skin feel cool?" asked Autumn.

"Of course," said Logan. "The water is all around and touches."

"And so is the air when we are in it," said Autumn. "Mayhap because the air is thinner up here Astauand cannot warm it as much because there is not so much to warm and so it is colder on our skins."

"Mayhap," said Logan, "but it seems to me that thinner air would let more warmth from Astauand through, much like a thinner blanket lets more cold through than a thicker one."

"Hmmm," said Autumn, "mayhap you be right at that. Argggh, it makes no sense to me. I confess I do not see the point of cold. Warmth is good, it brings life but look at this place. It is cold and desolate. Little save grass and moss lives here. Looplab has chosen a lonely place to live."

Since leaving the woods all signs of a trail had disappeared but the way was apparent as the ground rose up on each side, with the grasses and mosses giving way to bare rocks. The way ahead had levelled off and rose but slightly. They plodded on, Malkia picking her way between large stones and patches of loose shale where her hooves could not grip and the wagon's wheels slid sideways.

"There be clouds forming," said Logan, "fast and thick. I venture we be in for rain during the night."

"We have the awning on the side of the wagon for shelter from the rain," said Autumn, looking up at the clouds. "But we need somewhere to get out of this wind. There be plenty of rocks but none big enough to shelter behind unless we build a wall."

"We could," said Logan, "although I would think other travellers before us would have left such a wall if it were needed. Mayhap there be bigger rocks up ahead. 'Twill not be long before we reach the top of this pass and we can see what be on the other side. Shall we stop here and build a rock shelter or press on to the top?"

"Astauand still be two widths away from setting," said Autumn. "Let us keep going to the top. If there is no obvious shelter we should still have time to build a wall and light a fire."

"So be it," said Logan.

They plodded on, the top of the pass getting slowly closer.

"Umm, we may have a small difficulty," said Logan a little while later.

"Life is beset with difficulties," said Autumn. "Which one are you thinking of?"

"Lighting a fire," said Logan. "There are no trees here and no wood to burn. We have a little kindling on the wagon but that will not last long."

"Ah," said Autumn, then sighed. "'Tis bitter cold and colder than I have ever been before, night is falling, it is going to rain and we have no shelter from this cursed wind."

"And no way of cooking anything either," said Logan. "We have only the bread we cooked last night and cold water to drink."

"I welcome this opportunity!" said Autumn, sitting upright on the edge of the bench. "'Tis easy to accept the vagaries of life when life is

comfortable and easy! I left the Esyup to experience life's challenges and test my fortitude. 'Tis a joyous moment, is it not, friend Logan."

"Indeed," said Logan sourly. "Joyous for Yammoe mayhap or whatever stabbed you with that thorn. Could have saved himself the effort since we will no doubt perish this very night!"

"Pah," said Autumn, slumping back again. "What is a little cold and wet? It will simply make us more appreciative of the fresh morning that lies ahead."

"What be that over there?" asked Logan as they rounded a gentle curve which exposed a fresh view of the bluff. "There be a dark patch."

"Mayhap it be a patch of vegetation," said Autumn.

"Looks more like shadow to me," said Logan. "Let us go and look."

He guided Malkia a little to the right and the wagon went up the gentle slope towards the dark patch.

"I think it might be a cave," said Logan as they got closer.

"I shall go and look," said Autumn, jumping off the wagon.

She jogged ahead then turned and waved.

"'Tis a hollow," she called. "It be not deep but it has an overhang and it be out of the wind and there be the remains of a fire. Others have stayed here before. Bring the wagon over."

Logan parked the wagon in front of the hollow to provide a little protection if the wind changed direction in the night and left Malkia to forage as best she could in the patches of stunted grass.

"Look," said Autumn, bringing over a scrap of cloth. "I found this under a stone by the remains of the fire. Yofa was here."

It was a scrap of sackcloth with YB scratched on it in charcoal with a

small wavery line underneath.

“They must have passed this way in the past few days,” said Autumn. “Unless it has been left from a previous journey he has made.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, fingering the cloth, “but it feels too fresh to be old. I wager he left it for us in case we made it here. Did he leave any firewood?”

Autumn took the cloth back and stared at it thoughtfully then went to replace it where she'd found it.

“No,” she said. “There are a few unburnt knobs in the remains and they will last but a very short time. We will have to do without.”

The wavery line seemed to point to a fallen boulder the size of Malkia's head a little way further along.

“At least we are not in the wind anymore,” said Logan, getting their food bag and water skin from the wagon, “by Sploop it is getting cold!”

“We are out of Astauand's warmth,” said Autumn, going over to the boulder. “Ahh!”

“What is it?” asked Logan.

“There be a cache of wood here, behind this rock,” said Autumn. “Yofa must have left it for us.”

“That be right kind of him,” said Logan, gleefully. “’Tis enough for one night at least, by the look of it.”

Chapter Eighteen

Logan poked his nose out of his enveloping blankets and groaned then pulled the blankets over his head again. Whilst it wasn't overly warm or dry inside the blankets it was considerably warmer and dryer than outside. He sighed deeply, his breath warming the inside, and snuggled backwards trying to find Malkia's warm bulk. It wasn't there.

He pulled down the blankets just enough to open a crack for one eye to peer through. Everything was grey and featureless and there was no sign of Autumn. He rolled over, taking care not to create any other cracks in the blankets, and peered some more. No sign of Malkia either. He craned his head slightly and there was their last branch, burning insipidly on the nearby fire. Beside it sat a grey, featureless shape, squat, unmoving and indistinct, dark grey in a sea of pale grey.

"Hphhhh," he snorted and closed his eye again.

"Whnnhnnnhnnn," replied Malkia, sounding distant and deadened.

With another groan Logan sat up and rearranged the blankets so his face was exposed and then held the blankets tightly around his neck from the inside. He cleared his throat and spat and looked gloomily around. Off to the left a large shape loomed briefly then receded with a muffled clack of hoof on rock. The shape by the fire did not move. Only the side of the wagon was reasonably clear.

Logan scowled at the world then yawned.

"Foggy," he thought and nodded at his perceptivity.

He sat there in a private little world of misery, trying to summon the motivation to do something else. It took some time then he slowly got up and shuffled to the far side of the wagon, wincing at the coldness of the rock on his bare feet. He added his personal contribution to the dampness then shuffled back to sit on a grain sack, his feet tightly curled up again inside the blankets and a slightly damp piece of bread in his hand. The large shape disappeared altogether as Malkia sought a fresh patch of grass. The smaller black shape still had not moved. Logan lay down again, if lay be the right word for a graceless

slumping.

“I do not like being cold,” he muttered and scowled. He nibbled the edge of the flat stale bread half-heartedly and shivered dispiritedly.

“Whnnhnnhnnh,” replied Malkia from somewhere in the mist.

Slowly the small dark shape extended its arms sideways then raised them overhead then lowered them again then jumped up.

“Good morning, said Autumn cheerfully.

“Umphh,” snarled Logan from inside his blankets.

Autumn stirred the embers of the fire with a stick and turned the last log then put the cauldron in the centre of the embers.

“I will make some tea,” she said brightly. “Are you getting up or are you going to lie there all day?”

“I am going to lie here,” said Logan unenthusiastically.

“As you wish,” said Autumn, sitting back down beside the fire and holding her feet over the embers.

“Are not your feet cold?” asked Logan, sitting up.

“I do not know,” said Autumn, leaning back to rest on her elbows. “I have no feeling in them. Ahh, is it not a fascinating day?”

“’Tis cold,” muttered Logan. “What be fascinating about that?”

“’Tis like flying inside a cloud,” said Autumn, moving her feet around to warm them up. “This must be what it is like for Astauand and birds. I have found it very insightful, particularly as there have been no distractions, at least until you woke up. I have been in fog before but never one as thick as this. There are no sounds and no colours, just shades of grey slowly moving. I have found it quite revitalising.”

“Revitalising?” said Logan. “I find it depressing.”

“Ahh, Logan,” said Autumn, sitting up again to pour some tea. “You need to learn to look inside yourself and experience the joy of life from within, not be dependent on the world around you. Here, drink this. It will make you happier,” and she passed him a cup.

“I would much prefer to look within myself in a warmer place,” said Logan, letting the steam from the tea warm his face. “I do not mind the grey, 'tis the cold I dislike.”

“It is all in the mind,” said Autumn, “accept your circumstances and decide to be happy. 'Tis simple really.”

She had a sip of tea then jumped to her feet.

“Surely you are not going to do your exercises in this?” he asked, sounding a little dismayed.

“Why not?” she asked, turning to face him with a serene expression.

“You cannot see properly,” said Logan.

“All the more reason,” she countered. “When the need arises I have to fight in any conditions and this will be good practise. Besides my leg feels much stronger although it be a little stiff. Some exercise will loosen it and I am keen to see how it progresses.”

She balanced on her injured leg and hopped up and down a few times then twirled to kick some imaginary attackers then somersaulted backwards into the fog and disappeared from view. Logan tried to track her from the sounds but the fog muffled them and made them directionless.

“Wa-hah!” cried Autumn, directly overhead and a foot shot past Logan's nose making him spill his tea.

She jumped down from the overhang with a laugh and Logan curled his lip at her.

“That was not funny,” he said.

"'Twas not meant to be," she said, hopping to the side a few times then slamming her foot against a tall rock that stood knee high a few paces away. It broke in half and a couple of chips went flying.

"Ooops," she said. "I did not intend to hit it so hard."

She bent over it and Logan joined her.

"You broke a rock?" said Logan, peering at it. "That be right impressive."

"It must have been cracked already," she said.

Logan picked up the broken piece and inspected it.

"Mayhap," he said, "but there be no sign of weathering or staining. It looks like a solid piece of rock. Try and break this," and he tossed the lump at her. She let it fall to the ground without moving.

"I have no quarrel with this rock," she said, turning away. "I regret the breaking and will not try to break it again for some empty reason. Come, let us gather our things and be on our way. I venture this fog will delay us and may make it difficult to find the mine if it lingers."

* * *

"If this be the right stream," said Logan, tapping Yofa's crude charcoal map on the side of a grain sack, "then Cymogene's dwelling be upriver a bit, but it may not be the right stream."

The thick fog had not dispersed until after they had found the beginning of the trail through the woods on the far side of the pass and they had had to backtrack twice before they had found it. But, once the fog had thinned, they had made reasonable progress although it had been misty all day.

"I see no trail heading that way," said Autumn, getting off the wagon and peering along the side of the stream.

"Aye," said Logan. "That be the problem. I was expecting a trail of

some sort, if only from Yofa's wagon in the last two or three days but I can see none. So, do we head that way and risk this being the wrong stream or do we assume it is the wrong stream because there is no trail and carry on, and look for another. Either way, it be starting to get dark so we could get lost."

"Or we could spend the night here," said Autumn, going back to the wagon.

"We could," said Logan, "but we will be faced with the same dilemma in the morning."

"And it could be foggy again," said Autumn, "which will make it worse. I say let us head upstream and see what we find. If we keep close to the stream we will be able to return if we find nothing but if we cross the stream and lose the trail in the dark or the fog we may get entirely lost."

"Mayhap," said Logan, "but what if we run into the stream in the dark?"

"Then we would deserve to drown," said Autumn. "Twould be foolish to keep going in a strange land when it be too dark to see the way and 'twould be more foolish still to not trust Malkia to keep out of the stream. Let us go as far as we can then stop and in the morning see if there be any signs. If not we come back here and carry on along this trail."

"As good a plan as any," said Logan.

He urged Malkia forward and they headed off up through the sparse wood, keeping the stream a safe distance away. After a while the trees started to grow more closely together and it became increasingly difficult to find a path for the wagon.

"This be wrong," said Logan, bringing Malkia to a halt. "If this be the right way then it should be easier to get through the trees. Astauand be fully down now and night is almost upon us. Let us stop here and make our way back in the morning. Mayhap Yofa forgot this little stream when he drew the map and there be a bigger one further

down. I see no benefit to going further.”

“I agree,” said Autumn. “You deal with Malkia and I will collect some wood. This spot be as good as any.”

She went off to collect some fallen branches then took the cauldron down to the stream while Logan untied Malkia and lit the fire.

“I do not like this stream,” she said, coming back with an empty cauldron.

“Why not?” asked Logan.

“The water has a smell,” she said. “I cannot smell it from here but up close it smells of rotten eggs so mayhap there be something dead in it nearby.”

“No matter,” said Logan, “we have plenty of water in the skins. We can find a better supply of water tomorrow.”

* * *

Autumn half woke and rolled over then froze, her senses on high alert. There it was again, a rustle in the undergrowth, then another. Cautiously she sat up. The fire still burned brightly but beyond its flickering glow the night seemed darker. There it was again. Slowly she leaned over and clamped her hand over Logan's mouth. She felt him wake, try to speak then become tense.

“Something comes,” she breathed into his ear.

Logan's head nodded silently in acknowledgement and she took her hand away from his mouth. Slowly, taking care to make not a sound, she eased off her blanket and got to her feet. The sounds were coming closer. Very cautiously she bent to pick up her staff then crept away from the fire and disappeared among the trees.

Logan sat up and felt around for his knife then grasped its hilt firmly. Over by the wagon, Malkia slept soundly. The sounds were quite distinct now, definitely footsteps. Concentrating, Logan fancied he

could see a glow further upstream which seemed to be moving. He got up as quietly as he could and went to stand by the wagon.

Malkia woke and gave a soft whinny then struggled to her feet. She gave Logan a friendly nudge with her head then bent to eat some grass.

The glow had become a definite flicker and was heading toward their camp. Whoever or whatever it was was not attempting to be stealthy so Logan relaxed a little. Malkia looked up and turned her head in the direction of the light. She gave a little whinny then tossed her head and started to back away. The light became a flame, the flickering flame of a burning torch.

“Who be there?” called Logan.

“No one of any consequence,” came a thin, grating voice.

“Show yourself,” called Logan, watching the flame come closer.

“There be not much to show,” came the voice again, with a definite hint of humour.

“So you be a joker, then” called Logan, straining to see what was holding the torch.

“Mayhap,” said the voice then Logan gasped and brandished his knife as something stepped out into the light of the fire.

“That be not particularly friendly,” said the squat, pale green figure coming over to stand in front of Logan.

It tossed the torch onto the ground beside the fire and looked up at Logan challengingly, its face twisted and mocking.

“You startled me,” said Logan, keeping his knife up.

“How so?” said the squat figure. “You heard me coming and you have been talking to me. The fact that I arrived should have come as no surprise.”

It reached out a muscular arm and gently touched the tip of Logan's knife then smiled its twisted grotesque smile again. Its short, stubby wings half unfurled from its back then folded again.

"Umm," said Logan, "I was not expecting ..."

"Not expecting?" said the figure. "Not expecting? If you were not expecting why are you not still asleep? You awoke and got up and took out your knife. You must surely have been expecting or is this what you normally do in the middle of the night?"

"I heard noises," said Logan, stepping back against the reassuring bulk of the wagon, "and saw a light."

"You heard me and saw my torch," said the figure, "and got up from your sleep and pulled out your knife and still you were not expecting and I startled you? I have to say I marvel at your lack of intelligence."

It walked slowly up to Logan on short, muscular legs and prodded him in the belly.

"Boo," it said.

Logan jumped and the thing laughed then turned to look at the wagon.

"Tis a shame you were not expecting me," it said, walking round the wagon. "I have been expecting you, Logan."

"What?" said Logan, thoroughly confused.

"Tell me," said the thing conversationally, as it came round from the other side of the wagon, "have you any expectations at all or do you go through life being surprised at everything?"

It didn't bother to wait for an answer. It walked over to the fire with a curious loping gait and picked up the torch.

"I was expecting a human," said Logan, beginning to recover himself.

“How unoriginal of you,” said the thing, carrying the torch over to the wagon and peering at one of the grain sacks. “You are far from home and in a strange land. To expect something like yourself would seem unimaginative.”

“How did you know my name?” asked Logan, following it round.

“Yofa told me,” said the thing. “Ahh, I see what has happened.”

“Yofa has been here?” asked Logan.

“Well, obviously,” said the thing. “How else could he have told me of you? He told me also that you were a thinker but I am sorry to say I have seen no sign of that side of you. Mayhap your thinking goes in fits and starts and this be a bad day. No matter, we have been expecting you these three days past. Look.”

Holding up the torch so the map on the grain sack was well lit, it poked a long curved claw attached to a stubby finger at where the trail crossed the stream.

“You took the wrong fork in the trail a way back,” it said, “and Cymogene's dwelling be marked on the wrong side. If you had taken the left fork you would have gone right to the house and not be lost in the woods behind. Perhaps there be a lack of thought there also.”

“Yofa drew the map,” said Logan, “and we did not see a fork in the trail.”

“He should have known better,” said the thing, picking its teeth with the claw and studying the map.

“He did draw it in a bit of a rush,” said Logan. “I was leaving ...”

“Yes, I know,” said the thing. “No matter, you are here now. Come with me, I will take you to Cymogene. We can fetch the wagon tomorrow.”

“How do you know Cymogene?” asked Logan. “Do you have a name?”

"I be Ta'umboq," said Ta'umboq. "Cymogene's little helper," and he laughed.

"Where is she, then?" asked Logan.

"Up there through the trees," said Ta'umboq. "We saw your fire so she sent me to find you."

"Ahh," said Logan.

"Bring Malkia with you," said Ta'umboq. "I fancy she won't follow me. Horses do not like me for some reason."

"I cannot imagine why," said Logan sarcastically.

"Neither can I," said Ta'umboq. "I likes them well enough, right tasty they be," and he grinned. The light from the torch glinted off his fangs. "Go on, fetch the horse, let's be off. Cymogene be waiting."

"Umm, I'll just go and find her," said Logan, wondering why Autumn had not appeared.

Ta'umboq grunted and ambled over to the fire. He picked up a piece of bread and sniffed it then tossed it back on the ground.

"Here is Malkia," said Autumn, leading her into the light of the fire.

Ta'umboq jumped backwards in surprise and his wings flapped a couple of times to keep him upright.

"You!" he hissed. "What be you doing here? You be dead!"

Chapter Nineteen

“Why did you think I be dead?” asked Autumn.

“Yofa said so,” said Ta'umboq, regaining his composure.

“Why would Yofa think that?” asked Autumn.

“The minds of humans be beyond my comprehension,” said Ta'umboq. “Come, let us be away. My lady Cymogene be waiting.”

He strode away from the light of the fire, rolling a little from side to side on his bent legs, his wings twitching.

“Stay,” said Autumn. “We must put out the fire first.”

“Why?” asked Ta'umboq, turning back, his face seemingly more disinterested than puzzled.

“The wind may cause the fire to set light to the scrub or trees,” said Autumn.

“And what of it?” asked Ta'umboq.

“We do not want to start a forest fire,” said Autumn, frowning. “Do you not care about such things?”

“No,” said Ta'umboq. “The trees burn down, they grow again, it be nothing.”

“And what of Cymogene's dwelling?” asked Logan. “Be it not in the woods and in danger of burning?”

“Oh, her dwelling will not burn,” said Ta'umboq, “but if it will speed you on your way then so be it.”

He stalked over to the fire, insofar as it is possible to stalk on short, bent muscular legs, and hawked then spat on it. The fire went out. A thin plume of smoke drifted up then faded away.

Logan walked over and knelt beside the fire. He peered at it then put his hand in the embers.

“It be cold,” he said, surprised.

“Happy now?” asked Ta’umboq.

“How did you do that?” asked Logan.

“You know not how to spit?” asked Ta’umboq. He sighed contemptuously. “Come, boy, you do know how to walk do you not?”

He didn't bother to wait for an answer, just walked away into the woods, the flaming torch held high. Logan and Autumn looked at each other then Autumn gave a small shrug.

“’Twould seem we have been invited,” she said, “though I know not what we have been invited to.”

“I venture if we do not go that ... whatever it is will come back,” said Logan, “and we will get little sleep. Do you think the wagon will be safe here during the night?”

There was a sudden beating of wings and Ta’umboq landed in the ashes of the fire.

“Yes,” he said, baring his teeth, “the wagon will be untouched, you have my guarantee on that score. Be you coming or not?”

Logan looked at Autumn and she raised an eyebrow.

“Yes,” she said.

Ta’umboq raised an eyebrow of his own in scornful imitation and laughed then set off again. Autumn followed, leading a nervous Malkia. Logan watched for a moment then retrieved his staff and put his knife safely inside his tunic and joined them.

* * *

“Woah,” said Logan, stopping at the edge of the clearing and staring at the dark bulk of the building, bathed in the mild light of Plifal through a break in the clouds. “It be huge! I wager it be bigger even than the Roinad's Palace in Uli-Rratha.”

“I know not,” said Ta'umboq. “I care nothing for Roinads nor have I been to Uli-Rratha.”

He marched them across the short grass towards the building.

“Put the horse in there,” he said pointing to a small outhouse attached to the side, “then come round to the door. I shall tell Cymogene you are here.”

He thrust the torch at Logan who took it then disappeared in the direction of the door. Slowly Autumn and Logan led Malkia to the outhouse and peered inside.

“Looks like an ordinary stable to me,” said Logan, holding up the torch. “There be plenty of hay and a trough of water. There be no other horses though.”

Autumn led Malkia in and left her to investigate the hay.

“The walls be right strange though,” she said. “There be a faint glow to them.”

She went over and touched a wall then ran her hand along it.

“It be smooth and cold,” she said, sniffing her fingers. “This be not wood. It be more like the blade of your knife.”

Logan joined her and the light of the torch flicked in the wall. He reached out and touched it as well.

“This be a copper mine,” he said. “Mayhap this place be built from copper. Wood would be warmer but there be more than enough hay. I expect Malkia will be well for the night.”

“I have seen dwellings of branches,” said Autumn, gazing around,

“and of wood and mud and brick and stone, aye and even of cloth but never one of metal. I wonder if it be a good building material?”

“This Cymogene lives here,” said Logan, “and mayhap Ta’umboq and others besides. No doubt it suits them. Certainly there seems to be no draughts.”

“Let us not keep our hostess waiting,” said Autumn, heading for the door. “Ahh, ’twould appear the door be ordinary wood, and split like most stable doors. Mayhap we leave the top one open so Malkia can get out if something untoward happens in the night.”

Logan held the torch up high and looked at her.

“What be you thinking?” he asked.

Autumn sighed. “I know not,” she said, “but I do not feel fully at ease here. That Ta’umboq be right strange and does not sit well with me.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “He be turning the blood in my veins to ice, right enough. Malkia not be liking him either. I will push the bottom half closed but not bolt it and leave the top open.”

Autumn watched as his did just that then they both walked to the entry Ta’umboq had indicated. A simple wooden door stood open, waiting for them. They went inside.

“I have been to the Palace in Uli-Rratha,” said a light musical voice. “’Tis far bigger than this place. This be just a simple country cottage but I do so hope you like it.”

“Hello,” said Autumn looking down the corridor. “Where are you?”

“In the dining room,” said the voice. “At the end, on the left.”

“Which be the left?” whispered Logan.

“That side,” whispered back Autumn, pointing to the left.

She went down the corridor with Logan close behind.

"These walls be wood," she muttered, trailing her fingers along the wall. "Ahh."

At the end of the corridor there was an open door, conveniently on the left, so she went in.

"Greetings to you both," said the woman seated at the table. She was of indeterminate age and starkly beautiful. "So nice of you to drop in. I do so love having visitors."

She jumped up happily and ushered them in.

"Come in, come in," she said beaming. "Join me for some dinner, I do hope you are hungry."

"Umm, are you Cymogene?" asked Autumn.

"Oh my dears, you must think me so rude!" exclaimed the woman, flapping her hands at Autumn then smoothing the close cropped blonde hair on the sides of her head then running her hands down the sides of her body to smooth the already smooth, tight tunic she wore. "I should have introduced myself. I am Cymogene Hirao Sastruga, owner of Sauizuxu Mine. And you are Autumn and Logan?"

"I greet you Cymogene Hirao Sastruga," said Autumn, bowing with her palms together. "I am Autumn Savannah and this be my companion, Logan."

"Only Logan?" asked Cymogene, reaching out to stroke Logan's face. "No other names?"

"Just Logan," said Logan, flinching ever so slightly.

"Oh, I am sure there is no 'just' about you, Logan," said Cymogene, widening her eyes at him and letting her fingers roam down his chest.

Logan nervously leaned back slightly and her fingers dropped away. Cymogene smiled.

"But you must be so hungry," she said, "come and sit at the table."

You've been travelling so long and you have been unwell, Autumn, have you not?"

She led the way to the table which had ten chairs and sat them at one end, next to her.

"Yes," said Autumn, "Ta'umboq seemed to think I was dead."

"Oh my dear," purred Cymogene in mock horror, "you must not take too much notice of Ta'umboq. He gets easily confused, poor thing. Yofa told us you were unwell and came on ahead, that is all. Would you like some chicken pie, Logan? Autumn? Or would you prefer a slice or two of venison?"

"Oh, some chicken pie, please," said Logan, cheering up.

"I am not hungry," said Autumn.

"But you must eat," said Cymogene. "You are a pretty little thing but you look so thin. You need building up. Perhaps some fish?"

"A little fish, if I may," said Autumn. "So are Yofa and Esogar still here?"

"Alas no," said Cymogene, twisting one of the rings on her fingers. "Yofa decided to go home rather than wait for you. After all, he knew not where you were and we were all so worried about the pass getting blocked. You know how it is, don't you, dear. Men have to be so practical about things. Now, what did he tell me to do if you turned up? Hmm, what was it now?"

She drummed her fingers absent mindedly on the table, her long painted nails clacking.

"Ahh, here comes our dinner," and she smiled happily as Ta'umboq came in bearing three plates. "Ta'umboq, what did Yofa say to do with these two delightful people if they turned up?"

Ta'umboq neatly placed the right dishes in front of the right person.

“He said to pay them what was owing,” said Ta’umboq, “and to keep the horse and wagon until his return in the Spring. Shall I open some wine, lady?”

“Of course,” said Cymogene, “we must have some wine with dinner. Yes, that was it. I am to pay you, we will sort out the details tomorrow. Tonight is a night for pleasant conversation and warm companionship. The dirty details of commerce can wait until the morrow. Wine? Autumn? Logan?”

“No thank you,” said Autumn and Logan almost simultaneously.

“Oh what a dull pair you are turning out to be,” laughed Cymogene. “Thank you Ta’umboq, leave the bottle.”

“What manner of creature is Ta’umboq?” asked Autumn when he had left the room.

“You know, I am not really quite certain,” said Cymogene, leaning over and putting her hand on Autumn’s. “I think he is some sort of dog.”

“A dog?” said Autumn, surprised. “He be like no kind of dog I have seen before.”

She pulled her hand back and Cymogene released it, perhaps a trifle reluctantly.

“Really?” said Cymogene. “Perhaps he is not then, but he is very friendly and loyal. He has been with me forever! Tell me, are you both warm enough? ’Tis bitter outside this time of year.”

“It is nicely warm in here,” said Logan, tucking into his chicken pie. “You do not have a fire, how is this so?”

“Yes, Yofa said you had an enquiring mind,” said Cymogene. “We need a lot of heat for the mine, you see. The rock has to be melted to get the copper out and some of the heat comes to the house through a pipe. It is quite clever, really. If I want it warmer or cooler I just have to move a lever this way or that so there is more hot air or less

coming in. It is so much easier than having to keep fires going and much less smelly and smokey.”

“Is your stable made of copper?” asked Logan. “We were looking at the walls when we put Malkia in and they seemed to be some sort of metal.”

“Oh, you are clever,” said Cymogene admiringly. “Yes, the whole building is made from copper. Makes it so much more snug, I think.”

“Are not these walls made of wood?” asked Autumn.

“Wood panels, my dear,” said Cymogene. “Copper is poisonous, you know. I could not possibly live with bare copper walls.”

She noticed Logan's sudden worried look.

“Now then,” she said, leaning over to pat his hand. “You have no need to worry about your horse. A few days and nights will not cause her any harm. Do not give her safety another thought. Do you like my tapestries, Autumn?”

“I'm sorry?” said Autumn, taken by surprise by the sudden change of topic.

“My tapestries,” said Cymogene. “I find they really brighten the place up. You see that one over there? The one with Plakill and Plifal rising over a forest? Yofa brought that for me just two days ago. Is it not magnificent?”

“Yes, it is very nice,” said Autumn.

“I ordered it from Wase,” said Cymogene. “That is where I am from originally. Most of the little trinkets here are from Wase. These candle sticks, for example. Do you like them?”

“Yes, they are very fine candle sticks,” said Autumn. “They would appear to serve the purpose of holding candles quite admirably.”

Cymogene beamed. “They were very expensive,” she said, “but I do

think they were worth every parak. After all, what is the point of having paraks if you do not spend them on nice things?"

"Well, I venture that is one use for them," said Autumn, slowly. She pushed her half eaten fish away slightly and put down her fork.

"Do you not like the fish?" asked Cymogene, anxiously, her own plate untouched. "I have plenty of other delicacies if you would prefer. Perhaps some chicken pie? Logan would seem to have found it quite palatable."

"It was very nice," said Logan, having finished his pie some while previously.

"I have eaten well," said Autumn, "and, alas, I can eat no more."

"Perhaps some fruit and cream?" asked Cymogene, "or some cake? You are honoured guests and it does not sit well with me for you to leave my table hungry."

"I am not in the least hungry," said Autumn. "The fish was most delightful."

"Yofa brought it for me as a present," said Cymogene. "He is such a delightful man!"

"Do you not have fish in these parts?" asked Logan. "There be a stream near here. Surely there are fish in there?"

"You would think so," said Cymogene, "but there are none, more is the pity. No matter. Tell me, where are you from? I know so little about you and I would love to know you both well. I think we can become great friends!"

"I am from a little village a long way South of here," said Logan, stifling a yawn. "'Tis called Biasdo, you will not have heard of it, no one has."

"Ohhh," said Cymogene, seemingly horrified, "but you are tired! Such bad manners on my part. I can only apologise profusely. Come let me

show you to your rooms. Soft beds await you both. In the morning I can give you a tour of the mine, if you would like that?"

"I would like that," said Autumn. "I travel to find out about the world and I have never seen a mine before."

"Excellent!" said Cymogene. "This is going to be such fun! Please do not tell me you intend to run away quickly. Please, stay here as my guests for as long as I am able to tempt you. I am certain we are going to have so much to talk about."

"Perhaps," said Autumn, glancing at Logan. "We do not wish to impose on your hospitality and I feel I have a duty to return the wagon and Malkia to Yofa as soon as possible. He may need them before the Spring."

"Oh nonsense, child," said Cymogene. "Intelligent company is a rare treat for me. 'Tis a lonely place here in the mountains and good company is hard to find. As to the horse and wagon, we can decide all that tomorrow. Come, let me get you to your beds. A good night's sleep will make you much more open to staying here."

She took them out of the dining room and along the corridor.

"This be your room, Logan," she said, throwing open a door. "You will find fresh candles and a flint beside the bed. Sleep as long as you want. There will be food aplenty whenever you wake up."

"Ahh, thank you," said Logan, peering into the room. It, too, was lined with wood panels and tapestries and some incense was burning in one corner, giving the room a relaxed, comforting smell. "Where be Autumn sleeping?"

"In here," said Cymogene, throwing open the door to the room opposite. "Fear not, she will be close by. Sleep well, friend Logan."

She gently pushed him inside and closed the door firmly.

"This is your room," she said to Autumn. "Come inside. Is it not a delightful room?"

“It would appear so,” said Autumn, going inside.

Cymogene followed her in and closed the door behind her.

“Come, child, sit on the bed beside me,” she said, going over to sit on the bed.

Autumn took off her robe and sat on the bed beside Cymogene.

“Is this not a comfortable bed?” asked Cymogene, running her hand over the cover.

“It seems very soft,” said Autumn, bouncing a little. “But I am used to sleeping on the ground.”

“Oh you poor sweet little thing,” crooned Cymogene. “A pretty girl like you needs some luxuries in her life. And your hair! You have such beautiful long hair but it needs proper attention. Come, let me brush it for you. ’Twould seem knotted and tangled in places.”

“Thank you but ...” said Autumn.

“No, no, I insist,” said Cymogene, picking up a brush from the small table beside the bed. “Come, turn your back to me and let me brush your hair. You will feel such a difference, I assure you. I wish I had lovely long hair like yours but it does not suit me. My face is of the type that goes better with short hair.”

She untied the grass string that Autumn used to tie her hair back and started to brush Autumn's hair with soft gentle strokes.

“There, does that not feel nice and delightful?” asked Cymogene softly.

“Yes, it is nice,” said Autumn.

The tension in her shoulders relaxed slightly and Cymogene noticed. She gave a small smile and paused in the brushing to run the tips of her fingernails down the back of Autumn's bare neck.

“You like that, do you not,” she whispered.

Autumn did not reply.

Slowly Cymogene bent forward and touched her lips to Autumn's neck. Autumn froze.

"Come, my pretty," whispered Cymogene. "Do not pretend you know not what is happening here."

Cymogene gently stroked Autumn's cheek then got up and came round to face her.

"Such a lovely face," she said dreamily and bent to kiss her on the lips.

"Stop!" commanded Autumn.

Cymogene jerked back in surprise.

"I am a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume," said Autumn firmly, standing up. "Of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup. I have sworn a vow of chastity."

"Well, is that not a pretty little title," said Cymogene with a laugh. "I, too, am a Krisana. Of Mor'upita-sehen, from the Yeinarr ach Chaahken vur Looplaben Esyup or some such, I forget exactly these days. I have sworn many vows and kept none of them! What does your chastity have to do with me? I am not a man."

"Chastity is chastity," said Autumn, stepping back from the bed. "Makes no matter who the other person be."

"That be not a very good attitude from a follower of Vallume and Feandra," said Cymogene, "although it be your aspect of Vallume that interests me, not that of Feandra. Still, no matter. I will not force you. The offer remains open should you change your mind. My room be only at the end of the corridor. I will bid you good night and pray you do not sleep well at all and need comfort."

She smiled lasciviously and walked slowly from the room, leaving the door open this time.

“How did that little bitch survive your thorn?” she demanded viciously when she got back to her bedroom. “She be a self righteous little puritan, full of her inflated little vows and stuffery.”

“I do not know,” said Ta’umboq, squatting on the table beside her bed. “She were unconscious and dying when she parted company with Yofa. Mayhap the lad found some cure by mischance but I know not what it may have been. He does not seem the brightest of humans.”

“Grrrrr,” growled Cymogene, throwing herself into a chair. “She has to die and there be that infernal protection on her. You saw what happened when that tree fell on her. She stood there and walked away like it never happened. Mor’upita-sehen curse that pizda!”

“Mayhap we can get the adnaton’naja to get rid of her for us,” said Ta’umboq.

“How?” demanded Cymogene. “She will shrug off any attack. That be why you had to use the thorn. Nice and slow to get around whatever it be that protects her and we cannot try that again since it did not work.”

“Let me think on it,” said Ta’umboq. “That lad be her weakness. We can get to her through him and let the adnaton’naja to do the rest.”

“Logan?” said Cymogene, thoughtfully, tapping a manicured fingernail against her teeth. “Logan, hmmm, you may be right. There must be something going on there between them else why would she be bringing a yokel along with her? Hmmm.”

Chapter Twenty

“And why do you think I know about these things?” asked Logan the next morning. “I be as chaste as you, although I made no vow about it. It be just that the opportunity has yet to arise. Mayhap women lie with women as often as with men. I know not.”

“I wonder if men lie with men?” speculated Autumn.

Logan thought about that then wrinkled his nose. “Well, mayhap,” he said after a while. “But 'twould not be to my taste.”

“Aye,” said Autumn pensively. “I know nothing of such things but I venture you have the right of it. It be a matter of taste and if both be willing then I venture there be no harm in it. Would there be babies do you think?”

“I know not how babies happen,” said Logan, “but I do know only women have them so mayhap they have babies whoever they lie with. Mayhap it be a matter for study,” and he winked at Autumn and laughed.

She didn't notice as she was gazing reflectively into her mug of tea.

“It do make me wonder, though,” she said. “If a woman lies with another woman which one has the baby or do they both have babies? And mayhap men who lie with men have babies too and you just have not heard of such a thing happening.”

“And mayhap it be something other than lying with someone that makes babies,” said Logan. “You and I have lain together many times and neither of us is pregnant. Mayhap you should ask Cymogene. I venture she has more knowledge of these things than both of us together.”

“I would,” said Autumn, “but I confess I am reluctant to. It may open a path I do not wish to venture along.”

“What path be this?” asked Cymogene, coming in to the dining room.

“Umm, we were talking about returning South and you said something last evening about the pass becoming blocked,” said Autumn.

“Aye,” said Cymogene, fetching a cup of tea for herself and joining them at the table. “The snow can get too deep along the pass.”

“What is snow?” asked Logan.

“Snow?” said Cymogene. “It be rain that is frozen.”

“Frozen?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Cymogene, her brow creasing slightly in puzzlement. “Do you not know what freezing is?”

“No,” said Autumn.

“Stay here a while longer and you will become very intimate with it,” laughed Cymogene. “It be when things get very cold. The rain turns to snow and water turns to ice.”

“I do not understand,” said Logan. “Rain be water so be snow and ice the same thing and what are they anyway?”

“No,” said Cymogene. “Snow and ice be very different. Snow be soft and gentle and white but ice be hard and of no colour. Sometimes we get hail which is when the rain becomes ice not snow. I know not why.”

“I have heard of this,” said Autumn. “I have heard that in the North the water is as hard as stone. Be this true?”

“Absolutely,” said Cymogene. “Ohh, you are both from the South! You have not seen snow or ice?”

“No,” said Autumn. “This be why we have come North. I desire to experience water that is like stone.”

“Then stay here a few more days,” said Cymogene. “It be nearly cold enough for ice and will be soon. Then you can have as much as you

want.”

“So it be to do with the cold?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Cymogene. “You know how if you heat water it turns to steam? Snow and ice be what you get when you make water too cold.”

“How strange,” said Autumn. “Is it just water that does this when it be getting cold?”

“Oh dear me no,” said Cymogene, finishing her tea. “Cold will kill you, just as fire will. Did you sleep well, my dears?”

“I confess I did not,” said Autumn. “I am used to sleeping with the sounds of the woods around me. There were no sounds at all in that room.”

“Oh I am sorry to hear that,” said Cymogene. “We will have to find some sounds to help you sleep tonight. And you Logan? Did you have the same trouble?”

“I slept well enough,” said Logan, “although I had to lie on the ground. The bed was so soft I felt I was sinking.”

“Oh my, this is not good to hear,” exclaimed Cymogene in dismay. “I will make amends and assure you that tonight you will have harder beds to sleep on and noises aplenty! I cannot have my guests not sleeping well.”

“I venture we will not be here tonight,” said Autumn. “Your hospitality is most kind but we need to return Yofa's wagon and head South again, particularly as the pass is in danger of becoming blocked.”

“Ohh, we can talk about that later,” said Cymogene with a dismissive wave of her hand. “I will send Ta'umboq to get you some ice from higher up the mountains for you to see and you have yet to see around my mine. You said yesterday you would like to.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I am always desiring of knowledge of the world. Yofa said you mine copper here?”

“Yes,” said Cymogene, “there be a lot of it around here.”

“What is copper used for?” asked Logan. “I do not think I have ever seen things made from copper, only bronze.”

“Oh, my dear,” laughed Cymogene, grasping Logan's hand firmly and squeezing it. “Copper be bronze, or at least it be when a bit of tin be mixed with it. Everything that is bronze is mostly copper.”

“I did not know that,” said Autumn. “So you have a ready market for your copper?”

“We cannot dig it out fast enough,” said Cymogene. “It be a right profitable business. Come, let us go and I will show you how we mine it and what we do with it.”

She stood up and Ta'umboq appeared in the doorway with a long white fur coat for her.

“Be it far?” asked Autumn, pulling on her robe.

“Oh no,” said Cymogene. “It be in the next valley. 'Tis but a short walk.”

* * *

“Mizule!” said Autumn in horror when they crested the low ridge between the two valleys.

Almost the entire valley downwards from where they stood had been stripped to bare rock and the rock itself cut away in great swathes. Midway across the valley was a building with a dense cloud of smoke pouring out and some way down were other buildings. Other fires burned in places. Some trees in the distance looked stunted and misshapen and an unpleasant smell hung in the air. Higher up, the narrow strip of trees between the mine and the treeline looked naked and ravaged.

“Is it not a magnificent sight,” said Cymogene proudly.

“Umm,” said Autumn. “I thought mines were a hole in the ground, not ... this,” and she waved her arm at the widespread destruction.

“That be deep mining,” said Cymogene. “This be a surface mine where we strip the layers until there be no more copper then move on a bit and start over. It be much easier. You see those people over there?”

She pointed to a small group who seemed to be attacking the rock face.

“They are cutting the rock and the lumps are thrown down to that group who break them into small pieces. Those small pieces are then shovelled into the grinder,” and she pointed to some sort of device with three horses going round it in circles. “After the grinder the powder goes into that pool where it starts to bubble. We leave it there for a while then scrape the froth off and put it into that building there to dry.”

“What is that building with all the smoke coming out?” asked Logan.

“Oh, that is the smelter,” said Cymogene. “The dried froth goes in there where it melts and the copper floats to the top. Every few days we shut down the fires and scrape off the copper and pour it into moulds where it cools. That be where the heating for my house comes from, through a pipe in the side.”

“How much copper do you get from the rock?” asked Autumn.

“Oh it varies but for every thirty or so buckets of rock we get about one bucket of copper,” said Cymogene. “I do not think you will find a more efficient mine anywhere else. Every time I come here I simply stand and marvel for a while. It is so beautiful and so efficient!”

“I have never seen such ... destruction,” said Autumn. “It beggars belief.”

“You flatter me,” said Cymogene, “but I have to confess I am rather proud. The land does not give up its riches lightly but I am winning a great victory here!”

“Did you plan all ... this yourself?” asked Autumn.

“I wish I could take all the praise,” said Cymogene, “but most of the design was done by Ta’umboq and he manages it all for me. He is such a clever creature! Come on, let us go down and look at it more closely.”

She led the way down the narrow path to the valley and across the hacked and desolate landscape.

“You know which part fascinates me the most?” asked Cymogene.

“I cannot begin to imagine,” said Autumn dryly.

“It be where the rock turns to froth,” said Cymogene, oblivious to Autumn’s tone. “The cutting and crushing is very dull to watch and the smelting is too hot but, ahh, over there is where the magic happens. Come and see.”

She took them over to where the stream had been dammed which fed into a wide shallow pool. A number of women and children in rags were carrying large woven baskets of powder from the grinder and dumping them into the pool where two scrawny men were stirring with long poles. At the other end two more men were using long handled scrapers to collect the froth into buckets, which were taken away by more people. Several people in hooded robes stood around, watching.

“Why is the water coming out that colour?” asked Autumn pointing to the far end of the pool where another dam let the water out again.

“I am not sure,” said Cymogene. “But it is a lovely shade of orange, is it not?”

As far as the eye could see the stream below this pond was orange and the banks stained. Nothing whatsoever grew there. There were no birds in the sky either. In fact the only life was the constant flow of people with baskets and buckets.

“And what is that smell?” asked Logan. “There is a nasty smell behind

the wood smoke.”

“Oh that is coming from the dryer over there,” said Cymogene. “I will take you there in a moment, but look at this pond. Is it not the most wondrous thing you have seen? They bring baskets of rock and throw them in the water and all the copper froths up and can be scraped off. I could watch this all day. It makes me think of the power and benevolence of Mor’upita-sehen and the way It throws out all the wonderful frothy lava to cover the land. I feel my heart is going to burst with the sheer joy of it all!”

“Does not the destruction of the land and all that lives on it disturb you?” asked Autumn.

“This is not destruction,” said Cymogene, looking at her strangely. “This is creation! Just think of all the wonderful copper that is being made, right here in this pond and all the useful things that can be made with it. And, of course, all those lovely little paraks that come my way. Ohh, it is too easy, too too easy to make a lot of money just by doing a little digging and soaking.”

“The people who do this work do not seem too be overjoyed,” said Autumn.

“That is because they are concentrating on doing the best they can,” said Cymogene, laying her hand on Autumn’s arm. “They are dedicated to what they do. It be a labour of love for every one of them.”

As if on cue one of the children, a young boy by the look of it, stumbled and fell, spilling his basket of powder on the ground. Instantly one of the hooded figures ran over and started striking him with a long stick.

“Hold!” cried Autumn, running around the pond.

The figure froze with the stick in the air and looked over. Cymogene shook her head then jerked it slightly. The hooded figure turned and walked back to where it had been standing.

“Are you hurt?” asked Autumn, helping the boy up.

The boy's face and arms were filthy with ingrained powder and his hair was filthy and matted. He had an open sore around his nose and his eyes were rimmed with red. He glanced at Autumn then at the hooded figure then shrugged off Autumn's hand and fell to his knees and started scraping the fallen powder back into his basket with his bare hands then staggered over to the pond and tossed the powder in. None of the other carriers stopped to help although several watched her with sidelong glances.

Deep in thought Autumn walked back around the pond to where Cymogene and Logan waited.

“What manner of people do this work?” she asked. “These be women and children and all look in need of food and washing and warmer clothing.”

“They do the work for the love of it,” said Cymogene smiling happily. “Did you notice that boy did not speak nor did any other go to help? That be because they did not wish to interrupt the process of making copper. They are all as dedicated as I am. Are they not truly blessed by Looplab and most beautiful to behold?”

“So was all the food on the wagons Yofa brought destined for these workers?” asked Autumn.

“Chaahk, no,” said Cymogene. “There are fifty or more workers here, I am not sure exactly how many as they come and go and there are the overseers as well. Two wagon-loads of food would not last long. No, the wagons were just for me. The workers here dine well on what they forage.”

“There be nothing here to eat,” said Autumn. “Look around, nothing lives nor grows here.”

“Do not be concerned, Autumn, my precious petal,” said Cymogene. “You worry your pretty little head over nothing. Come, let me show you the accommodation I provide for my workers and you will see just how well cared for they are. Do not let a little dirt bother you. Have

you not seen how dirty farmers and bakers get when they be doing their honest labours? It all washes off and they sleep clean and secure in the knowledge of a task well done and are proud of it.”

“Hmmm,” said Autumn, “very well.”

“And on the way you can see the dryer,” said Cymogene. “It be that structure over there. The wet froth be laid on a platform above the fire where it dries. All the water has to be taken out before the copper can be smelted and made pure.”

They paused not far from the large brick structure. Its heat was fierce. Three men stood on poles, balanced precariously, using long handled shovels to turn the froth that was being thrown onto the platform. Each had a red cloth wrapped around their faces.

“We cannot tarry here too long,” said Cymogene. “The drying gives off a nasty smell and it can irritate your mouth and nose.”

“What of the men on the poles?” asked Autumn, studying one of them.

“Oh they be used to it,” said Cymogene. “Well, that be about all there is to the mine, excepting the smelter but that be too hot to visit. Down yonder is where the workers live. Let us go there.”

“You must get through a lot of wood,” remarked Logan. “A fire this hot takes a lot of burning and you say the smelter be a lot hotter?”

“Aye,” said Cymogene. “We do get through a lot of trees. It be a nuisance but until someone dreams up a better way of making heat we just have to live with that. I venture the woods on these mountains be running out before the copper does.”

“Does it not concern you that you are using up all the trees?” asked Autumn.

“Aye, it does, I have to confess,” said Cymogene, leading them away from the dryer.

“What will you do when all the trees are gone?” asked Logan.

"I have been thinking about that," said Cymogene. "Seem to me that one option is to start cutting down the trees on the other side of the mountains although that will need more people and take more time bringing the wood back here and there is the problem of the pass being blocked all winter. Mayhap the better option would be to shut down the mining here and start mining the other side, although we will need to dig many exploratory holes to find where there is copper that side. 'Tis a dilemma. Aye, and 'twould be a shame to leave my house this side but I venture it would not be too difficult to transport it across or mayhap I will build another."

"So you are happy to destroy everything here then move on and destroy another place?" asked Autumn. "Surely that is not what you were taught at your Esysup?"

"I was taught about the unending cycle of life and death," said Cymogene, "as I have no doubt you were too."

"The cycle is one of natural life and death, Cymogene," said Autumn, "not the wanton laying of waste for no reason other than your personal greed."

"I see you have not fully comprehended the philosophical implications of your teachers," said Cymogene. "The cycle of life and death is natural in all its forms. A tree lives, a tree dies, a worker lives, a worker dies, a river lives, a river dies. It is all one and the same and the death is inevitable. But what is important is not the death but the manner of death and the use to which that death is put. Yes, trees die here but they die for a good purpose. And yes, sometimes a worker dies but that death is also for a good purpose. You see life and death as a cycle in isolation but in truth it is not in isolation. You fail to see the broader impact that cycle has and the good it can do beyond the limits of that cycle."

"I confess I do fail to see the broader impact of good here," said Autumn, frowning. "I do see the stream turned orange and that there is nothing able to live on its banks. Mayhap further downstream that continues and nothing can live in, on or by that stream. You told us yesterday that no fish can live in these streams. What of people and animals further downstream? What of the life that is no more or that

can never be here?"

"I am disappointed in you, Autumn," said Cymogene. "I had hoped that you of all people could understand the good that comes from this. Do you deny that Looplab in all Its bounteous glory put copper in these mountains when It created the mountains?"

"I cannot deny that," said Autumn. "There be copper in these mountains else you would not be mining the stuff."

"And do you seek to deny that Looplab put that copper in the mountains to be used?" asked Cymogene.

"I do not know Looplab's purpose," said Autumn, "but I struggle to believe that Looplab would put the copper in the mountains to cause the destruction of all that lives on and around the mountains."

"But there is no other way to use the copper that Looplab has given us," said Cymogene. "And surely you must see all the benefits that copper brings us. Without copper we would not have bronze and without bronze where would we be? The fact that it brings me a handful of paraks is of minor interest. What is important is that I, and I alone, bring much that is good to this world and the death of a small part of the world is nothing compared with the good that is brought to the entire world. That is the true nature of the cycle of life and death. The death of the lesser brings life to the greater. Just as the death of the worm gives life to the bird and the death of the bird gives life to the man."

"You talk a falseness, Cymogene," said Autumn. "You talk as though the mining of copper brings life but it does not. No creature from the smallest insect to you yourself gains life through copper. This bronze you talk of is mere convenience, it is not life giving. You do not seek to bring good to the world, for if you truly believed what you say you would dedicate your life to the mining of copper in a different way. One that does not bring death and destruction to all around. I regret having to say this but I believe that you are not driven by a desire to do good but by a desire for personal gain and that you are willing to make any sacrifice for that gain."

“Ahh, Autumn, you sadden me greatly with your attitude and accusations,” said Cymogene, shaking her head slowly and seemingly on the verge of tears. “But we are here at one of the dwellings I provide for my workers. Please, I beg you, go inside and see the luxuries with which they live and then come back and tell me that I care nothing for the lives of those around me.”

“Very well,” said Autumn. “I shall do as you ask.”

“You too, Logan,” said Cymogene, holding open the stout wooden door to the stone building. “I desire that you be a witness to Autumn’s conversion to my creed.”

Autumn stepped inside, closely followed by Logan.

“We need a torch, said Logan turning back, “’tis dark ...”

The stout door slammed in his face and there came the sound of a bar being fitted across it. Logan pushed the door but it would not move.

“Sleep well, my lovelies,” called Cymogene. “I hope the ground be hard enough for you and that there will be noises aplenty.” She laughed happily.

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan. “We be prisoners again.”

Chapter Twenty One

“Mizule, that was foolish of me,” said Autumn in the darkness.

Her tone was deceptively mild but Logan could sense her making an effort to contain her annoyance.

“I was engrossed in discussing the rights and wrongs of Cymogene's actions and motives and allowed us to fall into a trap,” she said a few moments later after what sounded like some deep calmness exercises.

“As did I,” said Logan, trying the door again. It shifted very slightly and each time there was a wooden thunk as the bar stopped its movement. “’Twould seem there be no handle this side, although what use a handle would be if it is barred on the other side Sploop only knows.”

“Seems there be no windows or other openings,” said Autumn from further away. “I see no light nor feel any draught or movement of air.”

“What was that?” said Logan in alarm as there came a small scuffling sound immediately followed by the sound of Autumn jumping.

“There be things on the ground,” said Autumn.

“What sort of things?” asked Logan, feeling for the door and backing into it.

“It feels like pieces of cloth of some kind,” said Autumn, her voice coming from nearer the ground, “and something soft and ... ugh.”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan, “what is it? Is it dangerous.”

“’Tis not dangerous,” said Autumn making some sort of rubbing sound, “but ’tis not pleasant and I venture it accounts for the unpleasant smell in here. It be shit and human too, I wager, although not a healthy one.”

“So we have been locked in a toilet?” asked Logan. “What kind of toilet has the bar on the outside not the inside?”

Logan heard Autumn's shuffling footsteps.

"Be too big for that," she said after a while. "I have found the wall opposite. I venture this be more a sleeping place for the workers at this mine. 'Twould be my guess that we were deceived by Cymogene's promise of luxuries."

"Aye," said Logan as the shuffling came closer again then he jumped as a rather smelly hand touched his face. "Be that you, Autumn?"

"Fear not, Logan," came Autumn's voice nearby.

Logan felt her shoulder press against his as she stood beside the door.

"That be strange," he said. "Your face be glowing. 'Tis only very faint but I can make out the shape of it."

"What do you mean?" asked Autumn. "I cannot see your face. It be be blacker than black in here."

She reached over to try to touch Logan's face then exclaimed. "Oh, I can see the outline of my hand! 'Tis very faint but I can see it."

Logan took her hand in his.

"I cannot see my hand," he said, "except as a blackness over the glow of yours."

"How strange," said Autumn. "I wonder if this signifies anything? Do you think I have been afflicted by all this copper?"

"I have been where you have been," said Logan. "If it were that then I would glow too."

"So I would think," said Autumn. "Hmmm."

"Oh well," said Logan, "mayhap you have always glowed a little but we have never been anywhere dark enough to notice before." He hummed a tuneless little tune and tapped his fingers on the door.

“Tis a shame Darius be no longer with us,” he said. “He got us out of that prison in Uli-Rratha right quickly. Shall I call him and see if he answers?”⁸

“I do not see the need at present,” said Autumn, thoughtfully.

She slid down the door and sat at its base with her legs crossed. Logan slid down beside her and tried her manner of leg crossing once again.

“Why not?” he asked, uncrossing his legs again quickly as pains stabbed through his knees.

“I wager we can get out quite easily,” said Autumn.

“How?” asked Logan.

“You have your staff with you,” said Autumn. “Mayhap if you ask, Fiau will be able to get us through this door, it be a wooden door.”

“I did not think of that,” said Logan excitedly. “Oh, Sploop!”

“What?” asked Autumn.

“I propped my staff against the wall before I came inside,” said Logan. “It is outside.”

“I wager Fiau will still hear you,” said Autumn. “Call her.”

“Umm, Fiau,” said Logan, raising his voice a little and feeling foolish. “Fiau? Are you there?”

“I am here, Logan,” said Fiau, materialising beside him. She glowed brightly enough for Autumn and Logan to see each other.

“Ah, hello,” said Logan. “It is nice to see you again. Are you well?”

8 In Annal 1, Darius, aka Ept, tells Autumn and Logan that in times of need they can say his name three times and he will come to their aid. When imprisoned by Obvia Vasagle, the Roinad, they call for Darius and he helps them escape their cell by taking them through another dimension.

“I am well,” said Fiau, gravely. “How can I serve you?”

“Can you get me through this door?” asked Logan. “It is barred on the outside.”

“Yes,” said Fiau. “Do you wish me to do that?”

“Yes,” said Logan as Autumn said “No.”

“Umm, no,” said Logan. “Autumn, do we not wish to escape?”

“Not yet,” said Autumn. “‘Twould be good if your staff were inside with us though. Someone may take it.”

“Why do you wish to stay here?” asked Logan. “Oh, Fiau, would you bring the staff inside for me, please?”

Fiau's glow disappeared.

“Did she bring it in?” asked Autumn.

“I do not know,” said Logan.

He got to his feet and turned to face the door then started to feel along the wall. “Ahh, this feels like it,” he said happily then “owww”.

“What happened?” asked Autumn, the faint glows from her hands reaching out in the direction of his voice.

“I picked up the staff badly,” he said, “and hit myself on the head.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “Perhaps you should hold it with both hands so you know which way it is inclined.”

“I am going to leave it propped against the wall,” said Logan. “It be safer that way.”

There was a dull thunk as he propped the staff against the wall then a slither as he slid down the door and sat beside Autumn again.

“So why do we not escape?” asked Logan.

“I feel there is much badness here,” said Autumn, “and that the workers here may not be as they seem. Happy workers do not need to be beaten and I know not why we have been imprisoned. As we seem to be able to leave at any time, I desire to wait and see what happens. Mayhap this is a sleeping place for the workers and we can talk with them. 'Tis an opportunity to find out the truth of this place for I venture Cymogene has not been entirely truthful with us.”

“Aye, I was thinking the same,” said Logan. “This be a loathsome place and I do not see how any would work here willingly and those we saw did not seem well treated. If Cymogene be willing to destroy all around for her copper then I venture she be willing to destroy the people as well.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “And I am disturbed by other things she said as well. That copper be poisonous and the vapours from the drying of the froth be bad. And that there be nothing living in the stream or near it. It may be that there are none who live downstream but that is no reason to kill all the animals, birds, fish and plants.”

“Indeed,” said Logan. “You have the right of it. Let us find out more from them as work here, although what we do about it I know not.”

“It may be that our fears are ungrounded,” said Autumn. “Mayhap it be as simple as Cymogene not expressing herself well.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, “but we have also seen what we have seen and no amount of thinking can deny that she trapped us in this building.”

They both fell silent, each thinking their own thoughts.

“Them as work here,” said Autumn suddenly. “Did not Cymogene say there be around fifty workers here and overseers besides?”

“Aye,” said Logan.

“Where did they come from?” asked Autumn.

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

“You remember the sign on the edge of Saiwoc?” said Autumn. “That it be the last place of any size to the North?”

“Aye,” said Logan, sounding puzzled. “Oh! If Saiwoc be the last place to the North where have these workers come from?”

“Mayhap they be local,” said Autumn, “but if so their numbers would seem to indicate that entire villages are left empty so who will till their fields and tend their beasts?”

“It could be that they are from a village where everyone works at the mine,” said Logan.

“It could be,” said Autumn, “but if that be so then why has Cymogene built this place to house them?”

“It be a puzzle all right,” said Logan. “Ayah, there be lots of questions here and precious few answers.”

It was a long wait until the door opened again.

* * *

The hooded figure stood there silently. Then it hissed and waved a stick.

“I think he wants us to do something,” said Autumn.

The figure hissed again and waved its stick impatiently.

“I think he wants us to go outside,” said Logan. “There seem to be others out here now.”

There was a small fire burning not far away and a crowd of silent people sitting or lying on the ground with perhaps half a dozen of the hooded figures standing silently, watching them. A small queue of people stood near the fire, with two hooded figures standing over them. A woman was ladling something from a cauldron suspended

over the fire into bowls and handing them to people in the queue.

"I suppose we had better join the others," said Autumn and calmly walked through the door, staff in hand.

Logan followed her, not as calmly even though his staff was in his hand as well. She stopped in front of the hooded figure.

"I am Autumn Savannah," said Autumn to the hooded figure. "Who are you?"

Underneath the long cowl no features were visible in the twilight but the hiss was quite distinct.

"Hmmm," said Autumn. "Do you wish us to join the others by the fire?"

The hooded figure swiped at Autumn with its stick and she neatly parried it with her staff. Then it hissed again and pointed with its stick.

"Interesting," said Autumn and walked over to the fire, Logan close behind.

"Greetings," she said to the woman doing the cooking. "My name be Autumn Savannah."

"Dua," she said, glancing at the figure that had followed Autumn.

"What is happening here?" asked Autumn.

"It be mealtime," said Dua.

"For the mine workers?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Dua.

The figure hissed at her.

"Now what does he want?" asked Autumn turning to look at him.

“Best you join the queue,” said Dua.

“Then why does he not say that?” asked Autumn.

“They never do more than hiss,” said a gaunt man, sitting near the fire. “You have to guess right or else they be hitting you.” He licked the inside of his bowl carefully even though it was obviously empty.

Autumn looked at the hooded figure which raised its stick and pointed it at her threateningly. She shrugged and went to stand behind the only person left in the queue. Logan joined her.

“My name be Autumn,” she said to the man in front of her.

He ignored her, intent on getting his bowl of food.

“What is it?” asked Autumn, when Dua handed her a bowl.

“Root stew,” said Dua.

“It be hot water,” said the man who'd spoken before. “Mayhap there was once a root in that there cauldron but it ain't there no more.”

Autumn looked at Dua who just shrugged. “I just heat it,” she said, dispiritedly.

“Thank you,” said Autumn.

“I ain't seen you before. You be fresh meat here?” said the man who'd spoken before.

“We arrived yesterday,” said Autumn, uncertain what the man meant by 'fresh meat'. “May we sit with you?”

“Free country,” said the man and gave a short sarcastic laugh then spat.

Autumn sat beside him, her staff propped against her shoulder. Logan sat beside her and looked dejectedly into his bowl.

“I be Pacane,” said Pacane. “I saw you with that bitch, reckoned you were one of them but seeing as how you be here with us I reckon mayhap I be wrong. Them adnats don’t seem to like you much, not that they likes any of us.”

“Adnats?” asked Autumn.

“Them in the hoods,” said Pacane. He gave up on his bowl and tossed it over to the fire.

“Why do they only hiss?” asked Autumn.

“They ain’t human,” said Pacane. “Can’t talk, like.”

“What are they then?” asked Logan.

All the adnats started hissing loudly and hitting people at random with their sticks and there was a general flurry as people got up and started moving slowly over towards the building.

“Best drink up right smart,” said Pacane, getting up. “It be bed time.”

“He be right,” said Logan, draining his bowl. “It be just water with a flavour of roots. ’Twas not even hot.”

“Be glad it were not meat, lad,” said Pacane. “We only gets meat when one of us dies, and precious little then.”

* * *

The building was crowded when Autumn and Logan followed Pacane inside. People sat or lay wherever they could and Pacane was careless of who he stepped on. Autumn and Logan followed him, taking care to step between limbs. A single torch spluttered and smoked from a cord that held it to a wall and it cast but little light. Pacane led them to a corner where there was space to stretch out on the floor without lying on top of someone else.

“This be our corner,” he said. “Dua you have met, them be Bru’cht and Yawth. These be Autumn and, what be your name lad?”

“Logan,” said Logan.

Dua nodded and relaxed against the wall. Pacane kicked someone's legs to make more room and half mockingly invited them to sit.

“Me, Yawth and Bru'cht been here longest,” said Pacane. “Dua be newcomer like you two. Only thing here worth fighting for is space. If you can stretch out you can get some sleep and your body lasts longer.”

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

“Can't rightly say,” said Yawth. “It be late summer when I arrived and it be almost winter now.”

“That is not long,” said Autumn.

“Aye,” said Bru'cht. “Most be not surviving here long.”

“Why is that?” asked Autumn.

“I saw you over by the pond,” said Dua. “You helped that boy what fell over. You saw the dryer just beyond it?”

“Where the froth is dried?” asked Autumn and Dua nodded.

“You smell it there?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“The vapours be poisonous,” said Dua. “Them as works the dryer lives mayhap a sennight, mayhap a little longer. The vapours burns out their mouths and noses then their lungs. The further from the rock face you be the shorter you live.”

“Where do you work?” asked Logan.

“I be foraging and cooking,” said Dua. “Them three be cutting rock at the face which be why they be still alive.”

“So why do you work here?” asked Autumn.

“No choice,” said Pacane. “Them adnats see to that.”

Someone further along the wall started retching and was cursed by those around him.

“That one probably will not make it through the night,” said Yawth. “I saw him drink from the orange stream.”

“I have so many questions I know not where to start,” said Autumn. “What be adnats?”

“Adnaton'naja,” said Pacane. “Don't reckon any of us knows what they be exactly, 'cepting they be from the Land of the Undead and stupid as my old ma's turds.”

“Is that why they hiss?” asked Logan.

“They ain't got no mouths,” said Yawth. “Just a funny little tube where the mouth should be but they ain't got the brains to talk even if they could.”

“So why do you let them make you do things?” asked Autumn.

“They hits you 'till you do what they be wanting you to do,” said Dua. “If you don't figure it out they just keeps on hitting you. I seen one of 'em beat a girl to death because she were too scared to think straight.”

“But why do you let them hit you?” asked Autumn. “If they be stupid why not fight back or run away?”

“I hit one once,” said Bru'cht. “Hit it over the head with a heavy rock. It didn't even notice, just fell over then got up again and carried on walking. They be like beetles only shaped like us. They be not having skin, they have a shell, like a beetle. Don't know as how anyone be breaking through that shell.”

“More like roaches,” said Yawth. “They can run two, maybe three times as fast as a man when they have a mind.”

“But can you not deceive them?” asked Logan. “If they be stupid they must surely be easy to deceive.”

“Aye,” said Pacane. “They be stupid all right. Look at you both. It never occurred to any of them to take your staffs away even though you may be going to use them as weapons against them or the rest of us. All they think about, if they be thinking of anything, be the tasks and getting them done.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn. “Can you not just walk away and pretend to be doing some task? Would they not let you go?”

“Aye,” said Dua. “I go foraging with two or three others and the adnats pay me no never mind but if I go too far then that monstrosity will come looking and bring me back.”

“What monstrosity be that? asked Logan.

“Its name be Ta'umboq,” said Yawth. “Have you not seen it? Did it not bring you here?”

“That squat green creature with wings?” asked Autumn. “No, we came here with a horse and wagon, bringing supplies.”

“Yes, that thing,” said Pacane. “So you came here by your own choice? You be damned fools, the pair of you.” He shook his head sadly.

“Did you not come here through choice?” asked Autumn.

“Like buggery we did,” said Bru'cht. “That there monster snatched me in the night. There were a commotion among my chickens and I went out to see if something was at them and it swooped out of the sky and snatched me off and carried me here.”

“I were on a fishing boat,” said Pacane. “Out on Azour Sea. Yawth were stable hand in Uli-Rratha. We come from all over but we was all snatched from our homes and our loved ones. Ain't never going to be seeing any of them again, that be for certain.”

“I suspected as much,” said Autumn, nodding her head. “You all be

slaves, be you not?"

"Aye," said Yawth. "We be here 'till we be dead and that be the end of it."

"Still, I do not understand," said Autumn. "Can you not tie up these adnats or push them into the fires and when Ta'umboq comes for you band together and fight him?"

"It be a nice idea," said Dua, "but I reckon as how you ain't had dealings with that obscenity."

"What do you mean?" asked Logan.

"It be having some sort of magic," said Dua. "If you try to fight it your will gives up. Be right difficult to fight something when you have not the will to do so."

"That be interesting," said Autumn. She frowned. "What manner of creature be Ta'umboq? Cymogene said it were some kind of dog."

"Who be Cymogene?" asked Dua.

"That fair faced copper hearted bitch what runs this place," said Pacane.

"Oh, that one," said Dua. "'Tis strange but it never occurred to me she had a name."

"Ain't no kind of dog," said Bru'cht. "It be an augetreinn."

"What be an augetreinn?" asked Logan. "I have never heard of them."

"They be creatures from the Land of the Cysciec," said Yawth.

"Where be Cysciec?" asked Autumn.

"It be a place for them what is not Dead nor Undead," said Bru'cht.

"I do not understand," said Autumn. "Either you be Living, or Dead

or Undead. What else can there be?”

“Tis not a place well known, “ said Pacane, “but when you have been here but a short time you find out about it. You know of Yammoe, Lord of the Undead?”

“Yes,” said Logan, “Autumn bes...” and shut up abruptly when Autumn squeezed his knee painfully.

“We know of Yammoe,” she said.

“Well, Cysciec be where creatures be sent that be too evil for Yammoe to cope with.”

Chapter Twenty Two

The rat's whiskers twitched nervously, testing the air. It was foul. A thick miasma of unwashed bodies, wastes, putrefaction and death but the rat did not mind that. It had been born into this small world and knew no better. What it searched for was danger, a threat to its own life. The rat sensed nothing out of the ordinary. It edged forward, whiskers a-tremble, its nose twitching and its eyes darting. It edged forward another half step then scurried into the lee of a body, a child, a girl, perhaps nine or ten summers old. The child half-slept in a misery of loneliness, cold and pain, her intestines ulcerated from contaminated water. She huddled against an uncaring adult, pushed to the side and abandoned in the huddle for warmth. The rat cared even less. Easy prey though the child was, the rat could smell death. Somewhere in that huddle of bodies was a dead body. Easy prey indeed, if only the rat could find it.

The torch on the wall had almost burnt out. It cast only a faint dull red light but it was enough for Autumn to see the movement of the rat. She sat cross-legged, her back to the wall. Pacane, Bru'cht, Yawth and Dua stretched out beside her, sleeping the sleep of the exhausted. Beyond, bodies lay where they could, entwined and overlapping. A few, the lucky ones, found some sleep. The rat scurried along, stopped, tested the air, twitched its tail, scurried some more.

An eye looked at Autumn then looked at the rat. Slowly a grimy hand lifted, pausing each time the rat paused. The hand hovered, then snatched. The rat squealed and struggled but the grip was strong and sure, practised. The eye looked at Autumn again then the hand flashed to a mouth and teeth ripped into the rat's abdomen. There was a sudden turmoil and the mouth opened in a scream of anger as another hand snatched the dripping carcass from the man's hand. Instantly the man rolled and launched an attack on his attacker. Another joined in as a fat rat was a meal worth fighting for. 'Twas not the first such fight that night, not would it be the last. There were rats a-plenty but not enough to go round. Not near enough.

Autumn felt Logan shudder.

"Are you asleep?" she whispered.

"I will never sleep again," he whispered back. "This place be worse than the Land of the Undead."

"Come with me," she whispered and quietly got up. "Bring your staff."

In the faint redness of the torch she slowly made her way over to the door, picking her way as best she could between the people lying or sitting on the ground. There were a few curses, barely audible above the background of moans and sobs but no one made any move to stop her. Logan followed as best he could.

"Where are we going?" whispered Logan when they got to the door.

"We cannot stay here," whispered Autumn. "Ask Fiau to get us out."

"I have been praying for this moment," whispered Logan. "Fiau, can you hear me?"

"I am here, Logan," said Fiau, materialising beside him. She glowed brightly in the gloom.

"Shhhh," whispered Logan urgently.

Fiau just looked at him.

"Can you get us through the door?" whispered Logan.

"No," whispered Fiau like a cool breeze through warm evening leaves.

"What?" said Logan, startled. "Why not?"

"G'arn, shut it," growled a voice nearby.

"Sorry," whispered Logan. "Umm, Fiau, did you not say you could take me through the door earlier?"

"Yes," whispered Fiau.

"What has changed?" asked Autumn quietly.

“Nothing has changed,” whispered Fiau. “Tis not within my power to move any but Logan through.”

“Voqev!” whispered Logan violently.

“You go through with Fiau, Logan,” whispered Autumn calmly.

“For Sploop's sake, Autumn,” said Logan angrily. “I am not leaving you behind so do not even suggest it! How could you even think I would do such a thing?”

He stamped his foot to emphasise his point.

“Hush, Logan,” whispered Autumn. “Go through with Fiau and ...”

“I will not do it!” said Logan, “and you cannot make me.”

“Logan, let me finish,” whispered Autumn, putting her hand on Logan's arm. “Go through the door with Fiau and lift up the bar. That way I can get out through the door.”

“But ..., oh, yes, good thinking,” whispered Logan. “Umm, Fiau, how do we do this?”

“Grasp me firmly and step through,” said Fiau, holding out her long thin hand.

Moments later there were noises from the other side of the door then it creaked open.

“There be none of them packrat things about,” whispered Logan. “Come on.”

Autumn slipped through the door and a man untangled himself from the floor and peered cautiously out.

“It be clear,” he whispered and two or three others followed him out then there was a sudden rush of people. They melted into the night.

“That were a neat trick,” said Pacane, invisible in his dark corner.

“How did you do it?”

“Are you not leaving?” asked Autumn.

“No point, lass,” said Pacane. “They all be back soon enough. That monstrosity will round 'em up come morning and mayhap some will die. I be happy to eat their food come dawn.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “I venture we will meet again and soon but if not, fare well.”

“Aye, you too, lass,” said Pacane. “Shut the door, would you? There be a right cold draught coming in.”

“Should we bar the door again?” asked Logan.

“No, he or the others may change their minds,” said Autumn. “Come.”

“Where are we going?” asked Logan as he followed her away from the building.

“I am not sure,” said Autumn, hurrying across the bare earth towards the orange creek. “I had to get out of there. I could not focus my thinking with all that suffering around me. I need to find somewhere to think and decide what to do. We will head this way though as it is the way to Cymogene's valley and we still have to return Yofa's horse and wagon.”

“I know what you mean,” said Logan as they jumped across the creek. “I have not the words to describe it. Do you think anyone will chase us?”

“I venture that Ta'umboq will,” said Autumn. “If not soon then come morning. That be something else to think about as well.”

A wall of rock of Autumn's height loomed up in front of them and Autumn leapt up and landed on her hands and knees. She shifted round to help Logan up.

“There be trees over there,” she said. “That must be the side of the

valley. Let us head for them, if nothing else the trees may make it more difficult for Ta'umboq to spot us.”

“Aye, and there might be something to eat there as well,” said Logan.

“A day and a night without food be not harmful,” said Autumn.

“True,” said Logan, “but that be if we do find food. If we do not it could be a lot longer. We also need water and I do not want to touch the water in this valley.”

“Good point, Logan,” said Autumn as the ground started to rise. “If we cut across to the next valley the water should be cleaner.”

* * *

Plakill was high in the sky when they came across the stream in the next valley.

“Do not drink this water,” said Autumn when they came to the stream. “You remember that it has a bad smell? I wager what be killing the other valley be somehow contaminating this one as well but if I have my bearings right we should only be a short way downstream from the wagon, if it still be there. Our water skins be on the wagon and some roots if my memory serves.”

The wagon was where they had left it, the goods on it as yet untouched and their water skins and Autumn's pack were still under the bench.

“And our blankets,” said Logan happily. “That be right good.”

They wrapped themselves in the blankets and sat among the trees not far from the wagon, chewing on raw roots.

“We are not far from Cymogene's house,” said Logan after drinking some clean fresh water from the skin. “What say you we find Malkia and head back through the pass before it be blocked?”

“Tis an option,” said Autumn, “and if all else fails it be worth trying.”

“All else fails?” asked Logan. “Oh Sploop, what be you planning? We freed the slaves at the mine, what more can we do?”

“We only freed some,” said Autumn. “And the fact that others chose to remain because they believed they would be recaptured and returned does not bode well for those who did go. 'Tis hardly freedom if they only be gone for a half day. Besides ...” and she tailed off.

“Besides what?” asked Logan, starting to eat another root.

“There is much badness there,” said Autumn. “'Twould be good if we could release all the people but there is much more besides. There be the people who live downstream. I know not how many but I venture there be some and for certain there is much other life that is suffering and dying. The trees, plants, animals, fish and insects, mayhap even this mountain itself. I venture Looplab be not over joyous if Its mountains die.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan. “But how can we do anything to change that?”

“I know not,” said Autumn. “I wager if we did get all the people away and somehow stopped Ta'umboq finding them he would only get fresh victims. After all, many do die here and yet they keep the numbers going. 'Tis fruitless to end the suffering of one only to replace it with the same suffering of another. 'Twould be better to end the cause of the suffering for all.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “It would be a wonderful thing to end all suffering but not even Zeeth can do that.”

“That be true,” said Autumn. “Suffering be a fact of life and no mistake.”

She fell silent and Logan chewed thoughtfully on a third root.

“Be you not eating?” he asked after a while.

“Aye, I suppose I should,” said Autumn.

Logan passed her a couple of roots and she took them and put them

on the ground beside her.

“Another thought comes into my mind,” she said. “Cymogene said that with this mine they take all the copper from one place then move on and start elsewhere and she said she be thinking of taking the trees from the other side of the mountains and mayhap mining there too. If she be constantly seeking to grow her money and has no concerns for the damage she be doing what will she be doing when all this mountain be gone?”

“Start on the next mountain, most like,” said Logan.

“And when that be gone?” asked Autumn. “If she cares for naught but the paraks then I venture she will keep going until every one of the Mapdil Mountains be gone and all the land either side be dead and destroyed. I know not how many people and animals and other things live in Aferraron but I venture it be more than a few. What if her desire for money be bottomless?”

“Surely she will not live that long,” said Logan. “I know she be not an old woman but one day death will end her desires.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn pensively, “but think on what damage she can do in a lifetime. Ayah, I have had a most bothersome thought.”

“Another one?” asked Logan. “Have we not had enough bad thoughts to last us through to next summer?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but think on this. How long has she been mining here?”

“How would I know?” asked Logan. “A fair time I would imagine.”

“Why do you imagine that?” asked Autumn, tossing one of the roots from hand to hand.

“There be a lot of the next valley already mined,” said Logan.

“That be so,” said Autumn, “and we know not if there be other valleys already exhausted further along. I know not how to reckon this but it

seems to me that the amounts of copper she be taking away each day be quite small yet there be a vast amount of mountain gone which I venture would have taken a lot of summers.”

“Mayhap there be a way of reckoning that with my new way of writing numbers,” said Logan. “If I could write down the size of the mountain and the amount she takes away each day mayhap there be a way of getting the number of days she has been doing it.”

“Can you reckon that this night?” asked Autumn.

“Sploop no,” said Logan. “I would have to do a lot of thinking and playing and it may not even be possible.”

“Then let us not concern ourselves with that,” said Autumn. “Let us just agree that she has been doing this for a long time and shows no sign of stopping before she has destroyed the whole country.”

“If she do then who would buy her copper?” asked Logan.

“The people in Wase,” said Autumn, “or Neander or Sassese’lte or other places I have not heard of.”

“Ahh, I did not think of them,” said Logan. “Mayhap Ta’umboq would be getting slaves from those places as well.” He sighed deeply. “Mayhap she will eat up this entire mountain but I wager not even she be able to eat two or three, let alone all of them. Do not forget she will die one day.”

“Will she?” asked Autumn. “Can you be sure of that?”

“Everyone dies eventually,” said Logan. “Tis a fact of life.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “I would agree with you were it not for two thoughts I have. One be that she still seems young enough to have children so what happens if she passes her business to them or to someone else who shares her beliefs?”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “I did not think of that. ’Twould be like a farmer passing his farm to his children and they to theirs. It could go on

forever.” He nodded thoughtfully. “That be not a happy thought. Mayhap the other be happier. What is it?”

“The overseers at the mine be adnaton'naja from the Land of the Undead,” said Autumn, “and Ta'umboq be an augetreinn from the Land of the Cysciec.”

“No, it be no happier,” said Logan sadly. “I venture this thought be a whole lot worse. Finish it.”

“If Cymogene be working with the likes of them,” said Autumn softly, “why do you think she will ever die?”

Logan tossed away the last little chunk of the root he'd been nibbling on and leaned forward to rest his head on his knees.

“Oh Voqev,” he muttered. “That be a right pleasant little thought.” He sighed deeply and lifted his head. “When I met you, I had just left my village because they were going to hang me for thievery. I should have stayed. It would have been a lot easier.”

“But you would not have become the Roinad,” said Autumn. “I am sure everyone you stole from in your village now has a sign outside their house saying they were robbed by the future Roinad! You be famous there now, I be certain. Mayhap if you go back they be not wanting to hang you now.”

“I did not want to be Roinad,” said Logan. “Oh well, 'twas my accursed destiny I suppose.”

Autumn nodded in the moonlight and put her arm comfortingly around him to give him a hug.

“I have another thought,” she said after a few moments.

“I am going back to my village,” said Logan breaking the hug and getting up. “I do not like your thoughts anymore.”

“Oh, do sit down,” said Autumn so Logan obediently sat back down again. “You cannot go back to your village. You were right about your

destiny, your destiny is here.”

“I do not want to hear this,” said Logan and put his hands over his ears.

“I said 'your destiny is here',” said Autumn, pulling one of his hands away.

Logan sighed.

“And I suppose you have a right clever argument to show that, then,” he said.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Mother Midcarn said so.”

“I do not remember her saying any such thing,” said Logan.

“She gave you the staff,” said Autumn. “Before we even met Yofa and took the job to come here. That staff is part of Havildar which is here and it got you out of the mine. I venture Mother Midcarn knew you were coming here and she expects you to do something about it and gave you the staff to help you.”

“I thought she be a lot cleverer than that,” said Logan. “She be damned foolish if she be expecting me to solve things like this. Why me? Why not you? After all, you be the one with brains and clever skills and things. Besides it be the staff that be saving you from that thing in your leg. Mayhap that were the only reason she gave it to me.”

“Aye, that be true, right enough,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “But why give you a staff that could ask Awendene for help if we were not going to be anywhere near Awendene? She must have seen us coming here in her Window and expects us to do something about all this badness that be here. Mayhap she even arranged for us to be here. Mayhap it do be my destiny but you cannot deny she gave you the staff. Her note were addressed to you, not me. If it be my destiny it be yours too.”

“I do not like your thoughts,” said Logan after giving her a baleful look, “but here be one of mine and let us see how well you like it.”

“Very well, Logan the Destined,” said Autumn. “What be your thought?”

“If you be right and Mother Midcarn did know we were coming here,” said Logan, “mayhap someone else knew.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “What of it?”

“Just before we met Yofa and got set upon this path you were hurt by a thorn,” said Logan. “A thorn with bad magic on it. Mayhap this someone else who knew you were coming here was trying to stop you.”

Autumn stared at him.

“Then why not just kill me?” she asked.

“Who knows what reasoning there be in the mind of those from other Lands,” said Logan. “I be not saying this is so, just that it may be so.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and mayhap you have the right of it for I have another thought.”

Logan groaned.

“Mayhap if this other someone knew of me and my future,” said Autumn, “it also knew I am protected by Mother Midcarn’s ribbon so something quick would most like not kill me, such as an arrow or a falling tree. Mayhap it had to use a magic thorn so my death be slow and so get through the magic of the ribbon.”

“And since we are having thoughts and sharing them as good friends do,” said Logan, “although I venture no good friends have ever shared thoughts like these before, I too have another thought.”

“It be a good one I am certain,” said Autumn. “I look forward to your sharing it.”

“I am not sure it be all that good,” said Logan. “But have you wondered why Cymogene did not simply try to run you through when

you argued with her yesterday. For certain if she thought you ordinary she had them packrats around to attack you. Mayhap she knew you are protected against quick deaths which be why she put you in with the slow poisons of the mine.”

“Adnats,” said Autumn, “not packrats.”

“Adnats then,” said Logan. “Makes no never mind what they be called.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “An adnat by any other name be no more sweet. Are you still in the mood for sharing thoughts?”

“No,” said Logan, “but that be not stopping you, I venture.”

“You know me well, Logan the Insightful,” said Autumn. “Dawn be not far away and I have one last thought. Mother Midcarn gave you a staff which lets you move through wooden doors.”

“I hope and pray that this be not what I be thinking,” said Logan.

“I do not have your gift of insight,” said Autumn, “I know not what you be thinking.”

“I be thinking that Cymogene has a house with a wooden door,” said Logan apprehensively.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and you be a practised thief. What say you we pay her a visit and mayhap persuade her to see the error of her ways?”

“A thief, mayhap,” said Logan, “but one with a noose around his neck. Why do I get the feeling it be tightening?”

Chapter Twenty Three

"It has begun," said Ta'umboq, holding up a torch.

"That meddlesome wench?" asked Cymogene, looking at the open door to the slave hut.

"Aye," said Ta'umboq. "I felt a disturbance and flew here and found this door open. Over half the workers be missing. 'Tis no ordinary revolt which be why I called you."

"And the adnats let them go?" demanded Cymogene angrily. "I will break every last one of them!"

"Break them if you wish," said Ta'umboq, "they be yours to play with but they be blind in the dark, you know that. My powers in the Realm of Yammoe be limited and there be but few I can influence. The adnats be brutal and remorseless which be why we use them but this bitch be no ordinary mortal. The entry were barred and the magic still be intact so I know not how she got it open. I will bring the runaways back when it be light but while that meddler be on the loose she may yet ruin everything."

"Then you had better find her," growled Cymogene. "Or should I send you back whence you came and find another more capable?"

"We have an agreement," snarled Ta'umboq, jabbing a talon at her. "And do not be forgetting that."

"Aye, an agreement," spat Cymogene, "and who be responsible for working the mine, eh? Seems to me you be breaking the agreement, not I."

Angrily Ta'umboq flapped his wings and his red eyes flashed. His squat muscular body tensed and one hand squeezed tight as if around Cymogene's throat.

"You should have made special provision for that lad," he snapped. "I told you, he be the best way of controlling her. You should have kept him tight and let the adnats break her but no, you had to let them stay

together and make her a plaything for your pleasures. Your weakness be destroying all we have built.”

“Pah,” hissed Cymogene. “That were only to see if I could control her through her lusts but the tramp had made some pointless vow or other. Be that as it may, when the opportunity arose by happen-stance I locked them both in the workers’ enclosure with no difficulty. ’Twas not my fault you and yours could not contain them.”

They glared at each other in the torchlight.

“It is not yet too late, however,” said Cymogene as the tension became almost explosive. “I venture they will be back so get some more adnats over to this world to aid in her containment when she does return. ’Twould be wise to find out how they got out so you do not make that mistake again.”

Ta’umboq stared balefully at her then exhaled loudly as his tail whipped in agitation.

“Aye,” he said, and kicked the door to the slave hut so it banged noisily against the wall.

He stood in the doorway, holding the torch up high and glared around.

“You!” he shouted, stabbing a talon towards a corner.

“Shit,” muttered Pacane.

“Come here,” barked Ta’umboq. “Now!”

Slowly Pacane got to his feet and reluctantly sidled over.

“How did the door become open?” asked Ta’umboq, in a quiet, reasonable voice.

“I were asleep,” mumbled Pacane. “I saw nothing.”

Ta’umboq’s red eyes stared up at him, boring into his mind.

“We have met before,” said Ta’umboq, gently. “I may even remember your name if I try. Do you really want to go through all that again?”

Pacane shook his head nervously.

“How did the door become open?” asked Ta’umboq.

“I know not,” said Pacane.

Ta’umboq’s eyes became bigger and more intensely red. A hand reached up and its talons clawed towards Pacane’s face then pulled back as if grasping something. A deep wave of sadness and hopelessness descended on Pacane and his body sagged and wilted.

“How did the door become open?” asked Ta’umboq.

“I know not,” whispered Pacane despairingly.

Tears started to trickle from his eyes and he slumped to his knees.

“Do not try to fight me,” said Ta’umboq. “You know your mind is not strong enough.”

His hand reached out and again grasped as the air in front of Pacane’s face.

“How did the door become open?” asked Ta’umboq, softly.

Pacane collapsed on the ground in front of Ta’umboq as bleak desolation overwhelmed him.

“I know not,” he sobbed, curling himself into a protective ball. “All I saw was the boy take hold of a glimmering light and then he walked through but I know not what it was or how it happened.”

“The boy?” said Ta’umboq. “Interesting. And what be the girl doing?”

“She be walking through after he opened the door from the outside,” whimpered Pacane. “Oh sweet lord, let me die, please, I beg you, let me die.”

“Death be too easy for you,” said Ta'umboq abruptly. “Get back into your corner.”

He curtly waved his hand and Pacane crawled back, sobbing.

“’Twould seem the boy has powers too,” he said conversationally to Cymogene, who had been watching. “We did not expect that.”

“Another failing on your part, Ta'umboq,” said Cymogene coldly. “Your sources leave a lot to be desired.”

“Aye,” rumbled Ta'umboq. “There will be a reckoning, of that I can assure you.”

He looked up at the sky and sniffed the air.

“’Tis nearly dawn,” he said. “I will set about finding the runaways and bring them back. You take charge of the adnats and get what workers we have back to work. I will add to their numbers ere long.”

“And be quick about it,” said Cymogene, her eyes flashing. “I be not best pleased for losing production.”

* * *

Cautiously Logan pulled open the door and peered in. He couldn't see a thing because of the dark.

“Are you there?” he whispered.

There was a rustle of hay and a soft whinny then hot breath in his face.

“Ahh,” whispered Logan. “Are you well? Plenty to eat?”

He rubbed Malkia's forehead and she nuzzled him so he scratched her behind an ear.

“She be fine,” he whispered to Autumn.

“Why are you whispering?” asked Autumn, waiting beside the stable door.

“I know not,” confessed Logan. “It just seemed the right thing to do.”

“Let us find Cymogene,” said Autumn. “Come.”

Logan started to close the stable door but Malkia was in the way.

“We’ll be back soon,” he promised. “We will take you home, worry not.”

He gently nudged Malkia and she backed into the stable reluctantly then he pushed the door shut behind her.

“Right,” said Autumn and marched over to the main door.

“Why are we standing here?” asked Logan after a few moments.

“We should not just march in,” said Autumn, “but for some reason I am reluctant to bang on the door.”

“Be brave,” whispered Logan and Autumn gave him an indecipherable look in the dark.

She raised her staff and banged it on the door. They could hear its faint echo inside but nothing else. She paused then knocked again. No one answered the door. No one called out. A third time she knocked.

“Mayhap she be asleep,” said Logan.

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, listening intently. “No, I hear nothing.”

“What do we do now?” asked Logan, feeling deflated.

“Best we go inside and wake her,” said Autumn, “or wait if she be not here.”

“Ahh, good thinking,” said Logan. “Fiau, are you there?”

“I am here, Logan,” she said, materialising.

“Can you get me through this door?” asked Logan.

“It is not barred,” said Autumn, pushing open the door.

Fiau raised a long thin hand and gestured Logan through politely.

“Umm, ahh, sorry to have disturbed you, Fiau,” said Logan, discomfited. “Umm, thank you.”

Fiau merged back with his staff wordlessly.

“Why does she make me feel guilty?” asked Logan, staring at the staff in his hand.

“It be because you are a good person,” said Autumn, “and one who does not like to ask favours of another with no recompense. Do not blame her for your feelings. They be yours and yours alone.”

“But I feel as though I be pulling her away from some other business,” said Logan.

“Mayhap you are,” said Autumn, “but she has given you no sign of displeasure. Be grateful she be willing to help you, not ashamed for the asking. I venture someone be here, there are torches burning in the passage. Come, let us find her.”

It was pleasantly warm inside the house and Autumn pushed the door shut behind them.

“Cymogene told me her bedroom was at the end of the passage,” she said. “Although I know not which end.”

“We may as well start this end,” said Logan and pushed open the door next to him.

It was dark and silent inside. Autumn took the torch from the wall and went inside, closely followed by Logan.

“What be all this?” she asked in surprise. The room was filled with large wooden crates, stacked from floor to ceiling and covering the floor.

“They be right heavy,” said Logan trying to lift one. “I wonder what be inside?”

He lifted the lid and Autumn held the torch over it.

“Sploop,” said Logan. “It be full of paraks. I never knew there were so many in all the world!”

He ran his fingers over the loose coins that nearly filled the crate.

“There be twenty two other crates,” said Autumn, looking round the room. “Do you suppose they are all filled with paraks?”

“Let us look and see,” said Logan, reaching for another crate, a glint of avarice in his eye.

“We be looking for Cymogene,” Autumn reminded him, “not the spoils of thievery.”

“Oh, yes,” said Logan stepping backwards guiltily. “Well, she be not in here, let us try another room.”

The next room was filled with rolled up tapestries, carved statues and intricately wrought pieces of metal.

“She be not here either,” said Autumn, dragging Logan away from a statue of a naked female nymph that had caught his attention.

They worked their way along the passage, trying each room in turn. Apart from several empty bedrooms, two others were filled with crates of paraks, another with things to delight the eye and two with assorted foodstuffs in pots and urns. One contained nothing but clothing.

“She be right well equipped,” said Logan, his mouth and fingers sticky from sampling a pot of peaches in honey.

“I venture this mining be profitable,” said Autumn, “although 'twould seem she has little need of those profits. There be only one door left. This must be her bedroom, else there be more to this house than we have seen.”

She pushed open the door and peered in. There was a large ornate bed with rumpled covers and furs strewn over the floor. A large four pronged candle holder stood beside a large chair upholstered with forest scenes. A padded footrest sat in front of it with an embroidered kitten curled up asleep as decoration.

“Cymogene must be away,” said Autumn, looking around the room.

“Why is that tapestry not hanging straight?” asked Logan, pointing across the room. “It be snagged on something.”

“Mayhap Cymogene be not a diligent housekeeper,” said Autumn.

“Or mayhap there be something behind it,” said Logan. He strode over and lifted the tapestry. “Aha, there be another door here.”

“Be it locked?” asked Autumn, joining him.

“No,” he said, opening it.

Inside the small room was a table, covered with neat piles of parchments, and several wooden buckets of rolled parchments sat on the floor.

“These must be her records,” said Autumn, scanning a parchment on the table. “Look, this one be about Yofa. It be a receipt for payment. She be not here though, that is the main thing.”

She turned and went back into the bedroom.

“Come back, Autumn,” called Logan. “I thought I saw something.”

Obligingly Autumn came back with the torch.

“Oh, it just be a small copper box,” said Logan. “I saw a glint as you

went out.”

Autumn went out into the bedroom again and Logan followed.

“No, wait,” he said. “This be not right. Why would one such as she have a small plain copper box under a table? Her tastes lie in different directions.”

“What are you thinking?” Asked Autumn.

“I do not know,” said Logan, “but I be a thief, or used to be, and this does not feel right. 'Tis not something that fits with her.”

He went back into the small room and Autumn followed. He bent and retrieved the copper box from under the table.

“It be very light,” he said. “'Tis not full of paraks.”

“It is not our concern,” said Autumn, “come.”

She turned to leave but Logan opened the box and took out the roll inside it.

“It be some old parchment scroll,” he said, “but it be right strange. I have seen no skin like it before. It feels different.”

Autumn turned back to look at it.

“That be unusual,” she said. “Here, hold this,” and passed him the torch.

She took the roll from him and fingered it.

“This be recaisn,” she said. “We had some very old records written on this at the Esyup.” She frowned. “Why would Cymogene have something this old here?”

“Why not see what it says?” said Logan.

“There be a seal on it,” said Autumn, peering at the seal. “A strange

seal too by the look. I cannot make it out clearly.”

“Can I see?” asked Logan.

They swapped the torch and scroll and Logan peered at it.

“Be careful,” said Autumn. “There may be magic on the seal.”

“Too late,” said Logan with a wry smile. “It broke when I touched it.”

“How fortunate,” said Autumn, “unroll it very gently. Recaisn be quite brittle when it has aged.”

Very gently Logan unrolled it on the table.

“I cannot read it,” he said after studying it for a few moments.

“Let me see,” said Autumn passing him the torch again.

“It be upside-down,” she said, turning it the right way up. “And it be in the Old Tongue.”

She frowned at it and her lips moved.

“What do it say?” asked Logan, deeply curious.

“It be the Old Tongue but not the Old Tongue,” muttered Autumn, concentrating.

“What do you mean?” asked Logan, peering over her shoulder.

“It be the Old Tongue,” she said, “but many of the words I am not familiar with or are used strangely. Look, here it says Cymogene Hirao Sastruga, that be clear. And here is says something I do not understand but there be a line after it and it says Ta'umboq. At least I think it says Ta'umboq. The word is difficult but the sounding of the letters be Ta'umboq. I need better light, this torch flickers too much.”

“I shall get the candle from the bedroom,” said Logan. “One moment.”

The room plunged into darkness as he disappeared behind the tapestry then re-emerged with the candle holder with all four candles burning. He set the holder on the table and stood back to let Autumn sit on the stool.

"I think it is some sort of agreement," said Autumn after a lengthy study of the document. "Up here it says something like 'the first here do agree to make pathway to this Land to the second here' then something I do not understand. A little further on it says 'the second here will', I'm not sure, either 'forge' or 'construct', umm, 'abundance', perhaps, or 'plenty', something of that sort, 'being for the first here'. I wonder who are the first and second here?"

"Probably Cymogene and Ta'umboq," said Logan. "It sounds like she is agreeing to keep a path open to him from that place where he comes from."

"Cysciec," said Autumn, looking at him.

"Aye, there," said Logan. "And in return he agrees to give her lots of something. Paraks I venture."

"Yes, it does sound like that," said Autumn. "I wonder what sort of path she opened?"

"What else does it say?" asked Logan.

"The language is difficult," said Autumn, going back to the document. "I think a lot of the rest is about what is agreed and what is not. Ohh!"

"What?" asked Logan, leaning forward.

"This line here," said Autumn. "'The second here be granted', no, I think 'entitled' would be a better translation, or mayhap 'conferred', no, maybe 'granted' be better after all or ..."

"Granted what?" interrupted Logan.

"Oh, umm, 'the essences', spirits possibly, 'of them as ceases', ceases?"

No, 'expires', I think or 'dies'. Yes, 'dies' is probably the best word."

"So it says that Ta'umboq gets to keep the spirits of those who die?" asked Logan, perturbed.

"That is what it looks like," said Autumn. "The next few lines I do not understand at all. I am unfamiliar with the words but, ahh, I can read this one. Umm, 'the second here shall in foreverness be protection under the first here wherein no harm or impairment', umm, yes, harm. It goes on to say, umm, I am not sure but it looks as though this protection lasts as long as the first here remains alive."

"What does all that mean?" asked Logan.

"I think it means that Ta'umboq, if he is the second here, is guaranteed not to be harmed as long as Cymogene is alive," said Autumn.

"How convenient," said Logan. "Harmed by her or by someone else?"

"It does not say," said Autumn. "Although I would think if she is keeping a path from Cysciec open for him then he is probably safe from harm in this world as long as the path stays open and it will stay open as long as she is alive."

"So how long will she live?" asked Logan.

"It does not say," said Autumn. "Mayhap that be one of the lines I cannot read."

"What was the first line again?" asked Logan.

"Umm, the first here do agree to make pathway to this Land to the second here, something, something, the second here will create, perhaps, an abundance of something for the first here," said Autumn.

"Hmm," said Logan. "But it does not say money or paraks or copper or anything like that?"

"Not that I can see," said Autumn. "Why?"

“How about immortality?” asked Logan.

“Immortality?” said Autumn, “no, it does not ... oh.”

“What?” asked Logan.

“Actually it might,” said Autumn. “This word here, it usually means 'plenty' but it could mean 'endless', and it comes just before 'being for', which could also mean 'being of', in which case it is saying the second here will create an endless being of the first here. I thought it meant Ta'umboq was agreeing to create a lot of wealth for Cymogene, but it could mean he is making her an endless being. An immortal, I suppose.”

“I was afraid of that,” said Logan. “So if we be reading it right, somehow Cymogene has opened a path for Ta'umboq to this world and giving him all the essences he wants and the path stays open for as long as she is alive and in exchange she gets to live forever?”

“That is what it sounds like,” said Autumn. “But there are parts I cannot read and there is this part which says he cannot be harmed as long as she is alive which does not make sense if she will live forever. Why not simply say he cannot be harmed?”

“Mayhap she can be killed,” said Logan. “I venture if her body be cut into very small pieces and each burnt separately or eaten by animals she could not survive. Mayhap it only means she will not die of old age.”

“Or mayhap we be reading all this wrongly,” said Autumn. “Maybe it is about something different all together.”

They stared silently at the scroll, each lost in their own thoughts. One of the candles guttered and went out, leaving a thin spire of smoke.

“I venture I be not far wrong,” said Autumn. “This be written in the Old Tongue and it be on recaisn. Neither the Old Tongue nor recaisn have been used for a long time. Two or three hundred summers or more.”

“Aye,” said Logan slowly. “And did you not say that the amount of copper she be taking be small yet the damage be huge? Mayhap she has been doing this for two or three hundred summers which would, I wager, give your words the truth of this writing.”

“And if that be so,” said Autumn, “either she be living forever and there can be no end to this, or ...” and she trailed off.

“Or what?” asked Logan.

“My worst fear,” said Autumn sadly.

“What be that?” asked Logan concerned.

“I am going to have to break every principle I hold dear,” said Autumn. “I am going to have to hunt her down and kill her.”

Chapter Twenty Four

It was past dawn when they went outside again. The air was chill and crisp in the shadow of the mountains and Astauand's warming rays were some time away.

"I cannot be sure this is the right decision," said Autumn.

She was sitting cross-legged on the edge of Cymogene's lawn, staring into the woods.

"I venture 'tis not an easy one," said Logan, "although I do not understand the problem."

"On the face of it it is simple," said Autumn. "There is a wrong being committed here and by virtue of my presence here I can bring it to an end."

"That is how it seems to me," said Logan, "although I wager there is no small danger to you."

"That goes without saying," said Autumn, "but 'tis not the danger that concerns me. There is no shame in trying to right a wrong and failing. The shame lies in not trying to right the wrong for fear of failing. I will die one day and today is as good a day as any."

"I wish you would not talk like that," said Logan. "You may be happy to die but I would wish that you do not."

"Thank you, Logan," said Autumn, reaching out to touch his hand. "As always you remind me of the human side and that all is not pure thought. No, what concerns me is that I have sworn a vow to protect and yet in this I must be the aggressor. Always I have striven to avoid conflict and only fight as a last resort and only when forced to do so. Here I am not being forced. Cymogene is somewhere else and I have no doubt she be as undesiring of a fight as I. All I need to do is simply walk away to avoid the conflict."

"But that will not solve the problem," said Logan. "If no one stops her she will continue to poison the land and harm or kill all life within her

reach and if the document be anything to go by she will do it for evermore.”

“That is right,” said Autumn. “In the past the situation has always been simple. There has been someone before me in dire need and there be a simple solution. Here those in need are not before me. they are more in my imagining. I do not know of anyone downstream who is being affected nor can I be sure that the consequences of this mining be dire of the life in the valley. Do I have the right to aid what is not asking me for aid? Mayhap I am being influenced too much by what I perceive to be the ugliness of what she is doing but simply because I do not like the look of something does not mean it is necessarily wrong.”

“You are forgetting the workers at the mine itself,” said Logan. “You know exactly what is happening to them and their fates.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “But will their fates be any different if I remove Cymogene as the cause? What if their sufferings be not reversible? Many injuries will heal but poisonings, ahh, they may never heal. Mayhap the damage to the land itself can never be healed, in which case I will have caused a death unnecessarily.”

“I still do not really see the problem,” said Logan. “You are Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume and you are here, now. You are one of the few who have the skill to remove Cymogene and with her that thing from the Land of the Cysciec and bring this to an end.”

“But will it bring this to an end, Logan?” asked Autumn, twisting to look him in the eyes. “Will it? Suppose I do best Cymogene and somehow send Ta'umboq back to his own world, and I confess I know not how to do that, but suppose I do? What happens then? How do I repair the damage done to the mountain? How do I restore the woods and rivers? How do I return the people at the mine to their homes?”

“You take too much upon yourself, Autumn,” said Logan. “Is it within your power to make a river flow? No. Is it within your power to make a forest grow? No. Is it within your power to remove the cause of the problem? Yes. What more can you do?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but the taking of a life does not sit well with me. Is that your best counsel?”

“No,” said Logan. “My best counsel is to walk away from here. Take Malkia and go back to Saiwoc and return her to Yofa. I know you do not fear death and failure but I do. I do not want to see you hurt or dead.”

“And how would you explain this to Mother Midcarn?” asked Autumn. “I be certain her guiding hand is behind this and has brought us to this place.”

“If she were here I would tell her to mind her own business and do her own dirty work,” said Logan. “She be a powerful sorcerer and do doubt she be able to handle this on her own.”

“Mayhap she cannot,” said Autumn. “Mayhap her skills lie only in finding and guiding those who can.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, “but that be what I think although I know you will disagree.”

“Mayhap you be right, Logan,” said Autumn. “Mayhap you be right. I do not know if I can best Cymogene but I have a fair chance and 'tis likely that with her death the magic that aids Ta'umboq will end but it be the consequences that also concern me. Will these acts indeed end the problem, for if not then there be no point to the killing.”

“You mean the valley and all that lies beyond?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Mayhap the damage done cannot be undone and will spread of its own accord. That orange water be going downstream and may continue forever.”

“I cannot answer that,” said Logan. “My ignorance is too great.”

“As is mine,” said Autumn sadly. “If I have to kill then I will do so but I am not yet convinced of the need. Ahh, mayhap the problem be just one of time to think.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

“Hmm? Oh, suppose we are on our travels and we come across someone who is being attacked. That is a simple situation and there be no time to think, only to act. Here there be plenty of time to think. This situation has been going on for many summers past and may well continue for many summers more whatever I do.”

“’Twould seem I am being of little help,” said Logan. “Mayhap another’s opinion would bring you more aid.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, “but there are none here other than us.”

“There is Fiau,” said Logan. “Mayhap she can speak for the trees and streams.”

“’Tis a thought, Logan,” said Autumn. “Let us ask her.”

Logan touched his staff.

“Are you there, Fiau?” he asked.

“I am here, Logan,” she said, materialising.

“Umm, what should I ask?” asked Logan.

“Ask her if she knows what is happening in the next valley,” said Autumn.

“Fiau, do you know what is happening in the next valley?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Fiau. “I am but a fallen branch.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, “so you be not knowing how to save the trees there.”

“No,” said Fiau.

“Fiau, can you talk to Awendene?” asked Autumn. “Mayhap she can

help.”

“No,” said Fiau. “Awendene is on the far side of the mountain. I cannot call that far.”

“Sploop,” said Logan.

“Would you like me to call one who is near?” asked Fiau.

“Who would that be?” asked Logan.

“There are trees all around,” said Fiau. “Not all are sleeping.”

“Yes, please,” said Autumn.

* * *

“Who calls me?” came a thin, rustley creaky voice after a while.

“I call you,” replied Autumn. “I am Autumn Savannah.”

Fiau merged back into Logan's staff.

“Autumn be a time for going to sleep,” said the voice, “and now 'tis winter. Why do you disturb me?”

“May I know your name?” asked Autumn.

There was a long sigh then “Caradene”.

“Do you have form, Caradene?” asked Autumn. “Will you show yourself to me?”

Slowly a tall, brown green form appeared, swaying gently from side to side. Autumn stood up.

“I thank you, Caradene,” she said. “I would like to talk with you, if I may.”

“Then talk,” said Caradene sleepily

“Do you know what is happening in the next valley?” asked Autumn.

Caradene started to shudder and wave her arms around as though a sudden storm has sprung upon them. A startled bird fell from her hair and flew away calling loudly. She started to fade away.

“Please, do not go,” called Autumn urgently. “We mean you no harm.”

Fiau re-appeared.

“I am Fiau,” she said. “I am of Havildar and I vouch for their intent. These mortals be cherished by Awendene and the one who speaks is suffused with her benevolence.”

Slowly Caradene stopped shuddering and came back to solid form.

“What manner of Havildar are you?” asked Caradene. “You are not one of us.”

“I am of Havildar,” said Fiau. “I was a branch and was found and fashioned to aid these mortals in their undertaking.”

“Soooo,” creaked Caradene. “And who did so fashion you?”

“Mother Midcarn,” said Fiau.

Caradene regarded Fiau silently.

“That name is known to me,” she rustled after a lengthy pause.

Stiffly she turned to regard Autumn.

“So you be cherished by Awendene,” she said. “You are far from Awendene’s grove. How so are you suffused with her benevolence?”

“This mortal were inlaid with a seed of a Salodkaja,” said Fiau.

Caradene reached out a long arm to touch Autumn’s forehead with a gnarled finger. Slowly the finger was drawn down over her face and chest and stopped at her belly then withdrew.

"I accept your assurances, Fiau," said Caradene, "although I am loathe to do so."

"Can I ask why you are loathe to do so?" asked Autumn.

"You ask of the valley yonder," said Caradene. "There is much malevolence there from them as is mortals like yourselves."

"Aye," said Autumn. "That is what I wish to talk with you about."

"You have been to that place?" asked Caradene.

"Yes," said Autumn.

"Then what is there to talk of?" asked Caradene. "Save that it is not alone."

"You mean there are others like it?" interrupted Logan.

Caradene regarded him with distaste.

"Yes," she said.

"How many?" asked Logan.

"One is too many," said Caradene. She shivered and a leaf fell to the ground, swirling gently as it fell.

"Have you tried to stop what is happening?" asked Autumn.

"How?" asked Caradene. "We are but trees. How do we withstand axes and fire? How do we fight when the water poisons our sap and weakens our bodies? When our seeds cannot grow in the ground? We have tried but we are powerless."

"Yes, I understand," said Autumn. "Can I ask, Caradene, if it be that the mortals who do these things be gone, do you think that the trees can return? That the ground and water become clean again?"

"Can the mortals who do this be made to cease?" asked Caradene.

"I venture it will be possible," said Autumn. "But I desire to know if that will be a remedy or if it be too late."

"Sooo," whispered Caradene. "And be you the one that will drop this seed?"

Autumn glanced at Logan then made a decision. "Yes," she said firmly. "If by doing so the return will happen I will."

"Let me think on this," she said and stood there silently, waving her arms gently, fading and reappearing. After a short while she started to rub her arms together and slowly other forms like her appeared. They stood in a circle, each rustling and groaning while Astauand appeared over the top of the mountain and slowly made its way to its zenith and began its descent again. Then the rustling and groaning stopped and the others started to fade. Soon only Caradene remained.

"We are agreed," she said, "if the cause be ending then all shall return. 'Twill take time but the power of the poisons will seep into the depths and be cleansed by the rocks to return anew. And, when the winds blow in from all sides and the streams come down from the mountain tops and the snows melt new soil will form and mix with the decay of old life. 'Twill take a time indeed but the touch of Astauand and Plakill and Plifal will bring fresh sweetness and new life. Them among us as are oldest remember times of great privation when Mor'upita-sehen did lay waste to much of this land and we recovered. Different in some ways mayhap but all things change as time unfolds."

"Thank you," said Autumn.

* * *

"Come," said Autumn when Caradene had faded away. "Let us find Cymogene and see about ending this business. I wager she be at the mine. No doubt there be difficulties there that need her with some of the workers gone."

"It can wait a while," said Logan. "You have not eaten nor slept for a day and a half. You need to prepare yourself for what is to come."

"I cannot," said Autumn. "This matter preys on my mind even though I am now set upon my path. I will not be able to sleep well and 'tis not good to fight soon after eating. 'Tis best on an empty stomach."

"Are you sure?" asked Logan. "I would wager food would give you more strength."

"Aye, so you would think," said Autumn, "but it not be so. A full belly slows the body and the mind. Besides, we have no food."

"There be plenty in Cymogene's house," said Logan.

"Then we shall return here when this be over," said Autumn, "although if you be wanting food get some before we set off."

"Me?" said Logan nervously. "I am so worried I can't even piss let alone eat anything."

"I have said this before," said Autumn, "and one day you will learn the truth of it. There is nothing to fear except fear itself. Come, let us go to the mine. Mayhap you will be able to piss when you get there."

* * *

Cymogene watched as Autumn and Logan made their way across the scarred bare rock towards the froth pond. She stood relaxed, a mocking half-smile on her face. Her close cropped blonde hair gleaming in the afternoon light. All the workers noticed but only a handful looked openly. Not one dared a comment.

"I knew you would come back," she said when they came within earshot. "Meddlers and mischief makers like you always do. You care naught for those who simply want to live peaceably and earn a living."

"I have not come to argue with you, Cymogene," said Autumn. "Merely to ask a kindness and, if you grant it, we will leave peacefully."

"Your continuing existence is a kindness on my part," said Cymogene, "but that is a mere indulgence. What, pray, is this kindness that you

wish of me?"

"I ask that you stop your mining and leave this place," said Autumn.

"Is that all?" asked Cymogene.

"And that you do not start again elsewhere," said Autumn.

Cymogene's smile widened.

"Ahh my precious little Autumn Savannah," she said. "You ask so sweetly I find it impossible to reject your request. I promise this mine will shut down and that I will start no other. There, are you happy now?"

"That would make me very happy, Cymogene," said Autumn.

"Your happiness delights me above all else," said Cymogene.

She turned away to survey the froth pool then turned back.

"What?" she said feigning surprise. "Be you still here? What of your side of the bargain? It be time you left."

"I see no sign of your promise being kept," said Autumn.

"Be you calling me a liar?" asked Cymogene, frowning.

"You did tell me that you have made many vows and broken every one of them," said Autumn. "Why should this one be any different?"

"Oh my sweet child," laughed Cymogene. "This be a promise, not a vow. That be quite a different thing."

Autumn frowned.

"And when do you intend to make good on your vo ..., promise?" she asked.

"The day I die," said Cymogene. "So you see, my dear, I am going to

keep my side of the bargain. Keep yours and go.”

“I confess the fault lies with me,” said Autumn. “I should have put a time in my request. That was remiss of me and I accept the responsibility. We shall leave in peace in accord with the bargain but there is yet one more task I must perform before we do.”

“Oh really?” asked Cymogene. She smoothed her hair on the sides of her head. “And what be that?”

“You promised to stop your mining the day you die,” said Autumn. “Today is that day.”

Cymogene froze and narrowed her eyes at Autumn then let out a piercing whistle. All the adnats immediately stopped what they were doing and came running.

“This one cannot be killed quickly,” said Cymogene, pointing at Autumn. “Break every bone in her body then nail her to the rock to die slowly.”

The adnats started advancing on Autumn and Logan, hissing, their numbers swelling as the ones from further away arrived.

“Stay clear, Logan,” said Autumn, backing away. “Keep your eyes on Cymogene, this will not take long.”

She flicked her staff so one end was in her armpit and the shaft in her hand, the other arm outstretched towards the adnats as they advanced in a group. The first swung its stick at her and her foot instantly protruded from the back of its skull, pulling down its hood. Yellow grey muck splattered on those behind it. The adnat collapsed, taking Autumn with it. Three others fell on her, their sticks flailing. One went flying through the air, her staff in its gut. It landed on the edge of a rock and writhed obscenely, its back broken. The other two staggered backwards, their faces smashed as she rammed their heads together then hurled them away.

She jumped to her feet and two more fell, one with a broken neck the other with a shattered chest, from her scissor kick as the stick from

another caught her shoulder and she tumbled to the ground. Instantly another began beating her with its stick. She curled herself into a ball then pushed off with her arms and regained her feet then turned and thrust her fist through the chest of one. Her hand came out, coated yellow grey and she rammed her elbow into the other. It fell to the ground, both its two-pronged arms scrabbling at its throat.

The remaining five advanced towards her in a line and she backed away, stooping to retrieve her staff. She wiped her hand on the robe of the one that still writhed, albeit less frantically than before. Behind them several of the slaves had stopped work and were grouping, watching intently.

“She be killing eight of them buggers,” said one, incredulously.

“Do you yield?” called Autumn to the remaining five adnats.

They hissed and clacked then started to spread out. One suddenly lunged at Autumn and instantly she went the other way and rammed her staff into the face of another then spun and planted her foot through the head of another.

“Come on,” yelled one of the slaves and the group fell on the other two as Autumn despatched the one which had lunged at her.

The slaves pounded at the two fallen adnats with rocks to no avail. The rocks simply slid off the hard carapaces of their bodies.

“Hold them still,” commanded Autumn. She decapitated them expressionlessly.

“How be you doing that?” demanded one of the slaves. “Our rocks don't even scratch 'em?”

Autumn ignored him. She looked around and saw Cymogene staring at her, her face shocked and pale. Logan was standing a little to one side.

“A promise is a promise,” said Autumn.

Cymogene's eyes shifted to look over Autumn's head and Autumn instinctively ducked. A slave crashed into the ground nearby, dropped from on high, her head a bloody pulp. With a flurry of wings, Ta'umboq landed.

“Well,” he drawled, surveying the crushed and broken bodies of the adnats. “Twould seem I am not a moment too soon.”

Chapter Twenty Five

The silence was total.

There was no sound of pickaxes from the rock face. No sound of heavy hammers crushing the broken rock. Even the horses turning the grinder had stopped to see what was going on. All the slaves had gathered beside the froth pool and were just standing. Silently watching.

Autumn bent to pick up her staff then faced Ta'umboq squarely.

"This ends now," she said.

"For a while perhaps," said Ta'umboq. "Twill take a day or so to replace the overseers."

"There will be no replacements," said Autumn. "You have overstayed your welcome in this land."

"That is not for you to say," said Ta'umboq, glancing over at Cymogene. He gave a slight nod then looked back at Autumn.

"Then again, I dare say it will end today," he said conversationally. "You have been meddling too long." He scratched one of his ears with a talon.

Autumn advanced upon him, her staff under one arm and the other held poised and ready. Ta'umboq yawned nonchalantly then clawed the air in front of her, his red eyes blazing.

An immense wave of sadness came over Autumn.

"Oh Mizule," she muttered, standing there limply, the staff drooping.

"Autumn!" cried Logan, stepping forward. "What be wrong?"

"I am so tired," said Autumn weakly. "I cannot take any more of this."

Ta'umboq watched her dispassionately then clawed the air again.

Autumn fell to her knees, tears trickling down her face. Logan ran over and knelt beside her.

“What is the point of going on?” she asked Logan.

“Autumn, I ...,” he started then stopped. Autumn's face was bleak with despair. “Autumn, everyone depends on you!”

The slaves began to mutter and several of them started walking away, their shoulders showing they despaired as much as Autumn.

Autumn sat back on her heels and dropped her staff to put her hands to her face, her tears flowing freely.

“Come with me, Logan,” said Cymogene gently, pulling on his shoulder. “It be all over now. Come with me.”

Logan shook off her hand.

“Autumn!” he cried. “What is it? What has happened?”

“I am so sad,” she whispered. “So incredibly sad.”

“Come with me, lad,” said Cymogene. She slipped a knife under Logan throat. “Come with me.”

Logan felt the knife against his skin and froze. Cymogene pulled him roughly and forced him to his feet.

“Take him away,” said Ta'umboq. “I will finish this bitch.”

Cymogene dragged Logan away, her strength surprising. He struggled but she would not let him go.

“Noooooooooooo!” he shouted and bit hard on Cymogene's arm.

She let go in surprise and he rushed over to Autumn.

“That bastard is playing with your mind,” he shouted at her. “Fight him, fight him!” and he slapped her face hard before Cymogene

pounced on him again and dragged him away.

Autumn looked up in shock. Logan had hit her? *Logan?*

“Autumnnnnnnn!”

She jerked around and saw Logan being dragged away by Cymogene.

“No,” she muttered. “No! This cannot be!”

Using her staff she struggled to her feet and stared after him.

“Logan?” she cried, her face pale and tear streaked. The mark of Logan's hand stood out clearly,

Ta'umboq clawed the air again.

“Argghhhh,” cried Autumn and stumbled.

Grimly she held on to her staff and slowly turned to face Ta'umboq.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” she said quietly.

“You are nobody,” sneered Ta'umboq.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn more loudly, drawing herself up straight.

“You are dead,” laughed Ta'umboq. “Lie down and shut up.”

Again he clawed the air.

“Rraarrghh,” snarled Autumn, colour coming back into her face and she scowled at Ta'umboq.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” she said strongly, drawing on every fibre of her will.

She held her staff above her head, her body tense and vitally alive.

“I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume,” she shouted, her voice ringing out clear and strong over the desecrated landscape, “of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup. You will never break me. This. Ends. Now!” and she slammed her staff down hard on the ground.

The slaves who had walked away came running back. Again Ta'umboq clawed the air, this time with a hint of desperation.

“ARGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH” cried Autumn and launched herself at Ta'umboq.

Panicked, his wings lifted him off the ground but Autumn caught him by one of his taloned feet and dragged him back down. The fight was vicious and did not last long.

“You had better hope and prey to whatever deity you fear that you make it safe back to your own world,” said Autumn coldly as she stood over the crumpled body of Ta'umboq on the ground.

She bent and grasped his head between her hands then calmly snapped his neck.

She stepped back as the slaves started to mutter. One of them cheered then abruptly stopped. Ta'umboq had climbed to his feet. He was missing half a wing and his squat bent legs were more bent than ever. Black blood oozed from the remains of his nose and from around his eyes. His head hung limply behind him, no longer supported by his neck.

“I'll be back,” he croaked, his windpipe crushed.

Black blood trickled from the corner of his mouth and across his cheek. He spat then snatched up the half wing that lay on the ground beside him and blinked out of existence.

The slaves started to cheer then went silent when Autumn turned to face them.

“You are all free to go,” she said. “I know not where but that is your

choice. Which way did Cymogene go?"

"She went that way," called one of the slaves, pointing.

"No, it were that way," called another, pointing in a different direction.

"She killed the lad over there," cried a third, as they melted away.

Wearily Autumn bent to pick up her staff then spotted another lying on the ground not far away.

"This be Logan's," she muttered, recognising it. "Now what do I do?"

She stared around helplessly but there was no sign of Logan or Cymogene.

"Fiau!" she said suddenly. "Fiau, are you there?"

"I am here," said Fiau, materialising beside her.

"Fiau, I desperately need your help," cried Autumn, grasping Fiau's long, thin hand. "I need you to talk to Caradene. I need you to tell her that there is one last thing I need to do to end the badness here but I must find Logan. Tell her I need her help to find Logan!"

Fiau looked at Autumn silently.

"Did you hear me, Fiau," said Autumn anxiously, pulling on Fiau's hand.

Fiau held up her other hand to silence Autumn.

"He be in the valley of Caradene," she said after a while. "In the place where the other mortal dwells."

"In Cymogene's house?" cried Autumn. "Come, we must hurry!"

She ran off, a staff in each hand while Fiau struggled desperately to merge back into Logan's staff.

"I know what you did to Ta'umboq," said Cymogene. "That was not nice."

She was sitting at her dining table with a cup of wine when Autumn burst in.

"Where is Logan?" demanded Autumn.

"Beside you," said Cymogene, draining her wine.

Autumn looked behind the door and there was Logan, bound hand and foot and gagged.

"Are you well?" she said, bending to untie his gag.

Cymogene's chair scraped then a knife buried itself in the wood panel beside Logan. Autumn whirled to face Cymogene.

"So, it be true then," said Cymogene. "That knife went right through you."

"Aye, it be true," said Autumn.

She looked around the room and listened carefully. They were alone.

"He will be back and soon," said Cymogene. "Twill not take over long to repair his injuries. Would you like something to eat while we wait? Some wine perhaps?"

"Ta'umboq?" said Autumn. "I know. I have read your agreement."

"I thought so," said Cymogene. "I saw the box had been opened. Why do you persist with this? If you have read the agreement then you know I be protected by Ta'umboq, as he is protected by me."

"He is not here to protect you," said Autumn. "He is back in the Land of the Cysciec and if my understanding be right if you die the path from there dies with you."

"A legal formality, nothing more," said Cymogene.

She poured herself a cup of wine and one for Autumn. She picked it up and walked around the table.

"Here, have some wine," she said soothingly. "You have had such a busy day."

She reached out to hand the wine to Autumn then suddenly threw it in her face then whirled round and kicked Autumn on the side of her head. Autumn thudded against the wall.

Cymogene laughed. "I be a Krisana too," she said, "and I thank you not to forget that."

She bent into a fighting crouch as Autumn picked herself off the floor. She, too, dropped into a fighting crouch and warily they circled each other. Autumn launched a flurry of blows and Cymogene parried each then dodged and Autumn's hand crashed into the wall, ripping a hole in the wooden panel and denting the copper wall underneath.

"My, you are strong," said Cymogene, admiringly then launched her own counter attack, which Autumn parried then spun with her own kick. Cymogene was no longer there and the kick smashed into the wall, breaking more panelling and denting the copper. Round they circled, each parrying the other's moves, neither gaining an advantage.

Suddenly the entire house shook.

"That must be Ta'umboq," said Cymogene, cocking her head.

Autumn responded with her elbow then a knee and a kick and Cymogene fell to the ground. Instantly Autumn was upon her and landed a blow to Cymogene's temple, stunning her momentarily allowing Autumn to get one hand firmly behind Cymogene's neck and the point of her elbow in Cymogene's throat. Cymogene managed to get one leg up and her heel under Autumn's chin, forcing her head back.

"Let us see about legal formalities," Autumn croaked and forced down

with all her strength on her elbow.

Cymogene scrambled and writhed but could not break Autumn's hold and slowly she weakened then went limp, her eyes staring and her smooth pale face tinged with blue. Autumn pressed harder and with a final shudder Cymogene struggled no more. Slowly Autumn relaxed her grip. Cymogene did not move.

"'Twould be best to make certain," muttered Autumn as she disentangled herself.

The house shuddered again and something collapsed further along the corridor as Autumn broke Cymogene's neck. Immediately Cymogene's face started to wrinkle and her hair turned grey then fell out to lie in clumps on the floor. Autumn jumped back and stared in morbid fascination as Cymogene's body withered and fell in on itself until just yellowing bones lay on the floor dressed in a threadbare tunic. The house shuddered again and something else collapsed.

Autumn tore herself away from Cymogene's remains and ran over to Logan and quickly untied him.

"Be she dead?" he asked, rubbing his wrists as he stared at the pile of bones.

"I hope so," said Autumn, "but we have to get out of here. I think the house is falling down."

She draped Logan's arm over her shoulder and half dragged him down the corridor, his legs still numb from being tightly bound. The late afternoon sun shone in through a wide crack in the wall. Autumn threw open the door and they stumbled outside.

"What be going on here?" cried Autumn in astonishment.

"We be pulling down this place," said Caradene in her rustley creaky voice.

Four others like her were ranged around the house, feeling for finger-holds in the smooth copper walls then ripping off chunks.

“Let me go,” cried Logan, “I have to get Malkia out!”

Autumn let him go and he rushed, stumbling, over to the stable.

“Best you get out of the way,” rustled Caradene. “this place not be standing much longer. Get back over there with the other mortals.”

“What other mortals?” asked Autumn, looking over to where Caradene had pointed. All she could see was a mass of foliage.

“We found them near here,” said Caradene. “We be deciding what to do with them when we be finished with this place.” She ripped off some more copper and tossed it aside.

Autumn ran over to the foliage and peered inside.

“Yofa!” she cried. “What be you doing here?”

“Wah wah wah,” said Yofa urgently, his mouth full of dried leaves.

Both he and Esogar were tightly bound with vines and hemmed in by stout young saplings. Further back, behind the saplings, Ronnus was still between the shafts of the wagon, munching on fresh grass.

Autumn ran over to Caradene.

“They be friends of mine,” she said pulling on one of Caradene’s branches. “I beg you, let them go. They be not part of this.”

Caradene paused. “You vouch for them?” she asked.

“I do,” said Autumn.

Caradene looked steadily into Autumn’s eyes then rubbed her arms together. The saplings slowly moved away and the vines untangled themselves. Yofa and Esogar got up, spitting leaves.

“What be going on here?” demanded Yofa. “Where be Cymogene? What is happening to her dwelling?”

“Cymogene be dead,” said Autumn. “I will tell you all later but how is it you are here? Cymogene said you had returned to Saiwoc.”

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Logan leading Malkia into the woods.

“To Saiwoc?” said Yofa. “Why would she be telling you that? No, lass. When we arrived here and found you not here we went in search of you. We crossed by the pass further along and followed the river downstream thinking you still be going upriver. Then we found where you had camped for what looked like some days but there was no sign of a grave so we decided you had recovered. There were tracks of the wagon on the other side of the river so we came back here to find you. Where be Logan?”

“He has taken Malkia into the woods for safety,” said Autumn. “Your wagon be a little way downstream.”

“And what be all these?” asked Esogar, watching Caradene and her companions throwing lumps of copper as the house groaned and shuddered and threatened to collapse.

“They be the spirits of the trees in these parts,” said Autumn. “There has been much badness here but that time has ended.”

“Badness?” asked Yofa. “I know of no badness, 'cepting that my best customer be dead.”

“Have you not been to the valley beyond?” asked Autumn, wondering if Yofa was as innocent as she had thought. “Have you not seen the mine?”

“No,” said Yofa. “We have never been further that Cymogene's house. We make our deliveries then go home again. There is badness in that valley?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “But it is ended and Caradene and her companions are beginning to make things right again.”

“Well, this all be right strange,” said Yofa, running a hand over his

bald head. "It be making the streams seem almost normal."

"Streams?" asked Autumn, puzzled. "What about the streams?"

"A short time before we arrived the stream started to flow the other way," said Yofa. "I ain't never seen a stream run uphill before."

"Uphill?" asked Autumn, astonished. "How can water run uphill?"

"I know not," said Yofa, "but we saw it, did we not, Eso?"

"Aye," said Esogar. "And look yonder, I ain't never seen that waterfall there before. What be going on?"

"That be Khimera, from across the mountain," said Caradene, coming over. "All the rivers and streams from around be coming to help cleanse the valleys."

"Yammoe!" said Yofa staggering backwards. "The thing speaks."

"I venture it would be a good idea if you bring your wagon down to where the other wagon is," said Autumn. "There is a lot I need to explain to you."

* * *

Something light and soft tickled Autumn's cheek and she mumbled and brushed it away. She snuggled deeper into the warmth that surrounded her.

"Are you awake?" whispered Logan.

"No," muttered Autumn and fell asleep again.

Some time later she woke again and opened her eyes. Not far away a warm fire burned happily and there was some sort of canopy over her head. A smell of rabbit stew assailed her and her stomach made loud noises.

"Are you awake?" whispered Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn.

She stretched luxuriously and got a mouthful of fur.

“What be this?” she asked, spitting it out.

“I got you a fur coat,” said Logan. “Would you like some stew? You must be hungry.”

“Yes, please,” said Autumn.

She sat up and inspected the coat. It was thick and warm and very soft to the touch.

“Where did you get this coat?” she asked when Logan brought her a bowl of stew. “These coats, I should say,” as Logan was wearing one as well.

“I took them from Cymogene's house before it came down completely,” he said. “Eat the stew slowly, you have not eaten for a long time.”

“I must have slept all night,” said Autumn, taking the bowl. “It looks to be almost dawn.”

“You have slept all night and a day and a night,” said Logan. “I wager you needed it.”

“I did,” she said. “My mind was exhausted after battling with Ta'umboq. Where be Yofa and Esogar?”

“They left yesterday,” said Logan. “They had to go before the pass was blocked. They wanted to carry you on the wagon but I would not let them.”

“Why not?” asked Autumn.

Logan went red. “Umm, I like it better when we travel alone,” he said. “Just the two of us.”

Autumn smiled at him. “As do I, friend Logan. This is delicious stew.”

"I am pleased you like it," said Logan. "There are some peaches in honey afterwards if you would like them. Not many but I saved you a few."

"You took them from the house as well?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Logan. "Are your feet warm?"

"Very," said Autumn. "Why?"

Logan lifted a foot to show her. "I managed to find some boots as well. And I collected our staffs. Your pack is over there, ready for when you feel up to moving on. Yofa said we would be right welcome if we ever find ourselves in Saiwoc again."

"Aye, he be a good man," said Autumn. "Did you know he delayed leaving to go and look for us?"

"Yes," said Logan. "Although I wager he be most pleased with how it turned out."

"How so?" asked Autumn.

"He was paid for Malkia's wagon load of supplies," said Logan, "and he still has them. And he managed to get two of Cymogene's chests of paraks out as well. Oh, and I told him not to pay us."

Autumn laughed.

"Well, it be only fair," she said. "We did not give him much protection and we took away his best customer. I venture we do not need any money now, for we have some goodly warm clothing."

"I, umm, managed to acquire a small bag of paraks as well," said Logan. "Not many but our needs are few. Oh, Caradene built this canopy for you so you could rest undisturbed. She made me promise to give you her thanks. It seems that Khimera and several other rivers managed to cross the mountains and flooded the valley. All the adnats and the buildings and things have been washed away and the renewal can begin."

“That be right good news,” said Autumn. “Ahh, I have to get up now. My body is awakening and things need to be done.”

She returned a few minutes later.

“Let me do some meditating for a while,” she said, settling herself into a comfortable position with her booted feet on her knees. “Astauand be coming up although I cannot see it through these clouds. Shall we move on when I am done?”

“As you wish,” said Logan, reaching for the last of the peaches in honey.

Autumn rested her hands in her lap and closed her eyes. Something soft and gentle tickled her face and she ignored it. A few moments later something soft and gentle tickled her face again. Then again.

She opened her eyes.

“Ohhhh,” she said in wonder. “This is so beautiful. What is it?”

“I think it be snow,” said Logan as Autumn caught a snowflake and watched it melt in the warmth of her hand.

“It be the most wondrous thing I have ever seen,” said Autumn, happily. “I like snow. See how white and pure it is.”

Glossary

{Pronunciations given in brackets}

Adnaton'naja {ad-na-toneh-na-ja}: 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.

Aferraron {af-er-ra-re-on}: The country of the Onaman people. Geographically, Aferraron borders Wase to the East, the Azour Sea to the West and the Looncan Sea to the South. Continental Aferraron extends from 23.18° N to 81.92° N although the Mapdil Mountains (40.62 to 46.08° N) mark the Northern limit of habitation. If the Island of Ove, notionally within the political sphere of Aferraron during the period covered by *The Annals*, is included, the Southern limit lies at 21.62° N. Consequently, while much of Aferraron has a temperate climate, the South is Dry-Tropical and the North is Polar. There is no generally agreed reference prime meridian for longitude but, for the purposes of *The Annals*, if we take the capital Uli-Rratha as being at 0° (or, more precisely, the Great Hall Of The Palace Of The Roinad in Uli-Rratha), continental Aferraron extends from 34.32° W to 1.94° E at its furthest extremities. The inclusion of the Island of Ove extends this a further 0.88° W. The Island of Danornor was, for practical purposes, under the political control of Wase throughout this period and is consequently excluded.

Ahon Hara Mountains {ah-hon ha-ra}: A range of largely extinct volcanoes along the South Western coast of Aferraron. The largest, and the only volcano still active, is Mor'upita-sehen.

Ahtolgo {ah-tol-le-go}: A village of some 30 people.

Aloidia {al-oy-di-ah}: The deity of harvests and good fortune.

Awendene {ah-wen-di-ne}: A tree nymph (dryad) in Havildar.

Astauand {ast-ah-you-an-de}: The sun and the deity of the sun.

Augetreinn {au-ge-tre-in-ne}: A creature from the Land of the Cysciec of horrible appearance. Similar to Earth's *grotesque* but with some supernatural facilities and a limited ability to manipulate human emotion.

Autumn Savannah: Found at the age of one or two years by an unidentified member of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek

Esyup, Autumn was raised and educated in a mixture of martial arts and philosophical enquiry. At the age of approximately twenty two, unable to answer to her own satisfaction the question “What is your place?” posed by her mentor Noxu, Autumn chose to leave the Esyup and *The Annals of Autumn Savannah* follow her subsequent travels.

The Annals provide no clues as to the identity of Autumn's biological parents, the name they gave her at birth nor any clues as to her abandonment. A thorough search of the records of the Esyup finds only the entry “a babe was found and granted refuge and Autumn Savannah was the name given”. Confusingly the entry is undated and there is no mention of any other persons found, dead or alive, nor any property, although the latter is unsurprising given the Esyup's stance on material possessions. There is no mention in the Esyup's records of any subsequent enquiries about a missing child nor is there any record of a missing child in the public records. From this it would seem reasonable to conclude that Autumn was of middle to low birth.

Azour Sea {as-oh-ou-re}: A continuation of the Sea of Looncan, on the Western side of Aferraron.

Bae'e'yahkia Wood {ba-ah-ee-yah-ke-ee-ah}: A large wood near Ahtolgo.

Bay of Audab {oh-da-bey}: By far the largest bay on the South coast of Aferraron.

Bear Barrup {ba-re-ru-pe}: A professional wrestler with a travelling fair.

Bru'cht {be-ruc-he-te}: One of the slaves at the Sauizuxu Mine. A farmer before being abducted.

Cape Shugsuo {se-hug-su-oh}: A promontory at the Western end of the Mapdil Mountains, protruding into the Azour Sea and a port for trading primarily with Sassese'lte.

Caradace {ka-ra-da-ke}: A leafy plant with broad oval shaped leaves. The leaves have mild anti-septic properties and are often used for bandaging.

Caradene {ka-ra-di-ne}: A tree nymph (dryad) in Havildar.

Chaahk {ka-ah-ke}: The deity of rain and wind.

Chershoe {kay-er-sho-ee-ey}: The deity of ways, paths and roads.

Cysciec {ky-se-ki-ek}: A Land beyond the Land of the Undead wherein

dwells those spirits, entities and essences that are too monstrous or evil even for Yammoe.

Cymogene Hirao Sastruga {kay-im-oh-jen-ne hi-ra-ow es-ass-tru-ga}: A Dohi from the Land of Wase and a Krisana of Mor'upita-sehen, from the Yeinarr ach Chaahken vur Looplaben Esyup. How Cymogene came to leave her Esyup and arrive in Aferraron is unknown. At some point she did, however, and established the Sauizuxu Copper Mine.

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.

Dohi {do-hi}: An ethnic group who occupy Wase, a land bordering Aferraron to the East.

Dua {du-ah} One of the slaves at the Sauizuxu Mine.

Ehc {eh-ke}: A small leafy plant with crinkled leaves and a small tightly furled heart that resembles a large Brussels sprout. The leaves can be eaten as well as the heart.

Enmern {en-em-er-en}: A type of semi-domesticated wheat.

Ept {ep-te}: The deity of hearths and fire.

Era'ow {era-ow}: A formal pair bonding limited primarily to the upper classes. The lower classes paired in an informal 'almost era-ow'; what we would call a 'common-law marriage'.

Era'owen {era-ow-en}: Spouse in a formal era-ow. A de facto spouse is known as an 'almost era-owen'.

Esogar {es-og-ar-re}: Son of Yofa Bewelc.

Esyup {es-you-pe}: A school or commune dedicated to one, or occasionally two, deities. Esyups have a specific focus in addition to their religious and philosophical regimen, such as medicine or martial arts.

Feandra {fe-an-der-ah}: The deity of fertility.

Fiau {fee-oww}: The spirit of the staff given to Logan by Mother Midcarn.

Foamo {fo-ah-you-mo}: A farmer near Ahtolgo and major landholder in the area.

Gouph {go-up-he}: The owner of The Anchor at Cape Shugsuo.

Habibinur {ha-bib-i-nur}: A port on the East coast of Sassese'lte.

Hamamielis {ha-ma-me-el-is}: A tree that produces small yellow-green petals, similar to Witch Hazel. The petals have antiseptic properties.

Havildar {ha-vi-le-de-ha}: The Land of the Dryads, the woodlands of the Mapdil Mountains.

Jeren {jay-er-en-ne}: An old woman in Ahtolgo who assists at child births. An unqualified midwife.

Khimera {ke-hi-me-ra}: A naiad who lives in the water of one of the rivers that flow through Havildar. Naiads have greater healing powers than dryads.

Kino {key-no}: An alcoholic beverage made from fermented milk. A speciality of Ahtolgo.

Krisana {kre-is-an-h}: A graduate of an Esyup. Broadly equivalent to a priest but with a strong worldly philosophical overtone, rather than purely religious.

Liddoden {el-id-do-de-ne}: The deity of forests and woodlands.

Logan {lo-ga-ne}: Autumn's travelling companion. Orphaned at the age of ten or eleven, Logan was left to fend for himself although a local farmer allowed him to live in a cowshed. Inevitably Logan stole to survive and was exiled from Biasdo around the age of sixteen, presumably having been caught stealing once too often.

Looncan Sea {lo-oh-ne-ca-ne}: The Sea to the South of Aferraron and separating Aferraron from Neander.

Looplabb {lo-op-la-be}: The deity of mountains.

Lulerrain {loo-ler-aye-en}: The deity of water.

Malkia {ma-le-ki-ah}: One of the two horses owned by Yofa Bewelc.

Mapdil Mountains {mey-ap-di-le}: The range of mountains in the mid North of Aferraron and extending East beyond the border with Wase. The Western end of the Mapdil Mountains descend to form Cape Shugsuo. The Mapdil Mountains mark the effective limit of inhabitation of Northern Aferraron. Beyond the Mapdil Mountains lies the frozen wastelands known as Zabytaja Pounac.

Mecatonia {me-ka-to-ne-ah}: Beyond being some form of ointment

used for veterinary purposes nothing is known about this. However, from the description it may a solution of iodine.

Mianuska {mi-an-us-ka}: A word in the Old Tongue that means 'a name', (pl) mianuski.

Mizule {mi-zu-le}: The deity of men and warriors generally.

Morath {mo-ra-th}: The deity of war.

Mor'upita-sehen {mor-up-it-ase-ne}: The deity of volcanoes and the largest and sole remaining active volcano in the Ahon Hara range.

Mother Midcarn {as in English}: A sorcerer of uncommon ability. It is apparent throughout The Annals that Mother Midcarn has an interest in both Autumn and Logan and uses her skills to aid them, by way of gifts with magic properties, and guide them. Indeed, Mother Midcarn's powers are sufficiently beyond the norm for sorcerers, witches and the like, such as her ability to fold time (Annal One), that it begs the question of whether she is a deity in her own right. There is precedent for this within The Annals; Darius the cat (Annal 1) is stated to be the personification of the deity Ept, although no such statement is made regarding Mother Midcarn. Nor, it is worth pointing out, do Autumn or Logan ever express any doubts over her mortality. Some scholars have pointed to a statement by Awendene, in Annal Two, that Mother Midcarn is 'a friend to the woods and the rivers, and to animals and mountains and more besides,' as being suggestive that Mother Midcarn may be the personification of (Mother) Nature or, more fancifully, Gaia, but this view is not widely subscribed to. The primary argument against this hypothesis is that in Annal 1 Mother Midcarn appears to aid Autumn in ridding Aferraron of the Roinad Obvia Vasagle, showing a concern for human affairs that does not normally exist in Nature.

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.

Oboulco {ob-oo-ul-co}: An ethnic group who occupy Sassese'lte, a land to the West of Aferraron.

Ove {oh-vey}: The smallest of three islands extending South West from the Southern tip of the Ahon Hara Mountains.

Parak {pa-ra-ke}: The unit of currency.

Pacane {pe-ca-neh}: One of the slaves at the Sauizuxu Mine. A fisherman before being abducted.

Pek {pe-ke}: One sixteenth part of a parak.

Plakill {pla-ki-ell-le}: The larger of the two moons and the deity of 'The Big Moon'.

Plifal {ple-ye-fa-el}: The smaller of the two moons and the deity of 'The Small Moon'.

Quintile {as English}: A quintile generally is one fifth or fifty depending on the context. Quintiles are most commonly used in connection with pregnancy as, although otherwise physiologically similar to humans, the people of Mottle Blue have a typical gestation of two hundred and fifty days. Pregnancies are measured as five quintiles of fifty days each.

Recaisn {re-ca-is-ne}: An early form of writing material that pre-dates animal skin parchment. Recaisn was made from the scraped and pulped pithy centres of the stalks of the flowering recaisnasc plant. Similar to papyrus.

Ronnus {Ro-ne-nu-se}: One of the two horses owned by Yofa Bewelc.

Sabon Mutum Desert {sa-bo-ne mu-tu-me}: A desert in the North West of Neander.

Sauizuxu {sa-owi-zu-zu}: The copper mine established and run by Cymogene Hirao Sastruga. The mine is located in and around the Northern side of the Mapdil Mountains.

Saiwoc {sa-iwe-oh-ke}: A town with a population of some 200 people. Saiwoc is the furthest town to the North in Aferraron. Beyond lies only small isolated communities.

Salodkaja tree {sa-lo-de-ka-ja}: A species of Willow tree notable for its strength and flexibility. The seed of the Salodkaja tree is surrounded by thin, extremely sharp spikes which snag in the fur, hair or skin of anything that brushes against it, thereby extending its spread.

Sassese'lte {sa-se-sel-te}: The land of the Oboulco, to the West of Aferraron across the Azour Sea.

Schtei {shtay}The capital of Wase.

Seiliu {sey-il-i-oooh} The deity of cowsheds and Logan's personal god.

Skizze Mountains {ski-zee-ez-eh}: A mountain range in North Eastern Neander.

Southern Wasian Sea: The eastern part of the Looncan Sea.

Sploop {speh-lo-op-pe}: The deity of misfortune.

Susui {su-su-ee}: A prostitute at The Anchor in Cape Shugsuo.

Surogou {su-ro-go-oo}: The deity of hunting.

Ta'umboq {taum-bo-ke}: Cymogene Hirao Sastruga's augetreinn.

Tafa-ul {ta-fa-ul}: The capital of Sassese'lte.

Tolasy {to-la-si-ye}: A farmer near Ahtolgo who was forced off his land by Foaumo.

Uli-Rratha {ul-ir-re-at-ha} The capital and largest city of Aferraron with a population of approx. 12,000 people. It is home to the Roinad and government.

Vallume {va-elle-oom-ey}: The deity of women.

Vahaj {va-ha-jay}: The deity of places of entertainment, particularly hostleries.

Viakaja Savannah {vi-ak-aj-ah}: A large grassy plain in the Eastern sub-tropical region of Aferraron. Autumn Savannah was found as an infant in the Southern part of the Viakaja Savannah.

Vogev {vee-chou-ev}: The deity of evil things.

Wase {wa-se}: The land of the Dohi, far to the East of Aferraron.

Xibu Shan Mountains {zee-boo sh-an}: The Wasian name for the Mapdil Mountains that extend into Wasian territory.

Xive {zee-vey}: The middle island of three extending South West from the Southern tip of the Ahon Hara Mountains.

Yammoe {ya-me-me-we}: The deity of the undead and ruler of the Land of the Undead.

Yawth {ya-we-they}: One of the slaves at the Sauizuxu Mine. A stable-hand before being abducted.

Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup {yay-in-ee-da-de ru mo-ra-th-kay ni fe-and-ra-kay-ke es-you-pe}: The school where Autumn

Savannah spent her formative years. Specifically, the School for the Worshipful Discovery of the Essence of Morath and Feandra, the deities of war and fertility. Intriguingly, it seems from The Annals that Autumn is highly skilled in martial arts yet surprisingly ignorant of matters pertaining to fertility. The Yeinydd Esyup lies on the Southern edge of the Viakaja Savannah grasslands.

Yeinarr ach Chershoeen vur Looplaben Esyup {yay-in-ar-re ak kay-er-sho-ee-ey-en vu-re lo-op-la-be-ne es-you-pe}: The school where Cymogene Hirao Sastruga spent her formative years. Specifically, the School for the Worshipful Following of Chershoe of and with Looplab, the deities of the Way (or the Path) and the Mountain. There is an implicit co-joining of these deities in this philosophy. As distinct deities we have Chershoe *and* Looplab but 'vur' does not simply translate as 'and'. 'Vur' also means 'with' or 'within' so Chershoe vur Looplab means the deities combining as the Way *of* the Mountain and the Way *within* the Mountain. This in turn suggests that Chershoe is also seen by this School as the path by which Looplab itself can be known and understood.

Ymma {why-em-ma}: Almost era-owen of Tolasy.

Zabytaja Pounac {ze-ab-ey-ta-ja po-un-ake}: The largely uninhabited far North of Aferraron. Still referred to in the Old Tongue, Zabytaja Pounac translates literally as 'The Forsaken North'.

Yofa Bewelc {yo-fa be-we-le-ke}: A trader from Ahtolgo who supplies the Sauizuxu Mine and who employs Autumn and Logan.

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.

Zik {zi-ke}: A native of Saiwoc who is beaten by Bear Barrup in a fairground fight in Saiwoc.

Zuit {zoo-it}: The largest of three islands extending South West from the Southern tip of the Ahon Hara Mountains.