

Lietapis
Vosienskaj
Savany

The Annals Of
Autumn Savannah

a new translation

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the
Writer

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aka Richard The Writer.

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> Siomaja Kazka <

~ The Seventh Tale ~

Chapter One

The morning mist touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn Savannah. Her eyelids twitched and she was aware of the dawn's faint early glow and the dampness that surrounded her but did not open her eyes. Away to her right, Logan's faint whistling snores stuttered and he moaned lightly but still her inward focus did not waiver. Nor did it waiver when he stirred although her ears told her that he rolled onto his side facing away from her as his faint snores became the merest little bit fainter. Off to her left, not far away, she could hear the patter of a mouse's feet emboldened by the mist. No predator from the air could see it as it foraged among the leaves and grasses, searching for seeds and other morsels. Further distant she could hear the sounds of the land coming awake; the first stirrings of the morning birds in the woods nearby, the last stirrings of those creatures of the night as they settled themselves to sleep, a sudden but faint irritable chatter as some creature infringed the personal space of another. From far far off came the faintest of faint rumblings of thunder, the latest of several she had heard, each fainter than the last. The tiniest of breezes cooled the dampness on her skin and the tip of her tongue emerged to taste the dampness on her lips. Slowly her tongue withdrew and savoured the purity of the moisture it had encountered. All was as it should be and nothing was amiss.

The last of a chain of thoughts, each contemplated and considered, passed from her mind. For three more slow breaths Autumn kept her mind still but no other thoughts came unbidden. Her meditations had come to a natural end for this day, a day which promised to be like most, filled with wonders and delights at the discovery of the new and the rediscovery of the familiar. Slowly Autumn inhaled deeply then raised her arms high above her head, stretching her muscles to the utmost. Then, slowly, gracefully, she lowered them while exhaling and touched her palms to the cool damp grasses that surrounded her.

“Is it not a beautiful day,” she thought to herself and smiled with the simple pleasure of existing in such a peaceful place.

Slowly she opened her eyes then, explosively, she thrust herself upwards into a backward somersault and landed a pace behind where she had sat. She landed on her feet, her hands and arms already

forming a defensive posture yet ready for attack. There was a man in front of her. To be sure he sat on the ground, cross legged much as she had been, and was watching with curious eyes but his very presence was a surprise even as his posture suggested no threat. He continued to sit, three paces distant from where she had been, facing her. His hands rested on his knees and contained no weapons. He made no movement save his eyes which followed Autumn's every move.

Her eyes locked on the stranger, Autumn tested the air and smelt no unusual smells nor tasted any new tastes. Her ears heard no unfamiliar sounds and her skin felt no untoward movements of the air or grasses. Slowly she relaxed a little and pirouetted to see what, if anything, was behind her or to her sides. There was no one there, save only Logan off to her right, still whistling faintly as his breath kept his dreams alive. And, of course, the stranger in front of her.

"I apologise if I disturb you, Wahine," he said, his quiet voice pleasantly modulated and showing no signs of stress.

"You surprised me," said Autumn, inwardly dismayed at being surprised. It was contrary to everything her training had taught her. "You have great skill at silent movement for I was unaware of your presence. How long have you been there?"

"But a short time," replied the stranger, still unmoving. "My name is Kanikapila Hirao Five and I wager you have great skills yourself. Few I fancy could perform such a feat of acrobatics from a standing start yet you achieved it while seated."

"I am Autumn Savannah," said Autumn, "and yonder is Logan. Mayhap you and I both have skills that few others possess for I have never yet met one who can come upon me without giving any sign."

"Indeed we are both strangers to each other and know not yet of each other's past," said Kanikapila. "That may yet be remedied with time or it may not for the future is still awash with possibilities." He gestured slightly with his chin. "Your companion yonder. He has skills beyond sleeping?"

“Aye,” said Autumn relaxing further but still keeping her distance. “He has great skills which are unique to himself and are not readily apparent upon first acquaintance.”

“No doubt,” said Kanikapila. “By what manner do I address you so as to indicate peace and friendship? Or would you prefer to remain on formal terms?”

“Autumn will be sufficient,” said Autumn, “unless you see a pressing need for formalities. How should I address you likewise?”

“That sits well with me,” said Kanikapila. “As to my name, any part of it that enjoins you will be sufficient for me.”

“Then I shall call you Kanikapila,” said Autumn. “Are you from these parts?”

“Will you not resume sitting?” asked Kanikapila. “We are ending the formalities and, as you see, I am alone apart from Kauwa, so the need for your defensive posture is gone.”

“Who is Kauwa?” asked Autumn, tensing slightly because of the apparent presence of another seemingly unknown person. She looked around but could see no one.

“My hanaha,” said Kanikapila, “or servant, if you prefer, as you are not of these parts.”

“And where is Kauwa?” asked Autumn. “I see no one other than ourselves.”

“In the woods over yonder,” said Kanikapila, pointing with a wave of his hand. “She attends my camp.”

“There is much here I do not understand,” said Autumn. She contemplated Kanikapila for a few moments then sat down again on the spot where she had been sitting. “But these things can wait. I venture Logan and I have passed into Wase?”

“Indeed,” said Kanikapila. “The border, such as it is, is some two or

three days distant. It is a fairly fluid concept as no one has taken the time to define its location precisely. Was not Wase your intended destination? You speak our language well even though you are not Wasian.”¹

“I thank you,” said Autumn. “Why do you suppose us not to be Wasian?”

“You are unfamiliar with things no Wasian would be unfamiliar with,” said Kanikapila. He gave a half smile which softened his rather angular features.

“Ah,” said Autumn. “You have the right of it. Both Logan and I are from Aferraron. You are of Wase?”

“Indeed,” said Kanikapila, “although from some way to the North. What business have you in Wase?”

Logan rolled over onto an elbow and looked blearily at Autumn and Kanikapila. He had a faint air of bemusement.

“Greetings,” said Kanikapila. “You slept well?”

“Hello,” said Logan. He blinked a couple of times then shook his head. “Who are you?”

“This is Kanikapila Hirao Five,” said Autumn. “He is our guest for a while.”

“Ah,” said Logan.

He sat up fully and gathered his blanket around him.

“Good,” he said and looked blank. A few moments later he added, “I am Logan.”

“So Autumn has informed me,” said Kanikapila. “You are welcome to join us when you feel able.” He turned his attention back to Autumn.

1 See *The Annals - The Fifth Tale*; Autumn and Logan each have a necklace with magical properties given to them by Mother Midcarn which perform live translations.

“Your business here?”

“Logan and I are merely travellers,” said Autumn. “We seek only knowledge of the world.”

“To what purpose?” asked Kanikapila. “Knowledge without wisdom would seem a fruitless endeavour.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “But wisdom cannot come without knowledge on which to base it.”

“Perhaps,” said Kanikapila. “But such a debate is not appropriate at this time. You travel alone?”

“As you see,” said Autumn. “Will Kauwa join us?”

“No,” said Kanikapila. “That would not be fitting.”

“I see,” said Autumn. “You travel alone as well?”

“Yes,” said Kanikapila. “I have matters in Schtei to attend to.”

“Is Schtei far from here?” asked Autumn.

“Tis many days distant,” said Kanikapila. “To the East, beyond the Xibu Shan Mountains.”

Logan had wandered off to find a convenient bush and now returned. He sat beside Autumn. Kanikapila half smiled again and inclined his head in greeting.

“We have met someone named Hirao before,” he said. “Cymogene Hirao Sastruga². Are you related?”

“Tis merely a coincidence of naming,” said Kanikapila. “If we were related we would have the same family name. I am of the Kanikapila family and this other to whom you refer is of the Cymogene family.”

“Was,” said Logan. “She is dead now. Five is an unusual name, is it

2 See *The Annals - The Second Tale*

not?”

“How so?” asked Kanikapila, a slight frown flickering across his face.

“Tis a number,” said Logan. “People are not usually numbered.”

“Ahh,” said Kanikapila, his frown clearing. “You are not familiar with Wasian naming.”

“Indeed not,” said Autumn. “We are unfamiliar with everything in Wase.”

“And yet you speak our language,” said Kanikapila, his frown returning. “This is most strange.”

“So is it your custom to number people?” asked Autumn, not wishing to pursue the language issue.

“Of course,” said Kanikapila. “It is a simple rational way to identify each other.”

“And yet you have other names,” said Logan. “Kanikapila and Hirao.”

“Kanikapila is my family name,” said Kanikapila, “and Hirao is my generation name. Within Hirao I am the fifth sibling. My nearest older sister is Kanikapila Hirao Four and my younger brother is Kanikapila Hirao Six. How do you distinguish brothers and sisters in Aferraron?”

“They each have their own name,” said Logan. “My sister is called Emia.”

“Emia,” said Kanikapila thoughtfully. “But how do you know which family she belongs to or whether she is older or younger than you?”

“We do not,” admitted Autumn. “I can see that there could be advantages to your method of naming. Tell me, why was Cymogene Hirao Sastruga not given a number? Would she have been an only child?”

“No, an only child would be named One,” said Kanikapila. “And that

is another strangeness for Sastruga is three in the old form. How is it that young people such as you know someone who would have lived several generations past? How is it possible that you met someone of that age?"

"It is a long and tedious story," said Autumn, "and not for the telling now. What would the naming be if twins were born?"

"One would be born before the other," said Kanikapila, "and so the numbering would continue. Is it your intention to continue your travels today or do you plan to bide here a while?"

Autumn glanced at Logan who was watching Kanikapila.

"Our intention is to continue our travels," she said.

"Then you will indulge me by sharing a meal before you depart?" asked Kanikapila. "Tis always good to begin a day's travel with food in the belly."

"That is most kind of you," said Autumn. "A gift freely given is most precious indeed."

"My provisions are poor," said Kanikapila, "for I am travelling and some distance from my Esyup but you are most welcome to what I have." He lifted his head and gave a hissing whistle. "Kauwa will attend us shortly."

"Who is ..." asked Logan.

"Kanikapila's servant," said Autumn. "She is at their camp in the woods."

She heard a faint noise some way distant and looked up. Someone was emerging from the edge of the wood.

"And is that your hanaha now?" she asked.

Kanikapila glanced over and nodded acknowledgement.

“Her name is Kauwa,” said Autumn. “Your servants are not named by family, generation and number as are you?”

“Of course not,” said Kanikapila.

“Sloop,” muttered Logan distractedly. “Would you look at that?”

From a distance the approaching figure looked fairly normal with a head, two arms, two legs and a body but as she got closer it was apparent that the body was draped in a shapeless cloth garment of some sort that gave no clue as to what lay underneath and the head had no face. Both Autumn and Logan stared in fascination as she approached.

“Ahhh,” murmured Autumn as the figure got close. “I see.”

Kauwa may well have had a face but her hair was long and pulled forward and sideways so it covered her face entirely. The hair crossed over below what was probably the chin and was held in place with a thong tied behind her neck. No trace of what was underneath was visible except for the hint of eyes in about the place where one would expect eyes.

“Prepare food,” commanded Kanikapila without looking at Kauwa.

Kauwa dropped to her knees and slipped off a large pack that was strapped to her shoulders and began to rummage inside.

“Greetings,” said Autumn. “My name is Autumn. You are Kauwa?”

Kauwa's hair covered face briefly turned towards Autumn but no sound emerged.

“’Tis not the custom to talk to hanaha,” remarked Kanikapila, “except to give instructions.”

“’Twould seem rather harsh,” said Autumn. “Are not even servants due some respect?”

Kanikapila shrugged.

“As you wish,” he said, “but you will not get anything in return. Have no expectations of that.”

“But is not Kauwa human?” asked Autumn. “For certain she has that form.”

“In a manner of speaking,” said Kanikapila, “but not as you or I.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn, frowning.

Chapter Two

“There is little to understand,” said Kanikapila calmly. “Hanaha are hanaha and not like us. They exist only to serve. What more needs to be said?”

“In what way are they not like us?” asked Autumn.

Kauwa knelt beside Kanikapila and proffered two thin wooden bowls which he took without paying her any attention.

“Let us eat,” he said, offering a bowl each to Autumn and Logan. “Alas I have no meat but this travels well and is nourishing. Likely you are unfamiliar with this for you are strangers to Wase. It is a dish we call aroao which is made from sliced caran dried in the sun and pickled with chopped tomatoes. It is common throughout the country and is best eaten with janja which takes the sharpness from the vinegar.”

“This pink thing with the green streaks is caran?” asked Logan peering suspiciously into his bowl.

“Yes,” said Kanikapila. “It is similar to your melon only long and thin and slightly bitter to the taste. 'Tis made more palatable by the sweetness of the vinegar and best eaten by scooping it up with slices of janja, which is the bread.”

“This is bread?” asked Logan, poking one of the thin slices of something very dark and dense that stuck up from one side of the bowl.

“Eat it,” said Autumn. “We do not wish to offend Kanikapila who is generous enough to share his food with us.”

“Of course not,” said Logan scooping up some of the caran on the end of a slice of janja.

A few drops of vinegar fell from the scoop while he contemplated it then he bit into it. His mildly determined expression remained for a few moments then changed to one of pleasure.

“Ahh, 'tis good,” he exclaimed. “I know not what words to describe the taste but it is good.”

“Save a little janja until the end,” said Kanikapila with another of his half smiles. “It is our custom to drink the last of the vinegar then eat the last of the janja.”

“It is good to become familiar with customs when in a strange land,” said Autumn.

She too ate some of the aroao and nodded her head in appreciation.

“You do not eat?” she asked.

“Alas I carry only two bowls,” said Kanikapila. “I do not travel expecting to feed multitudes. I shall eat when you are done with the bowl.”

“And Kauwa?” asked Autumn. “When shall Kauwa eat?”

“You seem overly interested in things which do not concern you,” said Kanikapila with no trace of his customary half smile. “I venture that your search for knowledge does not extend to wisdom for many would argue it would be wise not to enquire too deeply into the customs of others when you are in their land and eating their food.”

“My apologies,” said Autumn, placing her bowl on the ground in front of her and putting her hands together in supplication. “I have no desire to cause offence. I seek only to understand. If, as you say, Kauwa is not human then I accept your word for this even as I lack understanding of the nature of Kauwa.”

“Good,” said Kanikapila. “There is wisdom in your acceptance. Please, if the food is to your taste, continue eating. There is more if you so desire.”

“One bowl will be sufficient,” said Autumn, “for I eat sparingly. Logan, I venture, may desire some more however.”

“What say you, Logan?” asked Kanikapila. “You would like some

more?”

“Ahh, if it would not cause offence,” said Logan, glancing at Autumn. “You say this is a common dish in this land?”

“How could I be offended by someone desiring more of what I offer?” asked Kanikapila. He gestured to Kauwa who rose and walked behind him to take Logan's bowl. “Yes, most here eat this dish as it is cheap and filling although I would caution you that too much can cause small sores on the tongue and insides of your mouth. Should you find that happens then drink milk and do not eat aroao again for a few days until the soreness has passed.”

“There are poisons in the food?” asked Autumn, pausing in her eating.

“None at all,” said Kanikapila. “Tis the nature of the vinegar, nothing more. Eat as much of the caran and tomato as you desire. Another common dish is chopped caran fried with beaten egg or with a paste of boiled beans. You can even eat it raw but many find it overly tough and difficult to chew.”

“It is good to know such things,” said Autumn resuming her eating. “You mentioned earlier that you are travelling and some distance from your Esyup. Would it cause offence if I enquired which Esyup you are from?”

“Not at all,” said Kanikapila. “I am from the Yeinarr ach Tehiakawaelo vur Purapua Esyup which lies in the foothills of the Xibu Shan Mountains some four days to the North of here.”

“I know not these names,” said Autumn. “Tehiakawaelo and Purapua?”

“They are two deities of my people,” said Kanikapila. “Tehiakawaelo is the deity of money and business and Purapua is the deity of those who seek. You would do well to acquaint yourself with Purapua as you are a seeker yourself. Do you not have these deities in Aferraron?”

“I have not heard of them,” said Autumn, “although Purapua may be another name for Chershoe who is our deity for ways, paths and

roads which are all means by which a seeker can follow towards an end. Teahiakawaelo would seem a most strange deity although I have only the briefest acquaintance with money so it does not surprise me that I am unfamiliar with the deity of it. Tell me, are you an elder within your Esyup although you would seem too young for that? A Krisana perhaps?"

"As you say, I am too young to be an elder," said Kanikapila, his half smile returning. "I am as yet still within my middle summers. My Esyup has only one elder for it is but a new Esyup, created by the Mo'i some eighty summers ago. We have no Krisanas at this time. The last died but four summers past."

"For what purpose was your Esyup created?" asked Autumn. "Based on my poor understanding there is little to money that would be fruitful to study."

She placed her empty bowl on the ground where it was immediately retrieved by Kauwa who wiped it with a part of her garment.

"Ahh there is much that is fruitful to study on that subject," said Kanikapila. He paused momentarily to take a bowl of aroao from Kauwa. "Although I concede that it would seem fruitless while sitting with friends on a grassy knoll surrounded by woods and far from the world of markets and businesses. What need is there for money here?" and he waved an arm to encompass all that surrounded them. "But I wager that you have no little familiarity with Esyups and the like for I have seen what I can only imagine to be but a small suggestion of your skills. Ahh, and therein perhaps lies a need for money in this place. 'Tis unlikely this place would be good for business but money has its place in the laying of wagers. You see, even here money has a purpose."

"A debatable point, Kanikapila," said Autumn, "for wagering is not something I agree with. By its nature there is a winner and a loser in any wager and the loser suffers a loss that is not recompensed by the gain of something. Unlike, say, the gain of food in exchange for money but that is no matter for we are not proposing to enter into any wager as I know you only meant it as a manner of speech. Yes, you are indeed correct. I am from an Esyup myself although Logan is not."

“You seem reluctant to explain further,” said Kanikapila after a brief pause. “Is there some reason I should not know your Esyup or your status within?”

“None at all,” said Autumn, “save only that I am in constant battle with my vanity and would not have you thinking I was boasting.”

“Come Autumn,” said Kanikapila. “If we are both of Esyups then we are equals. There is no suggestion of boasting in the telling.”

“As you say,” said Autumn. “Very well. I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup.”

A silence came over the knoll as Kanikapila paused in his eating to stare at her.

“Then I am in error,” he said after a while. “I am merely a minor thinker whereas you are a major doer and of no doubt unmatched prowess. I apologise for my presumptuousness at thinking we could be equals. I should have realised by your agility earlier that you were a mighty warrior.”

“That is not all,” exclaimed Logan. “Autumn is also the founder of the Yeinoba Vyliacennie im Rozum ny Duch Esyup.”

“You left your Esyup to found another?” said Kanikapila in surprise. “You must be mightier than mighty to do such a thing.”

“No,” said Autumn. “I am still of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup even though I travel and no longer fulfil my duties there. The Yeinoba Vyliacennie im Rozum ny Duch Esyup is a separate entity and I have not returned since its founding.”

“So you are of two Esyups?” said Kanikapila with some measure of wonder in his voice. “I have never heard of such a thing. Are you a Krisana of both?”

“Of course she is,” said Logan.

“I fear that is not so, Logan,” said Autumn. “There is only myself and Grimme, the Pravadyr. There are as yet no formalities for the granting of Krisanaships or other ordainments.”

“You are indeed the founder?” asked Kanikapila.

Autumn nodded.

“Then it would seem to me that as the Founder and a Krisana in your own right,” continued Kanikapila, “that it is sufficient for you to declare yourself Krisana of your own Esyup. There are none who can gainsay you.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but what purpose would it serve to declare myself a two-fold Krisana beyond feeding my vanity? It is sufficient that I am a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume and such vows as I have undertaken relate only to that.”

“Ahh, you have vows,” said Kanikapila. “Would it be impertinent of me to ask what vows you have undertaken?”

“My vows are personal to me,” said Autumn, “but I see no harm in telling you of them. As a disciple of Vallume I have vowed to protect the sanctity of women and as a disciple of Mizule I have vowed to protect the sanctity of myself. The two go together as I cannot protect the sanctity of women unless I am myself inviolable.”

“Yes, I see that the second would be a requirement for the first,” said Kanikapila thoughtfully. “Tell me, have you found it necessary to kill in order to maintain your vows?”

“Why do you ask?” asked Autumn sharply.

“Curiosity, nothing more,” said Kanikapila. “As one who thinks of little else than money and business I confess I find such matters engrossing.”

“I do not kill for money,” said Autumn firmly. “If that is in your mind then put it out of your mind immediately. Others have asked before and have had to be dissuaded from pursuing the idea.”

“And I imagine your methods of dissuasion would be most effective,” said Kanikapila, “but that was not in my mind.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “Let us talk no more on this matter. I do not find the idea of killing to be a pleasant one and avoid it at every opportunity. I seek to end suffering but by removing the cause of the suffering without taking the life of that causer.”

“A noble objective,” said Kanikapila, “and I agree. Now the mist has gone this day is most pleasant indeed and continuing discussion on this point will only darken it. Perhaps it would be best if we went our separate ways now. We are all travellers and sitting here does not take any of us elsewhere.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “And perhaps on our travels we shall meet again.”

“If that is our destiny,” said Kanikapila. “If I may offer you a word of advice, however, as one more experienced in travelling in these parts?”

“We welcome your advice,” said Autumn. “’Twould be foolish not to listen to the words of those with experience.”

“Listen no doubt,” said Kanikapila with his half smile, “but follow is a different matter entirely and I venture you will go your own way regardless. Still, that is by the by. We are in the foothills of the Xibu Shan Mountains in the South Western-most part of Wase. The mountains continue North and West and when they are in Aferraron they become the Mapdil Mountains. Have you heard of those?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “We have travelled in the Mapdil Mountains before.”

“Then you know how cold they are as you scale them,” said Kanikapila, “and we are only now at the beginning of winter and they will be colder still. I venture from your lack of baggage that you have not the warm clothing needed and yet if you wish to explore Wase you will need to go beyond the Xibu Shan Mountains for most of Wase lies on the other side.”

“Ah,” said Autumn. “Is there no way through that does not entail scaling their heights?”

“There are passes,” said Kanikapila, “but they are high and cold as well. My advice would be to head South, keeping the mountains distant and to your left until you reach the coast. The climate there is warmer and the mountains drop down to very little and you can skirt them. Once at the coast if you follow it North you will come to Schtei, our primary city, and from there the whole of Wase opens out before you. If you stay in the Southern coastal regions until spring you should not need to endure the rigours of the cold.”

“That is good advice,” said Autumn, “and we would do well to take heed of it for we have travelled in the Mapdils in winter and much as I admire the beauty of snow I am aware of its dangers as well. We thank you for your concern. Which way are you heading?”

“I am heading to Schtei myself,” said Kanikapila, “and will follow much the same route.”

“Perhaps you would like to travel with us?” asked Autumn, much to Logan's dismay as he preferred to have Autumn all to himself. “I am sure there are many matters we can discuss which will not be distressing to any. I, for one, would like to understand money for it is something I have difficulty comprehending.”

“I venture that would be a delight, if only for me,” said Kanikapila, “but I will be heading into the mountains from here for a time and will only delay you. Some three days South of here lies the town of Bufon and if you should find anything there to occupy you I may well catch up with you.”

“Then let us hope that Bufon has much to delight and delay us,” said Autumn, rising to her feet. “We thank you for your hospitality and company, brief though it was.”

* * *

“I did not like him either,” said Logan some while later, breaking the silence.

Astauand was high in the sky and Autumn had not spoken since they left Kanikapila. Assuming he had gone North as he had said he would now be a long way away.

“It was not that I did not like him,” said Autumn, pausing to lean on her staff and look at Logan. “It was more that I found ... aspects ... disturbing.”

“You mean Kauwa?” asked Logan, also pausing. He leant on his staff as well.

“Kauwa especially,” said Autumn. “But not just Kauwa.”

She sighed and looked around. The stream they had been following was slow moving and broad and its surface was dotted here and there with wide flat plants that looked like stepping stones but which could support no more weight than a small frog as Logan had discovered. The far side of the stream was packed with reeds with bright blue flowers and even from this distance the faint humming of a myriad of bees could be heard. This side was lightly wooded and the going was easy.

“You are thinking of our time on the Island of Xive?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “There are similarities.”³

“Yes, I thought so too,” said Logan. “Although why Kauwa kept her hair over her face I cannot begin to imagine.”

“You think Kauwa was a woman?” asked Autumn.

“I had that impression,” said Logan, “although I cannot say why. Perhaps it was just the smallness of Kauwa's body and the length of the hair.”

“Yet Kanikapila was adamant that Kauwa was not human,” said Autumn, “at least not in the way we are although he would not say how she was different. Perhaps Kauwa is not human, as he said.”

3 See *The Annals - The Fourth Tale*: In their travels through the Zuit Islands Autumn and Logan encounters people who appeared mindless because of the effects of a drug given to them to make them docile and able to work on the plantations for no wages.

“That was a strangeness in itself,” said Logan, watching a frog jump from one broad plant to another. “Every creature I can think of comes in two forms, that of the male and that of the female. How is it that Kauwa is like us but is neither male nor female and yet he calls her 'her'?”

“And why was the clothing such as to show nothing of the shape of the body underneath?” asked Autumn. “And why was the hair arranged to hide the face? Surely if Kauwa was much like us then her face would not be dissimilar and would be in no need of hiding?”

“Indeed,” said Logan. “And we only have Kanikapila's word for it that such things are the custom in this land. Mayhap Kauwa is a prisoner and held bond in a manner like those on Xive.”

“Grimme was certain that such plants only grew on Xive,” said Autumn, “although it is entirely possible that something similar grows elsewhere.”

She sighed and resumed walking. Logan followed, as always.

“I watched Kauwa carefully,” said Autumn. “I saw no sign of any mistreatment. Her hands were clean and had no marks of bruising or other injury not did her feet or lower legs. Nor was there anything in her manner to suggest any fear. Had I detected any sign of suffering I would have taken matters further but I saw none. It is not for me to interfere with someone who is happy nor because they wear their hair in an unusual way. Perhaps it is as Kanikapila says and Kauwa is not fully human and is content with serving but if that is so what manner of creature is Kauwa?”

“Perhaps if it is as Kanikapila says we will meet other Kauwas,” said Logan. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the frog keeping pace with them as it hopped from plant to plant. “What else disturbed you?”

“Kanikapila himself,” said Autumn. “I have never encountered someone who could approach me so closely without giving any sign and yet he claims to be nothing more than a thinker about money. I venture he has great skills but was unwilling to admit to them. Perhaps

he is a Krisana even though he claimed his Esyup had none.”

“But would an Esyup such as his work on such skills?” asked Logan. “You have your skills because you are of Mizule and your Esyup was dedicated to combat but would an Esyup dedicated to money work on skills of stealth and deception?”

“I confess I cannot see why,” said Autumn, “but we are supposing he was telling the truth about the Esyup. Perhaps it is dedicated to other things and the money was just a deception.”

“There is that,” said Logan, just as an arrow flashed past his face and almost impaled the frog.

Chapter Three

Before the frog had begun to croak in alarm Autumn had reacted. Her staff knocked Logan's left foot behind his right foot so he stumbled and at the same time she pushed him downwards from the shoulder so he fell faster. He also landed harder and the impact forced the breath from his lungs so he was unable to exclaim. Following through with the movement Autumn spun and rolled so she regained her footing two paces distant from where she had stood, facing the direction from which the arrow seemed to have come.

“Make another move and you die,” said a loud voice.

Autumn froze.

“Sploop!” exclaimed Logan, breathlessly.

“Stay down,” hissed Autumn, her eyes and ears scanning the undergrowth and trees before her.

“The wench speaks sense,” came the voice. “Stay down, lad. Leryn shall not miss a second time.”

“Show yourself,” said Autumn, her voice ringing clear.

“All in good time,” said the voice. “Leryn, watch them closely 'til I am free. Kill if needs be.”

“What ails you, Ebin?” came another voice, no doubt Leryn's, this time from higher up.

Autumn's eyes searched higher, trying to see within the lower branches of the tree no great distance in front of her. She thought she could see a shadow deep within.

“I be caught in this Voqev cursed prickly stuff!” came the first voice, further to the left of the shadow in the tree. “'Tis sharp enough to rip the hide from a tax collector's heart.”

The voice was undoubtedly male and sounded decidedly irritated.

Autumn relaxed imperceptibly as clearly little was going to happen quickly. Logan rolled onto his side and put his hand to his chest. Instantly an arrow flashed down and quivered a finger's breadth in front of his nose.

"Last warning," said Leryn. He sounded disinterested, perhaps even bored.

"Be still, Logan," said Autumn quietly. "Give them time to sort themselves out then we will see what's what."

"Sploop," muttered Logan, his eyes crossing as he stared at the arrow in front of him. It looked to be a well made arrow, almost straight with two red feathers bound with a fine twine at the end.

"Yammoe!" growled Ebin as a violent shaking began behind a large dark green leafed bush. There was a ripping sound and a large man stumbled out. One blood streaked hand held a sword and the sleeve of his other arm hung in tatters.

"Ragghhhh!" he exclaimed and spat at the bush behind him.

There were several scratches on his arm under the tatters and blood welled up to trickle slowly down to his elbow. A scratch on his cheek also discoloured the edge of his blonde beard with redness.

"You would seem to have some injury," said Autumn. "Would you like me to tend your hurts?"

"Oh, shut it," exclaimed Ebin with a scowl. "'Tis only scratches and be not you laughing at me or you will see the sharp edge of my sword in double quick time and make no mistake about it. Do you hear me?"

"I never laugh at hurts," said Autumn, "no matter how small. Indeed, 'tis often the smallest of hurts that hurts the most. Toothache being an example that comes to mind but there are many others."

"You will have no teeth in a minute if you don't shut your mouth," growled Ebin, brandishing his sword at Autumn. "Leryn, get down here."

The tree with the shadow swayed slightly and the shadow disappeared. Moments later another man, lighter in build than Ebin and darker in colouring emerged. He held a bow with an arrow in place pointing at Autumn. The string was taut but not at full extension.

“I did warn you,” said Leryn mildly, “but as always you know better than me.”

Ebin glowered at him and his lips went taut and thin. He spat again, this time towards Leryn.

“Just be sure your aim is true,” he growled and spat again.

Ebin turned his attention to Autumn and Logan and his scowl deepened.

“What be all this?” he demanded. “Where is your baggage? Your mules?”

“We have none,” said Autumn. “Merely my pack as you see. Logan here has a blanket and our water bottle but beyond that we carry nothing.”

“What be you doing?” snarled Ebin, noticing Leryn relax his string and lower his bow.

“Look at them,” said Leryn. “A wench and a lad and both skinny. They be no danger.”

“Aye,” said Ebin reluctantly. “But keep your arrow stringed. There may be others coming up.”

Leryn shrugged but kept the arrow in place on his bow.

“You, girlie,” said Ebin. “Toss me that pack.”

“My name is Autumn,” said Autumn, not moving. “There is no need for disrespect.”

“There is no need for disrespect,” mimicked Ebin with a sneer. “Do

you not know who we are, girlie?”

“I venture you are people who have fallen on hard times,” said Autumn, “and seek to ease your situation by relieving others of their possessions.”

“We are of Chanwar, wench,” said Leryn meaningfully.

“I know not what Chanwar is,” said Autumn. “But as I said my name is Autumn and I would ask you to address me that way.”

“Tis winter now and autumn is dead and gone,” said Ebin, “as you will be shortly although mayhap we may take you before Chanwar who has a liking for hides as decorations on the walls and a wench's hide will be a novelty.”

“Ahh, so Chanwar is a person?” asked Autumn.

“Aye, and a right vicious bastard Chanwar be,” said Leryn, “so if you knows what's best you be dealing with us instead. We be kind and sympathetic to travellers. Aye, and polite too. Autumn, pretty please, toss your pack to Ebin and let's be ending this nicely.”

“As you wish, Leryn,” said Autumn.

She slipped the strap of her pack over her head and lightly tossed it to land in front of Ebin.

“Did not sound heavy with coin,” he muttered and bent to pick it up. “Feels light too.”

He cut the length of twisted grass that held the pack shut and tipped the contents onto the ground.

“Be that all?” he said. “A bowl, an excuse for a knife and a stone? What be this?”

He held up a small jar.

“Tis a salve for my lips,” said Autumn. “They sometimes get over dry

and crack.”

“Pah,” said Ebin, sniffing the jar. “And this?”

“It is but a comb for my hair,” said Autumn.

Ebin tossed it back on the ground in contempt.

“You have not even food,” he said. “Who be you and where be you going?”

“I am Autumn,” said Autumn patiently, “and this is Logan. He has some cheese rolled up inside the blanket if you are hungry. You are welcome to what we have.”

“Cheese,” said Leryn with distaste, “and not much of it neither going by the thickness of that blanket. Where are you going?”

“Bufon,” said Autumn.

“What business do you have in Bufon?” demanded Ebin.

“We have no business in Bufon,” said Autumn. “We are merely travellers exploring the world and Bufon, we are told, lies in the direction we are heading.”

“Travellers exploring the world?” said Leryn. “’Twould seem an empty and profitless occupation, aye and a costly one at that. Where is the coin you use to pay your way?”

“We have no coin,” said Autumn. “We eat what we gather from the woods and streams.”

“Voqev,” said Ebin forcefully. “All those prickles and scratches for nothing.”

He inspected the cuts on his arm under the tattered remnants of his sleeve then licked the blood off thoughtfully.

“I venture your blood be tasting sweeter, girlie,” he said, looking at

Autumn.

“Autumn,” said Autumn.

“Mayhap they be carrying coin and more besides under their clothes,” said Leryn.

“Aye, mayhap,” said Ebin. “No sense in getting their clothes bloodstained neither. That be a nice warm looking robe and all.”

He stepped forward and raised his sword so the tip gently touched Autumn's skin at the base of her throat.

“Right, you two, strip,” he said, staring intimidatingly, or so he thought, into Autumn's eyes.

“It will be easier without the sword at my throat,” said Autumn calmly, matching his gaze.

“This one be reminding me of a wench I knew once,” said Leryn, “although she were too stupid to be afraid even as I ran her through. I fancy this one be not so stupid even though she be acting like it.”

“Are you stupid, girlie?” asked Ebin, pressing a little harder on his sword.

“Autumn,” said Autumn, not breaking eye contact although her eyes narrowed and hardened.

Ebin stepped backwards half a pace and hurrumphed to cover his discomfort.

“Strip,” he said, not so sure of himself, then after a pause, “Autumn.”

Autumn slipped off her robe and held it out to him.

“Do you wish to check for hidden pouches?” she asked.

“Aye,” said Ebin and snatched the robe from her hand.

He squeezed and poked the robe then tossed it aside.

“And the rest,” he said gruffly.

Autumn pulled the top of her tunic over her head and tossed her pony tail back over her shoulder before handing the shirt to Ebin. Then she untied the thong holding up the tunic trouser and let it fall to the ground. She stepped backwards, picked it up and handed that to him as well.

“As you see,” she said, holding her arms out to the sides and rotating. “I have nothing tied to my body.”

“Hah,” said Ebin.

He tossed the tunic on the ground beside the robe.

“Now you, lad,” he growled, pointing the sword at Logan.

“Logan” said Autumn.

“Oh, not again,” exclaimed Ebin. “I grow weary of your games.”

“His name is Logan,” said Autumn. “There is no harm in showing him that respect.”

“By the hind tit of Voqev,” shouted Ebin. “Get your cursed clothes off, Logan, Autumn or whatever you be named. I care not!”

Logan scrambled to his feet and did as he was bid. His tunic was tossed aside as well.

“Now what, Ebin?” asked Leryn. “Tis clear they have no coin unless it be inside them.”

“Aye,” said Ebin, “and that be a right inconvenient way to carry coin. Looks like we been wasting our time with these forsaken wastrels.”

“Oh, I wouldn't say that,” said Leryn. “This one be a bit skinny for my taste but she be having all the parts a woman should be having. What

say you we have a little fun before returning to Chanwar? Like as not we'll be getting no fun back there for returning empty handed."

"Aye, might as well," said Ebin, scratching his chin through his beard, "and I be thinking Chanwar will be enjoying the lad. His skin be young and wrinkly free and be making a smooth and hairless wall hanging. You bind him with these clothes and I be having first go with the girlie."

"Why be you always having first go?" demanded Leryn. "I be getting right sick of your leavings."

"I be older than you," growled Ebin, "and more deserving."

He caught Autumn's eye again and stepped backwards another half step.

"But then again," he said, "mayhap 'tis time you had a fresh one. Go on, you take the girlie while I bind the lad. Makes no odds when all's said and done. I wager two be not enough for her anyway. She has the look."

Leryn grinned and licked his lips. He laid his bow on the ground and pulled a short but very sharp looking knife from his belt.

"Come on girlie," he said, beckoning towards Autumn. "There be a bed of soft grasses over yonder."

"My name is Autumn," said Autumn mildly. "Autumn Savannah. Krisana of Mizule and Vallume of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup. You will not touch me."

"Feisty little bitch, ain't she," said Leryn happily. "This will be more fun than I expected."

He stepped forward so he was within arm's reach of Autumn and waggled his knife.

"Be willing or be bleeding," he said with a leer. "Makes no never mind to me."

Autumn merely smiled at him and stepped backwards.

“So be it,” said Leryn and lunged at her.

Autumn twisted sideways and Leryn sprawled on the ground. Ebin burst out laughing.

“That be right,” he jeered, “you show 'er what's what. And don't you be doing nothing lad.” He jerked his sword at Logan who was calmly watching. “I reckon 'tis only fair we be getting some of what you been having all to yourself. One twitch and I be running you through.”

Logan held up his hands placatingly as Leryn picked himself up from the ground.

“Sooo,” he drawled. “That's how you want to play it, hey? I be thinking you be right stupid after all. 'Tis going to happen either way. Why makes things unpleasant for yourself?”

“I fear the unpleasantness will be all yours, Leryn,” said Autumn, “unless I can dissuade you from this path.”

Leryn smiled nastily and lunged at Autumn again. Again she twisted but he managed to catch the end of her ponytail with one hand as he fell, dragging Autumn backwards. She went with the pull and landed on top of him. Instantly she rammed her elbow into his belly and continued the movement to roll backwards. She ended on all fours, facing Leryn. He gasped and grimaced but kept hold of her ponytail.

“Hah!” he exclaimed, yanking her ponytail. Autumn did not move.

Surprised, Leryn grasped the ponytail with his other hand as well and yanked as hard as he could. Still Autumn did not move. She just stared at him, her hands planted firmly on the ground. Disconcerted Leryn flung a leg around to kick her and she sprung upwards, so the leg passed underneath, and somersaulted backwards, pulling her ponytail from his hands.

“Do not continue with this,” she said, her arms raised in a defensive posture. “I cannot promise you will remain unharmed.”

“You're going to die,” hissed Leryn as he stared balefully at Autumn.

Ebin laughed again. “This be right entertaining,” he called. “Mayhap you need a real man to soften her up for you.”

“You be welcome to try, old man,” shouted back Leryn angrily and he hurled his knife at Autumn.

She dodged and it landed harmlessly in a bush behind her.

“Hold!” exclaimed Ebin. “End this or the lad dies.”

A moment later he lay sprawled on the ground after Autumn's foot numbed the thigh muscle of his left leg. Logan jumped on him and pressed his thumbs into Ebin's eyes.

“Lie still or I will take out your eyes,” he said, marvelling at how strong and vital he felt.

Moments later he lay sprawled on the ground as Ebin's right knee caught him between his shoulder blades. Ebin tried to jump on him in turn but his left leg gave way and a blow from Autumn to the back of his head laid him unconscious.

“This ends now,” said Autumn, turning to face Leryn.

In anger, Leryn charged and Autumn twisted to avoid him while grabbing his wrist. She forced his arm up behind his back as he landed heavily on the ground then she knelt on his back.

“You need to calm down,” she said and pressed between the first and second bones beneath the base of his skull. Leryn lost consciousness.

“Are you injured?” asked Autumn, getting up and going over to Logan.

“I think not,” said Logan getting up. He moved his shoulders to test between his shoulder blades. “I venture I'll ache a little tomorrow but nothing is broken.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “Next time, press your thumb nails between the

eye and the socket. He will take you more seriously then.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, crestfallen.

“But it was good thinking none the less,” said Autumn. “Even better though would be to leave them to me next time. You might hurt someone inadvertently. Go and see if they have left anything behind in the bushes where they came from. Try to avoid the prickly thing.”

“I’ll get dressed first,” said Logan, picking up his tunic. “Not that clothes did him much good.”

Autumn retrieved Leryn’s knife from the bush and put it neatly beside his bow. She picked up the arrow and slipped it into the slim pouch that hung from his belt then rolled him over so he lay more comfortably. She did the same with Ebin and laid his sword beside the bow then she got dressed herself before putting her things back in her pack. Then she sat, cross-legged, to wait for them both to regain consciousness.

Leryn was first and he moaned a couple of times before sitting up and looking groggily at her.

“Please do not attempt anything again,” said Autumn. “I have no wish to do you serious harm.”

Leryn looked over at Ebin, still lying unconscious, then he groaned and lay down again.

“I found this,” said Logan, coming back through the bushes. “It is a pack with food and some coins and jewellery inside.”

“They do not seem the kind who wear jewellery,” said Autumn. “Most likely they are the spoils of some other meeting.”

“I suppose you are going to let them keep the coins,” said Logan. “What about the food?”

“When Ebin recovers we shall ask,” said Autumn. “We will only take their food if they are willing.”

“What manner of person are you?” said Leryn, sitting up again. “You have bested two full grown men and yet will not take what is rightfully yours? 'Tis beyond my understanding.”

“How do you feel?” asked Autumn. “I tried not to hurt you but accidents do happen.”

Leryn just grunted and curled his lip. “Is he dead?” he asked a moment later, glancing at Ebin.

“No,” said Autumn. “He will awake shortly. I may have bested you both but these things are not rightfully mine as a result. I venture they're not rightfully yours either but that is by the by. You are both bandits?”

“There are some as call us that,” admitted Leryn. He eyed Ebin's sword but decided the risk was too great.

“And Chanwar?” asked Autumn. “Who is he?”

“Most displeased, I foretell,” said Leryn. “Chanwar works hard to make sure all in these parts know and fear the name. That you are ignorant of Chanwar's reputation will not bring pleasure.”

“Chanwar is your leader?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Leryn. “'Tis best to be for Chanwar than against.”

Ebin groaned and rolled on his side and started to retch. Autumn got up and went to attend him and Leryn lashed out with a foot at her legs. She nimbly jumped out of reach.

“Do you wish a rematch?” she asked. “'Twould not be in your best interest if you do.”

“Pah,” said Leryn and spat.

Autumn shrugged and moved over to kneel beside Ebin.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Like my head has been axed,” he admitted.

“It will pass before dawn,” said Autumn. “Sooner if you lie still and let your body recover. Would you like some water?”

“Aye,” said Ebin.

Autumn rose and fetched their water bottle from beside her pack and returned to help Ebin drink.

“Logan found your pack,” she said. “Are you willing to share your food with us? As you know we have none.”

“Take what you want,” said Ebin. “Why did you not kill me?”

“I do not kill unless I have to,” said Autumn, putting the stopper back in the bottle. “And I did not have to kill either of you for you were not much of a challenge. I thank you for the food.”

“No challenge,” mused Leryn. “’Tis an insult but you be having the right of it. So if you are not going to kill us, what are you going to do with us?”

“Nothing,” said Autumn. “This has been an experience for you both and I leave you free to draw what lessons you choose. Your destinies are your choices, not mine.”

Ebin looked over at Logan in puzzlement.

“She is always like this,” said Logan with a shrug. “It is her way.”

“What was your name again?” asked Ebin.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, “and he is Logan.”

“Autumn Savannah and Logan,” said Ebin. “I shall remember those names.”

“I would suggest you also remember how easily she bested you both,” said Logan. “’Twould not be a good idea to remember our names for

the sake of vengeance.”

“Who said anything about vengeance?” said Leryn. “We will remember your names so that we may avoid you in the future.”

“Sensible,” said Logan. “Now, Autumn, there is dried meat and some aroao in their pack. Shall I take enough for our needs today or for tomorrow as well?”

“Today will be sufficient,” said Autumn. “No doubt we will find other food tomorrow.”

“As you wish,” said Logan. “What about their weapons?”

“Leave them,” said Autumn. “I venture Leryn and Ebin will have more need of them than us. Come, let us be on our way and leave these two to recover in peace.”

Chapter Four

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Logan, or at least a stray shaft of sunlight for the sky was heavy with cloud. His nose twitched and a finger came out of the blanket to scratch it. He sighed and tightened his eyelids. The hand on which the finger resided flopped onto the ground. A small mouse nearby froze in panic, its whiskers twitching frantically. Then a loud grumbling gurgling stirred the mouse into action and it fled, twisting and turning between the grass stems. A long harsh fart rent the air and Logan's eyes flew open.

“Wha” he mumbled.

No one replied. Blearily he looked at where Autumn was sleeping but she was not there.

“Oh,” he thought and closed his eyes.

He opened them to look again. Her pack and staff lay on the ground and her robe was neatly folded on top of the pack. Satisfied he snuggled back inside his blanket.

“Phraw,” he muttered and shook the blanket to try to release the smell that had built up inside. It didn't make a lot of difference. Regardless, he drifted back into that world of dreams that never match the realities of his life. It was pleasant there. That is not to say his realities were not pleasant. Oft times they were but his dreams had a pleasantness of a different quality. There was a softness, an ethereal element, in his dreams that was lacking in his every day life.

Astauand was hidden behind the clouds when his eyes opened again. It could have been soon after, it could have been long after, there was no real way of telling. When time is measured by the progress of Astauand and Astauand does not show Its face then time ceases to have significant meaning. All one could say with any assurance was that it was day and not night. On the other hand, Logan was no longer sleepy so it would be fair to assume it was around the usual part of the day when Logan awoke.

His eyes opened and his belly gurgled loudly. Another prodigious fart

rent the air.

“Sploop,” he muttered and sat up. Not without some difficulty as his belly was tight and distended. He belched and wiped his nose. There was an acrid aftertaste to his belch and an uneasiness in his belly.

Logan reached over to grasp the water bottle and drank deeply to clear the aftertaste. He felt the cold freshness of the water run down his throat to his belly which gurgled loudly in protest.

“Pah,” he said and wiped his nose again.

Another fart rent the air but this one was from behind him and seemed to be at a distance. He twisted to look and saw Autumn. She was sitting on the ground some way off with her back to him.

“It is not a beautiful day?” she called, not turning to look.

“Perhaps,” called back Logan. He was not at his best in the mornings.

“Cheese,” he muttered. “I need cheese. That will settle my belly.”

He leant over and started to rummage in the grass between where he sat and the remains of their fire.

“If you are looking for the cheese,” called Autumn, “it is in my pack but it does not work.”

“Right,” called back Logan and he shuffled over on his haunches to Autumn’s pack.

“Does not work at what?” he called back after he’d found the cheese.

Autumn got gracefully to her feet and walked over. She sat down beside her robe just as Logan farted again.

“It does not settle the belly,” she said, farting herself. “I have tried.”

“So you have it too?” he asked, aware of the pointlessness of the question as Autumn’s predicament was as audible as his.

“Aye,” she said. “I venture it was that aroao we ate last night. The vinegar did not taste as fresh as that of Kanikapila’s.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, biting into a piece of the dry, hard cheese they had. “Perhaps also the caran helps and we had none.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “No doubt we will become accustomed to the aroao in time and learn of its secrets. I put the cheese in my pack because there were many mice investigating it when I awoke. Much as I did not wish to deny them sustenance I felt your need would take precedence.”

“I thank you,” said Logan, inspecting the next morsel before he put it in his mouth. It seemed clean enough.

Autumn sighed and pulled her ponytail from behind her. She started playing idly with the end.

“You have done your meditations?” asked Logan. Autumn rarely sighed and Logan felt disconcerted.

“Aye” she said, studying her ponytail.

“And your exercises?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “You have slept longer than usual and I have finished. How is your back?”

“Ahh, I had forgotten about that,” said Logan. He rolled his shoulders and stretched. All felt quite normal. “I am well. There is not even an ache. How fare you?”

“I am well,” said Autumn gravely. She leaned forward slightly and farted again. “The wind is beginning to ease, I think.”

Logan farted again in sympathy and fanned his face.

“These farts could be used as weapons I venture,” he said with a laugh.

“How so?” asked Autumn, looking at him questioningly. “I am unable to control mine and control is essential for an effective weapon.”

“I was joking,” said Logan, looking skywards momentarily. “I was only commenting on the powerfulness of the smell, although if we could contain the farts in some way and release them when needed they would certainly distract an enemy.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, looking doubtful. “But how could we contain them? We both seem unable to.”

“True,” said Logan. He thought for a moment. “Perhaps if we had an empty water bottle we could fart into that but I don't see how to release the foulness at the right moment except by breaking the bottle.”

“Twould seem overly complex as well,” said Autumn. “I daresay in the heat of the moment they would not even be noticed. For certain mine made no difference when I was exercising. I would speak with you if you are fully awake. I desire your counsel.”

She farted again but Logan didn't notice.

“I am all ears,” he said.

“I have a weakness,” she said, dropping her ponytail into her lap. “Tis easily remedied but I find I am greatly reluctant to take that remedy and I am unable to determine why.”

“Really?” asked Logan in surprise. “I cannot conceive of you having any weakness. What is it?”

“My hair,” said Autumn. She picked up the end of her ponytail and waved it at him.

“I don't understand,” he said. “How is your hair a weakness?”

“Did you not see Leryn catch me by my hair yesterday and trap me?” asked Autumn. “As it happened he was not able to take advantage of that but another may well be able to in the future. It is undeniably a

weakness and one I would be foolish not to take heed of.”

“But how can you remedy ...?” started Logan. “Oh Sploop! No! You must not cut your hair!”

“And therein lies my dilemma,” said Autumn. She started running her fingers through the hair at the end of the ponytail. “’Tis a simple and most effective remedy but I am curiously unwilling to do it.”

“But you can't cut your hair!” exclaimed Logan in agitation.

“Mayhap it would be difficult,” said Autumn, sliding one hand along her ponytail to the back of her head, “as I cannot see behind me but ’twould be easy enough for you.”

“No!” exclaimed Logan, shoving both hands behind his back. “I will not do it.”

“Why not?” asked Autumn, staring into his eyes. “I fancy it would only take two or three cuts with your knife.”

“You have beautiful hair,” blurted Logan, “and it would be a crime to cut it. Besides, ...”

“Yes?” asked Autumn.

“You would have to cut it very short,” he said quietly. “If there is any length at all someone can catch hold of it. Maybe if that is your only objective then you'd best shave your head entirely but it would be a dreadful thing.”

“That was my thinking also,” said Autumn. She lifted her ponytail so it hung in front of her eyes. “The solution to the weakness is to shave my head, as you say.”

“And I will not do it,” said Logan emphatically. “I cannot stop you if you choose to do it yourself but do not ask me to do it.”

“And there is my dilemma,” said Autumn, flicking the end of her ponytail before letting it drop. “I find myself curiously reluctant to

shave my head.”

She sighed then tossed her ponytail behind her back. Three or four hands breadths of it coiled messily on the ground.

“I cannot remember when it was last cut,” she said reflectively. “’Twas many summers ago that is certain. Noxu said that long hair is the mark of a woman and that it was seemly for me to keep it long but he did not explain why.”

“I do not know why either,” said Logan, “but there are few women with short hair and none I have encountered with shaved heads. Many men have shaved heads but not women.”

“And many men have long hair,” said Autumn. “You do yourself for it is down below your shoulders now. When will you cut yours?”

“’Tis not something I have thought about,” said Logan. “I imagine I will cut it when you tell me it is time or it becomes so long I cannot walk without it catching.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn and gazed at the remnants of the fire.

“Why is this such an issue for me?” she asked abruptly. Logan was dismayed because he’d hoped her silence indicated the matter was ended.

“Maybe because it will make you different,” he said.

“To other women?” she asked.

He nodded.

“But am I not different already?” she asked.

“Not to the casual looker,” said Logan. “Obviously when you fight a hundred men and best them all everyone will say that you are clearly different to other women but when you walk down a road and others see you they see an attractive woman and not a fighter of surpassing skill.”

“So is this a matter of my vanity again?” she asked. “Is my reluctance to cut my hair and shave my head simply because my vanity requires me to be attractive? Surely that is no valid reason as my vows mean that any measure of attractiveness is of no relevance anyway?”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, “but is it not the case that everyone wants to be attractive in some measure for we are all wanting to be admired by others.”

“You think I seek admiration?” asked Autumn.

“Ahhh,” said Logan and scratched his head. “Let me put it another way, you enjoy my company, do you not?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and that enjoyment would not be lessened in any way of you shaved your head.”

“Put aside the shaving of heads for a time,” said Logan, “and let us talk of generalities.”

“If you wish,” she replied. “Continue.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Tell me, would you continue to enjoy my company if I constantly criticised you?”

“If your criticisms were worthy, then yes,” said Autumn. “How else am I to improve?”

“But what if they were not worthy?” asked Logan. “What if I constantly criticised and ridiculed you for no good reason? Would you still want me by your side on your travels?”

“I think I see where you are going with this,” she said thoughtfully. “For certain it would grow tedious if you were forever criticising my appearance or manner of dress. But is that not simply vanity on my part? What if your criticisms were valid but I judged them not to be?”

“You miss my point,” said Logan. “My point is that I am more attractive to you as a companion by supporting you than I am by condemning you, am I not?”

“Well, I suppose so,” said Autumn, frowning, “but what has this to do with my hair being a weakness?”

“I am not sure,” said Logan with a half smile. “I rather lost the thread of that argument myself.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “Tis unlike you for normally you argue well and constructively.”

“Ahh, no,” said Logan. “What I was getting at is that I want you to like me and so it is entirely acceptable for me to want to be attractive in your eyes so that you do like me.”

“I still do not see the relevance,” said Autumn with puzzlement in her voice. “I do like you and will continue to do so if you shave your head or colour your hair green. I like you for who you are and not for what you look like. Will you not want to travel with me if I shave my head?”

“It will be strange to see you with no hair,” said Logan, “for you have always had a long ponytail but I daresay I will get used to its absence. What say you to only cutting half of it rather than shaving your head?”

“The weakness will remain,” said Autumn. “Any length of hair will be sufficient for an attacker to get hold of.”

“Aha!” said Logan suddenly. “There is a flaw in your argument.”

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“Even if you did shave your head,” said Logan, “an attacker can catch you by the sleeve of your robe. Would you travel everywhere naked because of the chance of that happening?”

“Hmm,” said Autumn thoughtfully.

“Or grab you by the arm,” continued Logan. “Would you cut your arms off to prevent that possibility?”

“That would be foolish,” said Autumn. “I need my arms to repulse an attacker.”

“But you do not need your robe or tunic,” he countered. “Nor your pack yet you continue to wear them.”

“But the clothes and pack serve a purpose,” said Autumn. “The clothes keep me warm and dry and the pack carries what little I need. My hair does not. It is a weakness with no discernable benefit beyond, as you claim, making me more attractive which is something I do not seek. At least not consciously. Perhaps my vanity would claim otherwise.”

“And we are back to that again,” muttered Logan. “Aye yay yay.”

He paused for a few moments.

“Very well then, let us suppose that the only thing standing between you and a shaved head is your vanity,” he said. “Is that necessarily a bad thing?”

“It is a bad thing for vanity to control your life,” said Autumn.

“I would argue that in this situation it is not controlling your life,” said Logan, “but no matter. In the past when we have talked of your vanity it has been in your skills in fighting and the risk of fighting where fighting is unnecessary because of an excess of pride in your skills, is it not?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Such fighting would be wholly reprehensible.”

“But is it not true that such fighting would be because you are so highly skilled at it?” asked Logan. “Your skill at fighting is so far above that of others that to fight simply for the sake of vanity would be wrong.”

“Unquestionably,” said Autumn.

“So do you believe your hair is vastly superior to that of any other woman?” asked Logan.

“I confess I cannot see how,” said Autumn, concentrating on Logan.

“Indeed,” said Logan. “In fact, would it not be true to say that your hair, far from making you vastly superior to another in fact only puts you on the same level as them?”

Autumn thought about that for a few moments then pulled her ponytail round to the front again.

“I venture you are right,” she said. “So you are saying that in the matter of my hair it is not vanity to keep it but a desire to be like others?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “And there is nothing wrong with that.”

“Even if it puts me at risk?” she asked. “And you if I am unable to protect you?”

“There is a risk to everything,” said Logan, “and one must balance the risk.”

“What is there to balance here?” she asked. “The loss of my hair would seem to cause no particular detriment.”

“Ummm, well there is the extra work of shaving your head,” said Logan desperately. “Twill have to be done every few days.”

“I venture it will be less work than the washing and combing of my hair,” said Autumn.

“And you will look strange,” said Logan. “You will look different to other women and may well attract the wrong sort of attention as a result. You may even find you have to fight unnecessarily because a certain type of person will pick on you because of your strangeness.”

“I find that difficult to accept,” said Autumn.

“Umm, well, perhaps,” said Logan. “No, take yesterday for example. Leryn and Ebin knew you were a woman from the outset and treated you accordingly. Had they thought you were a man they may well have fired the first arrow at you instead and you don't always wear your robe to protect you.”

“That is a fair point,” said Autumn. “For certain their intentions with me were different to their intentions for you. You think my hair made a difference?”

“Absolutely,” said Logan. “Very few men have hair as long as yours and I daresay they are from time to time mistaken for women. It is definitely an advantage for you to be seen as a woman from the outset rather than be mistaken for a small man. If nothing else it gives you more time.”

“This is true,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “and in all honesty I cannot see that someone grabbing hold of my hair is any more of a disadvantage than my robe or my arm.”

“And another thing,” said Logan, sensing that he might have gained the upper hand in the debate, “you have your vows.”

“My vows?” said Autumn in surprise. “What have they to do with my hair?”

“You have vowed to protect the sanctity of women,” said Logan confidently. “But women will be less inclined to trust you if you look like a man. How can you uphold your vows if those who you have vowed to protect do not trust you?”

Autumn did not reply. She sat there quietly, studying the end of her ponytail distractedly.

“Stay silent,” thought Logan to himself. “Do not overplay your hand. Let her think about it.”

“I think you have the nub of it, Logan Philosopher,” said Autumn after a while. “I am not yet convinced that concern for the loss of my hair is anything more than vanity but I can see that there will be some who may reject my aid thinking I am a man and intending only to compound their problems.”

Logan realised he had been holding his breath but was afraid to start breathing again.

“Very well,” she said suddenly, looking up at him again. “The risk of my aid being rejected is far greater than the risk of my being entrapped because of my hair. I will not shave my head.”

He let out his breath in a sudden gasp of relief.

“But I will ask you to cut my hair, friend Logan,” said Autumn.

“Now what?” thought Logan in despair. “Why?” he asked.

“I see the ends are beginning to split,” she said, holding up the end of her pony tail for him to see. “Mayhap just a hands breadth will be enough to counter that.”

Chapter Five

The rain that had been threatening all morning was falling by the time Ebin and Leryn approached their camp and they were soaked and in ill humour in consequence. They were not a little apprehensive as well for Chanwar could be, to put it charitably, unpredictable.

“Vogev cursed rain,” muttered Ebin, not for the first time. “I be hating the cold and the wet.”

“You and me both,” muttered Leryn, his head sunk between his shoulders. The thin hood of his outer tunic hung over his eyes and drops of water fell on his nose and moustache to seep down onto his lips where the moisture irritated him. He licked his lips constantly.

“If Chanwar be giving us grief I reckon I be a-saying farewell and heading South,” muttered Ebin. “Them as has been there tells me it be hot and dry and filled with delights to tantalise and please. Not this forsaken cold and wetness and endless discomforts and not so much as a thank you for kissing that bastard’s arse.”

“If Chanwar be giving us grief and you be saying farewell it ain’t the South you’ll be going to, old man,” said Leryn. He licked the water off his lips yet again and spat. “It be the land of Yammoe although they do be saying it be hot and dry there. Too hot and too dry by my reckoning and filled with discomforts without number.”

“Aye, and Chanwar do have a temper that’s for sure,” said Ebin. “Mayhap as how I won’t be saying farewell after all. Just disappear one night.”

“Hah,” said Leryn. “Like Zain did, you mean?” He flicked the front of his hood to clear some of the accumulated water.

“Not like Zain,” said Ebin, stopping for a moment to look at Leryn. “For I will not be caught. As Chanwar said when we be pegging Zain out, it be a learning experience and I for one have learnt not to get caught.”

“Reckon as how Zain didn’t learn much,” said Leryn, stopping also.

“Cepting how long it takes to be eaten alive. How you be thinking of avoiding that fate?”

“Don't know yet,” said Ebin, “but I be a-thinking on it.”

“Well, when you be finished thinking you keep it to yourself,” said Leryn. “I'd greatly prefer to live here like this than die in whatever way Chanwar be coming up with next. Come on, let's get it over with.”

He trudged off again towards the camp and Ebin watched him for a few moments before following.

“Who be you water-logged rats then?” challenged the solitary guard sitting under a large tree on the edge of the camp. He didn't bother to get up as Ebin and Leryn emerged from the undergrowth. They were obviously of the band as they had the look.

“Leryn and Ebin, you Vogeved cursed fool, Udjin,” growled Leryn. “Who else would lack the sense to stay out of the rain like you?”

“There be several teams out,” said Udjin mildly. “Find any pickings?”

“Just the one,” said Ebin and he shook his pack to demonstrate the truth of it. “What be Chanwar wanting?”

“Chanwar has not said,” said Udjin. “Reckon as how you've got time to get yourselves dry. There be a fire going in the hut.”

“Well, that be something,” said Leryn. “Any word on going back home for the winter?”

“When last of the teams be returning, Chanwar said,” said Udjin. “Mayhap another day or two.”

“That be right good news,” said Ebin. “I miss the comforts of my bed. These expeditions do my head in for I be not sleeping well on the ground. Nothing like a nice comfortable bed of straw and a willing companion to warm it.”

“And that last one be willing, was she?” laughed Udjin.

“Mayhap not, lad,” said Ebin with a gap-toothed grin, “but she be warm enough alright. Come on, Leryn, let’s be getting to that fire.”

The ground around the hut was muddy for the water that cascaded off the thickly leafed roof had added to the water falling from the sky and been churned by feet. Once past the thick cloth hanging that served as a door the ground was dry, at least beyond the first pace or so. A large fire burned in the centre of the hut and a dozen or more people sat or lay on the flattened earth. There was no other light. Some of those people tended to weapons, others talked and ate. A couple slept.

“Well met, Ebin, Leryn,” called a voice. “How be the pickings?”

Leryn looked around but there was no sign of Chanwar.

“Slim, Kifki,” he called back. “Only the one. This be not the season for travellers. Where be Chanwar?”

“Sleeping,” called back Kifki, emerging from the gloom beyond the fire’s light. “You both are soaked through. Get those wet things off and I’ll find you something dry, aye, and some food I be thinking.”

“You be a rare delight, Kifki,” said Ebin, dumping his pack on the ground and pulling off his outer garment. He left it in a heap on the ground and thin trickles of water emerged.

Kifki grabbed a couple of swords that were left unattended and rammed them into the earth near the fire.

“Drape your clothes over these so they may dry,” she said and disappeared back into the gloom.

Ebin picked up his outer garment and hung it on a sword then stripped off the rest of his wet clothes but Leryn had beaten him to it and hung his own clothes over the swords.

“Pah!” exclaimed Ebin and stalked over to one of those who lay sleeping and relieved him of his spear. That would serve to dry clothes as well as any sword.

“Here be a blanket each,” said Kifki, returning, “and some pesnoo. 'Twas fresh made only three days ago with rabbit.”

“A blessing on you,” exclaimed Leryn, taking the piece Kifki offered him.

He smiled at her and her eyes narrowed.

“Do not be taking this as having any meaning,” she said. “You be wet and hungry and that is all.”

“I would not dare,” said Leryn, his smile broadening. “Teuxa can rest easy.”

Not long after Kifki had joined the group with her almost era'owen, Teuxa, one of the men had slapped her bottom and she'd nearly severed his arm with a knife. The fact that she had not severed it was solely because the knife had been somewhat blunt. She had since learnt to sharpen blades effectively and never had fewer than two on her at any time. Both were within easy reach and rumour had it that she kept another small one hidden in her hair but only Teuxa knew the truth of that.

“'Tis not Teuxa's wish, 'tis mine,” she said sharply. “I will not share my bed with scum like you.”

“Oh, but you love us really,” laughed Ebin. “Else why would you stay here?”

“'Tis of necessity, not love,” she said and spat on the ground. Her eyes glittered.

“Aye, well that be true enough for us all,” said Ebin, his brief good humour disappearing again. “Udjin said we be going back home in two days. Is that true?”

“So Chanwar said,” said Kifki. “When the last of the teams has returned.”

“Let us hope Aloidia smiles on their feet and hastens them back,” said

Ebin. "I would return to the other side of the mountains where I belong. This side is not my place."

"We all wish that," said Kifki. "These foreign parts stick in my craw."

She spat again, this time into the fire, and adjusted the wet clothes that hung from the swords and spear. They were steaming happily.

"The pesnoo is good," said Leryn. "You made it?"

"No," she said. "Chanwar did and will be most gratified you like it."

Both men stopped chewing and looked at their pesnoo.

"Be not alarmed," laughed Kifki. "There is nothing in it except rabbit and some roots and herbs. I watched the making."

"Hmm," said Ebin, glancing at Leryn.

Both men resumed chewing but more slowly.

"Oh, and a little blood," said Kifki mischievously.

They stopped eating again and scowled at Kifki who burst out laughing.

"Only from a sliced finger," she said happily. "Chanwar is not as adept with a cooking knife as with a sword. 'Twas only a drop or two before the finger was bound."

She turn abruptly and walked away. There may have been the merest hint of a glint from within her hair but there may not have been for she had thick hair and delighted in wearing such necklaces as were not sold on for profit.

Leryn looked at Ebin the stuffed the last of his pesnoo in his mouth.

"Mayhap Chanwar's blood will strengthen your resolve," he said quietly then, more loudly, "I am going to sleep."

“I too,” said Ebin, eating his as well. “My head still pains me a little.”

* * *

It was late afternoon when a hush came over the hut. The rain had stopped some while earlier and no longer made a noise on the roof but the sound of voices had continued unabated. Quiet conversation, raucous laughter and the occasional harshness of acrimony and recrimination that is ever present in any group of any size. Especially in a group with shallow tempers and few inhibitions against violence. But all this suddenly ceased and the quietness in its aftermath was loud.

Ebin sat up and looked to the entrance. Chanwar was there.

The cloth hanging had been thrown up and was caught on the roof overhang and Chanwar was silhouetted against the last of the daylight but that silhouette was distinctive. The slim body and the two mounds of hair were unmistakable for only Chanwar had both sides and centre shaved. The remaining hair grew thick and long and hung in two braids. On occasion, as now, Chanwar also had a feather stuck in each braid that, in silhouette, looked like the antennae of some large predatory insect.

“Who has returned?” asked Chanwar after allowing the silence to build a tension.

“Ebin and Leryn, Chanwar,” said Kifki, emerging from the gloom that was her and Teuxa's private corner.

“Ebin and Leryn?” said Chanwar, looking around. “I see them not.”

“I am here,” said Ebin, getting up and clasping his blanket around him.

“As am I,” said Leryn, also getting up.

“Come to the fire where I can see you,” commanded Chanwar, also moving towards the fire.

The hut remained hushed as the others waited to see what mood Chanwar was in. It could be entertaining, if not for Ebin and Leryn, if that mood was bad.

“How were the pickings?” asked Chanwar.

“Umm, we only extracted tribute from one group of travellers,” said Ebin hesitantly. “The pickings are in my pack over there.”

“Bring it to me,” commanded Chanwar.

Clasping his blanket with one hand, Ebin moved over to collect the pack with his other and held it out to Chanwar. Leryn hung back.

“Empty it on the ground,” said Chanwar.

Ebin squatted and tipped the contents onto the flattened earth. He pushed the remains of their food to one side and spread the jewellery and coins so Chanwar could see.

“Not bad,” admitted Chanwar. “For only one picking that is not bad.”

A faint collective sigh passed through the hut. Chanwar was in a good mood.

“Tis a bad season for the pickings, Chanwar,” said Ebin nervously.

“Indeed,” said Chanwar, bending to look more closely. “We shall be returning home when the others are back.”

When in a good mood Chanwar's face was relaxed and pleasant, sometimes even beautiful. As she inspected the jewellery and assessed its value, Chanwar smiled and the corners of her eyes crinkled. An armlet caught her eye and she picked it up to inspect it more closely.

“Nice,” she said and slipped it over her hand and up her arm so it rested on her bicep. “This looks well on me?”

“Very well,” said Ebin, for indeed it did. The light from the fire gave the pale yellow of the stone a darker richer hue and the bronze

reflected the fire's flickering.

There was not much jewellery but what there was was well made and likely of some value.

“Good,” said Chanwar. She collected some of the coins in her hand and tossed them to Ebin. “For you and Leryn. You have done well.”

“Thank you, Chanwar,” said Ebin. He made no move to pick up the coins as it was apparent that Chanwar had not yet finished with him.

“Kifki, put the rest in store,” said Chanwar, “and bring me a stool.”

She gazed thoughtfully at Ebin while Kifki scabbled up the coin and jewellery then shifted the sword that hung from her belt to sit. She shifted her gaze to Leryn.

“Only one?” she asked softly. “You were gone four days.”

“Three days only,” said Leryn glancing at Ebin.

“You contradict me?” demanded Chanwar, her face hardening.

“No, Chanwar,” exclaimed Leryn. “I thought it was only three but I must have miscounted.”

Chanwar nodded.

“Kifki, is there any pesnoo left?” she asked, not raising her voice.

“Yes, Chanwar,” said Kifki, emerging from the gloom again. “Can I bring you some?”

“A small piece,” said Chanwar, still gazing thoughtfully at Leryn. “And some wine. My mouth is dry.”

Kifki disappeared into the hushed gloom again. The others waited expectantly. They could sense Chanwar was not yet ready for an evening's relaxation.

“Perhaps it was three days,” conceded Chanwar, licking her lips. “It matters not.”

Leryn nodded. There was a sudden crash as someone knocked or dropped a sword onto another. Chanwar didn't even blink. Her gaze stayed on Leryn.

“Tell me, Ebin,” she said, suddenly switching her gaze, “there was only one traveller? No others?”

“Only one with any pickings,” said Ebin, disconcerted. “There was another but they had nothing. Not even food.”

“But they were clothed were they not?” asked Chanwar.

Kifki held out a piece of pesnoo and a decorated metal cup which Chanwar took without looking away from Ebin. She had not even blinked since shifting her gaze.

“Aye,” said Ebin. “Both wore old tunics and one had a robe. The one with the robe had a pack as well but it had only a small knife, a bowl and some salve.”

“And a comb,” interjected Leryn and some around laughed.

“And a comb,” said Chanwar quietly.

“And each had a staff,” said Ebin, wondering where this was going and hoping it was going to end well.

“A staff each?” said Chanwar mockingly. “Amazing. Such riches indeed.”

“Yes, if you say so,” said Ebin, “but everything was old and worn. Nothing of any value.”

“And yet I see no comb nor salve in what you bring me,” said Chanwar. “Perhaps you put their staffs away from the fire so they did not burn?”

“Ahhh, no,” said Ebin. He clutched hurriedly at his blanket which had started to fall from his grasp. “We, umm, ...”

“Yes?” said Chanwar. “You ... what?”

“Umm, we did not take their possessions,” said Ebin, unable to tear his eyes away from Chanwar's hypnotic gaze.

“I see,” said Chanwar.

She took a bite from the pesnoo and chewed slowly then swallowed and took a sip of wine, all the while allowing the tension in the hut to rise further.

“And how many were in the traveller group?” she asked. “You said 'both' but I cannot imagine there were so few.”

“There were only two,” admitted Ebin.

“And yet you did not take all their possessions,” said Chanwar. “This puzzles me greatly.”

“They fought us,” burst out Leryn. “We were bested.”

“Ahhh, that explains everything,” said Chanwar. She took another sip of wine then another bite of pesnoo. “You told them you were of Chanwar?”

“Aye, Chanwar,” said Ebin, his fingers clutching and releasing the blanket nervously. “They did not know of you.”

“I see,” said Chanwar. “It all makes sense now. You stopped two people who did not know of me so they put up a fight and you were bested. Yes, that makes sense. They did not need to be mighty warriors for I can see that without my name to intimidate you two would be easily vanquished.”

“Umm, yes, Chanwar,” said Ebin. “I, umm, venture they were strangers in this land. How else could they not know of you?”

“Yes, that would seem sensible,” said Chanwar.

She stood up and went over to Ebin and stared upwards into his eyes for she was a head shorter than he was.

“Yes, you speak truth,” she said gently. “I see it there.”

“I speak truth,” said Ebin.

“You have eaten since you returned?” she asked, walking back to her stool. “I would not have my warriors going hungry.”

“Yes, Chanwar, we have eaten,” said Ebin. He started to relax. This was going surprisingly well.

“Good,” said Chanwar, sitting down again. Her sword caught on a clod of earth and she jerked it behind her. “Good,” she said again, gazing at the fire. “Kifki, more wine. My head begins to hurt.”

Kifki ran over to get the cup as the tension in the room rose even higher.

“Arghhhhh!” screamed Chanwar, her face contorting. Her lips twisted into a snarl and her skin went taut and glistened with sweat. Her eyes became beady and her body seemed to sink into itself and shrivel.

“Arghhhhh!” she screamed again and hurled her cup at Kifki.

Then she leapt at Udjin who had just come through the entrance. He fell back as she clawed at his face and bit at his neck. The others in the hut drew back, muttering and trying to get out of the way. When the mood was upon her none could restrain her. Surprised, Udjin tried to curl into a ball with his arms over his head but she still managed to draw blood. He made no other attempt to defend himself, just curled as tightly as he could.

“Chanwar,” called Kifki, running over. “Chanwar, Chanwar, calm yourself.”

Instantly Chanwar threw herself off Udjin and launched at Kifki,

ripping a dagger from its fastening on her leg. Kifki dodged and grasped the hand that held it.

“Stop this,” she said in a pleading voice. “Stop this, please.”

“Ayeeeeeee!” screamed Chanwar, her face contorted and the veins at her temples standing out. With every muscle of her body taut she lashed out with the clawed fingers of her other hand as Kifki held tightly to the dagger hand.

“Calm yourself, little one,” said Kifki, trying to keep her voice soft. “’Tis only a passing headache. Calm yourself.”

Chanwar lashed out with her foot and caught Kifki in the belly but still Kifki did not let go of the dagger hand. With an effort, Kifki managed to get her other arm around Chanwar’s slim body and pulled her close, trapping her other arm. Chanwar bared her teeth and tried to bite Kifki’s nose but missed. The opportunity lost she began to scream obscenities at Kifki.

“Calm yourself, all is well, little one,” said Kifki, smothering Chanwar’s face with her hair. “Calm yourself, calm now, calm. Take a deep breath. There now, there now,” and she hugged Chanwar tightly so she could barely move. “Calm down, that’s right, quiet now, quiet. All is well.”

Teuxa slipped behind Kifki and cautiously stroked Chanwar’s hand. Her knuckles were white but after a few strokes the hand relaxed and Teuxa slipped the dagger away. Kifki gathered in that hand and hugged Chanwar tightly. The obscenities dropped from screams to mutterings.

“There now, there now,” she crooned. “That’s right, calm now, calm now. Good girl, calming down, calm, calm. The headache is passing, ’tis about gone. Be calm.”

Then Chanwar went limp and only Kifki’s hold on her kept her upright.

“It be passing,” said Kifki breathlessly. “Help me Teuxa.”

Teuxa passed the dagger to another then stepped in and gathered Chanwar around her legs. Together they carried her over to the fire and Leryn hurriedly stepped forward and laid his blanket on the ground.

“I think she is done,” said Kifki when she and Teuxa had lain Chanwar on the blanket and wrapped it around her. “I think the pains have passed.”

“And no harm done,” muttered Teuxa, “which be a blessing.”

“Fetch some milk,” said Kifki. “Wine will only inflame her mind at this time.”

“Gladly,” said Teuxa and backed away.

Kifki wiped Chanwar's face with a corner of the blanket. Her face was relaxed and strangely beautiful again in the light of the fire. Her body, too, was relaxed although her sword stuck out.

“Here,” said Teuxa, reappearing. He held out a rough earthenware pot which Kifki took.

“Try to drink,” she said quietly, holding the pot to Chanwar's lips. “Twill help soothe your pains.”

Chanwar's lips parted slightly and Kifki dribbled a little of the milk into her mouth. Chanwar swallowed then her body convulsed, arching upwards, only her heels and head touching the ground as Kifki snatched the pot away. Chanwar stayed rigid for a few moments then relaxed, only to convulse again. Once more she relaxed and cautiously Kifki leaned forward and touched the pot to Chanwar's lips. Chanwar drank and lay still.

“Tis done,” said Kifki. “For now at least. Watch her and I will tend Udjin.”

She thrust the pot at Teuxa who took it but remained distant. Kifki curled her lip at him but said nothing. She rose to her feet and went to look at Udjin.

Chanwar lay still for a few moments more then she sat up and cast off the blanket. She looked balefully at Teuxa who backed further away.

“Ebin,” said Chanwar firmly, casting around to find him.

“Yes Chanwar,” said Ebin cautiously.

“You say these two did not know of me?” said Chanwar, fixing her gaze calmly on him once again.

“So they claimed, Chanwar,” said Ebin. “They did not know your name.”

“I see,” said Chanwar. “Did these two have names themselves?”

“Ahh, yes,” said Ebin. “A girl called Autumn Savannah and a lad called Logan.”

“You were bested by a girl!” said Chanwar, a look of surprise flicking across her otherwise blank expression.

“Umm, well, yes,” said Ebin. “Leastways, Leryn was. I was ...”

“Enough,” said Chanwar. “It is sufficient that neither knew of me and that I cannot permit. Find them, Ebin. Find them for they need to be taught a lesson.”

Chapter Six

“Tis a pleasant enough looking place,” said Logan. “Not overly prosperous I wager but peaceful.”

They stood at the top of a low hill overlooking the village. The stream they had been following ran around the hill and flowed through the village. Most of the dwellings were on one side with fields on the other.

“Most likely that is Bufon,” said Autumn. “I wonder if it is a town or a village? It doesn't look big enough to be a town yet it seems too big for a village.”

“Mayhap it is on its way to becoming a town,” said Logan. “There looks to be a mill some way further downstream although strangely there is only one road to the town. It stops there for some reason.”

“True,” said Autumn, “although there are tracks leading out of the place but, as you say, none big enough to be called a road. Ahh, does this not delight you? Here we are arriving at a new place and already our curiosity is being aroused. Such things as these give purpose to our travels.”

“To yours perhaps,” said Logan. “I will be more delighted if that is a mill and there be a generous soul who delights in giving fresh baked bread to weary travellers. I confess I am not overly curious about a road that lies only on one side.”

“As ever you are the reluctant traveller,” said Autumn with a smile. “Come, let us enjoy the walking downhill on a sunny afternoon. What awaits us awaits us and anticipation will not change that.”

* * *

“Does this not strike you as strange?” asked Autumn as they reached the dwelling at the edge of the place. “Tis a place of fair size with a number of dwellings but no people. There is no one in the fields on the other side of the stream either.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “There is no one washing clothes in the stream or children playing. I hear a dog barking but it is some way off.”

“And there is smoke from that dwelling yonder,” said Autumn. “I can only smell wood smoke however and nothing cooking.”

“This dwelling here is not looking as prosperous as I thought,” said Logan. “See? The branches used for its building are thin and the mud caking it is cracking and worn. 'Tis strange no one has done repairs for there would seem to be mud aplenty at the stream's edge.”

“Likely we will find out more further on,” said Autumn. “Astauand is still not far past Its peak and no doubt the people are about their business and will return before dark.”

“Ahh,” said Logan a few moments later. “I take back what I said. Whoever lives here has begun repairs. See the pile of mud and this side partly renewed?”

“I see something else also,” said Autumn. “Is that a body lying on the ground behind the dwelling?”

She stopped and looked around, her senses alert.

“I do not sense anyone else around,” she said. “Come with me but stay back if there is trouble.”

With her staff braced, Autumn stole around the side of the dwelling on the balls of her feet, Logan not far behind.

There was a body lying there. A man clearly and one no longer in the flush of youth but not far from it. He lay in the mild sun with a blanket over his legs. His eyes were closed and he seemed at peace.

“Is he still alive?” whispered Logan.

“He seems to be breathing,” whispered back Autumn. “Come let us go. He is resting and we should not disturb him.”

“Aye,” whispered Logan and tripped over a wooden pail.

“Who be there?” exclaimed the man, startled. “Be that you, Yulia?” He struggled to sit up and twisted to face them. “Yammoe! Who are you and what do you want?”

He grasped a length of branch that lay beside him and brandished it at them.

“We apologise for disturbing your peace,” said Autumn, giving a small bow. “We saw you and came to see if you needed aid but found you were only sleeping. The fault is entirely ours.”

“There is nothing here worth the taking,” said the man. He made no effort to get up, just sat there and waved the stick.

“Twas not our intent to take anything,” said Autumn, “merely to aid you if you needed aid. Come, Logan, let us leave this man in peace.”

She turned and started to walk away as the man grasped the underside of the blanket and hoisted his left leg around a little so he could see them more easily.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “You are not from here.”

“We are travellers,” said Autumn, noting how he'd moved his leg. “This is Bufon?”

“Aye,” said the man. He looked her up and down then did the same with Logan. “Why do you refuse to tell me your names?”

“That is remiss of me,” said Autumn, “and once again I apologise. My name is Autumn and my companion is Logan. We are from Aferraron and are making our way to the coast.”

“I thought you had that look about you,” said the man. “I be Raupp and let it not be said I deny hospitality to them as is my own. Come, help me up and take a drink with me. Rest a while on your travels.”

“You are unable to get up on your own?” asked Autumn, going over to Raupp. “You have an injured leg?”

“Aye,” said Raupp. “Bit of a bugger it be and no mistake.”

Autumn propped her staff against the wall of the shack and lifted Raupp firmly by his armpits. He grimaced and clenched his teeth.

“You be a strong 'un and no mistake,” he said when he was able to unclench his jaw. “Come inside.”

“Your leg is painin' you?” asked Autumn as he pushed the branch under his left arm.

“Aye,” he said and slowly made his way towards the shack entrance using his right leg and the branch to walk. The left leg he kept slightly bent so it did not touch the ground. The blanket appeared to be tied around his waist.

Inside was a small stone hearth with no fire burning and a variety of tubs, pots and cauldrons. Against the opposite wall was a pile of straw and in between stood a solid table with two sturdy looking chairs with rests for the sitter's arms.

“Sit,” said Autumn. “Logan can do the drinks. Or would you prefer to lie?”

“Actually I'd rather lie,” said Raupp, propping himself against the table. “It pains my leg to bend it over much. There be milk in the pail yonder and water, of course.”

“I'll find them,” said Logan and started looking inside the various containers.

Autumn helped lower Raupp onto the straw and he lay for a few moments catching his breath.

“How did you injure your leg?” she asked.

“I be a carpenter,” said Raupp. “I made them chairs and that table.”

“And very solid they look too,” said Autumn. “Your leg?”

“I was on the roof,” said Raupp. “This old hut be in some disrepair and I was repairing it, see. Re-doing the walls until it rained and we found there be a leak in the roof. So up I went and down I came like an old fool for not testing the strength of what was around the leak. Landed on some of my tools and ripped my leg to shreds.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “How long back?”

“But four days,” said Raupp. “We only moved in here a few days before that.”

“Would you mind if I looked at your injuries?” asked Autumn. “I have some knowledge of wounds and may be able to offer you aid.”

“Tis not a pretty sight,” said Raupp, “and my Yulia be tending it but if you have skills then I be a fool not to be accepting them.”

Autumn gently untied the thong that bound the blanket and pulled it away from Raupp's leg. His leg, from groin to knee was wrapped in bloodstained lengths of cloth.

“Were you cut from here to here?” asked Autumn pointing.

“Aye,” said Raupp. “More of a rip, like, and almost to the bone in places.”

“I wonder there is so little blood then,” said Autumn, frowning. “You will permit me to unbind the wound?”

“Yulia be going to do that when she returns,” said Raupp. “There is more cloth in the corner, ready torn.”

“I am puzzled by the lack of blood,” said Autumn, “for a wound such as you describe should bleed greatly. Can I unbind your leg and re-bind it with the fresh cloth or would you prefer to wait for Yulia?”

“Ahh, that be a dilemma,” said Raupp. “I know not when she will be back. Ahh, Sploop. Unbind it and see what you will. Makes no never mind to me for it be hurting either way.”

“I will be gentle,” said Autumn.

She carefully untied the knot that held the cloth in place then, easing Raupp's leg slightly so it bent at the knee, she slowly unwrapped the bandage.

Underneath was a long jagged tear that started near the top of Raupp's thigh muscle and continued to a hands-breadth above the knee. It was inflamed and angry looking but there was no blood seeping nor any sign of pus.

“It looks surprisingly healthy for just four days,” said Autumn, inspecting the wound. “What are these thin lines a finger's breadth apart all the way along?”

“That be Yulia's doing,” said Raupp. “She be using some of the hairs from her head to tie the edges together. She be saying it will heal faster that way.”

“Her hair?” said Autumn in surprise. “How did she get her hair through your flesh?”

“She used a needle,” said Raupp.

“Fascinating,” said Autumn, studying the wound. “A wound such as this will indeed heal faster if the edges are held together but I have never heard of hair being used to do this. The few times I have encountered such as this I have used tight bindings of caradace.”

“I know not what that is,” said Raupp.

“Then I wager it does not grow in these parts,” said Autumn. “Did she put anything on it beyond her hair?”

“Aye, a paste made from hamamielis,” said Raupp. “Tis a weed that grows freely.”

“That is good,” said Autumn. “Is there any more?”

“Aye, in a pot with the cloths,” said Raupp.

“Then if you have no objection I will put some more on your leg and replace the cloths,” said Autumn. “There is nothing more I can do here and your leg is healing nicely. All it needs is time and rest and I venture that is what you were doing before we came along and disturbed you.”

She found the hamamielis paste and smeared it over Raupp's wound while he gripped the straw beneath him tightly then she wound the clean cloths around his leg and tied them.

“I would like to talk with your Yulia,” she remarked when she was done. “She has skills with healing I have not come across before.”

“She is from Wase,” said Raupp. “Across the mountains. They have different knowledge there.”

“Is this not Wase?” asked Autumn. “We were told a few days past that the border lay some way to the South.”

“Aye,” said Raupp, contemplating his leg. “It is, for now.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn.

“The border used to be the mountains,” said Raupp. “Leastaways it was when I was a babe. Then there was a war and Wase took control of some of what lay to the South. Then there was another war and Aferraron took this land back and some of what lies beyond the mountains then that there Obvious Vassal⁴ lost us again to Wase. 'Twas right confusing but most folks round here consider themselves to be of Aferraron no matter what the tax collectors say. With Aloidia's help we be back with Aferraron soon.”

“How so?” asked Autumn. “Are you expecting another war?”

“Be hoping so,” said Raupp. “Th'hisan Potet wrote a letter to the new Roinad and got the heads of the other villages to sign it. He be asking that there Bogan⁵ to be taking us back from Wase.”

4 Raupp meant Obvia Vasagle, who was Roinad at the time of the 6th Wasian War.

5 Raupp here meant Logan, who became Roinad after the death of Obvia Vasagle. See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*. Logan hated the job so much that he ran away to re-join Autumn after the first day and Hysleria, the Piers Sakratar to the Roinad, took

“Who is T’hisan Potet?” and Autumn, “and Bogan?”

“Bogan be the new Roinad,” said Raupp. “You be not knowing that? I thought you were from Aferraron?”

“We are,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan, “but we have been travelling much and not kept current with what goes on in Uli-Rratha. And T’hisan Potet?”

“He be our Shamsadam,” said Raupp wearily. He sighed and eased his leg a little to one side.

“Ahh,” said Autumn.

“What is a Shamsadam?” asked Logan.

“A religious leader among followers of Aloidia,” said Autumn.

“I did not know there were such people,” said Logan. “Is not Aloidia the deity of harvests?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but harvests are part of the cycle of life and death and oft times someone is needed to help Aloidia’s followers understand such things.”

“You are not of Aloidia?” asked Raupp.

“No,” said Autumn. “I am of Feandra, which is also of the cycle of life and death.”

“Ahh,” said Raupp, lying back in his straw bed. “Yes. Well, we are mostly of Aloidia around here.”

“So, if I might enquire without seeming rude,” said Autumn. “Where is your Yulia?”

“Oh, she be at the Shasad,” said Raupp. “along with most everyone else, I wager.”

advantage of Logan’s absence to make himself the effective ruler.

“Why?” asked Autumn. “What is a Shasad?”

“It be the dwelling of T’hisan Potet,” said Raupp. “It be our place of worship as well, although we not be having many festivals in the winter.”

“Is there one now?” asked Logan.

“Hmm? Oh, no,” said Raupp. “Next one be in the spring, at the time of sowing. If there be one then. Most likely won’t be.”

“Is that when you expect war again?” asked Autumn. “I imagine it will be difficult to sow your fields if armies are tramping over them.”

“Mayhap,” said Raupp, “although I doubt it. No, T’hisan Potet be dying. That’s why everyone is at the Shasad, praying for his continuing life. I’d be there too if it wasn’t for this damned leg.” He raised his arm to slap it but changed his mind and dropped his arm again.

“Ahh, and what ails him?” asked Autumn.

“I know not,” said Raupp. “Only that he has said he is dying and there is none who can gainsay him. ’Twill be a great loss for he is a great Shamsadam and highly respected by all.”

He paused and coughed and Logan offered him a drink of milk. He declined and looked thoughtful.

“Something does occur to me,” he said. “If, as you say, you have some skill with healing you may be able to prevent his death.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “Although I cannot say without knowing what ails him and my skills are mainly to do with cuts and breaks.”

“But this is the thing,” said Raupp, leaning forward conspiratorially. “None of us can gainsay him but you are not of us. You are, or so you said, of Feandra and are therefore not beholden to one of Aloidia.”

“Well, that is a debatable point,” said Autumn but Logan tapped her on her shoulder and shook his head. “Hmm, well, regardless of his

allegiance I am willing to give aid where I can.”

“Then go to the Shasad,” said Raupp. “Offer what aid you can. If it is rejected or not sufficient, well, you have at least tried.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “It is not possible to do more than what one can. Where will I find the Shasad?”

“Tis up the road, past the village,” said Raupp. “Tis a big building, you cannot miss it.”

“Does it look like a mill?” asked Logan.

“In some way, perhaps,” said Raupp. “Why?”

“We saw a building that looked like a mill when we came to the village,” said Logan. “We will find it.”

“Then we shall go and see what can be done,” said Autumn. “You will fare well here alone for a time, Raupp?”

“I was alone when you woke me,” said Raupp. “Go.”

* * *

“Why did you tap me on the shoulder?” asked Autumn as she and Logan walked through the village.

“He did not want a debate,” said Logan. “He only wanted the hope that you may be of assistance.”

“That may prove unwarranted,” said Autumn. “I wager if this Yulia is there then Thisan Potet is in good hands. Likely in a place this size there are others with skills of healing as well.”

“It's not like you to be holding back on the offering of aid,” said Logan. “I confess it surprises me.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but there is a religious element to this and it is entirely possible that if this man should die while in my care then

some may blame me for causing his death and stir up trouble.”

“Ahh, I did not think of that,” said Logan. “But then, he said he was dying before we arrived so how could they blame you?”

“Grief does all manner of strange things to the minds of those who have lost a loved one,” said Autumn. “Oft times they seek someone to blame when there is no blame to be attached.”

* * *

“Who are you?” demanded a burly man when Autumn stepped inside the Shasad.

It was a large hut and was filled with people, all kneeling on the ground and many were weeping.

“My name is Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, “and this is my companion Logan. I have some skills with healing and Raupp asked that I come here to see if I can offer aid to your Shamsadam.”

“I fear you may be too late,” said the man. “His end is not far away.”

“I will leave if you wish,” said Autumn. “Tis not my intent to force myself upon those who wish me away.”

“Raupp, you say?” said the man, scowling. “You know of his injury?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I inspected it and it heals well. His almost Yulia has many skills in healing.”

The man's face cleared.

“Come with me,” he said. “I will take you to Yulia and let her decide. Make way, make way.”

He threaded his way through the mass of people to the far end of the Shasad where a raised platform stood. On the platform a young woman with long dark hair knelt beside a man lying on a thin pallet. Her hands were clasped as if in prayer.

“Yulia,” called the man. “Yulia.”

Yulia rose and walked slowly over to the edge of the platform where she knelt and leaned forward.

“Yes, Bruett?” she said quietly.

“This one be sent by Raupp,” said Bruett. “She be having some skills of healing.”

“It is too late,” she said with a quaver in her voice. She glanced back at the man on the pallet. “Thisan Potet is gone.”

Chapter Seven

Bruett gasped and pressed the knuckles of his hand to his mouth and stared at the body on the platform.

“A moment,” said Yulia, visibly restraining her grief.

She sat back on her heels for a few moments then stood up and faced the people gathered in the Shasad. She did not need to speak for the look on her face told everyone. Cries and exclamations rang out then many started to cry and prostrate themselves or tore at their clothes.

“T’hisan Potet is gone,” called out Yulia, raising her voice so at least those nearby could hear her. “He is gone.” Tears started to stream down her face and she stood there, alone and disconsolate on the platform.

“Are you certain?” asked Autumn, raising her voice a little over the wailing behind her. “Sometimes there may be the appearance of death when death has not yet arrived.”

“I am certain,” said Yulia, closing her eyes and putting her hands to her face. “Ahh, Bruett said you have some knowledge of healing?”

“Some,” said Autumn.

“Then see for yourself,” she said, taking a deep breath, “but do not disrespect his remains.”

“I will only show the greatest respect,” said Autumn.

She passed her staff to Logan then stepped onto the platform. A hush began to spread amongst those gathered then whisperings began. Autumn knelt beside T’hisan Potet and studied his body for a few moments. Then she reached out and pressed her fingers to the side of his neck. The whisperings turned to mutterings.

“What be she doing?” protested Bruett.

“Confirming what I believe to be true,” said Yulia, watching Autumn.

“Tis possible I may be mistaken.”

The Shasad went silent as the people absorbed what Yulia had said and new hope began.

Autumn stayed with her hand pressed to T'hisan Potet's neck for some time then bent to lay her ear on his chest. She listened for a few moments then sat back.

“You are right,” she said quietly to Yulia. “He is gone.”

Yulia turned back to the crowd and shook her head. The wailing began again.

Autumn leaned forward once more and gathered T'hisan Potet's hands in hers and gently laid them together on his chest then straightened one leg which was slightly bent.

“Go in peace, old man,” she said quietly. “Your time here is passed.”

She placed her hand on his forehead for a few moments then bent to kiss his cheek before slowly rising to her feet again. She stepped off the platform and thanked Yulia.

“Come, Logan,” she said “There is nothing we can do here.”

She walked back to the entrance at the far end, Logan close behind. The people parted to make way, drawing back as if to avoid any possible contact with her.

“We arrived at a bad time,” said Logan when they were back in the afternoon light of Astauand. “Tis unfortunate but that is the way of the world.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, looking back along the road towards the dwellings. “I am debating whether to return to Raupp and see how he fares or move on. What say you?”

“I wager Raupp is in good hands,” said Logan. “Twas a nasty wound yet he was in good spirits. I wager it is also unlikely we will find any

bread or cheese here today. We may as well move on.”

“Ahh, Logan, as always you bring things down to the essentials,” said Autumn. “Indeed, Raupp has no need of my aid. Let us move on. This road I would imagine goes somewhere worth making a road to.”

“Not necessarily,” said Logan, “for Bufon may be the reason for the road and not what lies at the other end.”

“True,” Autumn replied. “Let us ...”

“I would speak with you,” said Yulia, appearing in the entrance of the Shasad. Her voice was firm although her face was still wet. “Who are you and how do you know Raupp? You are strangers here.”

“My name is Autumn,” said Autumn, “and this be Logan. We are travellers and passing through. When we came into Bufon we saw Raupp lying on the ground and went to give him aid before we realised he was asleep.”

“So you do not know Raupp?” demanded Yulia.

“Only on the briefest of acquaintances,” said Autumn. “It was apparent he had an injured leg and I offered to check it was healing. I commend you for sewing his wound with your hair. 'Tis a novel solution to the problem of deep cuts.”

“'Tis how I was taught,” said Yulia. “How do you deal with such cuts?”

“I wrap the wound with caradace leaves and bind it tightly,” said Autumn, “but Raupp told me you have not such a plant in these parts. Hair is a good solution for there will always be one with hair when there is an injury.”

“Aye, but not always a needle,” said Yulia, “and a fine one at that. A thick needle will let the wound open again slightly and delay the rejoining of the flesh.”

“Ahh, that is good to know,” said Autumn. “Well, we had best be on our way. This is not a good time for you and your fellows.”

“Where are you going?” asked Yulia.

“To see what lies at the other end of this road,” said Autumn.

“Then can I offer you our hospitality?” asked Yulia. “Food and a place to sleep for the night? You offered us your aid in there and even though no aid was possible you showed great respect. For that I thank you.”

Autumn did not bother to glance at Logan for she knew he was always willing to accept hospitality, especially when food was offered.

“We thank you for your offer,” said Autumn, “and accept with the greatest of pleasure.”

“That pleases me,” said Yulia. “Come, let us return to my dwelling. There is nothing more I can do here and others will prepare T’hisan Potet for his funeral.”

“Can I ask who Bruett is?” asked Autumn as they set off. “He would seem to have some measure of authority here.”

“He is our headman,” said Yulia. “That is his dwelling yonder, with the painted cloth over the entrance. I do not envy him his position at this time for it will fall to him to find us a new Shamsadam and that will be no easy task. Few learned people venture into these parts.”

“You are here,” said Autumn, “and you are learned in the ways of healing.”

“Aye, but not for long,” said Yulia. “I am from Schtei and I am only here because Raupp is here.”

“You would not have chosen this place otherwise?” asked Autumn.

“Oh I would not say that,” said Yulia, “for I disliked the franticness of Schtei and desired peace in a remote place but until I met Raupp I did not know of this place. We have not been here long and thus far it suits me well despite ... well, it suits me well enough. We were intending to build a dwelling but Raupp's parents gave us a dwelling

and Raupp said it would be easier to repair one already there than build from nothing. I wager he has likely changed his mind for he would not have fallen through the roof of one he was building.”

“And Raupp?” asked Autumn. “Is he a stranger to these parts also?”

“Raupp was born here,” said Yulia, “but I, no. I have only been here a short time. Raupp brought me here in mid summer.”

“So you did not know T’hisan Potet well?” asked Autumn.

“No, not well,” said Yulia. “He is, was, the Shamsadam and I am of Aloidia as well so I attended the meetings and festivals. Here we are. Raupp? Raupp? Are you well?”

“My leg pains me as you would expect,” said Raupp, still lying in the straw where Autumn and Logan had left him. “Oh, hello. You two are back again. Greetings. Yulia, what news of T’hisan Potet?”

“He is gone, alas,” said Yulia. “Your new friend here has confirmed that.”

“Ahh cursed fortune,” cried Raupp, slapping the straw beside him. “That is grievous news indeed. We are cursed by Sploop and no longer in the favour of Aloidia! Dire times are upon us. I venture my leg will never heal now.” He rolled over and pulled some straw over his head to hide his grief.

“How so?” asked Autumn. “T’hisan Potet was a very old man and I wager he has been most fortunate to have lived as long as he did. I would guess some 80 or 90 summers, mayhap more.”

“I know not,” said Yulia. “Be seated and I will make a fire. I do know T’hisan Potet was Shamsadam before Raupp’s father was born. He was a very great teacher.”

Autumn and Logan, for want of anywhere else to sit, sat in the two chairs.

“You do not agree?” asked Yulia, seeing the look on Autumn’s face.

“I knew him not,” said Autumn, “and it is not for me to say yay or nay on the greatness of his teachings. I am of Feandra not Aloidia and no doubt the teachings of Aloidia are different.”

“That is a strange thing to say,” said Yulia, fanning the embers of the fire.

“’Tis only that I was struck by the great outpouring of grief by those assembled,” said Autumn, “yet when I saw him it was apparent he was of great age and surely his time could not have been unexpected.”

“Our Shamsadam was ageless,” said Raupp from within the straw, his voice thin and uneven. “He is dead and no more. ’Tis a great loss.”

Autumn glanced at Logan who didn't seem overly interested in the conversation and she remained silent. Satisfied that the fire was going to continue, Yulia put some thicker sticks on it.

“But that does not explain what you said about his teaching,” she said, fetching a large purplish vegetable and a knife.

Autumn sighed.

“That was remiss of me,” she said. “’Twas wrong of me to speak on a matter I know little of.”

“But you did speak,” said Yulia, testing the edge of the knife, “if only by your look. I would know why.”

“I venture you may have met your match when it comes to strength of mind,” said Logan with a grin. “I wager Yulia here will have it out of you in the end. She has that look in her eye.”

“Your man speaks the truth,” said Yulia, sitting crossed legged on the floor. She started to slice the vegetable on a board across her knees.

“So be it,” said Autumn. “Merely that it seemed to me that being of Aloidia the people at the Shasad should be well versed in the cycle of life and death and that their outpouring of grief likely came from a lack of understanding of that cycle.”

“Ahh,” said Yulia, pausing in her slicing. “So you are saying that by showing grief they were showing that they had not been taught well?”

Autumn shrugged.

Yulia regarded her for a few moments then resumed her slicing.

“You are of Feandra,” she said. “Do you not see death as the end of fertility and birth?”

“Not at all,” said Autumn. “Birth is the creator of death and death is, in turn, the creator of life. So it is with all things. That vegetable you have there, it was born and grew and now it is dead but it will feed us and what remains of it will feed the soil and the birth of another. 'Tis the same with people. What is that vegetable? I know it not and only presume it soon to be a meal.”

“'Tis caran,” said Yulia. “Do you not have it where you come from?”

“Ahh, caran,” said Autumn. “We have eaten it as aroao but have not seen the vegetable itself. No, we do not have it in Aferraron.”

“I did not know that,” said Yulia. “It is common in these parts. So you think it is wrong to grieve at the death of someone loved?”

“Wrong is perhaps not the right word,” said Autumn. “For those who have not the understanding it is entirely natural and that is what prompted me to wonder if T'hisian Potet was as good a teacher as you said.”

“I do not understand,” said Yulia.

“What Autumn means is that death is not an ending,” said Logan.

“If not an ending, then what is it?” asked Yulia. “Surely it is not a beginning?”

“Well, yes it is,” said Autumn. “It is the beginning of what comes after life.”

“Hmmm,” said Yulia.

She stood up and hung a large flat metal sheet above the fire and proceeded to lay the strips of caran on it.

“You mean the Land of Yammoe?” she asked. “The Land of the Undead?”

“To begin with,” said Autumn, “and for many from there to the Land of Zeeth, but that is only for the essence of that which lived. Its substance, its body returns to the soil as part of the cycle. That which is the true T’hisan Potet is even now in the Land of Yammoe and making its way to the Land of Zeeth.”

“In truth this is something I have never understood,” said Yulia. “T’hisan Potet and others before him have tried to explain but I lack the wit to comprehend.”

“That I doubt very much,” said Autumn. “You give every sign of having much in the way of wits. I venture ’tis the fear of death that blocks your understanding, not the lack of wits.”

“Does not everyone fear death?” asked Yulia.

“Autumn is not afraid of anything,” said Logan proudly, “including death.”

“That is not entirely true, Logan,” said Autumn, “but it is irrelevant. With true understanding of the nature of death and the cycle of life there is nothing to be afraid of.”

“And there you lose me again,” said Yulia. “Let me just turn these strips.”

“The explaining is simple,” said Autumn. “We are born and live life and build experiences through our senses and those experiences fill our minds. We know of food and comfort and discomfort and pain and companionship and all these things. Fear as well. Fear has not substance, it is simply the anticipation of a bad experience. But these things all come from the senses, through seeing, hearing and tasting

and so on. When we die those senses die too and so those experiences die along with them. What meaning can any experience have if the senses that produced them have gone? How can you, for example, feel fear when the senses that sense a bad experience no longer sense?”

“Hmm, I think I follow that,” said Yulia, frowning. “Go on.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “Those experiences that have arisen through living are what we like to think of as ourselves, what we refer to when we speak of 'I'. I am hungry, I am happy, I am alive and so on. But what happens when death takes away those senses, those experiences and the flesh that makes them possible?”

“I cannot imagine,” said Yulia, deftly flicking the fried strips of caran onto the wooden board to cool.

“You are left with the true self,” said Autumn. “The true 'I' that exists over and above the experiences that came from senses. The 'I' that continues after death and goes to meet Yammoe. The 'I' that, if Zeeth so decides, is reborn into another life.”

“But if we are reborn why are we afraid of death?” asked Yulia.

“As we build experiences in life,” said Autumn, “we also build habits. You are in the habit of slicing that caran and no doubt you do it the same way each time. The same is true of life for it is easier to do something in the way that habit tells us than to try and do it in a different way each time. The same is true of death. We become in the habit of fearing death because we are in the habit of living within our experiences and death is not one of those experiences for each life can only experience death once. You may be reborn but you are reborn into another life with new experiences and a new 'I' is created each time, although that is not strictly true. Each new 'I' is simply another 'I' in a sequence of 'I's and death only marks a transition from one 'I' to another 'I', not the ending of 'I'.”

“Hmmm,” said Yulia thoughtfully.

“That is what Logan meant when he said I do not fear death,” said Autumn. “From a very early age I was taught that death is normal and

comes to us all. Indeed, there is nowhere in this world that one can hide to avoid it. Because of this I have not learnt the habit of fearing death and embrace the fact that in time I will die and transition to a different 'I'. Whether I will have the same form I do not know but that is a matter for my curiosity, not my fear. In any event, I do not see myself as a single 'I', distinct and separate but as one of many forms that transition from one to another through the cycle of birth and death. Yes, I will die one day, perhaps tomorrow, but that will only be the death of the form that you see before you. The true 'I', the one that transcends the experiences that I have had as Autumn will continue. As a result, if I am faced with death tomorrow I do not fear it for I know it is only a transition."

"I am still struggling with what you say," said Yulia. "You have worked all this out for yourself?"

"Not at all," said Autumn. "I have had many teachers."

"And yet you are still young," said Yulia. "Mayhap only a summer or two past me. How is this possible? Thisan Potet was great in years and talked much yet said less than you have here."

"Autumn was found as a babe and taken into an Esyup," said Logan. "She was thinking on this stuff before you or I left the tit."

"I have heard of such things," said Yulia thoughtfully, "but I have never met someone who had been to one. What brings you here?"

"We are merely travellers," said Autumn. "I seek knowledge and understanding of the world and Logan, well I know not what Logan seeks but he travels with me and entertains me with his company."

"I am like you, Autumn," said Logan with a grin, "although I have lesser goals."

"How so?" asked Yulia.

"I, too, seek knowledge and understanding," said Logan happily, "but only of Autumn. I leave the world to her."

“Hah!” exclaimed Yulia. “I like that! Hey, Raupp, why do you never say things like that about me?”

“You are my world,” said Raupp, sitting up with straw through his hair. “That is all I know even though I understand it not.”

“Ooooh,” exclaimed Yulia. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me! Least, I think so. Come, let us eat and talk of other things. Things that do not bend and twist my mind to breaking point.”

“I do have a question,” said Logan, sitting up as Yulia started to slide slices of caran onto small platters and layer them with tomato. “What are hanahas?”

“I know not,” said Raupp, shifting so he was propped against a wall post. It creaked.

“Only we met someone a few days past with a hanaha,” said Logan. “He said that hanahas are servants.”

“What manner of thing was this hanaha?” asked Yulia.

“It had the appearance of a person,” said Autumn, “but its hair was arranged to hide its face and it never spoke.”

“I have never heard of such a thing,” said Raupp. “Are you sure it was not just a person with messy hair?”

“We do not know,” said Logan, “which is why we ask. Certainly the man led us to believe that hanaha are different.”

“Well, here we call servants servants,” said Raupp, “not that we have any who are servants in Bufon. Do they have hanahas in Schtei, Yulia?”

“I have known two or three who were servants,” said Yulia thoughtfully, “but they were much as we are and they called themselves servants. I have never heard of hanahas.”

“Mayhap he was playing tricks with us,” said Logan. “Tis not unknown for people to do that with travellers who know little of where

they are travelling.”

“Most likely,” said Raupp, accepting a platter from Yulia.

“And Chanwar?” asked Autumn, also accepting a platter. “Tell us of Chanwar.”

“Chanwar?” said Raupp, dropping his platter in surprise. “By Sploop you do not want to know about Chanwar! Chanwar be a cursed fiend that plagues us all!”

Chapter Eight

Yulia leaned over to retrieve Raupp's platter and held it out for him but he ignored her.

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“Chanwar be a deadly pestilence that lies over this land,” said Raupp intensely. He took a deep breath and only then noticed Yulia holding his platter. “Ah, my thanks,” he muttered, taking it.

Yulia plucked a strip of caran from the front of his tunic and put it back on his plate while he stared at Autumn.

“What manner of pestilence?” asked Autumn, looking puzzled. “I have heard Chanwar is a person and people are not pestilence.”

“We know not,” said Yulia, picking bits of straw off another piece of caran. “None who have met Chanwar have lived to tell the tale or so it is said. I know not.” She dropped the piece on Raupp's platter and rummaged for another.

“But there are those who claim to be of Chanwar,” said Autumn. “We met two yesterday.”

“Ahh, that is why you carry so little with you,” said Raupp. He frowned and fished inside his tunic for a piece of tomato. “All travellers in these parts be at risk from them as is of Chanwar.”

“No, they took nothing,” said Autumn. “We carry only what you see and nothing more. So Chanwar, or at least those claiming to be of Chanwar, are bandits?”

“Aye,” said Raupp, “only they be worse than any bandits you may have heard of before. How is it that they took nothing but let you live?”

“We talked,” said Autumn, “and I persuaded them we were not worth the effort.”

“That is beyond belief,” said Raupp, scowling. “Chanwar has not one

hair of charity. Them as displeases him are skinned alive and their hides are used to decorate his walls and yet you both retain your skins? This beggars belief.”

“And yet it is so,” said Logan, “for we are as you see. Skin and all.”

“I am new to these parts,” said Yulia, spotting another piece of tomato and picking it up. It was flecked with straw but she put it on Raupp's platter without noticing, “but I have heard it said that a man stood up to Chanwar and Chanwar had his belly split and his intestine nailed to a tree. Then he was made to walk until everything inside was pulled out. 'Twould not have been a pleasant way to die.”

“That was many summers past,” said Raupp, “for none dare face off against Chanwar or any of his followers now. Although I have met two who have lost an eye to Chanwar.”

“If they did not fight Chanwar, how did they lose their eyes?” asked Logan, intrigued.

“They were held down and their eye pressed out with a flat stick,” said Raupp dourly. “Chanwar uses them for a necklace or so 'tis said.”

“Would that not be rather smelly?” asked Logan. “After a while at least.”

“I wager Chanwar uses some sort of preservative,” said Yulia. “Perhaps something that hardens the eyeball as eyes be somewhat soft and squishy. I do not see them making a good necklace otherwise.”

“Do not jest about such things,” spluttered Raupp indignantly. “'Tis not only eyes but ears and lips as well. Any who dares stand against Chanwar or one of Chanwar will have removed anything that can be removed. Even ...” and he pointed anxiously at his groin.

“But to what purpose?” asked Autumn, puzzled. “'Twould seem a rather fruitless pastime unless Chanwar be one who enjoys the sufferings of others. Granted the two we met intended to kill us but they did not seem overly cruel.”

“You must have such powers of persuasion as are beyond belief,” said Raupp, “or the most profound blessings of Aloidia, both of you, for Chanwar and those of Chanwar have not the merest glimmer of any reputation for forgiveness or restraint.”

“Autumn bested them,” said Logan. “’Twas not luck.”

“You?” exclaimed Raupp, staring at Autumn again. “But you are so small!”

“Size is no great advantage,” said Autumn. “In fact, size is more often than not a disadvantage for it slows that person down. Speed will usually best size, if only by running away.”

“So is that what you did?” asked Yulia. “You ran away?”

“Autumn never runs away,” said Logan. “As I said, she bested them.”

“’Tis hard to countenance,” said Yulia, looking at Autumn quizzically. “Especially as you would seem to be of great learning. ’Tis my experience that those of learning have few other skills of life. Although whether that lack be from their devotion to learning or their learning arises from their lacking elsewhere I cannot say.”

“Autumn is a Krisana,” said Logan as if that explained everything.

“And what is that?” asked Yulia.

“’Tis of no great consequence,” said Autumn. “What is important here is that Logan and I have met with two who said they were of Chanwar and all lived to tell the tale. Raupp, you have met Chanwar?”

“By the blessed mercy of Aloidia I have not,” said Raupp. “And I pray that I never do.”

“So neither of you have any experience of Chanwar?” asked Autumn. “What you tell us is only hearsay?”

“Of Chanwar himself, aye,” said Raupp, “but I have many times seen those of Chanwar. When travellers be scarce they come to Bufon and

demand tribute.”

“Ahh, so that is why they are a pestilence on this land,” said Autumn. “They fleece the towns and villages?”

“That is so,” said Raupp, “although none have been here since Yulia arrived. I would wager there have been many travellers although I was myself away for two summers.”

“How many of Chanwar came when they came?” asked Autumn, picking up the last piece of caran from her platter. She popped it in her mouth.

“Four or five,” said Raupp. Seeing her eat reminded him of his own food and he started to chew a piece himself. His expression clouded and he spat out a piece of straw.

“And yet there are many in Bufon,” said Logan thoughtfully. “The hall was full. I wager a hundred or more were in there.”

“One hundred and eighty seven at last count,” said Raupp, “although several have died since and others born and Yulia has arrived.” He smiled at her and she smiled back.

“So surely Bufon could muster enough to repel five?” said Logan, drawing lines with his finger on the table.

“Mayhap,” said Raupp, “but that would only draw the anger of Chanwar and more would return. Our Shamsadam always counselled appeasement.”

“And oft times that is the best policy,” said Autumn. “There is little point in any being killed for the sake of food that can be replaced.”

“Tis not always easy to replace,” said Raupp. “Five or six summers past we were stripped of all our winter reserves and many nearly did not make it through to spring. We were forced to live on rats and leaves and other things best not talked about.”

“How long has this been going on?” asked Autumn.

“Since the dawn of time,” said Raupp, picking up a piece of tomato. “There have been bandits in these parts for as long as I can remember, aye, and my parents before me. Their numbers have been swelled in my time by deserters and criminals from the armies that have passed through.”

“And Chanwar?” asked Logan. “Chanwar has been here all along?”

“Nay, lad,” said Raupp. “Chanwar’s name did not appear until, ohh, some ten summers past. ’Twas only then that the viciousness began. Before that we suffered only the loss of food and other things but as the name of Chanwar spread so too did the tales of viciousness and cruelty.”

“Mayhap that is all they are,” said Autumn. “Tales to scare you and make you more compliant.”

“Then how do you explain them as have lost eyes and things?” asked Raupp.

“That I cannot,” said Autumn. “Are there any in Bufon?”

“There be Gambret,” said Raupp. “He came back after a time in the mountains with only one eye.”

“And there be Zehra,” said Yulia. “He has only two fingers on one hand.”

“Aye,” said Raupp, nodding. “I forgot about him. And two or three of the maids have been defiled by them as is of Chanwar.”

“That is not good,” said Autumn, her lips compressing. “But they survived their ordeals?”

“Yes,” said Raupp. “With some care and compassion although it was not always so.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn.

“’Twas our custom, or so I have heard,” said Raupp, “for them as had

been defiled to be cast out as soon as they could walk again with only the clothes they wore and a loaf of bread to aid them on their way.”

“What?” exclaimed Autumn with a hint of anger in her voice. “You would cast out someone who was a victim and not the cause of the outrage?”

“Whoa,” exclaimed Raupp, holding up his hands pacifically. “Tis not ‘What?’ exclaimed Fiednaour custom now. T’hisan Potet changed things. He was a great one for compassion, was T’hisan Potet. I venture that was his argument as well although no doubt many would have argued that the one defiled should have denied the defiler not submitted.”

“Tis a bad argument,” said Autumn. “There be few women who can defeat a man, especially one who is determined and if there is more than one she would have no chance.”

“We all carry knives,” said Yulia, tapping hers at her waist. “Tis always possible to cut a vein and deny the defiler that way.”

“Is it?” asked Autumn. “Seeing as how you fear death, could you do it?”

“Likely not,” said Yulia with a grimace. “I confess I would likely prefer being cast out to take my chances. Still, that is not the custom now so what does it matter?”

“True,” said Autumn. “Although ’tis my aim in life to reduce the suffering of others so when I hear that there are those who are made to suffer for no just cause I am saddened.”

“You sound just like T’hisan Potet,” said Yulia. “He hated to see anyone suffer. Oh, he will be sorely missed and no mistake.”

“I am curious,” said Raupp. “You said for no just cause. You are clearly one of no little learning, what would you consider to be a just cause for suffering?”

There was a moment's silence then Logan laughed.

“That was a foolish question,” he said, “although I mean no offence by my remark. 'Tis only that I venture Autumn will bend your ears all night with her answer.”

“How so?” asked Raupp, frowning. “Is it not a simple question?”

“But not one with a simple answer, I wager,” said Yulia, decisively, “no matter what them as thinks they know it might say. 'Tis after dark and best we be sleeping, especially you Raupp for your leg will not heal if you do not let it. Autumn, can we hear your answer tomorrow?”

“If you wish,” said Autumn, “but as you say there is no easy answer.”

“Aye,” said Yulia, getting up. “Do you wish to sleep inside with us or would you prefer to be outside? I know you are travellers and many travellers like the sky above them not a rickety mouse ridden roof.”

“I think outside,” said Autumn, “if that is no trouble.”

“None at all,” said Yulia. “And, with your permission, can I bring another to hear you speak?”

“Of course,” said Autumn, “although I venture few will be interested.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Yulia, pulling a burning brand from the fire.

“Most have their own views on justice,” said Autumn, standing up herself. She gestured for Logan to rise as well. “And few like to be challenged.”

“'Tis true enough,” said Yulia. “Come and I will show you a place where you are unlikely to be disturbed.”

They followed her outside to a dry spot on the other side of the dwelling from the rest of the village. It was fairly flat and stone free.

“We will talk more tomorrow,” she said. “Sleep well.”

Logan was awake when Autumn returned from doing her exercises. He did not look happy.

“Is it not a beautiful day?” said Autumn, studying his face.

It was indeed a beautiful day. Astauand was warm and white, fluffy clouds dotted the sky. A light breeze came from the East and carried no smell of distant rain although there was the faint ever present smell of excreta that every village and town had. Beyond the path that lay between the dwellings and the stream the water bubbled happily and the sparse rushes waved their heads. In the grassland beyond the stream some cattle munched on grass although from this distance it was not possible to say if they were happy or not. Every now and then one lowed mournfully but cows' lows always sounded mournful.

“Hmmp,” said Logan and his lips curled down even further.

“Is not all well with you?” she asked. “You are awake earlier than usual.”

“Aye,” he said grumpily. “I am well enough. You have been doing your exercises?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Further along the path beside the river bank where I would not disturb anyone nor attract attention.”

Logan nodded but stayed silent.

“I see you made a friend in the night,” said Autumn, sitting in her usual cross-legged position beside him.

“What friend?” asked Logan, leaning his head against the wall of the dwelling and yawning.

“The cat,” she said. “I saw you after my meditation and you had a cat cradled in your arm.”

“Ohh, the cat,” said Logan, scratching his armpit. “’Twas no friend of mine. Mangy little bugger.”

“Indeed?” said Autumn. “It was curled in the crook of your arm. You both seemed very comfortable and pleased with the arrangement. Perhaps the cat more so, but you were both sound asleep.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, “but not for long.”

“Why?” asked Autumn. She was accustomed to Logan's grumpiness when he had been awakened earlier than usual. Food usually resolved it although they had no food and there was only silence from within the hut.

“I was woken by a dog,” said Logan. He scratched his armpit again. “A great big towering black thing with a head the size of, ohh, I don't know, the size of a very big thing. It started to lick my face then the cat's face and the cat did not like it. Neither did I for that matter.”

“Ohh,” said Autumn. She couldn't think of anything else to say.

“And that was not all,” said Logan, warming to his theme. “Once that Sploop cursed beast had woken me they started to fight. The dog from Yammoë started to try to bite the cat and the cat just lay there on its back in my armpit smacking the dog on its muzzle and angering it. Cursed dog lay on me as well and I couldn't push it off, not with the cat hindering one arm and the dog lying on the other.”

Autumn smiled.

“And the cursed cat had fleas,” exclaimed Logan irritably, scratching his armpit again. “I wager that foul dog had fleas as well, or worse.”

“Ahh, that is not so good,” said Autumn. “Fleas would try the patience of Alintakam and none have more patience than the deity of vengeance.”

“That is not the worst of it,” said Logan grumpily. He pulled down the front of his tunic so Autumn could see the scratches. “When the cat had had enough it ran away, excepting the dog had its head in its mouth and the cat clawed me trying to escape.” There was a faint smear of blood along the length of the scratches but, in truth, very

little.

“You have not had a good start to the day, friend Logan,” said Autumn, rising to her feet. “Come with me.”

“Why?” asked Logan, looking up at her. “What ills do you plan to add to my misery?”

“First we get you in the stream,” said Autumn, reaching down to grasp his tunic to pull him up. “Clothes and all, for short of a sorcerer there is no way to rid ourselves of fleas except by drowning them and if you have fleas I will have them soon, too.”

“And second?” asked Logan as he was dragged reluctantly to his feet.

“We find you some hamamielis for your scratches,” she said. “Cat scratches can fester and turn nasty very quickly. In fact there is only one thing worse than a cat scratch for foulness left inside.”

“Oh deep joy,” said Logan sadly, “and what is that?”

“The bite of a human,” said Autumn. “Come on, get in the water. Your head too, there may be fleas in your hair.”

* * *

“Greetings,” said Raupp, emerging slowly from the hut on his branch. He yawned then looked Logan up and down. “Why are you soaking wet? Did you fall in the stream?”

“Autumn pushed me,” said Logan, pulling off his shirt to wring it. “She took offence to my fleas.”

“Strordinary,” muttered Raupp. “What was it about them she found offensive? Does not everyone have fleas?”

“They were on Logan,” said Autumn, joining them with a few small yellow-green petals in her hand. “And soon they would be on me if we do not deal with them.”

“Oh,” said Raupp. He looked around then up at the sky. “Going to be

a nice day.”

“How is your leg this morning?” asked Autumn, casting around for some suitable stones.

“It hurts,” admitted Raupp, “but it does not burn.”

“Good,” said Autumn. She spotted a suitable flattish stone and squatted beside it to grind the petals into a paste with another stone.

“We have hamamielis inside,” said Raupp and he yawned again.

“This is sufficient,” said Autumn. “Logan has only a few small scratches.”

“The fleas scratched him?” asked Raupp. “Is it not supposed to be the other way around?”

“Logan likes to be different,” said Autumn. She scooped up the paste on her fingertips and dabbed it on his chest. Logan flinched even though it did not hurt. “Tis the scratch of a cat in the night.”

“Ohh,” said Raupp. “Probably one of the neighbours. What colour was it?”

“I do not know,” said Logan. “I wasn't really looking.”

“Where is Yulia?” asked Autumn, wiping the rest of the goo on Logan's shoulder.

“She is off somewhere,” said Raupp. “She said she wanted to talk to someone about something but I wasn't really listening. I am not at my best early in the morning.”

“Neither am I,” said Logan. “Autumn though is usually up before Astauand.”

Autumn wandered off to watch some birds sitting on a branch overlooking the stream.

“My Yulia also,” said Raupp. “It is most disheartening, is it not?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “How anyone can be cheerful that early is beyond me.” He pulled on his damp shirt which wiped most of the hamamielis paste off his chest.

“Aye,” said Raupp, looking at the sky again.

They both stood there wondering what to say next. Neither had any inspiration.

“Have you both broken your fast?” asked Raupp suddenly.

“We have no food,” said Logan before realising that this sounded almost like begging.

“Then come inside,” said Raupp. “We have some janja and a little honey if that is to your taste.”

“Ahh, I thank you,” said Logan then paused, wondering if he should say something about not intending to beg. He caught Raupp looking a little strangely at him and decided to smile instead. It was his first smile of the day.

“Autumn,” he called. “Raupp is offering us some janja and honey if you would like some.”

“Thank you most kindly, Raupp,” called back Autumn. “I shall join you shortly.”

“She likes to watch things,” said Logan then wondered why he said it.

“Oh aye,” said Raupp disinterestedly.

He hobbled back inside and Logan walked slowly after him. From the roof of the dwelling nearby, a small white, ginger and brown cat watched him go then jumped down and went to lie on Logan's blanket on the ground.

Chapter Nine

“That cloud looks like a sheep,” said Logan, pointing to a cloud in the sky.

Astauand was getting close to Its highest and still Yulia had not returned. Autumn and Logan were sitting beside the stream in Its mild warmth and Raupp was asleep again, beside his hut.

“I suppose,” said Autumn doubtfully. “Where are its legs?”

“Tis more like a sheep lying down,” said Logan. “But that lump on that side could be its head and the rest is white and fluffy like a sheep.”

“You have a good imagination, Logan the Visionary,” said Autumn. “All clouds are white and fluffy until they turn into rain clouds. Mayhap all could look like sheep in one pose or another.”

“Well, what about that one over there?” said Logan. “That looks more like a worm than a sheep. Or that one? It looks more like a duck or a mayhap a chicken.”

“They are just clouds,” said Autumn. “Tis only your imagination that makes them anything else.”

“I am not saying they are sheep or ducks,” said Logan, idly. “Only that they look like them. I know they are clouds.”

“I was not being critical,” said Autumn, lying back while keeping her feet on her knees. She shielded her eyes from Astauand’s light. “What say you to that one, then?”

“Which one, where?” asked Logan, craning his head back. “Ohhh, yes. That one is strange. It looks a little like The Karoi’s palace in Neander. It even has the bowl shaped roofs and that tower thing he had in the middle.”

“Tis an unusual shape for a cloud,” mused Autumn. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a cloud that was bigger at the top than the bottom.”

“Can we see the top from here?” asked Logan, flopping backwards so he could see the cloud better. “Is not the cloud just mist floating in the air? What looks like the top from here is most likely the front and the top be above it and out of sight through the mist for we are underneath it.”

“A fair point, Logan,” said Autumn. She hummed thoughtfully for a few moments. “I wonder if the birds see the clouds as we do?”

“Why would they not?” asked Logan. He caught a glimpse of movement off to one side and twisted his head. The cat was stalking Raupp. “Pah,” he muttered.

“I meant when they fly above the clouds,” said Autumn. “Do the clouds have the same shape when seen from above as they do when seen from below?”

“Hmmm, interesting,” said Logan, watching the cat edge its way closer to Raupp's toes. “Do birds even fly above the clouds?”

“I think so,” said Autumn. “I am sure I have seen birds fly out from behind clouds but now I think on it it could be that they were flying inside the cloud rather than above. How do they see where they are going?”

“Mayhap they can't,” said Logan, feeling a sense of tension rise slowly inside as the cat got closer to Raupp's bad leg. “Maybe they fly blind and trust to the deity of birds that they do not fly into anything solid.”

The cat flattened itself to the ground behind a small twig and studied Raupp's toes, the end of its tail flicking from side to side. Logan rolled over to watch and the cat ignored him. Then its tail stopped twitching and its haunches lifted slightly and shifted from side to side as the cat readied to pounce.

“Oh, there you are,” called Yulia, appearing from around the corner of the dwelling. “I was afraid you had decided to leave.”

The cat looked alarmed and hurtled off in the opposite direction to clamber up the corner post onto the thick straw roof.

“We would not be so rude,” called back Autumn as she got to her feet.

“Blurrrr,” muttered Raupp and wiped a hand over his face.

“We would thank you for your hospitality before departing,” said Autumn, coming over. “Beside, did you not want to continue our discussion?”

Logan got up as well and sauntered over.

“If that sits well with you,” said Yulia. She moved to one side and beckoned behind her. “This is Bruett, our headman.”

Raupp jerked upright in alarm and Bruett gently put his hand on Raupp's shoulder to reassure him.

“We met yesterday,” said Autumn, bowing her head in greeting. “I am Autumn Savannah and this is Logan.”

“I trust you did not find me overly rude yesterday,” said Bruett. “’Twas a sad occasion and I was not expecting strangers.”

“I quite understand,” said Autumn, looking at the other two who followed Bruett. “Greetings.”

“These be Fiedna and Octan,” said Yulia. “Both are elders here.”

“Greetings,” they said, almost in unison. Octan bowed his head to acknowledge Autumn's bow but Fiedna merely studied Autumn closely.

“You are very young,” she remarked.

“A fault that will doubtless be remedied in time,” said Autumn. “How old do you wish me to be?”

Fiedna smiled drily. “Indeed,” she said, the smile almost reaching her eyes.

Autumn smiled back and waited patiently. One lesson she had learnt

thoroughly in her time at the Esyup was that of patience while waiting for those older than her to speak. On one occasion she had asked one such why rainbows had many colours and it had been three days before the answer “I do not know” was forthcoming. Autumn had learned great patience.

“I hoped, with your permission,” started Yulia then stopped. She looked worried. “Ahh, you said you had no objection to others joining our talking?”

“None at all,” said Autumn. “I wager with such company our conversation will be most enjoyable.”

“Shall we stay outside or go inside?” asked Yulia, turning to Bruett.

Bruett glanced at the side of the small dilapidated hut.

“Perhaps outside,” he said diplomatically. “It is pleasantly warm and there is shade if it becomes warmer.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. She glanced at Logan and he shrugged to say he had no idea what this was about either. “Would you prefer to stay here or go over beside the stream?”

“We are all here,” said Fiedna, “so let us all stay here.”

Octan helped her lower herself to the ground then sat beside her. Bruett sat a little further away. Autumn sat facing them and Logan sat beside Raupp, with his back against the wall. Yulia hovered anxiously.

“Something to eat?” she asked. “Or to drink, perhaps?”

“In time,” said Bruett, smiling up at her. “This may not take long at all.”

“Can I ask why you are all here?” asked Autumn. “I venture this is not how you normally welcome strangers.”

The cat on the roof peered over watching the goings on below with curiosity.

“Tis not a welcoming party,” said Octan pleasantly enough, “although you are most welcome to our humble town. ’Tis only that Yulia held your conversation to be most interesting and felt we may be interested in the continuation of your thoughts.”

“So you have an interest in what constitutes a just cause for suffering?” asked Autumn.

“Does not every right thinking person?” asked Fiedna.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “Although many would no doubt argue that custom is sufficient just cause and would consider themselves to be right thinking in doing so. As head man and elders here do you have a specific interest in this topic?”

“As leaders we must have an interest in every topic that affects the welfare of the people,” said Bruett.

“And customs can change,” said Octan. “I would argue that a truly right thinking person would seek to change custom where that custom is lacking.”

“You have a particular custom in mind?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Fiedna. “We desire only to hear your thoughts.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “My thinking is that, in an ideal world, there is no just cause for suffering.”

At this point the cat decided little of interest was happening and settled itself for a nap.

“What?” exclaimed Fiedna, stiffening. “You would not see punishment for a wrong as a just cause for the suffering of the wrong doer?”

“As I said,” said Autumn, “in an ideal world, for in such an ideal world there would be no wrong doings and therefore no cause for punishment.”

“Hah!” exclaimed Fiedna. “Help me up, Octan. I have heard enough.”

“A moment,” said Octan, putting a hand on Fiedna’s arm. “And in a world that is not ideal, Autumn?”

“Then we should strive to make it ideal,” said Autumn. “I do not see that making a wrong doer suffer improves the world.”

“So what would you do?” asked Bruett. “If someone harms another what would you do by way of retribution?”

“Therein lies the nub of the problem,” said Autumn. “Retribution. By its very nature it calls for suffering of equal or greater measure. If you seek only to improve the world then retribution ceases to exist for retribution only increases overall suffering.”

“But should not the wrong doer be taught a lesson?” asked Octan.

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “The wrong doer needs to learn the nature of the wrong so that he or she does not repeat the offence but retribution does not necessarily do that. It may in some cases but more likely it only causes resentment and encourages the wrong doer to devise ways to avoid retribution in the future rather than avoid doing the wrong. At its extreme, punishment by death merely hastens the wrong doer’s transition to Yammoe but does not remove the original wrong. It is merely revenge and revenge solves nothing.”

“So how would you teach the wrong doer that their action was wrong?” asked Bruett.

“That is where the difficulty lies,” said Autumn. “In an ideal world all would be brought up in such a way that all know what is wrong and seek to avoid doing wrongs, but this is not an ideal world. Therefore an alternative is to talk with the wrong doer and show them how their action is wrong so that should the situation arise again the person has the choice not to commit that wrong.”

“So you are saying there should be no retribution beyond a talking to?” asked Fiedna.

The cat’s head suddenly jerked up as a rustle, unheard by the people below, came from within the straw of the thatching. Its eyes opened

wide and it scanned the roof.

“I wager than oft times that may be sufficient,” said Autumn, “but there is another difficulty. What one may perceive to be a wrong may not be perceived as such by another. Before any consideration can be given to retribution surely it is only fair that there should be an agreement over whether there was indeed a wrong done.”

“I do not follow you,” said Bruett.

“If a hungry person takes food from another who has a store of food, is there truly a wrong done to the one with the store?” asked Autumn.

“Of course,” said Bruett. “That is theft.”

“So you think the one who is hungry is in the wrong?” asked Autumn. “Could it be that the one who has plenty but will not share is in the wrong for causing the hunger of the other?”

“But ...” started Fiedna then sank into thoughtfulness.

“I have heard it said,” said Autumn, “that some punish a child for taking food by denying food to the child. I confess I cannot see the logic of that. Denying food to one who is hungry only makes them hungrier and more likely to take food again. Would it not be better to give that child some food and teach them to ask for food when they are hungry rather than to take it?”

“Indeed,” said Octan, “but what of one who kills or maims another? Should they not be killed or maimed likewise? An eye for an eye?”

“It has the advantage of simplicity,” said Autumn, “but how is the world a better place? All you then have is two dead or maimed instead of one. Would it not be better to teach the one who killed that that is a wrong so that they do not do it again and instead spend the remainder of their life helping others? Indeed, thinking on it it could make things worse. After all, if someone takes one eye from two others and in return loses both theirs then you have two who are partly blind and one who is wholly blind. Where is the sense in that? No, the only sensible solution is to teach all not to do wrong in the first place and

be very clear on what is truly wrong.”

“And what if someone will not learn what is wrong?” asked Bruett.

“I have no answer for that,” said Autumn, “save that the teaching should not end simply because someone does not learn. Perhaps it is the manner of teaching that is at fault and not the mind of the learner. This is why discussions such as these are good and it should not be left to one or a few to make these decisions. All should take part so that all have the chance to learn and enlarge their perspective. But at its heart discussions such as these have at their core the debate over whether it is better to prevent the wrong from being done or to punish the wrong doer afterwards. It seems to me that the world would be a better place if wrongs were prevented rather than adding wrong to wrong by making the wrong doer suffer in turn.”

“An interesting point,” said Bruett, “but what about ...?” He stopped and cocked his head. “What is happening?”

He got up and went to the corner of the hut to look.

“Some strangers have arrived,” he said. “I do not like the look of them.”

“Help me up,” demanded Fiedna, grasping Octan's arm.

“Aloidia!” exclaimed Bruett, going pale. “I recognise that man. 'Tis Ipengar!”

“Ipengar?” exclaimed Octan, letting Fiedna drop heavily to the ground. “Oh no! Not again! Is he alone?”

“There are others with him,” said Bruett. “Aloidia protect us! I must go and talk with them. Surely they cannot want more. 'Tis the beginning of winter.”

“Who is Ipengar?” asked Autumn as Bruett stepped out onto the path and started walking nervously towards the arrivals.

“He is of Chanwar,” said Raupp sourly. “I wager the others are too.”

He spat on the ground. “This is a dark day indeed.”

“I will speak with them as well,” said Autumn. “Mayhap their aim is peaceful or they can be persuaded.”

She headed off after Bruett.

“Autumn!” cried Logan, “your robe!”

He dashed into the hut and reappeared a moment later with her robe in his arms and hurried after her.

“Here,” he said, catching up with her. “Put this on. There may be trouble.”⁶

“There are only six of them,” said Autumn, stopping. “But if it pleases you.”

“It pleases me,” said Logan, helping her put it on. “And tie up the cord.”

“There is the possibility of trouble and disharmony, Logan,” said Autumn. “Stay well back.”

“Your staff!” exclaimed Logan. “I’ll get it. Wait for me.” He turned and hurried away. Autumn smiled after him then started walking purposefully after Bruett.

“Greetings, Ipengar,” said Bruett rather breathlessly. “It has been some time since we last saw you.”

“Aye, Bruett,” said Ipengar, looking around. The women had disappeared and men were running from the fields. “Too long. We should visit you more often.”

“You are always most welcome,” said Bruett unctuously, washing his hands in imaginary water. “Is this a social visit?”

6 See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*. Mother Midcarn gave Autumn a length of ribbon to attach to the hems of her robe. This ribbon is imbued with magical properties that protect Autumn from fatal injury.

“We be looking for someone,” said Ipengar. “Two, in fact.”

“And who may they be?” asked Bruett.

“Her,” said Ebin, pointing towards Autumn, still some way away. “And him, the one running away.”

“You be sure?” asked Ipengar.

“Yes,” said Leryn. “There be no mistaking them.”

“Right,” said Ipengar. “Bruett, stand aside. This is nothing to do with you.”

“Ahh,” said Bruett nervously. “Umm, Ipengar, if I might have a word.”

“Oh, if you must,” said Ipengar impatiently. “Only be quick about it. I have a job to do.”

“I have a dilemma,” said Bruett, his hand washing getting faster. “While I have no desire to impede you, those two are guests here and we are responsible for them.”

“I relieve you of that responsibility,” said Ipengar. “None can defy Chanwar so you have no choice in the matter.”

“But ...” started Bruett, beads of sweat breaking out on his face.

“But me no buts,” said Ipengar. “Get out of my way or be damned.”

“Get out of his way, Bruett,” said Autumn, coming up behind him. “I wager his grievance is with me, not you.”

“She be the one for certain, Ipengar,” said Leryn. “And him what’s running back again.”

“Right,” said Ipengar, staring at Autumn. “Oh go away, Bruett, you snivelling bastard. You’re annoying me. Be off with you and count yourself lucky.”

“Y-y-yes,” stammered Bruett. “I’m sorry,” he muttered, glancing apologetically at Autumn then he backed away quickly.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, returning Ipengar’s stare. “I know these two, Ebin and Leryn, for we have met before but I don’t think I know you.”

“I am Ipengar,” said Ipengar pleasantly for he anticipated no difficulty in what lay ahead. In fact he was looking forward to it. “And these be Teuxa, Udjin and Klamme.”

“Greetings,” said Autumn. “You are all of Chanwar also?”

“Aye,” said Ipengar. “That be, ahh, Logan?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Logan, go and stand with Bruett. I fancy he needs help staying upright.”

“Your staff, Autumn,” said Logan proffering it.

“I will not be needing it,” said Autumn, continuing to look at Ipengar. “I am certain this will be a peaceful meeting.”

“I am sure it will be,” said Ipengar, smiling. “Chanwar has asked me to collect a small token from you both so if you are willing, we’ll collect and be on our way, all nice and peaceful like.”

“If it is within my power to give, then I shall give,” said Autumn, “and Logan likewise.”

“Do not let her mislead you with her fancy words, Ipengar,” said Ebin. “She be a right treacherous one and no mistaking.”

“What is it Chanwar wants from us?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing of any great substance,” said Ipengar, putting his large hands on his hips. “Just five toes from each of you.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “I am afraid that will not be possible.” She shifted one foot slightly to improve her balance.

“Oh, of course it is,” said Ipengar. “You both have ten each, I can see that, and Chanwar not be minding which foot they come from. They don't even have to all be from the same foot. Three from one and two from the other will satisfy or however you want to arrange it.”

“I regret I am very attached to all my toes,” said Autumn, “as is Logan to his. Can I ask why Chanwar wants such tokens?”

“So that you never forget Chanwar,” said Ipengar. “That is all. Now, will you give freely or do we have to do this the hard way?”

“Is there no third option?” asked Autumn. “Can we not find some amicable solution whereby neither I, nor Logan nor any of you come to any harm?”

“Oh, I wager none of us will come to any harm,” said Ipengar with a grin. “And if you be quiet then you will come to no harm neither, beyond the loss of a few of those dainty little things what sits on your feet and don't do much.”

“Once again I have to decline,” said Autumn. She took one step backwards.

“And for the first and last time I have to insist,” said Ipengar stepping forward. “Grab her, lads.”

Autumn somersaulted backwards just as Udjin and Klamme lunged at her. She landed on the bank of the stream and one foot slid in the mud so she ended up on her hands and knees.

Disturbed by the commotion, a duck emerged from the rushes and started leading her four ducklings across the path to somewhere quieter.

“Hold!” said Autumn loudly, thrusting one hand out in front of her over the top of the ducklings.

Ipengar and the others burst out laughing.

“Do not harm the ducks,” said Autumn calmly. “They have no part in

this.”

“So this is your great fighter, Ebin?” sneered Ipengar. “See how she grovels! You two, get the lad.”

He looked down at Autumn then lifted his booted foot and stamped hard on the last of the line of fluffy little ducklings.

“Aghh,” muttered Autumn as his boot crashed down on her wrist. She opened her hand and the duckling ran hurriedly after its mother who chided it with a whack on its behind with her bill. Autumn rolled and pushed upwards with that arm, unbalancing Ipengar and at the same time kicked Klamme hard in the throat with her heel. Ipengar tumbled just as Logan faced off against Teuxa and Ebin with Autumn's staff raised.

“Just you try it,” he growled, and waved her staff at them. It wasn't quite in the way she waved the staff herself and one end caught Bruett on the shoulder. Teuxa and Ebin separated and went in different directions around him.

Udjin and Leryn both drew their swords and slashed downwards at Autumn as she rolled. Leryn's sword passed through her chest and left a nasty gash in the path. Udjin's sword snagged on Leryn's hilt and they both cursed each other. Autumn finished her roll and jumped to her feet. Instantly she banged both their heads together and they fell. She jerked backwards as Ipengar's sword thrust at her then she spun and caught him in the midriff with the ball of her foot. He doubled over, dropping his sword and Autumn continued the spin, letting its momentum help launch her so both feet landed in the middle of Ebin's back, knocking him into Bruett who collapsed on the ground with Ebin on top of him.

Logan jerked backwards and caught Teuxa on the shins with Autumn's staff. Teuxa doubled up in pain and Logan had the presence of mind to knee him in the face, narrowly missing Autumn's head with the staff that was flailing wildly behind him. Ebin struggled to his feet, not caring that he was on top of Bruett and Autumn chopped at the back of his neck just as Ipengar jumped on her so she missed. She rammed her elbow in his belly and jerked her head backwards into his face. His

nose burst and he fell backwards. Spinning around, Logan whacked Ebin over the head with her staff and he collapsed on top of Bruett again. This time unconscious.

Autumn leapt backwards and looked around. Ipengar was rolling on the ground clutching his face. Ebin was unconscious on top of Bruett. Teuxa was sitting, groaning and holding his head. Udjin and Leryn were lying on the path but both were beginning to stir. Klamme was advancing towards her, sword in one hand and the other holding his throat. The ducks were nowhere to be seen.

“Bitch,” wheezed Klamme. “You’re going to die.”

He slashed at her with his sword and Autumn stepped calmly backwards. He advanced and slashed at her again.

“Stop,” she said. “This can go on forever and you will not catch me. Put your sword away.”

“Raghh,” wheezed Klamme and threw himself at her. She stepped to one side and hit him on the back of his neck as he lurched past. He fell in a heap.

“Are you unhurt, Logan?” asked Autumn, walking back.

“Aye,” said Logan. “Why are you holding your wrist?”

“Ipengar stamped on it,” she said. “I fear he may have broken a bone. Collect their weapons while I attend to their hurts.”

Chapter Ten

“That was a neat ruse,” said Fiedna as Yulia bound Autumn's wrist. “Although I am not sure what purpose it served.”

“Twas not a ruse,” said Autumn. “I did not want any of the ducklings hurt. It was not their fight.”

“Hmmm,” said Fiedna, watching Autumn's face. “And now you have a broken bone in consequence.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn and she smiled. “And how many broken bones would that duckling have suffered otherwise? I know not how many bones in a duck's body but I wager none would have been left unbroken.”

“Perhaps it was the duckling's time,” said Fiedna.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, wriggling her fingers. “No, that is not too tight, Yulia. Thank you. And yet, Fiedna, perhaps it was not. It is not for me to judge when any creature's time has arrived. I merely do what I can to protect and prevent suffering. Then again, no doubt if it had been the duckling's time then it would have died regardless of what I did.”

“Then why did you fight those men?” asked Octan. “Would they not have suffered less had you left them alone?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. She resisted the urge to flex and move her wrist. “But the fighting was not of my choosing. They were intent on harming Logan and myself and that I could not permit. I was, however, careful to minimise their injuries.”

“That was going to be my next question,” admitted Octan. “I wager you could easily have killed all of them.”

“Very likely,” said Autumn, “but what good would that do? This way those six can reflect on what happened and mayhap choose a different direction for the paths of their lives.”

“And what if they don't?” asked Fiedna.

“Then they will suffer the consequences,” said Autumn. “Either in this world or the next. Can I ask why you ask me these things? Do you want to continue our discussion from before?”

“No,” said Fiedna. “I have heard and seen enough. Octan?”

“Aye,” said Octan. “There is food for thought, that is for sure. How is Bruett, Yulia?”

“Still disorientated,” said Yulia, coming over from looking at Bruett. “He has no injuries but he is too old to be involved in fights. A rest and some food are all he needs.”

“Good,” said Fiedna. “Tell me, Autumn, if it is not too much of an intrusion, what are your plans?”

“We have no plans,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan who was sitting idly watching the clouds again. “We were heading for the coast so, unless there is a pressing need otherwise, we shall continue to do so.”

“The day moves on,” said Fiedna. “You intend to leave soon or can we prevail upon you to accept our hospitality for another night?”

“You are most welcome to stay with us again,” said Yulia. “Raupp enjoys your company, as indeed do I.”

“Then we will be happy to stay,” said Autumn.

“Is Logan your era'owen?” asked Fiedna of Autumn since Logan showed no sign of wanting to join the conversation.

“No,” said Autumn. “We are friends and travelling companions, nothing more. Why do you ask?”

“You speak for him,” said Fiedna.

“Actually she does not,” said Logan, coming out of his reverie. “It is simply that I go wherever Autumn goes and she is finally beginning to

understand that. If I wanted to do something else I would say so but I do not.”

“So be it, then,” said Fiedna. “Octan, help me up. Ahh, thank you. My bones are not as young as they used to be. Yulia, come with me. I have a rabbit you can offer to your guests for their evening meal.”

“There is no need,” said Autumn, trying not to notice Logan perk up at the prospect of meat.

“There is every need,” said Fiedna. “You have taught us a great lesson today and the rabbit is but a token of our repayment for that.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn, looking up at her. “What lesson have I taught you? Surely it cannot be my views on wrong doers. You did not seem overly impressed by what I said earlier.”

“Mayhap we will have opportunities to talk further on that topic,” said Fiedna, “but your lesson is closely related. You have shown us that those of Chanwar can be bested and that gives us hope for the future. Until now we have always submitted and that may not be the best policy. I will leave you now for I have much to do although I hope to see you again in the morning.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn.

“Did you think there was something odd about that?” asked Logan after the three had gone, taking Bruett with them.

“How so?” asked Autumn, watching her fingers move as she flexed them.

“I don't know,” said Logan. “It just seemed odd to me. Why do you suppose she thinks there will be opportunities for more discussions if we are leaving in the morning?”

“No doubt she is as ignorant of the future as we are,” said Autumn, “and who knows what opportunities will arise. Come, let us go back to Raupp and Yulia's dwelling. There is a matter I wish to discuss with you.”

“What did you want to talk to me about?” asked Logan when they had finished telling Raupp what had happened.

Yulia had returned and was inside the hut preparing the rabbit. She had seemed to want to talk with Raupp so Autumn and Logan had gone outside to sit and watch the stream.

“I have no wish to criticise you,” said Autumn, “especially when you are willing and enthusiastic.”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan, his shoulders slumping. He plucked a stem of grass and started to wind it around his finger “What have I done now?” He looked at Autumn with a touch of despondency in his eyes.

“Only your very best,” said Autumn, putting a reassuring hand on his arm. “And I am proud of you, let me stress that.”

“But,” said Logan. “I sense a but coming along.”

“Ahh, you know me too well,” said Autumn with a smile. “Indeed, but. You were very brave in taking on those two men with my staff.”

“But,” said Logan. “Come on, spit it out.”

“But I venture you are a danger to yourself and all around you,” said Autumn with a small shrug, “not just those who are attacking you.”

“Ah,” said Logan. He slowly unwound the grass stem while he thought about that. “Well, I do not have your skills and they came at me and you were busy with the others. What else was I supposed to do?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and I am proud of you for what you did.”

“I sense there is more to this but,” said Logan. “You haven't finished, have you?”

“No,” admitted Autumn. “I am thinking it be best if I gave you some training in the use of a staff, even though you are not a fighter. 'Twill

be safer all round, I think.”

“Woo-hoo,” said Logan, enthusiastically. “You’re going to make me as good as you?”

“I suspect you are starting too late,” said Autumn, “but how good you become depends on how much practice you give it. For certain my intent is not to make you into a fighter. I only want you to be able to use a staff when you have to without injuring the innocent.”

“Good,” said Logan, nodding. “I confess to feeling stupid and clumsy as I tried to wield the thing. It did not come naturally to me. Why have you not thought this before?”

“I daresay it was remiss of me,” said Autumn, “but you have not been involved in any serious fighting before, at least not while with me, nor have we had onlookers.”

“Fair enough,” said Logan. “When shall we start? Now?”

“If you wish,” said Autumn, “although only the basics. I wager from the smells that food will be ready soon and it would be rude of us not to eat when Yulia and Raupp do.”

“Excellent,” said Logan enthusiastically. “Mayhap I won’t feel so useless when you beat off hundreds of attackers single-handedly and leave me standing there like an ear of enmern. I’ll get your staff.”

He leapt up and ran back to the hut to collect Autumn’s staff before she had a chance to comment of his feelings of uselessness.

“Here it is,” he said, running back. One end came dangerously close to tripping him although he was careful to keep the other end well away from Autumn.

“Good,” said Autumn, standing up. “The first and most important lesson is to remember at all times that there are two ends, not just the one in front of you.”

“Well, of course,” said Logan. “Is that not obvious?”

“You would think so,” she said, taking the staff from him, “but it is easy to forget what the one end is doing when you are concentrating on the other. Now, hold the staff here at all times,” and she pointed to a spot about half of half way along the staff.

Logan took the staff where she indicated.

“Now, put this end in your armpit,” she instructed, “and hold your hand underneath, with your thumb pointing away from you.”

“Like this?” asked Logan.

“That is very good,” said Autumn. “Relax your grip a little. You only want to hold the staff, not break it. Good. Now, your feet.”

Logan looked down at his feet and the front end of the staff banged on the ground.

“No,” said Autumn. “Be aware of where the end is. If you bend over, lift the staff so it stays in much the same place as you bend.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, “like this?” and he bent over again, this time lifting the staff.

“Not so high,” said Autumn, “but you can practice that. Now, your feet. Stay on the balls of your feet and stand with one foot a little behind the other but spread so you are stable and not about to fall over. No, not that far apart. Close enough so you can walk or jump. That's better. Good. Give me the staff.”

Logan handed Autumn the staff and she backed away three paces.

“Now, I will toss you the staff,” she said, “and you catch it and go into that stance. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” said Logan, dancing a little with enthusiasm.

Autumn tossed him the staff and he caught it and immediately went into the stance.

“That is good,” said Autumn, watching him. “Hold the staff so that the end is in your armpit and your arm is not fully extended nor overly bent.”

“Like this?” asked Logan, adjusting his stance.

“A little further forward,” said Autumn, moving in to shift his hand a little. “That’s better.”

“Why just that way?” asked Logan.

“You want to hold it far enough back so you can thrust forward,” said Autumn, “but far enough forward so you can ram it backward if someone should come up from behind you.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, “makes sense,” and he jabbed the staff backwards at some imaginary attacker.

“With practice you will have more power in it,” said Autumn, “but you learn quickly. Feet.”

Logan quickly adjusted his feet the way she had said.

“Good,” said Autumn. “That is the basic stance and it is good for both defending and attacking.”

“When you do it you thrust your other arm forward,” said Logan.

“That is an extra defensive thing,” said Autumn, “and good for balance. If you feel more stable then do it as well.”

Logan thrust his arm forward, bent his knees a little and glowered at imaginary foes.

“Good,” said Autumn, “although you do not need to scowl at people. The mere fact you hold a staff like that will be intimidating enough.”

Logan’s face relaxed and he gave a small laugh. “As you wish,” he said.

“Good,” said Autumn. “Standing still there are four moves you can make. Thrusting forward and backward we have already done. The other two are swinging to either side. Stop!”

Logan stopped lashing the staff from side to side.

“There is a technique for doing this effectively,” said Autumn. “The way you are doing it will have you off balance. Swing from the hips, not the waist and shift your chest to compensate.”

“Like this?” asked Logan, swinging round. He went too far and staggered and the end of the staff crashed into the ground.

“Yes,” said Autumn, “like that but not so far. If you need to swing round that far you will need footwork and we will work on that another time. For now, keep your feet where they are and practice swinging the staff only as far as you can without falling over. And keep the end of the staff at chest height.”

“There is more to this than I thought,” exclaimed Logan. “The staff seems to have a mind of its own.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and now you have the basic stance you need to learn to control the staff and not have it control you. That is why you need to practice.”

“And practice I shall,” said Logan. He gave the staff some experimental side swings. “And when I have mastered this, what next?”

“Footwork,” said Autumn. “Then how to parry another without attacking.”

“And all the while with one end under my arm?” asked Logan, standing up straight.

“Until it is safe to do otherwise,” said Autumn. “Then and only then will we move on to two handed use of the staff.”

“I wager I will be a fearsome fighter by then,” said Logan and swung

the staff again.

He spotted Yulia coming out of the hut and leapt forward.

“Yield now or face your doom,” he cried, dropping into the stance and pointing the staff at her with a grimace on his face.

Yulia screamed and cowered back against the side of the hut.

“No, Logan!” cried Autumn, running forward to grasp the staff. “Never attack someone who is defenceless!”

“I’m sorry,” said Logan, apologetically. He let go of the staff and went over to Yulia who was watching him very closely.

“I am very sorry,” he said. “I was only practising and did not mean to frighten you.”

“What’s going on?” bellowed Raupp, staggering out on one leg and his branch. He brandished a knife in his other hand.

“I frightened Yulia,” said Logan. “’Twas a mistake on my part. I am most truly sorry.”

“Ohh, ’tis only you,” said Raupp relieved. “I thought them bastards were back again. Be you all right, Yulia?”

“Aye,” said Yulia, still keeping a close eye on Logan. “I was taken by surprise, that is all. Get you back inside. You’ll open up your leg again, running around like that.”

She ushered Raupp inside then reappeared in the doorway.

“I only came out to tell you food is ready,” she called.

“Thank you,” said Autumn, propping her staff against the wall. She looked thoughtfully at Logan then went inside. Logan followed, feeling a little ashamed of himself.

“Sit yourselves,” said Yulia. “I have made a stew.”

Raupp was back on the straw bed and there was an upended wooden bucket at the table with the two chairs. Logan sat on it.

“No, you take a chair,” said Yulia, “that is for me. You are our guest.”

“No,” said Logan. “I shall do penance from here.”

Yulia laughed. “Oh don't be so silly. I did not know you were practising. I know you would never hurt me.”

“True enough,” said Logan, looking at Autumn. “But I shall stay here if it's all the same with you.”

“As you wish,” said Yulia, ladling out stew into bowls. “It is the eating that matters, not the sitting.”

* * *

“Are you sure you have both had enough?” asked Yulia after both Logan and Raupp had emptied their second bowlfuls of stew.

“That was right delicious, love,” said Raupp looking wistfully at the cauldron.

“Aye,” said Logan. He leaned back a little, well aware he was sitting on a bucket. “Very nice it was,” and he stifled a belch.

“We thank you for your hospitality,” said Autumn, “although I venture you do not have meat often. You are most generous to share it with us.”

“Oh, get on with you,” said Yulia with a smile. “If it weren't for you we would not be having rabbit at all. Fiedna gave it to you not us. Now, Raupp and me will be going to a town meeting shortly. I hope you will not take it amiss that you are not invited?”

“We are not of this town,” said Autumn. “There is no reason why we should be invited. We will not take it amiss.”

“Good,” said Yulia. “There is some stew left and aroao, janja and some

cheese. Help yourselves if the desire takes you. We may be a while so do not feel obliged to wait up for us.”

“Shall we sleep in the same place as last night?” asked Logan.

“If it was comfortable enough for you,” said Yulia, “else sleep anywhere you like.”

“Thank you,” said Autumn. “And do not take it amiss if we depart in the morning. It is no rejection of you or your hospitality, it is only that we are travellers and we do not like to strain hospitality.”

“Tis no strain,” said Raupp, “and if we get to eat like this when you are here then I entreat you to stay as long as possible.” He gave a belly laugh then put his hand to his leg as a pain stabbed through it. “Eeee, why laughing hurts the leg I do not know but it does. No matter, it will heal in time. Yes, you be travellers and travel is what you do. If you do not you will need to think up another name for yourselves.” He laughed again, only not so deeply.

“Best we be going, Raupp,” said Yulia. “Twill take longer to get there than usual seeing as how you can barely walk.”

“I confess to being a little surprised Raupp is needed at the meeting,” said Autumn conversationally. “Could you not tell him of what is said on your return?”

“I fancy there will be a voting,” said Yulia, looking at the table. “If there is then Raupp must play his part.”

“Ah well,” said Autumn. “If you need help bringing Raupp back after dark, come and get me. It will be easier with the two of us.”

“Thank you,” said Yulia, “but I doubt that will be needed. There will be others there who can help although the way is flat and I can manage. Come, Raupp. Let us be making our way. Sleep well, if you should be asleep before we return.”

“And you,” said Autumn.

“Yes,” echoed Logan.

They watched Yulia help Raupp get outside where he could manage more easily with his branch than Logan let out a long belch.

“Ahh, that was wanting to come out,” he said patting his belly.

“And by the sound of it, just as well it did,” said Autumn. “I would thank you, Logan.”

“For belching?” asked Logan puzzled, “or for waiting until they had gone?”

“For bringing me a new understanding,” said Autumn.

“Oh,” said Logan. He pursed his lips and nodded several times while thinking back. “What did I do?”

“Let us go outside,” said Autumn. “I prefer to be in the open air.”

They went outside and settled themselves on the bank of the stream again. Astauand was low in the sky to the West and birds were beginning to call their good nights. An early bat, perhaps one that had had a bad dream, swooped low then returned to its tree.

“Do you remember when we were on Zuit?” asked Autumn, watching the water thoughtfully. “Lotadil wanted to hire me to be an assassin.”⁷

“Yes,” said Logan. “I have never seen you so angry.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “And my anger was because I have dedicated myself to the protection of others, not their killing.”

“That's right,” said Logan, wondering where this was going.

“And you recall there have been times when others wanted me to fight for money or to wager on my victories?” asked Autumn. She settled herself more comfortably and pulled the edges of her robe a little

7 See *The Annals ~ The Fourth Tale*: Lotadil wanted to hire Autumn to assassinate his brother, Ibu'oden.

tighter for the evening was getting chilly.

“Yes,” said Logan. “Not many but there have been some.”

“I was taught to question at the Esyup,” she said quietly. “And there was much that I did question but there was also much that it never occurred to me to question. When I left the Esyup I took with me a lot of thought and many skills but it never occurred to me to question the why of many of them.”

“I do not understand,” said Logan. He matched Autumn for quietness for he sensed that this was a matter of importance for her.

“Have you ever wondered why I have such fighting skills?” she asked. “Everything I was taught was about compassion and avoiding suffering both for myself and for all others, including animals and yet at the same time I was given skills that could cause great suffering and death.”

“Not really,” said Logan. “I would have thought it was obvious. How can you protect others if you have not the skills to protect them? I cannot for I do not have those skills.”

“That is what I thought also,” said Autumn. “When people wanted me to fight for money or to kill for money I thought on it and came to the same conclusion as you have just said.”

“So what is the problem?” asked Logan. “Why are we talking of what is obvious?”

“Because often there lies something hidden behind what is obvious,” said Autumn and she tossed a stone into the water. The ripples spread slowly outwards and a duck on the far side bobbed up and down with them.

“Ahh,” said Logan. “You think there is another reason?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, “and 'twas you who made me think of it.” She turned her head to look at him.

“How so?” he asked. “I know little of your Esyup and nothing of why they do what they do.”

“I was watching you when you were learning the use of the staff,” she said. “You enjoyed it and you were pleased with the skills you acquired.”

“And that was wrong?” he asked.

“Not at all,” said Autumn. “The practising would be most irksome if it were otherwise. I was the same.”

“So what then?” asked Logan. “I am getting lost here.”

“Tis simple enough,” said Autumn. “After you pretended to attack Yulia I remembered that I did the same when I was young and during our meal I was thinking on when I stopped attacking others for the fun of it.”

“And?” asked Logan, wishing she'd get to the point.

“There was no particular time or event,” she said. “It is simply that as my other training progressed I learnt not to attack excepting only in defence and that is what you have made me understand. I have great skills that could, if I so desired, be used to harm.”

“Granted,” said Logan. “I doubt there are many, if any, who could stop you if that was what you wanted, but you don't.”

“Ahh,” she said, tossing another stone in the stream. “You remember Cymogene? She had skills on par with mine but she chose a different path that caused great harm and because of that I had to kill her.”

“I am missing your point,” said Logan, frowning.

“I am not explaining well,” said Autumn, “for I am not entirely clear in my mind on this but it seems to me now that I was taught to believe what I believe so that I would use my fighting skills wisely and in support of what I believe rather than for my own gain or pleasure.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “Now I follow. You are saying that if you had been taught the fighting skills without the belief to restrain then you would be like Cymogene?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I venture the elders had to teach me both for the fighting skills without the compassion would be dangerous and the compassion without the fighting skills would be useless. The two must, of necessity, go together. Each supports and restrains the other. I venture Cymogene was taught the skills but not the compassion or if she was then she rejected it.”

“Well, that makes sense,” said Logan. “Your elders were not stupid people.”

“That is true,” said Autumn, “although there were times when I was young when I thought they were. Still, that is by the by. What makes me wonder now, however, is what I would be like if I had neither the skills nor the compassion.”

“I wager you would still be you,” said Logan. “How could you be otherwise?”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “perhaps not. Could it be that I have the views I have because I have the power to have them?”

“You've lost me again,” said Logan.

“We were talking with Fiedna and the others earlier,” said Autumn, “and I was talking of how retribution is wrong.”

“Yes,” said Logan, “I confess I don't entirely agree with you but I can see your argument.”

“But think on this, Logan Philosopher,” said Autumn. She sighed and tossed a handful of pebbles into the water. “I wonder if those that are bested by me learn only what may befall them if they wrong me again rather than not to do wrong in the first place. They learn to fear my retribution rather than to desire to do good. And given that, what happens to those who have not my skills? How do they prevent a wrong being done or the repeating of a wrong? I think I begin to see

that retribution may be necessary after all.”

Chapter Eleven

“Already you are much improved,” said Autumn as she joined Logan after doing her morning exercises.

“Ahh, you were watching?” asked Logan, leaning on Autumn's staff.

“Of course,” said Autumn. “Twas useful for me as well.”

“How so?” asked Logan, curious.

“Oft times when fighting there is more than one,” she said “and I need to track the others at the same time. This practising is good for the moves but the trees and stream stay where they are and offer no challenge.”

“I imagine I did not either,” said Logan. “As you will not let me move my feet.”

“All in good time,” she replied. “There is nothing to be gained by building on weak foundations. When your hand is comfortable with the grip and your muscles are content with knowing how to move then we can add more to your skills as a staff man. Come, let us return to Raupp and Yulia. They may think we have left without bidding them farewell.”

“Well, you know better than I,” said Logan as they started walking back alongside the stream. “For certain it still feels strange ramming the staff backwards. I feel the staff should be thrust forward like a knife or sword not backward. How is your wrist?”

“It still pains me,” said Autumn, “and I wager if ill fortune should bring me into another fight before it is healed then I will be at a disadvantage.”

“Pah!” exclaimed Logan, resting Autumn's staff across his shoulders and letting his arms drape over it. Autumn moved sideways a little to stay out of range. “Even with one arm tied behind your back you will still best any.”

“I thank you for your faith in me,” she said with a smile, “but 'tis best not put to the test. Ahh, it seems they have visitors. Likely Bruett and the other elders have come to say farewell also.”

“They look serious,” said Logan. “Do you suppose we have done something wrong? Mayhap someone has complained that we were using their land or something even though there were only trees and no fields.”

“Oh, I doubt it,” said Autumn. “I venture all round here know we are moving on. Most likely being elders they try to look serious all the time. 'Twould not be proper for elders to be laughing all the time or so they likely think.”

“I wonder why there are people gathered further along the path?” said Logan. “'Tis like they are waiting for something.”

“Perhaps they all intend to bid us farewell,” said Autumn. “Mayhap they are relieved we are going. After all, Ipengar and the others were only here because of us.”

“That's true enough,” said Logan, sliding the staff from his shoulders. “Still, I confess I will be glad to move on. Yulia and Raupp be nice people but Bufon itself is a little dreary. I know we do not seek out excitements, but, oh, I don't know.”

“'Tis a peaceful enough place,” said Autumn, “but I know what you mean. Mayhap it is because they are followers of Aloidia and leave much to Its caprices rather than make their own destinies.”

“Greetings,” said Bruett as they approached.

He rose to greet them, as did Octan but Fiedna remained seated. She did smile, albeit briefly.

“I trust you are feeling better today?” enquired Autumn as Logan propped her staff against the wall beside his own.

“Much better,” said Bruett. “I am of an age where someone landing of top of me is not easily shrugged off. Your arm? How is it?”

“As well as can be expected,” said Autumn, holding her hand up and waggling the fingers. “It will heal fully in time.”

“That is good,” said Bruett. He paused and looked down at Fiedna and Octan.

“I am glad of an opportunity to speak with you before we move on,” said Autumn, looking at Fiedna. “I have thought on what we said yesterday and I am inclined to change my views.”

“Why so?” asked Fiedna in surprise.

“Why don't we all sit?” suggested Autumn. She sat in her usual crossed legged position and Logan sat with his back to the wall of the hut.

Bruett and Octan looked at each other as though this had been unforeseen then sat down as well.

“Tis better to have meaningful talks when seated,” said Autumn. “I know not why but there it is.” She leaned forward and rested one elbow on the foot on top her knee. “As you pointed out, Fiedna, I am still young and although I was brought up in an Esyup where much was discussed and debated my knowledge of the world is small. I left there barely two summers past and have been travelling, in part to find my place and in part to learn more.”

“That is highly admirable,” said Fiedna, glancing at Bruett and Octan. “Have you learnt much?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, “and perhaps most important of all is that I have learnt how much there is that I do not know or understand. Much was discussed at my Esyup and I am slowly learning that much of it was based on ideas and opinions for most there had lived lives of seclusion and had little appreciation of the real world and all its vagaries.”

“Well,” said Fiedna, clearing her throat, “I have no experience of Esyups so I would not know. But it is interesting that you have spent time with one.”

“That is by the by,” said Autumn. “What I wanted to say was twofold.

Firstly, I realised after our discussion that it is all well and good for me to talk of the benefits of helping people to understand how their actions can cause suffering and seek to teach them how to do otherwise but I realised that I am in a position to do something about that. Most do not have my skills and are not able to either prevent a wrong being done to them or the repeating of that wrong.”

“Indeed,” said Fiedna. “That is the position we find ourselves in with Chanwar and the like.” She was watching Autumn closely.

“The other is that I have already gone against my own words,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan. “We encountered one not long ago who was doing great harm and who refused to change her ways.”

“What happened?” asked Bruett.

“I am ashamed to say,” said Autumn with a sigh, “that I defied my training, my beliefs and my vows.”

“Autumn killed her,”⁸ said Logan. He was proud of Autumn for doing that even if Autumn was ashamed of herself.

“But you resolved the problem?” asked Fiedna.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “although I would have preferred a different solution.”

“What more can anyone do?” asked Octan. “We may not always like the solutions to problems but when solutions are needed they have to be implemented.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and after our talk I realised that those who are not able to protect themselves need protection and there are some who will remain defiant regardless of how we may try to persuade

8 See *The Annals ~ The Second Tale*: Cymogene Hirao Sastruga had entered into an agreement with Ta’umboq, an augetreinn from the Land of Cysciec, which gave her some element of immortality (the sources are not clear on this but certainly Cymogene stayed alive as long as the contract remained in force) and she used that extended lifetime to build her personal wealth at the expense of desolating the landscape and wildlife. After defeating Ta’umboq and breaking the contract, Autumn was able to kill Cymogene.

them to change their ways. Since leaving my Esyup I have come to realise that this world is not ideal and that there is much in the reality of life that does not accord with the ideas we debated.”

“I see,” said Fiedna, thoughtfully. “Tell me, Autumn, do you often change your mind?”

“About as often as a mountain gets up and moves,” said Logan with a grin.

“Logan wrongs me,” said Autumn, sitting up straight. “If I make some statement or claim and I am shown to be in error then I admit the error.” She raised an eyebrow at Logan.

“I see,” said Fiedna. “Bruett, Octan, this changes things?”

“Perhaps,” said Bruett. “Although there is much to be said for a willingness to adapt. That she has spent time at an Esyup says much for her learning and explains her other skills besides.”

“Aye,” said Octan. “And the steadfast refusal to admit an error is a weakness, I venture, especially when she has the skills to enforce that error.”

“True enough,” said Bruett, “and a willingness to listen to others is also a strength.”

“So we remain in agreement?” asked Fiedna.

“Aye,” said Bruett after a moment.

Octan sighed and stared at the ground for a few moments then looked up. “Yes,” he said. “I venture the proposal is strengthened not weakened.”

Autumn frowned but said nothing. She merely leant forward and rested her head on her hand with her elbow on her knee again. She sensed something of importance was happening but had no idea what it was. Logan looked over to where Yulia and Raupp were sitting and Yulia just smiled.

“Umm,” he said hesitantly, feeling someone needed to break the silence. “If I might enquire without seeming rude, ahh, what proposal?”

“Tis not really a proposal,” said Fiedna, slowly. “More of an offer, or a request.”

She looked at Bruett and nodded.

“Right,” said Bruett and sat up straight. He tugged the bottom of his shirt to smooth out the creases. He took a deep breath and became very formal. “Autumn Savannah, I, Bruett Wylam, headman of Bufon, would ask you, on behalf of all who dwell in this town, following the untimely death of T'hisan Potet our Shamsadam, to become our new Shamsadam and guide and protect us in the name of Aloidia.”

* * *

“Have a care,” snapped Chanwar.

She was sitting on a low stool in the morning light of Astauand while Kifki used a small and moderately sharp knife to shave the centre of her scalp. The left side had already been shaved and bore one or two nicks which, though small, bled profusely.

“Then stop moving your head,” snapped back Kifki. She alone was not afraid of Chanwar and Chanwar tolerated that for some reason known only to her.

“Grrr,” snarled Chanwar and flung her head back to stare up at Kifki. Her eyes oft times glinted with a deep and baleful malevolence but today they were merely pale green.

“This will go as quick or as slow as you want,” said Kifki holding the knife above Chanwar’s forehead. “Your choice.”

Chanwar curled her lip but dropped her head down again. Kifki applied a little more chicken grease and started shaving again.

“You want me to wash your hair and re-do your braids?” asked Kifki. “I fancy you have a few lice in them.”

“That pleases you, doesn't it, Kifki,” said Chanwar, her voice low and soft. “You like to see me suffer, don't you.”

“Not at all,” said Kifki. “I do not like lice in my hair and I do not imagine you like them any more than I do. That is why I offered. We still have some acsinomy berries. I can crush them and add them to the washing water if you like.”

“You are all kindness,” said Chanwar, looking up at Kifki again.

Kifki instantly pulled the knife back. Chanwar was in a good mood and it was best not to cut her again by accident or that might change. Chanwar had never hurt Kifki the way she often hurt the others but she had a sharp tongue as well and Kifki had felt the lash of that many times.

“Please do not move your head,” said Kifki.

“As you say,” said Chanwar and leaned forward to rest her chin firmly on her hands. “You know best.”

Slowly Kifki scraped off the last of the stubble at the base of Chanwar's scalp then pushed Chanwar's head so the right side was tilted up and applied chicken grease liberally. It helped the knife slide more easily and softened the stubble a little, making the hair easier to cut.

“Do you miss Teuxa?” asked Chanwar suddenly.

“Only when he is away,” said Kifki. “When he is here I wish him gone,” and she laughed.

“Why so?” asked Chanwar.

“The missing or the wishing?” asked Kifki. She pulled the flap of Chanwar's ear out so she could get behind.

“The missing,” said Chanwar. “I understand the liking of men not being around when I've finished with them.”

This was true enough. Chanwar was free with her affections when she was in the mood but they rarely lasted long.

“I’ve grown accustomed to his face in my bed,” said Kifki, “and there is no other I would like to see in its place.”

“I have heard others say much the same,” said Chanwar, nodding. Redness started to discolour the grease but she didn’t seem to notice. “Never understood it though.”

“Not everyone has your powers,” said Kifki, rubbing some grease into the nick to help stem the bleeding. “One man is easier to manage for most of us.”

“Perhaps,” said Chanwar. “I know I am different. Not even my brother has power over me.”

“He’s as scared witless of you as the rest,” thought Kifki but didn’t say it. “Have you heard from One lately?”

“Not since the leaving,” said Chanwar and spat on the ground.

“You will not go back?” asked Kifki.

“Not unless he apologises,” said Chanwar. “Twas not a nice thing to do to cast me out like that. Family should stay together.”

“Aye,” said Kifki, knowing full well what had led to Chanwar Two’s expulsion by Chanwar One. “I be done with the shaving.”

She pulled a cloth from her belt and started to wipe away the chicken grease and blood. The nicks on the left side had clotted and the one in the centre was only oozing slightly. The one on the right smeared and she spat on the smear to clean it off. Chanwar ran her hands over the centre and left shaved parts but Kifki slapped her hand away from the right.

“I nicked you there,” she said. “Just the one but give it a few more moments to stop bleeding.”

Obediently Chanwar dropped her hand.

“Right,” said Kifki. “I will fetch the berries and we’ll see about your hair.”

She strode off and Chanwar immediately wiped her hand over the right shaved part of her head. She studied the fresh blood on her fingers then, as Kifki returned, licked it off, savouring the taste. Kifki noticed but didn't say anything. She'd known Chanwar for many summers and was accustomed to her little ways.

Chanwar's braids fell to the small of her back and Kifki was barely halfway through undoing the left braid when Chanwar burst into screeches of laughter.

“Look at that sorry band,” she cackled, slapping her thighs. “Would you just look at them!”

Kifki looked up to see Ipengar and his troop emerge from the trees looking somewhat the worse for wear. Her eyes sought Teuxa. He sported a ferocious black eye but seemed otherwise unharmed. He waved and Kifki waved back.

“Be you caught in a landslide, then?” jeered Chanwar.

Ipengar muttered something to the others and visibly steeled himself before walking slowly over to Chanwar. The others melted into their various dwellings. Kifki wanted to go to Teuxa but stayed with Chanwar. If she left before her hair was finished there would be trouble.

“We, ahh, had a bit of trouble, like,” said Ipengar, breathing through his mouth.

“So I see,” said Chanwar, sitting rigidly upright as Kifki continued the unbraiding. “I wager that is why you took so long returning?”

“Aye,” said Ipengar. “Not one of us is unhurt and we took our time.”

“What is that on your nose?” asked Chanwar. She reached up and

tapped it and Ipengar jerked backwards.

“I do not know,” he admitted. “But my nose got broken and the wench fixed it and smeared this stuff on. It has set hard and she said to soak it off with warm water when I can breathe through my nose again.”

“What wench was that?” asked Chanwar.

“Ahh,” said Ipengar. He looked a little shifty despite the discolouration around both eyes. “Well, it be like this, umm.”

“Oh yes?” asked Chanwar brightly. “What be it like then?”

The others in the camp began to gather around although they kept their distance. If Chanwar's mood changed they didn't want to be too close. Kifki started to brush Chanwar's left hair, holding the hair loosely in case Chanwar leapt forward.

“It be that Autumn what fixed my nose,” said Ipengar. “She tended the hurts of the others as well although it be a while before Klamme be talking properly.”

“You don't sound right, either,” said Chanwar.

“My nose,” said Ipengar, touching the side of it. “'Tis blocked and hurting.”

“Ah well,” said Chanwar. “You are all returned which is the main thing. Where are my trinkets?”

“Ah,” said Ipengar. He looked around but there was no one nearby. “Well, that be another thing, see.”

“I do not see,” said Chanwar sharply. She held out her hand. “Give them to me. Now.”

“Ummm,” said Ipengar nervously.

“Now!” screamed Chanwar, her eyes flashing malevolence.

Ipengar stepped backwards.

“We did our best,” he said anxiously.

“Where are my toes?” screamed Chanwar, leaping up. Her hair slid through Kifki’s fingers for Kifki had been expecting this. Kifki stepped backwards as well, just to be safe.

“Umm,” said Ipengar bracing himself for Chanwar was almost as tall as he and possessed of a wiry strength as well as extreme unpredictability.

Chanwar lunged at him and raked the nails of both hands down both sides of his face, narrowly missing his eyes but ripping off chunks of the stuff covering his nose. He cried out and clutched at his face.

“Ragghhhh,” screamed Chanwar, kneeling him between the legs.

Ipengar sank to his knees, moaning. One hand stayed on his nose and the other dropped between his legs.

“We were bested,” he gasped. “That bitch bested us all.”

Chanwar let out a howl that iced the spirits of all present, then she too sank to her knees.

“Oh you poor thing,” she crooned, putting her arms around Ipengar’s broad shoulders. “You poor dear sweet little thing. Did that nasty nasty girl hurt you?”

“Y-y-es,” stuttered Ipengar. “All of us.”

“Oh that is no good,” crooned Chanwar.

“She broke my nose,” muttered Ipengar.

“There now, there now,” crooned Chanwar, holding him and swaying from side to side. “Your little Chanwar will make it all better for you.”

“Umm, t-thank you, Chanwar,” said Ipengar nervously.

“Come now, try to stand,” said Chanwar, getting to her feet. “I know it hurts but you must try to stand.”

Ipengar hesitated then reluctantly dropped the hand from his nose to help him get up.

“Now then,” said Chanwar, sitting back down on the stool. “Which bitch exactly did this?”

“’Twas that Autumn Savannah,” muttered Ipengar. “The one you sent us to see.”

“The one with my toes?” said Chanwar, frowning. “The one that still has my toes, I might add.”

“Umm, er, yes,” said Ipengar, bracing himself for another attack.

“Well we can't have that,” said Chanwar brightly. She smiled and raised her hand. Ipengar flinched. “Kifki!”

“Yes, Chanwar?” said Kifki, coming forward again.

“You haven't finished my hair,” said Chanwar. “Now it be loose I can feel the lice. Deal with it.”

“I'll wash it straight away,” said Kifki, picking up the bowl of warm water.

“Good,” said Chanwar, staring at Ipengar who drooped visibly.

“Oh what a sight you are,” said Chanwar and started to giggle. “What a sorry sight indeed.”

“Umm, yes,” said Ipengar.

“We're going to have to see about this Autumn Savannah,” said Chanwar, trying to stifle her giggles with her knuckles. “Oh yes we are. And soon my darling Ipengar, my sweet one. Very soon.”

Chapter Twelve

Autumn stared open-mouthed at Bruett for several heartbeats, her mind uncomprehending.

“Forgive me,” she said collecting herself. “I must have misheard for I thought you asked me to be your Shamsadam.”

Logan leaned forward, his heart sunk deep into his belly for that is what he had thought he had heard as well.

“You did not mishear,” said Bruett. “We would like you to replace T’hisan Potet.”

“The Shasad would be yours, of course,” said Octan. “Tis the dwelling of the Shamsadam as well as the place of teaching and prayer. And the tithe.”

“I am sorry,” said Autumn. “I still do not understand. What tithe?”

“Everyone in the town contributes to the welfare of the Shamsadam,” said Bruett. “Food, clothing, repairs. You would want for nothing.”

“That is not entirely so,” said Fiedna, glancing at Logan. “Tis best we be wholly open and honest. It would not be seemly for the Shamsadam to live with a companion.”

“You mean Logan could not stay with me?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“Not in the Shasad,” said Bruett quickly. “But I, ahh, see no reason why we could not provide a dwelling nearby for Logan if you so desired. T’would simply be part of the tithe.”

“I am sorry,” said Autumn, shaking her head. “I am still not fully understanding. You want me to be your spiritual leader?”

“Aye,” said Bruett. “Your tasks would be to teach and guide us, lead us in worship and festivities and intercede with Aloidia when the need arises.”

“And protect you?” asked Logan, leaning forward with a tense expression on his face.

“If Aloidia should bestow such misfortune upon us,” and Fiedna, “and intercession has not been sufficient but the teaching and the guiding be the most part of it.”

“I see,” said Autumn. She leant backwards, took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Bruett, Octan and Fiedna sat unmoving, watching her.

“I thank you for the great honour you bestow upon me,” she said after a time. She opened her eyes. “I must think on this. When do you need my answer?”

“Soon,” said Bruett. “Aloidia waits for no one.”

“Very well,” said Autumn. “I shall give you my answer soon.”

The elders showed no sign of moving so Autumn rose to her feet.

“I shall sit beside the stream for a time,” she said in a quiet voice.

With a twitch of her eyebrow she signalled Logan to come with her and walked away.

“Ahh, excuse me,” mumbled Logan and hurried after her.

Autumn chose a spot beyond earshot and sat facing the stream. Logan sat beside her.

“Well, that was completely unexpected,” she said. “It has been a long time since I was last taken so completely by surprise.”

“It was a shock,” agreed Logan. “I think they are serious. I thought it was a joke at first.”

“You are certain it is not a joke?” asked Autumn, twisting to look at him intently. “I have never understood jokes so if it is, please tell me.”

“I don't think so,” said Logan. “They offered you a dwelling and a tithe. These are not matters for joking about.”

“I see,” said Autumn flatly. “So, 'tis a serious request then.”

“I think so,” said Logan. “And one I wager will be difficult to reject without causing great offence.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, quietly. “If I reject it.”

“Oh Sploop and Voqev!” muttered Logan flinging his arms over his head. “This is not happening!”

“You think I should reject it?” asked Autumn. She paused but Logan didn't respond. “I left my Esyup to find my place in this world. That is why is travel.”

“And you think this is your place?” asked Logan in a pained voice.

“I arrived here at just the time T'hisan Potet died,” said Autumn. “Is it not reasonable to think that the hand of Aloidia brought me here at such a time? Perhaps this is my place and this is my destiny.”

“You are not of Aloidia,” said Logan. “That would make it unreasonable.”

“True,” said Autumn. “Your thoughts?”

“My thoughts are filled with horror at the idea,” admitted Logan sadly, “but that is for purely selfish reasons. If you really think this is your place then you must do what you must do.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “And what will you do?”

“I know not,” said Logan. “They said they would build a place for me but in truth they do not want me here. Mayhap I shall continue our travels alone for I do not want to be here either.”

“I see,” said Autumn. She picked up a small pebble and was about to toss it in the water but changed her mind and started to toss it from

hand to hand instead. Then she stopped and gripped it tightly.

“If I am here by Aloidia's doing,” she said, “then Aloidia knows you are my friend and companion and that I would be dismayed by your departure.”

“So?” asked Logan, dropping his arms.

“If this is the doing of Aloidia then would it not be reasonable for Aloidia to have made provision for you?” she asked. “And, as you rightly say, neither of us are of Aloidia so would it not be more reasonable for Aloidia to bring one of Its own rather than me?”

“What I think is reasonable and what a deity thinks is reasonable may not be the same,” said Logan. “But another thought does occur to me. Mayhap it is not the hand of Aloidia doing this.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn, resuming tossing the pebble from hand to hand.

“Both Bruett and Fiedna talked of protection,” said Logan. “Could it be they are more interested in your fighting skills than your debating skills?”

“An interesting point, Logan,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “And did not Fiedna say yesterday that they have learnt, through me, that those of Chanwar can be bested and that gives them hope for besting them in the future?”

“Aye, she did,” said Logan, looking up. “I had forgotten that.”

“Hmmm,” said Autumn, continuing to toss the pebble thoughtfully. Then she stopped and tossed it decisively into the stream. “That does not solve the matter, but it does change its nature.”

“How so?” asked Logan.

“It changes from one of choosing to accept or not,” said Autumn, “to one of rejecting without causing needless offence, for these are good people and sincere in their desire for protection.”

“So you are not going to accept?” asked Logan, looking at her intently.

“I thought about it,” admitted Autumn. “The idea that I had found my place appealed to me but I confess, like you, the place itself does not. For certain, it is not my place to be a fighter for hire since that is what this amounts to. Food and a dwelling in return for protection is not my place in this world. That they accept you only unwillingly does not sit well with me either.”

“It pleases me to hear you say that,” said Logan.

“You are free to leave our partnership if you choose,” said Autumn. “Nothing binds you to me or me to you but it is your choice, not theirs.”

“Indeed,” said Logan. “And yours.”

“Yes,” said Autumn, “and I am decided. There remains only one thing left to do.”

“What's that?” asked Logan, brightening up.

“Tell them in such a way as to cause the least offence,” said Autumn. “As I said, they are good people and I wish them well.”

“That could be difficult,” said Logan. “Let me think on it.”

“I remember saying I was of Vallume,” said Autumn after a few moments, “but did I say I was also of Mizule?”

“I do not recall you saying that,” said Logan. “Why?”

“Perhaps that might be sufficient reason to decline,” said Autumn. “A fundamental incompatibility of beliefs.”

“Tis worth a try,” said Logan, “but I think I have a better one.”

“Yes?” asked Autumn.

“The only reason Ipengar and the others came this time was you,”

said Logan. "That means they may well return looking for you."

"True," said Autumn, "but they may well return anyway. They are bandits, after all."

"Indeed," said Logan, "but it could well be that as word of your staying here spreads there may be some who come to fight you simply to test their skills and for the chance of claiming they bested you. 'Tis only because we are always strangers that this has not happened before."

"So you are saying that my continuing presence here would in fact increase the risk to the townsfolk, not lessen it?" asked Autumn.

"Yes," said Logan.

"That is a very interesting argument," said Autumn, nodding thoughtfully, "and has the advantage of not slighting the people of Bufon in any way. I am of Mizule, the warrior, and my presence increases their risk, not reduces it. Excellent, that would seem sufficient reason. Come let us return and I will give them my decision."

She got to her feet.

"Oh, and Logan," she added, "twould be best if you gather our things while I do. I venture we will not be overly welcome here afterwards."

* * *

The setting sun touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn through a break in the clouds. As she poked the fire with a stick, a movement caught her attention. She looked up as Logan emerged from the bushes beyond the stream. His hands were empty. He waded across slowly.

"I couldn't find anything," he said with a shrug.

"Then we will have to make do with what we have," she said.

“Tis not much,” said Logan, squatting beside the fire.

“But better than nothing,” she replied. “You think it will rain tonight?”

“The clouds are building,” he said, looking up at the darkening sky. “But they’ve been building much of the day. Best we sleep back among the trees in case it does rain.”

Autumn nodded and cut their one piece of caran lengthways. She pushed a twig into each then pushed the ends of the twigs into the soil so the caran hung over the embers at the edge of the fire. Then she sat. Unusually, instead of sitting with her feet on her knees, this time she sat with her feet together and her knees drawn up, her arms wrapped around them.

“I have been thinking about Bufon,” she said, “and the offer of the Shamsadam.”

“You have regrets?” asked Logan.

“Not of the Shamsadam,” she said.

“Then what?” he asked, taking a swig from their water bottle.

“I feel I was deceitful,” she said.

“Oh,” said Logan and thought about it. “You mean for not giving them your true reasons?”

Autumn nodded as the last of Astauand sank beneath the horizon.

“Then you were not deceitful,” said Logan firmly.

“But I did not speak the truth,” said Autumn.

“That depends on what you mean,” said Logan. He leaned over and twisted the twigs so the heat reached the other sides of the caran slices. “You did not deceive them over accepting the role so they can have no complaint of deception on that score. You simply gave reasons that we thought would be more acceptable to them. ’Twas kindness not

deception.”

“And where do you draw the line?” asked Autumn.

“Was any harm done?” asked Logan.

“No,” admitted Autumn.

“Then there is the line,” said Logan. “If there was harm then there was deception. If there was no harm then there was not.”

“It has the sound of rightness,” said Autumn, “but not the feel. Ahh, no matter. The deed is done.”

“I, too, was thinking on a matter as we walked,” said Logan.

“Oh yes?” asked Autumn.

“Ipengar and the others came looking for us,” he said. “No doubt because of Leryn and Ebin before. You think their demand for our toes was a matter of retribution?”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “or perhaps it was as Ipengar said. Chanwar wants us to remember him.”

“Either way it smacks of someone who desires to inflict suffering for its own sake,” said Logan. “Ahh, thank you” and he took the proffered piece of toasted caran. It looked smaller than it had in Astauand's last light. He bit into it and chewed thoughtfully.

“I wager we have not seen the last of Chanwar's followers,” he said.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, holding her twig but not eating. “Does it worry you?”

“You bested two and then six,” said Logan. “What if Chanwar sends more?”

“Then Chanwar sends more,” said Autumn. “We have no say in that. If he does then I hope those in Bufon have the good sense to tell them

which way we went.”

“I wager they will,” said Logan, looking mournfully at his empty twig. “I doubt they will set out to protect us by bringing anyone’s anger upon them, let alone Chanwar’s.” He tossed the twig into the dying fire.

“I would give you mine,” said Autumn, tossing her twig in as well, “but I have eaten it all.”

“My thanks but I wager we will not go hungry for long,” said Logan. “Most likely we will find something to eat in the morning and we will be in Daihfew soon enough. Yulia said there is often a market there and sometimes a fair. For sure there will be bread and cheese and other good things. She said it be only another two days walking, mayhap three if we go slowly.”

“That’s if we go to Daihfew,” said Autumn.

“Oh,” said Logan in surprise. “I thought that was our aim. To head to the coast then go round the mountains.”

“Aye, it was” said Autumn, “but I am wondering if we should divert from that aim and go find Chanwar.”

“’Twould seem a foolish venture to me,” said Logan doubtfully.

“Why so?” asked Autumn. “If I can talk with Chanwar I may be able to convince him to change his ways.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, “although I confess I doubt it. I have a feeling Chanwar be one of those you said will be the sort to resent being asked to change their ways. If he sends his men to take people’s toes or whatnot then he is unlikely to be sympathetic to the suffering of others. Besides ...” and he fell silent.

“Besides?” prompted Autumn, looking at Logan’s face. It was shrouded in darkness and the flickering light from the fire did strange things to its shape. His expression was unreadable.

“He knows these mountains and we do not,” said Logan. “Most likely we will never find him. ’Twould be easier to wait and let him find us.”

“True enough,” said Autumn. She drew her robe around her and tucked her bare feet under its hem. “Do not get too excited by the prospect of a fair. We have no money.”

“Well, that may actually not be the case,” said Logan. “You remember when we first met Ebin and Leryn? I took some food from their pack?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, curling up on the ground with her head resting on one arm.

“There was more in that pack besides food,” said Logan. The firelight made his grin seem like the snarl of a ravening beast.

“Once a thief always a thief, eh, Logan?” said Autumn. She felt behind her to find a stone that was pressing into her back. Once found, she tossed it further away. “What did you take?”

“There was some coin and a few other things,” said Logan. He reached out to grab his blanket. “I took a handful of the coins and some of the jewellery. At least I think they were coins but they look like none that I have seen before. They were not paraks, that’s for sure. Do you want to see?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, sitting up again.

Logan untied the string around his blanket and partially unrolled it to reveal his little stash.

“If they are not coins we can no doubt sell the rings and the bracelet,” he said, passing the lot to Autumn.

She dumped them in her lap and reached over to stir the fire with a stick. Once it flared up she pulled out another that had a flame and used it to inspect the small hoard.

“I wager these are men’s rings,” she said, slipping them easily over her thumb. “Someone with fat fingers, too. This bracelet would seem to be

a woman's though for it fits my wrist. I wonder if they are worth much?"

"The stones are unfamiliar to me," said Logan, "although if they were worth little then I wager Ebin would not have kept them."

"Hmm," said Autumn, slipping off the rings and the bracelet. She held the burning stick close to one of the coins. "No, I have not seen one of these before. There is what looks like someone's head, only from the side. Someone with a long nose. And there is what looks like writing on the other side but I cannot read it."

"No, neither could I," said Logan. "Like as not it is in Wasian but why would there be someone's likeness on it? Perhaps they are images of a loved one."

"Perhaps," said Autumn, "but they all seem to bear the same image which would seem unnecessary for a loved one. Still, whoever it is it is not the owner of the rings for this person would seem too gaunt to have fat fingers. Mayhap it is of a woman and the bracelet is hers. 'Tis difficult to tell for the light is dim and the image is poorly drawn." She scooped up the trinkets and handed them back to Logan.

"I fancied it might be a woman," said Logan, "but as you say it is poorly drawn. No doubt someone in Daihfew will know."

"Did you not think to ask Raupp or one of the others?" asked Autumn, curling up again.

"I thought of it," said Logan. He stood up and wrapped his blanket around him then sat down again, "but they seemed to have a lot on their minds, what with the Shamsadam and Ipengar and all. Besides, there didn't seem to be anything worth buying there." He slipped the coins and jewellery inside his bowl and covered it with a corner of his blanket. "Did I just feel some rain?"

Chapter Thirteen

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn Savannah but her eyes did not flicker. Astauand was not warm for the chill of winter was not far away. The mild breeze carried a damp chill with no hint of new life in the vegetation beyond. Spring was the time for new life; winter the time for shutting down and sleeping until the warmth returned. The breeze shifted slightly and she inhaled deeply. Once again she detected the faint odour of human habitation with an underlying hint of saltiness.

Beyond the faint sound of leaves rustling in the breeze there was no other sound. Even Logan was silent, the whistling as he exhaled in his sleep gone for now even though he slept deeply. Perhaps it was the depth of his sleep that silenced the whistle. Autumn's mind briefly pondered this thought then moved on to other things. All was as expected and no hint of danger intruded.

Then there came a faint hum. A deep droning sound. It grew louder then faded again. Autumn's ears locked onto the sound, tracking it, estimating its distance. Her mind suspended all other thoughts as she assessed the sound. Was it dangerous? The humming droning sound grew louder again then there was the faintest of cold touches on the top of her ear. Instantly she launched herself the other way, her body pivoting on her outstretched arm so she would land on her feet, facing whatever it was. Sadly it was not to be. Her injured wrist gave way a little and she crashed onto her hip, her legs flailing.

Many summers of practising with both deliberate and accidental errors proved their worth and, even as her wrist gave way her body was reacting. She landed on her hip but her legs flailed with purpose for they forced her body into a twist, bringing her other arm into play. That arm shoved down with not a hint of weakness and her body righted itself. She landed this time on one knee, the other leg bent and that foot on the ground. Alas, the force of that arm shoving was slightly too great and her upper body continued too far causing her to reach backwards with an arm to steady herself; the arm with the injured wrist. A stab of pain shot up her arm and she winced.

“That must have hurt,” said a voice.

It came from behind and to the right and Autumn instantly thrust upwards with her legs and leapt forward and to the left. She landed on her feet and whirled to face the voice but her foot caught in a tussock of grass and she stumbled again and dropped to her knees. She allowed the stumble to continue and rolled to the side and pushed upwards with her good arm. This time she landed firmly and she instantly dropped into a defensive stance.

“You!” she exclaimed then whirled again as Logan's stuttering snore distracted her.

“Pah!” she exclaimed and turned around again.

“I am sorry if I startled you,” said Kanikapila.

He was sitting on the ground a short distance away, his legs crossed with his feet under his knees, his hands clasped loosely in his lap. He was wearing the same dark clothes as he had been on their last acquaintance and his shoulder length black hair was oiled and neatly combed.

“How is it that you are able to come upon me without any sign?” asked Autumn. She walked forward two paces then sat facing him. She massaged her wrist briefly then put it aside.

“Ahh, it is but a minor skill I have acquired,” said Kanikapila with a slight shrug. “It serves a small purpose but is nothing compared to your skills. I see you have lost none of them although you have an injury you did not have before.”

“Tis nothing of great significance,” said Autumn. “A small injury to my wrist, nothing more.”

“Enough to cause you pain,” said Kanikapila. “I saw you wince when you landed on it. How did you come by that injury?”

“Someone trod on my wrist,” said Autumn. “Was it you who touched my ear?”

“I? No,” said Kanikapila. “It was a large beetle that flew past. It

became alarmed by your ... activities and flew off that way in some haste.” He lifted a hand and gestured in the direction the beetle had flown.

“That would explain the sound I heard,” said Autumn. “It must have been a very large beetle.”

“Almost the length of my hand,” said Kanikapila. “We have such beetles in these parts although they are not common. They have a pair of very large pincers on their heads but do not be alarmed. Although fearsome to see the pincers are weak and cannot harm you. Tell me, the man who trod on you, and I wager it was a man, how did he die?”

“He is not dead,” said Autumn.

“Indeed?” Kanikapila looked disbelieving. “How is it possible that someone can tread on you and hurt you and yet still live?”

“You think I would kill someone for that?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“I would,” said Kanikapila. “At least if I had your skills. I do not so likely if someone trod on me they would get away with it.”

“And if it was an accident?” asked Autumn. “Would you kill him then?”

“Probably not,” said Kanikapila after a moment's thought. “Not if it was an accident. Was that an accident?”

“Wha’?” asked Logan sleepily. His eyes opened.

“The treading was not an accident,” said Autumn, “but my arm was not the target.”

“And I wager there is a tale behind that short statement,” said Kanikapila.

“Ohhh, you again,” said Logan. He coughed and snuggled deeper inside his blanket.

“Hello, Logan,” said Kanikapila gravely. “Sleep well.”

“Mmm,” muttered Logan and his faint whistling began again.

“You see?” said Kanikapila, addressing himself to Autumn again, “Logan does not see me as a threat.”

“Logan is his own person,” said Autumn, “and does not always see things as others do.”

“Meaning you see me as a threat?” asked Kanikapila. “That saddens me.”

“I see everyone and everything as a threat when they come upon me with stealth,” said Autumn. “Now I know it is you I do not see you as a threat.”

“I see,” said Kanikapila. “Well, that is something good at least. So your method is to react before you identify?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn drily. “Time spent in identifying can mean the difference between living and dying.”

Kanikapila regarded Autumn thoughtfully. “There is much wisdom in that,” he conceded after a while. “I will take care in future to announce my presence early.”

Autumn dipped her head in acknowledgement.

“How is it that you are here with us again?” she asked. “I understood you were going into the mountains.”

“I have finished my business there,” said Kanikapila. “I am now on my way to Daihfew. I heard your voices last night and saw your fire. I stopped a little way off for I did not wish to disturb your sleep. I merely wished to greet you again in friendship before continuing my journey which, alas, I must do shortly. I cannot linger here for long for I must be in Daihfew before the tide is out.”

“You are alone?” asked Autumn.

“As you see,” said Kanikapila.

“Kauwa is elsewhere?” she asked.

“Ahh, I misunderstood your meaning,” said Kanikapila. “Kauwa is back at my camp, readying for my departure.”

“We were in Bufon not long past,” she said. “None there knew what hanaha were.”

“Bufon is a small place,” said Kanikapila, “and lacking in wealth of any significance. They have no need of hanaha there.”

“Do they in Daihfew?” she asked.

“I think not,” said Kanikapila. “Daihfew is larger than Bufon and it is a port where much trading is done and has some wealth in consequence but again they have no need of hanaha.”

“Then you must be of no little wealth yourself,” said Autumn, “if you have need of a hanaha.”

“That depends what you mean by 'no little',” said Kanikapila with that half smile of his. “It is a term lacking a precise meaning. Let us simply say I am not poor and leave it at that. Where are you bound?”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “We head for now to Daihfew as well, although we are in no hurry. Is it far?”

“No,” said Kanikapila. “It is but a short distance. If you dally you will still be there before Astauand reaches Its peak. I have a small gift for you.”

He reached behind him and pulled out something wrapped in a gaily coloured cloth. He put it on the ground in front of him and pushed it gently towards Autumn.

“I wager as you travel so light that you have little food,” he said. “This is some caran and janja although sadly I have no vinegar. I thought you might like to eat before you continue your travels.”

“That is most kind of you,” said Autumn. “A gift freely given is precious indeed. We thank you.”

“It is my pleasure,” said Kanikapila, “although I would like something in return.”

“Sadly we have little to offer,” said Autumn. “As you said, we travel lightly.”

“And yet you have something that is in short supply in these parts,” said Kanikapila, smiling his half smile again. “Something that is very light to carry and yet carried by very few.”

“And what is that?” asked Autumn.

“Intelligent conversation,” said Kanikapila. “I ask only that when you arrive in Daihfew you dine with me as my guest. Guests, I should say for I include Logan in the invitation. If he is awake.”

“That is most kind of you, Kanikapila,” said Autumn. “I know not when we shall arrive in Daihfew but we would be happy to dine with you. I venture there is much you can tell us of Wase for I am given to understand that where we are now is not Wase even though the border is some way to the South.”

“This is true,” he agreed. “This side of the mountains is frequently disputed and the people here consider themselves to be of Aferraron regardless of who claims the land. Excellent. I shall look forward to our next meeting,” and he got to his feet. “Look for me at the sign of the Black Horse. If I am not there I shall be returning shortly.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn, looking up at him. “The sign of the Black Horse?”

“In truth it is more of a mule than a horse,” he said, “but it is black.”

“That does not help,” said Autumn. “What is this sign?”

“Ahh, my humblest apologies,” said Kanikapila, looking faintly alarmed. “There is a place on the edge of Daihfew where this road

arrives that offers beds of a sort to travellers and hot food to any that desire it. On the wall of the place is a picture of a black horse so that it is easily distinguished from the dwellings that surround it. There is another such place with a picture of a ship. Do not go there for it is near the port and is frequented by people with high thirst, low morals and no conversation.”

“Now I understand,” said Autumn. “We have such places in Aferraron but they do not generally have pictures, as least as far as I know. We do not frequent such places for we prefer the open air and quiet.”

“That does not surprise me,” said Kanikapila. “I prefer the comforts of home but needs must. I would counsel you however, if you plan to stay in Daihfew for any length of time, to spend your nights at the Black Horse. It would not be wise to sleep in the town otherwise, unless you have acquaintances there you can stay with.”

“We know no one,” said Autumn, “other than yourself. Ahh, I take it this place you call the Black Horse desires money in exchange for their hospitality?”

“Of course,” said Kanikapila in surprise. “Why else would they do it?”

“Why else indeed,” said Autumn thoughtfully.

“And yet, alas,” said Kanikapila, “I cannot tarry, much as I would like to. I have a tide to catch and time is pressing. Our future meeting will hurry my feet.”

“And ours,” said Autumn, out of politeness. “Fare well.”

“Safe journey,” said Logan, opening an eye briefly. He sat up with his blanket still wrapped tightly around him and blinked blearily.

“Kanikapila gave us food,” said Autumn. “And he wants to feed us again when we arrive in Daihfew.”

“He seems a very nice man,” said Logan. He scratched his head and looked up at the sky. “Oh, that is strange.”

“What is?” asked Autumn, inspecting what lay inside the cloth Kanikapila had given her.

“That cloud,” said Logan, pointing. “Tis the one that looks like the Karoi’s Palace again.”

“Go back to sleep,” said Autumn, wrapping the food. “Tis only a cloud and your imaginings. I am going to do my exercises. Leave a little of the food for me.”

* * *

“Looks more like a sheep to me,” said Logan, looking at a piece of painted wood mounted on a beam protruding from the side of a stone building. The paint was peeling and may well have once been black. “Or even a large rabbit. Are you sure this is the right place?”

“It is as Kanikapila said,” said Autumn doubtfully. “It is on the edge of Daihfew where the road from Bufon arrives, unless this is not Daihfew.”

“It is a port,” said Logan. “I can see the water down there and some boats. ’Tis unlikely that there be two ports at the end of this road.”

“And there are no other buildings with signs,” said Autumn, looking further along.

There was another stone building some way away and between the two was a straggling line of wooden structures. Some were in good repair, others sagged badly and one was only a suggestion of a dwelling. It had only half a roof and two sides, both with gaping holes. The other side of the road had only wooden dwellings, apart from a section of lush grass and weeds and a couple of smaller dwellings that were plastered with dried mud.

“Your pardon,” said Autumn, going over to a woman who leant against one of the wooden dwellings nearby. “Is this Daihfew?”

The woman looked at her then spat.

“Where else would it be?” she replied in a gravelly voice.

“Indeed,” said Autumn. She paused then turned away. The woman spat again and laughed.

“I venture it is,” said Logan. “I confess I do not like the look of that place, if that is a horse in the picture.”

The building was long and low and looked ill-kempt. The stonework was uneven and badly stained for much of its length up to about knee height and there were narrow slits in its walls.

“Neither do I,” said Autumn. “Ah well, let us go in and enquire about Kanikapila. If they have not heard of him then we shall move on.”

Beneath the sign was a stout wooden door that hung half open. Autumn approached it and peered inside.

“Interesting,” she said and went in. Logan took a deep breath then followed.

“Interesting,” he said, looking around.

It was a big room, well lit by a large number of thick candles that sat on wooden hoops suspended from the roof. There were quite a few tables of various sizes dotted around, the larger ones with benches and the smaller with simple chairs. In the far corner near a big fireplace were several large sacks that looked half full although what of was unclear. What had once been a fire still smouldered in the fireplace and fresh looking straw covered the floor. The air smelt of stale cooking and the fruitiness of fresh brewed ale. There was no one around.

“Now what do we do?” asked Autumn. “Although this does look like a place where food can be had.”

“And the best food in Daihfew,” said a large man appearing in a doorway near the fireplace. “Is that what you be wanting?”

“I am not certain,” said Autumn. “Is this the Black Horse?”

“Aye,” said the man. “Did you not see the likeness outside?”

He leant against the doorpost and let his large belly droop.

“We are meeting someone here,” she said.

“Oh aye,” said the man. “Stay here long enough and you be meeting everyone, I reckon.” He gave a short barking laugh.

“His name is Kanikapila,” said Autumn.

“Oh aye,” said the man. He scratched under his chins and looked them over.

“Is he here?” asked Autumn.

“I wager not,” said the man with a laugh, “unless he be hiding under one of them tables.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. She paused for a moment, wondering what to do, then turned. “Come, Logan. Let us leave this place.”

“Logan, huh,” said the man. “And who be you, missy?”

“I am Autumn,” said Autumn, turning back. “Autumn Savannah.”

“Oh, right you are then,” said the man. “I be Roffslam, owner of this here inn. Be you wanting beds for the night as well?”

“Umm, I do not know,” said Autumn. “Is Kanikapila staying here?”

“Aye,” said Roffslam. “He has a bed in the men's room. He said Autumn and Logan might be turning up. I wager he'll be back soon.”

“Ahh, good,” said Autumn. “If you do not mind we will wait for him.”

“I don't mind,” said Roffslam. “Be you wanting something to eat or drink while you are waiting?”

“We are eating with Kanikapila,” said Autumn, “so 'tis best we not

start eating before he returns.”

“Whatever you say, missy,” said Roffslam indifferently. “You be welcome to stay inside or go back out, as you like.”

“I think we’ll wait outside,” said Autumn.

“Don’t wait too close to the wall,” said Roffslam. “That be where the men piss.”

“Ah,” said Autumn. She hesitated, again unsure what to do.

“Where do the women piss?” asked Logan out of curiosity.

“T’other side,” said Roffslam, jerking his thumb to the other side of the building. “Where no one can see, like.”

“Ah, right,” said Logan. “That’s good to know.”

“And if you be wanting beds,” added Roffslam, “men sleep back there and women behind the kitchen. Don’t want no hanky panky here. This be a respectable inn and no mistake.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Tis an unprepossessing town,” said Logan as they wandered down what was likely to be the main thoroughfare.

“Do not judge by appearances,” said Autumn. “The people seem courteous enough even if the dwellings are lacking. Do not forget you lived many summers in a cowshed.”

“I suppose,” said Logan. “But that was not through choice.”⁹

“But there does seem to be a pattern among the places we have visited that are ports,” said Autumn. “Mayhap it is because of the constant arriving and leaving of travellers and those who work the boats so they take little pride in the place.”

“Likely so,” said Logan. “If you come in from somewhere else, unload your goods, take on another load and go off somewhere different the next day I venture you ask little of that place and care less. I wonder how many actually live here all year round.”

“Few I would imagine,” said Autumn. “There are also few boats in the harbour so mayhap most are out fishing. For certain this place reeks of fish.”

“Yes,” said Logan. “Is that not Kanikapila yonder?”

“Where?” asked Autumn, looking around.

“Beside that wagon down by the boat with the red and green flag,” said Logan, pointing.

“Aye, you are right,” said Autumn. “Let us go down and let him know we have arrived.”

They crossed the road onto a deeply rutted track which cut down through the low cliff and which led to the quay. The tide was out and

⁹ See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*. After the deaths of Logan's parents when he was around ten years of age, a local farmer took pity on him and let him live in a cowshed until he was exiled from the village of Biasdo for persistent stealing.

such boats as were there sat in the mud beside a long wooden platform on poles that stretched out towards the sea. The poles were thickly coated in seaweed and sea birds flew overhead or sat on the mud. Those flying squawked loudly as they wheeled and twisted, eyes peeled for any scraps of food that may appear. Five wagons were lined up on the platform and were being loaded with sacks, trunks, cases and barrels from two of the boats. Kanikapila was leaning against the last of the wagons, watching the unloading of one of the boats. His wagon was empty.

“Greetings, Kanikapila,” said Autumn as they approached.

Kanikapila's head jerked around and he smiled when he saw them. Kauwa sat motionless on the end of the wagon and took no notice.

“Ahh, you have arrived,” he said. “You found The Black Horse well enough?”

“Yes we did,” said Autumn. “And were told you were out.”

“Aye,” said Kanikapila and he grimaced. “I need not have hurried for the boat was delayed and came in on the last of the incoming tide. It is only now unloading and so will not be leaving until the next tide. I had expected to be loaded and at The Horse to greet you but it was not to be.”

“This is your wagon?” asked Logan, eyeing the horse between the wagon's yoke. The horse met his gaze and shook its head at him and snorted contemptuously.

“Aye, Logan,” said Kanikapila, “although not for long. I will sell it when my business is concluded.”

“Oi, you,” shouted a burly man, standing squarely on the deck of the boat. He was dressed only in a loin cloth and his muscles were thick and his beard bushy.

“Excuse me,” said Kanikapila. He went over to talk to the man who jabbed a couple of times at a document in his hand.

“’Twould seem there is some dispute,” said Autumn quietly when Kanikapila snatched the document from the man’s hand and studied it. He said something and slapped the document and the man shrugged as if not caring. Kanikapila scowled at him then turned to walk away. The man grabbed his arm and pulled him back whereupon Kanikapila pulled a small bag from inside his tunic and tossed it at the man. More words were exchanged during which Kanikapila made as if to take the bag back but the man kept a tight hold. Then, when it looked as though blows were about to be exchanged, both men broke into smiles. Kanikapila pulled out another, smaller, bag and removed a single coin which he handed to the burly man. The burly man slapped him on the back in a friendly manner and waggled his beard at another man, similarly dressed, who disappeared below the deck. As Kanikapila started to make his way back to the wagon, the burly man crossed the deck and gave the bag and coin to another who sat at a small table. This man started to count what was in the bag.

“That was most profitable,” said Kanikapila beaming.

“It looked like there was some dispute,” said Logan.

“Aye, there always is,” said Kanikapila. “They agree a price to get you trapped then hoist it when it comes time to take delivery and you have no choice but this time I was able to beat him down to almost what we had agreed.”

“That would seem most dishonourable,” said Autumn frowning. “An agreement is an agreement.”

“Most times, yes,” said Kanikapila, “but here the circumstances are, shall we say, different and a little flexibility is needed. Now, if you will forgive me, my goods are about to come off the boat and I need to inspect them as they are loaded on the wagon. Can I meet you back at the Horse when I am done?”

“By all means,” said Autumn. “There would seem to be a not unpleasant beach up yonder. We will explore it and meet you later.”

“You see up there?” said Kanikapila, pointing along the beach. “Those stone steps?”

“Aye,” said Autumn.

“If you go up them you will find yourself at the back entrance to The Black Horse,” he said. “It will save you walking back down the beach then up the road again.”

The man who had gone below deck had reappeared and was carrying a heavy object wrapped in sacking towards Kanikapila's wagon. Another was not far behind him.

“Kauwa,” said Kanikapila and Kauwa slid back a little then rose and waited for the first object to be deposited, the hair covering her face obscuring any sign of an expression.

“Until later,” said Kanikapila with a half smile that encompassed both Autumn and Logan.

The man deposited the first of the objects on the back of the wagon and Kanikapila stood with his hand on the sacking, watching Autumn and Logan with a pleasant but dismissive look on his face until they turned and walked away.

“He is a secretive man,” said Logan quietly when they were out of earshot. “He did not want us to see what was under the wrapping.”

“Perhaps he fears we may rob him,” said Autumn, “but what goods he has is none of our concern.”

“True,” said Logan, “but he didn't want to talk about Kauwa either.”

“We did not ask him about Kauwa,” said Autumn, looking a little puzzled.

“No, I meant when we first met him,” said Logan, “and again yesterday. He said only Kauwa was at his camp and nothing more.”

“He is under no obligation to say anything he does not want to say,” said Autumn.

“True,” said Logan, “but do you not find it strange?”

“I find many things strange,” said Autumn. “I wager it would take many lifetimes to satisfy my curiosity about all of them. If someone does not want to tell me something I am willing to accept that and let the matter lie.”

“You are saying I should as well?” asked Logan.

“That is your choice,” said Autumn. “As always.”

* * *

“Ahh, there you are,” said Kanikapila, peering round the front door of the inn. “I expected you to be at the back although I know not why. Come on in.”

“We were watching the people,” said Autumn, going inside. There were several people sitting at some of the tables and conversation filled the room.

“Ah yes,” said Kanikapila disinterestedly. He looked around. “Ah, excellent! Let us sit in the comfortable seats. These wooden benches make my backside lose all feeling.”

He led the way to the far corner of the room where the half empty sacks lay and dropped into one. He wriggled a little and it changed its shape to accommodate him.

“Tis an unusual seat,” said Autumn, doing the same.

She sat for a moment then laid her staff and pack on the straw floor beside the wall.

“The sacks are half filled with dried peas,” said Kanikapila. “They be the idea of Roffslam and I wager will become popular in times to come for they are comfortable and easy to make although they make eating a little more difficult.”

Logan sat and wiggled as well and lurched sideways with a yelp, getting entangled with his staff. Autumn jerked out a hand and pulled him back upright.

“Thank you,” he said breathlessly, He dropped the staff on the floor beside him and wriggled again, more cautiously. Kanikapila watched with an amused expression.

“That is much better,” said Logan, going slightly pink in the face. He lifted the string that held his rolled blanket over his head and dropped the roll onto the floor beside his staff.

“Why is eating more difficult?” asked Autumn.

“You cannot eat from a table while sitting in these,” said Kanikapila, “which is why no one else is sitting in them. When we eat we will go to a table or sit with the platters on our knees.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, leaning back. The sack felt strange, used as she was to sitting cross legged, but comfortable none the less and the difficulty with a table was obvious now it had been mentioned. “You have finished loading?”

“Aye,” said Kanikapila. “The wagon is safely round the back and Kauwa will come find me if there is trouble. You are staying the night here?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “I fancy Roffslam will be wanting some form of payment and I do not know if we have any money”

“You surprise me,” said Kanikapila, looking surprised. “I have met people with money and people without money but never before have I met any who did not know one way or the other.”

“We have little use for money,” said Autumn, “and carry none but we do have a few things that look like coins but they are unfamiliar. Could you tell us what they are?”

“Certainly,” said Kanikapila. “First though, let me get some drinks. What will you have? Beer? Wine? Something stronger?”

“Ahh, water will be sufficient for me,” said Autumn.

“Water?” said Kanikapila, blinking in astonishment.

“Or perhaps some milk,” she said calmly.

“Hmm,” said Kanikapila. He raised an eyebrow then looked around before shouting “Roffslam!”

“And you, Logan?” he asked as Roffslam made his way over.

“I will have whatever Autumn is having,” said Logan. He was beginning to relax even though the pea sack was not entirely stable. It felt as though it might tip him off at any moment if it had a mind to.

“A flagon of ale,” said Kanikapila, “and two pots of milk.”

“Cow or goat?” asked Roffslam.

“As you wish,” said Autumn.

“And we will be eating too,” said Kanikapila.

“There be a sheep on the spit,” said Roffslam. “Should not be too long.” He marched off, weaving his way between the tables, and put another log on the fire.

“Wonders will never cease,” said Kanikapila, watching him go. “I had not thought he had even heard of milk yet he was unsurprised. This is turning out to be an intriguing day. Travellers who know not what money looks like and an inn keeper who has heard of milk.” He looked over at Autumn and smiled his half smile then hooked a foot around the leg of a low narrow table and yanked it closer. “Show me your things that may be coins.”

Logan glanced at Autumn who nodded then lifted his blanket roll and loosened the string that bound it. He scrambled inside then withdrew his hand and deposited the coins on the table. One of the rings fell out.

“This be a pretty thing,” said Kanikapila, grabbing it before Logan could. He turned it over in his hands then held it closer to his eyes to examine the stone.

“Hmm,” he said and passed it back to Logan with his hand around it. “Best you be keeping that out of sight,” he added quietly.

“Why?” asked Logan in a low voice. He quickly tucked it back inside the blanket.

“That be a xuiui,” said Kanikapila, keeping his voice low. “Did you not know that?”

“No,” said Logan, lowering his voice even further. “I have never seen a stone such as that before. Is it worth much?”

“They be highly prized,” said Kanikapila, “although the ones with green flecks are worth more. Even so, your blue ones would fetch a respectable number of kalas.”

“What are kalas?” asked Autumn, leaning forward. The pea sack made a strange creaking noise.

“Them,” said Kanikapila, pointing at the coins. “Truly, you do not know what they are?”

“No,” said Autumn. “Are they like paraks?”

“Aye,” said Kanikapila. “They are to Wase what paraks are to Aferraron.” He, too, leaned forward and started to push the coins around with a finger. “This be a four kala and this be a one.”

“How do you know that?” asked Logan.

“That be what the writing is,” said Kanikapila, “and the one be a little smaller than the four. These others are hakinas. There are sixteen hakinas to one kala. All told you have, ah, twelve kalas ten hakina here.”

“Is that a lot?” asked Autumn.

Kanikapila waggled his hand. “Not enough to buy a hand cart but enough to get you killed if you go to the other side of town. If you be staying the night here one kala should cover the two of you. At the

moment the going rate is five paraks for four kalas, give or take a hakina or two.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn, frowning.

“Put those away, lad,” said Kanikapila. “Best not to flash these things around, even in here. What is it you do not understand, Autumn?”

“The going rate,” said Autumn. “I have no idea what that means.”

“Oh,” said Kanikapila, taken aback. “It means someone will buy five paraks from you for four kalas. Or give you five paraks for four kalas if that’s what you be selling.”

“But are they not money?” asked Autumn, looking perplexed. “How can you buy and sell money with money? That makes no sense.”

“I do not understand you,” said Kanikapila, also looking perplexed. “You can buy anything with money.”

“But why buy money?” asked Autumn. “What purpose does it serve? Is not money solely to give away?”

Kanikapila looked baffled. He opened his mouth to speak then closed it again then said “I ...” before stopping. “Hmmm.”

“Ale and milk,” said Roffslam, banging a flagon and three pots on the table. “Paying now or on the stick?”

“Stick,” said Kanikapila. “Thank you.”

“I be giving a shout when first slicing of mutton be due,” said Roffslam. “Shouldn’t be too long.” He hurried away for the room was filling up with people.

Kanikapila poured some ale into the one empty pot and supped it thoughtfully, watching Autumn over the rim.

“Can I ask you?” he said suddenly. “What is money for?”

Autumn raised an eyebrow. "To buy things," she said.

"Right," said Kanikapila. "Now I understand."

"I'm glad one of us does," said Logan.

Kanikapila smiled drily.

"Money isn't for buying things," he said, "it is for exchanging."

"Exchanging what?" asked Autumn.

"Whatever you want," said Kanikapila.

"I don't understand," said Autumn. She picked up a pot of milk and sniffed it. It smelt reasonable so she sipped it before putting it back on the table.

"Think on this," said Kanikapila, leaning back. "How would you pay Roffslam for that milk if there was no such thing as money?"

"I would give him something else in return," said Autumn, "unless he gave it to me out of kindness."

"Let us assume he is not kind," said Kanikapila. "He will only give you the milk in return for something but you have nothing that he wants."

"Then I imagine I will go thirsty," said Autumn.

"Well, that is one possibility," said Kanikapila. "Let us suppose that Roffslam has some milk, you have some caran and I have some eggs. You ask Roffslam for some milk and he wants an egg in return. What do you do?"

"I would find a stream and slake my thirst there," said Autumn.

"There are no streams," said Kanikapila.

"Then there would be no milk either," said Autumn, frowning, "for how can a cow make milk if it has no water to drink? Or goat."

“I think what Kanikapila means is that you would exchange your caran for some of his eggs,” said Logan, “then take the eggs to Roffslam and exchange them for milk.”

“But what if Kanikapila does not want any caran?” asked Autumn. “This seems overly complicated to me.”

“Precisely,” said Kanikapila. “If you have something that no one wants then you can't exchange it for what you want. That is why we have money.”

“But I don't want money,” said Autumn. “It will not slake my thirst.”

“No,” admitted Kanikapila, “but if you had money you could buy the milk from Roffslam without having to go to anyone else.”

“But I have no money,” said Autumn.

“Which is why you would sell something for money,” said Kanikapila, “and then you could buy the milk.”

“But did you not say I have nothing that anyone wants?” asked Autumn. “How can I sell something no one wants?”

“That was my mistake,” said Kanikapila, frowning. “I should have said you have something that only some people want.”

“And no doubt at least one of them will have some milk,” said Autumn. “I do not see that this is getting us anywhere.”

Kanikapila looked helplessly at Logan who grinned.

“What I am trying to say,” said Kanikapila, “is that money makes things easier because you can sell what you have to those people who want what you have for money without having to worry about them giving you something you don't want in exchange.”

“But I don't want money,” said Autumn, taking another sip of milk.

“That's right,” said Kanikapila. “You don't want money. So what will

you do with it?"

"Ahh, give it to someone who does want money?" asked Autumn.

"No," said Kanikapila. "You give it to someone who has something you do want and they will give you that something for the money."

"Why can I not just give them the money if that is what they want?" asked Autumn.

"Because you will be left with nothing," said Kanikapila.

"But I have nothing anyway," said Autumn, "except my staff and a few other odds and ends which I can easily replace without having to ask anyone."

"Don't look at me," said Logan as Kanikapila looked at him with a worried expression. "I cannot explain money to her either. She does not understand about owning things either."

"I see," said Kanikapila. "Or rather I don't see."

"What has this to do with 'the going rate'?" asked Autumn, "and what is 'the stick'?"

"Oh, the stick is easy," said Kanikapila. "While I am here whatever I buy from Roffslam he marks on a stick and when I leave I pay him for everything that is on the stick in one go."

He gazed at Autumn while trying to work out how to explain 'the going rate' to her. She gazed back at him thoughtfully.

"Ahh," said Autumn suddenly. "And by using money from other things you have already sold you can do that without having to offer him things he doesn't want, or carry around chickens and cows and wood and things in case he wants them."

"Exactly," said Kanikapila. "And I can do that with everyone without having to worry about what they might want."

“And they in turn can do that with you and all others,” said Autumn, grappling with the enormity of it. “Now it makes sense. It is all this talk of milk and eggs and things no one wants that was confusing me. So, all I need is some sticks and all will be well.”

“Yes,” said Kanikapila, “or rather no. You need money, not sticks.”

“But did you not say that you buy things with a stick?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Kanikapila, looking at Logan again. Logan just smiled happily. “The stick is there simply to bring together all the things I owe to Roffslam.”

“But would it not be easier for everyone to have such a stick?” asked Autumn. “That way everything could be marked on it and no one would have to bother with money at all. When the stick is full of marks you just throw it away and get another one.”

“But no one would have anything then!” exclaimed Kanikapila in horror.

“But no one has anything anyway,” said Autumn. “The egg came from the chicken and the milk from the cow. Neither comes from you or I and the chicken and the cow have no need of money. We simply take from them that which is theirs and then invent money to give to each other. What do we give to the chicken and the cow? Or to the trees?”

“The trees?” said Kanikapila, looking lost. “What trees?”

“For the sticks,” said Logan. “That’s what she means.”

“I give up,” said Kanikapila. “Money is such a simple thing and yet you manage to make it complicated.”

“’Tis not I,” said Autumn. “I did not invent it. So what is ‘the going rate’?”

“Well, that should be simple enough,” said Kanikapila. “Suppose you come to Wase with goods from Aferraron to sell. I want to buy them but I only have kalas and you want paraks. I will need to buy some

paraks from someone in order that I may give them to you.”

“I can see that would be a problem,” said Autumn. “The going rate?”

“Well, that is why I would use money to buy money,” said Kanikapila. “I would use the money of one country to buy money of another country. But how many kalas should I pay for the paraks?”

“I imagine whatever the person with the paraks wants you to pay,” said Autumn. She drank some more of her milk and watched Kanikapila.

“Indeed,” said Kanikapila. “And in a port like this there are many people who have paraks that they are willing to sell. Who should I buy the paraks from?”

“The one closest to you?” asked Autumn.

“No, the one asking for the fewest kalas,” said Kanikapila. “I want as many paraks as I can get for the fewest kalas. That is the going rate.”

“But what of those who want more?” asked Autumn. “Will they not suffer if their needs cannot be met?”

“Not really,” said Kanikapila. “All they have to do is be willing to accept fewer kalas for the same number of paraks. Look, I have some paraks with me,” and he pulled the small bag from under his tunic that he had used in his dealings with the burly man on the boat. He tipped a few coins on the table and counted them. “Look, here are, ahh, seven paraks. If I tell everyone here they are for sale different people will offer me different numbers of kalas for them. Would I not be stupid if I did not accept those from the one who offers me the most?”

“I would say not,” said Autumn. “Would it not be more honourable to accept the offer from the one who needs the paraks the most?”

“All that person has to do, if they really need the paraks,” said Kanikapila, “is offer me more kalas than anyone else and their need will be met.”

“Ohhh,” exclaimed Logan, lurching forward and picking up one of the paraks. “This one has my name on it!”

Chapter Fifteen

There was a sudden loud clanging and Autumn instantly slid off her pea bag into a defensive posture with one knee bent and the other on the ground. Her eyes darted around the room searching for the source of the noise.

“First slicing,” shouted Roffslam, “come and get it, first slicing.” He banged a bar of metal with a small hammer again then disappeared back to the kitchen.

“Relax, Autumn,” said Kanikapila, putting his hand over the coins in case she knocked the table. “’Tis only Roffslam saying that the mutton is ready for those who want to eat.”

“My apologies,” said Autumn. “I was startled by the sound.”

“You do not stay at inns often, do you,” remarked Kanikapila.

“This is my first,” admitted Autumn.

“And mine,” said Logan. He held up the parak he was holding. “Why does this coin have my name on it?”

“It is not your name, Logan,” said Kanikapila, sliding his other coins off the table into his hand. “’Tis the name of your Roinad.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. He studied the coin again then polished it on the sleeve of his tunic. “Why is it on the coin?”

“It is the custom for those who issue coinage to have their mark on the coins,” said Kanikapila. “As a way of showing the coin is valid and genuine. See, these others have the name of Obvia Vasagle who was your Roinad before this Logan fellow. Our coins have portraits of our Mo’i. This one is of Esper Kowring One who is our present Mo’i and that is of Esper Moochember One who was his mother and the Mo’i before him.”

“They were both first borns?” asked Autumn.

“That is our custom,” said Kanikapila. “The first born of the Mo’i become the Mo’i in turn. In fact this is true throughout all Wase. The first born becomes the head of the family when the last head dies. ’Tis is simple custom and avoids much in the way of argument.”

“What if there is no first born?” asked Logan, still holding the coin.

“Then the second born becomes head,” said Kanikapila, “or the third or whoever next still lives unless there is no offspring. In such a case there is, in effect, no family and that is the end of the name.”

“Can I keep this coin?” asked Logan. “I like my name being on it.”

“So you can pretend you are the Roinad, lad?”¹⁰ laughed Kanikapila. “By all means, keep it. ’Tis only a parak and not of much use in Wase.”

“Do you not need it for your trading?” asked Autumn.

“I have other paraks,” said Kanikapila, “and I trade little with Aferraron. Shall we eat now or wait for the next slicing?”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “We are your guests.”

“Indeed you are” said Kanikapila, “which makes it as you wish, not I.”

“Then let us eat,” said Autumn, to Logan’s relief.

“Shall we find a table?” asked Kanikapila, rising to his feet. He slipped the remainder of his coins into his bag. “I venture we will have to share with others though for this place is filling up.”

“Then let us stay here,” said Autumn. “Logan and I are used to eating without tables.”

10 In actuality Logan was the Roinad, in absentia. See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*. Logan was appointed Roinad as the result of a legal complication following the death of the previous Roinad Obvia Vasagle. However, he hated it so much that he ran away after one day and rejoined Autumn. The First Minister, Hysleria, took advantage of Logan’s disappearance to rule in Logan’s name rather than force the selection of another Roinad.

“Then wait here,” said Kanikapila. “I shall fetch the food for all of us. I will not be long.”

Logan admired the coin again then collected his Wasian coins and slipped them back inside his blanket.

“It feels strange to have my name on a coin,” he said quietly. “Do you suppose there are lots of them all over Aferraron?”

“I would think so,” said Autumn with a smile. “And likely the number will only get bigger as I would think coins get lost and have to be replaced. What are you going to do with it?”

“I do not know,” he admitted. “But I have never had anything with my name on it before.”

“Why not make a hole in it and hang it on a string?” suggested Autumn. “That way 'tis less likely to get lost.”

“That is a good idea,” said Logan. “Mayhap there is a smithy in town who can pierce it. I don't remember seeing one but I wasn't looking.”

“Here we are,” said Kanikapila returning. He had a platter in each hand and another balanced on one forearm. The platters were laden with thick slices of slightly under-cooked mutton and overcooked lumps of vegetables. “You both have knives?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, getting hers out of her pack.

Kanikapila handed a platter to each of them then sat down, spilling a little of the juices from the platter onto his clothing in the process. He cursed mildly.

“This is good,” said Logan, chewing vigorously. “'Tis not often we have meat.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “You said you do not trade much with Aferraron, Kanikapila. Would it be rude of me to ask where your goods came from today?”

“The Isle of Danornor,” said Kanikapila.

“They have paraks there?” she asked.

“No, Danornor is a dominion of Wase,” he said, “and they use kalas.”

“Ah,” said Autumn. She eyed a large lump of some vegetable that sat precariously on the blade of her knife then put it back on the platter and cut it in half. “So why did you pay in paraks?”

“I did not,” said Kanikapila. “I paid for the goods in kalas but the boatman wanted paraks for delivery. No doubt he will have some business in Aferraron to deal with.”

“They looked heavy,” said Logan. “What were they?”

“What were what?” asked Kanikapila.

“The things loaded onto your wagon,” said Logan.

“Ohh, statues,” he replied. “Tis the fashion at the moment for the wealthy in Schtei to have Danornor statues on display in their homes.”

“So is that what you do?” asked Autumn. “You buy and sell statues?”

“I buy and sell anything the wealthy want,” said Kanikapila. “Tis an easy business for when a wealthy person decides they want something they will pay anything to have it.”

“Can I ask why you had the statues delivered to Daihfew?” asked Logan. “Would it not be easier to have them delivered directly to Schtei? It would save you the trouble of hiring a wagon and carrying them yourself.”

Kanikapila sighed and leaned back in his pea sack.

“Tis my own fault,” he said sadly. “I let the company and conversation loosen my tongue. How much do you want?”

“Want?” asked Autumn “I do not understand.”

“How much will buy your silence?” he asked.

“My silence?” asked Autumn. She looked at Logan in confusion. Logan looked equally puzzled then his face cleared.

“Ahh,” he said. “I venture Kanikapila is doing something he should not be doing.”

“What should he not be doing with statues?” asked Autumn.

“I have no idea,” said Logan, “but why else would he want our silence?”

“Shall we say thirty kalas?” asked Kanikapila, wondering what Autumn and Logan were talking about.

“We have no need of money,” said Autumn. “I venture there are others in greater need than us.”

“Forty then,” said Kanikapila. “And that is my last offer.”

Autumn stared at him while a slice of mutton dripped unnoticed onto her platter.

“Very well,” she said. “Forty kalas.”

Kanikapila's lips compressed as he put his platter on the table. He pulled a bag from within his tunic and counted out forty kalas.

“There,” he said pushing them over. “You drive a hard bargain.”

“Thank you,” said Autumn. She, too, put her platter on the table. “You have bought our silence. I in turn want something from you.” She pushed the coins back to Kanikapila's side of the table.

“And what is that?” asked Kanikapila.

“An explanation of what you are talking about,” said Autumn. “It is beyond my comprehension.”

“You truly do not know?” asked Kanikapila. He suddenly looked around and saw eyes watching the coins so he hurriedly put them back in the bag.

“No,” said Autumn.

“Ohhh,” said Logan, his face lighting up. He also leaned forward and put his platter on the table. “It be taxes!”

“Shhh!” exclaimed Kanikapila in alarm.

“I do not understand,” said Autumn.

“I venture there are taxes to be paid on statues in Schtei,” said Logan. “By having them delivered here and taking them to Schtei himself, I wager Kanikapila is avoiding the taxes.”

“Close enough,” said Kanikapila. “There are taxes on all luxury goods going to Schtei but the taxes on those from Danornor be double what they are for those from Aferraron. That actually be something good your namesake has done. When I get to Schtei I will tell the tax collectors the statues came from Aferraron which they will believe since no one in their right mind would take statues from Danornor over land as Danornor is an island.”

“Is there something wrong with the food?” asked Roffslam, coming over. “None of you are eating.”

“We are merely resting for a time to prolong the delights of the meal,” said Kanikapila, picking up his platter again. “It has been a while since I ate this well. Indeed, unless my memory fails me my last meal this good was the last time I ate here.”

“That's alright then,” said Roffslam. “Only people not eating my food don't look good, see. Bad for business.”

“All is well, Roffslam,” said Kanikapila. “Ahh, Roffslam. My friends here will be staying the night. What say you to a good price?”

“A kala each,” said Roffslam. “Can't say fairer than that.”

“They are very good friends of mine,” said Kanikapila, looking him in the eye.

“Pah,” said Roffslam and scowled. “A kala eight then for them both.”

“Excellent,” said Kanikapila. “Put that on my stick as well.”

“There is no need,” said Autumn. “We can easily make camp outside of town.”

“You are my guests,” said Kanikapila, “and please, do not offend Roffslam with talk of camping.”

“We thank you,” said Autumn. She smiled at Roffslam who gave her a strange look and stomped off.

“Do not let your food get cold,” said Kanikapila. He watched as Autumn and Logan picked up their platters and started eating again. “Truly I do not understand you. How is it you neither understand nor desire money?”

“We have no use for it,” said Autumn. “Truly all our needs are met without it. We are simple folk.”

“Simple?” exclaimed Kanikapila then burst out laughing. “That I would dispute most mightily. Still it is no great matter. Tell me, if you have no need of money why do you carry some?”

“We found it,” said Logan hastily.

“And the ring as well?” asked Kanikapila. “It is too big for either of you so I venture you found that also?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “We were thinking we might find someone here who would buy it.”

“But if you have no need of money why sell it?” asked Kanikapila. “The ring at least is pretty and the money is not.”

“Autumn likes to give away what money we do have,” said Logan. “We

often come across people in dire need on our travels and a few coins ease their lives.”

“Hmm, I suppose so,” said Kanikapila. “Well, there will be a market here tomorrow. Some of what arrived on the boats today will be up for sale and others will come in from surrounding areas. Mayhap you will find a buyer among them.” He chewed some more food thoughtfully. “You say you found the ring? Can I ask where?”

“On our way to Bufon,” said Autumn. “Twas two or three days after we first met you.”

“Then I would suggest you do not try to sell the ring here,” said Kanikapila. “Like as not whoever lost the ring is well to do and known in these parts. The ring may be recognised and you accused of stealing it.”

“That is a point,” said Autumn to Logan. “Mayhap it would be a good idea to ask around at the market. If the rings are recognised we can return them to whoever they belong to.”

“Rings?” said Kanikapila. “So there is more than one?”

“There are three,” said Autumn. “And a bracelet.”

“Then you will definitely be called thieves,” said Kanikapila. “The odds of one person losing three such rings would defy belief. ’Tis not worth the risk trying to sell them here. I would suggest you keep the rings until you reach Schtei and sell them there. If you go to the Iflinbar market you will get a reasonable price and none will ask questions or take your hands.”

“What do you mean, take your hands?” asked Autumn.

“That is the penalty of stealing in Wase,” said Kanikapila. “The first time your left hand is cut off, the second time your right hand. If you still be stealing after that your head is cut off although not many carry on thieving with no hands.”

“Ah,” said Logan, wincing. “Mayhap it is best if we just toss the rings

in the sea.”

“Aye, that is an option,” said Kanikapila. “Not a profitable one though.”

“That would seem a harsh penalty,” said Autumn, frowning. “If someone has lost a hand would it not be more difficult for them to survive and make it more likely they will steal again rather than less likely?”

“Perhaps,” said Kanikapila, “but who cares?”

“I imagine the person who has lost their hand cares,” said Autumn.

“Tis rarely enforced on ordinary folk,” said Kanikapila. He put his empty platter on the ground beside him. “The law was introduced to scare off bandits for we are plagued with bandits and the Mo’i is struggling to deal with them.”

“You mean Chanwar and the like?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Kanikapila. “Chanwar is most known but there are others. How is it you know of Chanwar? You being strangers here.”

“There was talk of Chanwar when we were in Bufon,” said Autumn.

“Ahh, that would be the other Chanwar,” said Kanikapila. “The Chanwar stays on the other side of the mountains.”

“So there is more than one?” asked Autumn. “Are they related?”

“Aye,” said Kanikapila, “or so I have heard.” He belched contentedly. “I think there are four or five. No matter. They are all of the Wodazu family who control the Eastern slopes of the Xibu Shan Mountains and have done for, ohh, mayhap a hundred summers or more. Chanwar One took over as head when Ritawa was killed. Bufon, hey. I wager that must have been Chanwar Two for I have heard that there was trouble in the family.”

“That is the Wodazu family?” asked Logan.

“Yes,” said Kanikapila.

“What was the nature of the trouble?” asked Autumn.

“I do not know,” said Kanikapila. “I live in my Esyup on this side of the mountains and they do not take me into their confidence. I have heard it said that Chanwar Two fought with Chanwar One and was ousted but it could simply be that Chanwar Two wanted to set up on his own. I do not know. It could even be that Chanwar One is expanding this way and Chanwar Two is leading that expansion but I have also heard it said that Chanwar Two is dead. I know not. If you stay long in Wase you will find that we love to gossip and make up stories about each other. All I know for sure is that the Wodazu are a family of bandits and they keep themselves to themselves. Mayhap it is another family that is coming this way and laying the blame on Chanwar. If that be so then the Wodazu will be having something to say about it in time.”

“So the entire family are bandits?” asked Autumn. “That is unusual, is it not?”

“Yes and no,” said Kanikapila. “There are plenty of bandits as were deserters from one army or another as this side of the mountains has been much fought over but many of them have been taken in by the Wodazu and have become part of that family. Not the leaders though, or so I have heard. The head of the family is always a pure blood Wodazu, born of a brother and sister.”

“So none go outside the Wodazu?” asked Autumn.

“I do not know,” said Kanikapila, “but if they do 'tis likely they would be women and take the family name of the one they join with. Mayhap some would marry into the Wodazu from outside but they would not have pure blood offspring and would never be part of the inner tribe. Mind you, there will also be those who simply join with them for whatever pickings they can get and move on in time or die.”

“And they are on the other side of the mountains?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Kanikapila. “'Tis rare for the Wodazu to venture this side

or even down to the coast. They are mountain people. That is why I come this way. There is a pass through the mountains which would be a quicker way to Schtei but once through and down to the lower slopes I would undoubtedly fall foul of them. 'Tis safer to stay this side then follow the coast. Ahh, you are of Mizule, are you not, Autumn, or was it Morath?"

"Both and others," said Autumn. "I am Krisana of Mizule and Vallume of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup."

"Indeed," said Kanikapila. "'Tis a shame you cannot go to the pass for there is a shrine there that would interest you."

"How so?" asked Autumn.

"It is a shrine to Mizule," said Kanikapila, "or rather those of Mizule who fell there. Indeed the whole tale is one of great bravery and honour even though I am a Wasian."

"I did not know there was a shrine to Mizule in these mountains," said Autumn thoughtfully. "Please, what is the tale?"

"Oh, 'twas some sixty summers past," said Kanikapila. "Your Roinad Wyyven ap Nagul Spey declared war on Wase and sent an army up the coast. Our army under the command of Maarcoolin Bis Four met them a little to the North of here. Scouts sent out found that Wyyven's army was bigger than expected so Maarcoolin sent a large contingent of some two or three hundred to the North intending that they cross through the pass and come upon Wyyven from behind."

"Did it work?" asked Autumn.

"Not really," said Kanikapila. "Wyyven was a gifted fighter and anticipated such a move. He sent a small detachment to block the pass. There were only twenty of them but the pass is narrow and when Maarcoolin's men came upon them unexpectedly Wyyven's were able to hold them off for several days until they were all killed. Well, all except one. That one, I think his name was Iuo, was sent back to warn Wyyven when the Wasians appeared. The other nineteen swore they would never pass as long as any of them remained alive."

“So what happened?” asked Logan, fascinated.

“When the last of the nineteen finally succumbed,” said Kanikapila, “those of Maarcoolin who still lived hurried down to attack Wyyvven's army as was the plan. But Iuo had warned Wyyvven and their attack was beaten off and Wyyvven won a great victory.”

“What happened to Iuo?” asked Autumn.

“He killed himself,” said Kanikapila. “He told Wyyvven that all twenty had sworn not to let the Wasians through the pass and yet we got through.”

“But that was not his fault,” said Autumn. “He went to warn Wyyvven and thereby saved Wyyvven's army.”

“Indeed,” said Kanikapila, “but he insisted on dying as his comrades had done for he believed that to still live would be dishonourable both to himself and his comrades. When it was all over Wyyvven had built a shrine to Iuo and the Twenty with the blessings of Mizule at the head of the pass and even though Wase has since won this land back again we have not defaced or destroyed that shrine for we, too, honour their bravery and dedication.”

Chapter Sixteen

Logan was sitting on the edge of the beach behind The Black Horse when the attack came. He was gazing out to sea wondering where Autumn was and slowly eating something he held in his hand when two hands viciously sliced the air each side of his head. They passed but a hair's breadth from each of his ears and he clearly heard the whoosh. Before he had time to react something flashed across the top of his head, rifling his hair. He froze, the food halfway to his mouth, although he instinctively hunched his shoulders. The next moment Autumn cartwheeled over the top of him and landed squarely in front. One hand shot out in a deadly punch with the first and fourth fingers rigid but stopped just in front of his eyelashes. A moment later she flicked the tip of his nose.

“Is it not a beautiful day?” she asked, as she did most every day.

She relaxed and stepped backwards.

“I suppose so,” said Logan. His hand finished its movement towards his mouth and he took a bite. He was almost used to Autumn's practice attacks.

She eyed him thoughtfully.

“You seem out of sorts,” she said and glanced at the sky. “Ahh, you are awake early.”

“I did not sleep well,” admitted Logan. “There were five others sleeping with me and they snored and scratched and farted like the end of the world was nigh.”

“I, too, did not sleep as well as usual,” said Autumn, sitting beside him, “although it was the opposite problem. I was alone and did not have the usual sounds of Logan to lull me into sleep.”

“And when I did at last fall asleep,” continued Logan, “I was awakened soon after dawn by the rumbling and rattling of carts and wagons outside.”

“I heard them too,” said Autumn, “although I was on the beach at dawn. I wager it was people arriving for the market that Kanikapila spoke of. There seems to be some bustle and commotion down there beyond the boats. Is Kanikapila awake?”

“He is gone,” said Logan. “He left soon after dawn. He apologised for not making his farewells to you.” He took another bite and chewed slowly.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. She paused. “’Twas only that I wanted to thank him again for his hospitality.”

“He said we would no doubt meet again,” said Logan. “He said to look for him at some place in Schtei when we arrive.”

“What place would that be?” she asked.

Logan took another bite and chewed while he thought about it. “I do not remember,” he said after a while, his brow furrowed.

Autumn picked up a piece of seaweed and inspected it.

“Oh,” said Logan suddenly. He picked up a small bundle wrapped in a dirty piece of tattered cloth. “This is yours.” He held it out. “It seems that morning food is included in the price of a bed.”

“What is it?” asked Autumn, taking the bundle but not unwrapping it.

“’Tis called a janja wrap,” said Logan. “It is a piece of janja rolled around some cold left over mutton and something greasy, I know not what. I did not know where you were so I asked Roffslam’s helper to wrap it in a cloth for you.”

“That was most kind of you, Logan,” said Autumn. “I am still replete from yesterday so I will keep it for later.” She put it on the grassy sand beside him. “Ahh, ’tis still early and I feel a need to do more. Bide here a while.”

She jumped up and went over to where she had left her staff, pack and robe a little way further along the beach. She picked up her staff and

hefted it while looking out to sea then turned and waved at Logan. He waved back and she instantly dropped into a crouch then whirled to strike imaginary attackers from behind with the staff, swinging it with one hand. She let the far end continue the swing and twirled to catch it with her other hand then dropped it almost to the ground and jumped over it without letting go. Then she attacked an imaginary horde, flailing the staff from side to side while leaping, somersaulting and twirling to avoid their blows. Several times she thrust the staff backwards and thrice let the backward thrust embed the end of the staff in the sand to vault backwards over it. She continued this for some time, making Logan feel exhausted just watching her. Finally she jabbed one end in the sand and climbed nimbly up the staff, holding the top end and stayed there balanced for one breath, two breaths, three, four then flipped the staff as it toppled so the end leapt up to strike the last of the foes in the head. Then she slowly walked back to where Logan sat.

“Catch,” she cried unexpectedly while still some way away and threw the staff at him like a spear.

To his surprise, Logan caught it with one hand although, as he was still sitting, he fell over backwards.

“Good,” she said. “Your reactions are improving. Come. 'Tis time you learnt more with the staff.”

“About time,” he said getting to his feet. He took up the ready stance with the staff pointing to the front with one end in his armpit.

“Sweep your foot to one side,” said Autumn, “and swing round with the staff. Try to hit me in the head.”

She easily avoided his blow and he stumbled and nearly fell.

“You stepped too far,” she said as he stood up straight again. “Remember, your aim is to always be in control. 'Tis better to take two shorter steps and stay balanced than to take a long step and lose it. Try that again but sweep your foot only as far as is comfortable and stable. Pivot on the ball of your foot if needs be and hold your other arm out as a counter balance.”

She made him repeat the manoeuvre several times then again to the other side, each time pointing out errors in technique.

“You learn quickly,” she said after a time. “Now try hitting to the left then immediately to the right.”

Logan slashed to the left but struggled to control the staff and his blow to the right was short, ragged and lacking in power.

“You see the problem?” asked Autumn. “Once you start going to the left the staff and your body want to keep going left and it is a struggle to change that.”

“So how do I deal with that?” asked Logan. “For sure if there ever comes a time when I need to fight with a staff I will have an opponent to each side of me.”

“Like as not,” said Autumn. “Give me the staff. Watch.” She went through the movement in slow motion. “The trick is to let the staff keep moving and not to fight it but guide it. See? As I near the end of the left swing I start to lift the staff so it comes up and back on itself and at the same time I move my hips and back in like manner. That way it continues the swing rather than fights it and it is already moving to the right for the second blow. You try.”

Logan attempted the manoeuvre and almost got it right, save only a small entanglement of his feet.

“That was good,” said Autumn encouragingly. “Concentrate on swinging smoothly and do not worry about power. That will come in time when you have mastered the move. Keep practising.”

Astauand was half way up Its climb when Autumn called a stop to the practice. Logan was sweating profusely and his shoulders ached.

“You are doing well,” said Autumn from where she sat. “Come and rest.”

Obediently Logan dropped the staff beside Autumn and flopped on the sand. “It is hard work,” he said, picking up their water bottle. “I

had always imagined a heavier staff to be a better weapon but now I realise that it would be harder to control.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Never forget that speed will always defeat strength. Here, have the rest of this wrap. I have eaten my fill.”

“Ahh, thank you,” said Logan taking the proffered janja wrap. “’Tis hungry work, this.”

He made short work of the wrap then had another drink before stretching his shoulders.

“Will we be visiting the market?” he asked after a while, “before heading off to the pass in the mountains?”

Autumn jerked around to look at him and her eyes narrowed momentarily. Then she smiled.

“Ahh, Logan the Insightful,” she said. “You know me too well.”

“No sooner had Kanikapila spoken of a shrine to Mizule than I knew we would be going there,” said Logan with a small shrug. “I wager the entirety of Maarcoolin’s army could not keep you away.”

“In truth I would like to visit,” said Autumn, “and make my devotions, but if you would prefer not we can continue to Schtei.”

“I am happy to go there,” he replied, “for I have only once before seen a shrine and that was to Seiliu and was plastered in cow dung, but I would ask one thing.”

“And what is that?” asked Autumn.

“That we come back this side,” said Logan, “and follow the coast to Schtei. Kanikapila said the lower slopes after the pass are infested with bandits.”

“That is only fair,” said Autumn, “and I see nothing to be gained by visiting their nest. I would also like to visit the market. No doubt you would like to buy some food and I would like to look for a needle like

Yulia's. My bone needle is sufficient for repairing rents in clothes but is not fine enough to stitch a wound. Yulia's was very fine indeed and made of metal."

* * *

"Like as not they are in Daihfew, yonder," said Chanwar, pointing down the hill to the town that nestled on the water's edge. "We will look around for them and if they are not there we will start to make our way back along the road towards Bufon."

"What if they have already arrived there and moved on?" asked Ipengar.

"Then we will catch them up sooner or later," said Chanwar. "They are on foot and we are mounted. I venture they have not yet arrived. Still, it is a possibility."

She scratched her central bald scalp then pulled one of her braids round and started to chew the end thoughtfully.

"Right, gather round everyone," she said, not raising her voice. The men clustered around her. "It looks like market day so we have no need of stealth. We will ride down and stop on the edge of town, just beyond the market. Ipengar, you and the others who have seen them will then go among the market goers and look for them. If you spot them do nothing. Come back and tell me. There are two inns here or three? I do not remember."

"Two," said Udjin. "The Ship and The Black Horse."

"Ahh yes," said Chanwar and her face lit up mischievously. "The Ship be a right fun place, as I remember. Good. Udjin, you go to both and ask if they have stayed there recently. If they have find out if they are still there and if not then which way they went."

"What if they took a boat?" asked Ipengar. "Tis a port after all."

"You do like to search for difficulties," said Chanwar with a light laugh. "Yes, I imagine that is a possibility as well. If it be so then find

out which boat and I will deal with the captain on his return. I will not have it said that someone helped them get away and if it be so then that someone will live only long enough to regret it most deeply. You all understand?"

The men nodded.

"Good," said Chanwar. "Oh, and one more thing. No one gets to drinking until I have my toes. That there bitch be a sneaky, underhand sort and be filled with deception and trickery. You will all need your wits about you."

"What about the market?" asked Ebin. "There'll be plenty of coins and other stuff just waiting to be taken."

"Leave it 'til after our business be done," said Chanwar. "There will be plenty of pickings still and unwary travellers but my toes be the most important thing and let no one be forgetting that."

* * *

"It seems to be only a fish market," said Logan, gazing at the baskets of fish strewn everywhere. Some of the fish still flapped halfheartedly on top.

"There are other stalls over there," said Autumn, looking beyond. "I fancy that one has some cheeses."

"Where?" said Logan, looking away from a crab that kept waving an over-large claw at him and snapping it noisily as if in challenge. "Oh, yes."

"You go and see," said Autumn. "I will have a look along here."

She wandered off to look at a cart that held bolts of cloth as that seemed a likely place to start looking for a needle.

"That is a funny looking cheese," said Logan, pointing to one that had been cut in half. It had blue-green streaks running through it and sat in the centre of a plank with other, more normal looking cheeses lined

up on either side.

“Tis my finest,” said the woman standing behind the plank. “Want a taste?”

“Please,” said Logan.

The woman eased a sliver off the cheese with a thin bone knife and held it out to him. He licked the end of his finger and used the dampness to lift the sliver. It had some of the blue-green stuff in it. He popped it in his mouth.

“Nice,” he said, savouring the taste. “Yes, very nice. What is that blue-green stuff?”

“Tis mould,” said the woman. “Carefully grown and folded in during the making.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. He pursed his lips and looked intently at the cheese while trying to decide what his belly thought.

The woman looked contemptuously at him. “You think I be offering cheeses that will harm you?” she demanded.

“Tis not unheard of,” said Logan.

“Oh, be off with you,” she said irritably. She waved the little knife at Logan. “If you have not the sense to recognise a fine cheese when you taste it then you be wasting both your time and mine.”

“How much for that half?” he asked, pointing to the smaller.

“Twelve hakina,” she replied instantly.

“Hmm,” said Logan out of habit. “I will give you eight.”

“Ten and that be my final price,” said the woman determinedly.

Logan sensed someone come up close behind him and looked around.

“I have found a place that has needles,” said Autumn.

“Ahh, good,” said Logan. He looked at the woman’s face and decided he couldn’t be bothered to argue. “Very well,” and fished around for the coins.

“Thank you kindly,” said the woman, her face unexpectedly breaking out into smiles. She dropped the coins down the front of her dress and looked at Logan as if daring him to retrieve them. Logan sensed he had been cheated in some way but grabbed the cheese.

“Where?” he asked Autumn.

“This way,” she said, walking off.

The cart she led him to was cluttered with things made of metal, from bracelets made from twisted wires to knives and dishes with decorative patterns beaten into them. A tall thin man was standing between the rails. He had a long straggly beard and stained fingers with ragged nails and was jabbing one of those fingers repeatedly at a woman. His other hand clutched one of the shafts of the cart as though it was his mortal enemy’s throat. The woman, wrapped from head to foot in a warm looking shawl, kept running her fingers over a set of four decorated bowls and was bargaining spiritedly with the man.

Nearby, another man sat cross legged on the ground with his eyes shut. He looked to be asleep or contemplating something from which any aspect of the world would be a distraction. He looked old and scrawny and his thin tunic was threadbare in places. In front of him was a woven pot with a lid on it. Passers-by barely glanced at him and none stopped to ask what, if anything, he had for sale.

Autumn patiently waited for the woman to finish her bargaining while Logan toyed with some of the knives. They were not best quality but neither were they inferior and the man kept glancing at him between jabs with his finger at the woman. Abruptly the woman picked up one of the bowls and crashed it down on top of another, making Logan jump. The seller looked horrified and stopped jabbing. The woman hissed something loudly at him then, pulling her shawl tightly around

her, she stomped off.

“And you too!” yelled the seller after her. His moustaches quivered angrily and he clicked his thumbnail under his teeth at her. “Cursed woman,” he muttered irritably and tidied his bowls while glaring at Logan.

“Greetings,” said Autumn, stepping forward.

“Bimet at your service,” the man said instantly, twisting to beam at her. “Can I interest you in a collection of bowls? Most reasonably priced as you will agree after inspecting the decorations.”

“Alas no,” said Autumn. “However I am told you have some needles.”

“I have needles for every purpose and for no purpose save to delight the eyes,” said Bimet. His beam broadened. “Tell me your desire and I will satisfy it in an instant!” He cast his eyes over his collection of goods then pounced on a small wooden box almost hidden behind a small oval cauldron.

“I am looking for a fine needle,” said Autumn.

“Every one of my needles is fine,” exclaimed Bimet, opening the box. “The finest in all of Wase and beyond! Come, see for yourself,” and he held the box out to her.

“I am certain they are,” said Autumn, looking in the box, “but what I mean is one that is thin and good for delicate stitching.”

“Ahhh,” said Bimet, “I have just the needle you want.” He pulled the box back and upended it onto his hand and began searching through the needles that fell out. “Can I ask your intended purpose? Embroidery, perhaps?”

“The stitching of deep cuts,” said Autumn.

Bimet paused and looked intently at her with raised eyebrows. “Ask a stupid question,” he muttered and resumed flicking through the needles. “Perhaps this one?” he asked, holding one up between his

finger and thumb.

“Yes, that will do nicely,” said Autumn, impressed with how thin the needle was compared with her bone one. “Tell me, do you make these things yourself?”

“Everything from the smallest needle to the biggest cauldron was made by my own two hands,” said Bimet proudly, drawing himself up to his full height.

“I am most impressed with your skills,” she said, waving a hand over the cart. “Are you able to put a hole in a coin?”

“You insult me, Wahine,” said Bimet with a scowl. “I am a master craftsman. Put a hole in a coin indeed!”

“I humbly apologise for insulting you,” said Autumn. “I did not mean to offend, only my companion here has a coin which is special to him and he desires to put a string through it and wear it.”

The seated man's eyes suddenly flicked open and he yawned. He picked up some sort of flute that had lain unnoticed beside him and blew a few notes to check it was working. Logan looked over from where he was standing at the other end of the cart, wondering if he was a musician.

“Can I see the coin?” asked Bimet.

“Logan,” called Autumn. “Show this man your coin.”

“Here,” said Logan and stepped forward with the coin in his hand.

The musician leaned forward and lifted the lid off his woven basket.

“Ahh, to collect coins,” thought Logan as Bimet inspected the coin.

“Tis not a kala,” said Bimet, testing Logan's coin with his teeth. “What is it?”

The musician started to play a slow tune that weaved and waded in

time with his flute's swaying.

“It is a parak from Aferraron,” said Autumn. Then a movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention and she reacted instantly as the snake fixed the musician with its beady eyes and poised to strike.

Chapter Seventeen

The snake died instantly and the musician gawped up at her.

“Twas about to bite you,” said Autumn, holding up the snake.

“My snake!” exclaimed the musician, staring in horror and disbelief. “You killed my snake!”

“It was about to attack him,” said Autumn to three or four people who stopped to see what was happening. The snake still hung, lifeless, from her outstretched hand. “I venture it would have killed him.” She gave the snake a shake so it seemed to wriggle.

“But that was my snake!” yelled the musician, his face going dark with anger. “You have killed it!”

He jumped to his feet and started to hit Autumn repeatedly with his flute. Autumn backed away, her face filled with puzzlement and confusion. The man was no threat as he was a full head shorter than she and very slightly built but his anger was huge and intimidating.

“That woman killed his snake,” explained someone in the growing crowd to someone else. There were other mutterings and cries of dismay.

“I am sorry,” said Autumn, still warding off the musician's blows. “Have I done something wrong?” The snake still hung from her grip and its glossy scales were beginning to lose their shine.

“You will pay for this, you foul excretion of Yammoe!” shouted the musician. His dirty hat fell over his eyes from his exertions and he paused to jerk it back on his head. “You fiend, you destroyer of lives!” and he started to weep and threw his flute on the ground in despair.

“Please, please, calm yourself,” said Autumn, sensing the onlookers were beginning to turn hostile. “I apologise most humbly if I have done you wrong. I thought only to save you from attack.”

“Please everyone,” called Logan, stepping forward, “there has been a

dreadful misunderstanding here but we will do everything we can to resolve it. Please, stay calm.”

The onlookers fell silent as they watched to see what would happen next. The musician stumbled backwards and slumped to the ground. The basket caught his eye and he kicked it viciously.

“He be a charmer,” said Bimet, joining them. “That snake be his livelihood and you have taken it from him.”

“I don't understand,” said Autumn. She realised she was still holding the snake up and lowered her arm quickly.

“He plays a tune and the snake dances,” said Bimet, eyeing the snake in case it was still alive and getting angry at its mistreatment. “It is highly poisonous and he charms it so it does not bite.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. She looked down at the lifeless snake, uncertain what to do.

Logan picked up the basket and held it out so she dropped the snake inside. Logan quickly put the lid back on and put it on the ground beside the musician. He glared at Logan and lifted the lid to peer inside and gave the basket a shake. The snake clearly had not revived and he sat there, staring up at Autumn with hatred in his eyes.

“Umm,” said Autumn. She looked around and it was apparent that, although the onlookers were no longer overtly hostile, no one looked favourably on her. “What can I do to make amends?”

“He can likely get another snake,” said Bimet, secretly pleased because he didn't like having a poisonous snake so close to him while he was trading, especially as the lid of the basket was loose fitting, “but he will be having no livelihood until then and likely his family will starve.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “Perhaps if we give you some money? Will that help?”

The musician transferred his stare to Logan. “A hundred kala,” he said

loudly.

“Snake weren't that poisonous,” called someone from the small crowd and several people laughed. “An' it only be a little 'un. Fifty be more than enough.”

“I, umm, don't have fifty,” said Logan hesitantly. “I only have about ten, I think,” and he felt inside his blanket for the coins. His hand touched the bracelet and he pulled it out. “Will this do?”

A sigh passed through the onlookers and the musician's eyes lit up although he quickly masked his avarice.

“Show me,” he said, holding out his hand.

Bimet snatched the bracelet from Logan and looked closely at it.

“Tis a fine piece of work,” he said. “Not one of mine but fine none the less. Don't you be wasting this on that scumbag. This be too good a piece for the likes of him.”

“What price would you put on it?” asked Autumn, taking the bracelet and giving it back to Logan.

“Buying or selling?” asked Bimet.

“Does it matter?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“Course it bloody does,” said Bimet looking in surprise at her.

“Why?” she asked.

Bimet squinted at her. “I buy it from you at one price and sell it higher,” he said. “Stands to reason.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. She thought for a moment. “What will you give us for it?”

Bimet took the bracelet back and studied it more carefully. “Fifty,” he said after a few moments.

“Make it a hundred and it's yours,” said Logan, snatching it back.

The musician watched in bemusement.

Bimet pulled a face and stared at the bracelet in Logan's hand. “Seventy five,” he said at length.

“Done,” said Logan instantly, “if you will include Autumn's needle and making a hole in my coin.”

“Agreed,” said Bimet. “Come with me and we'll do the exchange. There be too many eyes here.”

As Logan and Bimet walked away the onlookers began to disperse as the excitement was over. One on the edge walked behind Bimet's cart to look at Autumn's face then hurried away. She didn't notice as her attention was on the musician.

“Are there many snakes around here?” she asked, squatting beside him.

“Aye,” said the musician, cheering up at the prospect of considerably more money than he would normally have collected. “Although that were a blue ringed nidget from the East and highly poisonous. One bite will kill almost immediately. 'Twill be difficult to find another.”

“Well, I apologise again,” said Autumn. “I thought only of your safety.”

“I thank you for that,” said the musician, his eyes following Bimet and Logan as they returned. “You are fast beyond belief, I'll give you that.”

“Here's the money,” said Logan, holding out a bag.

“Give it to our friend here,” said Autumn, rising to her feet.

The musician looked at the bag for a moment then hurriedly took it and shoved it inside his basket with the dead snake. He got to his feet and scurried off without a word, clutching the basket to his narrow chest.

“Here’s the needle,” said Logan, holding it up. “Bimet be making a hole in my coin now.”

“Good,” said Autumn. She sighed in regret for needlessly killing the snake then retrieved her pot of salve from her pack. She pushed the needle inside the salve and replaced the stopper. “When he is done we must find you a nice cord to hang it from.”

* * *

“I saw her,” exclaimed Klamme when he got back to where the others were waiting. “She be at the market.”

“And the lad?” asked Chanwar.

She was making patterns by laying out shells on the damp sand and drawing squiggly lines between them with a finger. The others were a little way off, on the other side of the dirt road. There was a copse of trees and plenty of grass for the horses. The men lounged talking quietly among themselves but all watched her.

“I think so,” said Klamme. “There was someone with her but I did not see his face so I cannot be sure.”

“Twill be him,” said Chanwar offhandedly. She studied her latest creation then carefully placed another shell on the sand. She studied it then grunted and shifted it a little to one side. “You have done well, Klamme. Go back and follow her. Oyen!”

“Yes, Chanwar?” asked Oyen, hurrying over.

“Is Ozio ready with the rope?” she asked, glancing up at him.

“Yes, Chanwar,” said Oyen.

“Good,” said Chanwar, jiggling some more shells in her hand. “Go find the others. Bring them back here.” Then she giggled and tossed the shells in her hand high in the air.

* * *

“I made a grievous error there,” said Autumn as they walked further into the market. “I should have realised that there was something unusual with the basket and not reacted until I had more knowledge of the situation.”

“Twas not your fault,” said Logan, admiring his name on the coin that now hung on a narrow length of leather around his neck. The leather was a deep green in colour and was, he thought, exceedingly fine. “Had you waited and the snake was not charmed it would have bitten the man and you would be saying you had made a grievous error for not reacting faster.”

“You have a point there, Logan the Wise,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “Which raises a question. Is it better to react swiftly without full knowledge or delay reacting until knowledge is acquired?”

“Tis not much of a question,” said Logan. “I would venture the answer is obvious. Where there is an apparent threat then reacting swiftly must always be the better choice for delaying even by the smallest amount could result in great harm”

“But was not great harm done to the snake?” asked Autumn, “and thereby to the charmer who lost his livelihood?”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, reluctantly dropping the coin inside the front of his tunic, “but it was only a snake and the charmer did well out of it for he gained seventy five kalas and will, no doubt, have another snake very soon.”

“But I abhor killing anything,” said Autumn.

“I know,” said Logan, stopping to look at someone else. “But you miss another point.”

“I do?” asked Autumn, frowning. “Twould seem I am not having a good day. What point am I missing?” She stopped too but was looking at Logan.

“This snake and the charmer was a single thing,” said Logan, “whereas your question was a general one for dealing with any

situation. There will always be single things that a general rule cannot be applied to.”

“And you are right once again,” said Autumn. “I have not heard of people who charm snakes with music but now I know some do I am better prepared for the future.”

“Good,” said Logan. “What do you suppose this is all about?”

He nodded at the young woman who was seated cross-legged on the ground. She was holding the hand of another young woman, barely more than a girl, also sitting on the ground and was doing something with a thin stick to the girl's fingers.

“I cannot imagine,” said Autumn after watching for a few moments.

Logan edged forward and peered at the girl's fingers. She looked up at him and smiled. “Nice, aren't they,”

“Do not move your hand,” admonished the one with the stick, not looking up. “I am nearly done. You, back off and wait your turn.”

“I am sorry,” said Logan. He backed away and turned slightly pink in embarrassment.

“What is she doing?” asked Autumn.

“She is painting the fingernails of the other,” said Logan quietly, not wanting to call attention to himself again.

“Why?” asked Autumn.

“I do not know,” said Logan, “but from what I saw it looked very nice.”

“It makes my fingers look pretty,” said the girl being painted. “It makes me feel special.”

“How so?” asked Autumn, her curiosity roused.

“Pah!” said the painter, jerking the girl's hand. “Ohh, that will have to do since you can't keep still.”

She blew on the girl's fingers for a few moments then released her hand. The girl studied her fingers and beamed.

“Look,” she said holding her fingers up so Autumn and Logan could see. Each fingernail had a delicately drawn image of a tiny butterfly on it, similar but each subtly different.

“That is very fine work,” said Autumn, looking at her fingers closely. “I wager I can imagine them flying off your fingers.”

“Yes,” said the girl delightedly. “Aren't they lovely?”

She studied the fingers of both hands then got up awkwardly, keeping her fingertips away from the ground and anything else.

“You should get yours done,” she said to Autumn. “You have the colouring.”

She checked her nails again then wandered off, keeping her hands raised and the fingers pointing inwards.

“Hello!” said the woman on the ground, smiling up at Autumn. “Sit down.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, holding her ground.

“Do you not want yours painted?” asked the woman. “I am the best nail painter outside Schtei, or inside for that matter for I am the only one. 'Twas my idea.”

“I am curious,” said Autumn. “What is the purpose of this?”

“Like the girl said,” said the painter, beginning to lose interest. “It makes you feel special.”

“But I do not see how?” said Autumn, looking at her own fingernails.

“You never will,” said the painter, smiling around her eyes, “until you do it. 'Tis not something that comes from thinking, only from feeling.”

“How much is it?” asked Logan for he had been much taken by the other girl's butterflies.

“Four hakina a finger,” said the woman, perking up as she sensed a possible sale, “or two kala for all ten.” She paused and looked at Autumn appraisingly. “You have dark colouring, I think pretty flowers on a dark background would suit you very well indeed. Your fingers will set off your robe and your hair very nicely.”

“I think not,” said Autumn, with a slight hesitation in her voice.

“I think you should,” said Logan.

“Why?” asked Autumn, looking at him intently.

He was about to say that it would make her prettier then changed his mind. Such a thing would not sway her and he knew it.

“It would be wrong of you to pass up an opportunity to gain knowledge,” he said gravely. “And knowledge that comes not from the mind? A rare opportunity indeed. An opportunity, I venture, none from your Esyup have ever had.”

“This is true,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “For certain I have never seen nor heard of anyone with painted fingernails in Aferraron or Neander.”

“I do toenails, too,” said the woman casually. “Sit yourself down, my lovely,” and she gently tugged on the hem of Autumn's robe.

“I'll hold your staff,” said Logan, taking it from Autumn.

Autumn hesitated then sat down. Logan smiled and sat beside her.

“I feel strangely nervous,” she said in a tone of surprise. “Why would that be?”

“Tis something wholly new and unfamiliar,” said Logan. “That is always scary.”

“So what's it to be?” asked the woman, taking hold of Autumn's left hand and easing her fingers straight.

“Just one,” said Autumn. “I do this only to find out what makes it special.”

“All ten” said Logan, handing over a couple of coins.

The painter glanced at them and gave one back as they were both two kala coins. She dropped the other in a slim pouch at her waist.

“And the pictures?” she asked, glancing at Logan as she assumed he was in charge.

“Flowers, as you said,” said Autumn decisively.

“Excellent choice,” said the painter.

Beside her was a tray with a number of small shells, each of which held different colours. She picked up another, empty, shell and poured in a small amount of blue then added a tiny amount of black. Then she picked up a twig with a thin wad of hair bound to one end and mixed the colours before holding it beside Autumn's robe.

“What are you doing?” asked Autumn, watching her every move.

“Getting the colour right,” said the painter. She added a drop more black.

“What is that stuff?” asked Autumn, intrigued.

“Tis a mixture of wax and the resin from a certain tree,” said the painter, “with a little something of my own to give the colours.”

She grasped Autumn's hand in hers and raised her brush. Autumn snatched her hand back.

“Will it last forever?” she asked.

“Oh, Vallume, no,” exclaimed the painter. “It will wear off in time and you can scrape it off with a stick anytime you want. If you want to change the pictures I will do that anyway.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “I am not convinced of this and I do not want anything that will mark me forever.”

“I would soon be out of business if that were the case,” said the painter with a little laugh. She took Autumn’s hand again, this time a little more firmly. “Now hold still, else you will make me do it wrong which would be no good for either of us.”

Defly she coated each of Autumn’s nails on that hand with smooth strokes from her brush and Autumn sat there watching every move intently, an air of expectant resignation about her.

“Now blow on them,” said the painter, demonstrating with her own hand, “while I do your other hand, but do not spit. They need to dry a little.”

Dutifully Autumn held her nails in front of her mouth and blew on them while the painter put the background on the nails of her other hand.

“Good,” said the painter when she was done. “Now blow on them.” She tossed the twig onto a small pile of discarded twigs and picked up a fresh one. This had but a single hair bound to it.

“Now,” she added, taking Autumn’s first hand, “this is the tricky bit. Absolutely no moving at all. Do not even breathe heavily.”

Holding each finger in turn close to her eyes she painted a few lines and dots on the nails in one colour then picked up another twig and did much the same in a different colour, then a third time in a third colour. Autumn and Logan both watched in fascination as pictures of flowers appeared. As with the butterflies before, each was similar but subtly different.

"I must commend you," she said when she was done. "Never have I known anyone sit so still and unmoving."

"Autumn does that a lot," said Logan, admiring her fingernails.

"That is your name?" asked the painter leaning back. "It suits you."

"Aye," said Autumn. "In what way?"

"You have not the heat of summer's passion," said the painter, "nor the cold of winter's reserve. You are somewhere in between, a spring or autumn for certain, and yet, I know not why, but there is something about you that speaks not to me of springs and new awakenings but more of autumns and thoughts of what is past and what is yet to come. You are but young, not much older than me I venture but there is an oldness to you as well. I see it in your eyes for they are older than your face. Much older. They have seen much and more than can ever be told, I wager."

"I am lost for words," said Autumn frowning a little. "I do not know how to respond to you."

"There is no need to respond," said the painter. "I know I am strange. Take no notice."

"What is your name?" asked Autumn.

"Chantal Twelve," said Chantal. "And all twelve be daughters to my father's great sorrow for he always wanted a son and having eleven sisters is, I confess, a burden. No matter. So, how do you like your nails?"

"I ... am not sure," said Autumn, studying them. "They are nicely done and I thank you for your time and your skills. What do I do now?"

"Find somewhere to be quiet for a while," said Chantal. "Let them fully dry else they will smear. Get your man here to buy you something nice to eat and sit in the sun while you eat it. Now, if you will excuse me I think I have someone else waiting."

“Ahh, my apologies,” said Autumn. She jumped to her feet without using her hands. “Logan, will you carry my staff for a while?”

“Assuredly,” said Logan getting to his feet as well. “Why don't we go over there where it is quiet and sit for a time until your nails dry?”

“A good idea,” said Autumn, holding her hands in front of her with the nails turned inwards. “I confess this does seem a somewhat burdensome exercise.”

They started to walk slowly towards a sunlit patch away from the bustle of the market without noticing Klamme point to them and speak to Chanwar. She nodded and pushed him and he hurried off to join the others further along the shore.

“If I cannot touch my nails until they are dry,” remarked Autumn as they walked, “how will I know when they are dry and can be touched?”

“I do not know,” said Logan. “Do you feel any different?”

“I do not think I feel special,” said Autumn, “although I am not clear on what is meant by special here although I do feel more exposed.”

They reached the spot Logan had suggested and she sat down.

“Exposed?” said Logan, sitting as well. He laid both their staffs on the ground beside him. “What do you mean?”

“I feel everyone is looking at me,” said Autumn, “although in truth I doubt that is the case.”

“That woman there is looking at you for sure,” said Logan, nodding towards Chanwar who was ambling towards them with a pleasant, open expression on her face. “’Tis an unusual way she has done her hair.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, looking at Chanwar. “Tell me, Logan, do you think there is an oldness about me? A darkness as Chantal Twelve said?”

“Hello my lovelies,” said Chanwar, beaming happily at them as she drew level. “Ohhhh, I love your nails! Aren't they just wonderful? Can I see?”

Chapter Eighteen

Without waiting for a reply Chanwar slipped her hand in Autumn's and lifted it so she could see the nails clearly. Autumn stiffened and stilled the urge to leap backwards. Instead she stayed seated, not sensing any danger.

"These are most beautifully done," exclaimed Chanwar. "Did you have them done here? I've been thinking of having mine done as well, but it is so expensive and they wear off far too quickly. Ohh, this one is soooo lifelike. I could almost pluck it and take it home with me. Did you have your other hand done as well?"

She reached down and slipped her other hand under Autumn's and lifted that too. Still Autumn sat, although she was beginning to feel uncomfortable with the attention. Logan watched in amusement.

"And the colours!" exclaimed Chanwar. "So rich and vibrant and the background matches your robe just perfectly. Where did you get that cloth? It is so beautiful and I wager it must be so warm on a cold day. That silver ribbon sets it off so well, don't you think? Isn't it a shame that your nails don't have a silver edge to them? That would make them just so perfect. What is your name?"

"Autumn," said Autumn. "And this is ..."

"A perfect name," exclaimed Chanwar, her enthusiasm bubbling over. "It suits your colouring so well and is not autumn redolent of cool evenings in front of a warm fire snuggled up close to someone, ohh, someone as handsome as your friend here. And your hair! Is it not so long and luxurious? Is that your natural colour? I would love hair like yours but mine is thin and straggly."

"I ..." began Autumn.

"I am thinking of colouring mine," continued Chanwar without a pause. "Mayhap just the ends of my braids. What do you think?"

"I ..." began Autumn.

“Mayhap red,” said Chanwar, releasing one of Autumn’s hands to pull her braid, “or mayhap blue or green even. I cannot decide.”

“Green ...” began Autumn.

“Or mayhap one one colour and one the other,” continued Chanwar, her eyes full of friendliness, “for I have two as you see but I would willingly have only one if it could be as long as yours. And your man? His name?”

“Logan,” said Autumn.

“And is he not as handsome as his name suggests?” asked Chanwar, eyeing Logan up and down and making him nervous and embarrassed. “Even though he is a little red in the face. Oh this is too wondrous a meeting, I can tell we are going to be great friends. Both of you. Tell me, Logan, why do you carry two staffs? Do your knees pain you?”

“One is ...” began Logan but Chanwar wasn’t listening.

“Such friends indeed,” exclaimed Chanwar, “but you do not live here, do you, for I would have met you before now if it were so. Where are you from?”

“We are fr ...” began Autumn.

“I would love to visit that place,” exclaimed Chanwar, interrupting. “For it must be a wondrous place if they as live there are as nice and as friendly as you two. Come,” and she stepped backwards pulling on Autumn’s hand. “I would love you to meet with some friends of mine. Other friends I mean since you are my friends, both of you.”

Autumn gave in to the pull of Chanwar’s hand and rose to her feet. Chanwar smiled happily and turned to take Logan’s hand in hers as well.

“This is a most fortuitous day,” she said gaily, swinging both their hands in hers. “Two new friends! I cannot believe it! Come, this way. ’Tis only a short distance along the road. We have some wine and soft

cakes and all good things to eat and make merry. We can talk and dance and you can tell me all about where you are from and we will have such a good time.”

She continued to chatter gaily, swinging their hands and making the occasional outrageous statement about some of the stall holders, many of whom were beginning to pack away as Astauand was at its peak and the market was coming to an end.

“We are just through this delightful little copse,” said Chanwar as they neared it. “Just on the other side. We have a fire and everything we shall need. 'Tis only a short way now and then the merry making can begin. I think mayhap there are even some of those flowers that are on your nails. I shall show them to you and we can compare and you will see how good the painter was. Who was she? Did she have a name?”

“Chantal Tw ...” started Autumn and again was not allowed to finish.

“And she is of this market?” asked Chanwar, as they went between the trees. “I must make a point of visiting her, aye, and very soon for I am consumed with jealousy. My own nails are such poor sad things when compared with yours. Now, you, Autumn, you stand just here for a moment while I get my ...” and a lasso dropped from the branch above Autumn.

It was dropped by Ozio who had been waiting and he quickly pulled it tight, pinning Autumn's arms to her sides. At the same moment, Oyen stepped from behind a tree and grabbed Logan around the chest. Ozio pulled upwards, lifting Autumn onto her toes. Chanwar tugged Autumn's hand, pulling her off balance then she finally let go. She stepped back and laughed.

“See, Ipengar?” she said, studying Autumn's face. Her eyes had lost their friendliness and were now vacant. “All it takes is a little planning.”

Ipengar and the others also emerged from behind trees and formed a circle around Autumn, Logan and Chanwar. Logan counted fourteen, not including Chanwar, but including the one behind him holding him tightly and allowing for one up the tree. Someone, he did not see who,

took the two staffs from his hand.

“So you planned this?” asked Autumn, having regained her balance even though she was on tiptoes.

“Of course,” said Chanwar.

She went over to Ipengar and gave him a long, lingering kiss. “Sadly planning is not Ipengar's strongest skill, although he is most skilled in other ways.” She squeezed his cheeks so his lips pouted then laughed and slapped his cheek affectionately.

“I was about to ask why you planned this,” said Autumn conversationally, “as I do not know you but I see some here I do know. Ipengar, for one, and Leryn I have met twice before and him, although I forget his name.”

“He is Teuxa,” said Chanwar, releasing Ipengar from her clutches. She walked over to Autumn and took hold of her hand again. “Truly you do not know who I am?”

“I regret not,” said Autumn. “You did not tell me your name.”

“Oh, and you have hurt your wrist!” exclaimed Chanwar, pretending to have only just noticed the binding around it. “How did that happen?”

“He stepped on it,” said Autumn, nodding towards Ipengar.

“So you are not invincible then?” said Chanwar, stepping very close to Autumn and staring into her eyes. Autumn stared back calmly but did not reply.

Chanwar's eyes hardened and she moistened her lips with a few small darts of her tongue. Then she smiled and squeezed Autumn's wrist hard.

“Ahhh,” exclaimed Autumn and closed her eyes briefly.

“No!” exclaimed Logan and struggled but his captor was too strong. Chanwar ignored him.

“See, Ipengar?” said Chanwar softly. “She is not invincible. My name is Chanwar. You still claim to not know of me?”

“I know the name,” said Autumn, “but I thought it was that of a man. Are you Chanwar One or Chanwar Two?”

Chanwar's eyes narrowed. “Do not mention that bastard's name to me,” she growled and tossed Autumn's arm away. “I am the only Chanwar that matters!”

“As you wish,” said Autumn calmly.

“Tis not my wish,” said Chanwar, stepping backwards. “Tis their wish,” and she waved her arm to encompass the men silently watching. “Aye, and that of the gods themselves.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “And what do you want with me and my companion?”

Chanwar walked slowly back to stand in front of Autumn again, pulling a viciously sharp looking knife from her belt. She picked up Autumn's hand again and kissed the fingertips, one by one, then, still holding her wrist she gently laid the cold blade along Autumn's cheek.

“I want only what is mine,” she crooned.

“And what, pray, is that?” asked Autumn.

“My toes,” said Chanwar. “Ten of them, five from you and five from him.” She jerked her head to include Logan but her eyes remained locked on Autumn's.

“I regret that is not possible,” said Autumn.

Chanwar smiled broadly and her eyes changed colour to a flinty green. “I am Chanwar,” she said. “Anything is possible.”

Autumn merely stared back.

Chanwar's eyes opened wide in mock surprise. “Ohh, but then I was

forgetting your beautiful nails,” she said, holding Autumn's strapped hand up again. “I think I will be adding these five fingers to my collection as well.”

She touched the tip of her blade to each fingertip in turn.

“I regret that is not possible,” said Autumn again.

Chanwar hissed then spat in Autumn's face. Then she squeezed Autumn's wrist again.

“Ahhh,” exclaimed Autumn, although her eyes did not blink this time.

“Leave her alone!” shouted Logan.

“Silence him!” shouted Chanwar angrily, whirling to point at Logan.

Instantly Autumn's legs flew up and locked around Chanwar's neck. She dropped a little as Ozio was taken by surprise but immediately doubled up and, using Chanwar's weight as extra leverage, yanked Ozio from the tree. As he fell she gripped the rope binding her and tore it apart¹¹, before crashing to the ground with Chanwar still in her grip.

The men watching reacted slowly as they had believed Chanwar to be fully in control of the situation. Logan, however, had been expecting Autumn to do something and was faster to react. He slammed his head backwards and caught Oyen full in the face. It was not a particularly strong blow as he did not have Autumn's skills nor strength but noses are surprisingly delicate and are easily broken. Oyen howled and released his grip. Off balance, Logan stepped backwards and tripped over Oyen's foot, thereby saving him from the slashing blow of their two staffs as the man who had taken them finally reacted. Oyen doubled up as the staffs hit him hard in his belly.

Leryn, having had experience of Autumn twice before was a little

11 It should not be forgotten that, when in Havildar, Autumn was imbued with the essence of trees by Khimera, a river naiad, in order to save Autumn from being consumed by a thorn coated with the evil magic of Cysciec. As a side effect, Autumn gained some of that essence, including enhanced strength and suppleness. See *The Annals ~ The Second Tale*.

faster than the others to react and loosed an arrow at Autumn which caught her full in the chest. He stared in astonishment as Autumn disentangled herself from Chanwar and jumped up, leaving the arrow embedded in the ground. He was fumbling for a second arrow when Autumn's foot caught him on the side of his head and he fell unconscious.

Ipengar, having had his nose broken by Autumn in their last encounter, rapidly stepped backwards and disappeared among the trees.

Logan kicked the man with the staffs as hard as he could and the man rounded on him, brandishing the staffs. Their combined thickness was too difficult to handle easily in one hand so he tossed one of them to his other hand and Logan was able to snatch at it and they both pulled hard, trying to wrest the staff from each other.

Klamme and two others jumped on Autumn as she twisted after kicking Leryn and she fell under their combined weight. She landed on her shoulder but managed to twist and lashed out at Klamme who slumped onto the ground beside her. The other two managed to land a blow each on Autumn before her knee caught one in the gut. Her elbow caught the other in the chest and both doubled up. She kicked them off her legs then did her shoulder press jump to land on her feet again. She whirled to face Ebin, Teuxa and another then leapt forward in a rolling somersault along the ground to take the legs of Teuxa from under him. Bouncing to her feet she scissor kicked Ebin before ramming her hand into the throat of the third. The blow hurt her wrist and she grimaced but crashed her elbow into Klamme's face as he struggled to get up.

Meanwhile, the man struggling with Logan tried to hit him with the other staff and Logan was able to wrest the staff from his grip. They faced off, each with a staff. The man fainted to the left then lunged at Logan from the right, raising his staff high. Just in time, Logan managed to swing his staff, which was in fact Autumn's, around to block the blow. His own staff, being wielded by his opponent, crashed onto Autumn's and bent in half like a piece of rope then shrivelled to the size of a twig. The man looked helplessly at the twig in his hand and Logan was able to smash his, that is Autumn's, staff over the

man's head. As he crumpled, Logan muttered "Good job, Fiau, thank you,"¹² and leapt over to help Autumn. His own staff regained its size and positioned itself across the man's throat, growing a few roots into the ground to trap him should he regain consciousness.

Chanwar, taken completely by surprise, had dropped her knife in her fall and had spent several moments scrabbling around trying to find it after Autumn had let her go. The knife now firmly in her grip she leapt to her feet.

"To me!" she screamed, brandishing the knife.

Teuxa, Udjin and the other four remaining men hurried over, Teuxa still rubbing his head. One of the four tried to slash at Logan with his sword but it caught in Autumn's staff as Logan tried to slam it down on his head. The force of Logan's blow embedded the point of the sword in the ground and Logan tried to use the staff to vault himself forward to kick the man in the face as he had seen Autumn do many times. Sadly his aim was not good and he missed and crashed into Autumn as she was in the process off twirling to kick Teuxa. They both crashed to the ground.

Chanwar instantly leapt on top of Autumn, her knife slashing down. Autumn cried out but managed to hit Chanwar on the side of her head and she sprawled on top of Logan. A little dazed, Logan lashed out and caught Chanwar on one shoulder, pushing her further away. She stayed on the ground, winded and dry retching. Teuxa and two of the others jumped on Autumn while Udjin and the other went for Logan. Autumn managed to get one hand in the long hair of Teuxa and pulled his head backwards while both her feet kicked out at the one who had gone for her legs. She caught him on the jaw with one foot and in the belly with the other. The third landed on her chest just as she rammed her hand in Teuxa's open mouth, dislodging two of his front teeth. The man on her chest shoved his face in hers, trying to bite her nose off but she was able to twist her head away and rammed her thumb in one of his eyes. He screamed and tried to jump up and she chopped him on the side of his head.

12 Fiau is a tree nymph (dryad) from Havildar who resides in the staff that was given to Logan by Mother Midcarn. See *The Annals ~ The Second Tale*. She has some abilities, including that of shapeshifting.

Autumn kicked the bodies off her and jumped to her feet just as Udjin smashed a fist onto the side of Logan's head. Instantly she lashed out with her foot and flung Udjin into a nearby tree. The sole remaining man let go of Logan and backed away, his hands held up in supplication.

“You gutless coward,” screamed Chanwar and threw herself at him. Her knife ripped into his belly and she pulled upwards as hard as she could. The man dropped to his knees, desperately trying to hold the sides of his belly together.

“Die, you filthy dog,” snarled Chanwar, stepping behind him. She pulled his head back and, with one unerring slash, slit his throat. He slumped to the ground and Chanwar straightened up.

“So,” she said happily. “’Tis only you and me now. What fun!”

Autumn backed away, glancing over at Logan. He was still breathing although he seemed unconscious. Around them several others lay unconscious and the rest were groaning and clutching various parts of their anatomies.

“Is this really what you want, Chanwar?” asked Autumn.

Chanwar grinned at her and licked her knife.

“Mmmmm,” she said. “I do so love the taste of fresh blood. It excites and delights me. No, this is not what I want,” and she gestured with the knife to encompass the remains of her troop. “What I want are your toes and fingers. They are rightfully mine,” and she dropped into a crouch with her knife pointing at Autumn. There were smears of blood on her lips and cheek.

“By what right do you think they are yours?” asked Autumn, dropping into her defensive posture and slowly edging sideways. Her robe hung open as the cord had come loose and fallen off.

“Because I want them,” said Chanwar, also edging sideways. “What other right do I need?”

“Nothing gives you the right to take another's toes and fingers,” said Autumn.

“Are you sure?” asked Chanwar, straightening up. She dropped her knife arm to her side. “But I was brought up to believe that if I want something then I could have it.”

“That is a false belief,” said Autumn, staying in her defensive posture. “Mayhap you can take things from those weaker than you but it is a cruel thing to do and causes much suffering.”

“Oh,” said Chanwar. “I never thought of that.” She looked around in puzzlement. “So all these be suffering because of me?”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“Is it not your fault for not giving me what I want?” asked Chanwar in a sad voice. “What say you we sit and talk about this in friendly discussion?”

“I did not start this,” said Autumn, slowly straightening up. “But if we can end it with no more suffering then I am willing. I abhor suffering in all its forms.”

“Really?” asked Chanwar, sounding surprised. “Well, yes, I can see there are disadvantages. Come, let us sit over there and talk further.” She pointed off to the left.

“If you wish,” said Autumn. She started to move towards where Chanwar had pointed.

Chanwar turned that way as well then suddenly lunged, her right hand with the knife flashing towards Autumn's belly. Almost casually Autumn evaded the attack and caught Chanwar's wrist.

“Drop the knife,” she said.

“Gladly,” said Chanwar and tried to stab Autumn.

Her arm barely moved. Autumn sighed and used the thumb of her

free hand to press between the second and third knuckles of Chanwar's knife hand. The knife dropped to the ground as Chanwar screamed in pain then she lashed out with her other hand. Autumn caught the blow in her cupped hand and held Chanwar's hand fast.

"Do you not know when you are bested?" she asked.

Chanwar slumped. "Aye," she said sadly. "I suppose I am. Are you going to kill me now?"

"I do not kill," said Autumn. "Look around. There were fifteen of you and all have been bested. The only one dead was by your hand."

"So mayhap you are invincible after all," said Chanwar. "Very well, I give up."

"Good," said Autumn. "Sit quietly over there while I attend to Logan."

She released Chanwar who quietly did as she was bidden. Autumn watched her go then walked over to Logan who was beginning to stir.

"Are you badly hurt, friend Logan?" asked Autumn, dropping to her knees beside him.

"Ohhh, my head," said Logan weakly. "There is a pounding like I have never known before."

"That man hit you on the side of your head," said Autumn, pointing to the man who'd hit him. He, too, was beginning to stir.

"Did you get him?" asked Logan, glancing over.

"Aye," said Autumn. "It's all over. Lie back and rest."

"What's that on your tunic?" asked Logan. "There, under your robe."

"Tis nothing that cannot wait," said Autumn. "I am more concerned with you."

"Oh Voqev!" exclaimed Logan in horror, his pounding head forgotten.

“You are bleeding!”

Chapter Nineteen

“Aye,” said Autumn, moving a finger in front of Logan's eyes to check they were tracking properly. They weren't for he was staring at the blood on Autumn's tunic. “Tis only a scratch.”

“No!” exclaimed Logan forcefully, struggling to get up. “There is too much blood to be only a scratch. We've got to do something! Now! Ohhh, my head.”

“Lie still for a few moments,” said Autumn. “Nothing can be done about my wound until these are dealt with,” and she waved her hand at Chanwar and the others.

“But you're bleeding!” exclaimed Logan again, fighting against her restraining hand.

“Enough!” said Autumn firmly. “Lie still.”

“But ...,” said Logan then shut up when he saw the look in her eye.

“Good,” said Autumn.

She got up with slight wince and walked over to Chanwar.

“So,” she said as Chanwar backed off a step, “what do you propose to do now?”

“What do you mean?” asked Chanwar.

“There are many injured here,” said Autumn, “but I cannot attend to them as long as you remain a threat. Will you give me your word to desist or is it your intention to prolong this dispute?”

Chanwar looked at Autumn thoughtfully then shrugged her shoulders.

“You have bested us all,” she said. “I see little point in continuing but I do not want your aid. I will not give you the satisfaction. They're tough. They'll manage.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “Now, to the future. What are your intentions?”

“I just said I would not continue this,” said Chanwar sharply. “Do you not believe me?”

“I believe you,” said Autumn, “but I meant beyond today. Do you intend to keep attacking me and Logan? Do you intend to continue as bandits? That is what I am asking you.”

“I see little future in it,” said Chanwar. She waved her hand at her men with an air of contempt. “I wager I will have little chance of keeping their loyalty now. Men such as these are loyal only to those who bring them the rewards they desire. They have taken a beating here today and at the hand of just you. They will not forget my leading them into this nor will they forgive easily.”

“So what will happen now?” asked Autumn.

“Aye yay yay,” said Chanwar, scratching the side of her head. “I will have to give that some thought.” She paused and looked at the groaning men around her. “There is land to spare in these parts, mayhap it is time I gave up this life and took up farming. Mayhap one or two will stay with me. Mayhap we can even breed horses.”

“Will you give me your word of honour on that?” asked Autumn.

“On the breeding of horses?” asked Chanwar. “No, for I cannot be certain that is the life to choose but on the giving up of banditry, yes I will give you my word of honour on that. I do not want a repeat of this day and if not you there may well be another.”

“This is true,” said Autumn. “So, let us be clear on this. On your word of honour do you swear to quit banditry for ever more?”

“Aye,” said Chanwar, holding up her left hand. “I, Wodazu Chanwar Two, swear to quit banditry for ever more.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “Now, gather your men and your horses and go to somewhere that will serve your new purpose.”

There was the briefest of flashes of something indecipherable at the back of Chanwar's eyes then she nodded abruptly. Autumn watched as she rounded up her men and loaded the two who remained unconscious on their horses. Ipengar had surreptitiously returned during the fight and pretended unconsciousness on the edge of the clearing. He helped one of the others sling the dead man over the back of his horse.

Only as the last of the horses disappeared through the trees did Autumn allow any of her pain to show.

“Chanwar caught me with her knife,” she muttered, clamping a hand to the side of her waist. “Help me get my tunic off. I wager it will need binding.”

Logan ran over and helped her out of her robe then sat her on the ground. Carefully he eased her tunic top over her head and arms and tossed it to one side. Then he gasped.

“Voqev,” he muttered, going pale. “’Tis bad and still bleeding. There is blood all over your waist and down your leg.”

“I was afraid of that,” said Autumn, clamping her hand over the wound. She, too, looked a little pale. “Tear a length off my tunic for me, please, Logan. I need to clean it before I can see how bad it is.”

“I will clean it,” said Logan, ripping a sleeve from her tunic. He grabbed their water bottle and soaked the cloth then started to gently dab around where the blood was still oozing.

“Be firm,” said Autumn. “You must clean the blood away not smear it around.”

“But I don't want to hurt you,” said Logan anxiously.

“It already hurts,” said Autumn. “A little more hurt will make no difference.”

She grabbed the water bottle¹³ from Logan and splashed it vigorously

13 This water bottle was a gift from Mother Midcarn and never runs out of water. See

over her side. Then she closed her eyes and started to hum quietly as Logan washed her side.

“That is the best I can do for now,” said Logan after a while.

Autumn let out her breath slowly then opened her eyes. She bent forward a little to look at the wound and it gaped.

“Tis not as bad as I thought,” she said. “Tis barely half a hand's width long.”

“There is another behind,” said Logan. “It looks like the knife went all the way through and came out the other side.”

Autumn tried to twist to see behind her but could not. “How long is it?”

“A fat finger width,” said Logan, “but it seems to bleed more than the front one. Stop twisting.”

“I am certain none of my innards are cut,” said Autumn, feeling around inside her body with her mind. “Still, there is always something good that comes out of every situation.”

“And what good do you see in this?” said Logan irritably. Autumn was hurt and he felt completely useless.

“Tis an opportunity to test the new needle,” she said. “Pass me my pack.”

She held the cloth against both cuts while Logan retrieved her pack and dug out the pot of salve. He pulled out the needle and wiped it on his leg.

“You are going to stitch it?” he asked, holding out the needle.

“No,” said Autumn. “The place is too awkward for me. You are going to stitch it.”

“Me?” exclaimed Logan, nearly dropping the needle. “But I know nothing of healing!”

“You know how to sew a tear in your clothing,” said Autumn, pulling loose the leather thong that bound her hair in a pony tail. “I have seen you. This will be much the same. Pull out one of my hairs.”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan mournfully. “Do I have to?”

“No, you do not,” said Autumn gently. “As always you have a choice.”

“Aye,” said Logan grimly. “I can do this or sit here and watch you bleed to death. What kind of a choice is that?”

“It is your choice, Logan,” said Autumn. “If you do not I will but I cannot see the one behind and it will be difficult to manage the one in front. It will be a lot easier for you and you will do a better job of it but if you do not wish to then give me the needle but let us be quick about it. The bleeding needs to be stopped.”

“Then I shall do it,” said Logan, “but you must tell me what to do.”

“Tis easy enough,” she said. “Pull a hair from my head and thread the needle then pretend you are sewing a tear in your shirt. It is the same principle.”

“Oh, very well,” said Logan. He looked at the needle then at the wounds on Autumn's side. “Lie on your other side. It will be easier.”

Obediently Autumn lay on her side with her knees drawn up and one arm outstretched to stop her rolling. Logan separated one of the hairs on her head and gave it a sharp jerk. It broke off and Autumn did not flinch. With one eye closed and the other squinting he carefully threaded the hair through the eye of the needle and pulled the end so it matched the other.

“Right,” he said. “So I, umm, push the needle through your flesh and out the other side, do I?”

“I cannot see any other way,” said Autumn. “Be sure to get the needle

to come out on the other side of the wound or the hair will not hold the edges together.”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan, filled with anxiety. “This is going to hurt.”

“Logan!” exclaimed Autumn. “Just do it.”

“Aye,” said Logan. He gently put the ball of his hand on Autumn's waist, a little below the front wound, and her muscles under the skin quivered. The wound itself seemed to grow ever larger. As gently as he could he pinched the sides of the wound together with his thumb and forefinger then forced his eyes to stay open as he touched the needle to her skin. She was humming again.

“Ouch,” he said suddenly and jerked his hand away.

“What is it?” asked Autumn urgently. She fought the urge to leap up.

“I stuck the needle in my thumb,” he said apologetically. “Sorry.”

The humming started again and her muscles relaxed slightly.

“Right,” said Logan firmly, willing himself to do this. He squeezed the sides of the wound together again then brought up the needle. He hesitated then, convulsively, he forced the needle into Autumn's flesh. More by luck than judgement it appeared the other side of the wound. He grasped the sharp end and pulled it through. Autumn was seemingly unconcerned although her waist muscles were like wood and her hands were clenched.

“Now what?” thought Logan. He stared at the needle for a few moments, wondering whether to continue the stitching as he would with his shirt or to tie this stitch off and do another stitch as a separate thing.

“Tie it off,” he muttered to himself.

“What did you say?” asked Autumn.

“Nothing,” said Logan. He carefully pulled the hair so the edges of the

wound came together then tied a knot. He tied another on top to be certain.

“Could you go a little faster,” said Autumn. “I can feel my body is starting to shake.”

“Oh, right,” said Logan and bent to do another stitch. It was easier second time around.

He sewed three stitches on the front wound and was tying the knot on the single stitch he'd done on the back wound when Autumn began to twitch and shudder.

“What is the matter?” he asked anxiously. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, 'tis normal,” said Autumn gritting her teeth. “This can happen after an injury. It will pass soon. Do you need to do any more?”

“No, I think this will be enough,” he said, “although I know not what I am doing.”

“Does either wound still gape?” she asked, her legs spasming.

“No,” said Logan, “and there is little bleeding.”

“Good,” said Autumn. Another wave of spasming passed through her.

“Is there anything I can do?” he asked, worried.

“Cover me with my robe,” said Autumn, her voice tense. “I feel cold.”

Logan held the remains of her tunic top against her side to keep the robe from getting bloodstained then wrapped her robe around her. He sat, holding her in his arms until the shudders died away.

“Do you feel up to walking?” he asked.

“Aye,” said Autumn, staying where she was. “Do you want to move on?”

“No,” said Logan. “I am thinking it is best if we go back to The Black Horse for tonight. ’Twill be safer and you can rest while I find somewhere to get you a new tunic. This one is thick with blood. It is badly stained and fit for nothing now. I wager also there will be someone who has some hamamielis or whatever they use here to put on your wounds. Aye, and some cloth or something to bind you.”

“That is good thinking, Logan,” said Autumn. She got up slowly, favouring her side. “I have had other wounds in the past but these feel different.”

“Different?” asked Logan, alarmed. “You think her blade was poisoned?”

“Oh no,” said Autumn, pulling her robe on properly. “There is no burning or anything that would suggest poison. No, I meant the stitches. The wounds feel stronger than when bound with leaves. I wager they will heal much faster.”

“That is good,” said Logan, “although I do not know when or how we will remove the stitches.”

“Not today, that is for certain,” said Autumn. “We can worry about that later. Let us go to The Black Horse, as you suggest. Where is my staff?”

“Here,” said Logan, passing it to her. Then he looked around and scratched his head.

“Oh Voqev,” he exclaimed after a few moments. “Those bastards have stolen my cheese!”

* * *

“So do you think Chanwar will keep her word?” asked Logan.

Autumn had slept when they got back to The Black Horse and Logan had bought her a new tunic although she had not yet put it on. After she had woken he smeared some smelly ointment on the wounds. The seller had sworn on his mother’s honour that this ointment was perfect

for cuts and grazes and if the smell was anything to go by it was powerful stuff.

“I would hope so,” said Autumn, “although I very much doubt it.”

“Can you stand?” asked Logan.

“Of course,” said Autumn. “It is only a minor wound. Why do you want me to stand?”

“So I can bind your waist,” said Logan. “I have a pad of grasses in case they bleed again and some cloth to hold the grass in place and keep the flies away. So why did you make her swear?”

Autumn stood up and permitted Logan to bind her wounds.

“I could see no other way to end it,” she said. “There were many injured yet she herself was unhurt and could have continued the fight and there is no one in authority here who we could deliver them to. Short of killing them all I could see no other option. Ahh, Logan!” and she jerked around to study his face. “You too were injured and I have not had the wit to check your injuries.”

“I am well,” he said, stooping to pick up the binding cloth he had dropped as she jerked around. “My head still hurts but it will pass.”

“And you will have a black eye,” said Autumn. “It is already discolouring. Is that a swelling on the side of your head?”

“I think so,” admitted Logan. “It is sore and feels like a lump when I touch it. Stand still and let me bind you.”

“Do you like the tunic I got?” he asked when he had finished binding Autumn's waist.

“It is a nice colour,” she said, walking around to get the feel of the binding. “I have not had a yellow tunic before.”

“I thought it would go well with the dark blue of your robe and your nails,” said Logan. “Try it on.”

“It fits reasonably,” said Autumn, putting it on. She did a high kick to see if it impeded her movement. “And I can move well enough.”

“Good,” said Logan, “for I wager the magic in your robe has ended.”

“I have been thinking on that,” said Autumn, sitting down. “It is entirely possible of course and I can never assume that its magic will work but I think it still does. Did you see that man fire an arrow at me?”

“No, I did not,” said Logan, his eyes narrowing. “Did it hit you?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “full in the chest when I was lying on the ground. I felt it pass through me and again when I got up for it was embedded in the ground. I think it was the one called Leryn but I am not sure. A lot was happening at that moment.”

“So how then did Chanwar manage to knife you?” asked Logan. “This makes no sense to me. An arrow passes through but a knife does not.”

“Actually it does make sense,” said Autumn. “If, as we suppose, the silver hem on my robe protects me from that which would kill me it does not follow that it would protect me from all manner of injury.”

“So you are saying that the arrow would have killed you?” said Logan, “so the robe protected you but Chanwar's knife would not so it didn't?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “although it is also possible that the magic of the hem ended after the arrow and when Chanwar stabbed me later I was not protected. I think the former is likely true as I have had injuries before while wearing the robe.”

“But not as bad as this one,” said Logan, “and what if it had sliced your kidney or other organ?”

“Mayhap the magic moved the knife a little to the side,” said Autumn, “so it missed the kidney and so I still live.”

“That would not seem of great benefit,” said Logan. “Anyway, as

arrows can pass straight through you, why not a knife?"

"Indeed," said Autumn. "It makes much more sense that the magic knew the blow was not a killing one and therefore did nothing. Not that it matters as we cannot know until the next time I receive a killing blow."

"Which may kill you," said Logan.

"Indeed," she replied, "so 'tis best I assume the robe no longer works and I avoid such things."

"But you will still wear it?" asked Logan. "Chanwar still lives and may not keep her word and we do seem to get more than our fair share of adventures."

"I will still wear it, Logan the Worrier," said Autumn, "if for no other reason than it is warm. As to adventures, most likely that is because we travel and do not shirk from them when they appear. If we stayed in one place I imagine little would happen and even if it did we could run away or find some excuse to avoid it, but we do not."

"I find it hard to imagine you running away from anything," said Logan.

"Oft times 'tis best to," said Roffslam, appearing in the doorway. "My apologies for interrupting but Logan said you were not well and I have come to see if I can aid you in any way."

"I suffered a slight injury, nothing more," said Autumn, "but I thank you for your kind attention."

"Well, if you need anything, let me know," he said. "Will you be well enough for eating?"

"I think so," said Autumn. "What is the meal today?"

"Mutton," said Roffslam. "Same as always. Oh, best you be staying inside after dark, there was some trouble on the road out of town earlier. Don't want none of them as stays with me getting the same."

“What sort of trouble?” asked Logan, trying to appear only reasonably curious.

“Man was found dead, or so I heard,” said Roffslam. “His body was found among the trees not far from the road some while after the market ended. Seems he had his belly and throat ripped apart and all his belongings taken. I heard the body was still fresh so it like as not happened today.”

“Was he someone from this town?” asked Autumn.

“Nay, lass,” said Roffslam. “He were a stranger, by all accounts. Most likely just passing through, like you two.”

“Do you have any idea who did it?” asked Logan.

“Like as not it were bandits,” said Roffslam, “although this being Daihfew it could as easily be someone what came in on a boat. No telling one way or the other. Best you be not venturing out after dark is all I'm saying.”

Chapter Twenty

Logan woke with a start. The ground beneath him was cold and hard yet strangely relaxing after three nights in straw surrounded by strangers. He rolled over and closed his eyes again, shielding them from the light with his crooked arm. Moments later the sound came again. A wheezing, throaty roar yet not a roar. He sat up in alarm and looked around. Everything looked normal, except Autumn. She was sitting on a rock in her usual way not far off but not deep in meditation, nor was she doing her exercises. She seemed to be looking at her hands for some reason. Puzzled Logan looked behind him into the scrubby woods. Nothing moved, save a few leaves as the breeze caught them. Reassured by Autumn's calmness he lay back down and pulled up his blanket. Astauand was bright but It gave little warmth.

Then the sound came again. It could have been some while later or it could have been barely a few moments, Logan couldn't tell. It felt like he had slept but he may not have. He scratched his nose then rubbed one eye.

“Cursed creature,” he thought. “Why will it not let me sleep?”

His face creased with irritation, he sat up again. Autumn was still sitting where she had been and Astauand was noticeably higher in the sky. He shifted his legs so he too was sitting cross legged and arranged the blanket around his shoulders so it covered him from neck to toe. Behind him lay the last of the trees, obscuring the lower slopes. Ahead lay scrub land, rising ever higher. Far off the scrub gave way to bare rock and, way way above, the rock gave way to sky. A few clouds dotted hither and yonder, small fluffy ones. None threatened rain.

“Is it not a beautiful day?” called Autumn.

“I suppose so,” said Logan grumpily. It was bright, to be sure, but it wasn't warm.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked, getting up and walking slowly over.

“I suppose so,” he said again. “I was woken several times by some loud fearsome creature with a sore throat. Did you hear it or was it in

my dreams?”

“I heard it,” said Autumn. She stirred the fire with a stick but there was no life left in it whatsoever so she dropped the stick and sat down. “I think I saw it as well. 'Tis not fearsome. 'Tis small and lives in that tree over there,” and she pointed. “I know not what it is for I have never seen such a beast before but it is the size of a small dog with a round face and is covered in grey fur. When you woke earlier it was sitting on the branch about half way up and clinging to the trunk but it has moved higher now.”

Logan studied the tree but could see no sign of the beast. He sighed and took a drink from their water bottle.

“How is your side?” he asked.

“It would seem to be healing,” said Autumn, “although I would ask you to look at it when you are more alert.”

“Of course,” he said, “but it does not feel inflamed or anything? Does it still hurt?”

“Yes, it is still painful,” said Autumn, “but in a good way not a bad way. I am restless because I dare not do any exercises for fear of tearing it again.”

“When do you think you will start again?” he asked.

“A few more days yet,” said Autumn. “With injuries such as this, rest is the best cure although three days in Daihfew was, I confess, something of a trial. I am pleased to be on the move again.”

“And your wrist?” he asked

“The swelling has gone down,” she replied, prodding it. “It is almost back to its normal thickness although it would not be a good idea to give it heavy use for some time.”

“'Tis unlikely you will need to here,” said Logan. “It is very quiet.”

He shifted over on his buttocks to where the cheese and janja lay and picked up a few morsels. This cheese did not have the blue-green streaks of the one that had been taken and was more to his taste.

“Cheese?” he asked, holding out the morsels.

“I had some while you were asleep,” she replied.

“Good,” said Logan, eating the pieces. “Rest alone is not enough. You need food to strengthen your blood and help heal your body.”

“True enough,” said Autumn, “and the way will be steeper today. The pass did not look high from below because of the heights of the mountains but already we are at the tree line and it looks no closer.”

“You think we will reach the pass today?” asked Logan, squinting upwards.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “There is no hurry though and I do not intend to over exert myself. Tomorrow will serve just as well.”

“Aye,” said Logan. He reached for some more of the cheese. “Do you still like your nails?”

“That is a strange question,” said Autumn. “What prompts you to ask?”

“When I woke earlier you seemed to be studying them,” he said. “I just wondered if you still liked them or if you were thinking of scraping the stuff off.”

“You are quick to draw conclusions from a casual observation,” said Autumn. “There could be many reasons why I might be looking at my hands. I could even have been looking at something else. My wrist for example.”

“True enough,” said Logan. “So what were you looking at? A beetle?”

Autumn smiled. “As you say, I was looking at my nails and thinking.”

“It was only a guess,” said Logan. “So do you still like them?”

“Do not like, do not dislike; all will then be clear,” said Autumn softly, looking at the nails of her right hand.

“What will be clear?” asked Logan, frowning.

“Ahh, I was only quoting Giv'itapalu-sen,” said Autumn. “She was an elder at my Esyup who died a few summers before I was there.”

“Ohh,” said Logan. He chewed some more. “So what does it mean?”

“Let me tell you the entire verse,” said Autumn. “The Perfect Way is only difficult for those who pick and choose; Do not like, do not dislike; all will then be clear. Make a hairbreadth difference and this world and the others are set apart; If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against. The struggle between 'for' and 'against' is the mind's worst disease.”

“So she is saying you shouldn't like or dislike anything?” asked Logan. “That seems most strange. Why should I not like this cheese?”

“What Giv'itapalu-sen meant was that liking or disliking is an attitude of your mind,” said Autumn, “and one which imposes itself between you and whatever it is you are talking about. So with that cheese, by saying you like it you are hiding the truth about the cheese since liking is not a thing of the cheese. It is a thing of you.”

“Well, I follow that,” said Logan, “but the truth is that the cheese is there and I am eating it. Why should I not like doing that?”

Autumn sighed. “I was perhaps seven or eight summers when Giv'itapalu-sen's wisdom was introduced to my teachings,” she said. “We discussed that verse at length and from every perspective but in its essence it is saying that liking leads to craving and disliking leads to aversion and both craving and aversion ultimately lead to suffering. By avoiding both craving and aversion we can avoid suffering. I was young and wanted only to please my teachers and so I accepted that argument as it has much in its favour in terms of logic.”

“But you do not agree with it now?” asked Logan.

“I venture you do not agree,” said Autumn. “Tell me your thoughts.”

“I can see its logic,” admitted Logan, “but I suspect it is missing something.”

“Such as?” asked Autumn, looking at her fingers again.

“Um, well, I venture there is more to liking something than just empty pleasure,” said Logan. “Mayhap I like this cheese because it is good for me and will not harm me. If it was rancid and rotten and full of maggots and whatever then I would dislike it and that is a good thing for it would make me sick if I ate it. 'Twould seem a foolish philosophy to eat anything and everything and claim to neither like nor dislike it and take that risk.”

“There is an element of truth in that,” said Autumn, “since everything we ate at the Esyup had already been chosen and deemed fit to eat so that risk was not there but I don't think that was what Giv'itapalu-sen meant. She meant that you should look at the cheese and see it for what it is. If it is rancid and riddled with maggots you should see the truth of that and reject it rather than eat it because you liked the cheese before it was bad.”

“I confess I cannot see how liking the cheese would make me eat it if it is bad,” said Logan, studying his piece of cheese in case it had suddenly become rancid.

“Likely not,” said Autumn, “but what if you could not see the badness?”

“If I could not see it then how could it be bad?” countered Logan. “Maggots are fairly obvious.”

“With cheese, perhaps,” said Autumn, “but what of another person? What if you like someone who is a bad person but your liking of them blinds you to their badness?”

“A fair point,” said Logan. “You could be truly bad but I would be

forever blind to that.”

“Or in turn disliking someone even though they are good,” said Autumn, her smile acknowledging Logan's sentiment.

“But this does raise a problem,” said Logan. “How can I know if someone is good because they are good and not simply because I like them?”

“Giv'itapalu-sen would say reflection and contemplation,” said Autumn. “Admit to yourself that you like or dislike the thing then cast that aside and ask if the thing remains the same when your feeling towards it is removed.”

“Easy enough to say,” said Logan, “but if I take away my liking for you and still declare you to be good how do I know it is because you are good or because there is still some of my liking of you left behind?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “How do we know anything other than through our perceptions and our perceptions will always be coloured by our emotions no matter how emotionless we endeavour to be.”

“I would take it further,” said Logan. “Cheese does not grow on its own, it has to be made and whoever makes it makes it because it is liked by others. If it were not liked it would not be made.”

“So you are saying the cheese owes its very existence to the emotions of people?” asked Autumn. “That is an interesting point. I wonder if a bad person becomes in some way less bad if he or she is liked by another.”

“Or mayhap someone becomes bad because they are disliked,” said Logan.

“But is that not in accord with Giv'itapalu-sen?” asked Autumn. “If that person were neither liked nor disliked then they would have to be as he or she truly is rather than the result of other's opinions.”

“Well, I suppose so,” said Logan, “if you put it like that. What are your thoughts?”

“My thoughts are that the teachings of the elders at my Esyup were very fine,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “but were based on abstract ideals. Since leaving I have slowly been learning that the world is not an abstract ideal and what may be entirely valid through pure logic may have little or no relevance in the reality of life outside the Esyup.”

“I venture that is true enough,” said Logan. “From what you tell me much of the reality of life did not exist in your Esyup. Like as not all Esyups are the same in that respect. So why are we having this conversation?”

“Ahh, once again you strip away the frills and come to the heart of the matter,” said Autumn looking, if anything, faintly embarrassed.

“And what is the heart?” asked Logan, feeling he'd lost the point of the discussion somewhere along the line.”

“I like my nails,” said Autumn with a small shrug. “I know I should not and I know not why I like them, but I do.”

“Ahh,” said Logan.

“I have considered whether it is my ever present vanity,” said Autumn, “but I confess I cannot see how. These pictures do not make me think I am a better person nor do I think that others will think the better of me for having them. They may do, they may not but I am indifferent to that.”

“Then what is it?” asked Logan.

“The best explanation I can think of,” said Autumn looking at her nails again, “is that they make me feel happy whenever I look at them, just as when I look at a real flower. Why I feel happy I do not know but I am unable to see how my happiness would hide any badness. They are just colours on my nails and nothing more. How can that be bad?”

“I don't think this Giv'itapalu-sen woman meant that things you like are necessarily bad,” said Logan, “merely that they may prevent you seeing any badness if there was any.”

“True enough,” said Autumn. “I was looking at my nails while you were asleep and wondering if I should let them grow longer so they could have bigger and more detailed pictures but I realised there would be a badness in that.”

“How so?” asked Logan, picking up some more cheese as it seemed he was allowed to like it again.

“If I had to hit someone when I had long nails,” said Autumn, “I could easily cause greater suffering. A long nail could take out an eye or cause a cut and that would be bad.”

“That is true,” said Logan, “and I daresay it would be bad if you allowed yourself to grieve when the colours wear off and you are left with your normal nails again.”

“Which I will not do,” said Autumn, “as change is a constant and nothing is forever. All things pass and it is pointless grieving once they are gone. But that said, you see no reason why I should not like my nails?”

“None at all,” said Logan, “and as with the cheese, your nails were created to be liked. That is their purpose and whether you like them or not that is the truth of it.”

“Good,” said Autumn.

“And here is another thought,” said Logan, “which Giv’itapalu-sen may not have considered. Her words are themselves creating suffering.”

“How so?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“By creating guilt for something as simple as liking something made to be liked,” said Logan. “What purpose does that serve?”

* * *

“I have brought you some broth,” said Kifki softly. “Do you feel well enough to have some?”

“My head no longer hurts,” said Chanwar matching her quietness, “although there is still great agitation inside.”

“Can I light a torch?” asked Kifki. “It is very dark in here.”

“If you must,” said Chanwar sulkily.

Kifki put the bowl on the ground and slipped backwards out through the cloth covered doorway of Chanwar's hut. She fetched a torch and lit it from the fire inside the main hut and brought it back.

“Is this too bright?” asked Kifki, holding the door hanging to one side.

“Tis tolerable,” said Chanwar, sitting up. “What broth is it?”

“Hare,” said Kifki. She hung the torch from a rope then fetched the bowl and brought it over to Chanwar. “Can you manage or would you like me to feed you?”

“I can manage,” snapped Chanwar. “You think I am incapable?”

“Not at all,” said Kifki soothingly. “Tis only that you have been where the rest of us cannot go since your return and you must be exhausted.”

“How long?” asked Chanwar, taking the bowl from Kifki.

“A night, a day and another night,” said Kifki. “Tis mid morning now.”

“As long as that?” said Chanwar, staring at Kifki. Her eyes were beginning to return to their fiery green from the empty grey blankness they had had.

“Aye,” said Kifki. She sat in the torn grasses that made Chanwar's bed. She hesitated then decided it had to be brought into the open. “It went badly then?”

“Who told you that?” growled Chanwar.

“There has been some talk,” admitted Kifki cautiously. “And the men had many injuries.”

“Who is saying these things?” demanded Chanwar angrily. “I will have their guts and knit a scarf with them!”

“No one,” said Kifki soothingly. “And all say how magnificent you were.”

“That is true,” said Chanwar, calming down. “I did best the bitch after all.” She ruminated while eating two spoons of broth. “I drew her blood and would have drawn more had those useless dogs been more than turds on the ground.”

“Undoubtedly,” said Kifki gently. There was no question whatsoever of reminding Chanwar that the bitch had been outnumbered fifteen to one. Chanwar was skilled at not remembering details such as that. “I have to ask though, was it wise to kill Bijuk then leave his body for all to see?”

“He was a filthy coward,” said Chanwar unconcernedly. “He had an opportunity to take the girl and get my toes but he ran away. He should be grateful for the quickness of the end I gave him for he did not deserve it. His death should have been lingering and exquisitely painful.”

Kifki sighed for she had seen how Zain had died and would not wish that on anyone.

“As to leaving him,” continued Chanwar, “well, he was just so much baggage by then and not worth the carrying. This is good broth, you have done well. Besides it will not hurt for the people of Daihfew to know what happens to those who cross me.”

“That is true,” said Kifki. It seemed fruitless to pursue the matter as Chanwar, true to form, showed no sign of regret or even concern. “What do you want done with his share?”

“Split it equally among the rest,” said Chanwar. She tossed the spoon away and started slurping the broth from the bowl. “They do not

deserve it but someone has to have it.”

“And how much will you keep?” asked Kifki, knowing the answer but knowing also that Chanwar liked to give it.

“None,” said Chanwar haughtily. “I care nothing for coin nor baubles.”

“As you say,” said Kifki. She paused. “The rest of the men are recovering.”

Chanwar didn't respond. She drained the bowl, licked it then tossed it at Kifki.

“Do you want more?” asked Kifki.

“No,” said Chanwar. “I am going to sleep again. Tell the others we depart when I awake.”

“They will be pleased to hear that,” said Kifki, standing up. She'd find the spoon when Chanwar was asleep. “Can I tell them where we are going?”

“If you like,” said Chanwar dismissively. She lay down and pulled her blankets tightly around her.

“Ahh, where are we going?” asked Kifki.

“To see my brother,” muttered Chanwar, her face half hidden by the blankets. “I will be avenged, make no mistake. I will have my toes, aye, and my fingers too.”

“Is that wise?” asked Kifki, knowing of their enmity, but Chanwar started to snore and did not answer.

Chapter Twenty One

“What was that you said, Autumn?” called Logan, staring up at a cloud.

“I said, this is a difficult pass to get to,” called back Autumn. “What are you staring at?”

“That cloud,” said Logan, pointing off to his right and upwards. There was a large cloud in the distance, partly obscured by the side of the mountain.

“What about it catches your attention?” asked Autumn, stopping her upward climb.

“I am being stupid,” said Logan with a small embarrassed laugh. “Tis nothing.”

“You are far from stupid,” she replied, gazing at the cloud. It looked much like any other cloud. Large, white and fluffy, although there was something familiar about it. “Tell me.”

Logan climbed up the steep path to where she stood. It was a path of sorts but long neglected for it was strewn with the small clumps of stunted grasses that covered the slope all the way back down to the tree line. What suggested it was a path was that it meandered and was edged with stones the size of small heads, laid every pace or so.

“Tis likely my mind is playing tricks with me,” said Logan when he reached her, “but I fancy that is the cloud I have seen two or three times before. You know, the one shaped like the Karoi’s Palace in Neander.”

“I remember you pointing it out,” said Autumn, “but I confess I could not see the resemblance and anyway, that one is half behind the mountain. What we cannot see could be completely different. Besides, clouds do not hold their shape. They are constantly changing.”

“I know,” said Logan, “and that is what intrigues me. I wonder what it is that makes a cloud decide what shape to have. Most likely it is not

even the same cloud for I imagine sooner or later the shape a cloud has now will be taken by another cloud. Do you suppose they all follow the same sequence of shapes and that no one has ever noticed?"

"That is an interesting question," said Autumn, turning her gaze from the cloud to the pass that lay ahead, "for if they do then we must ask why they have that sequence and if they do not then we can equally ask what drives the shapes they take. I have never heard it said that clouds have minds. I have always supposed them to be servants of Chaahk or Hadari. Still, I fancy this is a question for another time. That pass would seem no closer and the path is getting steeper."

"Aye," said Logan. "And is it not a strange pass in itself? Other passes we have seen have been low places between two mountains but this one seems to be a cleft in a single mountain. As though some mighty deity smote the mountain with an axe and cleaved it in two."

"And there is no sign of water," said Autumn. "You would think when it rains the water coming off the sides would collect in the pass and come out as a stream at least, yet there is no sign of any dry river bed. 'Tis like it never rains here, the ground is so dry and yet there are things growing."

"Would you like to rest a while?" asked Logan. "All this climbing cannot be good for your cut."

"I am favouring that side of me," said Autumn, "and it bothers me little now you have replaced that stitch that had broken but we can rest if you so desire. There is nothing to be gained by pressing on relentlessly."

"No, I am well," said Logan, "my concern was for you, not for me. Let us continue then. Surely we will reach the pass sooner or later unless there is some magic on it which moves it further away as we approach. Mayhap that is why it is little used, or so Kanikapila said."

"I venture it is because it is a difficult climb rather than magic," said Autumn, pausing to look back down the path. "I would not like to carry goods this way. No matter. Onwards and upwards."

“Who is that?” asked Chanwar, reining in her horse.

“I do not know,” said Kifki, reining in hers as well and turning to look. “Do you want me to find out?”

Some way back along the path through the trees Udjin was talking to a stranger.

“No,” said Chanwar. She turned to look ahead. “I want to make camp near Wodaken before dark. I would speak with my brother in the full light of day. Come, Udjin can catch us up.”

She urged her horse forward at the same moment as a whistle came from behind. Irritably Chanwar stopped again and twisted to look back. Udjin was waving.

“Oh, now what!” exclaimed Chanwar.

She glared at Kifki and Teuxa who were immediately behind her but no answer was forthcoming. Udjin waved again.

“Stay here,” barked Chanwar and pulled on the rein to make the horse turn around. Slowly she trotted back up the trail.

“Says he wants to join us,” said Udjin, jerking a thumb at the stranger. “Says he been looking for us for some time.”

Chanwar stared at the man who held her gaze for a while then turned away and muttered something inaudible. He was ill-kempt and ragged and appeared to carry no weapons.

“I am Chanwar,” said Chanwar, her face expressionless.

The man shifted his feet and didn't look back up at her.

“Who are you?” she asked, a sharp edge to her voice.

“Vantar,” muttered the man.

“Speak up,” barked Chanwar.

“Vantar,” said the man more loudly. He looked in Chanwar's eyes then looked away again.

“He's from Schtei,” said Udjin.

“That be a long way away,” said Chanwar.

Her horse tossed its head and wheeled around so Chanwar lifted her leg over its back and slid to the ground. Udjin grabbed its reins because Chanwar didn't bother.

“Why are you here?” asked Chanwar, planting herself directly in front of Vantar.

“You are well known in Schtei,” said Vantar, shifting his weight uneasily, “although ...”

“Although what?” said Chanwar in a friendly voice although her eyes glittered.

“Umm,” said Vantar, looking at Udjin. Udjin stared back. “No one said you was a woman, like.”

“You have a problem with that?” asked Chanwar, a dangerous edge to her voice.

“N-no, no,” stuttered the man. “'Twas just unexpected, see. 'Tis a good thing, I wager.”

“Pah,” said Chanwar. “So why are you not still in Schtei?”

“I, umm, killed someone,” said Vantar, looking at Chanwar as if seeking approval.

“Just the one?” asked Chanwar.

“Aye,” said Vantar.

“I am only a woman,” said Chanwar, staring at him, “and yet I have killed ... how many have I killed, Udjin?”

“Over thirteen that I know of,” said Udjin, “but then I've only been with you these two summers past.”

“Thirteen?” said Chanwar thoughtfully. She turned to look at Udjin. “Are you sure? I thought it was more than that?”

“Could be,” said Udjin. “You know I am not the best when it comes to tallying.”

“Hmm,” said Chanwar, turning back to Vantar. She pulled out her knife and weighed it in her hand. “So you want to join me, eh?”

“Aye,” said Vantar although his expression suggested that he might be changing his mind.

“What was that you said?” demanded Chanwar, suddenly cocking her head and looking at nothing to her side. “You think I should kill him?”

Vantar stepped back nervously and looked pleadingly at Udjin. Udjin grinned and eased the sword that hung by his side.

“Relax,” said Chanwar with a bark of laughter. “I was only joking with you. That be not what the voices really said.” She stepped forward and slapped Vantar on his shoulder. “Welcome! Udjin?”

“Yes, Chanwar?” said Udjin, his grin fading as it seemed there wasn't going to be any fun after all.

“Give Vantar here the spare horse,” said Chanwar. She spun around and jumped agilely onto the back of hers. “And some food if he is hungry. Oh, and Vantar?”

“Yes?” said Vantar.

“Get rid of the beard,” she said. “I don't like hairy men.”

She urged the horse forward and trotted back down the path to where

Kifki and Teuxa were still waiting.

“’Twould seem to be your lucky day, lad,” said Udjin, looking down at Vantar. “You could so easily have been the fourteenth.”

“Voices?” asked Vantar, looking after Chanwar. “What voices?”

“Best you not be thinking about that,” said Udjin scowling. “She be having her little ways, no doubt about it. You’ll get used to it in time, I daresay, although she can be a bit ... unpredictable. Come.”

* * *

“I see now how only twenty could hold back an army,” said Autumn.

The pass was barely wide enough to let three stand shoulder to shoulder and the bare rock on either side rose almost sheer with not even a toehold in sight.

“Not even a goat could get up there,” said Logan, craning his head back to look at the narrow strip of sky far above.

“Which means none could get up there and fire down upon them,” said Autumn. “’Tis the perfect place for a final stand and with no chance of ambush.”

“But no sign of a shrine,” said Logan. “Mayhap Kanikapila was having fun with us.”

“He said it was at the head of the pass,” said Autumn. “Mayhap it is at the other end. After all, he said it was built by the Wasians so likely they would put it on their side not ours.”

“Then let us go look,” said Logan, “and be quick about it. I do not like this place.”

“Why not?” asked Autumn, following him.

“I feel things here,” said Logan, stopping and turning to look at her. “Things that are not pleased to be here.”

“Ahh, you feel them too,” said Autumn. “I wager there is much resentment from those who died here.”

“Hmm,” said Logan. “Well, so long as they don't resent me enough to make me join them.”

Within a few paces the pass had narrowed to the point where a single broad man could touch both sides with his hands. Then, unexpectedly, it widened out again, perhaps enough for ten to stand side by side.

“’Tis almost like a doorway,” said Logan. A faint echo repeated some of his words and he repeated what he said so he could listen to it. Then he shouted “Autumn!” as loudly as he could and the name was repeated several times, each fainter than the last until it was lost in his laughter.

“I know not why,” said Autumn, “but I feel that is disrespectful to them as died here.”

“Sorry,” said Logan, crestfallen.

“I do not mean that as a criticism,” she said quickly. “’Tis just a feeling I have. Like as not a few joyous shouts are welcome. It seems a lonely sort of place.”

“We are almost at the other side,” said Logan. “I can see the edge up yonder. Mayhap the shrine is there.”

He walked forward perhaps another twenty or so paces then stopped.

“Autumn,” he said, looking around, “come and look at this.”

Softly Autumn walked forward to join him.

“Ohhh,” she said, a touch of reverence in her voice.

“Are they what I think they are?” asked Logan.

The sheer sides of the mountain had fallen away to leave a broad ledge that was at least twice the width of the pass. Each side, neatly

lined up against the rock faces, were piles of small rocks, each the length of a man. Resting on top of each pile was a sword.

“I think so,” said Autumn, going over to the closest. “This sword is badly notched.” She stepped back and counted then looked to the other side. “There are ten each side. I venture these are the cairns of The Twenty. Look, that sword is broken. So is that one at the end.”

“Why are the swords on top?” asked Logan, reaching out to touch one but afraid to lay his hand on it.

“Most likely because there is no soil,” said Autumn, walking slowly along the length of the cairns. “Tis difficult to hammer a sword into rock.”

“True,” said Logan. He, too, walked slowly past each cairn. “I wonder where the shrine is. The rest of this plateau is empty.”

He reach the end and looked out across the landscape then down at the sharp drop in front of him.

“How did anyone get up here?” he asked. “It is a long way down and almost as sheer as the rest of the mountain.” He turned to look at Autumn and caught sight of something on the cliff above the cairns. “What is that?”

“What is what?” asked Autumn, looking up. She was standing in front of the last of the cairns and had had her head bowed.

“That,” said Logan pointing. “It looks like writing and a picture of some sort.”

Autumn moved back from the cliff face to see better just as Logan exclaimed “there's more on your side.”

“Ahhh,” said Autumn, catching sight of it for the first time. “Oh Mizule!”

She stepped back several paces to take in what was written as the letters were half as tall as she was.

“What is it?” asked Logan, hurrying over.

“We have found the shrine,” said Autumn, a strange expression on her face. Her voice was filled with awe. “That is the symbol of Mizule. Two crossed spears with an eagle in the crook.”

“Can you read the writing?” asked Logan.

“Alas no,” said Autumn.

She clasped her hands together and bowed her head before the symbol of Mizule.

“It looks different to the other side,” said Logan after waiting a few moments.

Autumn raised her head and walked across to look at the other inscription. The image was the same but the writing was indeed different although just as big.

“It is the Old Tongue,” she said. “It says 'Idzi skazy Anamanam nieznamcu jaki prachodziec mima sto tut pasluchmianyja svaim abaviazkam Dvaccac liazac'.”

“What does that mean?” asked Logan.

“Go tell the Onamans, stranger passing by” intoned Autumn softly, her voice choking a little, “that here, obedient to their duty, The Twenty lie.”

“Oh,” said Logan, unnerved by Autumn's intensity. “Who are the Onamans?”

“We are,” she said, still gazing at the inscription. “The people of Aferraron are the Onaman.”

“I did not know that,” said Logan.

He waited for Autumn to say something but she did not. She just stared at the inscription carved in the rock.

“Kanikapila said the Wasians did this,” said Logan after a while. “I did not know they spoke the Old Tongue as well.”

“I’m sorry,” said Autumn, coming out of her reverie. “What did you say?”

“I said I didn’t know the Wasians spoke the Old Tongue,” said Logan.

“Likely they did,” said Autumn absently, “as Wase was founded by Aqineer do’h Raspusny after being exiled by his era’owen. She was the first Roinad of Aferraron.”

“Oh,” said Logan.

Autumn walked over to look at the other inscription again.

“The letters are the same,” she said, “but the words make no sense to me. It says something like ‘E hele e hai aku i na Onamana, he malihini e maalo ae nei, e hoolohe i ka lakou hana he Ka Iwakalua’. It seems to be of similar length as the other so likely it is the same inscription but in Wasian. There is the ‘Onamana’ too which is similar to Onamans.”

She walked back again so she was standing in front of the pass itself with an inscription each side. She stood there silently for a while, just gazing at the two inscriptions and the cairns. Then, abruptly, she sat down.

“Are you feeling unwell?” asked Logan, hurrying over.

“I am quite well,” said Autumn gravely. “I just feel ... overwhelmed ... by this.”

“Ohh,” said Logan.

He backed away and went over near the edge of the ledge to look down. It was a long way. Still Autumn just sat there so after a while he wandered back and sat down a little way away from her.

“Forgive me,” she said, aware of his presence.

“There is nothing to forgive,” he said and they sat in silence.

“Can you imagine?” she asked suddenly. “Down there at the other end of the pass were twenty men, alone and with no idea of what was to befall them nor any hope of aid. Mayhap they heard the sounds of people approaching and looked out across this very ledge and saw the hordes sent from Wase. Kanikapila said two hundred or more. Can you imagine what they felt?”

“Fear, I would think,” said Logan. “’Twould be a scary sight.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “there is always fear before a battle but read the inscription. ‘Obedient to their duty.’ That is the key. I wager they would have been filled also with elation at the opportunity to do their duty to the utmost of their abilities. They would have been proud and defiant, knowing only that death awaited them but steadfast and strong.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan.

“And they came,” said Autumn, not hearing him. “Two hundred or more, intent on killing our twenty. Perhaps they camped the night on this very ledge, not knowing the twenty waited for them. What must those men have felt, knowing this horde was resting and preparing for battle?”

Logan didn’t reply. He was watching Autumn intently as she was absorbed in her thoughts.

“And then they came,” she said. “Streaming down the pass and where it becomes narrow the twenty were waiting. Perhaps there was just one man there, blocking their way. Alone he faced them, his small band behind him but none by his side. What must he have felt?”

“’Twas only nineteen,” thought Logan but said nothing.

“Did he stay silent?” she asked, her voice soft and low. “Did he hurl insults or calmly speak his defiance? Whatever he said or didn’t say the message would have been clear to all. You shall not pass. How the Wasians must have trembled when faced with one lone man, sword in

hand blocking their passage! Naked resolution is a frightening thing. Then, at last, battle would have been joined. First one then another Wasian would have stepped forward to do battle. Each cut down and dragged away to let another have his turn. One by one they faced him, the unknown Onaman, until he, in his turn, bleeding and hurt in many places was finally cut down himself. How the Wasians would have cheered then fallen silent as another took his place. Fresh and determined, knowing only that death faced him yet resolute in denying dishonour. How long did each last? How many blows did each inflict? Growing weaker as the dead piled up in front of him yet refusing, no matter what happened, to give way so long as there was breath in his body. Perhaps indignities were heaped on his comrades that died before it was his turn but still each fought on.”

She fell silent and Logan began to get a sense of how she felt.

“And what of those behind?” she asked, her voice still low. “As each stepped forward to take their turn, what of those still waiting? Did they squabble over who would be next or did they take their place in some order we know not? Yes, each would have been afraid but each also knew that they had to live as long as possible. Iuo was running to warn the rest but was he running fast enough? They could not know. All they knew was they had to stay, fighting exhaustion as well as the Wasians, until their ends came. And what of Iuo? What shame he must have felt, running away from his comrades at the time of their greatest need? But what else could he do? He had his orders, he had to do his duty. 'Tis no wonder he thought only to rejoin them once he had given the warning. Ahh, if only I know which was Iuo's cairn. To him I give the greatest honour and respect. To die doing your duty is magnificent enough but when your duty is to run away? Ahh that must have been the hardest thing, to run away when every part of your being cries out to stand and fight. My heart goes out to you, Iuo, whichever one you are, but my heart goes out to you all. Mizule stands watch here, guarding your remains. I do not countenance killing but, Oh Mizule, the great deeds that were done here. Mere words cannot begin to speak of them. 'Here obedient to their duty The Twenty lie', I know not who wrote that but there, in its simple truth, lies great beauty.”

Chapter Twenty Two

“There are bandits either side,” said Logan. “I don't suppose it matters much whether we go on this side or go back through the pass and down the other side.”

“I am concerned for your safety,” said Autumn. “Kanikapila said this side was infested.”

“I cannot see why,” said Logan. “No trader in his right mind would use this pass. It would be easier to keep going to the coast and go around the mountains and if there are no traders then it would seem fruitless for bandits to be here.”

“Ultimately it is your choice,” said Autumn.

“And yours,” said Logan, “for wherever we go we go together. I will add, however, that while you were engaged with the shrine I have been exploring and watching below. There are steps cut into the rock over at that end. They are wide enough for three to pass at a time although I would not want to be the one beside the open edge as it is a long way down from the top. That said, there are mayhap fifty or so steps then the ground levels off to what looks like a fairly easy slope down to the trees. I have seen nothing moving although what lies among the trees I cannot say. 'Twould seem an easier descent than the other side.”

“As you wish, friend Logan,” said Autumn. She stood up and walked to the edge of the ledge and peered over then looked up at Astauand. “There is still some time before dark. Shall we spend the night up here or go down and find somewhere lower?”

“Are you done here?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn, turning back to face him. “I have revered all those who died here and have renewed my vows to Mizule. I am cleansed and have no need to stay any longer.”

“Then let us go down,” said Logan. “I feel that some spirits still walk here and I would be more comfortable down there where there is no

edge to fall off. I am not of Mizule and this place brings me no comfort.”

“We can pledge you to Mizule if you wish,” said Autumn. “I am a Krisana and can perform the rituals.”

“Do you want me to?” he asked, squinting up at her.

“It is your choice,” said Autumn. “As always.”

“Then I would prefer not,” said Logan. “My personal is Seiliu and cowsheds suit me better than battlefields.”

“Good,” said Autumn, moving over and squatting to put a hand on his shoulder. “You do not have the training that goes with being of Mizule although it is not a requirement. Cowsheds are important and useful places if only for providing you with shelter when you needed shelter so you are clearly favoured by Seiliu.”

“Alone among cows, no doubt,” said Logan with a grin. “Come, let us be off.”

They gathered their things and walked over to the steps at the far end of the ledge.

“They are quite steep, as you see,” said Logan, “but there is as yet little weathering and the steps look sturdy enough.”

“I venture there are more than fifty steps,” said Autumn. “Still, as you say, it is no great distance. Let me go first and you follow. There may be loose stones.”

She went down the first two steps then stopped, just as Logan was about to take the first.

“That is strange,” she said, looking down.

“What is?” asked Logan. “Ohh, where did that come from?”

There was now a light mist covering the ground and it was thickening

up around the bottom few steps.

“Still, 'tis only a mist,” said Autumn.

She took a few more steps and tendrils of mist began to coalesce around her ankles. She stopped again.

“It is coming up fast,” she said. “Shall we go back onto the ledge or continue?”

“If it is going to be foggy,” said Logan, “I would prefer not to be on a high ledge. 'Tis all too easy to take a wrong step and plummet over.”

“True,” said Autumn, “although it will be easy to step off the edge of these steps as well. Keep one hand against the cliff face else you go to near the edge.”

Four steps later the fog was over their heads and getting thicker.

“I do not like this,” said Autumn. “It comes upon us faster than any fog I have known before.”

“It is thick too,” said Logan as Autumn became just a shadowy form a little ahead of him. “I can barely see you.”

Autumn took another step then stopped again.

“No,” she said decisively. “There is too much risk here for I cannot see the steps beneath my feet. It would be far too easy to miss our footing and fall.”

“We should go back up?” asked Logan.

“I think so,” said Autumn. “At worst we will pass the night on the ledge. Even if we get to the bottom without mishap I venture it will be difficult to find somewhere for the night.”

She turned and saw Logan's outline also turn. Then it started to lean to the side.

“What are you doing?” asked Autumn.

“I can't find the cliff face,” said Logan. “I let go when I turned and I can't find it again.”

Autumn put out her hand and felt only the dampness of the fog. She shuffled sideways a little with her hand outstretched but to no avail. She brought her staff around and prodded. There was nothing there.

“I cannot find the rock with my staff,” said Logan, his voice slightly muffled. “Not the other side either.”

“Do not move,” said Autumn sharply. “There is something most strange going on here for these steps are a lot less than two staff length wide. I have no idea where the cliff has gone but it concerns me.”

“Mayhap by chance I have pushed my staff into a cave of some sort,” said Logan. “You try.”

“I already have,” said Autumn, “and I cannot find the cliff either. I venture any cave big enough for both of us to miss would have been obvious before we started down.”

“So what do we do?” asked Logan.

“We carry on up,” said Autumn, “but use your hands to check the steps in front of you before you step onto it. Make sure there is no side edge within your arm's length.”

There was a clattering as Logan tapped his staff on the step in front of him then his outline lurched and faded a little as he stepped upwards. Then the tapping began again. Autumn paused to let him get two steps ahead so she didn't crash into him then did much the same.

“How many steps down did we go?” asked Logan after a while.

“I venture no more than ten,” said Autumn.

“That is what I thought,” said Logan. “Only I have gone up twelve and

there are still steps ahead of me. At least three, judging from my staff.”

“Then perhaps it was fifteen,” said Autumn. “I confess I was not counting.”

“Let us hope so,” said Logan, “for I do not like this. Disappearing cliffs and endless steps. Something is very much amiss here.”

“Would you like me to go in front?” asked Autumn, going up another step.

“No,” said Logan, “for that would mean you would have to go around me and that would take you closer to the edge.”

“How do the steps feel?” asked Autumn, going up one more.

“What do you mean?” asked Logan, stopping his tapping.

“Do they feel like rock?” asked Autumn.

There was silence as Logan thought about what his feet felt underneath them then some scuffling.

“Hmm,” he said. Then the tapping began again, only slower.

“I ... do not know,” he said, his voice tinged with fear. “The rock feels softer and warmer than it should.” There were a couple more taps. “And they sound a little different too.”

“That is what I thought,” said Autumn. “I was hoping it was my imagination.”

“And I have now gone up sixteen steps,” said Logan. “I am certain we did not go down than many and there is still no sign of the cliff. It must be a mighty big cave if it is a cave. Umm, Autumn?”

“Yes, Logan?” said Autumn, standing still and feeling around with her staff. Logan's outline had not got any dimmer so it seemed that the fog was not getting any thicker.

“Would you think any less of me if I admit to being frightened?” asked Logan.

“Of course not,” said Autumn. “Fear is only to be expected when strange things are happening.”

“Good,” said Logan, “because I am frightened. How is it possible for mountains to disappear and steps to never end?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn. She took another step and put her hand on Logan's back. He yelped and leapt forward.

“I am sorry,” said Autumn. “I did not mean to startle you.”

“Sploop!” exclaimed Logan breathlessly. “Warn me next time.”

“Again, I am sorry,” she said. “I am much concerned about ... this and it was thoughtless of me.”

“My heart nearly stopped,” said Logan “I thought it was the hand of Yammoe or something worse. Ahh.”

“What is it?” asked Autumn.

“We have run out of steps,” said Logan, waving his staff from side to side. “There is nothing at all beyond two more steps.”

“Then we have reached the ledge,” said Autumn with a touch of relief in her voice.

Logan went up another step and she followed.

“And the fog is thinning,” said Logan. “It is definitely brighter and I can see the steps now. Last one.” He stepped upwards. “Oh Sploop. Sploop and Mizule and Looplab and all the others.” There was panic in his voice.

“What is it?” exclaimed Autumn, her body tensing.

“I can see the ledge,” said Logan. “Umm, you are not going to believe

this.”

Autumn hurried up the last two steps. “What?” she demanded as she emerged into the light of Astauand. “Where is the ledge?”

“Over there,” said Logan, pointing with his staff.

“Oh Mizule!” exclaimed Autumn. “What is it doing all the way over there?”

The ledge, and the rest of the mountain, was clearly visible some way distant. The fog that came to about waist height continued part of the way to the ledge but then stopped. Between the edge of the fog and the ledge was, as far as they could see, nothing.

“I ...” started Autumn then she stopped for she couldn't think of anything to say. She just stared at the ledge in bemusement.

“How did we get from over there to over here?” asked Logan after a while. “And how do we get back?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn. Slowly she shuffled around, very aware that beneath her feet, hidden by the fog, were an unknown number of steps that led down to somewhere equally unknown.

Behind her the fog rose up, billowing gently, to just above her head. It continued for some way to either side then seemed to curve around. Beyond the edges of the fog lay nothing, or so it seemed. Slowly she shuffled around to look back at the ledge. It was further away than it had been. The fog was lower as well. It was now around her knees although the fog behind was still head height.

“Oh no,” exclaimed Logan as two birds flew up between the edge of the fog and the now distant mountain. They circled briefly then landed on the edge of the fog and regarded Autumn and Logan curiously. “Oh no, oh no, oh no.”

“Stay calm, Logan,” said Autumn, using all her will power to stay calm herself. “I am certain there is a simple explanation for all this.”

“There is,” said Logan twisting to look at her with a white face and wide eyes. “We have gone mad!”

“It is possible,” said Autumn. “I see two birds perched on the edge of fog with the mountain we were on in the distance. What do you see?”

“My life flashing before me,” said Logan.

“Logan!” barked Autumn. “What do you see?”

“I see two birds as well,” said Logan, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it. “And the mountain a long way off.”

“Then I venture we are not going mad,” said Autumn, back in control of herself, “for we see the same things.”

She looked down and the fog was now billowing gently around her ankles. Her feet felt rigid and locked from gripping whatever lay underneath so she lifted a foot and shook it to ease the tension.

“What are you doing?” asked Logan, still standing without moving.

“Relaxing,” said Autumn. She lifted her other foot and shook that as well. “Whatever is happening we seem to be on something reasonably solid.” She started to tap around her with her staff. “Ahh. We seem to have a difficulty.”

“What is that?” asked Logan. He glanced sideways at her but did not move his head.

“We seem to be missing the steps,” said Autumn, squatting down and feeling around with her hands. “All around is flat.”

“So how do we get down?” asked Logan.

“I do not know,” said Autumn, rising and tapping further away with her staff. She stepped forward and tapped some more. The fog still billowed around her ankles preventing her from seeing what lay under her feet. “Start to move, Logan, or you might stay like that forever.”

Very reluctantly Logan brought his staff up and started to tap as well.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“To see how close I can get to the edge,” said Autumn, now some five paces distant.

“Oh,” said Logan. “Why?”

“To see what lies beyond,” said Autumn.

Logan pondered this then very cautiously stepped forward. Whatever was underneath the fog was a little soft and spongy but seemed to support his weight.

Tapping constantly, Autumn made her way to the edge of the fog. Intriguingly it just ended rather than become wispy. One pace from the edge she stopped and thrust her staff beyond. There was nothing there. She tried several more times then sharply jerked her staff against the edge of the fog. It sank in a little way then came up against something hard.

“Interesting,” she said, looking around.

“What is?” asked Logan, still some way behind.

“We seem to be on a platform of some sort,” said Autumn, “and one that is covered with this fog.

Moreover we would seem to be some way up in the air. I can see the ground all around and some way down. Come join me.”

“I am getting there,” said Logan, taking another careful step forward. “I just do not have your courage.”

One of the birds cackled something to the other then launched itself into the sky. The other watched Logan for a little longer then flew away as well.

“Come up to me,” said Autumn. “I want your help.”

“I doubt I will be of much help,” said Logan. “This place gives me the horrors.”

“I know what you mean,” said Autumn, “but I venture if we were going to fall through we would have done by now.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, getting closer, “but mayhap not. There could be holes.”

“True,” said Autumn. She watched while he cautiously took the last two paces. “Hold on to the end of my staff.” She held it out to him.

“Why?” asked Logan, taking it in one hand.

“I am going to look over the edge,” she said. “I may be able to see what is holding us up. I want you to keep a strong hold of my staff in case I fall.”

“Is that a good idea,” asked Logan.

“I can think of nothing better,” said Autumn. “If I can see what is holding us up I may be able to see a way down. Take a firm grip and brace yourself.”

Logan stared at her blankly for a few moments then laid his own staff on top of his feet and gripped Autumn's with both hands and braced himself. Autumn took hold of the other end and dropped to her knees. She shuffled forward and peered over the edge. Then she lay down in the fog and eased herself forward so her top half hung over the edge.

“What do you see?” asked Logan anxiously.

“’Tis a long way down,” said Autumn, pulling herself back. She sat up and let go of her staff. Logan stumbled backwards and nearly fell. His staff came off his feet and was lost in the fog. “And it would seem there is nothing holding us up, although the fog gets thicker underneath. Have a look.”

“I would rather not,” said Logan.

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “It may be that Fiau can help us get down to the ground again but you must warn her first. We are a long way up. I can see plenty of birds flying below us.”

“Fiau!” exclaimed Logan. He feverishly started to feel around in the fog until he found his staff. He held it up triumphantly. “Fiau, can you help us? But please be very careful for we are a long way from the ground.”

His staff quivered and the tall, thin form of Fiau materialised, very close beside him.

“Where are we?” she asked in her thin whispery voice. The circles in her green eyes pulsed as she looked around.

“We seem to be high up in the sky,” said Logan, “and there is no way down. Can you help us?”

“Where am I?” she asked, looking at Logan.

“We are on a platform or ledge,” said Logan.

“Tis more like fog,” whispered Fiau. She reached down with one of her thin branch-like arms to poke the fog. “Tis solid,” she added in surprise. “I cannot grow through it.”

“That’s a relief,” said Logan, looking at Autumn. “Umm, Fiau, the edge is there if you want to see how far up we are.”

Fiau slowly walked to the edge, testing the way with each step. She peered over and remained motionless for some time.

“I cannot reach,” she said, drawing back. “I would become too thin.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am sure,” she whispered and rubbed her hands together in a crackly way that suggested irritation.

“Oh well, ’twas just a thought,” said Logan. “Thank you for looking.”

Fiau sighed then merged back into the staff.

“So what do we do now?” asked Logan.

Autumn was still sitting near the edge of the fog.

“I have no idea,” she admitted cheerfully, “but does this not intrigue you?”

“Not really,” said Logan. He inched his way to the edge and peered over. “It looks very strange down there. Do you suppose those are trees?”

“Very likely,” said Autumn, “although I have never seen forests from above before. I wonder how far back this goes?”

“Hmm?” asked Logan. He drew back and looked at her.

“That way,” she said, nodding away from the edge. “The fog rises up around where we came up and no doubt goes back some way. I wonder what lies beyond. Mayhap there is some means of getting down there. I wonder what happened to the steps as well. They may have moved to the other end.”

“I suppose you want to go and see,” said Logan.

“Of course,” said Autumn, “or would you rather remain here?”

“We will have to go inside that fog,” he said, “for there is no way around. How far does it go, do you think?”

“I have no idea,” said Autumn, getting up. “I cannot see around it nor could I see from below. But have a care as you walk, there may be holes as you said and there could be more steps.”

She cautiously walked back to the bank of fog, tapping with her staff. Logan followed close behind, also tapping. The fog continued to waft to and fro around their ankles.

“Interesting,” said Autumn when she drew close to the bank of fog.

“Whatever stuff lies below the fog seems to be inside this as well.” She tapped at the bank a few more times and her staff sank in only a short way. “It has a slight softness but I can’t push far.”

Logan stood beside her and pushed his hand into the fog. “Aye,” he said, feeling around. “It feels more like a bed of moss than rock but there would seem to be rock underneath. Oh, what is this?”

“What is what?” asked Autumn, feeling around herself.

“There is a stick here of some sort,” said Logan. “It is quite short and seems to be attached at one end but I can wiggle it.”

“Let me feel,” said Autumn, shifting sideways. She put her hand in the fog where Logan’s arm went and he felt her hand on his so he let go. “Oh yes. That is most strange.” She wiggled the stick then, unexpectedly, there was a click and the stick seemed to come free.

“I think I have broken it,” said Autumn and pulled on it.

A large section of the fog came with the stick and she jumped back, letting go.

“Mizule,” she exclaimed, as the section of fog swung open. “Tis a doorway!”

Chapter Twenty Three

It was a child who first saw her. A boy, perhaps six summers old. He was playing with some puppies on the edge of Wodaken when he heard approaching horses. He looked up and froze. The puppies didn't care. They gambolled and played at his feet. Then suddenly the boy was gone. One puppy, caught by his foot, rolled over and the others jumped on it, shaking their little ears and uttering small yelps of fun. The boy was forgotten, for the moment at least, as a new game began.

"Mam, Mam," shouted the boy as he rushed inside the hut. "She be back! She's here!"

"Who is?" asked his mother wearily. She was far gone with another child and every chore was an effort and every effort a chore.

"Her!" exclaimed the boy, grabbing her hand. "Come and see, come and see!"

Unenthusiastically the mother put down the cloth she was sewing and got awkwardly to her feet. The boy dropped her hand and rushed outside again.

"It had better not be that Cacea again," muttered the mother. "Her and her endless bitching. 'Twould drive a Shamsadam to distraction."

She pushed some hair from her eyes then put her hands to her back in a vague attempt to ease the ache. Then she slowly walked outside into the weak afternoon light.

"Voqev," she exclaimed when she saw Chanwar at the head of a group of horsemen. "Paug, Paug, come back inside now or I'll give you such as walloping as will stop you sitting ever again!"

Paug didn't take much notice as he was used to his mother's threats which were rarely carried out. Besides, he was fascinated. His mother lunged forward and grabbed him by the hair. She dragged him unceremoniously into the hut where Paug burst into tears but she took no notice.

“Do not move!” she ordered, scowling at him. She poked him sharply in the chest to emphasise her point then she went back to the doorway to watch.

“What do you look like,” she said to herself and shook her head, half despairingly and half enviously at Chanwar’s indisputably charismatic presence.

When last she had seen Chanwar she had a full head of hair, matted and bedraggled. Now Chanwar had two long plaits with her scalp shaved on each side of her head and between the plaits. A broad red stripe ran through each shaved part and the three came down over her forehead to meet at the top of her nose. Another stripe, this one blue, ran from ear to ear across her eyes. She also wore a tight sleeveless tunic that showed off the sinewy muscles of her arms and shoulders and her hands were bound in strips of black cloth that wove between her fingers and up around her wrists.

Chanwar had seen the mother snatch the child and drag it inside. She also saw others, women, men and children, coming out of their huts ahead to stare and mutter with their neighbours. She stiffened her back and kept her gaze haughty and proud, looking neither left nor right. In truth she was enjoying the attention and the fear that she could sense her presence was generating. It was very different to when she had left, humiliated and cast out, alone. Now she was back at the head of an army. Admittedly a small army but an army nonetheless. Each and every one armed and fearsome looking, the women no less than the men. Slowly she walked her horse along the path that ran between the huts, acknowledging no one even though she knew them all.

Up ahead a figure emerged from the largest hut. She recognised him instantly. It was Arborwir, her uncle. A grizzled older man with a leg badly deformed from an old injury. He stared at her, shock and dismay written all over his face. Chanwar stared back defiantly and continued to walk her horse slowly towards him, letting the tension build. Then Arborwir spat before turning and limping back inside.

“Hah!” thought Chanwar. “Old fool!”

Most of the town now lined the street, muttering quietly and watching her carefully. Chanwar resisted the urge to twist and check on her small army. For certain they were not talking amongst themselves and she had to trust they showed no fear nor slackness. It was vital that she was seen as a strong leader with disciplined followers.

With two or three huts yet to pass before reaching the big hut another figure emerged with Arborwir limping a little way behind. It was Chanwar One, her brother and head of the Wodazu family. He resembled Chanwar, albeit a little taller and broader in the shoulder. His hair was not as long and no part of his head was shaved, save his face. That face was not welcoming.

They stared at each other as Chanwar's horse walked the last few steps then she brought it to a halt. The horse tossed its head but, as if aware of the role it played, it did not skitter. Instead it stood calmly, its head high as Chanwar looked down on Chanwar. The people of the town gathered round, keeping their distance but not wanting to miss anything for this would be discussed and debated for many evenings.

Neither brother nor sister broke eye contact. Neither spoke. A horse whinnied and there was a quiet curse from one of Chanwar's followers but other than that the silence was immense.

“Greetings, brother,” said Chanwar. She spoke clearly and although not loud her voice carried.

“Sister,” responded One, his face expressionless.

Chanwar leaned forward on her horse, resting her hands on the base of its neck. She slowly looked around then back at her brother.

“I see little has changed in my absence,” she said, pleasantly.

“Our numbers have increased,” said her brother. He paused then added, “as have yours by the look of it.”

“Aye,” said Chanwar. “Tis different to when we last met.”

“So it would seem,” said her brother. “Why are you here? You know

the terms of our agreement.”

“As I recall there was little agreement on my part,” said Chanwar, “but things have changed and I now go where I please.”

“And it pleases you to return to your birthplace?” asked her brother. “I find that strange indeed.”

“No, I confess it does not please me,” said Chanwar, sitting up straight again. “I would prefer not to return to the place that denied me my birthright.”

“Is that why you are back?” asked her brother. “To reopen that old foolishness? You know the custom. The firstborn becomes head of the family and you are not the firstborn.”

“Pah,” said Chanwar, “by a matter of chance. Had it been me that was delivered first I would be head and you would be the outcast.”

“Very likely,” said her brother. “But you were not. The matter is closed.”

Chanwar drew a deep breath and controlled her temper.

“Aye, as you say, brother,” she said, “the matter is closed.”

“For the moment,” she added in her mind.

She regarded him for a few moments.

“I would speak with you, brother,” she said. “There are things afoot that affect us both.”

“What things?” asked her brother.

“There is a pestilence abroad,” she said. “They are ravaging the western slopes and are making their way to the eastern.”

“They?” asked her brother. “There is more than one pestilence?”

“Two,” said Chanwar. “And perhaps pestilence is the wrong word. Fiends would be better, or demons. I and my followers have fought them thrice now and have thrice been bested.” She looked around to make sure everyone was listening. “Nine of my best fighters have been lost to these fiends. I have come to warn you before it is too late.”

Chanwar One let his eyes roam over his sister's troop. There were twenty three and the women were as well armed as the men.

“Two have bested thirty three?” he said. “What manner of fiends are these?”

“They take the shape of mortals,” said Chanwar, “but no two mortals could best us. They are fiends from some other world for they are not of this one.”

“I see,” said her brother. He thought for a moment. “And why do you come to warn me?”

“You are still my kin,” said Chanwar, waving an arm to include most of the village. “Despite our differences we still have obligations.”

Chanwar One burst out laughing. “Never once have I known you to meet with your obligations, sister. Had you ever paid them even scant attention you would still be among us. What is the real reason you are here?”

Chanwar held her tongue and instead slid off her horse. She tossed the reins to Kifki who caught them deftly while managing to snarl contemptuously at Chanwar One. She could be frightening when she wanted to be.

“I will tell you the truth, brother,” said Chanwar, going to stand in front of him. As always she stood too close but he resisted the urge to step backwards. “The fiends can be bested. I myself have drawn their blood but I had not the numbers to make it permanent.”

“And yet you would seem uninjured, sister,” said Chanwar One.

“By love and speed of reflexes, brother,” said Chanwar Two. “My

dearest and bravest jumped between us and took their blows. His belly and throat paid the price. For that I revere him greatly.”

“So you want my aid?” asked her brother.

“No,” said Chanwar. “I offer you mine for your days are numbered otherwise. They are coming and are growing stronger by the day as they learn our ways and feed off our blood.”

“And why should your aid be of any use?” asked Chanwar One. “You admit you have been bested thrice so what aid can you give us?”

“We have learned their ways as well,” said Chanwar Two. “My knowledge and your numbers will best them. Is it not as our father always said?”

“Aye,” said her brother, glancing at Arborwir. “Know your enemy was his mantra in life.”

“And did we not laugh at him for that?” said Chanwar, “for who needs to know anything of travellers and traders beyond what wealth can be extracted from them? But these two are different. They are travellers, yes, but they have no wealth and seek only to take that which is rightfully yours or mine. All we have left is what you see before you and now they are coming here for they know your wealth is vastly greater.”

Chanwar One stared at his sister for a long time then relented.

“Come inside,” he said, stepping backwards and lifting an arm to his doorway. “We shall talk. Arborwir, see that Two's companions are fed.”

He put a slight emphasis on 'Two' but his sister did not react, at least not outwardly although inwardly she raged. Not once in her life had she ever called him One as that would be an acceptance of her place and she would never, ever, accept being second to anyone, let alone her twin.

* * *

“Well now,” said Autumn after they had both stood and gazed at the opening in the fog for a while. “This is interesting.”

“I’m glad you think so,” said Logan. “I would greatly prefer to be somewhere very boring.”

“The wall would appear to be solid fog all the way through,” said Autumn, patting the side of the doorway. The fog swirled and small tendrils broke away but her hand would only go so far.

“I confess I am not that interested in the wall,” said Logan. “What is inside? Clearly this is a doorway of sorts but to what and where?”

“There is no sign of life,” said Autumn, peering in, “but it is entirely dark. I fancy there is a smell though.”

“A smell of what?” asked Logan. “Dead bodies?”

“I am not sure,” said Autumn, sniffing. “It seems familiar but I cannot place it.”

She grasped her staff and gently pushed it through the doorway. It met with no resistance so she waved it slowly from side to side and up and down.

“’Twould seem to be empty,” she remarked. “I wonder how far back it goes?”

“Fiau, can we have some light?” asked Logan. The end of his staff began to burn brightly and he passed it to Autumn. She leaned forward and held it inside.

“That is strange,” she said, looking around.

“Hah,” exclaimed Logan. “Tell me there is something here that is not strange!”

“Well, what is strange is the very lack of strangeness,” said Autumn.

“And now you speak in riddles,” replied Logan. “Just tell me what you

see.”

“’Tis a hallway,” said Autumn, “and there are some robes hanging on a row of hooks. ’Tis like the inside of someone’s dwelling.”

“Sploop,” exclaimed Logan. “A dwelling? Floating in the sky?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “You know what this means, don’t you,”

“Trouble,” said Logan sadly. “It can only mean trouble.”

“Mayhap not,” said Autumn.

“Sorcerers are always trouble,” said Logan. “I wager Mother Midcarn is behind this.”

“Possibly,” said Autumn. “For certain she has the power but it would seem out of character. Usually she gives us small gifts but an entire dwelling in the sky would seem excessive. Still, there is only one way to find out. If it is Mother Midcarn then she is either inside or she has left a message. Come on.”

“And if it is not Mother Midcarn?” asked Logan, hanging back.

“Then we need to make the acquaintance of whoever lives here,” said Autumn. “If only to find out how to get down to the ground again.”

“I hate it when you are always right,” said Logan, screwing up his face. “Why can you not be wrong for a change?”

“’Tis quite likely I am wrong,” said Autumn. “Mayhap the fog will go and we will fall from the sky or this place is filled with eagles or whatever waiting to rip us to pieces but we seem to have few options unless you have thought of something.”

“I think we should take our clothes off and use them like sails,” said Logan. “That way we can waft gently to the ground.”

“You think that will work?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“No,” said Logan, “but it is an option.”

“Was that one of your jokes?” she asked, her frown deepening.

“If we are laughing at the end of this then yes,” said Logan, “otherwise no.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn.

“Neither do I,” said Logan. “I think I am going mad after all.”

Autumn looked at him strangely then back inside the doorway. Then she looked at Logan again.

“I know not what to do now,” she said. “You have confused me.”

“Excellent,” said Logan. “Then we are in agreement. Excuse me.”

He stepped around Autumn and took his staff back in the same movement and went through the doorway.

“There are three robes,” he said, holding the light up. “And two hats and two sets of boots.”

“And what lies beyond?” asked Autumn, waiting for him to make way so she could go inside.

“Another doorway,” said Logan moving forward.

Autumn slipped in behind him and, a moment later, the door closed behind her. It was silent but Autumn felt the movement of air and turned quickly but there was no one there.

“The door just shut,” she said.

“Can you open it again?” asked Logan, turning as well.

“’Twould seem to be just a wall of fog,” said Autumn. She propped her staff against her shoulder and felt around with her hands. “Ahh, there is another of those sticks. I wonder ...”

She twisted her hand and there was a faint click. The section of fog swung open again.

“That is good,” she said, looking out to check everything was still the same. “We are not trapped.”

“Tis arguable,” said Logan. “We may not be trapped inside but there is nowhere to go outside.”

“Pass me one of the boots,” said Autumn, keeping her hand on the hidden stick.

Logan walked across the hallway and retrieved a boot and handed it to her. She put it neatly in the fog that covered whatever passed for a floor next to the side of the doorway then let the door section swing back. It hit the boot and bounced slightly but remained open.

“That is encouraging,” she said. “Whatever magic there is here it is not determined to keep the door shut.”

“Should I take the other boots as well?” asked Logan. “There is at least one more door to go through.”

“Twould seem a good idea,” said Autumn, “although I am not sure why. At any rate we can always put them back later.”

Logan tried to pick up the other three boots but they were awkward to carry as well as his staff so he slipped one on his bare foot. It fitted tolerably well so he slipped the other on and went to join Autumn who was inspecting the other door that stood at the far end of the hallway. It had a knob which puzzled her for a few moments but after experimenting she found that twisting it allowed the door to open. It was dark on the other side as well. Undaunted she stepped through and the walls began to glow. Surprised she stepped back through the doorway and the glow faded.

“Most strange,” she said and stepped through again.

Again the walls began to glow. This time she did not step back and the walls got brighter until the room was well lit.

“Shall I stop Fiau?” asked Logan, stepping inside as well.

Autumn didn't answer as she was gazing around the room. It was huge.

“Sploop,” muttered Logan, Fiau forgotten.

“’Tis definitely a sorcerer,” said Autumn. “Look at all the scrolls!”

Every wall was lined with shelves and every shelf was packed with scrolls. Many were squashed flat with more piled on top of them. In places piles of scrolls sat on the floor and elsewhere lay discarded scrolls, some rolled from both ends as though they had been tossed aside. There were also several tables and benches which were covered with all manner of things including, as was clear on closer inspection, a dead eagle, a live owl, several frogs, some living and some dead, and something small and hairy in a wooden cage that made faint barking noises but looked more like a cat and was the size of a mouse. There were also countless bowls, dishes, pots and several cauldrons of various sizes. Most were empty but looked unwashed with dried scum and, in a few, mould. One had some eggs that were a mottled greenish colour. Beside it sat a skull with teeth that matched the eggs and very large incisors in the lower jaw that fitted outside the upper jaw and reached almost to the eye sockets. In one corner sat a large square table that was completely empty save for a dish of dark liquid and a long feather with a sharpened tip. Next to it was the only chair in the room. It was empty save for a plump cushion.

“These are not in our language or the Old Tongue,” said Autumn after looking at some of the scrolls.

“I would not like to have met this when it was alive,” said Logan, touching one of the incisors on the skull. It was very sharp. “It must have been a fearsome creature and look at the size of it!”

“And I wager this is a writing table,” said Autumn, picking up the feather. “I wonder if whoever lives here wrote all these scrolls. I fancy not as the scrolls I've looked at would seem to have different handwritings.”

“Do you suppose any of the scrolls will tell us how to get down from here?” asked Logan. He picked one up but he couldn’t read the language so he put it back down again.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, looking around, “but it would take a very long time to read them all even if we could.”

“Then let us try the next room,” said Logan. “There might be something more useful in there.”

“What other room?” asked Autumn, putting down the feather.

“Through there,” said Logan, pointing to the door beside her.

Autumn jumped away from the door in surprise. “That was not there just now,” she said. “Twas all scrolls on shelves.”

“Mayhap it is Mother Midcarn after all,” said Logan, going over to the door. “You know what her place in Gleard was like.”¹⁴

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, joining him, “but this place has not the feel of Mother Midcarn.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “I know what you mean. You twist the knob?”

She nodded so he twisted and gave the door a slight push. It swung quietly open to reveal another room, considerably smaller than the one they were in. It was dimly lit and seemed to be lined with wooden panels and little else save a large fireplace with a fire burning merrily and a large chair. The chair was in front of the fire and had its back towards them.

“That is encouraging,” said Logan, going in. The room did not get any lighter. “Somehow a fire in a hearth is a sign of comfort not danger.”

“True enough,” said Autumn, following him.

Then they both froze as a scroll fell from the chair and someone

¹⁴ See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*. When Autumn and Logan first encounter Mother Midcarn her dwelling is larger inside than out and she is able to add and remove rooms at will.

snored.

Chapter Twenty Four

“Someone is there,” whispered Logan, clutching Autumn's arm.

“Yes,” whispered Autumn back. “Why are we whispering?”

“Mayhap we should leave,” whispered Logan.

“Why?” whispered Autumn, unpeeling Logan's fingers from her arm. “Are we not looking for someone to help us down from here?”

“Well, yes,” whispered Logan, “I just don't want to actually find anyone. If we keep looking mayhap we will find some more steps or a rope or something.”

“Be strong,” whispered Autumn. She dropped Logan's hand and cleared her throat.

Something wrapped itself around Logan's leg and he lurched backwards in shock. His staff banged noisily against the wood panelling and its light went out. Instinctively Autumn's hand shot out and grabbed him by his tunic to steady him.

“Miaoww,” said a small black cat. It looked up at Autumn then wrapped itself around and between Logan's legs again.

“'Tis only a cat,” said Autumn.

“But what manner of cat?” asked Logan, trying to disentangle his feet. “Mayhap it is the sorcerer himself.”

Autumn pursed her lips then squatted.

“Hello,” she said to the cat. “Are you a sorcerer?”

The cat stopped entwining itself around Logan's legs and looked her with wide yellow eyes. Another rumbling wheezing snore came from the chair but the cat ignored it.

“Do you have a name?” asked Autumn.

The cat blinked slowly then sat down and started to lick its chest.

“I wager not,” said Autumn, standing up again. She looked over at the chair then knocked firmly three times on the wood panel with her staff. “Hello, there,” she called, raising her voice.

Whoever was in the chair harrumphed then sighed but did not otherwise react. Autumn glanced at Logan with a raised eyebrow then took a step towards the chair. Instantly the cat got between her legs and she tripped over it but she twisted her shoulder and rolled with the fall to jump back on her feet again.

“You do not wish me to disturb whoever is in the chair?” she asked the cat.

“Miaoww,” said the cat, looking very satisfied with itself.

Autumn shrugged and started towards the chair again. Immediately the cat ran between her legs but this time she stepped over it and continued walking. With an angry “rawwoww” the cat shot across the room and leapt onto the back of the chair and down onto the lap of whoever was there.

“Harrumph,” spluttered whoever it was and threw the cat off. It landed on all four feet with a thump and glared at Autumn. Then it stalked away, its tail stiffly erect in protest.

“Damnation to all cats,” said a voice. “Now I’ve lost my place.”

The chair groaned slightly and a hand appeared, patting around for the scroll that had been dropped. Then a man’s head appeared as he leaned over the arm to look for the scroll. He spotted the scroll, grabbed it and withdrew into the recesses of the chair again.

“Greetings,” said Autumn, walking slowly forward.

The fire froze. It stopped crackling and its flames stopped dancing. Instead they balanced on the logs motionless.

“Sploop,” muttered Logan under his breath. He prised himself away

from the wall and walked cautiously after Autumn.

The man's head appeared again, twisting around the back of the chair. He looked to be quite old and his long grey-white hair was dishevelled. He hissed when he saw Autumn.

“Hello,” said Autumn. “My name is ...”

“What are you doing here?” demanded the man testily. “How did you get up here?”

“We do not know,” said Autumn, stepping closer. “We were ...”

“We?” exclaimed the man. “We? There is more than you? Oh, this is too much!” He thrust himself from the chair and stared at Logan with quivering indignation. “How am I to ever get any peace and quiet if you forsaken devils keep chasing me everywhere?”

“I apologise most humb ...” started Autumn.

“I suppose you want a love philtre,” exclaimed the man. He flapped his scroll at them. “Well, I cannot make you one, do you hear! I do not make love philtres! Be off with you this instant!”

“No,” said Autumn. “We want nothing from you except ...”

“Pah!” said the man angrily. “I cannot give you immortality either. Go talk to whichever is your personal deity about that.”

“Please,” said Autumn, “stop interrupting, I beg of you. Allow me to explain ...”

“Very well then,” said the man and stared stonily at her. The cat sat down and looked at her with a definite air of amusement.

“We came through the pass,” began Autumn.

“Which pass?” demanded the man.

“Ah, the one with the shrine to Mizule,” said Autumn.

He glowered at her but said nothing.

“We started down the steps from the pass but a fog rose up,” she continued. “Afraid we might accidentally fall over the edge we turned and went back up and found ourselves here.”

“And you expect me to believe such nonsense?” demanded the man. “I have spells in place to stop intruders. How did you get past them?”

“Umm,” said Autumn, “I know nothing of spells, we ...”

“And you,” barked the man, suddenly pointing at Logan. “Why are you wearing my outside boots?”

Logan stepped backwards in alarm. “I’m sorry,” he said nervously. “Tis only that we found doors and I took the boots so as to prop them open.”

“Pah,” said the man. “If they are to prop open doors why are they on your feet? Answer me that!”

“Twas easier to carry them that way,” said Logan, aware of how lame that sounded.

“Twaddle,” shouted the man. “You are nothing but thieves! I have a good mind to turn you into toads and feed you to the cat! Both of you!”

“Stop!” exclaimed Autumn, her voice strong and commanding. The man, Logan and the cat all looked at her in surprise. “We are not here by choice nor are we thieves and we speak only the truth. I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup and I swear on my honour that neither I nor my companion Logan would lie to you.”

The man stared at her in silence then a puzzled frown came over his face. A faint buzzing noise started. It went for a short time before stopping then starting again.

“I know that name,” he said thoughtfully and he gazed around the

room as if trying to place it. The intermittent buzzing continued. “Now, where did I hear it?”

His gaze returned to Autumn but his eyes were blank. “Ahh, where is my diary?”

“What is a diary?” asked Autumn.

“Tis making that sound,” said the man. He gazed round the room again but apart from the three of them, the cat and the chair it was entirely empty. “Now where did I put it?”

He noticed the fire and snapped his fingers at it. It disappeared, leaving only an incongruous bank of fog in the wood panelling. Irritably he snapped his fingers again and the fog was replaced by a wood panel. The cat went over and sniffed delicately where the fire had been then walked through the panel and disappeared. The buzzing got louder and more urgent.

“It must be next door,” he said and strode across the room and through a panel.

Autumn looked at Logan then followed him. Just as she reached the panel a doorway appeared. She paused and looked through then walked into the other room. Anxiously Logan scurried after her. The doorway disappeared behind him.

This room was similar to the one full of scrolls they had been in earlier. It, too, was littered with scrolls but the walls were lined with hanging cloths and tapestries. The man was sifting through the scrolls that covered a table on one side of the room. After glancing at each he tossed it aside until they were all on the floor. The buzzing continued.

Scowling, the man started to stalk around the room, listening intently. He paused beside a large box then moved over to a leather bucket which he peered into.

“Aha!” he exclaimed triumphantly and pulled out a thick black scroll. Its surface pulsed with a faint glow in time with the buzzing. “Speak,

diary!”

“You have a meeting with Autumn Savannah from Aferraron and Logan, no second name, also from Aferraron,” said the diary in a high pitched feminine sounding voice.

“Why did you not warn me?” demanded the man. He gave the diary a shake.

“I did warn you,” said the diary, its voice accusing, “but you fell asleep.”

“Then you did not warn me sufficiently!” he exclaimed and tossed the diary back into the bucket.

“That was not nice!” complained the diary. “I could have been damaged!”

The man ignored it and looked thoughtfully at Autumn.

“So,” he said at length, “you have an appointment. Why, pray?”

“I have no idea,” said Autumn, bemused. “We did not know we had an appointment.”

The man sighed and rummaged in the bucket again to retrieve the diary.

“Diary,” he said. “Why do I have a meeting with Autumn and Logan?”

The diary stayed silent.

“Diary,” he said, shaking it. “Talk to me.”

“Not until you apologise,” said the diary in a huffy voice.

He closed his eyes and sighed, a pained expression on his face.

“I apologise,” he said to the diary.

“Apology accepted,” said the diary formally.

“Add a new task,” said the man.

“Ready,” said the diary.

“What is going on?” whispered Logan watching in fascination.

“I have absolutely no idea,” whispered back Autumn.

“Reinstall diary spells, earliest convenient,” said the man.

“Added,” said the diary grudgingly. Its surface turned dull and it took on an air of resentment.

“Now, diary,” said the man, “pretty please, why do I have a meeting with Autumn Savannah?”

“The bracelet,” said the diary.

“Ahh!” exclaimed the man, slapping his forehead. “Now I remember,” and he tossed the diary back into the bucket. It squawked angrily then went silent.

“Hello,” he said, beaming at Autumn. “Delighted to meet you at last,” and he held out his hand.

“At last?” she said, looking at his hand. “Who are you and why were you expecting us?”

“You do not know who I am?” he said, puzzled.

“No,” said Autumn.

“I am Orgajatoby Miunitou Lopel Bai,” he said grandly, “but as you are friends of Mother Midcarn you may call me Toby.”

“I might have guessed,” muttered Logan.

“Then please answer me, ahh, Toby,” said Autumn. “Why are you

expecting us and what have you to do with Mother Midcarn?"

"Let us go into my parlour," said Toby. "The bracelet is there. Come."

He turned and walked through the wall again. Autumn followed, as did Logan, albeit reluctantly. This new room was small and well lit with a pink hue. It had three chairs, thickly upholstered with pictures of flowers, and a small table with carved legs sat between them. It was really quite cosy.

"Can I offer you some refreshments?" asked Toby, sitting in one of the chairs. "Do sit down."

Three mugs appeared on the table together with a large fruit cake, already sliced. The mugs steamed gently.

"Help yourselves," said Toby. "There is plenty more if you desire."

"Thank you," said Autumn.

She laid her staff and pack on the floor beside one of the chairs and sat down but did not pick up any of the refreshments. Logan did much the same but also picked up a slice of cake. He studied it then sniffed it before taking a small bite. It was delicious so he quickly ate it before picking up another.

"Now then," said Toby, picking up one of the mugs. "Let me think. Ah yes. Mother Midcarn came to me, ahh, when was it? I do not recall but it was not long ago. She requested me to make a small gift for you and to deliver it."

"This is the bracelet?" asked Autumn.

"Indeed," said Toby. "Ahh, the bracelet! I almost forgot."

A small cabinet appeared in a corner of the room. Toby beckoned and it slid over and came to a rest beside him. He pulled open the top drawer and took out a small pale box which he put on the table and pushed over to Autumn. The cabinet disappeared.

“Open it,” said Toby leaning back in his chair. “I trust it is to your liking.”

Autumn inspected the box without touching it then leaned forward to pick it up. As she opened the box, Logan leaned forward and took another slice of cake.

“Tis delicious,” he said.

Toby smiled and inclined his head. “It should fit your wrist,” said Toby then he frowned. “Although I did not allow for a bandage. Still, it should bend enough if you want to wear it on that arm.”

Autumn squeezed her hand through the circle of yellow wires twisted tightly together and held it up.

“What are these?” she asked, tapping one of the five small amber pellets that were embedded between the wires.

“They are charms,” said Toby and his face clouded over. “And therein lies the difficulty. Oh, and she left a message for you. It is in the box as well.”

“What difficulty?” asked Autumn, looking inside the box again. She pulled out a small piece of parchment. “A prettie for your armie MM', what does that mean?”

“I wager it is one of her jokes,” said Logan. “Like when she gave you those mittens and said you'd find them handy¹⁵. This is something pretty to go on your arm although like as not there is more to that bracelet than meets the eye.”

“So you have had gifts from Mother Midcarn before?” asked Toby, sipping his drink.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “And most times they have some magic that turns out to be most helpful. You said there was some difficulty?”

“Yes,” said Toby looking embarrassed. “It is, well, ahh, it is like this.

15 See *The Annals ~ The Third Tale*.

Umm, Mother Midcarn asked me for this bracelet because I and I alone have something that, well, let us say it has its uses. She wanted those charms to have this something but, alas, when I came to add it to the charms I found I had none.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. She held up her arm and flicked one of the charms. “So what were these charms supposed to do?”

“I cannot possibly tell you that,” said Toby, taking a slice of cake himself. Despite Logan having eaten four slices the entire cake still sat on the table. “That would reveal something of your destiny and I cannot do that.”

“Yes, Mother Midcarn says the same,” said Autumn. “It is most frustrating. So what was the something you were to put on the charms?”

“I am not sure I should reveal that either,” said Toby, pursing his lips, “but then again, knowing something exists does not mean you know how it will affect your destiny. I have,” and he beamed proudly, “invented something that I call my Tincture of Animation.”

“I know what a tincture is,” said Autumn, “but what is 'animation'?”

“Tis just a fancy word for movement,” said Toby with a self-deprecating laugh. “If I coat, say, a piece of metal with my tincture then it is able to move. Tis as though it is alive although, of course, it is not. It is still a piece of metal.”

“So this bracelet would become alive?” asked Autumn frowning.

“No,” said Toby. “It would only seem alive and not the bracelet anyway. The tincture was only for the charms.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. She stared thoughtfully at the bracelet.

Logan had stopped eating, partly to listen to Toby and partly because he was beginning to feel a little queasy.

“How is it that you no longer have any of your tincture?” he asked.

“Indeed,” said Toby. “How indeed. I have only once used the tincture since I discovered its properties and I put it away safely but when I came to get the stuff for the bracelet I found it was gone.”

“Gone?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Toby. “I know not where, nor does my diary. Mayhap it is something to do with being up here.”

“Ahh, so we are in the sky?” asked Autumn. “I thought we were as we could see the ground below.”

“Indeed,” said Toby. “I live inside a cloud.”

“Why?” she asked, “if I am not being too rude.”

“For the peace and quiet,” said Toby. “When I lived in Schtei there was such a stream of people wanting love philtres or wealth or take away their fat or grow their hair that I could barely get any sleep let alone do any work. If I locked all my doors and shuttered all my windows they would hammer and clamour and the neighbours would complain. It was intolerable so I made this cloud and moved in. 'Tis pleasant on a nice day to drift in the light of Astauand and if it rains I just move it out of the way.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, suddenly realising. “So this cloud looks like the palace of the Karoi of Neander? That explains why we have kept seeing it.”

“’Twas a vanity on my part,” said Toby, smugly. “’Tis not as large however. You have seen the palace?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, “but tell me more about this bracelet.”

“There is nothing more to tell,” said Toby. “Mother Midcarn asked me to make it for you and I have done so, as best I can.”

“But she wanted it to have some ability that was to be given by this tincture,” said Autumn, “and it does not? Could you not make some more of this invention?”

“Indeed,” said Toby, “and I am but 'tis a complicated process and takes two full summers to ferment.”

“Oh Sploop!” exclaimed Logan as realisation came upon him. “So she knows we are heading in to trouble yet her aid will not work?”

“So it would seem, Logan,” said Autumn, frowning. “And I venture there is nothing we can do about it except cope as best we can.”

* * *

“There is a stranger outside,” said Arborwir gruffly as he came inside Chanwar's hut. “Says she's with Chanwar so I wager she's one of yours, Two.”

“Does she have a name?” demanded Two, glaring up at him.

“Aye,” said Arborwir. “Daily or some such.”

“De'laia,” said Two. She got up. “She has news of the fiends. I will speak with her.”

She came back a few moments later, smiling.

“'Tis good news, brother,” she said. “De'laia spoke with the keeper of The Black Horse in Daihfew. The fiends did not continue on around the coast but left intending to breach the pass of The Twenty. 'Tis confirmation of their intent to wrest your wealth and lands from you.”

“It would seem so,” said One, frowning. “Why else would anyone leave the coast for such a pass when they can go around?”

“Then we are in agreement?” asked Two, sitting back down.

One looked at Arborwir who merely scowled.

“Yes,” he said decisively, looking back at his sister. In the heat of the fire she had started to perspire a little and the red and blue stripes had begun to run. If anything it made her more terrifying to look at. “I cannot be certain you are telling me the truth or not but equally I

cannot ignore the possibility. I will add another thirty to your band.”

“Only thirty?” asked his sister, her eyes hardening.

“Aye,” said One. “If thirty is not sufficient then I must look to saving the others, not cast them against an invincible foe. The good of the family is paramount.”

Chanwar Two stared at the fire for a few moments. “Very well,” she said. “The thirty will include Janey?”

“You fear them that much?” asked her brother, watching her closely.

“I fear nothing!” exclaimed Two, slapping the ground. “But his presence will put fear into their hearts, of that I am certain.”

“As you wish,” said Chanwar One. “Thirty including Janey.”

“Under my leadership, naturally,” said Two. “We shall depart at first light and head for the pass. Like as not they will follow the trail to begin with.”

“Under my leadership,” said her brother.

They locked eyes, each trying to dominate the other then Two backed down. She had achieved her main objective and leadership could wait a little longer.

“As you say, brother,” she said then laughed. “We two are very much alike, are we not?”

“In appearance,” said One drily, “but little else. I kill only when I have to and for good reason. You? You do it for pleasure and no reason. I will be watching you very closely, sister. Do not forget that.”

Chapter Twenty Five

“You surely do not believe that treacherous, fork tongued, three faced, pox ridden whore?” demanded Arborwir after taking Chanwar Two and her followers to a place where they could spend the night some way from the rest of the village.

“Be careful what you say, uncle,” said One gruffly, narrowing his eyes at him. “She may be all that you say but she is still my sister and as such should be accorded a measure of respect.”

“She may well be my niece,” responded Arborwir moodily, “but though I fear her greatly I will never respect her.”

“That will be sufficient,” said One, pouring himself another cup of wine. “Fear, respect, they are much the same.”

“And that stuff on her head,” remarked Arborwir. “I venture it is she who is the fiend and the rest is made up for some fantasy in what passes for her mind.”

“I would remind you that but for chance she would be head of the family,” said One. He lounged back in his chair and put his feet on the table. “Mayhap if our mother had lain differently when her time came or some such then Two would have been firstborn not I.”

“And thankful we are that this is so,” said Arborwir, settling himself and pouring a cup of wine as well. “I would sooner die than be led by her.” He belched then tore a leg off a cold cooked bush turkey and took a bite. “So, you believed her?” He waved the leg in the general direction of the doorway.

“No,” said One, “and mayhap yes. For certain something has got her spooked and it is not all a ploy. You saw the injuries on many of those in her party?”

“Probably done by her own hand,” said Arborwir with a sneer. “You know what she is like.” He took another bite.

“I had Aeie talk with her followers under the guise of giving them

food and drink,” said One, nursing his cup. “’Twould seem they are both loyal and close-mouthed. She was able to learn little save there were two of them, one male, one female. None would talk of the deaths of any of their number save that there have been deaths.” He sighed. “For certain there is someone or something out there that has driven her back here for I venture she would not come to me for aid otherwise.”

“You saw how the brat twisted it so it was her giving you aid?” said Arborwir derisively. He spat on the ground. “So, what is your plan?”

“She does have that gift,” said One with a laugh. “Nothing is ever her fault and she has no idea of responsibility. She is seemingly able to think up explanations on the spur of the moment without the smallest resort to reason or facts and then convince herself of their truth. No matter. There is something going on and I must find out what it is.”

“But thirty?” asked Arborwir, “and Janey? You seem to be taking it seriously.”

“Well, the thirty is simple,” said One. “Two has twenty or thereabouts of her own so ours must outnumber them should it turn out to be a trap. And Janey, well, that is more of a test. From what she says these fiends, if they are fiends, have taken mortal form. Mayhap they are mortals, in which case Janey alone will be more than enough to remove them from this world.”

“And if they are fiends?” asked Arborwir, “which I wager they will not be, but if they are?”

“Then Janey will die,” said One sadly, “and that will prove them to be fiends for no two ordinary folk could defeat him.”

“A bit of a waste, though,” said Arborwir. “He may be simple but he’s a likeable enough chap.”

“Aye,” said One, “but you are not thinking this through. If these two are ordinary folk then Janey will best them and that is the end of it. But if not, if Janey is bested, then what?”

“I do not follow?” said Arborwir, his brow furrowing.

“I have to protect the rest of the family,” said One, “and that is why you are coming with us. If it looks that Janey is being bested then you leave us to fend for ourselves and ride back here like the wind and take everyone else to some place of safety. I will do my best to rid the world of them and return but if not, and if they truly are fiends then it is likely that we will not, then you must take charge until Five can be brought back.”

“Ahh,” said Arborwir. “You are right, I had not thought this through.” He studied the fire for a while, musing. “You think she will? Did she not take the name of the Migdobols and move to their land and renounce her kin?”

“There is no other choice,” said One heavily. “Three died at birth and Four is too stupid to even know his name and can never be family head. Once I am gone, the choice will be Two or Five and like as not if I die at the hands of these fiends then Two will as well. ’Twill be your task to bring Five back and get her with child else the line ends.”

“And if Two lives while you die?” asked Arborwir.

“Then she will be head of the family,” said One. “That is our law.”

“Then may all the gods help us,” said Arborwir, shaking his head in sorrow, “for we will all be doomed.”

* * *

“I have a confession to make,” said Autumn unexpectedly.

Toby had deposited them some way further down the mountain and they had been walking through the trees in silence for some time, Logan admiring the scenery and Autumn lost in thought.

“You have no need to confess anything to me,” said Logan. “You can do no wrong.”

“Mayhap in your eyes,” said Autumn, putting her hand on his forearm,

“but you cannot see me as I truly am for you like me too much.”

“Ahh, so this is a philosophical confession, then,” said Logan. “I thought for a moment that you had stolen something from Toby.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn, frowning in puzzlement. “What could I possibly want from Toby and why would I steal it?”

“Ohh, Autumn,” said Logan, shaking his head sadly. “You are a great and wise thinker, perhaps even the greatest and wisest that has ever lived and yet you have still not learned a basic truth.”

“You confound me, Logan,” said Autumn stopping her walking and pulling on Logan’s arm so he stopped as well. “I am far from being a great thinker or wise but I hope my failings are not for want of trying. What is it that I have still not learned?” She looked worried.

Logan sucked on his teeth for a few moments. “Autumn,” he said seriously, taking her hand in his, “’tis a simple yet profound truth and it pains me to have to say this.”

“Say it,” said Autumn tersely, her face becoming more worried.

“If you insist,” said Logan. He paused, mainly for effect. “If I say something and you do not understand it there is only one possible explanation. How can it be you have not learned this?”

“What have I not learned?” demanded Autumn, snatching her hand away. “Tell me!”

“If I say something that you do not understand,” said Logan, looking at her earnestly, “then the only possible explanation there can be is that I am joking.”

Autumn stared at him for a few moments, her eyes hard and her brow furrowed. “I do not under... Ah.”

Logan grinned and spread his arms in delight.

“So what you said about me stealing was a joke?” said Autumn, raising

an eyebrow.

“Aye,” said Logan happily.

She gave him a long, searching look. “’Tis true, to a point,” she admitted. “I never know when you are joking and when you tell me I do not understand the joke.”

“Nor the explanation,” said Logan, “although ’tis rare for a joke to stay funny when it is explained.”

“And yet,” countered Autumn, “I would say you have not learned a basic truth either.” She turned and walked on.

“Undeniably,” said Logan, following, “for I have not your gifted mind nor your training. What is it that I have not learned?”

“That I never understand your jokes,” said Autumn, “and yet you persist. ’Twould seem a pointless exercise. If one’s path is blocked by some impassable blockage it makes no sense to keep trying to pass and fail only to try again. Would not your efforts be better made in a different direction?”

“And now the joke is on me,” said Logan. “You are right, Autumn, as always. I never learn.”

“What do you mean, the joke is on you?” asked Autumn. “Or is that another of your incomprehensible jokes?”

“Not at all,” said Logan, “for you have turned my silly little joke into a philosophical point and made me look foolish.”

“Then I apologise,” said Autumn, stopping to look at him intently again. “That was not my intent.”

“Do not apologise,” he said, grinning again. “That was a joke too. In truth I get some entertainment from watching you struggle to understand these things.”

“You take pleasure in my suffering?” asked Autumn.

“You do not suffer from it,” said Logan. “It doesn't bother you in the least bit that you don't understand my jokes.”

“You are right,” said Autumn after thinking about it for a few moments. “I accept your jokes as simply being a part of what makes you Logan. Much as when a frog croaks I accept the croaking without understanding and do not suffer from that.”

“Many would find that insulting,” said Logan mildly.

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“That what they say is no more than the croaking of a frog to you,” said Logan mischievously.

“That is not what I said!” exclaimed Autumn stopping and facing him again. “I merely said that when you, on occasion, make a joke and I do not understand it that I accept it as being a part of your fundamental and unchanging nature. I did not say you were a frog. I merely used a frog as an example of something similar.” Her dark eyes had fire deep within.

“It is wrong of me, I know,” said Logan, “but it is entertaining to see you get worked up. You are normally so calm.”

“Pah,” exclaimed Autumn. She started to say something then she closed her mouth and walked away.

“Have I upset you?” he asked anxiously, catching up with her.

“How many times have I told you that you always have a choice?” asked Autumn, not stopping.

“About as many times as there are ants,” said Logan. “Perhaps more.”

“I venture not that many,” said Autumn, “but I choose not to be upset for there is nothing to be upset about. The essential truth is that I do not understand your jokes and I wager this entire conversation has been a joke.”

“Touché,” muttered Logan.¹⁶ “I’m croaking like a frog again.”

“No,” said Autumn happily as she was aware she had managed to counter his joking even though she didn’t understand how. “You are merely being Logan and I embrace that.”

“Good,” said Logan happily as he was pleased she wasn’t upset after all. “So, what is your confession?”

“What are your thoughts on this bracelet?” she asked, holding up her wrist.

“Ahh,” said Logan. “They have not changed from what I said before.”

“That trouble lies ahead and that the aid Mother Midcarn has sent us will not work?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Logan. “Although I am hoping that something else she told us will aid us instead.”

“What is that?” asked Autumn.

They separated to go around a tree then came together again the other side.

“She said that destinies are not fixed and inviolable,” said Logan. “There is always doubt because of the complexity of how everything else interacts with us. I am hoping that the trouble that lies ahead that her gift was intended to help us with will not now happen because her help cannot happen.”

“That is an interesting point,” said Autumn, stopping to look at him again. “I did not think of that.”

“Tis only a hope,” said Logan not noticing. He carried on walking. “But it seems to me that if her gift working as intended led to one destiny then the fact that it does not may well lead to a different

¹⁶ *Translator’s note:* There is no English equivalent to what Logan actually said but this French term is a fair approximation.

destiny.”

“And that leads to an interesting possible conclusion,” said Autumn, catching him up.

“What is that?” asked Logan.

“That her gifts to us in some way cause the problems the gifts are intended to resolve,” said Autumn.

“You mean that people only try to kill you because you have your ribbon?” asked Logan, stopping to look at her.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, stopping also. “I would like to return to Mother Midcarn's to discuss this with her. No doubt it is something she has already thought about and reached a conclusion.”

“Then let us go back to Glead,” said Logan, turning around. “For certain it is a more sensible choice than continuing on knowing that there is trouble ahead.”

“We do not know that,” said Autumn. “Aside from the point you have just made that our destinies may have changed, we only know that the trouble lies ahead in time, not space. It could be that turning back is what takes us into trouble.”

“Sploop,” said Logan wrinkling his nose. “You are right. And it is possible that the magic on the bracelet not working causes us to go back to Mother Midcarn and leads us into greater trouble than if we had continued the way we had been.”

“There is that too,” said Autumn. “I confess I am glad I am not a sorcerer with the skills of Mother Midcarn. It must be very difficult to make sense of things when nothing is certain nor even appears to be certain.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “I wager 'tis better to stay in ignorance and deal with things as they arise rather than ponder the vast number of things that may happen and know not what to do. Was that your confession?”

“Was what my confession?” asked Autumn, hesitating before walking on the way they had been.

“About being glad you are not a sorcerer?” said Logan following, as always.

“Ah, no,” said Autumn. “Twas something else entirely. I only asked about the bracelet to see if your thoughts had changed and they have not.”

“No, not really,” said Logan. “Whether or not our destiny has changed I wager there is trouble ahead for there is always trouble ahead. It is the nature of life.”

“That is undeniably true,” said Autumn. “And your thoughts about her message? As we have agreed I do not understand jokes and you have a love of them so what do you make of it?”

“Yes, that has me worried,” said Logan. “Her message could be read in two ways. One way is as a joke and the message merely means that she gave you something pretty to put on your arm but I wager that is not the case because the bracelet was supposed to have some magic on it.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and we know that because Toby said so. Had the tincture been put on no doubt he would not have told us and we would then accept the message that way.”

“Unlikely,” said Logan, “as we know Mother Midcarn only too well.”

“True,” said Autumn, “but given that we do know the bracelet is supposed to aid in some way her message takes on a different meaning.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “A pretty for your army. I venture that, as Toby's tincture somehow makes things move, the charms in your bracelet are somehow intended to become an army.”

“My thinking also,” said Autumn. “And what possible use would an army be unless we are confronted by a group larger than I can deal

with on my own?”

“An army to take on an army,” said Logan thoughtfully. “There are only five charms, are there not?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “’Tis not many if an army is what she meant.”

“An army of six would be a lot if the five charms all had your skills,” mused Logan.

“And I am not convinced of the logic of it,” said Autumn. “I can handle a fair number of attackers and a great number would not all be able to attack me at the same time for there simply would not be the room. ’Tis like back at that pass. One man could hold off many for only a few could attack him at any one time.”

“But they were still defeated,” said Logan. “Don't forget that. Sooner or later the force of numbers defeated each of the defenders.”

“True,” said Autumn. “Mayhap that is what she intended.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan. “I doubt we will ever know as Mother Midcarn is very grudging with her explanations. So you think that perhaps we will be attacked by some large army and each of the charms were meant to fend off some of them while you dealt with those within your capabilities?”

“No doubt there is some other explanation that will fit what little we know,” said Autumn, “but I have been unable to think of one.”

“I confess I cannot either,” said Logan. “So what has this to do with your confession?”

“Ahh, my confession,” said Autumn. “Yes.”

She walked on in silence, a thoughtful look on her face. Logan walked beside her, wondering what it was she wanted to confess. Given the nature of their conversation it was unlikely to be pleasant.

“’Tis my vanity,” blurted Autumn after a time. “I fight it but I am

unable to put it to an end.”

“I don't understand,” said Logan. “What has your vanity to do with this?”

“The pass,” said Autumn. “The Twenty stood before a horde and held out until they died and a shrine was made to honour their glory.”

“So?” said Logan.

Autumn stopped and turned to face Logan. She looked very serious.

“If we are indeed to face an army,” she said, “and if we do not have Mother Midcarn's magic to aid us then we will face them alone. In fact, I will face them alone for I will not permit you to be involved. You would stand no chance against an army.”

“Oh no,” said Logan, brandishing his staff. “I have nowhere near the skills you do but I can do some damage.”

“Some,” conceded Autumn, “but against a horde? No, I will not allow it.”

“I see little point arguing about it now,” said Logan. “Your confession?”

“It is to my eternal shame,” said Autumn, sadly, “but that is what vanity does to you.”

“What is?” asked Logan. “I'm getting confused here.”

“I am looking forward to this,” said Autumn, looking solemnly at him. “I find I am wanting to take on this army, whoever they are.”

“Why?” asked Logan aghast. “Why ever would you want to do that? What if you are killed?”

“It would not matter,” said Autumn solemnly, “just as it did not matter for The Twenty.”

“Oh no,” said Logan, backing away and holding up his hands protectively. “Oh no. No, I cannot believe this, Autumn. Not of you, surely not.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, looking away. “’Tis my cursed vanity that speaks.”

“Absolutely not,” said Logan, staring at her. “I will not allow you to die so that someone will build a Voqev cursed shrine to your memory!”

“Mayhap it will be you, Logan, who builds it,” said Autumn, “or you compose a song that people will sing about me.”

“No!” exclaimed Logan. “I will not!”

“I know,” said Autumn, stepping forward to take his hand. “Do not let it worry you for I will not permit it to happen as far as is possible. But, as I say, this is my confession and I confess that my vanity would like such a memorial. It disgusts me that this is so but there it is. A confession of something laudable is no confession, it is mere boasting, after all.”

Chapter Twenty Six

“Greetings,” said Kanikapila, stepping out from behind a large tree.

Autumn had whirled into a defensive stance before Logan had begun to react but he, too, turned and brought up his staff protectively.

“You have lost none of your speed, I see,” said Kanikapila, keeping his distance. “Tis only I, Kanikapila. Do not be alarmed.”

“And you have lost none of your stealth,” said Autumn, straightening up. She looked around and listened but detected nothing untoward. “Greetings to you in turn. Have you been lying in wait for us?”

“Ahh, no,” said Kanikapila. “I am returning from Schtei and I stopped for the night in a clearing up yonder. I heard your approach and came to see who it was. There are dangers in these parts for unwary travellers.”

“And yet I neither heard nor saw any sign,” said Autumn. “How is it you are able to move so delicately?”

“I am a man of business,” said Kanikapila, smiling his half smile. “Oft times profit can be made by moving stealthily when an opportunity arises. It is possible to acquire the goods of another for very little outlay, for example, by being stealthy and circumspect. Those goods can then be sold later for a respectable profit. But, as you have little interest in profit there is no point in talking further on the matter. I know it is still some little way before dark but if you are not in a hurry would you care to join me at the clearing for the night?”

“We are in no hurry,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan. “We have some food and would be pleased to share what we have with you.”

“Excellent,” said Kanikapila. “It is but a short way.”

The clearing lay to one side of the path they had been following and showed signs of frequent use. There were the remains of three fires dotted around and bare patches where the grass had been worn away. At the furthest point from the path a fire burned although there was

no other sign of occupancy.

“Kauwa is not with you?” asked Autumn as they walked across the clearing. She paused to inspect one of the old fires.

“She lies hidden in the undergrowth,” said Kanikapila, watching her. “It seemed safer until I ascertained who was coming.”

“That is wise,” said Autumn walking over to another of the old fireplaces. She used her foot to push the remains around then stooped to pick up a stone. She blew off some ash and dirt then nodded before walking over to join Kanikapila and Logan.

“Your journey to Schtei was successful?” she asked sitting down beside Logan. She sat facing into the clearing so she had a good view of it and the path that touched its edge. “Or is your wagon in the undergrowth as well?”

“I had a successful journey,” said Kanikapila, “and sold the wagon as well as I had no further need for it. You are heading for Schtei?”

“Yes and no,” said Autumn, pouring a little water from the water bottle on the stone. It was long and narrow and quite flat and she used a handful of grass to wipe it fairly clean. “We head in that direction and Schtei happens to lie the same way.”

“Ahh,” said Kanikapila watching her clean the stone. “If it is not too much of an intrusion, can I ask the significance of the stone?”

“At the moment it has none,” said Autumn. “’Tis merely an idea I have. Tell me, do you have some twine or thin rope?”

“Of course,” said Kanikapila, raising an eyebrow. “I never travel without any. Kauwa, bring the pack.”

There was a scrabbling rustling from behind them and, a few moments later, Kauwa appeared carrying a pack. She put it beside Kanikapila.

“Are you well?” asked Logan.

Kauwa did not respond. She stood there silently.

“Hanaha do not talk,” said Kanikapila.

“Oh,” said Logan. He paused, unsure what to say next.

Kanikapila rummaged through the pack and pulled out a ball of twine. “Will this do?”

“That will be perfect,” said Autumn, “although I only want a short length. Logan has some money if you want payment.”

“Take what you need,” said Kanikapila, waving a hand to reject the offer of payment. “What are you going to do with it?”

“Bind the stone to my wrist,” said Autumn, holding up her bandaged wrist. “Logan, if you would help?”

“Of course,” said Logan. He shifted over and pulled out his knife to cut the twine. Autumn held the stone in place while he wrapped the twine around her wrist and palm then tied it off before cutting the ball away.

“Thank you,” he said, handing it back to Kanikapila.

Autumn waved her hand around and experimented with making a fist.

“That should work,” she said. “Thank you, Logan.”

“I am most intrigued,” said Kanikapila, watching every move. “Your wrist still pains you?”

“A little,” admitted Autumn, “but only occasionally when I overuse it.”

“And the stone is to give it support?” asked Kanikapila.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“Your wrist was injured some time back and yet you only now look for support?” he asked, clearly puzzled. “Would it not be simpler to not

overuse your wrist?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan, “but there is a chance I will need to make great use of it in the not too distant future.”

Kanikapila's eyes narrowed as he thought about this then widened again.

“Ahh, you are expecting trouble,” he said, “and soon by the look of it.”

“It is possible,” she said, “but if it comes then it will be directed at me and like as not when you are long gone so have no fear.”

“I am not afraid,” said Kanikapila, “although I venture Chanwar will not come upon us in the night.”

“Why do you think the trouble will be from Chanwar?” asked Autumn, looking at him intently.

“I cannot imagine any but one of the Chanwars worrying you enough to prepare for them,” said Kanikapila, half smiling again. “Which one do you anticipate?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “We have met with Chanwar Two or her people thrice now but we have not met her brother.”

“Her?” said Kanikapila in surprise. “I did not know Chanwar Two was a woman.”

“And a fearsome one at that,” interjected Logan. “She managed to stab Autumn with a knife.”

“Tis only a minor cut,” said Autumn, “and it is stitched and well strapped.”

“Where did this happen?” asked Kanikapila.

“On the edge of Daihfew,” said Logan. “The same day you left.”

“Then Chanwar Two will have had time to talk to her brother,” said

Kanikapila thoughtfully. "You came through the pass with the shrine, did you not?"

"Yes," said Autumn. "And a most magnificent tribute it is."

"Hmm," said Kanikapila, not really listening. "I wager they are looking for you further ahead for they would be expecting you to have travelled faster."

"And they may well not be looking for us at all," said Autumn.

"They are," said Kanikapila scowling. "None in that family forgive or forget and you are right to prepare. Shall we eat?"

"Yes," said Autumn. "Then we will put out the fire. I see no point in aiding them to find us if that is their intent."

It was already too late. The presence of travellers in the clearing had already been noted by a youth who had left with a stealth that equalled if not exceeded that of Kanikapila. The youth, no longer a child but not yet a man, was even now making haste towards Chanwar One, anxious to prove himself and begin his climb upward in the ranking within the family. This was his opportunity.

* * *

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn Savannah. She sat cross-legged, her feet on her knees as was her custom, on the edge of the clearing near their fire, now long cold. Ahead was the clearing with the path that touched it directly in front of her. To one side lay Logan, fast asleep as was his custom at this time of day. Kanikapila did not sleep. He sat amidst the trees several paces away from where she sat. He watched Autumn and he watched the clearing. Both were quiet and still.

The morning sun brought no warmth but Autumn was aware of its light and of Logan and Kanikapila. She briefly wondered why he was still there then dismissed him from her mind. His choices were his own to make. She briefly eased her injured arm for the stone made its resting on her knee awkward then stiffened as she heard a sound. It

was unclear but it could have been the sound of a footstep some way away. Her senses focused and concentrated. There it was again. She sensed Kanikapila becoming more alert. Then came the sound of a twig snapping. Then another.

She opened her eyes but as yet no one was visible even though there were now faint sounds coming from all around. She slid her feet off her knees and leaned over to put her hand on Logan's mouth. His eyes flicked open and stared uncomprehendingly at her.

“Someone comes,” she whispered. “Several.”

She looked over at Kanikapila but he was concentrating on the sounds, his head cocked, listening.

“Gather our things and stay in the bushes,” she whispered, taking her hand from Logan's mouth.

Logan nodded and quietly got up. He gathered their few possessions and hid them behind a bush while Autumn walked to the centre of the clearing, her staff in her hand. The sounds were quite clear now and came from all around. Logan retrieved his staff and went to join Autumn.

“No,” she said quietly, rotating to track the sounds. “I wager from the sounds there are too many. Go and hide in the bushes.”

“No,” said Logan, matching her quietness. “My place is by your side.”

“Logan,” said Autumn firmly. “There are too many for me to deal with and look after you as well. Go and stand with Kanikapila and Kauwa. They may need your assistance.”

“No,” said Logan, hefting his staff. “Don't you worry about me. Kanikapila and Kauwa can look after themselves.”

As if on cue Kanikapila grunted and rapidly backed out of the bushes. A man with a raised sword followed him. Another nearby emerged, dragging Kauwa by the hair. Autumn noted this but continued to rotate as others emerged from the bushes all around the clearing.

Several she recognised.

“Oh Voqev,” muttered Logan. “’Tis an army!”

“Mizule would be more appropriate,” said Autumn calmly, “and an army would seem right. I count mayhap fifty or so.” She rotated full circle once again and noted that the man standing beside Chanwar bore her a resemblance. She stopped rotating and faced him as this was likely to be Chanwar One.

“Greetings,” she said clearly. “Is it not a beautiful day?”

The man looked a little surprised at this greeting.

“This them?” he asked gruffly, bending his head towards his sister without averting his eyes from Autumn.

“Aye,” said Chanwar Two, grinning happily. “Although I know not who they are.” She pointed at Kanikapila and Kauwa.

“They are but passing strangers,” said Autumn. “They have no part in this.”

“So you know what this is about,” said Chanwar One. “Do you know who I am?”

“I do not know you,” said Autumn, “but I wager you are Chanwar One, brother of Chanwar Two.”

Chanwar One looked around then returned his gaze to Autumn.

“Aye,” he said. “Wodazu Chanwar One, head of the Wodazu family.”

Autumn bowed formally. “I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup and this is my companion, Logan.”

“I know not what any of that means,” said One, not bowing in return, “although it sounds pretty enough. Are you a fiend or a demon?”

“I am neither,” said Autumn. “Nor is Logan.”

“Well now,” said One with easy authority. “That leaves me with a bit of a predicament. You say you are not a fiend and yet my sister here says you are so who am I to believe? My sister or you?”

“I regret I cannot aid you in your dilemma,” said Autumn. “What you choose to believe need have no bearing on the truth. I say again that I am no fiend but if you choose not to believe me then there is little I can do.”

“You are right, 'tis indeed a dilemma,” said One, “for if I choose to believe you then I must call my sister a liar.”

“Why do you waste time arguing with this fiend?” exclaimed Two. “She be playing with your mind!”

“Well, there is that, sister,” said One, scratching his nose, “although she looks too small and insignificant to be a fiend. How was it this one came to best you?”

“Because she is a fiend,” snarled Two, “and I drew her blood!”

“As I see it,” said One, ignoring her, “there be only one solution. Trial by combat.”

“By that you mean I must fight you?” asked Autumn. “Is there no peaceful solution to this?”

“Not me,” said One. “Janey.” He looked around again. “Where in Voqev's name be that cursed fool?”

“He's taking a piss,” called someone and there were laughs from all around.

“Then we wait,” said One.

“While we wait,” said Autumn, “what are the rules of this trial? We are strangers here and know not your customs.”

“There are no rules,” said One.

“Then how is the outcome judged?” asked Autumn.

“If Janey wins then you be not fiends,” said One, “since none but a fiend could best Janey and if you be winning then that be proof you are a fiend for the same reason.”

“I think you will find there is a flaw in your logic,” said Autumn with a slight frown.

“There is no flaw,” said One as Janey emerged from the undergrowth.

He was massive. Half as tall again as Autumn and three times her width although his head was surprisingly small. He was clad in a thick leather jerkin and carried a short thick stick with a length of chain attached to it. At the other end of the chain was a heavy metal ball with sharp spikes. Despite his fearsome appearance his face looked babyish and innocent.

“You think any but a fiend can best that?” asked One, pointing at Janey. Janey looked at him and smiled happily.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Just because it has not happened before does not mean that it cannot happen and to die proving innocence would seem a poor way of judging.”

“The fiend be playing with your mind again, brother,” hissed Two, glaring balefully at Autumn. “Get on with it!”

“You are too impatient,” said One, mildly. “All in good time. We have the whole day ahead of us.”

“A question, if I may,” said Autumn.

“Yes?” said One to Two's annoyance.

“I do not want to fight this man,” said Autumn. “What happens if I refuse?”

“Then your head will be quickly removed from your shoulders,” said One as Janey casually swung the ball from side to side, “and your companions likewise.”

“I see,” said Autumn. “And if I should, despite not being a fiend, best Janey?”

“Then you will face the rest of us,” screeched Two. “Either way you die and I get my fingers and toes!”

“Is that what this is all about?” demanded One, rounding on her. “More baubles for your collection?”

“No, brother,” said Two, quickly suppressing her thirst for blood. “’Tis as I said, this fiend is after the wealth of the family and will stop at nothing to get it. The fingers and toes are just something I have promised myself as a reminder of the great evil that so nearly befell us.”

One gazed at her with narrowed eyes then exhaled noisily. “There will be a reckoning, sister,” he said quietly. “Count on it.”

“Then you are giving up, brother?” asked Two, just loudly enough to be heard by all. “Like a coward?”

One stared at her with ice in his eyes, his anger growing.

“Janey,” he called, his eyes not leaving Two. “Get on with it.”

Janey’s face crumpled and he looked helplessly at One. “Who?”

“That one,” shouted Two, jabbing her finger at Autumn. “Kill her!”

Janey’s small head swung round to look at Autumn. Happy again now that he knew what to do and who to do it to he ambled forward in a slight crouch, swinging his ball and chain in slow circles. Two stepped forward, her eyes wide with anticipation and delight.

“Hold!” barked One.

Janey stopped and looked at him, his face crumpling again in confusion.

“Not her,” said One. He paused then made his final decision. “This one,” and he pointed to his sister.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Chanwar Two whirled to face him, her face angry. Janey changed direction and headed for her, happy again now that he knew what he was doing.

“To me!” shouted Two, pulling out her sword.

Two or three of her followers stepped forward then stopped when they realised none of the others had moved.

“To me!” screamed Two, her face now hideous with rage as she whirled around seeking support. “To me! Now!”

No one moved.

“Hold!” shouted Autumn, stepping forward. Janey stopped again in confusion. “I cannot permit this.” All eyes shifted onto her. Even Two stopped moving to watch, her eyes narrowing as she assessed this new development.

“Be silent,” commanded Kanikapila stepping in front of Autumn and putting his hand on her shoulder. “This is not your concern.”

Autumn knocked his arm away. “I cannot allow another to come to harm if I am able to prevent it,” she said, staring at him. “Stand aside!”

“Kauwa,” said Kanikapila quietly. Instantly Kauwa grabbed Autumn in a bear hug from behind and lifted her off her feet. Instinctively Autumn kicked back with her foot and gasped in pain as her heel encountered what felt like solid rock. She struggled but Kauwa's grip around her arms and chest was too strong.

“Trust me,” whispered Kanikapila. “Please.”

Autumn abandoned her struggling, knowing she was bested. Kanikapila nodded and turned to face One.

“My apologies, Wodazu Chanwar One,” he said formally. “Tis not for

us to interfere in family business.”

“I will deal with you later,” said One, acknowledging Kanikapila.

He turned to face Two and with an inhuman howl she hurled her sword at him then leapt on him, her teeth bared and her fingers like claws. Taken by surprise he crashed to the ground with Two on top of him, her nails ripping at his face and her teeth locked onto his neck. Moments later her head disintegrated in a flurry of blood and slivers of bone as Janey's heavy spiked ball found its target. The force of the blow threw the rest of her body an arms length distant. A shocked silence fell over the clearing.

With a groan, Chanwar One got slowly to his feet. Blood coated his cheeks from many deep scratches and more oozed from a bite on his neck. He wiped his face and stared at his hand for a moment then looked down at his sister's body. Kanikapila muttered something to Kauwa and Kauwa let go of Autumn.

“Janey,” said One heavily.

“I did good?” asked Janey worriedly.

Chanwar One stooped and picked up one of Two's plaits. It was still joined to the other by some bloody skin. He inspected it with distaste.

“You did good, Janey,” he said. “Thank you.” He dropped the plait on the ground. Janey beamed happily, his ball swinging gently from its stick.

“So,” said One straightening up and looking around. “One matter, at least, is now resolved.”

His eyes sought out those who had been followers of his sister.

“You,” he barked, pointing at Klamme. “Come here.”

Klamme started and looked around nervously. He stepped forward slowly.

“You were oath bound to my sister,” said Chanwar One. “Why did you not keep to your oath?”

“Umm,” stuttered Klamme in confusion.

“We made no oath,” said Kifki, stepping forward. She stopped two paces from One. If she was afraid she did not show it. “None was asked and none was given. By any of us.”

“You speak truth?” demanded One, wiping his face again with his hand. He felt drained.

“She speaks truth,” said Ipengar, stepping forward. “None of us swore any oath.”

“Aye,” said Teuxa, also stepping forward. “There was no oath of loyalty binding us, only fear.”

“Then you were not bound to defend her,” said One, “that much is clear at least. Arborwir, bring me some water. What remains of my throat is dry.”

Arborwir limped over with a water skin and One drank deeply. He seemed a little surprised to find no water leaked from his throat.

“Thank you,” he said handing the skin back. He sighed and looked at each of Chanwar's followers in turn again.

“If I may,” asked Kifki hesitantly, “what happens to us now?”

“A good question,” said One. He stared at her and she met his gaze then looked away. “You have done no harm to me or my kin. You are free to go. All of you.”

“We have nowhere to go,” said Kifki. “That is why we joined your sister. Can we not join you now?”

One stared at her some more. “Will you swear an oath of allegiance to me and my family?” he asked.

“I will,” said Kifki, “and so will my man. I cannot speak for the others.”

“I will,” said Ipengar.

“And I,” said Klamme.

The others followed in quick succession.

“Then so be it,” said One. “We will do the swearing when we return to Wodazu.”

“And her?” said Ipengar, pointing at Autumn. “That one has bested us three times now. What happens to her?”

Chanwar One sighed. What had started out as a good day had rapidly turned bad and was getting worse. He wanted it to end soon.

“Is she a fiend?” he asked.

“I know not,” said Ipengar, “but I wager she is invincible. Like as not even that one will not best her,” and he nodded towards Janey.

“What was your name again?” asked One, looking over at Autumn.

“Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn.

“You are pretty enough,” he said, “and by all accounts a good fighter even though you are lacking in size. I would take you in to my family if it were not for the fact that you are the cause of all this but if I do not you will remain a constant threat.”

“I am not the cause,” said Autumn. “I am merely a peaceful traveller. Your sister sought me out.”

“Aye, I know,” said One wearily. “She wanted your fingers and toes. I confess she was a strange one and had many faults but she was my sister and there must be a reckoning for her death. Mayhap you are fighter enough to best Janey but all of us? I think not. Seize them!”

“Now, Kauwa,” cried Kanikapila as several of One’s men hurried to seize them.

Instantly Kauwa leapt in front of Autumn and split into nineteen pieces. From each a soldier appeared, lean and hard as stone. They formed a circle around Autumn and Logan, their short stabbing swords and spears poised and ready. One’s men fell back in surprise then turned and ran to join their companions, themselves shocked and on the edge of panic.

“This ends now, Wodazu Chanwar One,” said Kanikapila, marching forward. He too wore the plumed helmet, warrior tunic and nailed boots of the nineteen but he carried only a short stabbing sword. “Although the manner of ending is yours to choose.”

“Who are you?” demanded Chanwar One, his patience at an end. “Explain yourself this instant!”

“I am Iuo,” said Kanikapila, planting himself directly in front of One. “And these are my companions. Together we are known as The Twenty.”

“Pah!” exclaimed One. “You take me for a fool?” He ripped his sword from its sheath and smote Kanikapila as hard as he could. His sword shattered against the rock of Kanikapila’s chest.

“You are a fool if you continue this way,” said Kanikapila, unmoved. “Prove your wisdom and return to your home in peace.”

“Kill them,” shouted One and several of his men rushed forward to attack the circle of soldiers. Several others shot arrows. None had any effect as the swords shattered and the arrows bounced off the rocks.

“Desist or die,” said Kanikapila. “’Tis a simple choice when all is said and done.”

One stared at Kanikapila then slowly reached out and touched his chest.

“You are stone,” he whispered, his eyes wide in astonishment. “What

sorcery is this?"

Kanikapila did not reply.

"Truly, you are The Twenty?" asked One, his voice uneven.

"Truly," said Kanikapila. "Go home. Today is not a good day to die."

One stepped back and looked around. Barely a third of his companions remained. The rest had melted into the woods, overcome by fear at the strangeness of what was happening. He stepped backwards again then waved his arm in a circle over his head.

"Return to Wodaken," he cried. "We are bested here. You and you, bring my sister's body."

"You are a wise man," said Kanikapila. "Go in peace."

Chanwar One could not think of anything to say in reply so he turned and stalked away with as much dignity as he could muster. In a matter of moments they had all gone although Two's plaits still remained. No doubt they would make nesting materials for the local birds.

"Well, that was fun," said Logan as the nineteen soldiers reformed into Kauwa again.

"I am not sure it was fun," said Autumn, watching Kanikapila as he returned to being Kanikapila. "But it was certainly interesting."

"You can remove the stone from your wrist now, Autumn," said Kanikapila, smiling his half smile. "They will trouble you no more. Shall we eat? There was no time to break our fast."

"I would prefer explanations to food," said Autumn.

"Can we not have both?" said Logan.

"Of course we can," said Kanikapila. "Kauwa, make a fire and prepare hot food."

Kauwa disappeared silently into the undergrowth in search of firewood. Kanikapila sat down and waited expectantly.

“Am I to understand that you are Iuo?” asked Autumn, remaining standing. “The one who took word to Wyyven that the pass was under attack?”

“I have that honour,” said Kanikapila, “or dishonour depending on how you look at it.”

“You did not kill yourself then,” said Autumn.

“I did,” said Kanikapila. “That is why I am here.”

“That makes no sense,” said Autumn.

“From your perspective likely it doesn't,” said Kanikapila. “Please sit yourselves. You make my neck ache looking up at you.”

“And the others?” asked Logan sitting down. “Are they really The Twenty?”

“Shall we leave that for now?” asked Kanikapila still looking up at Autumn. “I venture Autumn would like things explained one at a time.”

“No doubt much is interwoven,” said Autumn, “but I would like to clarify you first. Who are you and what are you?”

“Please sit,” said Kanikapila, patting the ground. “I am no threat to you.”

Kauwa emerged and busied herself with the fire. Autumn watched for a few moments then shrugged and sat down.

“That is better,” said Kanikapila. “As to who I am, I am Iuo as I said.”

“And you are not dead?” asked Autumn.

“I am dead,” said Kanikapila, “but Zeeth would not accept me.”

“How so?” asked Logan.

“I killed myself,” said Kanikapila. “That in itself was sufficient to bar me from the Land of the Dead.”

“Should you not be in the Land of the Undead then?” asked Logan.

“By rights,” said Kanikapila, “but Yammoe would not have me either for my death was honourable.”

“Is that not a difficult situation?” asked Autumn.

“It was at first,” said Kanikapila, “but I amuse myself with trade while they argue about it.”

“Zeeth and Yammoe?” she asked.

“Aye,” said Kanikapila. “I daresay one day they will reach agreement and I will step over into another land but for now here I remain.”

“That makes sense, of a kind,” said Autumn. “Kauwa? What is she?”

“Ahh, Kauwa may cause you more difficulty,” said Kanikapila. “She is the essence of the Xibu Shan Mountains and was created from the leavings of the rock carved to make the shrine to The Twenty.”

“So she is the spirit of The Twenty then?” asked Autumn.

“In a manner of speaking,” said Kanikapila. “You seem to understand which surprises me.”

“Such a thing is not new to us,” said Autumn. “Fiau, would you join us for a moment?”

“How may I aid you?” asked Fiau, emerging from Autumn's staff. Kanikapila watched with great interest.

“Please explain yourself to our companion,” said Autumn.

“I explain myself to no one,” said Fiau, the circles in her eyes flashing.

“I am what I am and that is sufficient.”

“My apologies for disturbing you,” said Autumn, a little taken aback.

Fiau withdrew into the staff with no further ado.

“I think you upset her,” said Logan wryly.

“I think so too,” said Autumn. “I will apologise again later. Ahh, Kanikapila, that was Fiau. She is the spirit of the trees of Havildar and resides in Logan's staff.”

“So you are familiar with things I had not anticipated,” said Kanikapila. “That is good. If I may clarify, however, Kauwa is not the spirit of The Twenty. She is the spirit of the mountains but can be the other nineteen if the situation calls for it.”

“Do they also walk this land although dead?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Kanikapila. “My comrades died honourably and are with Zeeth.”

“Can I ask why Kauwa is female?” asked Logan. “The nineteen were men and Looplab is neither.”

“Kauwa is neither,” said Kanikapila. “She is an essence and the essence of women is stronger even than that of warriors and mountains so it seems more appropriate to refer to her that way when the need arises.”

“I thought so,” said Logan, looking at Autumn.

“I accept what you say,” said Autumn. “Why are you both here and why did you aid us?”

“That is more difficult to explain,” said Kanikapila. “Some days after we parted company in Daihfew I was summoned by one who lives in the sky. He asked ...”

“In the sky?” interrupted Autumn. “You mean Toby?”

“I know not that name,” said Kanikapila. “The one I refer to was named Orgajatoby Miunitou Lopel Bai.”

“That is him,” said Autumn. “He is a sorcerer who lives in the clouds.”

“Ahh, so you know him, then,” said Kanikapila. “Interesting.”

“Why did he summon you?” asked Logan.

“He told me that he had made a gift for you, Autumn,” said Kanikapila, “which would aid you but that the gift was lacking in some way that he did not explain. He asked that I give you my aid instead.”

“Why you?” asked Autumn.

“He showed me a bracelet,” said Kanikapila, “and now that I think on it I see you are wearing it. You see the charms woven into the bracelet?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, holding up her arm to look at the bracelet again.

“The intent was that when faced by an army the charms would become as the wearer,” said Kanikapila, “thus providing five more Autumns to contest the foe. But, alas, for some reason the charms do not work. Kauwa and I were called so that The Twenty would come to your aid instead.”

“It was very kind of you to agree,” said Autumn. “I am not certain that I could have bested all fifty of them.”

“We shall never know,” said Kanikapila. He sighed. “I confess it was not in my mind to agree to his request as The Twenty are not at the beck and call of any passing stranger and we distrust the machinations of sorcerers but you changed my mind.”

“How so?” asked Autumn. The smell of the food Kauwa was preparing did not distract her at all although Logan was definitely aware.

“We heard your voice and your thoughts at the shrine,” said

Kanikapila. "You honoured us all greatly and me in particular for you truly saw that there was no dishonour in my leaving my comrades in their time of great peril. Something I did not see myself at the time."

"There can be no dishonour in doing your duty unflinchingly," said Autumn. "So you were there?"

"We all were there," said Kanikapila. "Some small part of each of us resides at the shrine and we observe all who pass. You are one of the few who honoured me unequivocally and we honour you in return."

"I thank you," said Autumn, bowing her head.

"Ahh, the food is ready," said Kanikapila as Kauwa started to ladle food onto platters. "Let us eat. No doubt you will want to be on your way after we are done."

"I think so," said Autumn, taking a proffered platter. "And you? Where will you go?"

"Alas I am bound to this neighbourhood," said Kanikapila. "I can go as far as Schtei to the north and Uli-Rratha to the south but that is all. I cannot travel as you do."

"Do you not get bored?" asked Logan.

"I have my trading," said Kanikapila. "As I said, it affords me much amusement and there is my Esyup."

"That is real?" asked Autumn, "or part of your spirit world?"

"It is real," said Kanikapila, "although I told you a small untruth when first we met. It was set up by me and not the Mo'i of Wase. There are but four there. Myself and three others."

"Are the others as you?" asked Autumn.

"No they are mortal and have yet to die," said Kanikapila. "I shall mourn their passing when their times comes."

Autumn nodded her understanding then became thoughtful and they ate in silence.

“I have a thought,” said Autumn when they were done. “I know not if you will like it but it may resolve an issue that is as yet unresolved.”

“As have I,” said Kanikapila. “What is yours?”

“I wager yours is more interesting than mine,” said Autumn. “Tell us of your thought and I will tell you of mine.”

“Oh, mine is very simple,” said Kanikapila, “and I venture you will not like it for it is more about my amusement than yours. Why do you not join my Esyup? You will be our first Krisana and with your training of the mind I am certain you will add much to our understanding of money and trade. It would please me also to have a female of your attractiveness there as well.”

“I think not,” said Autumn, “but I thank you for the offer. I have sworn oaths and among them is that of chastity.”

“That would not be an issue,” said Kanikapila, “as I am not of this world but I thank you for even acknowledging that possibility.”

“And despite my training,” said Autumn, “I find money and trade incomprehensible. I cannot see how either you, your Esyup or I could benefit.”

“It could be a challenge,” said Kanikapila, “and challenges can be most diverting.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “and my thought is one that could perhaps provide you with a challenging diversion of its own.”

“I am all ears,” said Kanikapila, smiling.

“As I said,” said Autumn, “I have sworn oaths and within those oaths is a desire to end the suffering of others.”

“Very commendable,” said Kanikapila. “Who is suffering?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn, “although suffering is widespread and there is little I can do about much of it.”

“Then why are we talking of it?” asked Kanikapila.

“Because the Wodazu family are the cause of some,” said Autumn. “Two is dead and her brand of suffering is at an end but her brother and the others will continue as bandits and cause much suffering of their own.”

“Very likely,” said Kanikapila. “What of it?”

“My thought was that you could extend your amusement,” said Autumn. “What if you embraced the Wodazu family and taught them trade? They would seem to be fond of money so it could divert them from banditry.”

“An interesting thought,” said Kanikapila, smiling his half smile, “and no doubt one that would extend my Esyup. I will think on it for, as you say, it could well afford me more amusement. No matter. It is time, I think, for Kauwa and I to leave you.”

“So soon?” asked Autumn. “I had thought we could spend some time discussing things.”

“I could dally here forever,” said Kanikapila, “but you two have yet to fulfil your destinies. Perhaps in time we will meet again and I shall look forward to that time should it arise. I bid you a fond farewell, Logan. I bid you a fond farewell, Autumn. Live long and prosper.”

“Farew...” started Autumn, but Kanikapila and Kauwa had already faded into thin air.

Glossary

{Pronunciations given in curly brackets}

(OT refers to Old Tongue terms, N to Neander terms, W to Wase terms)

[where an entry is specific to a particular Tale, that Tale is in square brackets]

Acsinomy {ah-ch-si-no-me} (W): A small shrub common in South and Western Wase whose yellowy-pink berries can be crushed and the juices drunk. The drink is quite bitter on its own and is usually mixed with something sweet. Acsinomy juice is also moderately effective for the removal of head and body lice and minor fungal infections.

Acie {ay-iy-eh} [7]: Chanwar One's almost era'owen. Although it was the custom in the Wodazu family for the head of the (extended) family to be the first born of the union between the head of the family and his or her oldest sibling of the other sex in order to keep the leadership blood pure, it was not uncommon for the family head to have another, unrelated, person as their formal or informal spouse. Any offspring from that outsider could not, however, become head of the family.

Aqineer do'h Raspusny {OT: aka Aqineer the Lewd}: Era'owen of Ptemsesnis III, ruler of Zachad. Aqineer was exiled from Zachad by Ptemsesnis for unspecified 'crimes against her person' and he and his followers established what would become the State of Wase.

Arborwir {ar-bo-re-we-re} [7]: Uncle to the Chanwar twins.

Aroao {ah-ro-ay-oh} (W): A simple dish made from sliced sun dried caran pickled in a sweet vinegar with chopped tomatoes.

Bijuk {bi-yu-ke} [7]: A bandit under Chanwar Two's leadership who was killed by Chanwar during the attack on Autumn and Logan outside Daihfew. Not a member of the Wodazu family.

Bimet {bi-me-te} [7]: A dealer in metal goods at Daihfew market.

Blue Ringed Ninget: A highly venomous water snake. As its name suggests, it has two brilliant blue rings behind its head. The ninget's habitat is the shallow swamplands of Eastern Wase and it feeds primarily on water fowl. Ningets typically grow to between 80cm and 120cm. The bite of an adult ninget can kill an adult human in less than a minute.

Bruett Wylam {be-ru-et-te wuh-ee-la-me} [7]: The headman of the village of Bufon.

Bufon {be-uff-on-ne}: A village in the South West of Wase with a population of some 180 people.

Cacea {ka-ke-ya} [7]: A member of the extended Wodazu family, living in Wodaken under the leadership of Chanwar One.

Caran {ca-ra-ne} (W) [7]: A vegetable common throughout Wase which is similar to a courgette but with a bluey-purple skin and coarse pink flesh with green veins.

Chantal Twelve {ke-ha-ne-ta-al-le 12} [7]: A Wasian artist and painter of fingernails at markets.

Chanwar {ke-han-wa-re} [7]: The generational name for the twin brother and sister of the Wodazu family who became warlords on different sides of the Xibu Shan Mountains. See also: *Wodazu Chanwar One* and *Wodazu Chanwar Two*. Their father was Wodazu Ritawa One who was succeeded by Wodazu Chanwar One as head of the Wodazu family. The twins had three younger siblings; Chanwar Three died in infancy, Chanwar Four was feeble minded and took no part in the family business, and Chanwar Five who married into the Migdobols family and took their name.

Daihfew {da-ih-fey-we}: A village in the South West of Wase with a population of some 250 people.

De'laia {del-ay-ya} [7]: The era'owen of an unspecified member of the group of bandits under Chanwar Two's leadership.

Ebin {eb-in-ne} [7]: A bandit under Chanwar Two's leadership.

Emia {em-me-ee-ah}: Logan's sister. She moved to another part of Aferraron with her almost era'owen before their parents died. Logan did not know where she was and consequently was left to fend for himself after his parents' deaths.

Esper Kowring One {Es-pe-re Ko-we-ri-ne-ge 1} (W): The Mo'i of Wase during the time of *The Annals of Autumn Savannah*.

Esper Moochember One {Es-pe-re Mo-ok-he-me-be-re 1} (W): The mother of Esper Kowring One and Mo'i of Wase before Kowring.

Fiedna {Fee-ed-na} [7]: An elder of Bufon.

Gambret {ga-me-br-et-te} [7]: A member of the village of Bufon.

Giv'itapalu-sen {Giv-it-ah-pa-luse-ne} [7]: An elder at the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup who is recorded to have died from old

age three years before the arrival of Autumn. There is no record of Giv'itapalu-sen's age or time of arrival at the Esyup although she must have been there for some considerable time as there are several verses and dictates attributed to her in the collective wisdom of the Esyup.

Hakina {ha-ki-na} (W): Unit of Wasian currency. One hakina is a 16th of a kala.

Hanaha {ha-na-ha} (W) [7]: The term used by Kanikapila Hirao Five to refer to servants even though the term was not used by anyone else.

Iflinbar {if-li-ne-ba-re} (W): One of the poorer sections of Schtei notorious for the buying and selling of stolen and contraband goods.

Ipengar {ip-en-ga-re} [7]: A bandit under Chanwar Two's leadership.

Iuo {ee-yu-oh} [7]: A soldier under Wyyvven ap Nagul Spey during the 2nd Afer-Wasian War. Iuo was one of a contingent of twenty soldiers sent to guard a strategic pass through the Xibu Shan Mountains. All twenty swore an oath that no Wasian would get through the pass while any of them still lived. When the Wasians attacked, Iuo was sent back to warn Wyyvven. The remaining nineteen held off the Wasians for several days until all nineteen were dead. After informing Wyyvven, Iuo killed himself as part of his oath to his comrades.

Janey {ja-ne-ye} [7]: The familiar name for Wodazu Janey One, a distant cousin of the Chanwars. Janey was notable for his immense size and strength as well as his skill with the use of a spiked ball on a chain. According to popular accounts from the time the ball was so heavy no normal man could wield it.

Janja {ja-ne-ja} (W): A dense heavy unleavened bread which is almost black in colour. Similar to rye bread and is unsuitable for pastry.

Kala {ka-la} (W): Unit of Wasian currency. There are 16 hakina in one kala.

Kanikapila Hirao Five {ka-ni-ka-pi-la hi-ra-ow 5} [7]: Ostensibly a travelling Wasian trader, Kanikapila is in fact the spirit of Iuo, one of The Twenty, who was barred from entry to both the Land of the Dead and the Land of the Undead due to his suicide and honour respectively.

Kauwa {kah-oo-wa} (W) [7]: The name of the servant of Kanikapila Hirao Five. Kauwa was a personification of the essence of warriors and mountains and was created, by an unknown person, from the rock

left over from the carving of the inscription at the shrine to The Twenty.

Klamme {ke-la-me-me} [7]: A bandit under Chanwar Two's leadership.

Leryn {le-ri-ne} [7]: A bandit under Chanwar Two's leadership.

Lupah {lu-pa-ah} (W): A dark yellowy brown grain similar to corn but with a decidedly earthy taste which many find mildly unpleasant. Lupah is generally ground into a flour and used for pie (savoury or sweet) pastries rather than bread as the other ingredients used in the pie hide the taste of the lupah. Lupah also has the advantage, once cooked, of sealing the contents and keeping them fresh and untainted for extended periods, provided it remains unbroken.

Maarcoolin Bis Four {ma-ar-co-oo-li-ne bi-se 4} (W): The Mo'i of Wase at the time of the 2nd Afer-Wasian War. Maarcoolin had a shrine built to honour The Twenty even though they were Onamans.

Mo'i {mo-ee} (W): The Wasian term for King.

Octan {ok-ta-ne} [7]: An elder of Bufon.

Orgajatoby Miunitou Lopel Bai {or-ga-ja-to-by me-un-it-oo lo-pe-le ba-ee} [7]: A Wasian sorcerer who elected to live in a cloud rather than suffer the annoyances of city life. He developed a 'tincture of animation' that allowed inanimate objects to move. Because of this he was entrusted by Mother Midcarn to make a bracelet to aid Autumn which, unfortunately, he was unable to do.

Oyen {oy-en-ne} [7]: A bandit under Chanwar Two's leadership.

Ozio {oz-ee-oh} [7]: A bandit under Chanwar Two's leadership.

Paug {pa-ug} [7]: A child in Wodaken.

Pesnoo {pe-es-no-oo} (W): A pie made from a pastry of ground lupah and usually filled with a mixture of chopped meat and roots although sometimes berries and sweet fruits are used. Pesnoo can be eaten hot or cold.

Purapua {pu-rap-oo-ah}: The Wasian deity of the Seeker or Searcher.

Raupp {ra-up-pe} [7]: A member of the village of Bufon.

Ritawa {ri-ta-wa} [7]: The generational name of the generation preceding the Chanwars in the Wodazu family of warlords. Ritawa One, the head of the family, was father to all five Chanwars. See also:

Wodazu Chanwar One and *Wodazu Chanwar Two*.

Roffslam {ro-fe-fes-lam} [7]: Owner of The Black Horse Inn in Daihfew.

Shamsadam {sh-ham-sa-da-me}: A religious leader among the followers of Aloidia and predominantly found in the North Eastern parts of Aferraron. The role of a Shamsadam is to lead religious meetings and instruct the followers of Aloidia on matters of doctrine. Occasionally Shamsadams are accompanied by an acolyte but generally they live and work alone within their community. Shamsadams are elected by their community from within the community and are usually, but not always, chosen by their level of piety. Often a Shamsadam has learnt to read and write and, in rural communities where such skills are in short supply, acting as a scribe when the need arises.

Shasad {sh-as-ah-de}: The combined home and place of worship of a Shamsadam. Such places are built and maintained by the community and vary in quality and opulence according to the wealth and commitment of those involved.

Schtei {sh-tay-ee}: The capital of Wase.

Shoxin {sh-ho-zi-in}: The language of Wase.

Tehiakawaelo {te-ah-ee-ah-ka-wa-el-oh}: The Wasian deity of money and business.

Teuxa {Tey-ucks-ah} [7]: A bandit under Chanwar Two's leadership.

T'hisan Potet {tee-sa-ne po-teh-te} [7]: The Shamsadam of Bufon and the surrounding area.

Twenty, The [7]: During the 2nd Afer-Wasian War, Wyvven ap Nagul Spey led an army up the coast towards Schtei. Anticipating an encircling manoeuvre by Maarcoolin Bis Four Wyvven sent a small force of twenty soldiers to block a pass through the Xibu Shan mountains. Nineteen of the twenty managed to hold off a considerably larger force of Wasians for several days, giving the twentieth, Iuo, time to get to Wyvven and warn him. Iuo subsequently killed himself in an expression of unity with his nineteen comrades who died. Despite their being Onamans, Maarcoolin created a shrine to Mizule to honour the bravery of The Twenty.

Udjin {ud-ji-in-ne} [7]: A bandit under Chanwar Two's leadership.

Vantar {ve-an-ta-re} [7]: A bandit under Chanwar Two's leadership.

Wahine {wa-he-ne} (W): Depending on the context Wahine means woman or lady. In the context of addressing someone whose name is not known it invariably means 'lady'. Where the person's name is known and Wahine used in its place, it means 'woman' and is used either dismissively (as in 'be off with you, woman!') or to express annoyance (as in 'damned woman!'). When used in reference to a male it is intended, somewhat inevitably, to be insulting.

Wodaken {wo-da-ke-ne}: A settlement on the North Eastern slopes of the Xibu Shan mountains which is the base of the Wodazu family.

Wodazu Chanwar One {woe-da-zoo ke-han-wa-re 1} [7]: The older (by a few minutes) twin brother of Wodazu Chanwar Two. Chanwar One was a warlord on the Eastern side of the Xibu Shan Mountains, inheriting the position of leader of the Wodazu from his father and holding it through strength and cunning.

Wodazu Chanwar Two {woe-da-zoo ke-han-wa-re 2} [7]: The younger twin sister of Wodazu Chanwar One. Chanwar Two was a bandit leader with aspirations to being a minor warlord and had a reputation for unusual cruelty and viciousness. It is said that her brother was unable to control her and when she threatened his position of leader of the Wodazu he expelled her from the family. Chanwar Two then moved to the Western side of the Mountains and formed her own band of brigands, none of whom were from the Wodazu family. Some scholars claim she intended to form her own dynasty; the Western Wodazu, but others say she had no long term intentions. Either way, she and her followers spent each winter on the Eastern slopes in preference to the Western because the climate was better. It is said, although there is no extant evidence for this, that Chanwar Two liked to decorate her home with the tanned and painted skins of those she captured and skinned alive.

Wodazu Chanwar Three {woe-da-zoo ke-han-wa-re 3} [7]: A younger sister of the Chanwar twins who died at the age of four from 'the sweating sickness', most likely a form of influenza or possibly pneumonia.

Wodazu Chanwar Four {woe-da-zoo ke-han-wa-re 4} [7]: The younger brother of the Chanwar Twins who was severely retarded and unable to function socially in any meaningful way. Nothing is known of Four's care but a somewhat cryptic aside in a letter from One to Five some

years after the time of *The Annals* suggests that Four was still alive in his mid-30s.

Wodazu Chanwar Five {woe-da-zoo ke-han-wa-re 5} [7]: The youngest sister of the Chanwars. Five renounced the Wodazu family and married into the Migdobols family, becoming Migdobols Chanwar Five. It is unclear whether this was a love match or a political statement in which Five renounced the Wodazu family values but, given that the Chanwar twins were in their mid twenties at the time of *The Annals* it would seem likely that Five would have been in her mid to late teens when taking the Migdobols name.

Wyvoen ap Nagul Spey {wy-ve-ven-ne ap na-gu-le spey}: Roinad of Aferraron at the time of the 2nd Afer-Wasian War.

Xuiui {zu-ee-oo-ii}: A precious stone found only in the mountains of far Eastern Wase. Xuiuis are dark red in colour and are flecked with either blue or green depending on the local geology. When polished they have a shiny, almost waxy, surface and are highly resistant to scratching.

Yeinarr ach Teahiakawaelo vur Purapua Esyup {yay-in-ar-re ak te-ah-ee-ah-ka-wa-el-oh vu-re pu-rap-oo-ah es-you-pe}: The Esyup founded by Kanikapila Hirao Five. Specifically *The School for the Studious Following of Teahiakawaelo and Purapua*, the deities of Business (or money) and Seekers. Essentially the Yeinarr ach Teahiakawaelo vur Purapua Esyup was an early form of a school of Economics devoted to the study of the flows of money as well as means of its acquisition through business practices.

Yulia {ye-ul-ee-ah} [7]: Almost era'owen of Raupp.

Zachad {OT}: Under the leadership of Buyayciyat, a loose coalition of tribes in South Eastern Aferraron and Western Wase, unified to become the Zachad. The expansion of the Zachad, and their subsequent split under Ptemsesnis III when the events surrounding Aqineer do'h Raspusny led to the latter going into exile, resulted in the eventual creation of the Aferraron and Wase States.

Zain {ze-aye-in-ne} [7]: A member of Chanwar Two's band who deserted and was caught. Chanwar's punishment was to have Zain pegged out on the ground and left to be eaten alive.

Zehra {ze-he-ra} [7]: A member of the village of Bufon.