

Lietapis Vosienskaj Savany

The Annals Of
Autumn Savannah

a new translation

Richard Jefferis

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the
Writer

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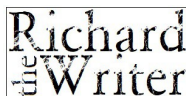
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› Adzinaccataja ‹

› Kazka ‹

~ The Eleventh Tale ~

Chapter One

The midday sun touched lightly on the head of Logan as he sat cross legged in the clearing. He didn't notice the warmth on his head as the single shaft from Astauand was not strong. 'Twas barely the middle of spring and the days were still mild and oft times wet. This day, however, was not wet but such of the sky as could be seen through the canopy was dull with cloud and wetness was likely before Astauand retired for the night. He was appreciative though of the light and took the opportunity to put the broken piece of bone down and run his hand along the length of the branch he was polishing while twisting it so the shaft of light showed up any rough patches. There weren't many as he'd been assiduously rubbing the wood smooth with the bone since not long after awakening.

"Aye, not far off," he muttered and bent to his task again as the shaft of light faded.

The branch was serviceable but not yet perfect and he very much wanted it to be perfect for it was a gift for Autumn and he'd been working on it for much of the previous day as well. He'd found the fallen branch by chance a little further along the bank of the small stream beside which they were camped and, after hefting it and assessing its sturdiness and weight, had broken off the smaller branches and twigs that adorned it and brought it back to their camp. There he'd stripped the bark off and, not without some effort, had broken it over a rock so its length was no more than a hand's breadth more than that of Autumn. Then he'd hardened the thicker end in their fire while rubbing the narrower end with a rough stone to make it rounded and comfortable to the hand. That done he'd used the stone to grind down the remnants of the branches and twigs that dotted its length so there were no protrusions that might catch in clothing or snag the skin. After all, the last thing he wanted was Autumn to cut or tear her hands while using her new staff. That someone else might get cut or torn by a protrusion should Autumn be forced to use her new staff in a fight never crossed his mind.

Work on the staff had occupied him for much of the previous day and he'd gone to bed content with his efforts. He hadn't slept well as the night had been on the cooler side and Autumn was wrapped in her

robe and both their blankets to keep her warm but he had slept sufficiently. The blankets were a little on the small side as Logan had taken one of the huge blankets from the Palace of the Saamrat when he'd rescued Autumn¹ and they'd torn it in half to provide a moderately sized blanket each. Since waking and recovering his good humour he had resumed work on the staff, polishing it smooth and occasionally checking on Autumn as she slept.

Another shaft of light broke through the canopy just as there was a rustling in the undergrowth further downstream. Logan glanced up out of curiosity as he felt no sense of danger. The finely shaped head of a yaaiaab peered at him, its large deer-like eyes filled with concern as it gazed at the strange creature beside a fire. Its nose twitched as it sampled the air then its eyes flickered to the stream and back at Logan. Clearly it wanted to drink but was afraid. Logan stayed motionless, his polishing hand resting on the staff and his breathing stilled. The yaaiaab eased itself back into the bush a little way, casting anxious glances at Logan and the stream. Still Logan stayed motionless and the yaaiaab's confidence grew. Slowly and cautiously it edged out of the bush and bent its neck towards the water. A bird of some description screeched some distance away and the yaaiaab jerked back into the bush. Logan relaxed his hand and took a deep breath but continued to watch the bush.

Sure enough the yaaiaab reappeared several heartbeats later. It was thirsty and the bird's cry had not set off alarms elsewhere in the wood. Nor, as far as it could tell, had the strange thing beside the fire moved. Cautiously it shifted over to the stream again and bent to drink. Its thirst assuaged, the yaaiaab looked nervously at Logan once more then turned and ran.

“Go in peace, little one,” murmured Logan with a grin as this is what Autumn usually said when encountering a wild creature. She wasn't in a position to say it herself this time and it pleased him to say it for her. He looked around the small clearing but nothing else seemed to be happening so he bent to his task of polishing again. He wanted the

1 See *The Annals ~ The Tenth Tale*. Autumn was kidnapped by the Saamrat of Sassese'lte in an attempt to persuade Logan, as Roinad of Aferraron, into a political marriage with her daughter Agneida. Despite being held in a tower secured by the magic of the Saamrat's sorcerer, Logan was able to free Autumn and make their escape.

staff to be perfect.

Astauand was perhaps halfway down from Its peak when Logan heard Autumn groan and stir. He quickly put down the staff and went over to where she lay. She wasn't far away but she was under a bush that was itself under the broad branch of a tree so she was protected, as far as was possible, from any rain.

“How do you feel?” he asked, kneeling beside her.

“Ugh,” said Autumn and rolled over so she lay on her back.

Logan put his hand on her forehead. It was still hot but not as hot as it had been which was good.

“Do you still ache?” he asked.

“With every fibre of my body,” muttered Autumn, her voice thick and hoarse. She half sat up then groaned and flopped back down again. She briefly looked up at Logan with bloodshot watery eyes then closed them.

“Would you like something to eat?” he asked.

“A drink,” she muttered and touched her throat with her hand. “My throat ...”

“Of course,” said Logan and jumped up to fetch some water from the stream. He returned a moment later with the bowl half full and knelt down again.²

“Here you are,” he said, gently pushing his hand under her head to help her lift it.

She sneezed violently, knocking the bowl out of Logan's hand and soaking his legs. He jerked back as she sneezed three more times and copious thick ropes of greenish-yellow snot shot out of her nose.

2 As recounted in *The Annals ~ The Tenth Tale*, Autumn and Logan were forced to leave their water bottle – a gift from Mother Midcarn which never ran out of water – when they were attacked by Tefkuu and his pirates on the beach at Rhabor.

“Yuk,” exclaimed Logan, screwing up his nose in distaste..

“Ugh,” muttered Autumn, too drained to do more than half-heartedly flap her hand at the snot on her chin and the blanket.

Logan wiped the snot from her face then, for want of anything better to do, wiped his hand on the blanket. Autumn groaned again then rolled onto her side and started coughing, a wracking cough that seemed to come from the depths of her small body. Her face contorted and she gasped for breath then coughed several more times, pausing only to spit thick wads of phlegm on the freshly growing sprouts of grass that surrounded the bush.

“I wager I am dying,” she muttered, pressing her hand to her forehead.

“Doubtless you are,” said Logan cheerfully, “for as you often remind me we all will die but I fancy you will not be dying soon. 'Tis only the au'ai and will pass soon enough. I'll get you some more water.”

He touched his hand to Autumn's forehead again but she twisted her head away and grimaced before he could assess her temperature. He gently patted her shoulder and she started to cough up phlegm again. With a sympathetic sigh he got up and ambled over to the stream to get more water.

“Here,” he said quietly, kneeling beside her again. “Try to drink.”

He helped her lift her head and touched the bowl to her lips. She managed a few drops then wiped away the snot that was dribbling from her nose before taking a mouthful.

“Thank you,” she whispered before another bout of sneezing contorted her body. “Urghhhh.”

“Do you feel able to eat?” asked Logan, brushing some hair from her sweaty face. Her usually neat ponytail was in complete disarray and lay in a messy heap around her head.

“I can barely move my jaws,” muttered Autumn, her eyes shut. “My

throat is closed and my belly rebels at even the thought of food.”

“Aye, it can be like that,” said Logan. “Lie still and try to sleep. The only cure is to wait it out.”

Her body convulsed with wracking coughs again and she spat another thick wad of phlegm onto the new grass shoots before rolling onto her side and curling up into a ball. Logan carefully tucked the blankets in around her then bent to inspect the phlegm. It was thick and grey-green in colour but, to his relief, there were no flecks or streaks of red. He sat back on his heels for some time and watched as her body relaxed into sleep again.

“Best thing for her,” he thought. “Poor Autumn.”

After a while he got to his feet and looked around. The clearing was perhaps a little brighter so he looked up and shifted round until he could see through the canopy of leaves.

“Looks like the clouds are thinning,” he thought. “Mayhap it won't rain again today after all.”

He ambled back to the stream and washed Autumn's snot from his hands then watched a small group of tiny fish dart around. Sadly he'd seen no bigger fish and even if he managed to catch all of these tiny ones, taken together they would not amount to a mouthful. He sighed and wandered back to his sitting spot beside the fire, picked up the piece of bone and started polishing again. There was nothing else to do and very likely Autumn would be well in the morning. He wanted very much for her new staff to be ready.

* * *

Logan woke suddenly. It was clearly some time after dawn as the light of Astauand was streaming through the canopy and warming his chilled body. 'Twas not that that had woken him however. As he lay on his side, his head cradled on one arm, he sifted through his senses. Nothing was immediately apparent. The birds were calling cheerfully to each other as they do when all is well and the stream was chuckling quietly as it had since they'd arrived. Still, he had a strong sense that

something was different. He sat up and the yaaiaab at the stream's edge panicked and made a mad dash through the water to the other side and disappeared into the safety of the woods. His vague feeling that something was watching him did not go so he slowly looked around the clearing, blinking the sleep from his eyes and mind but all seemed well.

"Greetings," said Autumn from behind him. "Is it not a beautiful day?"

"Autumn!" exclaimed Logan, twisting around. She was sitting in her usual position with her heels on her knees and wrapped in one of the blankets. The other lay in a heap beside her. "How do you feel?"

Autumn sneezed but only a little snot came out. She wiped her nose with her fingers and inspected them before wiping her fingers on the grass.

"Vastly better," she said, her voice now husky rather than hoarse. "I fancy I will not die after all. At least, not today."

"Do you still ache all over?" asked Logan, twisting round and getting to his knees so he could see her better.

"Yes but I begin to have the use of my limbs again," she said.

"That is most excellent news," said Logan happily. "'Twill only be a short time now before you are back to your usual self."

"You are familiar with what ails me?" asked Autumn, pulling the blanket a little tighter around herself.

"Aye," said Logan, getting to his feet. "'Twas au'ai. I have had it myself. 'Tis a nasty thing but it passes after three or four days." He went behind a tree for a few moments.

"How long was I so afflicted?" asked Autumn, frowning. "I have lost all sense of time."

"This is the beginning of the fourth day," said Logan, reappearing

from behind the tree. He put his hand on Autumn's forehead and she only flinched rather than jerked away. "Ahh, good. You no longer burn. Yes, it comes on all of a sudden and you feel you cannot move for the pain in your joints and muscles then the wet begins in your throat and chest so you cannot breath and you cough and sneeze to get all the foulness out but it passes almost as quickly as it began."

"For certain I feel much improved," said Autumn. She hesitated with a strangled look on her face then coughed up more phlegm which she spat on the ground. "I do not feel I am coughing up my insides anymore at least. You say you have had this affliction?"

"Aye," said Logan. "Several summers before I met you. 'Tis common enough and most suffer from it at one time or another."

"I have not," said Autumn gravely, "nor do I know of any at my Esyup who were so afflicted."

"Likely that is because it passes from person to person," said Logan, noticing the bowl had no water in it. He picked it up. "You have told me your Esyup received few visitors so likely no one had it."

He walked over to the stream and filled the bowl then brought it back for Autumn. She drank deeply.

"Thank you," she said, passing it back to him. "If this au'ai passes from person to person then you will likely suffer from it soon."

"No," said Logan. "Once you've had it you never have it again. I know not why. Do you feel able to eat?"

"I would like to eat," said Autumn, "but do we have any food? There would seem to be little that is edible around here."

"I saved you the last of the bread and cheese," said Logan. "I'll get it for you."

He hurried around the fire to where he'd left the last of their food in a little cairn of stones he'd made to keep it safe from prying animals in the night and wrapped in leaves to keep away the ants. He unwrapped

them and scraped away the spots of mould on the bread with his fingernail before handing it to her. The cheese was somewhat dry and hard but had yet to start going mouldy. Autumn nibbled on the edge of the bread then dipped it in the water bowl to soften it.

“A moment,” she said, suddenly scowling at Logan. “Is this the last of the bread and cheese we brought with us?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “That is why the bread is getting mouldy. It is quite old.”

“But we had little left as I recall,” said Autumn. She hesitated then sneezed again. “What have you eaten these three days past?”

“I had some of the bread and cheese,” said Logan, “but I saved this for you. I knew you’d be hungry when you recovered.”

Autumn stared at him for a few moments then had a coughing fit. She fumbled the piece of bread to the ground then covered her mouth with both hands and clenched her eyes. In time the coughing passed and she spat the phlegm onto the ground and rubbed her chest.

“Aye-yai-yai,” she muttered, her voice noticeably less husky than it had been. “That hurt.”

“Twill be nothing but a memory by mid morning,” said Logan. “Eat. It will hasten your recovery.”

“No,” said Autumn, pushing the bread and cheese over towards Logan. “Twould seem you have not eaten these past few days. You eat.”

“No,” said Logan, pushing the bread and cheese back. “I have not been sick. You need to build up your strength again. You eat. I saved this for you.”

Autumn gazed levelly at him for several heartbeats then picked up the bread again. Fortunately she’d put it on top of the cheese so in the to-ing and fro-ing the damp bread hadn’t picked up any dirt.

"I apologise," she said. "You chose to forgo what food we had to aid me in this illness. It is wrong of me to deny your sacrifice. I thank you." She took a bite from the bread and chewed it thoughtfully. "And I also wish to thank you for tending to me during this time."

"What else would I do?" asked Logan, puzzled. "You think I'd just go off and leave you on your own?"

"No, I know you would never do that," said Autumn, swallowing a little cautiously as her throat was still sore. "Nor would I you were the situation reversed."

"I know that," said Logan. "So why are we talking about it? Eat, eat!"

"I am eating," said Autumn, breaking off a little of the cheese and holding it up to show him. "And I know we both know that each of us will look after the other in times of need but nonetheless I felt a desire to thank you."

"You never need to thank me," said Logan, feeling a little embarrassed. "You should know that by now."

"I always need to thank you," said Autumn, "if only to thank you for being Logan." She beamed at him then started coughing again. "Mizule! How can a body hold so much muck?"

"I know not," said Logan, smiling because she was returning to her usual self. "But it does. Umm, I have a gift for you."

"A gift?" asked Autumn, swallowing the piece of cheese. "Is this one of your jokes? There is nowhere around here to get me a gift and besides, we have no money."

"No, 'tis not a joke," said Logan, getting up to fetch the staff he'd made. "I made it and, before you start to protest, don't forget what you always keep saying."

"And what is it that I always keep saying?" asked Autumn as a sudden angry shout from not far away made both of them jerk their heads around.

“Sploop, what was that?” exclaimed Logan. “Is someone coming?”

Chapter Two

There was another shout then a sudden movement as something dark burst through the undergrowth and careered headlong into Logan. As he went flying into the stream with whatever it was on top of him Autumn launched herself explosively into the air, flinging her blanket aside. At least that was the intent. The reality was that her limbs refused to obey her and she fell forward, narrowly missing the fire, and landed face down on her elbows.

Logan, on the other hand, fell backwards into the stream, his hands tightly enmeshed in the fur of the creature's head. He twisted round a little, trying to get an arm under him to break his fall and his head went under the surface. Water streamed in through his open mouth and he started to choke. Shocked at the speed of the surprise attack he kicked out with his legs, banging the toes of his left foot on a smallish rock embedded in the bank. Unable to breathe and with his eyes tightly closed he used the rock for leverage and managed to twist himself over on top of the hairy beast. The creature smashed a hand into the side of his head but Logan managed to grab the hand while collapsing on top of the beast, his weight pushing the creature down in the water.

“Bastard!” shouted the creature in his ear and tried to hit him again.

Meanwhile, Autumn forced herself into a kneeling position then used the trunk of the tree to hoist herself upright. She paused for a moment then tried to leap forward to aid Logan and fell flat on her face again.

Startled, Logan managed to get one arm across the creature's throat and levered himself out of the water. Two angry eyes glared up at him through soaking wet matted hair as the shallow stream flowed around them.

“Voqev!” he spluttered in astonishment. “A girl!”

“Mizule!” exclaimed Autumn and punched the ground in frustration. Then she forced herself to her hands and knees and looked up. Logan was now standing and pulling a girl to her feet. She was wearing a soaked and tattered coarse tunic of some kind and her thick hair was

a sodden tangled mess. Her immersion in the stream had clearly only removed the topmost layer of grime.

“Good, you’ve caught the bitch then,” said a harsh male voice as a horse burst through the undergrowth not far from where the girl had appeared.

Autumn tried to jump to her feet but had to resort to using the tree for support again as she slowly got up. More significantly, the girl cried out and tried to run but Logan kept hold of her hand and was nearly dragged off his feet. She lashed out at him and he dodged her blow.

“Stop it!” he exclaimed loudly and jerked her hand. “I’m not going to hurt you. Stop it!”

“Hurt her all you want,” snarled the man on the horse. “Won’t be nothing compared to how she be hurting when I gets her back to the farm.”

The girl tried to hit Logan and run again but he blocked her blow then turned and climbed out of the stream, dragging the girl behind him. Autumn gave up the struggle, knowing that her body had bested her mind and that she was incapable of giving any assistance at this time. Instead she leant against the tree to watch what promised to be an interesting situation, confident that Logan would be able to deal with it.

“Greetings,” said Logan, staying well back from the horse. “I am Logan and yonder is my companion Autumn. Who are you and what do you want with this girl?”

He wiped the water off his face with his free hand but kept a tight grip on the girl’s hand. She tried to run again, jerking his shoulder and pulling him off balance but he still didn’t let go. The man on the horse snorted and glanced over at Autumn. He clearly dismissed her as any sort of threat.

“I be Ifgez,” the man said, leaning his elbows on his horse’s neck. “Overseer to Shina Ganam who owns most of what lies yonder.” He

casually waved a hand that encompassed most of the world to his left and behind. "That there be one of his beasts and he be wanting her back right smart. Hand her over lad and I'll be on my way."

Logan frowned and looked over at Autumn. His frown deepened when he saw she was leaning against a tree and clearly not intending to take any part in this. The girl again tried to run and jerked him but he maintained a tight grip.

"I do not understand," said Logan, looking back at the man. "You say this girl is a beast? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean what I says," said Ifgez. "Her be just a beast what's needed on the farm, see."

"You mean she's a slave?" asked Logan, raising an eyebrow.

"No boy, slaving be against the law," said the man with a grin. "Her be yook, like." He chuckled to himself.

"What is yook?" asked Logan. "Is that her name?"

"Reckon it is, reckon it ain't," said Ifgez. He scratched his head. "Reckon you ain't from around these parts neither."

"No, we are from Aferraron," said Logan, glancing at the girl. She had given up struggling and just stood there, staring at the ground and dripping. She appeared to have given up all hope as well.

"Ain't never heard of the place," said Ifgez and spat on the ground. "So, you be handing her over nicely like or what?"

"I don't think she wants to go with you," said Logan. He glanced at the girl again. "Do you?"

The girl looked at him then spat at Ifgez and snarled in his direction. Sensing a change in Ifgez's demeanour Autumn looked around and spotted Logan's staff. With an effort she walked over and picked it up.

"I think that was a no," said Logan genially. "Best she stays with us."

"I don't think so, lad," said Ifgez, his voice hardening. "That there yook be Shina's property and he don't be taking kindly to them as steals from him."

"This is a girl," said Logan. "Not someone's property. I will not hand her over to you."

"Pah," exclaimed Ifgez and spat in the girl's direction. "More like a wild beast I reckon. No matter. So, you be wanting to do this the hard way then, lad?" He reached behind him and pulled out a short but thick cudgel and pointed it at Logan

"My name is Logan," said Logan, staring at Ifgez. "The girl stays with me."

"I think this is yours, Logan," said Autumn slowly walking over and holding out Logan's staff.

"Ahh, thank you, Autumn," said Logan, taking it. He let go of the girl's hand and took a step backwards while shifting the staff so one end sat under his armpit and the other pointed unwaveringly at Ifgez. He leant forward a little, poised and ready.

"You stupid fool," exclaimed the man as the girl rapidly disappeared into the undergrowth on the other side of the stream. "Now you've let the bitch go!"

"Tis her choice," said Logan evenly. "And it is my choice not to let you cross this stream."

Ifgez stared at Logan and Logan stared back until, after a lengthy pause, Ifgez dropped his stare.

"Well now," he said, rubbing his chin with the back of his hand. "No yook be worth a fist fight that be certain and that 'un be more trouble than she be worth I reckon. Logan of Aferraron you say?"

"Aye," said Logan. "And you be Ifgez."

"Well, Logan of Aferraron," said Ifgez. "Can't say as there be any need

for you to remember my name but best you be remembering the name of Shina Ganam. He won't be best pleased you stopped me bringing that 'un back to him."

"Tis likely I will forget that name soon enough," said Logan with a casual smile. "I only remember what is important."

"Brave words, lad," said Ifgez, pushing his cudgel behind him again. He spat again then brusquely turned his horse and trotted off back the way he'd come.

Logan watched him go then sighed and dropped his staff.

"Thank you for giving me my staff," he said, looking over at Autumn. "Things nearly got nasty there and I didn't want you involved."

"You handled him well, Logan," said Autumn. "Although that remark about not remembering the name was ill advised. Likely he took it as an insult."

"I meant only to show I wasn't scared of him," said Logan, shrugging. "I didn't mean it as an insult and I am sorry if he took it that way. No matter. How do you feel? You seem to be having some difficulty moving."

"I confess 'tis an effort for me to move," said Autumn, slowly sitting down beside the fire again.

"That's what au'ai does to you," said Logan, moving over to where she sat. "'Twill quickly pass however. Where did she go?" He stripped off his tunic, wrung it out and laid it on the ground to dry before sitting down as well. The air was chilly on his skin but not overly cold.

"That way," said Autumn, pointing across the stream. "Do you wish to move on? I confess I do not feel up to walking any great distance as yet and likely Ifgez will not return. I fancy he will abandon his search for this girl for he said she was not worth the trouble."

"Well, may Aloidia favour her if he does continue," said Logan, looking across the stream.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “What are your thoughts on what happened?”

“I can't rightly say,” said Logan thoughtfully. “It all happened so fast but I did get a strong feeling the girl was going to be treated badly and I didn't want that to happen. For certain she was very frightened of him. Should I have let him take her?”

“The girl has made her feelings very clear,” said Autumn. “She has run off a second time so I think there is little doubt you did the right thing. Certainly I would have done the same for it is apparent she would have suffered greatly had she gone back. Ifgez admitted as much himself.”

“Yes, I seem to remember he said something about what would happen to her when they got her back,” said Logan. “Ah well. He is gone and she is gone so I venture 'tis best we are gone too. Doubtless Ifgez is on his way back to tell of me to this Shina fellow and if we stay here we can expect a visit.”

“I agree,” said Autumn, “but I am unable to walk far or with any speed at the moment.”

“But your pains are easing?” asked Logan concerned.

“Aye they are easing,” said Autumn, “but that is not my difficulty.”

“How so?” asked Logan, puzzled.

“I have learnt to overcome pain,” said Autumn. “'Tis a simple process but one that takes no little practice and if it were only pain then we could be far gone from here quickly.”

“But?” asked Logan. “I sense a but here.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. She gazed at the fire for a few moments then looked across the stream towards where the girl had disappeared. “This au'ai has been a powerful learning experience for me. Yes, a very powerful one.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

Autumn sighed.

“Pain I can ignore,” she said. “In truth I have had many injuries in the past and overcome the pain for allowing pain to disable me is a sure and certain path to being bested but 'tis only now that I begin to appreciate the truth of sickness. I thought I knew of it for I have much knowledge of injuries and the healing of injuries and assumed sickness to be much the same. In that I have been greatly mistaken.”

She paused and took a sip from the water bowl. Logan watched her, his heart slowing as he recovered from the tensions of what had occurred.

“When Ifgez first appeared,” she continued, “I tried to do what I would normally do and overcome the aches and pains in my muscles and joints. But this is the thing, friend Logan. Because this was from sickness not injury I found my body refused to do what I wanted. I tried to jump up but my legs simply would not do so. 'Twas as if they had a mind of their own.”

“You have told me of this before,” said Logan. “Remember when we were thrown overboard off the coast of Neander? You told me then your body took over your mind and refused to be drowned.”³

“Aye that is true,” said Autumn slowly. “But that was different. As I remember it my mind had accepted I was drowning but my body did not and clung to life. Here, however, I know I am not dying and yet my mind was still not able to overcome my body. My mind said 'jump up' and my body said 'no'. Even when my mind insisted I found I could do little more than cling to this tree for support. All at my Esyup were convinced that the mind could and did control the body in all circumstances and yet the drowning off Neander showed me that the body controlled the mind when the death of the body was close. Until then I had supposed that because my mind knew that my existence would continue after death my body would be as accepting but clearly it was not so.”

“Which is unsurprising,” said Logan with a snort. “Your mind may continue to exist after death but your body ceases to live and

3 See *The Annals ~ The Fifth Tale*.

doubtless it is willing to give up life only with the greatest reluctance.”

“Aye, so it would seem,” said Autumn. “And yet this present situation is illogical. Had you been bested and Ifgez turned on me I would have been bested as easily as a new born chick. If my body wishes to continue with life surely it would have been logical for my muscles and joints to do as my mind instructed but it did not. It simply refused to cooperate and vastly increased the likelihood of being killed.”

“Well, that's what sickness does to you,” said Logan. “Tis not like an injury.”

“And that is what I am learning,” said Autumn. She took a stick from the dying fire and poked another with it. The fire briefly flared up then died down again. “I have never been sick before. Oh, I have had upset stomachs from bad food which I venture is a form of injury but a sickness like this au'ai? No I have not had anything like it before. Indeed I do not recall any at the Esyup suffering such an affliction.”

“What about that thorn that nearly killed you?” asked Logan. “You were very sick then and nearly died.”⁴

“Again that was different,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “and, I venture, the thorn itself was just a small injury and would not have killed me. 'Twas the magic of Cysciec that nearly proved fatal.”

“True enough,” said Logan, shaking his head so droplets of water flew everywhere. “'Twas fortunate Awendene and Khimera were there to help.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Although much has happened to me it is not until these few days past that I have experienced sickness and, as I say, it has been a revelation.”

“Yes, I can see that,” said Logan. “And it comes as something of a shock to me too.”

“How so?” asked Autumn, frowning. “You have known sickness. Why

4 See *The Annals ~ The Second Tale*.

would my sickness shock you?"

"Because it shows you are human after all," said Logan grinning. "Until now I had believed you to be one with the gods."

"Oh now you are being absurd," said Autumn, scowling at him, "or was that another one of your attempts at a joke?"

"Ahh, you are making definite progress," said Logan. "There is yet still some hope."

Autumn just stared at him.

"In what way?" she asked after a lengthy silence.

"If you can see absurdity then you are halfway to finding a joke funny," said Logan.

"What is funny about the absurdity of thinking I am as one with the gods?" asked Autumn. "I do not understand your meaning."

"When you put it like that," said Logan with a grin, "absolutely nothing. Only a fool would think such a thing."

"You mean you are a fool to think I am as one with the gods?" asked Autumn, "or you think I am a fool for thinking such a notion absurd? You raise a conundrum here for I do not believe either of us to be fools."

"No, we are both fools," said Logan, leaning back on his outstretched arms. "Me for putting forward the idea and you for taking it seriously."

"I wager I have said this before," said Autumn slowly, staring at Logan, "but you baffle me at times."

"Not all the time?" asked Logan, making himself look sad.

"No," said Autumn. "Much of the time you would appear to be a man of intelligence and no little understanding. Perhaps I am wrong in that

understanding of you. Tell me, is it your desire to baffle me at all times?"

"Not at all," said Logan. "Some of the time is sufficient."

Autumn raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips. She let the silence hang for several heartbeats.

"Yes," she said. "You have the right of it. 'Tis I who am the fool for I continually allow you to play these games with me."

"You are not a fool," said Logan, "but I thank you for letting me play games with you."

"Hmm," said Autumn. "I will let that pass without comment. Tell me, do you have any thoughts on why sickness prevents my mind from controlling my body?"

"Aye, a couple," said Logan. "One you may like, the other you may not."

"Now this sounds more interesting," said Autumn, holding up the stick she'd pulled from the fire. "Tell me."

"One is that logic is only in the mind," said Logan. "You bemoan the fact that your body does things that your mind thinks to be illogical but as far as I know you have never suggested the body has logic of its own."

"A fair point," said Autumn. "And it follows from that that the body may have a logic but it is a different logic to that of the mind. An interesting thought that deserves more consideration for I had always supposed there to be only one form of logic but that may not be the case. The other?"

"That your body is resisting your mind at the moment because it is engaged in another battle," said Logan.

"Explain," said Autumn, frowning.

“I know not what causes au'ai,” said Logan, “but mayhap the pain in the muscles and joints and all the snot and whatever comes from the body fighting with something that has got inside. You said that it would seem more logical for your body to obey your mind and be ready to face a threat like Ifgez but what if it is already fighting a grievous battle with some unseen foe within and cannot spare anything to fight what your mind thinks it should fight?”

“You are wrong,” said Autumn after thinking for a while. “I confess I dislike both your thoughts. The first because if it is the case that the body has a different logic to that of the mind then how can we know which is the better logic? I see a major quandary rising with that thought.”

“And the second?” asked Logan.

“With an injury,” said Autumn, “I know the cause and can see how to heal it or if it cannot be healed then how to live with it. But if there are unseen things that get inside the body and fight from within ... how can such things be dealt with?”

“I have no idea,” said Logan, shaking his head. He froze when Autumn suddenly held up her hand and cocked her head.

“What was the name of that man you said you would forget?” she asked.

“Shina Ganam,” said Logan. “Why?”

“I think I hear him approaching,” said Autumn. She smiled. “I did not truly think you would forget his name no matter what you said.”

Chapter Three

Logan stared at her for a few moments then, as a rustle and two faint footfalls reached his ears, he jumped up and began pulling on his tunic. It was no longer soaking but was more than damp. He paused for a moment with one arm inside, one arm outside and his head covered and pondered why there was no word for something too wet to be called 'damp' but not wet enough to be called 'wet'.

"Are you trapped?" asked Autumn. "You seem to be fighting with your clothes."

"Sploop no," exclaimed Logan, shaking his head quickly to dismiss the thought. His voice was a little muffled by the cloth and his action also had the effect of wrapping the loose sleeve of the tunic under his chin and around his throat so his free hand could not find the opening. "I just had a thought is all. No matter. Where has that Voqev infested sleeve got to?"

"Let me aid you," said Autumn, getting to her feet unsteadily. Her movement was slow and lacked her usual grace, much like that of a very old man, but she did not need to use the tree this time. "Hold still."

"My thanks," said Logan as she pulled the tunic off his head and pushed his hand inside the sleeve. "Where is my staff?"

"Tis over beside the stream," said Autumn. "You have need of it? I fancy the sounds were not him after all."

"You said Shina Ganam was coming," said Logan, hurrying over to grab his staff. "There may be trouble."

"You think that likely?" asked Autumn, frowning in puzzlement. "The girl is long gone so he will not need to fight us to get her back. If he has any sense he will be searching for her elsewhere not coming here to renew our acquaintance."

"A fair point," said Logan. He stood there for a moment or two listening. "And I hear no more footsteps. Like as not I reacted too

quickly, or over reacted or something.” He gave an embarrassed little laugh and shrugged. “At any rate I did not want to face the man naked which is why I got all tangled with my tunic.”

“Noxu oftimes said 'more haste less speed',” said Autumn. “’Twas one of the many things he used to say that made no sense to me when I was young for it seemed contradictory but I learnt to see the sense in it in time.”

“Aye, I was too hasty,” conceded Logan. He sat down again and carefully put his staff on the ground beside him. He watched as Autumn lowered herself to the ground. “How do you feel?”

“The pains are receding,” said Autumn, “and my limbs are doing what my mind commands but with reluctance. Still, it is a beginning.”

“Do you feel up to moving on?” asked Logan, pulling at his tunic as it felt cold and clammy on his skin. “I hear what you say about Shina Ganam but he may yet visit here. After all, he may be affronted that we are camping on his land or ...” He froze at another rustle nearby then his hand sought his staff. “What was that?” he asked in a whisper.

“Shhh,” hissed Autumn, holding up a finger and twisting her head to look at where the rustle had come from. She flexed her hands as if warning her body some speedy action may be called for.

“There!” whispered Logan as a leafy frond on a nearby bush shivered.

“I see it,” whispered Autumn. “Ahhh, ’tis an adagu.”

The adagu's small head emerged and it looked around anxiously. Seeing no particular danger it crept forward, its long neck seemingly endless. It sniffed the air then craned its neck around to stare shortsightedly at Logan. He didn't move. Suspicious, the head retreated then reappeared a little further away. Again it looked at Logan then, seemingly reassured, its hairy body emerged and it quickly trotted down to the water's edge to drink. Satiated it looked at Logan once more, the long thick fur around its mouth dripping then craned its neck again to look upstream.

“Go in peace, little one,” whispered Autumn, pressing her palms together and bowing her head at the adagu. Instantly the adagu was off and running. They could hear it crashing through the undergrowth and a flock of birds scattered into the air, tweeting their alarm and displeasure.

“You had a thought,” said Autumn, turning back to Logan.

“I did?” asked Logan.

“When you were fighting your tunic,” said Autumn.

“Ohh, it was nothing,” said Logan, flapping his hand.

“Nonetheless I would like to hear it,” said Autumn. “This sickness has deprived my mind of all thoughts these three days past and the thoughts of Logan are always tasty morsels. Tell me.”

“Oh you jest with me,” said Logan dismissively. “Most of my thoughts are of cheese and bread as you well know.”

“Is that what made you fight to get inside your tunic?” asked Autumn. “The thought of bread made you aggressive?”

“I was not aggressive!” exclaimed Logan. “I just got the cloth stuck over my head and I couldn’t find the sleeve, that’s all!”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “But you were thinking of bread? You can have this last piece if you want. I have not finished it.” She held out the small lump of stale bread.

“No, you eat it,” said Logan. “Your need is greater than mine. No, ’twas just a silly little thought. Not worthy of repeating.”

“Ahh Logan,” said Autumn with a sigh. She contemplated the bread then put it down beside his leg. “Alas I cannot eat this bread for I have lost my appetite. Your refusal to share your thoughts with me curdles my belly and I cannot eat.”

“So now you try to guilt me?” asked Logan, picking up the lump and

putting it on her knee. He smiled inwardly as he knew Autumn was not serious. She had no sense of humour but he had learnt that at times she liked to be a little playful. “You think refusing to eat will make me tell you every little piece of nonsense that passes through these addled wits of mine?”

“You are absolutely right as always, Logan the Addled,” said Autumn. She picked up the bread, broke it in half and dipped one half in the water bowl. “Your nonsense is not worth risking this food for.” She popped the soggy bread in her mouth and chewed briefly before swallowing. She smiled disarmingly at him then dipped the other half in the water.

“And the cheese,” said Logan. “I see some still remains.”

“I shall eat that momentarily,” said Autumn. She ate the rest of the bread then picked up the piece of cheese. “Tell me of your thought and I will tell you of mine.”

“Doubtless yours will be of great significance and deep meaning,” said Logan, “whereas mine is but a speck of dust on the floor of knowledge but since you asked here it is. I merely wondered for a moment why there is no word for something that is beyond damp yet not wet enough to be called wet.”

“That is a very interesting thought,” said Autumn, staring at him with the cheese halfway to her mouth. “I wonder why that is so also for I cannot think of such a word myself and the deities know there are many many words and oftentimes for things you would not think would need a word. Like petrichor.”

“What is petrichor?” asked Logan.

“’Tis the smell of a woodland fresh after rain,” said Autumn. “We often smell that smell but we do not think to speak of it yet a word for it exists anyway. Why then do we not have a word for something that is not wet but not yet damp?”

“I have no idea,” said Logan. “Who invents words anyway?”

“I wager no one is charged with making words,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “How would such a person be chosen and who would do the choosing? And who would say to this person that they need a word for whatever it is they need a word for?”

“So how is it that petrichor came to be a word?” asked Logan.

“A good question,” said Autumn, frowning. “My first thought is that someone somewhere wanted to talk of such a smell but had not the word for it so they came up with the word petrichor and explained it to others and the word spread. Why it would spread I have no idea for I do not recall ever speaking to anyone about the smell of woods after rain but for some reason I know that word. 'Tis an intriguing question.”

“I would expect Noxu or someone else at your Esyup used that word,” said Logan.

“Aye, very likely,” said Autumn. She snorted. “The elders at my Esyup debated at great length on matters that would seem obvious and not in need of great debate so very likely they invented new words to aid them in expressing their thoughts. What intrigues me is that there would seem to be a need for identifying the point at which something that is wet becomes merely damp as it dries. The smell of wet woodland is simple and straightforward. Here is a wood and here comes the rain. Clearly there will be different smells to the wood both before and after the rain yet someone felt the need to have a word for the after smell but not the before smell. That said, however, there is a simple solution to your thought, Logan.”

“How long have we known each other?” asked Logan, staring at Autumn.

“Nigh on three summers,” said Autumn, raising an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Three summers, eh?” said Logan. “I have known you for three summers and yet it still astonishes me that you can make a mountain out of a anthill! I mention a silly little thought I had and you turn it into a philosophical enquiry on why words exist and what drives their creation. Explain to me why there would be a need for a word that

describes a state of wetness that is neither wholly wet nor damp.”

“I would have thought it was obvious, Logan the Sceptic,” said Autumn. “Think on it for a moment or two and it may come to you.”

“Pah!” exclaimed Logan, slapping his knee. “Do not play your games with me. Explain yourself!”

“Oh Logan, Logan,” said Autumn sorrowfully. She shook her head slowly. “It should be apparent to you that there is a need for such a word for it was you who thought of it. Did you not yourself ask why there is not such a word? If there was no need for such a word then you would not have asked the question.”

“So you are saying that by my asking I created the need myself?” asked Logan, frowning.

“Most definitely,” said Autumn. “Mayhap others have asked such a question before but they have done nothing about it and the need for such a word withered and died. You, I fancy, are made of sterner stuff.”

“Now you have lost me,” said Logan, throwing up his hands. “What do you mean, sterner stuff?”

“Because I have no doubt,” said Autumn calmly, “that now you see a need for a word for the state of being not wet yet more than damp you will think on it further and come up with a suitable word.”

“Now you are being silly,” said Logan, chuckling.

“Am I?” asked Autumn. “Did you not think up a new way of tallying because you saw a need?⁵ I had never thought to do so. I accepted tallying as it was and thought no more about it.”

“Aye but that is different,” spluttered Logan.

“How so?” asked Autumn. “You saw a need which mayhap others had also seen but you did something about it and came up with a better

5 See *The Annals ~ The Second Tale*.

way. That shows a greatness of mind in my opinion. Doubtless now you see a need for a new word you will think of one and in time to come it will become commonplace.”

“Oh rubbish!” exclaimed Logan. “I grant I did think of a different way of tallying but no one ever uses it.”

“And you know the truth of that, do you?” asked Autumn. “Yofa was much impressed as it made the tallying of his profits and stocks much easier and faster and doubtless word of that is spreading. 'Tis only that we do not stay anywhere for long that we do not see it happening. Like as not if we ever return to Ahtolgo we will find your method widespread. Mayhap Yofa even teaches it to others as another means of making money.”

“I am lost for words!” exclaimed Logan, staring at Autumn with wide eyes.

“I do hope not,” said Autumn with a smile. “You have a new one to think of.”

Logan burst out laughing.

“Ohh Autumn, Autumn,” he spluttered. “You fascinate and tantalise me! How do you do it?”

“I venture that if it is indeed so, which I doubt,” said Autumn calmly, “that I do it the same way you fascinate and tantalise me.”

“And how is that?” asked Logan.

“By being yourself,” said Autumn. “For certain I do not set out to fascinate and tantalise so I can only conclude it is something in my manner.”

“And that killed that conversation,” said Logan with a snort. “It was a compliment of sorts, not a statement to be analysed and debated.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. She frowned and pursed her lips. “I am not familiar with compliments and I confess my nature is such that every

utterance is a statement to be analysed and debated. My apologies if I have offended you.”

“Aye, that’s true enough,” said Logan. “Many times I have seen someone compliment you and you have not noticed. That is what makes you you and I would not have it any other way. Now, your part of the bargain.”

“What bargain?” asked Autumn. “Is that another compliment?”

“No,” said Logan, “but we had a deal. I told you of my thought so now you tell me of yours.”

“Ahh, yes,” said Autumn. “I had not realised it was a deal as such but yes, we had that agreement. My thought was how much you have changed since first we met. Indeed since we came to Sassese’lte.”

“Oh no!” exclaimed Logan. He shifted away from her quickly. “We’re not back to that again, are we? I won’t do it!”

“Back to what?” asked Autumn, puzzled. “I do not understand.”

“Making a man of me,” said Logan tersely. “Making me go away on my own.”

“Now I am lost,” said Autumn, confused. “How is my saying you have changed led to this?”

“It’s what you said when we were in Danornor all over again,” said Logan. “You said we should go our separate ways because you thought you were holding me back or some such nonsense.”⁶

“Twas not nonsense,” said Autumn. “I believed it to be true that I was holding you back in your development into manhood but I was in error.”

Logan started to speak then realised he’d been holding his breath. He sucked in a lungful of air and started to cough.

6 See *The Annals ~ The Ninth Tale*.

“What do you mean?” he asked, his voice a little squeaky from coughing.

“I was unable to be involved with Ifgez due to my sickness,” said Autumn, “so I stood here and watched. I was impressed with how well you handled the situation that had been thrust upon you and pleased that you not only protected the girl but avoided a fight.”

“Oh,” said Logan, blinking rapidly in surprise. “So you thought I did well then?”

“Decidedly,” said Autumn. “It came to me that you are now a man and no longer the boy you were when first we met. Granted you are still a young man as you are but eighteen but a man none the less.”

“Well, um, thank you,” said Logan, going bright red with embarrassment. “Umm, well, yes. But you gave me my staff so doubtless that stopped any fight developing.”

“I was hoping you would not fight,” said Autumn, “but I sensed a change in him then he pulled out his cudgel so I gave you your staff so you were not disadvantaged. For certain you stood up to him and did not hand the girl over.”

“Well, why would I?” asked Logan. “She was defenceless. I was only defending her.”

“And you did not allow yourself to be intimidated by him,” said Autumn, “even though you knew I could be of no assistance. You stood up for what you held to be right and did not waiver. My giving you your staff was only after Ifgez produced his cudgel and was preparing to take things further but you had not backed down at that point nor showed any sign of backing down. I was proud of you, Logan, and doubtless that girl, when she has a chance to think about it, will be also.”

Logan was speechless. He just stared at Autumn, his mind both blank and in a confusing whirl.

“Oh,” he said after a while.

“I do not think back on that time in Danornor with relish,” said Autumn. “I have thought about it much since and see that I was greatly in error. Indeed, I suspect now that it was my own vanity in thinking that I could hold you back from becoming a man for there is a certain inevitability about the process that I had not fully appreciated. Moreover, much as you did not want to come to Sassese’lte and play the part of the Roinad in the signing of the Treaty you did so like a man and not like a boy.”

“I did?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Did you not dismiss Xomerin from his role as your Piers Sakratar when he refused to hire mercenaries to find me and you replaced him with Zytote?”

“Well, he didn't think you were important,” said Logan bashfully.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but I fancy you would not have been able to even think of such a thing a summer or two past for Xomerin was a man of much authority and power. Nonetheless you accepted the responsibility and acted as you saw fit. What more can anyone ask of a man?”

“Well, I suppose,” said Logan hesitantly, the redness of his face not diminishing in the least.

“And there is another thing,” said Autumn, “now I think on it.”

“Oh Sploop,” exclaimed Logan. “Now what? You think I should find that girl and take up farming or some such?”

“Well, if you so desire,” said Autumn, surprised, “although I fancy you should become better acquainted with her first. No, all I was going to say is that your beard is no longer bumfluff. It is much as a man's beard should be although, if you do not object to me saying so, I think a short beard will suit you better than a long one.”

Chapter Four

“Enough of this talk of beards and manhood,” exclaimed Logan a few moments later. He slapped his forehead in exasperation. “I have a gift for you and forgot all about it! A moment.”

He jumped up and fetched the staff from where he'd hidden it behind the bush where Autumn had slept. He held it out to her with both hands and bowed.

“’Tis the best I could do but with Aloidia's aid it will suffice,” he said.

“’Tis a very fine looking staff,” said Autumn, looking up at the staff. “May I touch it?”

“Of course,” said Logan, a little puzzled. “It is for you. I made it.”

“Ahh, my apologies,” said Autumn, taking the staff. “I did not realise. Thank you for this most noble of staffs. A gift given freely is most precious but one over which you have laboured long is vastly more precious still.” She ran her hands over the smooth polished wood reverently. “Aye, ’tis also a thing that delights the eye as well as the hand. You are most kind and generous. I thank you.”

She stood up, not without some effort, and took hold of Logan's hand.

“This must have taken you no little time,” she said, squeezing his hand. “I shall treasure this gift.”

“Umm, well, I am pleased you like it,” said Logan bashfully.

“Indeed I do,” said Autumn hefting the staff. “’Tis solid and of good weight but not too heavy and of a goodly length. No little work has gone into this for it is polished and has no protrusions or sharp edges.”

She suddenly tossed the staff in the air, caught it again and whirled, albeit a lot more slowly than was usual, before slamming the staff against the side of the tree behind her. It made a satisfying thump.

"'Tis strong as well," she said, inspecting it. "'Tis not dented nor splitting. I fancy this will serve me well in times to come."

"I found a fallen branch some way further downstream," said Logan. "I knew you would not like it if I pulled a living branch from a tree."

"Indeed," said Autumn. "There is no reason why a tree should suffer when fallen branches are readily available." She looked into Logan's eyes for a few moments then suddenly kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you again," she said and hugged him.

"Ooh-er," exclaimed Logan going pink with embarrassment even though he'd hoped for a reaction like this. In truth, however, he'd rather expected Autumn to be more detached as she had no real grasp of the concept of ownership which is an important aspect of gift receiving.

Autumn sat down again and laid her staff across her lap.

"Tell me," she said, "as you have suffered this affliction yourself. How long am I likely to be unable to move with ease?"

"Oh, I would expect you to be back to normal by dusk," he said, sitting down as well. "For certain by dawn."

"So the question is," said Autumn, "do we stay here until dawn and remain hungry or do we move on in search of food? I wager I can walk although likely not with any great speed even though I have this staff to aid me."

"I have food if you want it," said a voice from the other side of the stream.

Autumn merely twisted to see where the voice had come from but Logan tried to jump up and grab his staff but became entangled in Autumn's staff which lay across her lap. He fell flat on the ground in a tangle and the other end of the staff jumped up and smacked Autumn on the side of her head. Her arm had simply not moved sufficiently fast to intercept the staff although she had reacted quickly enough.

“Voqev!” exclaimed Logan, disentangling himself and getting to his knees. “Did I hurt you?”

“’Twas nothing more than a leaf dropping,” said Autumn, rubbing the side of her head. She peered across the stream but could see no one.

“Greetings stranger,” she called. “Where are you?”

“I am here,” said the voice and the girl who’d crashed into Logan earlier stepped out from behind a tree.

“Come join us if you wish,” said Autumn. “My name is Autumn and my companion is Logan.”

The girl hesitated then looked slowly around before stepping into the stream.

“I have a rabbit for you if you want it,” she said, holding it up by its hind legs. The water flowed around her feet but she stayed in mid-stream.

“That is most kind of you,” said Autumn. “Come, share the rabbit with us if you are in no hurry to leave.”

She nudged Logan's leg with her elbow.

“Aye,” said Logan and took a step forward. “We have a fire and 'twill only take a moment to rebuild it.”

The girl looked around again and cocked her head as if listening. She sucked her teeth then stepped back onto the far bank. She tossed the rabbit so it landed at Logan's feet.

“A gift,” she said and disappeared behind the tree again.

“Wait!” called Logan. “Come back!”

The girl reappeared but stayed beside the tree.

“Will you not join us?” asked Logan. “You will be safe here.”

The girl came over to the water's edge but didn't step in.

"He may return," she said.

"Ifgez?" asked Logan and she nodded. "I wager not but we will not let him harm you if he does. Come," and he beckoned.

The girl hesitated then slowly crossed the stream and came over. She stayed out of arm's reach.

"Welcome," said Autumn, smiling up at her. "Are you Yook?"

"That is what I am called," said the girl, "but that is not my name."

"Ahh," said Autumn. "Please, sit with us. What is your name or would you prefer we called you Yook?"

She poked Logan's calf and he glanced down at her.

"Sit," she mouthed.

"Ahh," said Logan and quickly sat down.

Cautiously the girl knelt down but didn't sit.

"My name is Cindue," she said.

Up close it was apparent that her thickly matted hair hung in hanks like braids and was thick with dirt. Her tunic was also dirty and torn in places and her bare arms, legs and feet were smeared with dirt and dried blood from a number of scratches.

"Greetings Cindue," said Autumn. "If you will permit, can I ask why you are called yook when it is not your name?"

"Tis the name given to all slaves," said Cindue.

"Ahh," said Logan. "I thought so."

"Did not Ifgez say that slaving is against the law?" asked Autumn.

"I know not," said Cindue. "I am from far away and know not the law around here."

"Where are you from, Cindue?" asked Autumn.

Cindue half smiled at the use of her name as it had been a while since anyone had called her that.

"I am from a place called Esu'taw," she said. "'Tis a long way to the north, beyond the mountains. Where are you from? I think not from around here else you would know of yooks."

"We are from Aferraron," said Logan.

"I know not that place," said Cindue. "Is it far?"

"'Tis a very long way away," said Autumn. "To the East, across the Azour Sea."

"What is Azour Sea?" asked Cindue frowning. "Is it in Sassese'lte?"

"No," said Autumn, glancing at Logan. "It is a very large lake on the far edge of Sassese'lte. Aferraron is on the far edge of that lake."

"Ohhh," said Cindue. She frowned. "Why are you here then? 'Tis a powerful long way to come to be hungry and sick in a strange place."

"We are travellers," said Autumn. "We travel far and wide in search of knowledge and understanding but yes, when you are sick home seems a very long way away. Tell me, how did you know I was sick?"

"I been listening to you," said Cindue. She started nervously as something rustled in the bushes and nearly jumped to her feet. Nothing emerged however and she settled back on her knees. "Aye, I ran off when Ifgez came but I stayed nearby, watching."

"Would it not have been better to keep going and leave this place?" asked Autumn.

Cindue shrugged.

"I wanted to know what manner of man would defend me," she said.

"A good man," said Autumn. "One who knows right from wrong and is willing to defend those who are wronged. Logan is such a man."

"Shall I cook the rabbit now?" asked Logan, deciding he'd had enough embarrassment this day already. He leant forward and picked it up. Its head rolled back as its neck had been broken.

"Tis a fine looking rabbit," he said, frowning at Cindue, "but I see no marks on it. Was it dead when you found it?"

"No, I caught it but a short time ago," said Cindue.

"But there are no marks of a trap," said Logan, turning the rabbit over. "How were you able to catch it?"

"I disturbed it in the bushes," said Cindue. "It ran for its burrow and I gave chase and caught it. Fear not, it showed no sign of disease."

"You must be mighty fast," said Logan.

Cindue shrugged again.

"No matter," said Logan. "Tis good you broke its neck as we have no water bag. This will do nicely."

"So, Cindue," said Autumn as Logan moved away to start work on the rabbit, "am I right in thinking you were a slave on the farm of Shina Ganam?"

"I know not," said Cindue. "I was sold to that man Ifgez but a few days ago and brought here. I managed to escape and ran but he had a horse and gave chase. Were it not for your man there I would doubtless be near death by now."

"In what way?" asked Autumn.

"Ifgez told me that the punishment for escaping is to be tied to a tree and whipped until near death," said Cindue, her eyes flashing

defiantly. "I told him that there was no punishment for escaping only for being caught and that in such an event he would die a worse death at my hand but he found that funny and laughed. 'Twas while he was laughing I pulled him off his horse and ran. I should have killed him while he lay winded but I did not have a knife."

"'Twas brave of you," said Autumn. "How is it that you came to be sold? Who claimed ownership of you and gained from the selling?"

"'Twas two brothers," said Cindue. "They be named Sayam and Neiter from a place called Rudailk which is some days to the north of here. They bought me from a man called Tioksen and made me work their fields for two summers then tired of me for they said I was too stupid to work."

"You do not seem stupid to me," said Autumn, raising an eyebrow.

"I caused much damage to their crops through my stupidity," said Cindue with a grin. "Can't say as I be knowing exactly how that happened but I took care to never get better at my work and they gave up in time."

"So this Sayam and Neiter are farmers?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Cindue. "Tioksen was not. He was a trader."

"A trader in people?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Cindue. "He travelled to places where battles were fought and bought those taken prisoner as I was. He then sold us to those who had need of extra workers."

"Hmm," said Autumn. She looked over at Logan who was carefully removing the pelt of the rabbit without breaking its skin, other than at the neck. "So, you were taken prisoner in a battle?"

"An army came upon us from Us-Iota," said Cindue. "We won or so I was told but me and two of my friends were caught and taken prisoner while foraging in the woods."

"I am surprised you were not given back since the army from Us-Iota lost the battle," said Autumn.

"Likely my people thought we were dead," said Cindue, shrugging. "Mayhap they came looking for us, mayhap they didn't. 'Twas only a day or so before Tioksen took us away and sold us so it makes no never mind."

* * *

It was a while before Logan had the rabbit skinned and cooked over the fire. He left the pelt turned inside out ready to be scraped and tanned later.

"Cindue is of an age with you, Logan," said Autumn, walking over to the fire. "She is but seventeen."

"Is that so," said Logan, cutting one of the rabbit's legs off. He waited for Autumn to sit beside the fire then passed it to her. "How do you feel?"

"Much better," said Autumn, passing the rabbit leg to Cindue who also sat beside the fire. "You were right. I wager I will be as I was before come dawn. The pains are almost gone but there is still some reluctance in my limbs to move well."

"That is good," said Logan, passing Autumn another leg. He cut one off for himself then settled back on the ground. "Ahh, fresh meat! It has been a while."

"Enjoy it while you can," snarled Ifgez, stepping out from between two bushes on the other side of the stream with barely a sound.

Cindue jumped up instantly and started to run the other way then stopped and backed away as another man, bigger and older than Ifgez emerged. He carried a rope of some sort over his shoulder. Ifgez quickly splashed through the stream, brandishing his cudgel. Logan had also jumped up and hurried to fetch his staff. Autumn, on the other hand, stayed calmly sitting as Ifgez came up behind Cindue. Logan stepped over and touched his staff against Ifgez's chest. The

older man flapped his hand and Ifgez backed away a step and stared insolently at Logan.

“Greetings,” said Autumn, looking at Ifgez then the older man. “We have cooked rabbit if you are hungry.”

“Aye, we could smell it,” said the older man. “We followed our noses and look what we found. This be my yook, Ifgez?”

“Aye, it is,” said Ifgez, “and these be the two that got in the way before.”

“I take it you are Shina Ganam?” asked Autumn, putting down her piece of rabbit.

“Aye,” said Shina. “And you be?”

“I am Autumn Savannah of Aferraron,” said Autumn. “These be my companions Logan, also of Aferraron, and Cindue of Esu'taw. You will not take it amiss if we camp here for the night?”

“Camp where you likes, my lovely,” said Shina, moving closer. “But not her. She be coming with us.”

“Alas that is not possible,” said Autumn. “She is our guest and likely would prefer to stay with us rather than go with you.”

“I see,” said Shina. “So you be wanting a finder's fee, is that it?” He fished a couple of coins from a small bag hanging from his belt and peered at them in the fading twilight. “Here be six banuuls. That be fair, I reckon.” He tossed them on the ground in front of Autumn.

“Is a finder's fee what I think it is?” asked Autumn, frowning slightly.

“Aye,” said Shina. “You found her so I be giving you a fee for handing her back to me.”

“I see,” said Autumn. She picked up the coins and held them out to Shina. “Please, take them back for we will not be handing Cindue over to you.”

“Well that be right unfriendly, like,” said Shina. “This yook be mine, see. Bought and paid for. How much was it, Ifgez?”

“Five ban ten,” said Ifgez. “Cash on the nose.”

“I see no money on Cindue's nose,” said Autumn, standing up. “What do you mean by that?”

“Tis just an expression,” said Shina with a snort.

“Tis a strange thing to say nonetheless,” said Autumn, holding out the coins again. “Regardless, please take your money.”

Shina scowled at her then dug in his coin bag again. He peered at the coins then tossed them in front of Autumn.

“Nother half ban there,” he said. “That be a whole ban and more than the bitch is worth but it be yours. Step out of the way, lad.”

“My name is Logan,” said Logan, looking over at Shina without moving his staff. “Kindly show me some respect.”

Shina laughed.

“Then with the greatest of respect, Logan,” he said sarcastically, “get out the Dinaj cursed way and let me take what belongs to me.”

Autumn sighed and dropped the coins in her hand beside the ones on the ground. Clearly this wasn't going to end as peacefully as she'd hoped.

“I regret that is not possible,” said Logan as Cindue stayed behind him, He glared at Ifgez.

Shina just gazed at him for a few moments then walked slowly over to the fire. He bent down and pulled the remaining leg from the rabbit carcass and took a bite.

“Nice,” he said. “Well cooked. You be doing the cooking, lad?”

“Logan,” said Logan, shifting his position slightly.

“You be with two women and they make you do the cooking?” scoffed Shina and tossed the rest of the rabbit leg in the fire. “Reckon as how you ain’t deserving of even being called lad.”

He lifted the coil of rope over his head and took hold of the short stick that was attached to one end before tossing the rest of the rope out on the ground behind him. In the flickering light of the fire it became apparent that the rope was thin braided leather and at least half a length longer than Logan.

“Now let me see as if I’ve got this right,” said Shina. “There be a yook which be bought and paid for by me. There be a lad what ain’t really a lad saying the bitch ain’t mine and there be a maid what can’t be bothered to cook saying she don’t want my money. Be that a fair summary?”

“Let’s be perfectly clear on one thing at least,” said Autumn calmly. “I am always happy to cook. It is simply that Logan prefers to do so himself.”

Shina burst out laughing.

“Oh I do like you, my lovely,” said Shina. “What was your name again?”

“Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn.

“That’s right,” said Shina and flicked his whip so that the tip cracked loudly some way above Logan’s head. “Well, stand back Autumn Savannah. I be not wanting to hurt you. Ifgez, take the bitch and you two stay back or I be flaying you both alive.”

Chapter Five

Ifgez knocked Logan's staff away with his cudgel and started to lunge towards Cindue. As Logan tried to swing his staff back to slash it at Ifgez, Cindue stepped around him and kicked Ifgez hard between his legs. He cried out and sank to his knees as Logan's staff whistled over his head and caught Cindue on her shoulder. She gasped in pain and bent double, clutching her shoulder, just as the tip of Shina's whip cracked where her shoulder had been. Logan pushed her down to the ground and kicked backwards, catching Ifgez on the side of the head with his heel. Ifgez sank to the ground, one hand tightly lodged between his legs and the other clutching his head. Autumn watched with interest then calmly stepped forward and stood, poised, but not in her defensive posture, directly in front of Shina just as Logan put his foot on Ifgez's neck.

"Do you really want this?" she asked as Cindue kicked Ifgez in the region of his kidneys.

"Rragh!" growled Shina and slashed at her with the handle of his whip.

Autumn twisted in the direction of his blow and dropped down so his arm passed harmlessly over her shoulder. She grabbed his wrist and forearm with her hands and pushed upwards with her legs, throwing Shina bodily over her shoulder. He landed with a solid thump on the ground, narrowly missing both the fire and the remains of the cooked rabbit. Autumn stamped down on his wrist then snatched the whip handle from his grasp.

"I ask one last time," she said, tossing the whip into the fire. "Do you really want this?"

Shina groaned then rolled over and snatched the handle of the whip from the fire.

"You're going to die," he growled getting to his feet and flicking the cord of the whip away, readying to slash at Autumn just as Logan grabbed the neck of Cindue's tunic as she was about to leap on Shina's back. She twisted and lashed out at Logan. Autumn spun,

dropping to put one hand on the ground, and kicked Shina in the belly. He doubled up, clutching his belly as Logan cried out in surprise at being slapped hard in the face. Logan staggered, letting go of Cindue's tunic. Cindue fell backwards and collided with Shina, hitting him hard on the head with her elbow. Shina collapsed on the ground, groaning, and Autumn stepped backwards, dropping into her defensive pose, readying herself for an attack from Cindue.

It never came. Instead Cindue jumped to her feet and started kicking Shina repeatedly. Autumn jumped forward and pulled her away but she lashed out at Autumn, her face almost grotesque with hatred and anger. Autumn easily evaded her blow and let go of her. Immediately Cindue turned back and started kicking Shina again.

"Enough!" shouted Autumn and again pulled Cindue away. Again Cindue lashed out at Autumn but this time Autumn pulled her close and clamped her arms around Cindue.

"Let me go!" screamed Cindue, trying to kick Autumn. "Let me kill the bastards!"

"Absolutely not," said Autumn forcefully, wincing as Cindue's heel crunched down on her toes.

Logan ran over and slapped Cindue's face. She spat at him.

"I fancy that isn't helping," said Autumn drily and tightened her grip on Cindue. "Calm yourself Cindue, calm yourself."

Cindue glared at Logan from under the matted hair that now covered her face. She snarled at Logan, who took a step back in alarm, then she visibly calmed.

"Why will you not let me kill them?" she demanded, her voice almost back to normal.

"It would serve no purpose," said Autumn. "Promise me you will not harm either man and I will release you."

Cindue gave one last struggle then reluctantly whispered "so be it."

“Logan, would you check those two in case of serious injury,” asked Autumn, letting Cindue go.

Cindue jumped forward and Logan stepped in front of her, his staff raised, in case she was going to attack Shina or Ifgez. She just looked contemptuously at him then tossed her hair back and straightened her tunic.

“Fear not,” she said. “I will permit those scum to live.”

“Good,” said Logan, not sure what else to say.

“For now,” added Cindue and curled her lip at Autumn.

“That is enough,” said Autumn. She gazed into Cindue's eyes for a few moments and Cindue stared insolently back at her. “Let me attend to the fallen.”

“As you wish,” said Cindue.

“I venture some thanks are in order,” said Logan, annoyed by Cindue's attitude. “We could have just handed you over to them.”

Cindue scowled at him then unexpectedly dropped to her knees. She prostrated herself in front of Logan, her forehead touching the ground.

“I offer you my heartfelt thanks for coming to my aid, Logan Saviour,” she said.

“Oh, there's no need for that!” exclaimed Logan, embarrassed.

Cindue ignored him and instead shuffled round to prostrate herself in front of Autumn.

“I offer you my heartfelt thanks for coming to my aid, Autumn,” she said.

“Get up,” said Autumn. “I give my aid freely and so does Logan. We thank you for your thanks and let that be an end to the matter.”

"As you say, friend Autumn," said Cindue, getting to her feet again. She saw their faces and frowned. "Did I do it wrong?"

"Do what wrong?" asked Autumn, also frowning.

"My obeisances," said Cindue. "It has been several summers since last I gave thanks. Did I do it wrongly?"

"Is it the custom from where you are from to lie on the ground when giving thanks?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Cindue.

"Then you did not do it wrongly," said Autumn, reaching out to pat Cindue on her arm. "'Tis not our custom to give thanks that way so we were confused, nothing more."

"Ohh," said Cindue. She pondered for a few moments. "So what do you do?"

"We merely say 'thank you'," said Autumn. "Excuse me. I must attend to these men."

She tossed the whip in the fire again then faced Shina who was now sitting up and rubbing various parts of his anatomy.

"Is this at an end or do you wish to continue?" she asked, glancing at Ifgez who had gingerly got to his feet and was leaning against a tree.

"What do you think?" muttered Shina with a snort.

"I think you would be a fool to continue," said Autumn, "but it is your choice. 'Tis best, I think, that you and Ifgez leave."

"Aye," said Shina and got to his feet. He reached for his whip then abandoned it when he saw it was beginning to smoulder and discolour. "Come Ifgez. Let us be away from here."

Ifgez levered himself off the tree and, painfully, the two of them made their way to the edge of the clearing.

"Tis not the end of this," said Shina, twisting round. "That bitch still be my property." He spat then went amongst the trees.

"It never ceases to fascinate me the hold money and possessions have over people," said Autumn, watching them go. "Surely even he should see this is a lost cause and 'twould be best to abandon it."

"Aye, but I venture he won't," said Logan. "Best we be going as well. I would not be surprised if he returns soon enough with others to aid him."

"Indeed," said Autumn. She looked around then started scraping earth over the fire with her foot. Logan searched around on his hands and knees for a few moments, looking for the coins Shina has tossed down. The coins found, he rolled the remains of the rabbit inside their blankets while Autumn tossed her few belongings into her pack. Cindue watched but kept glancing at the woods.

"Shall we continue following the track?" asked Logan when they were ready, "or go through the woods or follow the stream?"

"The stream, I think," said Autumn. "The track will be too obvious and finding a way through the woods difficult in the dark. Astauand is almost gone."

"Agreed," said Logan and glanced enquiringly at Cindue.

"Can I come with you?" she asked hesitantly.

"That would likely be best," said Autumn, nodding. "Shina will doubtless come looking for you soon enough and likely will bring companions." She stepped into the water and headed off upstream. Cindue looked at Logan and he gestured for her to follow Autumn.

"How do you feel, Autumn?" he asked, bringing up the rear of their little party. "You seemed to manage well enough in the fight, although I grant it wasn't much of a fight."

"Which was fortunate," said Autumn. She sighed. "I feel much better and my strength is returning but I was fearfully slow in my

movements. Had he been a better fighter or better armed things could have turned out differently.”

“Better armed?” exclaimed Logan. “A whip is a fearsome thing!”

“Aye,” said Cindue. “Some summers back I went to a fair with my parents and there was a man there doing tricks with a whip. He had someone stand with an apple on her head and sliced it into four pieces the same size with just a flick or two of his hand!”

“Impressive,” said Autumn, “but as a weapon a whip is almost useless.”

“It can do great harm,” said Cindue. “I have seen the effect of a whip on flesh. 'Tis terrible in how it cuts and tears.”

“Oh I do not doubt that,” said Autumn, slipping on a loose stone under the surface. She trust out an arm and kept her balance. “But to be used you have to throw it away first so you can slash it forward and that gives warning to the one who is to be hit and moreover it can only be used at a certain distance. If the other is too close or too distant the whip serves no purpose. That is why I stood close in front of him. He could only strike me then with the handle and a whip handle is a poor substitute for a staff.”

“But what if you'd been too far away to get close in time?” asked Logan.

“Then I would have stepped back,” said Autumn. “One or two steps would be sufficient for whips cannot be over long else they would be too difficult to use.”

“But what if there was something behind you?” asked Cindue. “A tree or some such.”

“That is more difficult,” said Autumn, “but not overly so. In such a situation 'tis best to twist in the direction the whip is coming from and let it pass then take hold of the cord. If you do not let go then the whip is rendered useless and can be used against the whipper.”

“You speak as if you have great knowledge of whip fighting,” said Cindue.

“I wager Autumn does,” said Logan. He glanced at Autumn. “Did you have training with whips at your Esyup?”

“Some but not much,” said Autumn. “As I said it is a weapon ill suited for fighting and so we spent little time on it. Whips are best only for frightening and punishing but I venture 'best' is not a good word for it would be best to neither frighten nor punish.”

“What is Esyup?” asked Cindue.

“Tis a place of great learning,” said Autumn.

“Is that where you learnt to fight?” she asked, “for it is apparent to me that you have skills in fighting and show little fear.”

“Autumn is afraid of nothing,” said Logan proudly. “And she is the greatest fighter in all of the world.”

“Do not listen to him, Cindue,” said Autumn. “Logan knows very well that I have been bested many times yet he has convinced himself otherwise.”

“Is that so?” exclaimed Logan, stopping to put his hands on his hips and staring at Autumn. “And what about that time on the beach at Rhabir when you bested fifteen pirates armed with swords?”

“They wanted us alive,” said Autumn, pausing to look back when she no longer heard Logan's splashing, “so it was not a fair fight. Anyway Cindue does not wish to hear of such things. Doubtless she wants to go home to her family.” She continued wading through the shallow water.

“I would very much like to hear of how Autumn bested fifteen armed men,” said Cindue, now slightly in the lead as she hadn't stopped walking. “I wager you bested more, Logan. Besides, I know not how to find my way home.”

7 See *The Annals ~ The Tenth Tale*.

“Ohh, I only managed one,” said Logan. “I am not a fighter you see.”

“A moment,” said Autumn, putting up her hand and stopping again. “You say you do not know where your home is, Cindue?”

“I know where it is,” said Cindue, glancing back at Autumn and stopping as well. “Just not how to find it again. 'Tis a long way to the north is all I know.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn and started walking again. Logan and Cindue fell in behind her. “That would be a difficulty. For certain you cannot stay in these parts. Shina will be looking for you and will doubtless spread the word among his friends.”

“I will manage,” said Cindue.

“And I fancy we have business in the north,” said Autumn. “What say you that we help Cindue find her place, Logan?”

“What business do we have in the north?” asked Logan, stopping again. He looked perplexed but as it was now dark his expression could not be clearly seen. That he was still Logan was apparent from the light of Plifal but not the details.

“There is someone I wish to visit and speak with,” said Autumn, also stopping. “Would you like us to travel to your home with you, Cindue?”

“Who? We know no one in ...” started Logan then he realised. “Ohhh, Sploop! No! I think that would be a mistake. 'Tis none of our concern.”

“What would be a mistake?” asked Cindue, looking at Logan. “Do you not want me with you, Logan?”

“'Tis not that,” said Logan. “'Tis this person Autumn wants to speak with.”

“I venture it would be the concern of every right thinking person,” said Autumn. “Slaving is a bad business.”

“Who is this person you are speaking of?” exclaimed Cindue. “You speak in riddles, both of you!”

“Tioksen,” said Logan. “Am I right, Autumn?”

“Aye,” said Autumn.

“Tioksen?” exclaimed Cindue. “Why would you speak with Tioksen? You wish to buy slaves too?”

“I wager Autumn wants to persuade him to give up his trade,” said Logan, staring at the outline of Autumn.

“Tis best to cut an infection out at its source,” said Autumn. “With Tioksen no longer in business others will not be able to buy from him and with the aid of the deities the practice will die out.”

“Well, 'twould certainly be easier than trying to free all the slaves in the land,” said Logan, “but surely someone else will take over if Tioksen ends his business.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, “but it would be a start, would it not?”

“Tioksen!” said Cindue with a chilling edge to her voice. “The whole world would rejoice if that filth departed to the Land of the Undead!”

“That is not my intent,” said Autumn. “I wish merely to speak with him and mayhap persuade him to see the errors of his ways.”

“If you can find him,” said Logan with a snort. “Tis a big place, Sassese'lte, and doubtless this Tioksen takes precautions against being found by those who do not appreciate him.”

“Tis not a problem,” said Cindue. “I will do the killing if Autumn is faint hearted.”

“Perhaps it is best you do not travel with us then,” said Autumn. “I abhor unnecessary killing.”

“Then I shall not kill him,” said Cindue quickly. “I shall keep myself

apart from your efforts to find him but I would greatly appreciate your aid in helping me return to my family. It would be a goodness.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn.

“And don't forget that Tefkuu⁸ has his base in the north,” said Logan. “’Twould be a fearful risk of us being recaptured again. The more so because I wager a slaver would have dealings with pirates.”

“I am mindful of that but we are in Us-Iota and Tefkuu is in Roaaut,” said Autumn. “I doubt there is much exchange between mintikas. Besides, Logan, do we not travel to gain knowledge and understanding of the world? Was it not our intent to explore Sassese'lte? Returning Cindue and then looking for Tioksen will in no way affect that. Indeed, they merely give additional purpose to our travels.”

Cindue picked up on the 'then looking for' but held her tongue. It would take some time to get to the far north and things could change. It might even be that they had word of Tioksen sooner rather than later.

“You're doing it again,” said Logan, resignedly. “As always.”

“Doing what again?” asked Autumn.

“Coming up with a thousand reasons why we should do something you wish to do when I don't,” said Logan. “Ah well, let us continue on our journey or shall we stand in this stream for the remainder of our days?”

“My apologies, friend Logan,” said Autumn, immediately contrite. “You do not wish to do this so we shall not. My apologies, Cindue. We will not accompany you on your journey home.”

“What?” exclaimed Cindue just as Logan snapped “Oh Voqev!”

“Autumn is jesting with you,” said Logan. “Of course we will help you

8 Tefkuu being the pirate leader who captured Logan and Autumn and held them to ransom in *The Tenth Tale*.

find your home. Then we will come back south. Won't we, Autumn."

"Aye," said Autumn. "Or mayhap go somewhere else."

"Good," said Logan. He started splashing upstream again and Autumn and Cindue followed. "That reminds me. I wanted to congratulate you, Autumn, on making a funny joke. It was very good. Well done."

"I made a joke?" exclaimed Autumn, mystified. She stopped walking and stared at Logan's back. "About finding Tioksen you mean?"

"No," said Logan, not noticing. "When Shina was trying to get things straight in his mind and you said 'Let's be perfectly clear on one thing at least'. That was right funny."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," said Autumn, baffled as always when the subject of humour came up. Nonetheless she started walking again.

"Aye, I remember that," said Cindue and laughed. "It was indeed funny,"

"What was funny about it?" asked Autumn. "Logan does enjoy cooking!"

"True enough," said Logan, "but it was the least important thing that Shina was talking about. That's what made it funny."

"But he was showing you disrespect," said Autumn, frowning. "I will not tolerate that."

"I thank you for that but it was still funny," said Logan.

"I am pleased to hear it," said Autumn. "So, correct me if I am wrong, but choosing the least important of several things is funny?"

"Well, not when you put it like that," said Logan. "Mayhap it was just because of the situation we were in that made it funny."

“Which does not clarify things for me,” said Autumn. “No matter. Mayhap what I said was a joke, mayhap it wasn't but it was most definitely not intended as a joke.”

“Which saddens me,” said Logan, “but I have not yet given up all hope. Doubtless there is a sense of humour buried deep inside you which is struggling to get out.”

“Why do you disrespect your woman so, Logan?” asked Cindue. “From what I have seen Autumn is deserving of the greatest respect.”

“We are but travelling companions, Cindue,” said Autumn, “and Logan shows no disrespect. He merely aids me in knowing myself fully and I welcome his observations on my humour as I do in all matters. That his jokes oftimes baffle me is something I am trying to understand myself.”

“Oh,” said Cindue, a little baffled herself. Surely, she thought, everyone knows themselves? “That's all right then.”

Chapter Six

A large fly settled on the tip of Logan's nose as he lay sleeping. It sat there for a few moments as if contemplating its next move then sat back and started to rub its two front legs together in a thoughtful way. Logan's nose twitched and the fly froze at the unexpected movement. When no other movement eventuated the fly ambled down the side of Logan's left nostril, pausing two or three times to peer inside the deep recesses of the cavern that was his nose. Save periodic gusts of wind as Logan breathed peacefully there was little of interest there so the fly continued its walk. Logan's hand shifted up from where it had been lying on his shoulder and lightly brushed the side of his nose. The fly, whose reactions were many times faster than that of Logan, or even Autumn come to that, flew off instantly and circled, waiting for the attack to subside. The hand gone, the fly circled once more, checking for danger, then alighted on the side of Logan's other nostril, just above the beginnings of the hair that adorned his upper lip.

The fly, iridescent in the shaft of light that came through the leafy branches above where Logan lay, spread its translucent wings for a few moments then folded them back. It marched half a dozen paces downwards and stepped onto Logan's hairs. Doubtless there was a tiny speck of rabbit juice trapped nearby which would prove sufficient for a hungry insect and the fly was determined to find it. Suddenly the hand slapped again as the fly's motion among the hairs tickled Logan's upper lip. He scratched a couple of times and the fly, circling nearby, watched and waited. With a harrumph Logan rolled over and snuggled back down, hanging onto the last vestiges of sleep like one who has fallen hangs desperately onto the cliff edge. It was not to be. The fly moved in, interested in exploring the gap that had opened between Logan's lips. It crawled along a hair then stepped onto his lip. Its antennae twitched as it sensed moisture further within and, perhaps with some excitement or perhaps not as who knows what emotions a fly experiences, the fly started to make its way along the inside of Logan's lip. Instinctively Logan's mouth clamped shut, the fly trapped within. Doubtless the fly was not aware it was trapped, merely that whatever light there had been had disappeared. In any event, the fly, undisturbed, continued to walk around inside Logan's mouth.

Logan, however, was well aware even as he slept that something was not as it should be inside his mouth. His eyes flicked open then squinted as the shaft of light fell full upon them. He felt a movement on his tongue and, once again instinctively, he spat and pushed himself half upright.

“Yuck,” he muttered when he saw the fly struggling desperately to free itself from the small ball of spit hanging between two blades of grass. He scowled and spat again then wiped his mouth. With a deep sigh he sat up and looked around blearily. The little clearing where they'd stopped for the night was deserted.

“Where's Autumn?” was the first thought that consciously crossed his mind. Several other thoughts had already passed but they were unconscious and of little import. The absence of Autumn was, however, of no little significance. He scratched an itch on his chest and lifted his head a little. And there she was, on the far bank of the stream. She was sitting between two bushes with her face towards the stream. Her legs were crossed and her heels were on her knees as usual. The backs of her hands rested lightly on her heels and her first fingers and thumbs were touching to make Os. The other fingers were lightly curled in relaxation and her eyes were shut. She was, as was customary at this time of day, seemingly oblivious to the world.

Some splashing noises from further downstream drew Logan's attention. He couldn't see what was making the sounds as they came from around a curve in the stream and there was a trunk and some bushes in the way but the sounds stopped after a few moments. Another glance at Autumn showed she had not moved so clearly there was no danger in the sounds. For all her seeming withdrawal, Logan knew Autumn monitored every sound, touch and smell. Had her senses alerted her to something amiss she would even now be investigating.

That said, Logan had a feeling that there was something amiss. What, he couldn't tell, but things were not entirely as they had been when he'd gone to sleep. He looked around again and noted his and Autumn's staffs were where they'd been left. Autumn's pack sat neatly near the flattened grass where she'd slept and her robe was neatly folded on top of it. Further round the clearing was another patch of

flattened grass with Autumn's blanket carelessly discarded nearby.

"Odd," thought Logan. "'Tis not like Autumn to not fold her blanket neatly."

There were some more splashing sounds and what sounded like a faint groan. Logan's hand jerked towards his staff but he stilled it when he saw Autumn had not moved. With a faint groan of his own he got to his feet and went behind a tree for a few moments. Re-emerging he sauntered down to the water's edge and squatted to rinse his mouth of fly trails before drinking deeply.

Cindue! That was what was missing! The girl who'd come with them and laid down to sleep with Autumn's blanket. She wasn't there!

"Is it not a beautiful day?" asked Autumn, opening her eyes. She knew Logan was at the stream's edge as she'd been tracking him since he'd sat up and her thoughts had naturally come to an end anyway.

"Aye, it is," said Logan as it wasn't raining and that was the most significant feature of whether or not the day was beautiful to him.

Autumn slowly raised her arms above her head, stretching as high as she could then, with her arms outstretched, she brought them down again and slipped her heels off her knees.

"How do you feel?" asked Logan, squatting back and watching her.

"I feel good," said Autumn, smiling at him. "I feel renewed and refreshed."

"No aches or pains?" he asked. "No fevers?"

"No aches, pains or fevers," said Autumn and she inhaled deeply. "And no coughs or sneezes. 'Tis a joy to be alive on this most beautiful day."

"I am right glad to hear it," said Logan, not feeling particularly joyful at being alive. Then again he wasn't dead which was always a bonus. "Has Cindue left us?"

“She is further downstream,” said Autumn, rising gracefully to her feet in one sinuous movement without using her hands. “She said she wanted to wash.”

“Good,” said Logan for she had been quite filthy and smelt quite strongly although he would never say that in her hearing. In truth it was a basic fact of life that many people were dirty and smelly although Cindue's odour had a certain ripeness to it. He had himself been much that way before meeting Autumn although her influence had since encouraged him to bathe himself and his clothing as often as she did.

“Are you well, Logan?” asked Autumn, stepping through the ankle deep water.

“Aye, well enough,” said Logan, “although I nearly swallowed a fly while I slept.”

“If you were asleep, how did you know you nearly did?” asked Autumn, pulling a scrap of meat from the remains of their cooked rabbit.

“It woke me,” said Logan, “and I spat it out. Will you be doing your exercises today?”

“Tis my intent,” said Autumn, “although this clearing is somewhat small but I feel a need to run and jump. No matter. It will suffice and if the need remains I shall do so later when we come across somewhere larger.”

She chewed the morsel of rabbit then scooped up a handful of water to drink.

“Tis good to see you are back to your old self,” said Logan, looking up at her.

“Aye, 'twas an unpleasant experience,” said Autumn. “Catch!” and she threw the rest of the water in her hand at Logan.

He ducked as you always do when someone throws something but

she'd already gone. She'd leapt full across the stream and thrown herself at a tree. She got one leg up in time and used it to push herself sideways off the tree trunk and twisted fully before landing in a crouch then dropped onto one hand and lashed out with a sideways swipe of her leg at the tree, keeping the other foot on the ground. As her foot made contact with the tree she kicked out with her other foot to smash the tree with her heel and twisted at the same time to land on her back. Instantly she did her kicking arm push to jump upright and aimed a flurry of chops and punches at the tree while dancing around it. As she emerged from the other side of the tree she stopped and waved at Logan.

"You seem fully recovered," he said.

"I am slow," she replied. "Better than half my usual speed but still slow. Likely it will be a day or two yet for it would be foolish to expect full recovery this quickly. Throw me my staff, Logan."

She somersaulted over a bush and bounced back again while Logan fetched her staff. He tossed it across the stream and she threw herself on the ground, caught it with her feet and tossed it back to him. He wasn't expecting that and it clattered on the ground beside him.

"Harder," she said, jumping to her feet.

Wordlessly Logan picked up the staff by one end and hurled it sideways at her. She sidestepped the staff and caught it neatly with one hand, twirled it overhead then rammed it onto the ground and vaulted over the bush, taking the staff with her.

"What is Autumn doing?" asked Cindue's voice behind him.

Logan spun to see Cindue emerge from behind a tree. She was wearing her tunic but both it and she were soaking wet. Her hair was plastered to her head and hung wetly down her back. Disconcertingly her wet tunic hugged her body like a second skin but fortunately it was made of a coarse cloth and not every detail was apparent.

"Oh, umm," muttered Logan, going a little pink. He had seen Autumn fully naked many times before but the sudden appearance of another

girl with her clothing clinging to her thus alarmed him in some unfathomable way. “Umm, she is doing her exercises.”

“Looks like she is fighting a ghost,” remarked Cindue, dripping her way over to the edge of the stream. “Why does she do this?”

“She does it every day,” said Logan, his eyes following her as his face reddened a little more.

“Mayhap, but to what purpose?” asked Cindue, bending forward and sweeping her hair over her head. She started wringing the water out of it while looking upside-down and sideways at Logan.

“Oh, umm, she likes to practice her skills,” said Logan.

“She is a fighter then?” asked Cindue, pausing her squeezing of her hair. A puddle was forming in front of her and the water was even now finding a way to trickle back to the stream.

“Of a sort,” said Logan, unwilling to divulge the true extent of Autumn's skills.

“I fancied I saw that yesterday with that foul excrement of Yammoe,” said Cindue. “She bested his whip quite easily. You were no slouch yourself, Logan.” She resumed her squeezing, working her way down the length of her hair then starting over.

“Oh, 'twas nothing,” muttered Logan, feeling uncomfortable with her gaze upon him, even though she was upside-down.

“Logan! Look out!” screamed Cindue suddenly, jerking herself upright as Autumn appeared behind him and slashed at his head with her staff.

“What?” exclaimed Logan, ducking and twisting round.

Autumn's staff stopped a hand's breadth from where Logan's head had been then dropped to the ground.

“My aim is a little off as well,” remarked Autumn, frowning. She stood

there for a few moments, rubbing her shoulder, as Logan picked himself up and Cindue scowled at her.

“Why did you attack Logan?” she asked.

“Autumn did not attack me,” said Logan. “’Tis just her way of practising not hitting as well as hitting. Did you hurt your shoulder, Autumn?”

“Aye, I misjudged a tree,” said Autumn. “It will pass but I am in dire need of practice.”

She jumped in the air while passing her staff under her feet with both hands on it then, as her feet touched the ground again, she jumped up, somersaulted backwards and disappeared amongst the trees. Cindue stared in astonishment then scowled at Logan.

“What?” he asked, seeing her scowl.

“The pair of you be most strange,” remarked Cindue, “and that one be stranger than you by a long way.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

She turned away and bent over to squeeze her hair some more. Logan couldn't help but notice several dark bruises on the backs of her legs that continued up underneath her tunic. There were some more on her upper arm but they looked more like they were from someone's fingers gripping her arm tightly.

“All this ... whatever this is,” said Cindue, flapping her hand towards wherever Autumn had gone. “Practising not hitting instead of hitting seems wrong and you both be saying the strangest of things. I have never met anyone like you two before.”

“Oh,” said Logan. He didn't know what to say to that so he sat down some distance away from Cindue and facing the stream so he wasn't looking directly at her.

“Like yesterday,” said Cindue, continuing her train of thought, “when

Autumn said you were helping her to know herself. That be right strange. How is it that she does not know herself for she is herself. I can see how she might not know someone else but herself?

“Ahh,” said Logan with a half smile. “Yes, I can see that might cause a little confusion.”

“Did she lose her mind at some time and is struggling to find it again?” asked Cindue.

She gave her hair one last squeeze then, satisfied that little more water would come out, she swung her head so her hair flopped damply against her wet back. There were several thumps and crashes as Autumn continued her battle against some imaginary foe in the woods behind them.

“No,” said Logan. “That isn't what she meant.”

“So what did she mean?” asked Cindue, coming over to sit beside Logan. She was a little too close for comfort so Logan shifted over slightly. He also noticed her distinct odour had receded although it was still discernable.

“I think she meant her true self,” said Logan.

“You mean she has a true self and a false self?” asked Cindue, frowning at Logan. “She is two faced and full of deception? I had not thought that to be so.”

“No, no, you misunderstand me,” said Logan quickly for the thought of anyone thinking Autumn was deceitful was unbearable. “What I mean is ... um ...”

“Well?” asked Cindue. “What do you mean?”

“Tis difficult to explain,” said Logan, frowning and watching a bird fly down and settle on the far bank. “Umm, well, sometimes people pretend they are something when they are not, umm, maybe to make that other person like them, for instance.”

“Is that wrong?” asked Cindue, scratching at a half healed scab on her forearm. “Surely if someone is not liking you when you want them to like you then does it not make sense to change so they do like you after all?”

“Aye, I suppose it does when you put it that way,” said Logan, “but what if you are deceiving yourself in the process? What if you truly believe you are like that when in fact you are not?”

“Does it matter?” asked Cindue, inspecting the sore on her arm now she’d got the scab off.

“Yes,” said Logan. “If you are not true to yourself then you are only deceiving yourself. I grant that mayhap this other person may like you for what you pretend to be but they are not liking the real you that lies underneath.”

“Oh,” said Cindue. She thought about that for a few moments. “But what of it? Surely what is important is that they like you.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, as Autumn’s crashing and thumping got nearer. “But it is still a deception. And, consider this, what if you want two people to like you but they each like different things about you. Would you not then have to make two different kinds of deception, one for each of them? It would then become most difficult if both were with you at the same time for you would not know which face to show.”

“Well, I suppose,” said Cindue reluctantly.

“And what if you came to believe that deception yourself?” asked Logan. “What if you believed yourself to be something when you actually are not? Like, oh, I don’t know, umm, mayhap you believed you were brave when you really were not? What then?”

“Are you brave, Logan?” asked Cindue, looking at him. She put her hand on his arm.

“Not in the least,” said Logan, alarmed at her touch. “But, um, well, if I thought I was brave and fearless then I might put myself into a bad

situation that could not turn out well for I'm not really brave and fearless. That wouldn't be good, would it."

"You seem brave and fearless to me," said Cindue as Autumn's rustling came from not far away. "And I have not thanked you for protecting me yesterday." She turned her face towards Logan and leant forward.

"Ahh, well, mayhap," said Logan with a touch of panic in his voice. He pulled his arm away from Cindue's touch and leant back a little out of the way. "But that is Autumn's intent. To know the truth about herself and not believe things about herself to be so when they are not."

"How interesting," said Cindue, putting her hand on Logan's arm again. "And what do you believe to be true about yourself, Logan? Other than being brave and fearless, of course." She fluttered her eyelashes a few times at him.

"Oh Sploop!" exclaimed Logan, nervously looking around for aid as Autumn burst through the undergrowth behind him. "Ahh there you are Autumn. Oh Voqev!"

He pushed Cindue away hard as Autumn turned out to be Shina Ganam. Several other people came crashing through the undergrowth as well. He grabbed his staff and leapt to his feet just as Cindue jumped up.

Chapter Seven

There were four of them. Shina, Ifgez and two others. Shina and one of them carried short but viciously sharp looking knives that curved inwards. Doubtless they were intended for slicing through clumps of crops but they looked useful for slicing through other things. Ifgez had his cudgel in one hand and a coiled rope in the other. The fourth man had a two pronged fork on a long shaft. They fanned out behind Shina and stood waiting, restlessly toying with their implements.

“So, found you at last,” snarled Shina. “Where be the other girl, eh?”

“What do you want with her?” asked Logan, shifting over so he stood in front of Cindue.

He kept the tip of his staff on the ground a little to one side of him so it wasn't threatening but the other end was in his armpit and his hand grasped it firmly. It could be whipped up and around without hesitation should this visitation turn out to be unfriendly. Not that it showed any sign as yet of being friendly in any way but appearances could be deceptive.

“Nothing,” said Shina. “It be her I want,” and he pointed his knife at Cindue.

Cindue stepped round Logan and spat at Shina. She missed but the point was made.

“No,” said Logan, putting his arm out in front of Cindue in case she attacked Shina. “Regretfully I cannot allow that.”

He brought up his staff so the end pointed at Shina. Ifgez and the other man with a knife who was at the opposite end of the trio both moved further sideways so Logan was surrounded, with the shallow stream behind him.

“Ifgez, Duef, get the girl,” snapped Shina, going into a crouch and waving his knife. The man with the fork stepped forward and made threatening gestures at Logan.

Logan stepped back, pushing Cindue so she was forced to step into the water. Ifgez lunged forward and Logan swung his staff around sharply and caught him hard on his shoulder. He twisted with the swing of the staff, as he had seen Autumn do many times before, and rammed his staff in Duef's chest who gasped and fell to his knees clutching his ribs. Ifgez stumbled, slipped on the bank of the stream and fell head first into the water. Cindue immediately jumped on his back, using her weight to hold his head under the water as he struggled.

"Noften!" exclaimed Shina angrily and lunged forward, swinging his knife around to slice at Logan's neck. At the same time the fork man rammed his fork at Logan's legs. Logan jumped backwards instinctively and fell over Cindue, knocking her sideways. She managed to maintain her grip in Ifgez's hair however and dragged herself back on top of him. He was able to gulp a mouthful of air before his face was once again thrust underwater. With frightening concentration Cindue grimly held him down as he struggled and kicked.

Shina and the fork man had made their first, and last, mistake. Instead of spearing Logan while he was disorientated in the water they both watched and waited for him to get back onto the bank. Doubtless neither wanted to get wet or perhaps both were unused to fighting or simply they were slow thinkers. In any event, Logan climbed back on the bank and, still dripping, he grasped his staff as firmly as he could with both wet hands and lashed out.

Autumn, meanwhile, emerged from the undergrowth on the far side of the stream. She had run back as fast as she could as soon as she'd heard the voices but a quick glance showed Logan had things under control. The shaft of the fork was broken and the fork itself embedded in the ground. The man holding the broken shaft was backing away, afraid of the madman with a whirling staff. The other knife man was on his knees, moaning and clutching his chest. Shina, admittedly, was uninjured and squaring up to Logan while waving his knife threateningly and searching for an opening. His face, however, showed his fear and the dawning realisation that his three companions were bested and he was on his own.

Cindue, however, was still intent on drowning Ifgez and was leaning heavily on his head. His struggles were weakening and every muscle in her lithe body was rigid. Autumn quickly waded over and dragged Cindue off Ifgez by the scruff of her neck and a generous handful of hair. She pulled Cindue onto the bank and Cindue turned on her, her face ugly with murderous rage. She lashed out at Autumn unthinkingly. Autumn caught her hand and pushed her hard against a tree trunk.

“No,” said Autumn firmly. “Let him live.”

“He dies!” screamed Cindue and tried to bite Autumn's nose.

Surprised by noises behind him and Cindue's scream, Logan glanced back and saw Autumn. In relief he let the end of his staff drop and Shina saw his opportunity. He rushed in, his knife raised.

“Logan!” shouted Autumn, catching Shina's movement out of the corner of her eye. She let go of Cindue and hurled herself upon Shina just as Logan recovered and swung his staff up and around. The staff hit Shina on the right side of his upper belly and Autumn's shoulder hit him on the left side of his chest at the same time. 'Twas fortunate his back was not broken. Needless to say he went flying and ended up on his back on the ground with Autumn on top of him.

“Did I hit you? Are you all right?” gasped Logan, dropping his staff and rushing over to pick up Autumn.

“I am unhurt,” said Autumn, getting to her feet. Shina stayed on the ground, winded and in pain, wondering if he'd been caught in a landslide.

Ifgez, coughing and spluttering, struggled to the bank and weakly collapsed. Cindue ran over and kicked him in the side of the head.

“Enough, Cindue!” barked Autumn. “He has no fight left in him. Leave him be.”

“Pah!” exclaimed Cindue and spat on Ifgez. “This scum deserves to die.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but that is for Zeeth to judge, not you. Go over there and calm yourself.”

“Are you sure you are well?” asked Logan worriedly, aghast that he'd hit, or nearly hit, Autumn with his staff. Granted it was accidental but that has no significance to injuries. Cindue looked at Logan with a sullen expression then curled her lip at Autumn but did as she was bid. She slowly and with obvious reluctance walked over to sit on the fallen tree at the edge of the clearing.

“I am entirely well, Logan the Worrier,” Autumn said, turning to look at him now Cindue was no longer a threat. She stood back and gazed appraisingly at Logan. “I confess I was greatly alarmed when I heard Shina's voice and hurried back, berating myself for foolishly going so far into the woods but it seems I need not have returned at all. Logan the Indefatigable had the measure of the situation.”

“I would have been bested at the end there,” said Logan, embarrassed to have been caught off guard but greatly pleased by Autumn's praise. “'Tis fortunate you were able to jump on him.”

“Not so, Logan,” said Autumn. “'Twas only because I interrupted that you were surprised. Had I not arrived you would have bested that man. Of that I am certain.”

“Well, perhaps,” said Logan. His eyes searched Autumn's face in case she was teasing him. There was no sign of such however and suddenly he beamed. “You think I did good?”

“You did most excellently,” said Autumn. “Although I would caution you. Never drop your guard no matter what happens until you are certain your opponent has ended the fight. 'Twas foolish of you to relax simply because I arrived. Shina could have killed you at that moment and I would be bereft.”

“Oh,” said Logan, a little of his euphoria dissipating. “Well I heard Cindue scream and then I saw you ...”

“I grant you needed to know why she screamed,” said Autumn, “but that is no reason to drop your guard. Indeed, it is a good reason to

increase your guard as another attack from behind may have ensued. Moreover, when you turned back and struck Shina with your staff your feet were not best positioned. You would have had greater effect had you had more of your weight on your back foot and your front foot further forward.”

Logan scowled even as he was astonished that Autumn was able to both see and judge his footwork in the instant she was lunging at Shina.

“Aye, you are right,” he said sadly. “I am sorry. I shall work more on my feet.”

Autumn suddenly stepped forward and hugged him.

“I am proud of you, Logan Warrior,” she whispered. “My heart is filled with joy that you are unhurt.”

“Sploop!” exclaimed Logan when he was able to breath again. His face was burning but he didn't notice.

“Now, let us attend to the injured,” said Autumn, turning to practical matters. “Did they bring any rope?”

“Umm,” said Logan, looking around helplessly.

“It's in the water,” said Cindue crossly. “He dropped it when Logan hit him.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “Logan, would you find it for me while I check the others? I dare say one or two will need binding in case they try again.”

“I'll do it,” said Cindue, “although why you do not kill them I cannot fathom.”

“Because killing is them is unnecessary,” said Autumn, turning to look at her. “It serves no useful purpose.”

“You speak nonsense,” said Cindue bitterly. “Had you killed those two

last time they would not have returned. Doubtless you will let them go so they can come back again and likely with yet more to help them. Mayhap you like putting Logan's life in danger. Kill them now and be done with it."

Autumn stared at Cindue for a few moments while Logan quietly fished in the water for the rope..

"Aye, 'tis a view for certain," she said, "and has some merit. However it does not accord with my background and training. I see no benefit to killing when it is unnecessary and likely after this Shina and his companions will have gained from the experience and will not only not attack us again but will be less likely to attack other travellers in the future."

"Tis a foolish thought," said Cindue. "Scum like these care nothing for others."

"Perhaps," said Autumn, "perhaps not. But surely you can agree this is an opportunity for them to learn and perhaps change their ways? For certain they cannot change their ways if they are dead."

"Nor will they when they return with twice their numbers and kill us," said Cindue. "Why risk it?"

"That will make no difference," said Logan, coming over with the soaking rope in his hand. "Even with thrice their numbers Autumn will best them. You can be sure of that."

"Mayhap you would, Logan," said Cindue, "but how will Autumn best anyone when she only practices not hitting rather than hitting? I venture 'twas only that your staff hitting that pig when she jumped on him that stopped him laying her out cold."

"You are greatly mistaken," exclaimed Logan, his voice hardening. "Autumn is easily able ..."

"Enough, Logan," said Autumn, holding up her hand. "There is time enough to discuss these matters later. Let us attend to the injured first and, if they are willing, I would like to talk with them as well."

Cindue snorted and Logan subsided although it went against the grain to let anyone be critical of Autumn.

* * *

“So, one uninjured but frightened, two with broken ribs and one half drowned with cuts and lumps on his head,” said Autumn as Logan collected their weapons and put them well out of reach. “They will be in pain for a time but 'tis nothing greatly serious.”

The men sat with their backs to some trees and Ifgez and the frightened man had their hands and feet tied. Shina and Duef were unlikely to make any trouble given their injuries.

“So what shall we do with them?” he asked. “Leave them here or take them back to wherever they came from?”

“Give them to Yammoe,” muttered Cindue darkly.

Autumn ignored her and sat on the ground near Shina.

“Are you able to talk, Shina?” she asked.

“Aye,” said Shina with a wince. He had one broken rib from where Logan's staff had hit him and two on the other side from Autumn's shoulder.

“Am I right in thinking that you have a farm near here?” asked Autumn, “and these others work for you?”

“Aye,” said Shina again. His voice was quiet as anything much above a loud whisper was painful.

“And these others are also bought and paid for?” asked Autumn. “Like Cindue?”

“Nay,” said Shina. “They work for me in the usual way.”

“What is the usual way?” asked Autumn.

“Them two,” and he tried to nod towards Duef and the other but it was too painful, “comes and asks for work and I give it them. Ifgez be working for me for many summers.”

“So they do work and you pay them?” asked Autumn.

Shina slightly nodded his head.

“So why is Cindue different?” she asked.

“She be with me under taug cohmm,” muttered Shina.

“And what is that?” asked Autumn as Logan sat down.

“Tis a new way of finding workers,” said Shina.

“New in what way?” she asked.

“They are promised to work for several summers,” said Shina. He groaned and shifted position a little to ease his chest. “Old way was they buggered off after harvesting and like as not never come back.”

“I see,” said Autumn, puzzled. “How is it that Cindue is bought and paid for? Is she not just another worker like those two?”

“She can't go until her debts are paid off,” said Shina. “That be the agreement.”

“Twas not agreed by me,” snapped Cindue.

“Then who was it agreed with?” asked Autumn.

“A trader up north,” said Ifgez. “He visited us last summer and spoke with Shina. I was sent to fetch that 'un from them as wanted to sell her. I was bringing her here, like, to start work.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn. “Sell her? Did you not tell me yourself when we first met that slaving is against the law?”

“Ain't slaving,” said Shina. “Them yooks be getting a wage so it ain't

slaving.”

“But these yooks are still bought and sold?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“Tis only a manner of speaking,” said Ifgez. “A yook be working for someone to pay off their debt, see. If them as who they be working for wants rid of them someone else takes over the debt. Ain't selling as such, more handing over what is owed.”

“I still do not understand,” said Autumn, her frown deepening. “How is it that such a person owes a debt in the first place?”

“Well, there be the fee for finding 'em,” said Shina, “then the cost of transport and for feeding and sheltering 'em and clothing and what have you.” He closed his eyes and wished he was dead after all.

“Tell me,” said Logan, leaning forward. “How is Cindue or another to pay off this debt?”

“Out of their wages,” said Ifgez when it became apparent Shina wasn't going to answer. “They work for us until all the debt be paid off or him there,” and he nodded at Shina, “sells the debt to another.”

“And how long does that usually take?” asked Logan.

No one answered.

“I do not understand,” said Autumn. “This mystifies me. I know of working for money but working for debt? 'Tis beyond my comprehension.”

“I wager 'tis a trick to get around the law,” said Logan. “What say you, Shina?”

Shina didn't answer. He just sat there, hanging his head and looking miserable.

“How is this getting around the law?” asked Autumn. “All you do is muddy the water, Logan, not clear it.”

“Tis slaving of a form, I wager,” said Logan. “I know not what the law actually says but I venture if someone is paid a wage then they are not thought to be slaves. But, and mayhap Shina or Ifgez will say I am wrong, if the person they are working for charges more for their costs than they pay them the worker will never be able to pay off the debt and be enslaved yet because they are earning a wage the law says they are not slaves. Is that right, Shina? Ifgez?”

Neither answered so Logan prodded Shina with his staff. Shina yelped and nodded.

“So what is taug cohmm?” asked Autumn, her face set.

“Answer,” said Logan, prodding Shina again.

“Tis a contract,” said Shina reluctantly. “Taug cohmm be a contract where the yook works until a debt is paid off.”

“And who is this contract with?” asked Autumn. “Cindue would seem not to have agreed to any such contract.”

“Them farmers up north,” said Shina. “Them as sold the debt to me.”

“So they had the same taug cohmm contract with someone else?” asked Autumn, “or did Cindue make this agreement with them?”

“I ain’t never made any agreement,” said Cindue vehemently. “I was taken prisoner and sent to that farm.”

“I wager the original agreement was made with whoever took Cindue prisoner,” said Logan, “rather than Cindue herself.”

“Likely this Tioksen,” said Autumn, nodding thoughtfully.

“Aye, that was the trader who came to see me,” said Shina. “He said it be a new way of finding workers what be better for me and for them. Made sense to me so I said I be trying it out. That ‘un be the first and I reckon she be the last as well. Ain’t never had no trouble like this before with workers.” He spat and winced.

"I confess I am at a loss to see how it would be better for the workers," said Autumn, raising her eyebrows. "Trapped until they pay off a debt which is ever increasing?"

"Aye, well, if you put it like that," said Shina. "Tioksen said it be better for them since they will always be having a roof over their heads and food in their bellies and won't never go hungry again."

"As long as you keep feeding them," said Logan wryly. "What manner of food do you provide?"

"Well she ain't got to the farm yet," said Ifgez.

"But what food were you intending?" asked Autumn. "Fresh meat and vegetables? Bread, cheese, milk?"

"Oh bits and bobs," said Ifgez evasively. "Tioksen said the yooks be grateful for whatever they be getting."

"What did you get fed at this other farm, Cindue?" asked Logan.

"Scraps," said Cindue. "Same as the pigs and chickens. Never enough though."

Chapter Eight

“Do you think Shina will find another yook now he has lost Cindue?” asked Logan as they followed the path heading roughly north.

In truth it was not a path, nor even a track for it was overgrown but there were occasional cart ruts and other signs that people passed this way if only occasionally. This suggested that ahead lay a destination of some sort that some desired to achieve, even if infrequently.

“Tis my hope,” said Autumn. “He did say that she was the first and will be the last but whether he will keep that view I cannot say.”

“I confess I was surprised you did not extract some sort of promise or oath from him,” said Logan, skirting around a large puddle.

“It seemed fruitless,” said Autumn.

“Tis the wrong season for fruit,” said Cindue, catching up after inspecting a fallen tree. She’d hoped there was a nest or burrow beside it but to her dismay there weren’t even any mushrooms. “But there may be some old fruit still hanging although it will be insect ridden and likely dry and shrivelled. Where did you see it?”

“We were not talking of fruit,” said Autumn. “I was merely saying I saw no prospect of Shina staying beholden to any promises now we are gone from his land.”

“Oh,” said Cindue. “What would you have made him promise?”

“Not to take any more yooks,” said Logan. “Tis a bad thing.”

“Aye, that it is,” said Cindue, “and I thank you both for aiding me.”

“Tis my aim to help those suffering whenever I can,” said Autumn. “I do not seek thanks.”

“And what is your aim, Logan?” asked Cindue, walking beside him.

“To aid Autumn,” said Logan, conscious that she was walking a little

closer to him than was strictly necessary. “Not that she needs my aid.”

“Do not believe Logan when he says things like that,” said Autumn. “He thinks such things are funny but I know not why.”

“It did not seem funny to me,” said Cindue. “If everyone aided others then this would be a better place.”

“That is true enough,” said Autumn. She walked on several more paces. “Ahh, Logan, I was not being entirely open with you. There is more to this than simply fruitlessness.”

“How so?” asked Logan, looking at her with a mildly puzzled expression.

“All this talk of fruit is making me hungry,” said Cindue, “and fruitlessness is making it worse.”

“Mayhap you could catch us another rabbit,” said Logan, glancing at her.

“I will, if I see one,” said Cindue.

“Good,” said Logan. “You were saying, Autumn?”

“Merely that as we were talking with Shina something Hysleria said came into my mind,” said Autumn.

“Who is Hysleria?” asked Cindue. “Tis a funny name.”

“He is someone we know in Aferraron,” said Autumn. “Likely you do not recall, Logan, but he said that the only rights people have are those allowed to them by those stronger than they.”⁹

“I do remember something along those lines,” said Logan. “What of it?”

“His remark came to me when talking with Shina,” said Autumn. “You

9 See *The Annals ~ The Tenth Tale*. Hysleria's point in their discussion on the nature of power was that Autumn by being the victor was able to enforce her views on others whether they accepted those views or not.

had bested him and restored Cindue's freedom to her but it seemed to me to be wrong of us to impose our wills upon him by extracting a promise to never take another yook again. Does that not put us in the same place as him when he bought Cindue?"

"Not at all," said Logan, frowning. "The situation is entirely different!"

"How so?" asked Autumn. "Our insisting on him doing what we want is entirely similar to him insisting Cindue does what he wants."

"Not in the slightest," said Logan, stopping to look at Autumn. "What he wanted with Cindue was entirely bad as he was making her a slave. We gave her back her freedom and that, surely, is good. The intent is what makes it different."

"Aye, that was my first thought," said Autumn, "but then it came to me that there may have been some truth in what he was saying. Have we not met some on our travels who were in need of food and shelter and, by entering into such an agreement, would they not have been better off?"

"Aye, if such aid was freely given," said Logan. "But it was not. The giving of such aid under this taug cohm thing is simply a trap intended to get around the laws on slaving. You heard Cindue. Such food as she was given was poor and insufficient. Is that not so, Cindue?"

"Aye," said Cindue. "I was always hungry."

"Good," said Autumn, walking on. "We are of like mind although it does raise a dilemma."

"Which is?" asked Logan, following her. Cindue shrugged and followed Logan.

"How can we establish intent when we come across a situation that, on the face of it, would seem bad?" asked Autumn. "Again, if I may use you as an example, Cindue, what if the arrangement with Cindue was entirely beneficial but, because we came upon the situation by surprise we did not have time to determine the intent of Shina and

merely jumped to a conclusion.”

“So you think we may have wronged Shina?” asked Logan.

“Likely not,” said Autumn, “for in Cindue’s case we spoke with Shina and it was apparent that he did not have Cindue’s welfare at heart. And, as I think on it, that raises another issue in my mind but to stay with my original point, how can we be certain that we are in the right of it? And, if we cannot be certain then by what right do we seek to change things?”

“We have talked on this before,” said Logan. “We can only know what we know at the time of making a judgement and act accordingly. That is why intent is important.”

“But what if the intent is good but the outcome bad?” asked Autumn.

“You are both talking nonsense,” said Cindue. “I do not see what purpose there is to this. Slaving is a bad thing and you rescued me. Unless your intent was to make me your slave as well then I cannot see how this talk achieves anything.”

“The slaving is but one thing,” said Autumn. “What Logan and I are talking of is a general thing. Given a certain situation how can we decide whether some action is for the best or not.”

“Still seems a pointless talk to me,” said Cindue. “If the situation is bad and you can change it then change it. What is the problem with that?”

“A fair point,” said Autumn. “But consider this. We took you from Shina and then discussed the situation with him. What if, as a consequence of that, he decides to continue with taug cohnm but changes his intent. What if his intent becomes a desire to put the welfare of his yooks first and foremost? Would that not be a good thing? Moreover, if we extracted from him an oath to never take another yook again would we not then be condemning those who would have benefited from that to a life of hunger?”

“You think that is likely?” asked Cindue, a touch contemptuously.

“That piss-soaked foulness?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” said Autumn. “But do you not see the possibility? Moreover, in other situations, might such a good outcome be quite likely?”

“You're full of shit!” exclaimed Cindue. “You'll be wanting to take me back next! Well I ain't going, that's for certain!” She stopped and started to back away, looking challengingly from Autumn to Logan and back again.

“Calm yourself, Cindue,” said Autumn going over to her. “Please. There is no question of you going back to Shina.”

“Then why are you talking of it?” asked Cindue, backing away a little further.

“Because that's what we do,” said Logan with a laugh. He walked back as well and took Cindue's hand. She resisted then relaxed as his touch was friendly and not grasping the way Ifgez's had been. “Autumn is a krisana and I have been her companion for several summers. We spend most of our time arguing pointless details.”

“I would most definitely disagree with you there, Logan,” said Autumn, taking Cindue's other hand. “There is a point to every detail.”

“So what is the point to this conversation?” asked Logan, “beyond scaring Cindue?”

“I venture it is much the same as in many of our other discussions,” said Autumn. “How do we know when we do something that what we are doing is for the best. And, given what Hysleria said, how do we know if we are simply imposing something because we are stronger rather than because it is right?”

“I still say you talk nonsense,” said Cindue, calm again and content to have them both holding her hands. It had been a long time since she'd felt a kindly touch.

“What is your reason for saying that?” asked Autumn.

“Tis simple,” said Cindue. “If you have good in your heart then you do the best you can whatever the situation and Yammoe take the consequences.”

Logan burst out laughing.

“I think Cindue has bested you there, Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup,” he exclaimed. “Get out of that if you can.”

“Pah!” exclaimed Autumn, pulling her hand from Cindue's. “That is not even the beginnings of a challenge.”

“How so?” asked Cindue. “Seems pretty simple to me.”

“Tell me, Cindue,” said Autumn. “How do you know what is best?”

“That which relieves suffering,” said Cindue. “Obviously, and that is what Logan said your aim is anyway.”

“True enough,” said Autumn. “But best for who? For the one who is immediately suffering or for others who will suffer as a consequence of my actions? And when? What if less best now would result in something much better in the future?”

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

“Let us suppose there are five people, all starving and at Yammoe's gate,” said Autumn. “I have enough food for one but not all five. Should I give one of them the food or would it be better to kill one of them and give that body to the other four to eat? We shall not consider the problem of which of the five to choose in either case. What is best is such a situation?”

“Umm,” said Cindue, confused. She let go of Logan's hand and scratched her head. “I don't know.”

“I venture if you have good in your heart then killing one will not be

an option,” said Logan, feeling a little sorry for Cindue.

“Aye, 'twas a poor example,” said Autumn, “but 'tis easy to say do your best but not so easy to know what your best is.”

“I know!” exclaimed Cindue suddenly. “’Twould be best to divide what little food you have between the five and keep them all alive for a little longer then go in search of more food. If you do not find any then all will die of hunger but they would have anyway and if you do find food you have saved them all. Surely that would be best?”

“I venture you have the right of it, Cindue,” said Autumn. She stopped and looked appraisingly at Cindue. “Although it does give rise to the question of what if you only think of what is best some time after doing what you thought was best at the time.”

“Now I am lost,” admitted Cindue, scowling. “Say that again only more slowly.”

“’Tis of no matter,” said Autumn. “Tell me of yourself. I confess I had not expected you to argue so well.”

“Aye, mayhap she has the makings of a krisana herself,” said Logan, smiling to himself.

“What is this krisana thing you keep talking of?” asked Cindue. “I have never heard of such a thing and what has it to do with Vallume and Mizule and the others?”

“Have you heard of an Esyup?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Cindue. “Is it something from where you are from?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “’Tis a place of great learning and I am from such a place.”

“Ohhhh,” said Cindue, wondering if she should be impressed or not. “And what is it you are all learning?”

“Mostly how to argue at length on nothing in particular,” said

Autumn, “much as you have heard Logan and I.”

“To what purpose?” asked Cindue.

“To determine the truth,” said Autumn, “although quite what the truth is no one has yet fully explained.”

“And now you are back to nonsense,” said Cindue. “I am hungry and that's the truth.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “but what if I gave you some food? You might say that you are still hungry after eating it and that would be the truth to you but I might say you couldn't possibly still be hungry and that would be the truth to me. Truth is something that seems to be obvious but in reality can shift and change depending on the situation and who is saying what is truth and what is not.”

“I think it would have been better had I'd stayed with Shina,” said Cindue wryly.

“In truth?” exclaimed Autumn, taken aback.

“No,” said Cindue, keeping a straight face. “I was joking.”

“Is she joking, Logan?” asked Autumn, looking at him with a worried expression.

“Yes, definitely,” said Logan, smirking. “All Cindue meant is that she finds you confusing.”

“But perhaps not as confusing as I find humour,” said Autumn drily. “Enough of this. You were going to tell us of yourself, Cindue.”

“There is little enough to tell,” said Cindue with a shrug. “I was taken prisoner when I was foraging for food with some friends, or so I was told, and after several days I was given to a man in Oas'tal. His name was Mikh Chap and he kept me chained to a wall and beat me many times and fed me nothing until I was too weak to run away then he sold me to Neiter and Sayam near Rudailk. There I was forced to work on a farm. 'Twas there I quickly learned to befoul myself for

there were two other girls there who were made to do things by the men but because of my filth I was left alone. After two summers they grew tired of beating me for being useless and ruining their crops so they sold me to Ifgez. 'Twas on the way to Shina's farm I saw an opportunity to escape and there you found me."

"So you were told?" asked Autumn, frowning. "You did not know you were foraging with friends?"

"I have no memory of the time before I was taken by Tioksen," said Cindue. "I only know what I was told by those who said they were my friends but I know not if they were my friends. They also told me my name was Cindue but I know not the truth of that. For certain they were not given to Mikn Chap. Only three men and me were handed over. The two who claimed my friendship were not. What happened to them I do not know."

"How is it you know nothing of that time?" asked Autumn. "Were you hit on the head?"

"I do not think so," said Cindue. "I have thought about that time but all I remember is waking up in the back of a cart with chains on my arms and legs. The two I was with told me what had happened and I have no reason to doubt them."

"Most strange," said Autumn. "You said are from Esu'taw?"

"So I was told," said Cindue. "I have no memory of the place, nor of my family nor where it is, save that it is the other side of the mountains."

"How do you know that?" asked Logan.

"The cart was driven through the mountains," said Cindue. "We were taken to Oas'tal so I wager Esu'taw is no great distance from there."

"Do you know where Oas'tal is?" asked Logan.

"Only it is some way to the north and near mountains," said Cindue. "Oh, and it is on the Hrea River. Several times Mikn Chap threatened

to throw me in the Hrea River if I did not behave.”

“There is much here that puzzles me,” said Autumn. “I know not where these places are nor what armies are fighting nor why they fight for we are strangers in this land and know nothing other than a little of Tafa’ul.”

“What is Tafa’ul?” asked Cindue.

“Tis the main city of Tersees,” said Autumn, “and the place of the Saamrat of Sassese’lte.”

“These words have no meaning to me,” said Cindue, frowning. “Saamrat? Sassese’lte?”

“This land is called Sassese’lte,” said Autumn, “although I think we are in a part of it called Us-Iota. Do you not know this?”

“No,” said Cindue shrugging. “I have no idea what land this is nor which land I am from. All I know is where I have been which is Esu’taw, Oas’tal and Rudailk. I do not even know where I was going save that it was where Shina was.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “Well, likely that is not surprising if you were taken prisoner and brought south. Mayhap Esu’taw is not in Sassese’lte which may explain to some extent why there was a war. Doubtless that will become clear when we find the place. More puzzling, however, is your nature.”

“How so?” asked Cindue, seeming to shrink into herself a little. “You do not like me?”

“Not at all,” said Autumn. “We like you well enough, do we not Logan?”

“Oh, err, yes,” said Logan, a pinkness coming over his face. “Yes we do like you.”

“Do you really Logan?” asked Cindue, edging a little closer to him as they walked.

“Umm, yes,” said Logan, edging away. “Umm, what do you mean, her nature?”

“Only that Cindue is clearly intelligent and has no little learning,” said Autumn. “Indeed, it is as you said, Logan. Cindue would not be out of place as a novice at my Esyup. I have difficulty seeing her as the child of a labourer or farmer who was taken by force and sold into slavery.”

“And yet that is what happened,” said Cindue, “unless you doubt my word.”

“I have no reason to doubt it,” said Autumn, stopping to look at Cindue. “But I would very much like to know what happened before you were captured and how it came to be that you have no memory of that time nor of your life before.”

Chapter Nine

“What are you doing?” asked Cindue, slumping to the ground beside Logan. As always she sat a little too close to Logan and he shifted over slightly to give her, and himself, more space.

Cindue was breathing heavily and her brow was damp with sweat. Intrigued by Autumn's morning cavorting she had tried to match Autumn's somersaults, jump rolls, twisting lunges and what have you but had soon given up as Autumn was too fast for her. Then Cindue had spent a while trying to copy Autumn's rather neat little trick of dropping down on one leg and spinning with one hand touching the ground for balance and the opposite leg outstretched. After getting entangled several times Cindue had then had a brief panic attack as Autumn whirled around her, chopping and punching with her hands and elbows but never once touching her. Then when Autumn had slowed sufficiently for Cindue to see where exactly she was Cindue had lashed out with a fist and, to one watching, had appeared to send Autumn flying even though Cindue had felt no contact. However, Autumn crashed heavily to the ground, rolled backwards then got to her feet with a strange upward kick with both legs that somehow involved her arms and left her standing upright in a single movement. That done, Autumn had bowed to Cindue with her palms together at chest height, smiled then run off to jump up and catch a tree branch almost a body length above her, spin around it then leap over to a branch on another tree before disappearing into the woods.

Somewhat bemused by Autumn's antics Cindue had then made several attempts to leap up and catch the branch herself but not managed to get close even with a long run up. Three times she'd fallen on her face and once, the last time, she'd slipped on take off and crashed headlong into a bush.

“I'm working on the rabbit skin,” said Logan, holding it up. “The other is not yet dried enough but this one is.”

“Oh,” said Cindue. She wiped her face then started picking bits of leaves and broken twigs from her hair. “What you making?” she asked after a while.

There was a distant crash and a yelp as Autumn made a mistake, most likely deliberately, and Logan looked up and smiled. Autumn often made deliberate mistakes in order to practice recovering from them.

"'Tis going to be a water carrier," he said. "I've folded over the ends of the legs and bound them tight with stalks so the water doesn't pour out. Now I'm coating the ends with goo from a tree."

"Why?" asked Cindue. Satisfied her hair was reasonably free of bits and pieces she looked around for some long grass stalks and leant over to pluck three or four.

"When it dries it will seal the legs," said Logan. "That way water shouldn't seep out. Have you never made a water skin before?"

"I don't know," said Cindue. She gathered her hair, which hung in long matted ropes like black snakes each the width of her finger, into a bundle and wrapped the grass stalks around so the thick bundle hung down to touch the ground behind where she sat. "What do you do with its neck and arse?"

"The neck I will leave open so we can drink from it and refill it," said Logan. "I'll do its arse the same way as the legs. I confess I don't like drinking from a rabbit's arse."

"Doubtless 'tis clean enough," she said with a snort. "What with all that scraping you did. Will not the water all slosh out of its neck? 'Tis a big enough hole."

"No," said Logan. "I'll fold that over as well and hold it tight with a piece of split wood. All that remains is to find some creepers or cord so the skin can be carried over my shoulder. 'Twill be awkward carrying it in my hands when it is full of water. With Aloidia's aid I will find some cord in the next village for I have not seen any creepers in these woods."

"Where did you learn to make water skins?" she asked.

"From my Da," he said, putting the rabbit skin down in a patch of

sunlight. "I was mayhap four or five summers when I made my first." He leant back and laughed. "'Twas a piss poor job too for water went everywhere when we filled it. I had not tied the openings tightly enough nor spread the goo thick enough."

"This was back in Aferraron?" asked Cindue.

"Aye," said Logan. He leant forward again, listening intently. "I can't hear Autumn. I wonder where she's got to?"

"She does this every morning?" asked Cindue

"Aye," said Logan, looking around with a frown.

"What for?" asked Cindue, not overly concerned that Autumn was nowhere to be seen.

"So she can keep her skills sharp," said Logan. "She told me once that if she does not do her exercises for three days she gets too slow to fight effectively so she does these things every day."

"Seems a funny way of practising for fighting," said Cindue, wrinkling her nose. "Rolling on the ground and jumping into trees. What manner of fighting is that? She does not even practice hitting!"

"Well, her way is unlike any you may have seen before," said Logan, a touch of complacency in his voice. "You have to see it to believe it but she has never been bested. She says she has but I've never seen it."

"That I do not believe," said Cindue with a snort. "She be much the same size as me. Does she only fight rabbits and bushes and the like and leave the fighting of men to you?"

"Oh no," said Logan. "I am not a fighter although I have been learning a few skills. No, Autumn is ... is ... oh, I have not the words to tell you how good she is but she is even better than that. 'Twas not so long ago she bested fifteen armed men and ..."¹⁰

10 See *The Annals ~ The Tenth Tale*. Autumn and Logan escaped from the pirates lead by Tefkuu but were later caught by them on the beach at Rhabir. Needless to say Autumn did best fifteen men while ensuring Logan escaped.

He broke off suddenly as Autumn's staff crashed down between them. Cindue gave a little scream and lurched to the side, hunching up with her arms over her head.

"Ahh, there you are, Autumn," said Logan, unruffled. "I was beginning to worry about you."

"My apologies for frightening you, Cindue," said Autumn, stepping between them, "but Logan was about to speak an untruth and I had to intervene."

"I do not know why you keep saying I am not speaking the truth on this," said Logan, scowling. "There were pirates everywhere and you bested at least fifteen of them so I could get away. You left one dead, one scalped, another with a broken jaw, someone with no teeth left and one on fire and yet you insist this did not happen! 'Tis beyond my understanding!"

"You need to understand, Cindue," said Autumn calmly, sitting down, "that Logan has an overly high regard for my skills. 'Tis true enough there was a fair number of these pirates but many were still in their boats and those on the beach came at me in groups so it was not fifteen in one swoop. Moreover, the one who died was not by my hand, nor was the breaking of the jaw for Logan did that."

"That I believe for I have seen how Logan fights," said Cindue, "and most brave he is too although I wonder that he left the fighting to you for he does not seem the type to run away. The rest, aye, I fancy Logan is making that up as you say."

"I am not making it up!" exclaimed Logan, thumping his hand on the ground. "Autumn really did best those men!"

"Yet Autumn says otherwise," said Cindue, looking at Logan. "Are you calling her a liar?"

"Voqev!" exclaimed Logan. "Autumn, tell her the truth! I will not permit you to do yourself down like this!"

"Ahh, what is truth, Logan?" said Autumn, shaking her head slowly.

“You say one thing and I say another. Mayhap if any of those pirates were here some or all could confirm what is being said but the truth is that you and I see things differently. You see a great victory whereas I see only people injured and suffering who I was not able to aid. I see only my failure and that is the greater truth.”

“Pah!” exclaimed Logan. He twisted so he wasn't facing Autumn anymore.

“But there really was a fight?” asked Cindue, puzzled.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Regretfully I was unable to avoid it and people got hurt.”

“And you fought fifteen of them?” asked Cindue, her eyes narrowing.

“At least fifteen!” snapped Logan. “Likely more.”

“And just as likely fewer,” retorted Autumn. “Twas on dusk and time did not allow us to do a full tally.”

“Where was Logan?” asked Cindue. “Surely he did not run away?”

“No, he did not,” said Autumn. “He wanted to stay and fight but I would not let him.”

“You are both making fun of me,” cried Cindue, scowling. Her feet scrabbled on the ground as she tried to shift backwards and away from Autumn and Logan. “You made Logan run away so you could fight fifteen men indeed! 'Tis all nonsense and tosh. You are making it all up! 'Tis not nice to make fun of people!”

“You see?” exclaimed Logan, twisting back around. “Now you have upset Cindue!”

“I apologise, Cindue,” said Autumn, leaning forward to put her hand on Cindue's arm. “Twas never my intent to upset you, merely to clarify Logan's words. Let us say no more on this matter for the past is past and cannot be changed.”

“Tell me true,” said Cindue, staring challengingly at Autumn. “Was there a fight with pirates?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “But the most important thing has not been spoken of.”

“And what is that?” asked Cindue.

“Regardless of the numbers and the injuries,” said Autumn, “both Logan and I are here now and likely the pirates have given up looking for us. That is what matters.”

“Oh faff!” exclaimed Logan.

“Is that why you have nothing?” asked Cindue. “The pirates took everything you had?”

“They took a few coins and two rings,” admitted Autumn. “Nothing of any consequence however.”

“That explains much,” said Cindue thoughtfully. “You were set upon by pirates and stripped of everything but managed to escape. Aye, I had wondered for you give the appearance of beggars yet you say you are travellers from another land which confused me for why would travellers from another land be beggars here? Moreover travellers need a lot of coins so 'tis no wonder you drew the attention of pirates. Why did you not say so from the beginning? All this talk of besting fifteen men! Pah, I knew it was just a tale from the start.”

“We are most certainly travellers and not beggars,” said Autumn, putting her hand on Logan's arm as he opened his mouth to protest. “And you are right. Logan should not have talked of fighting. It served no purpose.”

“But ...” started Logan and Autumn squeezed his arm. “Oww!”

“My apologies, Logan,” said Autumn, releasing him. “Let us speak no more on this matter. Shall we move on or shall we stay here for a time?”

“Let us move on,” said Logan, disgruntled. “I don’t like this spot any more.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “Let me quickly wash and comb my hair then we will be on our way.”

She got up in a single graceful movement and stepped over to the stream. Logan prodded some of the goo on the rabbit and decided it was hard enough to travel although not yet hard enough to hold water. He rolled up the skin then went to fetch his blanket. Cindue rolled her blanket, which was Autumn’s, then went into the bushes.

“Would this be of any use, Logan,” she asked, re-emerging from the bushes. She held up a length of thin cord, neatly coiled.

“That would be perfect,” he said, uncoiling the cord. “’Tis enough here for both skins, I wager. Where did you find it?”

“’Twas over there by that bush,” she said, pointing.

“What, there?” asked Logan, frowning. “But that is where I slept and I did not ... oh Vogev!”

He froze, staring at the bush.

“What’s the matter?” asked Cindue.

“Is all well?” called Autumn from beside the stream.

“Cindue found this cord,” said Logan, waving it at Autumn but still staring at the bush.

“That is good,” said Autumn, walking over to look. “Why are you looking like that?”

“Was there anything else there?” asked Logan.

“No, just the cord,” said Cindue. “Why? What else did you want?”

“That’s just it,” said Logan, going over to investigate around the bush.

“Why would a nice new looking piece of cord be here just when I wanted a piece of cord?”

“Is there a message?” asked Autumn, going over to look at the bush as well.

“What is going on?” asked Cindue, confused.

“We have a friend,” said Autumn. “She sometimes leaves us gifts in unexpected places.”

“I can't find any message,” said Logan, scrabbling around on his hands and knees.

“Then likely it wasn't her,” said Autumn.

“Are you playing more games with me?” exclaimed Cindue. “You have a friend who follows you around and leaves you gifts? What nonsense do you speak now?”

“Tis not nonsense,” said Logan. “Tis just that when she leaves a gift it usually means there is trouble ahead.”

“But there is no message, Logan,” said Autumn. “That would mean that this is just a piece of cord that someone has left behind, nothing more.”

“Aye,” said Logan, stopping scrabbling. He sat back on his heels and gazed at the ground.

“Have you quite finished?” asked Cindue sarcastically.

“And even if there was a message,” said Autumn, “it is wrong of you to assume trouble lies ahead. We have spoken on this before. Do not Mother Midcarn's gifts mean we will prevail when trouble comes to meet us?”

“Mother Midcarn?” said Cindue, frowning. “Mother Midcarn? Why do I feel I know that name?”

“You know Mother Midcarn?” asked Autumn, her head jerking around to look intently at Cindue.

“Oh Sploop!” groaned Logan. “I knew there would be trouble!” He slowly got to his feet.

“I do not know anyone by that name,” said Cindue, still frowning, “and yet ...”

“And yet?” asked Autumn, going over to her. Logan followed, studying the cord in his hands.

“I feel that is a name I know,” said Cindue, her expression changing to puzzlement. “How? Why? I have no idea. 'Tis just a feeling I have.” She shivered and looked around. “Who is this Mother Midcarn and why does she follow you? Where is she?”

“Likely still in Aferraron,” said Autumn. She bit her bottom lip, deep in thought. “For some reason unknown to us you have no memory of your time before you were taken prisoner, is that so?”

“Indeed,” said Cindue. “As I told you.”

“And your memories of your time since?” asked Autumn. “Are they good?”

“Good is not a word I would use,” snapped Cindue. “Bad would be a better word. Dire and terrible still better.”

“My apologies,” said Autumn. “That is not what I meant. I meant only to ask if your memories on these past two summers or so are intact or if you have more missing memories.”

“Much as I have tried to rid myself of those memories they are still with me,” said Cindue. “At times they come to me in my sleep as well.”

“Doubtless,” said Autumn. “It takes a deal of strength of mind to not dwell on such bad things as have happened. Tell me though. Have you met Mother Midcarn since you were taken prisoner?”

"I have no memory of that," said Cindue, thinking about it. "I knew everyone on the farm I was at although it could be that she was one of those at Tioksen's place of cruelty. There were others there that I did not speak to or hear their names."

"I cannot believe that she would have been at such a place," said Autumn, pursing her lips. "Is it possible you could have heard someone talk of her?"

"Aye, it's possible," said Cindue. "Why are you questioning me like this?"

"Once again I apologise," said Autumn. "'Tis only that Mother Midcarn is a person of great significance and ability and I was most curious as to how your paths crossed."

"I did not say our paths crossed," said Cindue, starting to get irritated. "Only that I have heard the name. Nay, not even that, only that I feel I have heard the name. Nothing more. Doubtless I am mistaken."

"There is another possibility," said Logan, happy, to an extent, now that he had not found any messages.

"That Cindue feels she knows the name from before she was taken prisoner?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Logan. "Could it be her memory is beginning to come back?"

"Likely that is the truth of it," said Autumn. "Mayhap the simple fact that she is no longer a slave and treated badly is enough to let that happen."

"I truly hope so," said Cindue. "You cannot begin to understand what it is like to have no memory of who you are and what you were."

"That I can believe," said Autumn. "I forget things from time to time but to forget everything? Ahh, 'twould be a most dreadful thing. Do you remember anything else from back then?"

Cindue screwed up her face then slowly shook her head.

“No,” she said. “Nothing.”

“Likely it will take time,” said Autumn. “For certain I have no idea how to aid you in this.”

“Tell me more of Mother Midcarn,” said Cindue. “You said she is someone of great significance and ability so mayhap telling me of her will aid my memory.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “She is an elderly woman we know in Aferraron. Somewhat shorter than me but decidedly wider with a cheerful face and long grey hair. Does that help?”

“No,” said Cindue. “I have no memory of old grey haired fat women.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “What if I said she is a sorcerer of great power?”

“That I would remember I am sure,” said Cindue. “Unless it was she who took away my memory. Or is this another of your made up little stories to try to confuse me?”

Chapter Ten

“Sploop!” exclaimed Logan in surprise as he emerged from the woods.

“Interesting,” said Autumn, emerging behind him.

“What is it?” asked Cindue, unable to emerge with Autumn and Logan standing in front of her and a tree on either side.

“Tis a village,” said Autumn, glancing behind. “Is this the village you came through with Ifgez?”

“I cannot see,” said Cindue, pushing Logan. “Smells much like it though.”

“Ahh, sorry,” said Logan and stepped forward so Cindue could get past.

“Could be,” she said when she was able to see it. “Lot more people though.”

“That is what surprised me,” said Logan. “There are, what, mayhap twenty dwellings but there are people everywhere. Too many I wager for such a place.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “And do you notice all seem to be men and carrying weapons?”

“There are some children over there,” said Cindue pointing. “Down by the stream.”

“But I do not see any women,” said Logan. “What manner of place is this with only men and children and no women?”

“That is what makes this village interesting,” said Autumn cheerfully, “and intrigues the mind. What would be the point of travelling if everywhere was the same and held nothing to excite curiosity?”

“True enough,” said Logan, “but what excites my curiosity most is whether Aloidia and Chershoe honour this place.”

“What do you mean?” asked Cindue, glancing at him with a faint frown. “You think there is danger here or some such ill fortune?”

“He means only that there may be the prospect of bread or cheese in the village,” said Autumn with a smile.

“Or both,” said Logan, grinning and rubbing his hands. “It would be the greatest of ill fortune if there was neither.”

“Ohh,” said Cindue. “Aye, some bread would be nice. Would not the favour of Ept be good as well? You cannot make bread without a fire and a hearth to bake it on.”

“They have fires,” said Logan, pointing towards the village. “Do you not see the smoke?”

“Not really,” said Cindue. “My eyes do not see overly clearly at a distance. I see only a haziness over some of the dwellings.”

“Is that so?” asked Autumn. “’Tis a common enough affliction and there are those who can see clearly at a distance but not when things are close and, of course, those who cannot see at all. Do you find it troublesome?”

“Not at all,” said Cindue. “I can see clearly up close and for some distance but not for long distance. Those goats in that field over there are clear enough. So, are we going to the village? Might it not be best to stay away? All those men there do not calm my mind.”

“I fancy they will offer us no trouble,” said Autumn. “We are clearly just travellers and poor ones at that and have no intent other than to find out if there is bread and cheese. Do we have any money, Logan?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “We have the coins Shina gave us and the two half bans you kept from the Saamrat’s Palace. That makes two bans which should be enough for bread and cheese or some other food if they have neither.”

“You have spoken of Saamrat before,” said Cindue as Autumn started to lead the way towards the village. “What is it and why does it have a

palace?”

“The Saamrat is the head of the Council that rules this land,” said Autumn.

“You know the ruler of this land?” asked Cindue, stopping and staring at Autumn. Autumn didn't notice and kept walking so Cindue hurried forward.

“We met only for the briefest of times,” said Autumn. “Twas not long enough to build up any great acquaintance beyond politeness.”

“Ahh, so you stole from him then,” said Cindue, nodding. “Were you arrested and how did you escape?”

“The Saamrat is a she not a he,” said Logan, “and no we did not steal. Autumn found the coins.”

“Oh, how dull,” said Cindue with a little disappointment in her voice.. “I thought you'd have an exciting tale to tell.”

“Oh we are just travellers,” said Logan. “We lead lives of great dullness.”

“But have you not travelled far and wide?” asked Cindue. “Surely there is excitement and adventure elsewhere? Why else would you travel if not to seek adventure?”

“I seek knowledge and understanding of the world,” said Autumn. “There is no small delight in a greater understanding.”

“And why do you travel, Logan?” asked Cindue archly. “You search for pretty girls, eh?”

“Sploop no!” exclaimed Logan. “Girls scare me, especially the pretty ones.”

“So you do not find me pretty?” said Cindue, wrinkling her nose. “You do not seem scared of me.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, sensing danger. “You are different.”

“How so?” asked Cindue, stopping to look at him.

“A good question,” said Autumn, also stopping to look at him. “I would very much like to know as well, Logan.”

“Voqev!” exclaimed Logan, stopping because the others had but very much wanting to run away very quickly. “And once again I open my mouth and put both feet in it!”

“That’s as may be,” said Cindue, “but it does not answer my question.”

“So you do not like cheese, then?” asked Logan, his voice a little higher pitched than usual.

“I like cheese well enough,” said Cindue. “’Twould not be my first choice perhaps but it serves well enough when hungry. Your answer?”

“Umm, what was the question again?” asked Logan, looking around desperately for something else to take their attention.

“The question posed was in what manner Cindue is unlike other girls,” said Autumn.

“Oh, that,” said Logan nervously. “I thought I had answered.”

“Only to ask if I like cheese,” said Cindue. “Come, I am most desirous of knowing how I am different.”

“Is it the colour of her skin?” asked Autumn when Logan didn’t answer. “I grant her skin is a little darker than mine but she is not as dark skinned as those we met in Neander.”

“Umm,” muttered Logan, his face going bright red as he shifted his weight from one foot to another.

“Or my hair?” asked Cindue, pulling on one of her braid-like strands. “’Tis not free flowing like Autumn’s but many girls have hair like

mine.”

“Umm,” muttered Logan again. He looked down at his feet then up at the sky. “Umm.”

“I apologise,” said Autumn suddenly as she realised the extent of Logan's embarrassment. 'Tis wrong of me to discomfort you in this way. Come Cindue, let us go to the village.”

“But I want to know why Logan does not think I am a girl,” exclaimed Cindue, scowling.

“He does think you are a girl,” said Autumn, “and I fancy he is as scared of you as he is of any other girl. Let us speak no more of this. Can you not see Logan is deeply troubled?”

“But ...” started Cindue.

“Come,” said Autumn, taking her hand and pulling gently. “Let us walk to the village. I am certain the men there will appreciate you being a girl even if Logan does not.”

“What do you mean, Logan does not?” exclaimed Cindue, standing her ground. “What has Logan said to you about me?”

“Truly he has said nothing,” said Autumn. “’Twas a bad choice of words on my part.”

“Pah!” exclaimed Cindue, snatching her hand from Autumn's and squaring up to Logan with both fists firmly on her hips. “Logan. I stand before you. Do you see a girl or not?”

“I, um, I see a girl,” mumbled Logan, glancing at her momentarily while wishing he was safe in the Land of the Undead.

“Good,” said Cindue, not in the least mollified. “So in what manner am I different from other girls?”

Panic stricken and fighting an urge to piss and run, not necessarily in that order, Logan looked pleadingly at Autumn.

"Enough of this, Cindue," barked Autumn, her need to protect Logan rising sharply. "I will not permit you to belabour Logan in this way!"

She grabbed Cindue's hand and pulled her again, this time not as gently. Cindue tried to pull her hand away but could not. Autumn's grip was too strong.

"Oh very well," she said, giving Logan a look that clearly said 'you have not heard the end of this' but Logan wasn't looking at her.

They were perhaps three paces away when Logan found his voice.

"You were a wild animal," he blurted.

"What?" exclaimed Cindue, turning so quickly even Autumn was taken by surprise. "You think I am a wild animal?" Logan recoiled.

"No, no, no," he said hastily, holding his hands up protectively. "I do not think that now."

Autumn sighed and her shoulders drooped a little.

"Logan, I think that calls for some explanation," she said as Cindue glowered at him, the fingers of her hands clenching and unclenching.

"Yes, Logan," said Cindue in a voice that bore certain similarities to that of Yammoe, the Lord of the Land of the Undead. "Explain."

"Tis only ..." squeaked Logan. He stopped and cleared his throat then tried one of the calming exercises Autumn had taught him. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath then opened his eyes again. "Tis only that when ..." He caught Cindue's eye and ground to a halt.

"Yeesss?" said Cindue with a dangerous edge to her voice that made Autumn step forward in readiness.

"Well, um," stuttered Logan then continued in a rush. "You leapt on me and pushed me into the stream, remember? When that man was chasing you and you got away and you came upon us in the clearing. You remember?"

"I remember," said Cindue, the edge to her voice not leaving in any way. "A wild animal?"

"I thought I was being attacked by a wild animal," said Logan, not looking at either of them. "A bear mayhap. All hair and stinks."

"You think of me as a bear?" demanded Cindue.

"Oh Sploop!" muttered Logan. He forced himself to look at her. "No! I do not think you are a bear. It's just that that is what I thought when ... when ... when you attacked. 'Twas only later I found you were not."

"But you think I still stink like a bear?" asked Cindue, her face changing from a look of impending doom to merely that of a crestfallen girl.

"No, not at all," said Logan hurriedly. "'Tis just that ... Oh Sploop! You are really scaring me now!"

"I think what Logan means," said Autumn diplomatically, "is that when he first made your acquaintance the circumstances were somewhat unusual and that has mayhap tainted his perception of you."

"Oh," said Cindue. She thought for a moment then looked at Logan. "But do you think ill of me still, Logan?"

"Not at all," said Logan, sensing that perhaps the worst of the danger might be over. "I think most well of you."

"Do you, Logan?" asked Cindue, her face lighting a little. She stepped over to put her hand on his arm and looked up into his face. "Do you really?"

"Umm," started Logan, half sensing that the danger wasn't abating after all, merely coming from a different direction. "Yes, yes I do." It seemed the safest answer.

"That pleases me, Logan," said Cindue, her voice softening. "That pleases me greatly."

Autumn relaxed, at least in so far as she ever relaxed, although she was concerned about Logan. His face was a colour she'd never seen it before ~ a mix of puce and white and not overly pleasant. His hands moved jerkily and he also seemed to have developed the beginnings of a tic under his right eye.

“Good,” she said briskly, feeling it was time she interjected in some way. “I am glad that is settled. Shall we continue on to the village?”

Logan was too anxious to respond but Cindue patted his arm gently then turned to look at Autumn.

“Aye, let us continue,” she said brightly, “for we are friends journeying together, are we not, Logan?”

“Oh, umm, yes, absolutely,” said Logan. “Umm, in a moment.” He turned and fled back into the woods to relieve his bladder and rest his head against the comforting trunk of a tree.

“Do I stink, Autumn?” asked Cindue, turning back to look at her.

“No more than anyone else,” said Autumn bluntly.

“Oh,” said Cindue. She frowned. “I confess I hadn't noticed but now I think on it you do not and nor does Logan. Why is that?”

“We wash at every opportunity,” said Autumn. “Our bodies and our clothes. Others wash only infrequently.”

“I see,” said Cindue. “Clothes too huh?” She looked down at her ragged tunic then pulled some of her hair around to sniff it.

* * *

“I fancy these men are soldiers,” said Autumn as they neared the centre of the village. “They have a similarity in dress and weapons and they have a manner that seems to go with soldiers.”

“Why would there be soldiers here?” asked Cindue.

Logan stayed silent as he was still reliving their earlier discussions and cursing himself for his stupidity. He'd silently vowed never to open his mouth again on the walk to the village.

"Mayhap there is a war going on," said Autumn. "Mayhap the war where you were taken prisoner has spread south."

"They do not look like men preparing for battle," said Cindue, "although I would not know what men preparing for battle look like."

"Neither do I," said Autumn, glancing at Logan and wondering why he wasn't offering an opinion.

"Ahh!" exclaimed Logan, his vow of silence forgotten at the sight of several stalls set up on the other side of the village green. "Bread!" and he hurried off.

Autumn and Cindue followed him more slowly.

"These are most unusual," remarked Autumn, pausing beside the first of the stalls.

"You have a most discerning eye, Eashiq," exclaimed the man, running his eyes over Autumn and Cindue to assess their wealth. He wasn't impressed but any customer was better than none. The day had been slow as all who could afford his wares had them already and the time had not yet come for breakages to be replaced. "Are these not the finest bowls and dishes you have ever seen?"

"Without a doubt," said Autumn, picking up a bowl. It was gaily coloured and had a smooth shiny surface. She ran her fingers over the surface then turned it upside-down. She was surprised to see that its bottom was the usual rough brown of earthenware. "What manner of pottery is this?"

"Tis the usual pottery as you see, Eashiq," said the man beaming, "but it has a most delightful coating, does it not?"

"Indeed," said Autumn, putting the bowl down and picking up another. It, too, was gaily coloured but different in colours and

pattern. "How is it made?"

"I know not the details, Eashiq," he said, "for these come from Sid and they keep the process most secret but I do know that the coating is made from a special rock that is ground most finely and mixed with things to give these most delightful colours. Then the mixture is painted on the bowl and it is fired again to make it hard. 'Twill never fade nor will the juices of what you eat change its colours."

"Intriguing," said Autumn. She scratched her fingernail across the bowl and the man winced. "Never is a long time."

"Ahh, an Eashiq of great prowess, I see," exclaimed the man. "Indeed you are most right and correct in pointing out that detail. Let us agree then that this bowl will last you a lifetime. Can't say fairer than that, can I."

"I daresay," said Autumn, "but whose lifetime? One destined to live long or one at Yammoe's gate?"

The man burst out laughing.

"Eashiq, Eashiq," he exclaimed. "You have a mighty wit! You like that one?"

"'Tis somewhat bright," said Autumn, putting it down and picking up another. "This one is nice though, do you not think, Cindue?"

"Aye, it is pretty enough," said Cindue. "The green matches the green of your robe although this one is more to my taste." She ran her fingers over a bowl that was a pale shade of blue.

"A bargain at only a ban each," said the man quickly, "although for two most charming and delightful eashiqas such as yourselves, shall us say a ban ten for the pair."

"Half a ban for the two," said Logan, joining them. He had two large loaves of bread clamped under his arm.

"Oh you jest with me, Eashian," said the man, delighted that they

wanted to buy. “A ban six and they be yours.”

“I think not,” said Logan, experienced in the ways of bargaining and knowing that Autumn cared nothing for money. “I’ll go to ten banuuls and that is my last word.”

“Do we have that much?” asked Autumn, rather taken with the green bowl. It cheered her in some way and, in truth, her old wooden bowl was beginning to crack and leak.

“Agreed!” said the stall keeper before Logan could say they did not. The lad looked no wealthier than the two maids.

“Good,” said Logan. He counted out ten banuuls from the coins clutched in his hand and the stall keeper smiled and quickly took them.

“Can I change my mind?” asked Cindue.

“No refunds,” said the stall keeper quickly. “Once paid that be the end of it.”

“Tis only that I think I like this one better,” said Cindue, touching a bowl that was a deeper shade of blue.

“What say you?” asked Logan, raising an eyebrow. “Tis not a refund we’re asking for, just an exchange.” He shifted his staff in his hand as he felt one of the loaves starting to slip out from under his arm.

“And who am I to deny one as lovely as she?” said the man smoothly, misinterpreting Logan’s adjustment of his staff. “Whatever the lovely wants, eh?”

“Thank you,” said Logan as Cindue hugged the bowl to her chest and looked sidelong at Logan.

“A question, if I may,” said Autumn, undoing the string around her pack so she could stow her new bowl away. “Who are all these men and why are there no women here?”

“Ahh,” said the man. He looked around and spat. “They be a detachment of troops of that there Aisitou abn bloody Busno and all our women be kept inside safely out of sight.”

“Who is Aisitou abn Busno?” asked Autumn.

“You not be from around these parts, then?” asked the man, scowling. “Bastard be Sarkun of Us-Iota.” He glanced around to check no one else had overheard him.

“Ahh, so we are still in Us-Iota,” said Autumn. “Good. Tell me, why is there a detachment of the Sarkun's troops here? Where is here, by the way?”

“This be Etenen,” he said, a little surprised. “They be here for training.”

“Is war expected then?” asked Autumn. Cindue looked up from admiring her bowl, perturbed.

“Nay, Eashiq,” said the stall keeper with a disgusted look on his face. “They be getting ready for the year's tax collecting.” He spat again. “Bastards!”

Chapter Eleven

“Tell me, is there any in the village who makes cheese?” asked Logan.

“Aye, Wona does,” said the stall keeper. “You be wanting some?”

“Yes,” said Logan as Autumn wandered over to the next stall to see what delights were there. Cindue looked around and spotted a seller of cloth at the far end of the stalls. “I see no stall for cheeses though.”

“Reckon there won't be 'til them bastards be gone,” said the man with a sniff. “Wona be staying well out of sight. Ain't safe for a woman to be out in the open, like.”

“Ahh, that is a shame,” said Logan.

The man beckoned him forward and leant over his board.

“She be second from end down there,” he whispered and pointed further along the path that followed the stream. He looked around furtively then leant even closer. “Best you knock on the wall and call out that Aeid sent you else you won't be seeing her.”

“Aeid, right,” whispered Logan. “Is that you?”

“Reckon so,” said Aeid, resuming his normal stance. “Go softly mind.”

“I will,” said Logan. “Thank you.”

He looked around and spotted Autumn discussing something of doubtless great significance to do with a bundle of nondescript looking dried herbs with the man at the next stall. He walked over and stood beside her.

“... for the running squirts,” said the man, tapping the bundle. “Chew on these and it dries you up right quick.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan.

“I'm just going to see someone about some cheese,” whispered Logan.

“I will return shortly.”

“Ahh, yes,” said Autumn and turned her attention back to the stall keeper. “But I was asking of au'ai. Do you have anything for that affliction?”

Logan turned and headed off up the path alongside the stream, trying to look as nonchalant as he could.

Meanwhile Cindue, at the other end of the line of stalls, was fingering a folded length of blue cloth and comparing it favourably with the colour of the glaze on her new bowl as two soldiers sauntered around the corner of a dwelling nearby.

“Whoa!” exclaimed the shorter of the two, stopping suddenly. “What do I see over there?” He pointed at Cindue. “’Tis a market and there be my favourite kind of ale!” He grinned. “Female!”

“Not a bad looking bit, neither,” said the other, studying Cindue's back and legs. “Nice shape, bit scruffy, mind.”

“Since when do you care, Waad?” said the first, tossing aside the now empty wine-skin. “Sides, I likes 'em rough. They be more willing.”

Waad sniggered then looked around to see if their omastem was in sight but the coast seemed to be clear.

“Come on,” said the shorter, digging Waad in the ribs with his elbow. “Let's be having a bit of fun.”

“Yeah,” said Waad with a leer. “Bit of fun, that's all.”

They sauntered over to where Cindue stood, rummaging through a heap of other lengths of cloth. The stall keeper stiffened and muttered something to her which made her look around.

“’Allo, gorgeous,” said the shorter man coming up close to Cindue. “What you up to then?”

“I am looking at cloth,” said Cindue, her brow furrowing.

“Pretty cloth for a pretty maid, eh?” he said. “I be Ranta. What's your name my pretty?”

“What business is it of yours?” demanded Cindue, scowling. The stall keeper backed away, sensing trouble and hoping they'd move away from his table.

“Don't matter none,” said Ranta with a laugh. “Reckon as how you don't be needing any cloth. What you be wearing looks fetching enough.” He put his hand to a tear in Cindue's tunic at her waist and slipped two fingers inside.

“Oi!” barked Cindue and slapped his hand. “Stop that!”

“Ohh I like it,” said Ranta and ripped the cloth a little more. “Feisty!”

“Get away from me!” snapped Cindue, stepping backwards and brought up short by Waad immediately behind her. She twisted and dropped her new bowl.

“What's this then?” asked Waad, picking it up.

“Tis mine,” said Cindue, her eyes flashing. She snatched at it and Waad jerked it away.

“Give it to me,” demanded Cindue, snatching at it again.

With a laugh Waad tossed the bowl to Ranta and Cindue whirled to grab the bowl but Ranta backed away a step and tossed it over her head back to Waad.

“Give me my bowl!” screamed Cindue angrily, rounding on Waad.

Autumn heard her scream and instantly looked up and around. She saw Cindue at the far end with two men and hurried over.

“Tell you what,” said Waad, holding the bowl above his head so Cindue couldn't reach it. “I'll give it back if you give us something.”

“What is it you want?” asked Autumn, stepping between Waad and

Cindue.

“Ohhh, looks like another pretty wants to be joining the fun,” laughed Waad. “What you think, Ranta? Shall we let her?”

“One each be fair, I reckon,” said Ranta, coming up behind Autumn and grabbing her backside.

Instantly he jerked backwards as Autumn's elbow removed several of his front teeth.

“Noften!” he tried to exclaim, grabbing at his mouth and spraying blood over his hands. He staggered back in pain and fell onto the cloth seller's table, collapsing it.

“Now that weren't nice,” exclaimed Waad as several of his army friends saw the attack and hurried over to give aid. He tossed the bowl away and tried to grab Autumn's throat but she caught his hand and bent his arm back. Cindue leapt forward and managed to catch the bowl before it hit the ground. She backed away and kicked the back of Waad's leg so his leg gave way and he staggered.

A sword scraped in its sheath behind Autumn and she instantly leapt forward, releasing Waad's arm in case she broke it.

“Get away!” shouted Autumn to Cindue as she whirled and dropped into her defensive stance. “Go! Leave them to me.”

Cindue hesitated then backed away to stand a little way behind the stall. The stall keeper had seen the other soldiers arrive and had disappeared with an armful of cloth.

“Nofting bitch!” exclaimed Waad, getting to his feet and pulling out his sword. “Stand back lads, this ferea be mine.”

The three new arrivals held back as Waad advanced on Autumn. Several more soldiers came over to see what was happening. Autumn backed away, one end of her staff firmly in her armpit and the other held out to her side. Waad lunged with his sword and her staff caught him squarely on his upper arm, throwing him on top of Ranta who

was still moaning and spitting blood.

The other three, supplemented by two more, spread out and advanced on Autumn, watching her closely as she backed further away.

“Keep her alive,” growled Waad, pushing himself off Ranta. “That ferea will pay dearly for this.”

The one in the centre lunged at Autumn just as the two at the ends rushed in to grab her. She swung her staff up and around to clout the centre man's sword hand, causing him to drop the sword, and followed the move through with a spin, kicking a side man in his belly. She continued the spin, letting her staff drag on the ground and punched the other side man then leapt backwards.

“Can we not discuss this?” she asked as the sword man picked up his sword again and Waad joined them.

“You're going to die,” exclaimed Waad and leapt at her, his arms outstretched and grasping. Autumn casually stepped aside and Waad went sprawling but one of the others, coming from behind, grabbed her around her chest. Instantly she rammed her head back, driving his lower jaw into his upper jaw most painfully then doubled over, throwing the man to the ground in front of her. He let go and she rolled forward, hitting him on the head with the end of her staff as she released it. She continued the roll and leapt to her feet to spin and kick another in the throat before jumping sideways to avoid a sword thrust from Waad. She grabbed Waad's arm and pulled him round, throwing him onto another man's sword. He screamed and both fell to the ground. Another slashed at her with his sword but it passed through her and cut deeply into Waad's thigh. He jerked back in surprise and Autumn spun and kicked him in the side of his head then fell to the ground and rolled out of the way as another tried to stab at her.

Jumping to her feet she spun round to face some others as they arrived but they stayed at least two body lengths away to watch. She dismissed them as an immediate threat as their swords stayed sheathed and, sensing movement behind and to the side, she spun the other way, narrowly avoiding a sword cutting down on her. She kicked

that man in the chest then spun again, punching another in the face and kicking a third in his belly. Yet another man leapt at her and she flung herself backwards as both sides were blocked, kicking him between his legs. One of the watchers caught her and pushed her back into the fray with the words “get the bastards, girlie!”

Using the momentum of his push Autumn threw herself into a forward roll and jumped up, twisting, to find herself behind her attackers. She paused for a moment to catch her breath and looked around for Cindue. She was still standing, open mouthed and clutching her bowl, with her back to the wall of a dwelling. Reassured, Autumn turned to face her attackers once more. Four were left although several lay on the ground either unconscious or clutching various parts of their anatomy.

“Do you wish to continue this?” she asked, backing away as the four sorted themselves out and, very warily, started to approach her with swords at the ready.

“You Seibi's be a bunch of useless turds,” shouted one of the increasing number of watchers and the other watchers laughed. “There be eight of you and you be bested by a girlie!”

“We ain't bested yet,” growled a thickset and heavily bearded soldier advancing on Autumn. He made several gestures telling the other three to spread out and take Autumn from the sides. Autumn, on the other hand, stopped backing away and stood, calmly relaxed, waiting for them.

“Now!” shouted the bearded man and all four charged at her, swords raised.

Autumn dropped prostrate to the ground so all swords clashed uselessly above her then rapidly crawled between two of the men and jumped to her feet behind them. The watchers jeered derisively and catcalled.

Disconcerted, the four men turned and launched themselves at Autumn again. She spun around, one leg lashing out, and broke the jaw of the man at the end, throwing him into the man beside him. The

other two slashed at her and she hopped backwards on one leg, the other raised and bent, ready. Seeing a momentary opportunity she rammed her heel in one man's throat then spun, switching legs, to kick the fourth in his belly. The remaining man, hesitated and looked around. The man who'd been pushed to the ground when his companion's jaw was broken, came over to join him.

"Let us bring this to an end," said Autumn, holding out her hands. She wasn't even breathing heavily. "There is no need for this."

"I agree!" said a man forcefully, pushing his way through the onlookers. He was tall and broad with a short beard showing some signs of grey. "What is going on here?"

"Who are you?" asked Autumn as her two remaining attackers sheathed their swords and stood to attention. One looked defiant and the other sheepish.

"I am Seibi," said Seibi, surveying the wreckage. "Omastem of the third cohort. These wastrels are mine."

"Greetings, Omastem Seibi," said Autumn, bowing with her palms together. "I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup."

Mutterings started among the onlookers as those who knew what a krisana was explained it the others.

"I have heard of krisana," said Seibi, nodding his head, "and thought them to be a falsehood. 'Twould seem I am mistaken." He turned and glared at the onlookers. "Get back to your duties," he roared, "or I'll have the lot of you flogged!"

The men watching rapidly dispersed. The two remaining attackers stayed where they were.

"Now," he said, turning back to Autumn. "What happened here?"

"My companion was accosted by two of your men," said Autumn as Cindue trotted over, bowl safely in hand. "I interceded and these

others joined the fray.”

“Her being your companion?” asked Seibi, gesturing at Cindue.

“That one took my bowl!” exclaimed Cindue. “And the other ripped my tunic!”

“Which ones?” asked Seibi, his scowl deepening.

“Him with the bloody face ripped my tunic,” said Cindue, pointing to Ranta who was still lying across the cloth table. “And him what be dead took my bowl.”

“Did you do that?” asked Seibi, going over to look at Waad's body on the ground. The owner of the sword that had gone through his heart had disappeared.

“No,” said Autumn. “Another was attacking me with the sword as this one jumped on me. I threw him off but alas could not avoid the sword. What was his name?”

“Waad,” said Seibi, pushing Waad's shoulder with his foot so he rolled over on to his back to stare sightlessly at the sky.

“I would be most appreciative if you gave him a decent burial,” said Autumn.

“What in Voqev's name happened?” exclaimed Logan running over. He stumbled over his staff and dropped his cheese but quickly picked it up.

“Another companion?” asked Seibi, glancing at him.

“Aye, both are my companions,” said Autumn.

“Well now,” said Seibi with a heavy sigh. “One dead and three, four, five, six injured with two remaining. Looks like I arrived in time else you would have destroyed my entire cohort.”

“I offer my apologies, Omastem Seibi,” said Autumn. “I did not begin

this.”

“Who did?” asked Seibi with a sigh.

“He did,” said Cindue, pointing at Ranta again. “When they took my bowl Autumn came over and he grabbed her bottom.”

“Is that true?” asked Seibi, looking at Autumn.

“It is true,” said Autumn. “I could not permit such an action.”

“Indeed,” said Seibi. He scratched under his beard for a moment then turned to the two remaining men. “You two, take that shit and throw him in the lockup. And the rest of 'em. Put yourselves in as well.”

“What will happen to him?” asked Autumn as they hurried away to arrest Ranta.

“That is not your concern,” said Seibi, turning back to her. “'Tis up to our commander but as he assaulted two women of the town and provoked a riot resulting in the loss of over a half of my cohort's strength I wager he will not be treated kindly. I offer my apologies to you, Krisana Autumn Savannah, and to your companions.”

“Apologies accepted, Omastem Seibi,” said Autumn. She put her hands together and bowed slightly.

Seibi looked assessingly at her for a few moments then nodded and stalked off to grab one of the unconscious and drag him away.

“What was all that about?” asked Logan anxiously. “I was gone for but a few moments and return to find the village full of bodies. What happened?”

“I am not certain,” said Autumn. “I heard Cindue scream and hurried over to find her being assaulted by two men then some others joined in although I know not why. Excuse me a moment, I would like to talk more with Seibi.”

"Tis true," said Cindue. "I was looking at cloth at that stall and much admiring the blue for I was thinking of asking you to buy it for me so I could make some new clothes then those two men came up to me and took my bowl which you gave me." She held it up to show Logan it was undamaged.

"But you are unhurt?" he asked.

"I am unhurt," said Cindue, "although my tunic has a new rip in it." She stuck her fingers in the rip and pulled on it to show Logan and in the process ripped it a little further.

"Aye, you do need some new clothes," he said, trying not to look at what was revealed under the rip. "Alas I have no more money."

"Oh well," said Cindue, sadly. "Much as I liked the cloth I can live without it. You were right though, Logan."

"What about?" asked Logan, walking over to the cloth stall.

"Autumn," said Cindue, walking with him. "You said I had to see how she fights to believe it and now I have seen I believe most truly. Nine men! 'Twas a sight to behold. I wager she would have killed them all if that Seibi had not interrupted."

"No, Autumn would not have done that," said Logan. "She makes every effort to hurt people as little as possible. I wager she did not kill that man who died."

"Alas no," said Cindue. "She threw him and he landed on a sword. Why does she not kill? It would make it easier for her."

"She doesn't think killing works," said Logan. "Is this the cloth you liked?" He held up the folded wad of blue cloth which had managed to escape being bloodied by Ranta.

"Aye," said Cindue. "I like blue and it almost matched the blue of my bowl." She hesitated. "Would you have bought it for me if you had the money, Logan?"

“Aye,” said Logan, “but I don’t.”

“Tis the thought that counts,” said Cindue, putting her hand on his arm.

“Still,” said Logan, looking around for the stall holder but he had not yet reappeared. “Hold these for me.” He passed the bread and cheese to Cindue then quickly stuffed the cloth inside his tunic before grinning. “Come, best we leave quickly.”

“But ...” started Cindue then bit her tongue and hurried after him.

“Logan!” called Autumn as she turned away from talking to Seibi. “This way.” She waved and beckoned. Logan changed direction and sauntered over, trying to look innocent in case any of the other stall holders, who were only now returning, had seen him. Cindue followed, impressed he had stolen for her.

“Seibi said Rudailk is this way,” said Autumn, pointing up stream. “We follow the stream for a time then stay with the track. It goes to Rudailk.”

“Why are we going to Rudailk?” asked Cindue, frowning and taking a step back. “You are going to return me to Neiter and Sayam?”

“Most definitely not,” said Autumn. “Never will I return you to that form of treatment. No, you were brought from the north to Rudailk then from there to Etenen and thence to where we met you. Not knowing where you came from it makes sense to me to follow your path backwards.”

“Perhaps,” said Cindue. She gave a little shudder and closed her eyes for a moment. “But you will protect me if I am spotted?”

“Of course,” said Autumn, looking quizzically at Cindue. “Seibi also told me something that I found most strange.”

“Can we go now?” asked Logan. “I feel a strong need to leave this place. I, umm, have something I should not and I don’t want to be seen with it.” He pulled a corner of the cloth from under his tunic for

Autumn to see then tucked it away again.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “Right. Let us be away.”

“You are not surprised at Logan?” asked Cindue as they started to follow the track beside the stream out of Etenen.

“He is what he is,” said Autumn. “Mayhap Logan will tell you something of his past when we stop for the night.”

“I shall look forward to that,” said Cindue, looking at Logan. “Logan's past is most interesting to me.”

“Yes, well,” said Logan, starting to get embarrassed yet again. “Let me relieve you of the cheese or the bread. It would not be good if you drop your bowl and break it now.”

“Indeed not,” said Cindue, passing the two loaves of bread to Logan. “I shall treasure this bowl for ever more.”

“Oh Sploop,” thought Logan, dismayed. “Now what have I done?”

“So what did Seibi say that was most strange?” he asked, changing the subject.

“He said that there is no war up north,” said Autumn, “and there never has been. There is nothing past the mountains save the Yankin Haramun.”

“What is that?” asked Logan.

“I do not know,” said Autumn, “although Seibi said that that is the old name in ancient Selti which is what they still call it. In modern Selti it means The Forbidden Domain.”

Chapter Twelve

“So you think I am lying to you?” demanded Cindue, stopping walking.

“Not at all,” said Autumn. She stopped as well and Logan, his mind largely occupied with wondering why Cindue wanted to know of his past, continued walking for three or four more paces. “Few travel much beyond the next village so it is not unexpected that Seibi does not know of Esu'taw nor anything else beyond the mountains. Indeed, 'tis impressive he even knew there were mountains in the north. I only asked as it seemed to me that he may have been involved in the war in which you were captured.”

“But he said there was no war?” asked Logan, coming back.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but again that means little save that he was not involved. He spoke of it being the commander's decision what happens to the men who challenged Cindue which means that Seibi is not of high rank and likely not involved in the whys and whens of war.”

“True enough,” said Logan. “Likely he just goes where he is sent and thinks very little about it.”

“I confess though to being curious why you thought I would think you were lying to us Cindue,” said Autumn, resuming walking.

“Agh,” said Cindue, following. She gave a dismissive little wave of her hand. “'Tis only that after being sold twice I am suspicious of everybody. You two are the only ones who have helped me and I fancy I am fearful of losing your good opinions.”

“Aye, that I can understand,” said Autumn. “Cruelty can affect the mind as well as the body.”

“And doubtless will take longer to recover from,” said Cindue. “I apologise if I upset or affronted you.”

“'Tis no matter,” said Autumn. “Each of us is different and we always

have choices.”

“What do you mean?” asked Cindue.

“She means you always have a choice in how to respond to things,” said Logan. “It took me a while to understand Autumn’s thinking on that but I follow it now.”

“You mean when someone says something and you can choose whether to accept it or get angry about it?” asked Cindue.

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “or deal with it in some other way.”

“So are you saying I should not have reacted the way I did to those men?” asked Cindue, frowning.

“Not at all,” said Autumn, pausing. “Do you see those wild flowers on the far bank of the stream? Are they not most pleasing to look at? I have not seen such flowers as those before.”

“Yes they are pretty,” said Cindue, not looking at them. “I do not follow what you are saying.”

Logan briefly debated with himself whether or not to wade across and fetch one or two of the flowers for Autumn but decided not to. She did not approve of the killing of flowers simply because they were pretty. It also occurred to him that Cindue might be angry if he did not get her a flower and if he did get her one she may take it as a sign of something or other that would lead to much embarrassment. On the whole it was best to let the flowers alone. And keep his feet dry which was a minor matter but a useful benefit none the less.

“Well,” said Autumn, walking on again. “You could have chosen some other path although I am not saying any other choice would have been better. I fancy they would not have returned your bowl and had you talked with them in a friendly manner things may well have turned out very differently.”

“So you are saying that man is dead because of me?” asked Cindue, a little anger in her voice. She stopped again and stared belligerently at

Autumn.

"I seem to be saying the wrong things at the moment," said Autumn. "I apologise, Cindue. I do not attach any blame to you nor, I fancy, were you the cause, except perhaps indirectly. No, those men have only themselves to blame."

"But you are saying I caused it?" demanded Cindue.

"Well, it is difficult to attribute cause," said Autumn. "I was not there when it began but the man with the bowls did say that all the women of the village were in hiding because of the soldiers so doubtless you and I attracted attention. That is all I meant. I most certainly was not saying you sought their attentions nor spurned them when they were made. Their actions were their own choices."

"Well, that's all right then," said Cindue, mollified. "I would not have you thinking I sought the attentions of strange men. Or you, Logan. I am not like that I assure you." She smiled at him.

"Oh, I am most glad to hear that," said Logan, mystified.

"So why did you hit that man in his mouth and break his teeth?" asked Cindue several paces later. "Logan tells me you do not like to cause suffering or death so it would seem a strange choice to do so."

"Ahh, that was not by choice, alas," said Autumn. "Given time to make a choice I would have treated him far less harshly but he attacked me from behind and I simply reacted to the attack rather than delayed to consider my choices. I regret it but do not chastise myself."

"You regret it," said Cindue flatly. "You have the ability to best nine men and doubtless more for you did so with the greatest of ease and still you regret hitting the one who first attacked you? I find you a most strange and perplexing person."

"Yes, I do regret it," said Autumn. "Had I not struck him then it is possible that that would have been the end of it. We could have retrieved your bowl and gone on our way. As it was he attacked me, I

reacted and others reacted to that. I am not the cause but likely I made the situation worse.”

“Is she always like this, Logan?” asked Cindue. “If it were me I would be crowing about my victory against the odds not blaming myself for starting it.”

Logan laughed.

“You have to understand that Autumn cannot be bested,” said Logan, “so there is nothing to crow about.” He held up his hand to forestall her. “And don't bother to say it, Autumn I know you have said many times you have been bested before but I don't believe you. Moreover, Cindue, because Autumn cannot be bested she sees little point in starting fights. 'Tis better, she thinks, to avoid them in the first place.”

“That last is certainly true,” said Autumn. “I would have preferred another solution but the choice was not mine.”

“Hmm,” said Cindue. “I do not really understand but so be it.”

“And you, Logan?” asked Autumn. “You do not seem to be yourself. Does something ail you?”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan. “I feel much as always. Do I look sick or something?”

“No, you look much as you usually do,” said Autumn. “'Tis only that when I told you that Seibi said the name of the land beyond the mountains is The Forbidden Domain you did not react. I had expected you to say something along the lines of there being trouble in store if we go there or some such.”

“That is because I am learning,” said Logan with a snort. “Doubtless the name of the place is misleading. I fancy 'tis not forbidden and none are there to do the forbidding. Most likely the name is not Forbidden Domain anyway but Forbidding Domain as it is doubtless a cold and desolate place like the Zabytaja Pounac.”

“What's that?” asked Cindue.

“Tis what we call the land to the north of Aferraron,” said Logan. “It means The Forsaken North and is a most forsaken and lonely place where water is as hard as rock.”

“Ohh, I do not like the sound of that!” exclaimed Cindue. “You think I come from such a nasty place? Surely I would remember if I did?”

“You said where you are from is just to the north of the mountains?” asked Autumn.

“So I was told,” said Cindue. “It may even be Esu'taw is in the mountains rather than beyond them. I remember travelling through the mountains but I do not remember approaching them from the other side.”

“That would explain it,” said Autumn. “The southernmost parts of the Zabytaja Pounac are not unpleasant and doubtless the southernmost parts of the Yankin Haramun are too. And doubtless Logan is right in saying it is forbidding rather than forbidden. I wager 'tis bitterly cold and forbidding far to the north.”

“Besides,” said Logan, “it would be a waste of my breath to suggest that we do not go there simply because it is forbidden. 'Twould be like the Wall of Loriki all over again¹¹. We were told of many fearsome things beyond that and despite my several suggestions that we took heed of what we were told it only raised your curiosity still further.”

“What fearsome things?” demanded Cindue, “and where is this Wall? Is it near here?”

“Tis a long way away,” said Autumn, “across a vast sea. It is simply a wall that divides an island and there were no fearsome things on the other side. Those were only tales put about by the people south of the wall to stop the people north of the wall from venturing south.”

“And yet you did venture past it?” asked Cindue. “Why did you not believe those tales?”

11 See *The Annals ~ The Ninth Tale*. The Wall of Loriki separates the northern tip of the island of Danornor from the land of Taliesin in the south.

“They lacked consistency,” said Autumn. “If there was any truth in the tales then they would have been much the same from teller to teller but each of those who spoke of the wall told a different tale. That is why we crossed the wall, to find out the truth of the matter.”

“I know Logan says you cannot be bested,” said Cindue, “and I have seen you myself and I am willing accept it as the truth but even so I find it strange that you sought out this wall and ventured past it anyway. Mayhap your very invincibility leads you into dangerous situations.”

“That is what I have said many times!” exclaimed Logan. “’Twould be best not to go there I said but Autumn insists.”

“You do me an injustice, Logan,” said Autumn. “All it takes is for you to say no, we shall not go there and I will accept that and not go. Besides, does it not always turn out well?”

“Pah!” exclaimed Logan. “As if that were so, indeed! If I say no we should not go somewhere then you give me endless reasons why we should until my head hurts and I give in to you. That is the truth of it.”

“Ohh, ’tis not nice of you to treat Logan so, Autumn,” exclaimed Cindue. “You may be invincible but I wager Logan is not. ’Tis wrong of you to put him in harm’s way!”

“Now you both do me an injustice,” said Autumn. “I am not invincible and I have been bested many times even though Logan does not believe me and while it is true that I do put forward reasons why going somewhere may be beneficial I do not insist on it and if Logan’s last word is no then no it shall be. Moreover, I would never take Logan into a situation where he will likely come to harm. That would be unforgivable and I could not in all conscience do so.”

“I am most pleased to hear it,” said Cindue. “I would be most upset if Logan were to come to harm.”

“So would I,” said Logan with a grin. “But shall we put this to the test?”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

“I say let us not go to The Forbidden Domain,” said Logan. “Doubtless as we get closer we will hear tales of why it is forbidden so let us save ourselves the effort and not go.”

Autumn gazed at him and pursed her lips.

“Very well,” she said abruptly. “You say no and I accept that. Let us turn back south again and explore there.”

“What?” exclaimed Cindue, greatly alarmed.

“Logan does not wish to go north,” said Autumn, “so we shall not. I bid you fare well on your journeying, Cindue. I trust you find your home without too much difficulty. Come, Logan. Make your fare wells to Cindue and let us be on our way.”

“But you promised!” exclaimed Cindue, horrified. “Logan! You promised you would help me return to my place! Stop her, Logan! Stop her! Don’t leave me here all alone!” She grabbed Logan’s hand tightly and started to pull him along the path.

“You see, Autumn?” said Logan with a laugh as he allowed himself to be dragged along. “There is always a reason why we should go where you want whatever I say!”

“Tis not what I want,” said Autumn with a half smile twitching on her lips. “Tis what Cindue wants.”

“Which you well knew,” said Logan as Cindue stopped dragging him and stared at them both. “You played that very well.”

“What do you mean?” asked Cindue, frowning yet again.

“Autumn promised we would help you,” said Logan, straightening his tunic. “She would not break a promise so easily. She was only teasing me, that’s all.”

“She was playing with me?” demanded Cindue. “Is that all?”

“I venture it was Logan who was playing with you,” said Autumn. “It was he who said we should not go north. I merely acceded to his wishes.”

“Is that true, Logan?” asked Cindue.

“Aye,” said Logan. “I knew she wouldn’t break her promise. That’s why I said we should not go north.”

Cindue stared at him then looked at Logan’s hand in hers. She curled her lips in distaste and tossed his hand away.

“I do not need your aid,” she said haughtily and flicked some of her hair over her shoulder. “I shall be on my way now. Thank you and fare well.”

She turned and started walking along the path, her back stiff in protest.

“Tis your game, Logan,” said Autumn softly. “What do you want to do now?”

“Aye,” said Logan, matching her. “More fool me, eh? Come, let us go with her.”

They set off along the path, matching Cindue for speed and not catching up. Cindue glanced behind then walked on several paces before stopping.

“Why do you follow me?” she asked.

“We desire to find The Forbidden Domain,” said Logan.

“What is that to do with me?” asked Cindue.

“We need your aid,” said Logan. “We are strangers in a strange land.”

Cindue just stared distastefully at him.

“Please,” said Logan, acutely conscious that his little joke was going

badly wrong.

“And is that your wish also, Autumn?” asked Cindue.

“I have no idea what is happening here,” said Autumn cheerfully, “but where Logan goes I go.”

“Well, that is news to me,” exclaimed Logan, looking at her in disbelief. “When did that start?”

“Twas not far from Biasdo¹² as I recall,” said Autumn, “but no matter. What say you, Cindue?”

“Well, I don't know,” said Cindue, shaking her head thoughtfully. “I confess I do not wish to saddle myself with a pair of ne'er-do-wells and cutthroats who might rob me in the night.”

“I fancy we are not wanted after all, Autumn,” said Logan. “Best we be heading south after all.”

“Enough!” exclaimed Autumn, throwing up her hands in exasperation. “Will one of you explain to me what is going on?”

“Oh all right then,” said Cindue. “Come with me if you must.”

“But is it not you who wishes us to?” asked Autumn. “I'm confused here.”

Cindue burst out laughing and, after a moment or two, Logan did as well.

“I am just playing Logan's game back at him,” said Cindue. “Of course I want you to come with me.”

“So let me get this straight,” said Autumn. “Logan was making one of his jokes and now you are making a joke back at him?”

“In a nutshell,” said Cindue. “I believed him at first though. I was

¹² Autumn and Logan first met near Logan's home village of Biasdo. Autumn was passing through at the beginning of her travels and Logan had just been exiled, on pain of death, for repeated thefts.

despairing for a time but then, as Logan said, you had promised and I did not think you would break a promise so easily. Was it not a good joke?"

"Aye," said Logan, "but you forgot something."

"What's that?" asked Cindue.

"I still have your cloth," said Logan, pulling it from under his tunic. "I didn't think you would go and leave it behind."

"No, I did not forget," said Cindue, "but I thought you'd be taking it with you."

"Ahh, so that is what you took," said Autumn. "'Tis a nice colour. You took it for Cindue?"

"Aye," said Logan. "She wants to make new clothes."

"Do you mind, Autumn?" asked Cindue.

"Why would I mind?" asked Autumn, puzzled. "Your clothes are badly tattered and this blue will suit you but the making will be a difficulty for I have only a small amount of thread in my pack. Not nearly enough for a full tunic."

"No, I meant do you mind Logan taking this cloth for me?" asked Cindue, watching her closely.

"'Twould have been better if he'd paid the man," said Autumn, "as he deserves some recompense for his labour but that is by the by."

"No, that is not what I meant," said Cindue. "I meant did you mind him doing it for me, rather than for you."

"Not at all," said Autumn, puzzled. "Why would I? I am not in need for new clothes."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Cindue. "I was just being foolish."

Chapter Thirteen

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Cindue. She woke, easing herself out of her dreams then slowly opened her eyes. Logan lay beside her, barely four hand lengths away. He was on his side, as she was, but facing towards where Autumn had been. She watched him breathing for a while, hearing the faint whistle he made on each exhalation. Wanting to reach out and touch the hair on the back of his head but equally not wanting to disturb him she rolled onto her back then sat up. A faint mist rose from the stream that meandered beneath the flat rocky protrusion on which they had made their camp.

Autumn sat at the end of the rock where it jutted out over the stream. She sat, as was usual for her, with her legs crossed, her heels on her knees and her hands lightly curled in her lap. Logan had said that this was the time when Autumn let her mind float freely and thought such thoughts as came to her. Doubtless this was true as Autumn was, in Cindue's opinion at least, a most strange and unusual creature. Slowly and quietly so as to not disturb Autumn, Cindue peeled her blanket back and felt the chill dampness of the dawn on her skin. Doubtless this was why Autumn was wrapped in her robe with its hood pulled over her head. From a distance Autumn could be mistaken for a smallish moss covered boulder, if the one looking could accept the deep green of her robe for the grey-green of moss. In any event, Autumn was as unmoving and seemingly as unaware as a boulder.

Cindue rose deftly to her feet, unaware that Autumn was aware she was awake and now moving. Indeed Autumn had heard her breathing change as she came out of sleep and a faint scraping as she rolled over and sat up. With only the quiet murmur of the stream and the occasional cry of a bird in the distance, such tiny sounds as were made by Logan and Cindue were perceptible at the edge of her hearing and, by their familiarity, were both predicable and unalarming. That said, Autumn's training over her summers at the Esys had imposed a discipline of not being misled by the expected. Her time since leaving the Esys had added to that discipline rather than diminished it. In consequence, although she expected to hear both the sounds of Logan and Cindue she still attended to those sounds with a small part of her mind while another small part listened for other sounds that did not fit their pattern. The sound of a small

fish, for example, jumping momentarily from the stream, doubtless to catch an insect, and returning with a faint splash or the sound of either a four legged animal or two two legged animals walking in unison on the other bank and upstream a little. The idea of two two legged animals walking in unison was disturbing as likely only humans would do that and that part of Autumn's mind that monitored these things stayed listening until it was clear that the sound was indeed a four legged animal that was now drinking with a single mouth and no apparent danger.

A sudden rustling of leaves behind her shifted the attention of that part of Autumn's mind. Likely it was Cindue going quietly into the undergrowth beyond the rock but if so that would mean she had arisen with great stealth for Autumn had not heard her arise. Clearly it was not Logan for his faint whistle was still evident. Without affecting the bulk of her mind as it wandered the various convoluted pathways of thought, the monitoring part narrowed in on where the rustle had come from. At the same time and also without disturbing the bulk of her mind her hands changed position ever so slightly so they were better placed should instant action be required. The breaking of a twig a few moments later brought her muscles to a slightly higher level of readiness as well.

But action was not to be. A faint spattering, readily interpreted and not wholly unexpected, told Autumn's mind that Cindue was only relieving herself for the likelihood of a potential threat, animal, human or deity, pausing to do such a thing was vanishingly small. Autumn's alertness diminished as faint sounds indicated Cindue had returned and was back under her blanket. Intriguingly, despite the paths Autumn's thoughts followed and the way she questioned almost everything to test the truth and reliability of her knowledge and beliefs, it had never once occurred to Autumn to question why she monitored everything around her for possible danger. Such was the nature of her training and such was the nature of her experience of the world after leaving the Esyup that at no time did she ever completely relax. The dangers of the world, while not ever present nor constant, were sufficient to maintain constant vigilance. All the more so because those dangers could take many forms. The likelihood of a bandit or some other human threat was small but snakes, spiders and other dangers were commonplace and there was always the chance of

fire or falling rocks or some other non-living risk.

In short, the world was full of risks and, for some reason that would likely never be explored, that idea had not been questioned by Autumn. She accepted the existence of the wealth of dangers unquestioningly unlike, for example, the air she breathed. She had oftentimes wondered why she needed to breathe and what exactly the stuff she breathed was and where that air came from and why it never seemed to run out nor even changed much from place to place. Surely the different smells in different places indicated the air was different and yet she could still breathe. And, come to that, why could she not breathe underwater? That would seem a strange oversight on the part of those deities who had created the world. Then again, fish could breathe underwater but not out of water so mayhap there was a reason for this difference. That in turn had, on occasion, made her wonder if there were similarities between air and water but it seemed unlikely although frogs seemed to be able to breath both air and water. And did water in different places smell different to those that breathed it? It was a puzzle.

Doubtless Cindue would not have found such questions as intriguing. Still, she had her own thoughts to occupy her as she pulled the blanket over herself once more and settled to watching Autumn. At some point, and with Aloidia's aid before Logan awoke, Autumn would stir herself from her thoughts, take a sip of water and wash her face then start about her exercises. These past few days since leaving Etenen, however, Autumn's thoughts had taken time and she'd ended her sitting and begun her moving after Logan had woken. Granted Logan was not at his most alert at that time but he was still aware of things around him to some extent.

Slowly the woods around them woke to the new dawn. Bird song began to fill the air, several small creatures came down to the water's edge to drink and a tribe of monkeys in the distance howled with pleasure. At one time something large with a deep voice growled but it was not near by. The growl came again a while later and the shape of a large cat-like beast loomed like a dim shadow in the mist some way downstream. It took no apparent notice of the three on the rock but Cindue watched it leave, taking care not to come any closer.

Slowly the warmth of Astauand drove the thin mist away. Some way off to the west clouds were massing and gave rise to the prospect of rain later in the day. A flock of parrots flew past, swooping and rising as individuals and shouting at each other yet staying as a group moving towards the east. For a brief moment or two they passed between Astauand and the rock, casting a shadow. 'Twas unlikely that that shadow was sufficient to bring Autumn out of her reverie but the coincidence of the ending of her thinking and the passing of the shadow was there nonetheless. She stretched her arms high above her head, breathed in deeply then exhaled as she slowly brought her arms back down again. She sat and watched the parrots disappear into the distance and Cindue heard her whisper "go in peace little ones" then put her palms together and bow her head.

Rising to her feet in a single graceful movement, Autumn turned and smiled at Cindue.

"Greetings," she said quietly so as not to disturb Logan who was now flat on his back with one arm outstretched. "Is it not a beautiful day?"

Cindue smiled back and nodded her agreement. She glanced at Logan then back at Autumn, putting her finger to her lips to show he still slept.

Autumn again smiled then stripped off her robe. She folded it neatly and put it on the rock then stepped over to where the rock dipped down to the water's edge. She drank a little water then washed her face and hands then knelt for a few moments, gazing into the water at the small fish that darted among the weeds and pebbles. Then she stood up and stretched, every muscle straining as she reached for the sky. Then, as Cindue watched, she squatted down again, balancing on one foot at a time as she washed her feet and ankles. Her full body wash would come later, after she'd done her exercises.

Leaving wet footprints Autumn went back across the rock and glanced at Logan as she picked up her staff. He was still asleep and looked quite small and in some way vulnerable as he slept even though he was half a head taller than Autumn now and over a hand's breadth wider across the shoulders and chest. His arm muscles had developed as well, she noticed. A far cry from the scrawny little lad she'd first

encountered soon after leaving her Esyup although he would never be a big man. All seemed well with him however so Autumn smiled to herself then went to the edge of the rock where she'd been thinking. She paused for a moment then, without warning and holding her staff in both hands, she leapt into the air and over her staff and, without letting go, she pulled the staff over her head then jabbed out at imagined foe. First to the right, then to the left then with both hands then spun around fully before jumping high and forward to land on the far bank with a somersault in mid air. Tossing the staff vertically in the air she twirled and kicked a tree trunk a little above head height before catching the staff and twirling once more. Then she leapt over a bush and, seemingly, began to wage war on the entire forest.

Cindue watched her go then listened for a while. When Autumn seemed to be some way distant she unwrapped herself from the blanket and leant over to check Logan. He was still asleep even though his eyes were moving rapidly and his eyelids twitched. Likely he was in the middle of a dream for his breathing had speeded up a little and he grunted once. Cindue hesitated, uncertain, then glanced over to where she could hear Autumn. She was out of sight.

“Good,” she muttered under her breath then looked at Logan to check he was still asleep.

She rubbed two fingers against her thumb then flicked the nail of the thumb against the tip of her forefinger before touching the forefinger to the ground beside her. A ball of pale yellow thread appeared with a thin bone needle thrust between its coils. She quickly picked it up then stood. Stepping over Logan, carefully in case her foot touched him, she went to a thin straggly bush not far from his head. She gently dropped the ball of thread so it was partially obscured by the bush's lower fronds. Stepping back she looked at it critically and decided it was too far under and likely to be overlooked. She picked it up and dropped it again, a touch closer to Logan. Again she looked critically at it and this time decided it looked unnatural, as though it had been placed deliberately rather than dropped accidentally. She tried again and decided its position was good but it still looked a little wrong. She pursed her lips and stared at it then squatted down and flicked a segment of dry leaf over it.

“Perfect,” she thought, glancing at Logan. “He should see that quite quickly.”

She smiled and walked past him to the remains of the fire, now long dead. She picked up their last loaf of bread and pulled off a smallish hunk then replaced the bread and went to sit roughly where Autumn had been sitting. Slowly eating the bread she sat and enjoyed the peaceful surroundings, marred now and then by the sounds of Autumn doing battle and the occasional alarm calls of birds and monkeys as they fled.

Some while later Logan spluttered and Cindue looked around. He was sitting up with a blank look on his face.

“Greetings, friend Logan,” she called. “You slept well?”

Logan just looked at her then scratched his armpit before yawning.

“Blurgh,” he said and tried to smile.

“Would you like me to bring you some bread?” asked Cindue.

Logan looked in her general direction as if trying to work out where her voice had come from. Then life began to appear in his eyes and he shook his head. The shaking moved down through his shoulders and chest then to the ground where he sat.

“Please,” he said and scratched his chest. “Where is Autumn?”

“She is off doing her exercises,” said Cindue, fetching some bread for Logan.

“Ahh, thank you muchly,” said Logan, taking the bread. He sat and looked at it then started pulling off small pieces with his fingers and eating them.

Cindue squatted down beside him, aware that he did not like waking up and that it took him a while to recover from the shock of it.

“You slept well?” he asked when the bread was finished and his mind

was beginning to come to terms with a new day.

“Very well, thank you,” said Cindue. “Did you?”

“I think so,” said Logan and yawned again. He looked around then got to his feet like a very old man. “A moment.”

He stumbled off behind the bushes, kicking the ball of thread with his foot but not noticing it. Cindue sighed and repositioned it. A short time later he came back and almost stepped on the ball of thread.

“That's better,” he said and sat down. “Where is Autumn?”

“She's across the stream doing her exercises,” said Cindue patiently, wondering how Logan could not have seen the thread.

“Have I already asked you that?” asked Logan, a faintly puzzled look coming into his eyes.

“Aye, but no matter,” said Cindue. She put her hand on his arm. “I know it takes you a time to wake up.”

“Aye,” said Logan, uncomfortably aware of her hand but a little too scared to move his arm away and offend her.

“Have you been awake long?” he asked.

“But a short time,” said Cindue, taking her hand away, to his relief. “I have been sitting at the rock's edge, eating some bread and watching the woods come alive. 'Tis a beautiful day although I fear it may rain later.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, looking around and taking notice of the woods for the first time. “Rain. Oh well.”

Autumn's staff, or one that looked very similar, thudded onto the rock and skated off into the undergrowth. A moment later Autumn jumped across the stream and landed on her hands. Staying upright she walked several paces on her hands, her ponytail trailing behind her then dipped her arms and thrust herself upwards to land on her feet

in front of them.

“Greetings to you both,” she said, slightly breathlessly. “Is it not a beautiful day?” She had several leaves caught in her hair and one stuck to the sweat on her forehead. Her feet were coated in dirt and bits of foliage were caught in her tunic.

“It's going to rain,” said Logan.

“Inevitably,” said Autumn cheerfully. “If it never rained again I fancy 'twould be the end of the world. Rain keeps everything alive.”

“Oh,” said Logan dourly.

“He has eaten,” said Cindue, catching Autumn's questioning look.

“Good,” said Autumn. “Doubtless he will cheer up soon then. I am going to wash.”

“I'll come with you,” said Cindue, standing up as well. If nothing else it would give Logan a chance to find the thread.

They walked along the rock and down to the water's edge.

“Did you have a good practice today?” asked Cindue as they stripped off.

“Aye, fair,” said Autumn. “'Tis only now I feel fully recovered though. These past few days I have felt slow and heavy.”

“You surprise me,” said Cindue, splashing cold water over herself. “You always seem blindingly fast and light on your feet to me. What have you recovered from?”

“I had au'ai,” said Autumn, using a piece of bark to scrub herself. “When you came upon us after escaping Ifgez I had not long been able to get to my feet unaided.”

Cindue paused in her washing to stare at Autumn.

“Yet you were as fast as any that time,” she said. “Are you sure it was au'ai?”

“That is what Logan said,” said Autumn, tossing away the bark and pulling her hair tie off.¹³ She immersed her head in the stream for a few moments and let the water flow through her hair. “’Twas several days of much snot and great aches.”

“That's sounds like au'ai,” said Cindue. “How long did you have it for?”

“Oh, four days,” said Autumn. “’Twas hard on Logan for we ran out of food.”

“Aye, he likes his food,” said Cindue with a chuckle. “Four days sounds about right. I have had the au'ai myself. 'Tis a foul thing.”

“Was this before you were taken prisoner?” asked Autumn.

“No, 'twas during my time in Rudailk,” said Cindue. “Why?”

“I merely wondered if your memory was returning,” said Autumn, getting out onto the bank. She bent over and started to wring her hair dry.

“Ahh, alas no,” said Cindue, getting out as well. She wiped the excess water off much of her body before pulling her tattered tunic back on. “I remember nothing before that time.”

“No matter,” said Autumn, tossing her hair back. She too got dressed and picked up her hair tie. “Doubtless when you are back with your loved ones much will return then. Mayhap even some will return when we reach Rudailk although I fancy we are no longer heading that way.”

¹³ Autumn's leather hair tie was a gift from Dhru, the son of the trader Inyanasi, with whom Autumn and Logan travelled for a while in Neander. Dhru was greatly impressed with Autumn and proposed to her, through his father as was the custom, but Autumn turned him down. Not long afterwards Subota, the sorcerer to the Karoi, also proposed to Autumn although for very different reasons. See *The Annals ~ The Fifth Tale*.

“What do you mean?” asked Cindue, watching Autumn as she started back onto the rock again.

“Seibi said to follow the path beside the stream for a time and stay on it after it went away from the stream,” said Autumn. “It has been four days and still we stay with the stream and I have seen no sign of any path going away from this one. Either Rudailk is much further than I was lead to believe or we have taken a wrong turn.”

“Ahh,” said Cindue, following. “Well, doubtless this path will take us somewhere and I have no burning desire to return to Rudailk. I have no fond memories of that place.”

“I was wondering about that myself,” said Logan, coming over to join them. Cindue noticed he had still not yet found the ball of thread and sighed inwardly. “Do you think we should go back away and search for the right path?”

“Twould seem fruitless,” said Autumn. “Be it the right path or the wrong path, this path still heads north which is where we want to go. Rudailk is of itself not important.”

“True enough,” said Logan. “There is still plenty of bread and some cheese.” He turned and something yellow caught his eye. “What's that?”

“What's what?” asked Cindue, breathing a sigh of relief. “You mean that yellow thing over there?”

Chapter Fourteen

“Greetings,” said Autumn a few days later. “My name is Autumn. How fare you?”

The old man paused in his slow climb up the hilly path and leant heavily on his walking stick. His breathing was laboured and he gazed at Autumn for a few wheezy breaths.

“Tis a long climb,” he said, glancing behind him then back at Autumn. He took another couple of breaths. “Aye, a fair old climb. I be Citwyn.”

He glanced at Logan then turned his attention to Cindue who was now resplendent in her new blue tunic with yellow stitching and looking wholesome. She had also used a piece of the cloth that was left over to make a hair tie to hold her dreadlocks in place behind her head and she'd decorated it with a pattern using the last of the ball of yellow thread. Clearly the old man found her rather fetching for he paid little attention to Autumn and none at all to Logan.

“My companions are Logan and Cindue,” said Autumn. “We are travellers and strangers in these parts.”

“Oh aye?” said Citwyn, making himself stand a little straighter. “Cindue, eh. That be a pretty name. A pretty name for a pretty lass.” He beamed at her and started to cough.

“Thank you kindly, Citwyn,” said Cindue, smiling at him. Her smile turned to a frown as his coughing became hacking. She glanced at Autumn worriedly as Citwyn bent over, one hand clutching his chest and the other gripping his knee. He seemed to be trying to cough up his innards.

“Sit, sit,” said Autumn, thrusting her staff at Logan so she could take Citwyn by the shoulders and ease him to the ground. “Sit up straight and concentrate on breathing slowly without coughing.”

After two or three more coughs Citwyn made a determined effort to stop coughing. He sat there for a few moments, massaging his chest

and taking shallow breaths while Autumn rubbed his back.

“Tis easing now,” he gasped and looked around for Cindue. “Fear not, lass.” He paused and grimaced while taking another breath. “There be life still in this old carcass.”

“Is he all right?” asked Cindue, still looking worried.

“I venture so,” said Autumn, stopping rubbing his back. “This is not new to you, is it, Citwyn.”

“Nay,” said Citwyn. He coughed once more then spat some phlegm on the ground. Autumn glanced at it then at Logan for there was blood in his phlegm. “Agh, that’s better.” He wiped the end of his beard over his mouth then looked at Cindue again.

“Travellers, eh?” he said. “What be a pretty lass like you be travelling for? What say you end your travelling here, eh? Look after an old man and keep him warm at night, eh?”

“I fancy that will hasten your time, old man,” she said with a laugh, “and not ease your suffering.”

“Mayhap,” said Citwyn, his eyes twinkling, “but I can think of no better ending.”

He glanced at Logan and sniffed then looked at Autumn again for a few moments before returning his eyes to Cindue.

“Ahh, best not,” he muttered sadly and shook his head. “Aloidia does not cast Its delights my way anymore. Alas.”

“If I might ask,” said Autumn, “how long has this coughing affliction beset you?”

“Ohh, six, seven summers now,” said Citwyn. He coughed again but didn’t spit.

Autumn looked at Logan and shook her head slightly.

“Do you feel well enough to stand?” she asked.

“Aye, reckon so,” said Citwyn. He started to get to his feet and Autumn put her hand under his arm to help him. He pushed her away testily. “I can manage. I am not so decrepit I cannot get to my own two feet.”

“I did not mean to imply that,” said Autumn, stepping back out of the way. “I wished only to help.”

“Then I thank you,” said Citwyn, pushing himself upright with his stick, “but I have no need of help.”

“So I see,” said Autumn. “Tell me, is that Rudailk down yonder?”

“Rudailk?” exclaimed Citwyn. “Bless you no, lass. That be Fus. Rudailk be many days to the west. Is that where you are heading?”

“That was our intent,” said Autumn. “’Twould seem we either lost our way or were given poor directions. No matter.”

“Not that there be much in Rudailk,” said Citwyn. “I was there once, in my youth. ’Tis a small place and has few delights. Fus be a much better place I reckon.”

“Then we shall take pleasure in becoming acquainted with Fus,” said Autumn. “Is that where you are from?”

“Aye, born and bred,” said Citwyn. “So, travellers, eh? Where be you from?”

“Many days to the south,” said Autumn.

“I have heard that there are places to the south,” said Citwyn, nodding thoughtfully. “Can’t say as I’ve ever been down that way. Never seen no need. Well, best I be on my way. Nice to have met you, Cindue.” He beamed at her then glanced briefly at Autumn. “And you too, lass.”

He turned and started walking slowly up the last part of the small hill.

"I wonder where he is going," said Logan quietly, watching Citwyn.

"Doubtless he would have told us if he'd wanted us to know," said Autumn. "Come, let us go to Fus."

She started off down the hill and Logan and Cindue followed.

"So what do you think ailed him?" asked Logan. "I saw the blood in his spit."

"I am not certain," said Autumn, "but I fancy his time is not far off. He said he has been coughing like this for several summers so I fancy he has an affliction of his lungs. I felt some lumps on his back when I was rubbing it." She stopped walking for a moment and looked at her feet. "There was a man called Alacsa at my Esysup when I was young. He also had such lumps and coughed endlessly and brought up blood. He did not live long past his thirtieth summer. The elders there knew not what was wrong with him and nothing they did saved him from wasting away."

"Ahh, so that is why you did nothing to help Citwyn," said Logan. "I did wonder."

"Aye," said Autumn. "There was nothing I could do. Mayhap in times to come someone will find a cure for such an affliction but likely not for Citwyn is only the second such I have encountered. It takes time and many trials to find cures which is why we only have cures for common things."

"You think he is going somewhere to die?" asked Cindue, looking back up the hill. Citwyn had reached the top and could no longer be seen.

"Oh he will die, that is certain," said Autumn, walking downhill again. "We all do sooner or later, but I fancy his time is not today. Alacsa spent his last few moons abed, wasting away and unable to leave it. The elders gave what succour they could to ease his pains but that was all that could be done."

"Poor man," said Cindue, catching up.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but the manner of our departing this world is in the hands of the deities.”

“So they say,” said Logan, inwardly certain that even the deities held no sway over Autumn.

* * *

“’Twould seem to be market day,” remarked Logan as they approached Fus. “Tis a shame we have no money.”

“Mayhap you could pick a pocket or two, Logan,” said Cindue.

“Alas that is not one of my skills,” he said quietly, “and don't say things like that so loudly. People don't like it.”

“Ahh, sorry,” said Cindue. “I was not thinking.”

“And we have no great need,” said Autumn. “I grant some bread and cheese would be useful but there is food aplenty in the woods.”

“Aye, roots and such,” said Cindue. “Some honey would be nice to go on the bread though, don't you think Logan?”

“Honey is nice,” conceded Logan, “but likely there is no seller of honey here. It seems a fairly small place.”

“I wonder what is going on over there,” said Autumn, pointing to a handful of people clustered around something. “This is what I like about travelling!”

“Seeing people in a market?” asked Cindue, frowning.

“No, coming across something new and curious,” said Autumn. “It excites the imagination and gives opportunities for new knowledge and insights.”

“Then let us go and see,” said Logan.

They ambled over to find a man behind a flimsy looking table. He

had three coconut husk halves and was rapidly sliding them around the table. He glanced at Autumn then stopped moving the husks.

“So, my friend,” he said, looking at a young lad who was watching the husks intently, “where be the nut?”

“That one,” said the lad confidently. He reached out and touched one of the husks.

“Are you sure?” asked the man.

“Aye, I am certain,” said the lad.

“Tis your last chance to change your mind,” said the man behind the table. “Could be the nut is under one of the others.”

“No, it be under that one,” said the lad. “Lift it up.”

“As you wish,” said the man with a sigh. He lifted off the husk and there was a collective gasp as the people gathered round saw there was nothing underneath it.

“What?” exclaimed the lad angrily. “Where be the noften nut then?”

“Hey now, no swearing,” admonished the man, holding up a finger. “There be eashikas here.” He glanced apologetically at Autumn.

“Don't give me that,” snapped the lad. “Where be the nut?”

“Tis under this one,” said the man, lifting another of the husks. The nut sat there in all its small glory.

“Pah!” exclaimed the lad angrily. “Again!”

“That be another two banuul,” said the man.

“Go on Mash,” said the girl next to the lad. “You get it this time.”

“Aye, reckon so,” said Mash irritably. He fished two banuuls from a small bag that hung from his belt and flung them on the table.

“That be right kind of you,” said the man, smiling. “Anyone else care to place a wager?”

“Aye, I will,” said a plump short man with a bald patch. “I been watching you!”

“And there was me thinking you didn't like me,” said the man behind the table with a laugh. “Give us a kiss then!”

“Pah!” exclaimed the plump man. “Get on with it.” He tossed two banuuls on the table as well.

“Well now, we have two what is taking up the Three Husk Challenge,” said the man, scooping up the four banuuls and making them disappear. Where to, no one could quite see. “So, here it is. One little nut.”

He put the nut carefully down on the table so all could see it plainly.

“And here are the three husks,” he said, scooping the coconut husks up. “I put one over the nut, like this.”

He slowly put one of the husks over the nut.

“You all know the nut is there, don't you,” he asked, looking around with the other two husks in his hand.

“Show me,” said Mash.

“As you wish,” said the man, lifting the husk. Sure enough the nut was still underneath. “Satisfied?”

“Aye,” said the plump man grudgingly.

“Good,” said the man. “Now I put one husk on this side,” and he put a husk down next to the one with the nut, “and the other the other side,” and put that husk down as well. “The one in the middle still has the nut.” He lifted the middle husk to show the nut was still there.

“Get on with it!” exclaimed Mash impatiently. He, and the plump

man, were staring intently at the middle husk.

“With pleasure,” said the man. “Now, watch closely as I shift and slide the magic husks around.” He rapidly moved the husks around on the table as the two gamblers and the rest of those gathered watched very closely.

“Now, my friends,” he said, suddenly stopping. “For a half ban, which husk is the nut under?”

“The middle one!” exclaimed the plump man.

“Nay, 'tis that one!” exclaimed the lad, pointing. “I was watching!”

“So was I,” exclaimed the plump man, clenching his fists. “’Tis under the middle one!”

“Eashian, eashian,” said the man, holding up his hands to calm them. “’Tis just a game! Let us see, shall we? You said the nut is under this one, did you not?” and he touched the husk the lad had pointed at.

“Aye,” said the lad, his jaw clenching.

“And you said this one?” said the man, touching the middle one and looking at the plump man.

“Yes,” he said, scowling.

“So which is it?” asked the man. “You can’t both be right. Anyone else?”

“’Tis the end one,” said the girl with the lad confidently.

“This one?” asked the man, touching the lad’s choice again.

“Aye,” she said. “That one.”

She squeezed the lad’s arm and he shook her hand away.

“Are you certain, sweetie?” he asked.

“Aye,” she said and looked at the lad for reassurance. He ignored her and kept his eyes on the husk.

“Well now, let's find out shall we?” said the man. He looked around and winked at Autumn then lifted the husk. There was no nut there and the lad snarled.

“Told you!” exclaimed the plump man triumphantly. “’Tis the middle one, like I said.”

“Noften stupid game!” exclaimed the lad and stomped away. The girl hurried after him.

“Now then,” said the man, looking at the plump man. “You said this one, didn't you,” and he touched the other end husk.

“No, no, no!” exclaimed the plump man agitatedly. “The middle one.”

“Are you sure?” asked the man. “It could be under this one,” and again he touched the end husk.

“No!” said the plump man excitedly. “Stop trying to put me off! ’Tis the middle one!”

“Well, if you are certain,” said the man resignedly. He lifted the middle husk and the onlookers gasped again for there was no nut there.

“Why, you cheat!” exclaimed the plump man angrily. “What did you do with it? Eat it?”

“Not at all,” said the man. “’Twas under this one all along.” He lifted the last husk and the nut sat there innocently.

“Pah!” exclaimed the plump man and smashed his hand down on the table, making all three husks and the nut jump.

“Now then, now then,” exclaimed the man, putting his hands protectively over the husks.

“Grrr,” growled the plump man. He glared at the husk man for a few moments then stomped off.

“Some people just don't watch carefully enough,” remarked the man. “How about you, my lovely?” and he turned to Autumn.

“’Twas the end one as you said,” said Autumn. “I was watching closely.”

“Were you now,” said the man, beaming at her. “And what be your name?”

“Autumn,” said Autumn. “What is yours?”

“Enk Wido, at your service,” said Enk. “Would you care to partake of the Three Husk Challenge? ’Tis only two banuuls and if you pick the one with the nut I’ll be giving you a half ban for besting me.”

“I have no money,” said Autumn, “and even if I did I do not approve of wagers for they bring out the bad in people.”

“Ohh that distresses me greatly,” said Enk, looking downcast. “But why do you say you have no money? I can see some behind your ear.”

He reached out and plucked a two banuul coin from behind Autumn's ear. She jerked back at his touch then stared at the coin he held up.

“Where did that come from?” she asked. “I had no money behind my ear.”

“Oh yes you did,” said Enk, reaching out to pluck another coin from behind her other ear. Instead his arm was tightly gripped and pressed down on the table. A coin fell from between his fingers.

“Oww!” he exclaimed and Autumn let him go. “That hurt.”

“Are you a sorcerer?” asked Autumn as he rubbed his arm.

Enk burst out laughing.

"If I were you think I'd be working a market for a few coins?" he asked. "No, I am a trickster."

"What is a trickster?" asked Autumn.

"Tis someone who pretends to be a sorcerer but isn't," said Enk. "Look."

He picked up a twig trimmed to about half as long again as his hand which sat at the end of the table and proceeded to push it up his nose. When the twig was all gone he smiled at Autumn then pulled the twig out of his other nostril with his other hand.

"You see?" he said. "Neither the twig nor my nose is damaged."

"You did not push it up your nose," said Cindue, who'd been watching him closely. "You made it look as though it went up your nose but you kept it behind your hand. Then you switched it to your other hand before pretending to pull it out again."

"Ohh, she's good," said Enk admiringly, giving her an appraising look. "So where did this coin come from, if not from behind the lovely Autumn's ear?"

"Twas in your hand all along," said Cindue. "You had it hidden between your fingers."

"Are you in the trade?" asked Enk, giving her a quizzical look.

"I have no trade," said Cindue, "save that of farm labourer."

"I see," said Enk, putting the two banuul coin on the table. "So, if I make this coin disappear without picking it up will you tell me where it's gone?"

"I will try," said Cindue, raising an eyebrow.

"Good," said Enk. "Now, I am not picking it up but I'm going to put my hand on it and rub it. You see?"

Cindue nodded.

“And if I keep rubbing it,” said Enk, moving his hand gently from side to side on top of the coin, “it will disappear.” He stopped and lifted his hand. The coin had gone. “So where is the coin?”

“If I tell you will you let me keep the coin?” asked Cindue.

“Aye,” said Enk, fairly confidently as this was one of his better tricks.

“’Tis on the ground behind the table,” said Cindue.

Enk scowled then bent to retrieve the coin.

“How did you know?” he asked, handing the coin over as promised.

“You slid it backwards as you rubbed it,” said Cindue, “until it fell off.”

“Pah!” exclaimed Enk. “You be a sight too clever, girlie.”

Cindue smiled and glanced at Logan then Autumn before putting the coin back on the table.

“Can I play the Three Husk Challenge?” she asked.

“No,” said Enk. “I fancy you’ll know which husk it is under. I ain’t risking a half ban that easily.”

“Then let us change the nature of the wager,” said Cindue.

“What do you mean?” asked Enk, suspiciously.

“You do it as you did before,” said Cindue, “except you say which husk the nut is under. If you are right you keep the two banuuls and if you are wrong you give me a whole ban.”

“I choose?” asked Enk, disbelievingly. “Not you?”

“That’s right,” said Cindue. “You choose. You get it right, you win and

if you get it wrong, I win.”

“Agreed,” said Enk, forgetting the two banuul coin was his in the first place. “Here’s the nut and ...”

“I will place the nut,” said Cindue, picking it up. She put it down a little further away.

“As you wish,” said Enk. He quickly put a husk over the nut and the other two on each side.

“Now move them,” said Cindue.

Enk hesitated then rapidly moved the husks around.

“Good,” said Cindue when he stopped. “Here is my two banuuls. Where is your ban?”

Enk frowned then fished in his coin bag and laid two half ban coins beside her two banuul coin.

“Now choose,” said Cindue.

“This one,” said Enk, knowing exactly where the nut was. He lifted the husk and stared at the table, aghast. The nut wasn’t there.

“Thank you,” said Cindue with a smile. She scooped the coins off the table as Enk quickly lifted the other two husks. The nut was nowhere to be seen.

“Come, Logan, Autumn,” said Cindue. “Let us find some bread and honey.”

“But where is my nut?” wailed Enk, looking around agitatedly.

“It’s in your coin bag,” said Cindue, beaming at him.

Enk stared at her for a few moments then started fishing around in his coin bag. His face froze and he slowly pulled the nut out.

“How ...?” he stuttered.

“Magic!” said Cindue with a laugh. “Enjoy your day!”

Chapter Fifteen

“How did you do that?” asked Autumn as they walked away from Enk Wido's table.

“Do what?” asked Cindue, looking around to see where Logan was. He was walking a little behind them but twisted to look back at Enk.

“Hide his nut in his bag,” said Autumn.

“That was right clever,” he said, catching up. “That Enk still doesn't believe it! How did you do it?”

“I just asked Cindue that,” said Autumn.

“Oh, 'twas easy enough,” said Cindue, jangling the coins in her hand. “I just did what he did only back at him.”

“Did what he did?” asked Autumn, looking a little puzzled. “I do not know what he did save it was clever as Logan said.”

“Tis simplicity itself,” said Cindue. “He knew that people would be watching the husk that had the nut so as he moved the husks around he flipped the nut from one husk to another and hid the doing by moving the husks quickly so no one noticed. All I did was flick the nut into my hand as he put them down. I thought he might notice but he didn't so when he moved them around again the nut wasn't under any of the husks and most definitely not where he thought it was.”

“But did he not put one husk over the nut before he put the others down?” asked Logan, frowning in an effort to remember exactly what had happened.

“Oh Logan!” said Cindue sorrowfully, shaking her head slowly from side to side. “If that were so then I could not have flicked the nut without him seeing, could I?”

“Umm, no, I suppose not,” said Logan, uncertain of whether what he remembered was right. It had all happened so quickly.

“Did not Enk pick up the husk after putting it over the nut to show it was still there?” asked Autumn, just as bemused as Logan.

“No, that was the time before,” said Cindue. “With the fat man and the boy.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. She thought back for a few moments then shrugged. “And how did you put the nut in the bag?”

“I just slipped it in while he was moving the husks,” said Cindue. “I thought it would be funny.”

“Was it funny, Logan?” asked Autumn.

“His face was funny,” said Logan. “Aye, it were right funny when he looked inside the bag and found the nut there. I still do not see how you managed that without him noticing, Cindue.”

“His mind was on his husks and the expectation of winning an easy wager,” said Cindue.

“Well, that I can understand,” said Autumn. “Sometimes in a fight I am able to make my opponent think I am going to move one way so I can move another way and catch him off guard. We called it misdirection at my Esyup. 'Tis a right useful skill and one that takes no little practice for the body naturally wishes to move the way it started and changing that movement without showing the opponent is difficult. Hmm, I wonder.”

“What do you wonder, Autumn?” asked Logan, a touch anxiously as Autumn's wonderings could oftentimes lead to long and confusing explanations.

“If mayhap Cindue's memory is returning,” said Autumn.

“I do not follow,” said Cindue, pursing her lips and raising an eyebrow.

“It seems to me,” said Autumn, stopping beside another stall and looking at Cindue, “that what you did back there needed intent and

practice. Aye, and a fair amount of knowing that it could be done. You were confident and knew you could do it else it would have been a most foolish wager. It follows, therefore, that you have likely done this before and it further follows that if that is the case then likely you had some training as a trickster like Enk before you were taken prisoner and lost your memory.”

“Well, I suppose 'tis possible,” said Cindue uncertainly. “I have no memory of that though.”

“But you knew you could deceive Enk before you tried?” asked Logan.

“I suppose I must have,” said Cindue. She stuck out her bottom lip then scratched the back of her head under her mass of dreadlocks. “I confess I did not think about it though. The idea came to me and I acted upon it without thinking.”

“Which further speaks of much practice,” said Autumn. “The ability to do things without prior thinking shows that. 'Tis like when someone attacks me I am able to defend myself without thought because of all the practising I have done.”

“So you think I was a trickster before?” said Cindue thoughtfully. “Aye, well, I suppose it is possible. What do you think of that, Logan? You like the idea of me being a trickster?”

“Oh, umm ...,” said Logan, caught off guard. “Umm, yes, I venture 'tis a useful skill.”

“So is the skill of buying,” said a man's voice. He sounded both amused and irritated at the same time. “Are you three going to block my stall all day or are you going to buy something?”

“Ahh, my apologies,” said Autumn, turning quickly to look at the man. “My mind was elsewhere. Forgive me.”

“I would forgive such a fair maid anything,” said the man, beaming at her now she was paying attention to his wares. “Can I tempt your mind back with delights and challenges?”

“What are these things?” asked Logan, pointing to a pile of small blocks of dried mud. “They would seem to serve little purpose.”

“And there you have the essence of that which stimulates and edifies the mind,” said the man, transferring his beam to Logan.

“How can lumps of dried mud stimulate the mind?” asked Logan as Cindue picked up a block of mud and found it had several coloured dots on the underside.

“Everyone knows the usefulness of that which is useful,” said the man, now beaming at Cindue, “but no one knows the usefulness of that which is useless.” He looked back at Logan then at Autumn. “Do you not agree?”

“Ahh, you are a philosopher,” said Autumn. “That is the sort of question that used to occupy my mentors and I after Astauand had departed the sky. I am Autumn, what is your name?”

“I am Ridoradi, maker of games and other idle distractions,” said Ridoradi. “Used to? You no longer occupy your mind with that which is useless?”

“Please, do not get Autumn started on such matters!” said Logan, stepping back and holding up his hands defensively. His grin belied any offence this might cause. “She will debate the use of that which is useless with you until old age takes you to another world.”

“You do me an injustice, Logan,” said Autumn, frowning. “I seek only the truth of things.”

“I was only joking,” said Logan, acting contrite. “Silly of me, I know. I shall not say another word.”

He ran a finger across his lips as though sealing them tight. Cindue laughed and Autumn raised her eyebrow and looked quizzically at him.

“What are these dots for?” asked Cindue, holding up one of the blocks.

“Counting,” said Ridoradi.

“So you hold this block and count the dots then count them again to make sure the number has not changed?” asked Cindue, a touch sarcastically.

“In a manner of speaking,” said Ridoradi. “You will note, however, that there is a line across the block and there are a different number of dots on each side of the line.”

“Indeed,” said Cindue, glancing at the block in her hand. “What of it?”

“And, if you would condescend to pick up another block,” said Ridoradi, forestalling her by picking one up himself, “you will see that it too has a different number of dots.”

“Undeniably,” said Cindue. “Is that important?”

“Well now, that depends on what you mean by important,” said Ridoradi, putting the block down on the table with the dots facing up.

“That is exactly what Autumn would say,” said Logan, breaking his temporary vow of silence.

“Because it is most decidedly true,” said Autumn. “That which is important to one may not be so to another, nor in a different situation. Clarifying what you consider to be important is, of itself, of great importance. To me at any rate, if not to you.”

“And you have the right of it,” said Ridoradi smoothly. “If I may be permitted to explain?”

“Please do,” said Autumn.

“You see that this block has one dot on one side of the line and three on the other?” said Ridoradi, tapping his block gently.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Is that important?”

“Most definitely,” said Ridoradi. “That is in fact the essence of this.”

“How so?” asked Logan, mildly intrigued.

“Ahh,” said Ridoradi, holding up one finger. “Now we come to the crux of the matter. You see this other block in the hand of this most delightful maid? It has two dots on one side and one on the other, yes?”

“Well obviously,” said Cindue, not bothering to look at the block again. “What of it?”

“You place your block on the table,” said Ridoradi, taking the block from Cindue and putting it next to the other, “but note that it can only be placed in such a way that the single dot on each are next to each other. It could not be placed the other way as one has two dots and the other three. They do not match.”

“But how does that stop me putting the block that way?” asked Cindue, sliding one block to the other end of the other block.

“It is against the rules of the game,” said Ridoradi. “Only matching numbers of dots can be placed together.”

“Ohh, 'tis only a game,” said Autumn, dismissively.

“Only a game? Only a game?” exclaimed Ridoradi, closing his eyes and putting his hands over his heart with a pained expression. “Eashiq, I am bereft. Only a game indeed!”

“But that is all it is, is it not?” asked Autumn. “A game to pass the time and of no great importance other than that.”

“Perhaps to you, one of doubtless great learning and skills of the mind,” said Ridoradi, “but to others? No, to others it is of great importance for it calms their minds and, doubtless all too often, aids them in learning their numbers and how to count.”

“Ahh, so it is a teaching aid, then,” said Autumn. “Why did you call it a game?”

“The reasons are many and varied, Autumn, if I may call you Autumn?” He looked at her questioningly and Autumn nodded. “I am a maker and seller of games so I call it a game for to call it otherwise would make a mockery of my trade. Moreover, were I to call this a teaching aid doubtless none would buy for few desire teaching aids but many desire games. It serves that purpose but in subtle ways that do not disturb the minds of those not so fortunate as ourselves.”

“And now I follow its importance,” said Autumn. “Does this game have a name?”

“Damare,” said Ridoradi. “The full game has twenty four blocks and comes in a nice polished wooden case.” He held up a set to show them. “And, if I may say so myself, at the very reasonable and affordable price of only four bans. What say you to that?”

“’Twould seem a grievous amount to pay for just a game,” said Cindue, “even if it is also a teaching aid.”

“I am deeply hurt by your remark,” exclaimed Ridoradi, looking pained but not putting his hands over his heart. “But, if you are unable to afford such luxuries, perhaps this version? It has the same twenty four blocks but they are smaller and come in a most tasteful small cloth bag for a mere ban six.” He held a bag up to show them.

“But would not mud blocks in a bag such as that chip and crumble?” asked Autumn.

“’Tis the risk you take by buying cheaply,” said Ridoradi. “Now, a wooden box,” and he lifted the box again, “such a box protects the pieces admirably, most admirably.”

“I think not,” said Autumn. “We are travellers and have no way of protecting such a thing even if we had a need for such a game as Damare. Moreover we can all count quite satisfactorily.”

“Oh,” said Ridoradi, disappointed.

“You like to play games?” asked Logan as an audacious idea came to him. Cindue’s performance with the husks had inspired him.

"I am a maker and seller of games," said Ridoradi, "although I do, from time to time, play them myself."

"And what of wagers?" asked Logan.

"You have a wager in mind?" asked Ridoradi, frowning.

"Aye," said Logan. "'Tis more of a mind game though."

"A mind game?" asked Ridoradi, his interest piqued. "Tell me more."

"I have a puzzle," said Logan. "It came to me a while back but I had great difficulty explaining it. I fancy that you, a maker and seller of games, would find the explanation right quickly though as you have the mind for such things."

"You intrigue me," said Ridoradi, scratching his chin. "And the wager?"

"Oh, 'tis simple enough," said Logan, beginning to doubt himself now, particularly as both Autumn and Cindue had moved back a little with puzzled expressions on their faces. "Umm, I will show you the puzzle and if you can explain it you keep the coins and if you cannot you give me a ban."

"So it is a coin trick?" asked Ridoradi. "Doubtless one you picked up from Enk Wido. I saw you by his table earlier. I think not."

"Oh," said Logan. "No, 'tis not a trick like his. 'Tis quite different."

"Hmm," said Ridoradi. "A different kind of trick? Interesting. What coins do you propose to use? I will not put up a ban against only a banuul or two."

"A moment," said Logan. "Cindue, what coins do you have?"

"You're not having them," said Cindue, backing away with the coins tightly in her grasp. "They're my coins. I won them."

"Ahh, my apologies," said Logan. "Sorry."

“You play the game well, Eashiq,” said Ridoradi. He was amused because this looked very much like a ploy to both encourage him to wager and distract him.

“So you do not wish to share your good fortune with Logan?” asked Autumn. She was confused by Logan's desire to wager on something but Cindue's attitude seemed a little unfair. “No matter. 'Tis your choice.”

“'Twas wrong of me,” said Cindue after a moment's hesitation. Reluctantly she held out her hand to show Logan the coins. “Please Logan, take all you want.”

“Now there's an offer you don't get from a maid every day,” laughed Ridoradi. “Then again, lad, with two lasses I reckon you be not needing much in the way of offerings!”

“What are you talking about?” asked Autumn, looking intently at Ridoradi as Logan selected the two half ban coins and quietly thanked Cindue. He appreciated that Ridoradi would be unlikely to accept the wager if only the two two banuul coins were involved.

“No matter,” said Ridoradi, looking at the coins Logan held out. “Two half bans against a whole ban? That seems a fair enough wager.”

“So you are willing to take the wager?” asked Logan, moving closer to the table.

“Aye,” said Ridoradi. “Cash on the nose. That's how I like it.”

“I have heard that said before,” said Autumn. “What does it mean?”

“What, cash on the nose? Can't say as I rightly know,” admitted Ridoradi, scratching the tip of his nose. “Reckon it be just something people round here say.”

“'Twould seem a strange thing to say,” said Autumn. “Why would anyone put money on their noses?”

“Well, if you put it like that,” said Ridoradi. “Never thought about it

before. Is that what this wager is about? Explaining what cash on the nose means?"

"No," said Logan, putting the two coins on the table. "'Tis about these coins."

"So, what, they be trick coins then?" asked Ridoradi. "Can I check them first?"

"Of course," said Logan. "They are perfectly ordinary coins. We got them from another stall."

"Enk's?" asked Ridoradi, picking them up.

"Ah, no," said Logan quickly. "Another one."

"Hmm," said Ridoradi, looking at him suspiciously. After a few moments he examined the two coins minutely and tried to bend each of them between his teeth. "Well, reckon as how they be all right. So what's this here trick?"

"It isn't a trick," said Logan. "More of a puzzle. Your ban?"

"So it's not a trick then," said Ridoradi as Cindue and Autumn moved closer to watch.

"No," said Logan. "It is merely something strange and your purpose is to explain it. If you can you keep these two half bans and if you cannot then I keep your ban as well as these."

"If it ain't a trick then it shouldn't be too difficult to explain," said Ridoradi. "No cheating, mind."

"No cheating," agreed Logan. "Ready?"

"Aye," said Ridoradi as a couple of other people drifted over to watch.

"Good," said Logan. "Now, I put these two coins down side by side, like this. You see the heads on the coins are both facing the same way?"

“Aye,” said Ridoradi.

A nervous knot started to form inside Logan's belly. What he was about to do had always happened when he was trying to work out why it happened but that didn't necessarily mean it would work this time.

“What do you think will happen if I roll one coin around the edge of the other?” asked Logan. “Will the head on the one I'm rolling go round once or twice or thrice?”¹⁴

“The other doesn't move?” asked Ridoradi, studying the coins carefully.

“No, only the one rolling round the outside moves,” said Logan, not touching the coins. “As it rolls the head on the coin will roll with it so my question is how many times will the head on the coin roll around?”

“Hmph,” grunted Ridoradi. He frowned and waved his finger as he imagined the coin rolling around the other one. “I be thinking just the once as both coins will be the same length around the outside but that be such an obvious thought I am wondering why you would be making a wager on it.”

“Perhaps that is what he wants you to think,” commented Cindue, entering into the spirit of things.

“Aye, perhaps it is,” said Ridoradi, looking up to stare into Logan's eyes. “So, be it a real puzzle or be it just a bluff, eh?”

“It be just the once,” muttered one of the onlookers. “Stands to reason, like. The coin be only going round the once and the head with it.”

¹⁴ In fact this problem arose when Autumn was playing with some coins she'd found to occupy her mind while held prisoner in the Sky Tower at the Palace of the Saamrat in Tafa'ul. The Saamrat had had Autumn kidnapped and incarcerated in order to clear the pathway for Logan, as Roinad of Aferraron, to become betrothed to her daughter. See *The Annals ~ The Tenth Tale*. Autumn had demonstrated the coin problem to Logan after he'd freed her but neither she nor he were able to immediately see an explanation.

“Aye, reckon so,” muttered another. “Don't make no sense else.”

Logan shrugged, trying to keep his face blank.

“A ban either way,” he said. “What say you?”

Chapter Sixteen

“No, I do not see that,” said Cindue, her brow furrowed with concentration. “Explain it to me again.”

“Tis really quite simple,” said Logan, “but it is much like one of Enk's tricks for you have to see past the deception. Look.” He put one coin beside the other on a flat stone so the heads of whoever it was stamped on the coins both faced the same way. “Now, as I roll this coin around the edge of the other, you see the head rotates with it?”

“Yes,” said Cindue.

“So what is the head rotating around?” asked Logan.

“The other coin,” said Cindue. “Obviously.”

“And that is the deception,” said Logan. “Look what happens if I take the other coin away and just rotate this coin on its own. What happens to the head?”

“It rotates,” said Cindue, watching every move of Logan's fingers closely.

“So what does it rotate around?” asked Logan. “It cannot be the other coin for that coin is not there anymore.”

Cindue pursed her lips, searching for deception.

“The middle of the coin,” she said at length.

“Indeed,” said Logan. “So when I bring the other coin back and roll this coin around its edge this coin rotates, yes?”

“Yes,” said Cindue.

“So where is it actually rotating?” asked Logan, slowly rolling the coin backwards and forwards around the edge of the other coin. “Around the edge of the other coin or around its middle?”

Cindue blinked and watched some more.

“Ahh!” she suddenly exclaimed. “This coin is rotating around its middle!”

“That’s right,” said Logan. “The deception here is that there are actually two different movements and one is hidden by the other. Look, what happens to the head if I slide this coin around the other but do not let it rotate?”

“It stays the same way up,” said Cindue.

“Indeed,” said Logan. “So if I roll this coin around the other the head rotates but it must be because the coin rotates but that is hidden by the moving of the coin around the other coin. The head rotates, not because it is moving around the coin but because the coin is itself rotating. If I slide it the head does not move. If I roll it the head moves.”

“Indeed,” said Cindue, her face clearing. “Tis obvious now.”

“Aye,” said Autumn who was watching. “Most things are obvious once explained.”

“Doubtless you saw it at once,” said Cindue, looking over to where she sat cross-legged beside their, as yet, unlit fire.

“Not at all,” said Autumn. “I played with these coins for a time but could not fathom it. Logan had to explain it to me as he has with you.”

“That is because he is right clever,” said Cindue, putting her hand on top of Logan’s. “Are you not?”

“If I were I would have seen it quickly,” said Logan, not moving his hand nor going pink for Cindue seemed to touch him at every opportunity and he was getting used to it. “It took me several days and many headaches before I saw the deception.”

“But you did see it,” said Cindue, gently stroking the back of his

hand, “and to you goes all the credit for persisting.”

“Ahh, well,” said Logan. “Autumn wanted to know, you see, so I had to.”

“Oh,” said Cindue and withdrew her hand.

“But you have not yet fully explained the problem,” said Autumn, picking up two dry sticks to rub together to start the fire. “Why does the head rotate twice when the coin only goes round the other once? They are both the same size are they not?”

“Indeed,” said Cindue, her frown returning. “Why is that, Logan? Should not the head only rotate the once?”

“Again it is because of the deceiving movement,” said Logan. “The sizes of the coins do not matter.” He looked around and picked up a small broken pebble then used it to make a mark in the stone each side of the coin. “Look. The marks show how wide the coin is.”

“Clearly,” said Cindue even though the marks weren’t particularly clear.

“Now, if I put the other coin next to the mark,” he said, carefully positioning it, “you agree that is where this coin should be?”

“Aye,” said Cindue. “Right next to the other one if it were there.”

“Indeed,” said Logan. “Now, you agree that this coin,” and he tapped it gently, “actually rotates around its middle, yes?”

“Yes,” said Cindue, watching closely again.

“So, let me make another mark where the middle is,” said Logan, moving the coin away and making a scratch roughly where the centre of the coin had been, “and another the other side, like so. Now, this is the important bit. Do you see that from the middle of the coin this side to the middle of the coin that side is twice the width of the first coin?” He demonstrated using his fingers.

“I fear I am missing something,” said Cindue, shaking her head. “How does that explain why the head rotates twice?”

“Because it rotates around the middle,” said Logan, “not around the edge of the coin. Which means, because the middle is all the way out here,” and he tapped one of the outer marks, “it has had to travel twice as far and so has to rotate fully twice. If I move the coin so the middle of it goes around the edge of the other then it would rotate only once. We see the coin roll around the other coin but do not see where the middle of the coin is moving.”

“Let me try,” said Cindue, taking both coins from Logan. She rolled one around the other, using a grass stalk to track the path of the middle of the coin. “Ohh yes! You are right! 'Tis the moving of the coin that deceives the eye.”

“And the mind,” said Autumn, adding small twigs to the fire to keep the spark going.

“That be right clever,” said Cindue, sitting back and smiling at Logan. “What would happen if the coins were different sizes?”

“I am not certain,” said Logan, “as I have not tried with different sizes of coins but it seems to me that the one moving will always have its middle half of its width away from the other so however many times bigger one is the other will rotate that many times plus an extra time because of that extra part.”¹⁵

“'Tis interesting,” said Cindue, sliding the coins around. “I can't say as I see any purpose to it but 'tis interesting all the same.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, watching the twigs start to catch light. “But all that means is that we do not yet see a purpose not that there is none at all. Who knows, mayhap in times to come someone will fathom a purpose, such as when using a wheel to drive another wheel or some such.”

“Why would someone want to use a wheel to drive another wheel?”

¹⁵ Logan is absolutely correct on this point. If a circle of diameter D_r is rolled around another, stationary, circle of diameter D_s then the number of rotations, R , will be $R=(D_s/D_r)+1$.

asked Logan, sitting back on his elbows.

“Why would someone want to use money?” said Autumn, shrugging. “Doubtless before anyone thought of it no one would have seen any point to it if money had been suggested but now it seems we cannot live without it. The future is a foreign land and unknowable.”

“Aye, true enough,” said Logan. “Not even Mother Midcarn know what the future will bring with any certainty.”

“That is a strange thing to say,” said Cindue. “Surely everyone knows what the future will bring without any certainty. It is called hope, is it not? Or fear, depending.”

“Well that is also true,” said Logan with a laugh. “But Mother Midcarn is able to see the future although she says she cannot with any certainty because there is too much involved.”

“That makes little sense to me,” said Cindue. “Either you can see something or you cannot.”

“Not so,” said Autumn, looking up from the fire. “At times what you can see is hazy and difficult to make out, perhaps because of mist or in twilight. Unless you already know what it is then that tree stump over yonder could look like a man watching us from a distance or even just a vague unfathomable shape.”

“But did you not say that this Mother Midcarn is a sorcerer of great ability?” asked Cindue. “Surely such a person would have great clarity as well? I can’t say I like the idea of a sorcerer who can’t see what they are doing. Anything could happen.”

“I don’t think it works like that,” said Logan, “but not being a sorcerer I cannot follow what she says sometimes. Mayhap if we ever meet her again I will ask if she sees a future where the rolling of coins around another is useful but I wager she will not tell me. No matter. Speaking of the future, Autumn, do you still plan to head for Rudailk in the morning?”

“I see little point to that,” said Autumn. “Our goal is to return Cindue

to her home which is to the north, beyond the mountains. At some time soon I would also like to find Mikn Chap and Tioksen and talk with them about their manner of trade. Rudailk is to the west it seems and likely it will serve no purpose to go there. Perhaps on our return but there is no urgency nor apparent need.”

“Is not Mikn Chap at Rudailk?” asked Logan. “I thought that was why we were heading there.”

“No, Rudailk is where Mikn Chap sold me to the brothers Neiter and Sayam,” said Cindue, “may Yammoe curse their entrails forever,” and she spat on the ground.

“Mikn Chap is at Oas'tal,” said Autumn. “Is that not so, Cindue?”

“Aye,” said Cindue. “Oas'tal is where he has his prison but I know not where Tioksen is. He travels a lot, buying and selling such as I. I confess I do not wish to return to Oas'tal.”

“Understandably,” said Autumn, “but Oas'tal is this side of the mountains so it would seem fruitful to begin our search for him there and you could likely point him out to us. Doubtless Mikn Chap will be able to tell us where Tioksen is to be found. That said, Cindue, I will not force you to go to Oas'tal.”

“I would prefer to return home,” said Cindue, “although I would like to see you kill them. That would bring great joy to me.”

“Tis not my intent to kill either of them,” said Autumn, adding several large sticks to the fire that was now burning happily. “Merely to talk with them both and, with Vallume's aid, persuade both to change their ways.”

“That I doubt even you can do, Autumn,” said Cindue. “Mikn Chap's desire is money and his pleasure is cruelty. Nothing short of death will cure a man of such things.”

“Likely you are right,” said Autumn, “but surely it is worth making an effort? Mayhap all he needs is someone to show him the consequences of his ways and that change is possible.”

Cindue merely growled in her throat and spat on the ground again.

"If you do not kill him, I shall," she said, looking balefully at Autumn.

"Then I venture it would be best if we return you home first," said Autumn, sitting back on her heels to look at her. "Doubtless he will sell others while we do so but that is the risk we take."

"Perhaps not," said Logan. "Seibi did say there were no wars going on up north so mayhap Mikn Chap has no prisoners to sell."

"True," said Autumn, "but he also said there had been no wars for many years but Cindue was taken prisoner so the word of Seibi is in doubt."

"And mayhap that war still continues," said Logan thoughtfully. "Perhaps it would be better to go to Oas'tal and find Mikn Chap first. He would know of any wars in the north and 'twould be best if we knew of any before heading there. I know no army could best you, Autumn, but a war would be a nuisance if nothing else."

"As always you over state my skills, Logan," said Autumn. "As you well know I have been bested before and will doubtless be bested again although you raise a good point. We may come upon a battlefield and be expected to take sides or be taken prisoner or even find both armies against us which would complicate things. I grant if there is a war going on we will have to pass through it somehow but being forewarned does have an advantage. Mayhap Oas'tal is the better choice."

"Then let us hope you find Mikn Chap before I do," said Cindue with a set look on her face. "For he will die soon after we arrive, either by your hand or by mine."

"Tis a quandary, Logan," said Autumn, frowning. "If we go to Oas'tal first Cindue may get to Mikn Chap before I am able to speak with him and put herself at risk and may well kill him or be killed in the process. On the other hand, if we do not go to Oas'tal we likely will not know there is a war until we find ourselves in the middle of it. Your thoughts?"

“Doubtless as we get closer to the mountains we will find others who know of any war,” said Logan. “Such knowledge is not limited to Mikn Chap.”

“A fair point,” said Autumn. “Any other thoughts?”

“Autumn likes to do this, Cindue,” said Logan, rolling his eyes. “She seems to think that making me think is going to make a man of me or some such.”

“I think you are very much a man already,” said Cindue, reaching over to touch his arm, “and a handsomely made one at that. Do you not think so yourself?”

“Tis not that, as such,” said Autumn, not noticing Logan go pink as she was spitting the chicken they had bought at the market from Logan's winnings. “Tis that I encourage him to think through as many aspects of a problem as come to him. His mind is at least as important as his body, perhaps even more so as he is of no little ability.”

“Oh I am certain he is of great ability,” said Cindue, opening her eyes wide to look suggestively at Logan. “And with other things as well as his mind.” She ran her tongue over her lips and smiled.

“Umm ...” started Logan, his mind going blank. He had no idea why but Cindue's words and actions had erased every thought in his head.

“You have more thoughts, Logan?” asked Autumn, looking up from the chicken.

“Ahh, yes,” he said, frowning and looking away from Cindue. Sometimes she could be very distracting. “Umm, what were we talking about?”

“Whether to go north in the morning or head for Oas'tal,” said Autumn, frowning. Something had happened to Logan but she had no idea what. Cindue seemed to be behaving a little oddly as well but that could simply be the prospect of meeting Mikn Chap again. For certain she took Cindue's threats against Mikn Chap seriously.

“Oh yes, right,” said Logan. “Yes, umm, oh the war. If there is one then we may likely find Mikn Chap there acquiring new prisoners rather than in Oas’tal.”

“Another good point,” said Autumn. She lifted the chicken onto some sticks she’d planted in the ground to hold it above the fire. “Any more?”

“On the other hand,” said Logan, making himself not look back at Cindue, “Mikn Chap, even if he is not in Oas’tal, may have others chained up in his prison waiting to be sold. Likely we could free them while he is away then find him and free any others he has collected.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “That was my thinking too.”

“But if he is in the north,” said Cindue, “would it not be better to stop him acquiring new prisoners? You can always free the existing ones later when you return south. ’Tis not likely they will have been sold in his absence.”

“What have you to say to that, Logan?” asked Autumn.

“I fancy it would be a matter of weighing the suffering of those newly acquired against those already acquired,” said Logan, continuing to not look at Cindue.

“Indeed,” said Autumn, sitting back to let the chicken cook on its own. “But how do we measure the one against the other?”

“And your thoughts?” asked Logan.

“I’m a little surprised you need to ask, Logan,” said Autumn. “There is another aspect to this you have not considered.”

“Doubtless,” said Logan. He glanced at Cindue then stiffened. Had she blown him a kiss? It was difficult to tell for it was getting dark and the moment had been fleeting but he shifted a little further away to be safe, just in case. Cindue appeared not to notice. “Um, what is that?”

“The Forbidden Domain,” said Autumn. “That lies to the north as well. Does it not intrigue you?”

“Clearly not as much as it does you,” he said. “I am content with the knowledge it is forbidden but I wager you see that as more of a challenge.”

“Not a challenge,” said Autumn, “but a curiosity nonetheless. If we are forbidden from entering or exploring then so be it but I would like to know who does the forbidding and how. Mayhap it is nothing more than a name and seems forbidding because of an army that defends its borders. And, before you speak out about that, it could be that with a war between Us-Iota and whoever guards the Forbidden Domain we will be unimpeded on our travels.”

“Actually it may not be Us-Iota,” said Cindue. “It could be Ahi'aktes. I do not know which mintika borders the mountains in their southern reaches. It could even be that the war, if there is a war, is between Us-Iota and Ahi'aktes and does not involve the Forbidden Domain.”

“There is that too,” said Autumn. “So, Logan. Which way shall we go in the morning? Oas'tal or the mountains?”

“Why is it up to me?” asked Logan.

“It is not,” said Autumn. “There are three of us here and all have a say. I merely ask what is your say on this?”

“Oas'tal,” said Logan. “I have no desire to be involved in a war and if Mikn Chap is there he will likely have more knowledge of what is happening with the war than others we chance upon.”

“Cindue?” asked Autumn, reaching out to turn the chicken over.

“The mountains,” said Cindue. “Much as I desire Mikn Chap's death I desire more to go home.”

“So what say you, Autumn?” asked Logan.

“Much as I appreciate the suffering of those already taken and those

about to be taken,” said Autumn, plucking a blade of grass, “I am conscious that they are just speculation. However, Cindue's desire to return home is real and so is her threat to Mikn Chap. I think we should go to the mountains first then return to Oas'tal.”

“But would not exploring the Forbidden Domain delay our return?” asked Logan.

“Aye it would,” said Autumn, “but doubtless there are those who live nearby who can tell us more. We can always return to the Forbidden Domain after speaking with Mikn Chap should it seem the place is of interest.”

Chapter Seventeen

“Are you awake?” asked Autumn as Logan blearily gazed at the world around him.

It seemed little changed from the day before. A smallish beach on the edge of a lake called Sidysmis Tafki, or so Cindue had said. The woods behind and around were dense although a narrow track had lead them through to the lake from the path they had been following. The beach itself was pebbled with the occasional larger rock. In front of him the cool blue lake lapped lazily at the shore. That it was a big lake was apparent for the far shore was barely visible in the distance. Indeed, the lake could have been mistaken for a sea were it not that the water was clean tasting. That others had camped on this beach before them was apparent from the two places where fire had been lit and the broken remains of crab shells that surrounded them. Indeed, one of those places had their own still smouldering fire and several fresh crab shells piled neatly beside it.

“I suppose so,” said Logan unenthusiastically.

He sat up although he kept his blanket wrapped around him for the morning was chilly. Mid way across the lake he could see, now his feet were out of the way, a low island, lush and green. He yawned and stretched his arms out, allowing the blanket to fall. Stretch completed he pulled his blanket around himself again. Slowly it percolated through to his mind that Autumn was sitting near the edge of the water watching him. Almost perceptibly the thought hardened into realisation. Autumn was watching him. She wasn't doing her thinking, nor was she doing her exercises. Moreover, she had spoken to him.

“What's wrong?” he blurted, reaching for his staff.

It was still where he had left it although his fingers, cold and a little stiff, banged its solid woodenness rather than grasping it firmly. It hurt his fingertips and he scowled.

“Nothing is wrong,” said Autumn, staying seated. “I merely asked if you were awake.”

“Good,” said Logan, relaxing. He briefly sucked the tips of his fingers then sat there for a few moments, clasping and unclasping his fist.

“Cindue is gone,” said Autumn, still watching him.

“Ohh,” said Logan. For some reason the distant island caught his attention and he stared at it while coming to terms with this new thought. “What do you mean, Cindue is gone?”

“I mean she is not here,” said Autumn. She pointed to where Cindue's crumpled blanket lay.

“Where is she then?” asked Logan, staring intently at Cindue's blanket. Unwilling to move from within the comparative warmth of his blanket he again reached for his staff and used it to prod Cindue's blanket. As was readily apparent, Cindue was not curled up underneath it.

“I do not know,” said Autumn.

“Oh,” said Logan. He yawned again and scratched his head. “Well, likely she is in the bushes or washing herself further along the shore or looking for more crabs.”

“That is what I thought at first,” said Autumn, “but there has been a strangeness about this morning.”

“What do you mean, a strangeness?” asked Logan. He yawned again and his torso gave a little shudder as though preparing itself for the day ahead.

“I awoke before the dawn as is my custom,” said Autumn. “There was a thin mist over the lake and the island yonder was but a faint shadow. As I settled myself to my thinking I became aware of a movement upon the water. 'Twas difficult to see as Astauand was but a glimmer in the sky and the crescents of Plakill and Plifal were low behind the trees but it seemed to me I saw someone walking across the water.”

Logan just stared at her, his face a curious mix of frown and

blankness.

“Likely I was wrong,” said Autumn. “I watched for a time as the shape moved further from the shore and then, when it was perhaps halfway to the island, the shape stopped moving. After staying motionless for, oh, four or five breaths, it appeared to raise both arms above its head then sank down into the water until it was all submerged. I waited to see if the shape would rise again but it did not. 'Twas only then that I realised, as the light grew stronger, that Cindue had gone.”

“So you think this shape on the water was her then?” asked Logan.

“I confess that was my first thought,” said Autumn. “After discovering her absence I looked around for traces of where she might be but found none. Mayhap now Astauand is fully awake there may be signs of pebbles that have moved from their place but for certain there are no footprints leading away, either to the water or to the undergrowth. Moreover, all has been quiet, save a few dawn creatures coming to drink. That she is gone is apparent and 'twould appear she has gone freely.”

“Freely?” exclaimed Logan, “You think someone could have taken her in the night?”

“It was a possibility I considered,” replied Autumn. “There is a possibility, however small, that Shina Ganam is looking for her or mayhap word has reached Mikn Chap or someone else that she has escaped and they seek to return her or recapture her for some other purpose. There are, however, no signs of a struggle nor did anything alarm me in the night. Cindue is not one who would go freely and quietly back into that life.”

“That's true enough,” said Logan. He scowled then slapped his face with both hands. “Grrr, I am slow in thinking today. What of this shape on the water? Was it human or an animal or bird of some sort?”

“It had the appearance of a human,” said Autumn. “It appeared to be upright not on all fours like a beast nor did it fly away.”

“You think it might have been Cindue?” asked Logan, getting up to

take a drink from their water skin.

"Twas not possible to see any details," said Autumn. "It could have been a man as easily as a woman and may not have been either. I considered the possibility that it was Cindue but I struggle to see how she could walk upon the surface of the water. 'Tis possible she swam away but walking on water? I think not. Likely it was something entirely different or nothing at all. Mist and fog can take on strange forms and deceive the eye."

"Aye, right enough," said Logan. He stepped over and picked up Cindue's blanket then stood for a few moments folding it and looking at the ground around where she had slept. "That is interesting."

"What do you see?" asked Autumn, getting up herself and walking over.

"'Tis what I do not see that catches my eye," said Logan, looking further away. "Where is her blue bowl? She always kept it close for she was greatly attached to it but it is gone. There is only the blanket here."

"Ahh," said Autumn, also looking around. "That makes things easier."

"What do you mean?" asked Logan as Autumn went to the edge of the beach to peer among the undergrowth.

"If she took her bowl with her then likely she went freely," said Autumn, "and is not planning on returning to us. I was wondering whether we ought to search for her and how long to wait for her return but it would seem unnecessary now."

"I suppose," said Logan. "'Tis a puzzle though. Why would she leave in the middle of the night when we are helping her to return to her home. It does not make sense to me."

"Aye, 'tis a puzzle indeed," said Autumn, abandoning her search in the undergrowth. "And I would have expected her to at the very least make her fare wells with you, Logan, even if I did upset her inadvertently."

“Did you upset her?” asked Logan, frowning. “I do not recall anything that might have done.”

“Neither do I,” said Autumn, “but you have said in the past that sometimes I annoy people and mayhap I annoyed Cindue and she decided not to say anything and left.”

“That does not sound like Cindue,” said Logan, pursing his lips. “She was quite free in speaking her mind, or so it seemed. Anyway, why would she bid me fare well and not you? That makes no sense either.”

“I fancy she liked you more than she did me,” said Autumn, “which is entirely understandable given the nature of men and women. It would not have surprised me had she felt a need to leave us for her to make an arrangement to meet with you again.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan, standing perfectly still and staring worriedly at Autumn.

“Do not be alarmed, Logan,” said Autumn, putting her hand on his arm and smiling. “She is gone and you are safe.”

“But ...” stuttered Logan, “but ... you think she liked me more than as simply a travelling companion?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “although 'tis of little consequence for she has left us and likely our paths will not cross again. The question now is where do we travel next since the purpose of our travel has gone with her. Think on that while I do my exercises.”

She patted Logan on the arm again then, without warning, leapt backwards and somersaulted in the air, shedding her robe at the same time. She landed on her feet and immediately dropped down to spin with one leg outstretched and using an hand to balance then snatched up her staff and launched an attack on an overhanging branch. Logan watched her for a few moments then backed away and sat down. The thought of Cindue liking him in the manner of women liking men was disturbing and, given what had happened with Komorebi in Schtei, distinctly alarming.¹⁶

16 See *The Annals ~ The Eighth Tale*. While wintering in Schtei, Autumn and Logan

Some time later Autumn leapt over him, landed on the pebbles and lost her footing. She fell on top of him, but instantly leapt up, pushing him backwards into a tree.

“Owww!” exclaimed Logan, rubbing the back of his head. “That hurt!”

“My apologies,” called Autumn as she spun around then leapt into the tree and hung from a branch some way over his head. “Are you bleeding?”

“No,” said Logan grumpily, looking at his hand. “But I think the tree stabbed me in the back.”

“Ah,” said Autumn and dropped to the ground, one foot landing between Logan's outstretched legs and the other to his side. “Show me.”

Obediently Logan leant forward and Autumn inspected his back and the tree.

“No, it did not stab you,” she said. “There is no rent in your tunic nor any sign of blood. 'Twas just a knot in the tree trunk. Once again, my apologies for hurting you. I should have been more aware.”

“Then where is that blood coming from?” asked Logan, noticing a crimson smear of blood on her hand.

“'Tis just a scratch at the base of my thumb,” said Autumn. “I caught it on a shell when I slipped.” She walked over to the water's edge to wash her hand then inspected it. “'Tis nothing more than a little scratch.”

“Is it still bleeding?” asked Logan, joining her.

“A slight oozing,” she said, holding up her wet hand to show him. “It will clot shortly. So, your thoughts?”

lodged next door to Komorebi and her father. When Komorebi realised that Logan had neither wealth nor prospects she accused him of lying to her and declared she wanted nothing further to do with him which upset Logan probably more than he would admit.

“Cindue is gone and we will likely never meet her again,” said Logan.

“Indeed,” said Autumn, raising an eyebrow and looking at him a little strangely. “I meant about where to go next.”

“Ahh,” said Logan who hadn't given the matter any thought at all. The idea of Cindue liking him as a woman likes a man had filled his mind to the exclusion of everything else. “What are your thoughts?”

“Cindue is free to go as she pleases,” said Autumn. “Why is she occupying your mind?”

“Cindue?” said Logan, caught off guard. “I have not given her another thought. She has gone and that's that.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “She has gone but I doubt that that is that.”

“You speak in riddles,” said Logan. “Why is that not that after all? What more needs to be said of Cindue?”

“I fancy we need to go after her,” said Autumn.

“On my account?” asked Logan, becoming alarmed again.

“Why would you think that?” asked Autumn, licking the cut on her hand and inspecting it again. It was clotting nicely and looked to be a clean cut.

“I ... don't know,” said Logan sheepishly as, despite his alarm and misgivings he didn't find the idea of meeting up with Cindue again wholly displeasing. After all, if she did like him as a woman likes a man he might find out what that actually meant, even though it was a decidedly scary prospect.

“Hmm,” said Autumn, watching him. The silence hung and Logan's alarm grew.

“What?” he asked defensively.

“You puzzle me sometimes,” said Autumn. “What are you thinking?”

“I am not thinking anything,” said Logan quickly. “Only where to head next.”

“I see,” said Autumn. She hesitated. “Are you thinking to follow Cindue?”

“Why would I think to follow Cindue?” blustered Logan. “’Twould seem a strange thing to do. Anyway we know not where she’s gone.”

Autumn regarded Logan for several heartbeats then put his manner to one side for later consideration as she had even less of an idea of how men and women liked each other than he did. That said, she had seen the impact Komorebi had had on Logan and was concerned that it did not happen again. However, as she was forced to admit to herself, Logan was free to do as he chose, as was Cindue, and if that was how things were to be then she would have to accept it. She just didn’t want Logan hurt again.

“It came to me when I was exercising that we do know where Cindue has gone,” she said. “Or at least a distinct possibility.”

“Oh?” said Logan. He felt a slight twist in his stomach but ignored it. “Where?”

“Well, ’twould seem pointless for Cindue to leave us and head for Esu’taw alone,” said Autumn, “when we were accompanying her there anyway. Moreover she has given no sign of desiring to go anywhere else save Oas’tal.”

“But when we discussed this a few days ago she said she would prefer to go to Esu’taw rather than Oas’tal,” said Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but she wanted us to go to Oas’tal in order that I would meet with Mikn Chap and kill him. I fancy she only said she’d prefer to go to Esu’taw after I made it clear that I would not kill Mikn Chap.”

“I don’t follow your reasoning,” said Logan, frowning. “Why would she say Oas’tal then change to Esu’taw then sneak away in the night to go to ... ahh. So you think she left us in order to find Mikn Chap and

kill him herself?"

"It is a possibility," said Autumn. "What are your thoughts?"

"She certainly had a deep hatred of him," said Logan thoughtfully. "Which is understandable. I suppose it is possible though that we are getting close to Esu'taw and she does not wish us to accompany her for the final stages. Mayhap she does not want us to meet her family or see where she lives."

"Aye, that is possible," said Autumn, "although that would make more sense if we were in the mountains. We are still some days away however. It could also be that she lied to us about Esu'taw and she comes from somewhere this side of the mountains."

"Well, it is possible, I suppose," said Logan. He sucked his teeth for a few moments then rubbed the back of his head again even though the pain had gone. "I do not know Cindue well but I confess I do find it more likely she has decided to kill Mikn Chap herself rather than lied to us. Mayhap she has even decided to go back and find Shina Ganam and get rid of him too."

"Perhaps," said Autumn, "but he did her little harm. Those two farmers who sold her to Shina Ganam would be more likely."

"True," said Logan. He sighed. "And Mikn Chap is the most likely. So, you think we should go to Oas'tal instead? You want to find Cindue and stop her?"

"It would seem right," said Autumn. "At the very least we should give Mikn Chap an opportunity to change his ways. Mayhap she will get to him first or wait until after we have moved on but I am desirous of finding Mikn Chap anyway and there is no pressing need to visit the Forbidden Domain now Cindue has gone. Mayhap we can also find Tioksen and speak with him as well."

"You think Cindue will try to kill him too?" asked Logan.

"It is a possibility," said Autumn. "And we must not forget the possibility that Mikn Chap or Tioksen may kill Cindue. Like as not

each has friends who will aid them should she attack. 'Tis a confused situation but I feel we do have some responsibility for the life of Cindue given that we saved her from a life of enslavement even though we have no responsibility for the lives of Mikn Chap or Tioksen."

"Did not that responsibility end when Cindue decided to leave us?" asked Logan. "It was her choice, was it not?"

"Aye, said Autumn. She gazed out over the lake for a few moments. "You are right in that. Doubtless it is merely my vanity that makes me feel some responsibility for her. So, let us drop the matter of Cindue and where she has gone and leave the lives of Mikn Chap and Tioksen to the whims of their personal deities. Where shall we go now?"

"I think we should go to Oas'tal," said Logan, not willing to entirely drop the matter of Cindue just yet. "There are the lives of the other unfortunates that Mikn Chap has got his hands on. Mayhap nothing will come of it but we should at least talk to him about it. Or you should anyway. I am no good at persuading people to change their minds."

Chapter Eighteen

“Your pardon, Eashian,” said Autumn a few days later, “is that town yonder Oas’tal?” She pointed to the buildings that lay some way distant.

The man pulled gently on the reins of his cart so it came to a halt. He leant back and rested his foot on the brake lever so the cart didn’t roll back down the gentle slope nor tire his horse. Then he leant forward and rested his elbow on his raised knee and gazed thoughtfully at Autumn.

“Aye, reckon so,” he said slowly. He paused and bared his teeth for a moment then added, “ain’t no place round here what might be mistaken for it.”

His horse looked round then tossed its head and bent to eat the grass that grew thickly between the ruts that distinguished this as a track rather than a path. That the track was not frequently used was evidenced by the height of the grass which tickled the horse’s belly.

“Thank you,” said Autumn. “My name is Autumn and my companion is Logan. We journey to Oas’tal.”

“Oh aye?” he said and looked at the sky which threatened rain. “I be Hanres. You folks ain’t from around these parts, are yez? Ain’t seen yez afore and I be knowing everyone what comes to Oas’tal from Fus, this being the only track and seeing as how it runs past my place.”

“Indeed we are not,” said Autumn. “We are travellers and strangers here.”

“Oh aye?” said Hanres. He scratched his chin then scratched the top of his head which was going bald. “Travellers eh? Reckon that would be explaining why yez be travelling then, eh, eh?” He chuckled.

“Yes, I imagine it would,” said Autumn, frowning slightly. She glanced at Logan. “Tell me, do you know a man by the name of Mikn Chap? We are told he lives in Oas’tal.”

“Not a lot of people travel this way,” said Hanres. “Not a lot of call for people what be from Fus to be travelling to Oas’tal. No, don’t reckon there be many at all. Long way off is Fus, or so they say. Ain’t been there meself, mind. Just what them as is travelling tell me. Long way, Fus is. Or so they say.”

“Aye it is indeed a fair distance,” said Autumn. “We have been travelling some ten days. Mikn Chap?”

“Ten days is it?” said Hanres, his eyes widening. “Aye, reckon that be a fair distance an all. Ten days!” He sucked his teeth then spat over the edge of the cart. “Be you folks a-knowing Defut? He be from Fus just like you two.”

“Alas, we do not know Defut,” said Autumn. “We are not from Fus. We are merely travellers who journeyed through Fus on our way here. We are looking for a man called Mikn Chap.”

“Tis strange you be not knowing Defut,” said Hanres, leaning back. He inadvertently eased his foot on the brake lever and the cart rolled back a little, dragging his horse backwards. He scowled and pressed his foot down again while the horse twisted its head to look irritably at him. “He be a right old laugh be Defut. Bit of a joker, see. Everyone knows ‘im.”

“Sadly we do not,” said Autumn. “Well, it was a pleasure to meet you, Hanres. We shall be on our way and delay you no further.”

“Oh, right,” said Hanres who’d been looking forward to a long chat about Fus and its residents. “Well, best you be going then and if it be Mikn Chap you be looking for then you best be looking for him in Oas’tal. That be where he be, I reckon. Oas’tal, see. It be that way,” and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Can’t miss it. It be where them houses is. End of the track, see. Down there aways.”

“I thank you again,” said Autumn, inclining her head. “You have been most helpful.”

“Defut ain’t there though,” said Hanres. He shook his head vigorously. “No, he be in Fus. Grand old joker is Defut.”

“We shall endeavour to make Defut's acquaintance when next we are in Fus,” said Autumn. “Fare well and we wish you good fortune on your journey.”

“Aye, reckon so,” said Hanres. “Fus be that way, see.” He pointed forward. “That be where Defut be. Fus, like.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. She glanced again at Logan who was struggling to keep his face straight. “Come, Logan, let us be on our way.”

Logan nodded cheerfully at Hanres who glared at him then flicked the reins. With a lurch the cart slowly moved away.

“Interesting man,” said Logan. “He did seem to like Defut. Perhaps we should visit him on our return to Fus.”

“I think not,” said Autumn. “Still, it would appear that Mikn Chap is in Oas'tal and doubtless someone there will know where to find him. Come.”

* * *

The outskirts of Oas'tal were mostly small mud dwellings with an occasional stout wooden hut but as they approached the town centre wood huts predominated. The huts were thickest around a wide bare earth square and there was a narrow and somewhat rickety bridge over the river. Further up the river, on the opposite bank to the rest of the town, lay a handful of stone buildings. Each was separate from the others and each had a boat or two tied to the bank. That it was not market day was apparent as there were no stalls in the town square although there were a fair number of people milling around and several of the shops had tables outside with their produce on display.

“This appears a prosperous looking town,” remarked Autumn as they approached the square.

“And not short of people,” said Logan. “Doubtless someone will know Mikn Chap. Ohhh, 'twould seem that shop over there has knives for sale. Let's go and have a look although 'tis likely we will not be able to

afford any. We only have two bans and eight banuul.”¹⁷

“You go,” said Autumn. “Knives hold little interest for me. I shall make enquiries about Mikn Chap.”

“As you wish,” said Logan.

He set off towards the shop which had a table outside displaying a number of knives as well as several farming implements. Three men were standing beside the table, animatedly discussing the relative merits of two spades. That they were young farmers was suggested by their comparative size and their mud bespattered heavy boots. One, wearing a sleeveless vest, had arm muscles that were clearly attracting the interest of two girls who were giggling outside a cloth shop but paying very little attention to the cloth on display. Their frequent glances in his direction were not going unnoticed as the farmer took every opportunity to move around the spade he was holding in such a way as to flex those muscles although he pretended not to notice the girls. The other two men were, on the other hand, well aware of the girls and found their interest in their companion mildly irritating.

More to Logan's interest, however, were several knives of varying sizes at the other end of the table. He picked up the smallest and likely the cheapest and inspected it. The blade was reasonably straight and the edge tolerably sharp. He tapped it on the side of the table and held the hilt to his ear. There was a distinct musical hum which suggested the bronze was of good quality and that the knife likely contained no bubbles of air within.

“That be finest quality,” said a woman, coming out of the shop. She didn't know Logan and wasn't about to let him handle her knives without being close by.

“So it seems,” said Logan, balancing the knife in his hand. It sat quite comfortably. “How much do you want for it?”

“Fifteen bans,” she said, after looking him over and clearly deciding he wasn't wealthy.

17 Logan's expensive knife, complete with sheath and a sharpening stone, had been taken from him by Tefkuu the pirate leader when he and Autumn were taken hostage. See *The Annals ~ The Tenth Tale*.

“Ahh,” said Logan, quickly putting the knife down. “Perhaps not.” He glanced up as a woman walked behind him with a young boy who had a puppy on a length of twine. The puppy was clearly enjoying the outing as it darted everywhere investigating each new smell and keeping the twine taut.

“Twelve ban,” said the shop keeper, “seeing as how you be a fine upstanding young man what be in need of a best quality knife.”

“Thank you but no,” said Logan firmly. “I do not have that much to spare.”

He turned away just as the youngster loosened his grip on the twine. The puppy, noticing Logan's bare feet, rushed back to investigate and Logan tripped over it. He easily regained his footing but accidentally put his arm out to balance himself and brushed the back of the sleeveless man.

“My apologies,” said Logan as the boy lunged forward to grab the end of the twine. Logan managed to step over him and the boy hauled the puppy back towards where his mother stood waiting.

Logan looked around and saw Autumn some way away, talking to a man who was pointing towards the river. He'd only gone three paces when someone shouted “Oi!” and grabbed the back of his tunic.

“Where do you think you're going?” snarled the sleeveless man. “Give it back.”

“What?” exclaimed Logan, trying to twist round so he could see what was happening.

“Me coin pouch, give it back,” snarled the man, jerking Logan around. Logan's staff went flying.

“Yeah, give it back or we'll do ya,” snarled one of his two companions who were now standing on either side of Logan.

“I do not have your coin pouch,” exclaimed Logan, now teetering on tip toe as the sleeveless man lifted him almost off the ground.

“Noften pickpocket!” exclaimed the man. “I felt you take it from me belt. Give it back!” A large clenched fist appeared at Logan's eye level, ready to swing forward.

“Hold!” echoed across the square as Autumn hurried over.

“Stay out of this girlie,” snarled one of the other men. “We caught a thief and 'taint none of your business.”

“Give it back, I say,” snarled the sleeveless man grimly, “or I'll knock yer noften head off, so I will.”

“I haven't got it!” exclaimed Logan. “Put me down and I'll show you!”

“Pah!” exclaimed the man and let fly with his fist. Autumn leapt forward and punched the fist away before it touched Logan. The man staggered a little but didn't let go of Logan's tunic.

“No,” said Autumn firmly. “Put him down. Let us discuss this calmly.”

“Bugger off, girlie,” snapped the man. He gave her a shove just as one of the others grabbed her from behind.

Autumn used the shove to fall backwards, twisting as she did so the man's arms slid over her head. She continued the twist down and around then rose up sharply and rammed her knee into the small of his back, throwing him on top of Logan. Taken by surprise, the sleeveless man let go of Logan and rounded on Autumn, throwing a heavy punch at her face. She ducked and at the same time bent forward to launch a backwards kick at the third man who, it must be admitted, wasn't an immediate threat. He was standing stock still, thoroughly bemused by the speed at which the situation had changed. He caught Autumn's heel in his belly and sagged to the ground. The mother of the boy with the puppy disappeared very quickly, dragging the boy and the puppy behind her. The two young girls, however, stood their ground and watched with interest. Fights were fairly common and both girls enjoyed watching the sleeveless man in action.

It was not to be, however. The man who'd fallen on Logan climbed back up and tried to leap on Autumn but she jumped back out of

reach and he fell on his knees, empty handed. The sleeveless man went after her, his big fists raised. He threw one punch then another but Autumn easily dodged both.

"Please," she said, backing away with her palms lifted and facing him. "This is unnecessary. I do not want to hurt either of you. Can we not discuss this?"

"Noften bitch," snarled the sleeveless man, his upper arm muscles bunching in anger to the delight of the two watching girls. He advanced on Autumn as his companion sidled around, trying to get behind her. A small crowd was forming as it wasn't every day that the sleeveless man looked to be being bested. The man who'd been kicked in the belly was now bent over with one arm against the wall of the knife shop, retching. He was clearly out of the fight for now even though he'd never really been in it.

Logan picked himself up as Autumn backed slowly away. She had taken up her defensive stance and her eyes were flicking between the two advancing men. A little winded, Logan considered leaping onto the sleeveless man's back then decided he'd only get in Autumn's way if he did. After all, there were only two of them. He scanned the crowd of onlookers and concluded none of them would be coming to the aid of either of the men. The onlookers' faces showed no signs of sympathy.

"So you be running away then, eh bitch," jeered the sleeveless man. "Started a fight but ain't got the balls to finish it, eh."

"I do not understand," said Autumn, hesitating but staying in her defensive posture. "What balls are you referring to?"

Just at that moment the companion man lunged forward, intending to hit Autumn from the side. Almost with an air of disdain she twirled round and slammed her foot into his shoulder, throwing him into the crowd. A moment later some in the crowd threw him back amidst cheers and laughter. He staggered forward just as the sleeveless man tried again to punch Autumn in the face. This time she twirled and dropped down, kicking the companion man on his thigh. She swept her leg under herself and rolled onto her back. The sleeveless man

regained his balance and tried to kick her on the ground but she did her trick of throwing her legs in the air and pushing up with her arms to jump to her feet out of range. With a snarl the man came at her again, his huge fists bunched and his head lowered.

“Do you really want this?” asked Autumn, stepping back yet again.

“I’ll rip your noften head off, so I will,” snapped the man, his face contorted in anger.

“As you wish,” said Autumn sadly. She evaded his attempted blow to her head and caught his arm, pulling it sideways and down at the same time as kneeling him in the chest. As he fell she aimed a blow to the back of his lower skull but missed as he fell faster than she had expected and caught him between his shoulder blades. He sprawled on the ground, winded, just as the third man recovered sufficiently to realise his two companions were being bested. With a roar he charged at Autumn who stepped forward to meet him then twisted out of the way at the last moment. He continued another three paces, staggering, then he turned and charged her again. This time she stepped out of the way while tapping his ankle so his feet became entwined. He fell forward and sprawled on top of the knife table, bringing it crashing to the ground.

The sleeveless man got to his feet and ran over to grab a large machete and turned to face Autumn, a look of glee on his face. The third man rolled off the table and grabbed whatever implement was nearest. The man who’d been thrown back by the crowd tried to get to his feet but his leg was useless; the blow to his thigh having numbed his leg and made it unresponsive. Still, his two companions looked to have everything under control as they advanced slowly towards Autumn, one armed with a machete and the other with a hoe.

“You’re going to die!” gloated the sleeveless man, slowly waving the machete in front of him, thinking it would scare Autumn.

“Aye, die!” exclaimed the companion, holding the hoe behind him, ready to slash it forward and hopefully slit the bitch’s belly open.

“I fancy not,” said Autumn, not backing away as it was now apparent

this fight was not going to end easily, “but I cannot promise you both will remain uninjured. Please put down your weapons and end this peacefully before someone is seriously hurt.”

“Get on with you!” shouted someone in the crowd. “Kill both the sodding bastards!” There was widespread laughter and one or two cheers. Clearly this trio were not highly regarded members of the community.

With a quick glance at each other – a mistake as it told Autumn what was about to happen – both men launched their attacks. The one with the hoe aiming for her belly and the sleeveless man going for her throat with the machete. Stupidly the hoe man swung his hoe from right to left and the sleeveless man back-handed from left to right. Autumn casually stepped backwards and both implements crashed together, the machete sliding down the shaft of the hoe and slicing off the man's thumb and forefinger. He screamed and clutched his hand to his chest, blood spurting.

With an angry shout, his eyes blazing and all sense gone, the sleeveless man lashed out at Autumn with the machete and she deftly twirled out of reach and kicked him in the side of his chest then slashed down with her hand on the back of his neck, mindful not to hit hard enough to break it. As he collapsed she took the machete from his hand so he didn't land on top of it. She hesitated for a moment, surveying the scene for further threats, then tossed the machete on the ground in front of Logan before hurrying over to the hoe man to attend his injury.

“That be forty ban,” said the woman who ran the knife shop and who'd watched the fight with interest.

“What?” exclaimed Logan in surprise, hesitating in stepping over to the cloth table. He knew from experience that Autumn would be calling for cloths any moment.

“That girlie be with you, ain't she,” said the woman. “That there machete ain't been paid for. It be used now and bloodstained. I ain't taking it back.”

“Oh Voqev,” muttered Logan. He looked around helplessly then a thought struck him. “Mayhap you are right, but it seems to me the quality of your implements has been demonstrated here. Likely if you are quick you can get a better price before these people go back to their homes.”

The woman looked at him in surprise for a few moments then she snatched up the machete.

“Best quality machete, its worth proven beyond all doubt!” she shouted holding it up in the air so everyone could see the blood stains on it. She hurried over to where Autumn was kneeling beside the injured man. “Only eighty bans! A bargain at twice the price!”

“Logan!” called Autumn as two or three people began spirited bargaining over the machete. “I need cloths to stem the bleeding and bind the wounds. And water to wash them.”

Chapter Nineteen

“What ails you, Autumn?” asked Logan as they crossed the rickety bridge over the river. “You do not seem yourself.”

Several of those who'd watched the fight had followed, doubtless to see what Autumn would get up to next, but none seemed willing to cross the bridge.

“Ahh, 'tis my cursed vanity again,” said Autumn, stepping off the bridge. She turned and leant against the rail and gazed downstream. “I thought I had it under control but that man lost his finger and thumb because of my carelessness.”

“It wasn't your fault,” said Logan, also stopping. He leant his hip against the rail so he could watch Autumn's face. “'Twas that big man with the machete and he was aiming at you. All you did was dodge his blow. I don't see how your vanity comes into it.”

“Ahh, Logan, did you not see?” asked Autumn. “I fought poorly and with bad judgement.”

“No, I do not see,” said Logan, scowling. “It seemed to me you fought well. You bested three of them without them even touching you! How can you possibly say you fought badly?”

A nondescript looking man ventured across the bridge and skirted around them, giving Autumn only the most cursory of glances before heading off along the path upstream. Logan watched him for a few moments while waiting for Autumn to respond.

“My vanity,” said Autumn with a small sigh. She turned to look him in the eyes. “I knew they were no challenge and because of my vanity I did not give them my full attention. Yes, I did what I could to avoid seriously injuring any of them but when it came to a head my inattention was the cause of that man loosing his finger and thumb.”

“Sloop, no!” exclaimed Logan. “Were you wielding that machete? No, 'twas that big man. It was his vanity for thinking he could best you, not yours. And doubtless his intent was to do more than chop a finger

or two off you. I cannot begin to understand why you blame yourself. They were looking for a fight, don't forget. It would only have taken a moment for him to realise that I did not take his coin pouch but, oh no, he did not want to know the truth. He wanted a fight. Mayhap he never even had a coin pouch in the first place. The blame lies entirely with him and his friends."

"I grant the truth of what you say, Logan," said Autumn. "He clearly wasn't interested in talking or getting the pouch back if you had indeed taken it. But the fact remains that because I did not take the fight seriously I made an error and as a result there is a man with a serious injury."

"You got out of the way when you were attacked by two men with a machete and a hoe," said Logan. "How is that an error?"

"I should have stepped to the side," said Autumn sadly. "I should have anticipated that by stepping backwards the two weapons would clash and that in all likelihood the machete would slide along the hoe. What I should have done was step to the side so both weapons went the same way then they would not have clashed. Had Noxu been here I would now be facing a beating for my inattention. Aye, and for my vanity in supposing the fight wasn't worth my full attention."

Logan stared at her in disbelief then started to laugh. A chuckle at first which grew to a full belly laugh. Autumn stared at him in confusion.

"Oh, Autumn, Autumn, you delight me so!" he spluttered. "Only you could best three armed men intent on killing you and blame yourself for not letting them attack you in such a way that they might not get hurt! 'Tis unbelievable!"

"Why are you laughing at me?" asked Autumn, looking pained. "You think my failures are a joke?"

"I am not laughing at you, Autumn," said Logan quickly. "I am laughing at the absurdity of the situation. They chose to start the fight and they must accept the consequences. And before you start to argue with that I will also say that yes, your vanity is at fault here."

“So you agree then, Logan?” asked Autumn, raising an eyebrow.

“In part,” he said, “but your vanity lies not in thinking you should have moved this way or that way but in taking the blame for someone else's injury. Anyone else would be delighted to have simply survived yet you, because of your vanity, blame yourself for winning! Is that not truly absurd?”

“I do not blame myself for winning,” said Autumn. “I blame myself for that man's injuries.”

“And that is your vanity speaking,” said Logan. “You make no allowance for Sploop to involve Itself. The machete and hoe need not have clashed, the machete could have cut the hoe's shaft or broken, the man could have dropped the hoe. Any number of things could have happened but in your vanity you hold yourself wholly responsible. What if you had stepped to the side and the hoe cut the other man's head off? Would you blame yourself for that as well?”

Autumn scowled and looked back down at the water. Logan, having learnt some wisdom in their time together, decided to remain silent and let her think about it. Regardless of how she felt he was most pleased with the outcome. Autumn was uninjured and, in the confusion after the fight ended, he had managed to slip the knife he had been admiring inside his tunic unnoticed. A good outcome indeed.

“I follow your reasoning, Logan the Persuasive,” she said after a while. “While I remain unconvinced that my vanity lead me into not taking the fight as seriously as I should have I concede that taking responsibility for an injury that was not caused by my hand also comes from vanity. Sploop has a hand in all things.”

“Good,” said Logan. “And can I add one more thought?”

“Of course,” said Autumn. “Your thoughts are always of value.”

“The next time there is a fight I would ask that you do not spend time during that fight thinking about whether you are taking it seriously,” said Logan. “You have told me before that you are trained to react to

attacks without thinking so put your trust in your training. Do not, whatever you do, stop to think about whether you are taking it seriously enough for that way lies peril. React as your body and training tells you and never fight yourself as well as your opponents. Your vanity can only be an issue while you stay alive.”

“And once again you have exposed the essence,” said Autumn, nodding thoughtfully. “You are absolutely in the right of it. Indeed it may be that my vanity lies in thinking my vanity is more important than it actually is.¹⁸ For certain it would be a breach of my vows to allow my vanity to stay my hand and put myself at risk as a result. ’Tis something of a quandary.”

“Not really,” said Logan, shrugging. “Do what you need to do when it needs doing and worry about whether or not you should have done it afterwards when it no longer matters.”

“There is much that is wrong with that statement, Logan,” said Autumn, “but there is an underlying truth to it as well. I shall put my vanity aside for, as you rightly put it, ’twas their choice, not mine and the consequences lie with them. Come, let us find Mikn Chap. I was told he lives in the house at the end of this row.”

“Mayhap he is the man who just passed us,” said Logan as they started to walk upstream. “I saw him go into the last house. Mayhap he was watching the fight.”

“Then let us hope it does not cause him to judge us harshly,” said Autumn.

“If anything it will make him more amenable,” said Logan with a laugh. “Likely he will be afraid when we knock on his door.”

“I hope not,” said Autumn. “I would not wish any to be fearful of me.”

“Small hope,” said Logan. “Anyone who’s seen you fight but does not know you would be fearful.”

¹⁸ This is not a new idea. When Autumn was proposed for the role of Krisana the other members of her Esyup agreed that her rejecting that honour because of her vanity was but a reflection of that vanity and not sufficient reason of itself. See *The Scroll of Autumn Savannah*.

“And that does not sit well with me,” said Autumn, “but I do not see what can be done about it.”

“Absolutely nothing,” said Logan. “’Tis something you will just have to live with unless you abandon your vows completely.”

“Which will not happen,” said Autumn, studying the house as they drew near.

It was a pleasant looking house, somewhat larger than most and made of stone much like the others this side of the river. Clearly those who lived in these houses were well off as they had neatly tended gardens of pretty flowers and raked paths rather than crops and there were colourful hangings over the windows. Unlike most dwellings which had a simple hole in the roof to let the smoke from fires escape all these houses had chimneys with a cover that stopped the rain getting in.

“My apologies for disturbing you,” said Autumn when a well dressed woman of comely appearance opened the door to her knock. “My name is Autumn Savannah and my companion is Logan. We would like to speak with Mikn Chap. I am told he lives here.”

The woman gazed at her for a few moments with a bored expression then glanced at Logan before dismissing him.

“You were told rightly,” she said. “Come in.” She opened the door fully and stepped aside to allow Autumn and Logan entrance.

“Thank you,” said Autumn.

“He is out the back,” said the woman. “This way.”

She led them along a narrow corridor to another door at the rear of the house which was already open.

“A pair of visitors to see you, Mikn,” she called to the empty garden then turned and went back up the corridor.

Autumn glanced at Logan then stepped through the doorway. Two

men, one sitting and the other standing beside him and bent over as if in discussion, glanced up. The one standing was the nondescript man who'd passed them on the bridge.

"Greetings," said Autumn. "I am looking for Mikn Chap."

"I have that distinction," said the seated man. "Alas, my only distinction. Who might you be?"

"I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup," said Autumn, bowing with her palms together in front of her, "and this is Logan." Logan bowed as well.

"I know not what that is," said Mikn, standing up, "but it sounds right impressive. This is Dar Nidri, my associate."

"Greetings, Dar Nidri," said Autumn, inclining her head.

"That will be all, Dar," said Mikn. "We'll continue this discussion later."

Dar nodded curtly while keeping his eyes on Autumn then walked around the far side of the house.

"Please, seat yourselves," said Mikn, waving a hand at three more chairs the other side of a low table. A number of scrolls sat on the table and it was apparent that Mikn had been busy doing some tallying. "Can I offer you something to drink or a cake perhaps?"

"Perhaps some water if I may," said Autumn, moving around the table to sit on one of the chairs. Logan followed and sat next to her. The back garden was pleasantly arranged with neatly kept grass between beds of ornate flowers and a small pond. At the bottom the river flowed peacefully although the low banks suggested the garden might become flooded after heavy rain.

"But of course," said Mikn, sitting down. He clapped his hands twice. "And for you, ah, Logan?"

"Water too, please," said Logan.

The woman who'd opened the door appeared in the doorway.

"Yes?" she asked, still looking bored.

"Would you be so kind as to bring us two cups of water and an ale, my dear?" asked Mikn.

The woman nodded and disappeared inside the house.

"My almost, Witibea," said Mikn, smiling genially. "I'd ask her to join us but she doesn't get involved in business discussions. I presume this is business not social?"

"We would like to talk to you about taug cohmm," said Autumn.

"Indeed?" asked Mikn with a mildly puzzled look. "I confess you do not have the appearance of farmers in need of labour but likely I am mistaken. You are not from these parts I suspect."

"No, we are from Aferraron," said Autumn.

"Now that does surprise me," said Mikn, leaning forward. "I was not aware that taug cohmm operated overseas."

"It does not," said Autumn.

"Ahh," said Mikn as Witibea returned with their drinks. He waited while she put them on the table then thanked her. She smiled briefly then departed again. "So, I am all ears. You are thinking perhaps of setting up a similar practice in your country?"

"Not at all," said Autumn. "We are here to ask that you desist the enslavement of people under taug cohmm."

"Enslavement?" said Mikn, barely reacting beyond mild puzzlement. "I hardly think enslavement is the case here."

"Perhaps I am wrong," said Autumn, "but I have it from one who has experienced taug cohmm that it is enslavement in all but name."

"Tis a puzzle," said Mikn, leaning back to sit more comfortably. "Taug coh'm is a service I provide that brings aid to both those in debt and those seeking workers. There is no enslavement involved as all are entirely willing. Might I ask on whose authority you lay these charges?"

"A young woman by the name of Cindue," said Autumn. "We encountered her when she escaped from Shina Ganam near Etenen."

"I know no one by the name of Cindue nor Shina Ganam," said Mikn. "Nor do I do business that far afield. I fear you have been told untruths about me."

"Tis a possibility," said Autumn, inclining her head a little in acknowledgement. "Although taug coh'm was explained to me and you readily admit it exists."

"Indeed it does," said Mikn, "and I am proud to say that 'tis of my own devising. Do tell me, however, what untruths you have been told of the nature of taug coh'm. This is of great concern to me."

"My understanding is that prisoners of war, as Cindue was, are taken and sold to a man called Tioksen," said Autumn. "Tioksen then brings them south to you where they are broken in mind and spirit then sold on under a scheme whereby the costs of their employment are taken from their payment for their labour and that the costs are such that all payment is withheld. In effect the person so employed is forced to work for no benefit to themselves. That is, or so I understand, enslavement."

"I am bereft," said Mikn, holding his arms out in supplication. "This is indeed a description of taug coh'm but greatly distorted and containing many untruths. Permit me to disentangle truth from lies and then you will understand that I perform a useful, nay, necessary service and that all benefit. Let us hear no more of enslavement."

"Of course," said Autumn. "I am, as always, in search of the truth."

"And I am delighted to hear it," said Mikn. "First of all, I do not get involved with prisoners. Prisoners are the responsibility of Aisitou abn

Busno, Sarkun of Us-Iota and 'twould be against the law for me to do so. Secondly I am not aware of any wars that Us-Iota is involved in. To which war are you referring?"

"I do not know which war Cindue was captured in," said Autumn. "Only that it was to the north either in or near the Forbidden Domain. She was, or so she said, captured some two summers past."

"And that is most definitely incorrect," said Mikn. "The last war Us-iota was involved in was some seventeen summers past and was against Okiebai which is, as you doubtless know, on our southern border. I venture it would not even be fair to call it a war. More of a skirmish and lasted little more than eight or ten days. You say these prisoners were sold to me by Toska?"

"Tioksen," said Autumn. "I know not where he lives however."

"Never have I had any dealings with a Tioksen," said Mikn, frowning and shaking his head. "No, there is much here that is untrue. Moreover, I do not buy and sell people, only debts."

"Perhaps you could explain that," said Autumn.

"I would be delighted to," said Mikn, smiling with the greatest sincerity. "It bothers me more than you will ever know that such a charming and delightful young Eashiqa such as you might labour under so many falsehoods about me. Permit me to explain."

"Please do," said Autumn.

"For any number of reasons, people in these parts and doubtless in Aferraron find themselves, on occasion, unable to live on their own resources," said Mikn, leaning forward again and resting his elbows on his knees. "In such times some resort to borrowing money from those better situated and thereby become indebted to that person. For many that is sufficient and they are able to find their feet again. However, some unfortunates find themselves unable to pay off that debt and that is where I come in."

"How so?" asked Autumn, conscious of her lack of knowledge of

money although she had a vague idea that sometimes people borrowed money. Presumably the expectation was that the money would be repaid but how it worked she had no idea.

“I know many people far and wide,” said Mikn. “Many run farms and businesses and some are in need of workers. However, as I am sure you know, farms are generally in places where there are few people. My design, and this is the true nature of taug cohnm, is that I buy the debt of some unfortunate who is unable to clear the debt themselves then sell it on to one who needs a worker. That unfortunate, or perhaps I should say fortunate, is then able to repay that debt to the employer from their earnings. My role, such as it is, is more that of bringing those two together, the one in debt and the one in need of workers. I am an agent, as it were and that is all I do. I introduce and cover the transfers of money. I do not buy and sell people nor do I break minds or spirits. That would be a nasty thing to do.”

“But would it be true to say that the payments to the employer would be excessive and make it impossible for the worker to escape servitude?” asked Autumn.

Mikn sat back again and smiled genially at Autumn.

“I can see that this greatly concerns you,” he said, “and that does you great credit. Alas, not everyone is as kind hearted as you and I concede that it is possible for someone of an avaricious nature to abuse any agreement. Sadly, as the intermediary I am unable to take responsibility for how one individual treats another any more than, say, a baker can take responsibility for bread after he has sold it to you. I will point out, however, that every agreement has a time limit after which the worker is no longer obliged to work for the employer.”

“How long ...” started Autumn.

“And if I might add,” continued Mikn, holding up his hand, “all who enter into agreements with me, both those in debt and those seeking workers, are most happy with the terms of the agreement.”

“I see,” said Autumn, wondering where to go next with this discussion.

“If I might ask a question?” asked Logan.

“But of course,” said Mikn. “I am most anxious that you both end thinking ill of me.”

“You would seem to be quite wealthy,” said Logan. “How do you benefit from taug cohnm?”

“I desire to be totally open with you both,” said Mikn happily. “I pay off the debt of one so indebted for a little less than the actual amount of the debt. The one who is owed the money is oftentimes happy to get most of their money back rather than none at all. I then sell that debt on to the employer with a small fee added for my time and efforts. And, before you ask, I take pride in performing such a service for my fellows and would do it for nothing if I were able.”

“I see,” said Logan, nodding thoughtfully.

“Do you have any further questions?” asked Mikn. “I am rather busy but more than happy to dispel any misunderstandings that you may still have.”

“No, I think you have answered everything,” said Autumn. “I apologise for disturbing you and ask forgiveness for suggesting you were involved in enslavement.”

Chapter Twenty

Autumn hesitated once they were back on the track outside Mikn Chap's house then decisively headed upstream and into the woods.

“That was a puzzle was it not,” said Logan, following her.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but we will not speak of it here. Let us find somewhere beside the river where it is quiet and we will not be disturbed.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. He glanced around but did not see anyone following them.

“Voices can carry,” remarked Autumn, noticing his glance.

The clouds, which had been threatening all day, began to rain. Gently at first but with the promise of more to come. They continued for some distance, the ground gradually rising, until they came to a small waterfall, a head or so less than a body length in height. At its foot there was a small pool where the falling water tumbled and collected itself before flowing downstream. Above the waterfall lay a fallen tree, its trunk partially submerged in the water and a goodly part of its branches projected out over the fall. Usefully, its torn and twisted roots curved up and over a depression in the ground where once the tree had sat.

“Up there, I fancy, we can stay dry,” said Autumn, pointing.

“And mayhap light a fire,” said Logan. “Things don't look to be too wet yet.”

It took but a short time to collect foliage to lay over the roots to provide a roof and not much longer to collect dry leaves, twigs and some fallen branches to make a fire. Getting the fire lit and burning took longer but such is the nature of making a fire in the rain and the doing gave Logan time to catch a fish in the pool below the waterfall. He scraped some mud from the bank and smeared it thickly around the fish before putting it in the centre of the fire to cook.

“Ahh, fresh fish to eat and a roof to keep off the rain,” he said happily, settling himself down beside Autumn under their improvised covering. “Aloidia is with us today.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “perhaps not.”

“You are thinking of Mikn Chap?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I confess I had not expected him to change his ways after talking with us but I had hoped for some clarity. 'Tis not at all clear what to do next.”

“I agree,” said Logan. “What seemed simple is now no longer so. Who do you think is lying? Cindue or Mikn Chap?”

“And therein lies the confusion,” said Autumn, leaning forward to push a burning piece of wood back on the fire. “You recall Tolasy and Foaumo these two summers past?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “I hope Logan is growing well.”¹⁹

“I am certain the boy prospers,” said Autumn, “and will doubtless grow into a fine man like his namesake. I mention Foaumo as that was a simple situation. He drove Tolasy and Ymma from their land and admitted that when I spoke with him. There was no confusion. Here, however, there is much confusion. Cindue said she was taken as a prisoner in a war and sold into enslavement yet we have been told that there are no wars, that there have been none for a long time and any such prisoners would be dealt with by the Sarkun. Who is right in this?”

“It does not help that Cindue claims to not remember,” said Logan. “Although she was treated badly and escaped from Ifgez and Shina Ganam.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and we were both witness to that. Yet Mikn Chap says there is no enslavement and that he does not know of Cindue nor Shina Ganam. Indeed all that he said seemed most

19 See *The Annals ~ The Second Tale*. Foaumo drove Tolasy and Ymma from their home in order to appropriate it for his own use. Shortly afterwards, Ymma gave birth with the aid of Logan and they named the boy Logan.

reasonable although I know not what debt is.”

“I only know a little myself,” said Logan. “I know no one who has borrowed money but I know that when that happens the one who has borrowed is said to owe a debt to the one who lent. Doubtless that money has to be returned at some point although what happens if someone is never able to pay that money back I know not.”

“That is the impression I got from Mikn Chap,” said Autumn, “so it would seem reasonable for the one who should give the money back to provide their labour if they cannot and I daresay if the one who gave the money does not need a worker then it makes sense for one who does to pay the money instead and receive the labour. On the face of it at least Mikn Chap provides a useful service.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “and if the one who is paying the money and getting the work in return treats the worker harshly it would hardly seem to be Mikn Chap's fault.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “but how then are we to account for what Cindue told us? And, come to that, Shina Ganam's willingness to fight to have her returned to him. If it were just a matter of money surely he would have been willing to let her go if she did not want to be there or at least to avoid a fight.”

“Ah, that is where you are wrong,” said Logan. “There are plenty who would kill their own mothers for money so that is the one part of this that I do understand.”

“You mean you would kill your mother for money?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“No,” said Logan. “I am not one of those people as I have never had any money worth fighting over but we have oftimes come across such people.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “So we are back to the central question of who is lying. 'Tis more likely to be Mikn Chap I fancy for he would doubtless be willing to lie to protect himself although if that were the case would he not lie and deny all knowledge of this taug cohm? As it

was he seemed proud to have devised it himself which he would likely not claim if it was the cause of much suffering. As to Cindue, well, I cannot see why she would lie. She does not benefit as far as I can see by lying or making up falsehoods.”

“’Tis possible she is mistaken,” said Logan thoughtfully. “Mayhap before she lost her memory she got into debt and entered into an agreement with Mikn Chap and was mistreated by those farmers who sold her on to Shina Ganam. I forget their names.”

“Neiter and Sayam,” said Autumn. “Aye, ’tis possible but why would she make up a war and being captured?”

“That I do not know,” said Logan, “but it may explain why she disappeared. We were getting close to Oas’tal and mayhap she did not want us to talk to Mikn Chap and find out the truth.”

“Unlikely,” said Autumn. “We were not heading for Oas’tal then. We were heading for her home.”

“True,” said Logan. He shook his head and sighed. “Mayhap, if she was lying about the war and being captured she was also lying about where her home is.”

“Then why stay with us as long as she did?” said Autumn. “That makes no sense either. Granted she found our aid useful in getting away from Shina Ganam but why stay with us and ask for our aid in getting her home when her home was elsewhere?”

“Mayhap she simply wanted some company,” said Logan, throwing up his hands. “I don’t know! ’Tis all confusion and nonsense and I venture ’tis best we walk away from all of this and continue our travels.”

“I am inclined to agree,” said Autumn, poking the ground with a twig. “If we found any who were actually suffering then we could likely do something about it but no one is. I daresay we could go searching for people suffering but I know not where to start looking. Certainly we cannot visit every farm around and ask to talk with all their workers.”

“Aye,” said Logan. He prodded the mud around the fish and decided it wasn't cooked yet. “I need a piss.”

He leaned forward so his head was past the roots covering them and peered up at the sky. Twilight had arrived and it was beginning to get dark.

“It looks like the rain has nearly stopped,” he said and stood up. “Aye, 'tis just a light drizzle.” He disappeared behind the fallen tree's trunk.

Autumn leaned forward, resting her head on the heel of her hand with her elbow on the heel of her foot which in turn rested on her knee. The conversation with Mikn Chap was still much on her mind as were the apparent discrepancies in Cindue's tale.

“Mayhap she just stayed with us because she liked Logan,” she thought, frowning. “But why then leave? He did not upset her as far as I know.”

“Oh Voqev! No!” exclaimed Logan from the other side of the trunk.

Instantly Autumn leapt out of the shelter, twisting as she did so. She landed solidly and slipped in the mud, falling onto her backside. With a quick thrust of her arms she was up again and leapt over the trunk expecting to see bandits or bears or some such but there was nothing there save Logan. He was staring at the tree trunk with wide eyes.

“What is it?” she said, dropping into her defensive posture and scanning all around.

“There,” he said, pointing to the trunk with a trembling hand.

She looked over and saw nothing threatening

“What?” she said, slowly standing upright again.

“There,” said Logan, jabbing his fingers at some scraps of cloth snagged on the bark.

“'Tis just some old cloth,” said Autumn, picking them off the tree

trunk.

“Look at the square piece,” he said. “’Tis a message from Mother Midcarn.”

Frowning, Autumn gave him a hard look then looked down at the cloths. One, the smallest, was indeed square and neatly embroidered on it were the words 'To help you both see clearly MM'.

“Ahh,” she said and smoothed the other two pieces between her fingers.

“They were on the trunk,” said Logan, his voice taut. “Underneath a stone. You know what this means, don't you.”

“Aye, that likely she saw you pissing,” said Autumn as the rain started to get heavier again. “Come back under the shelter.”

“What do you mean, she saw me pissing?” asked Logan with some agitation as they settled themselves out of the rain again.

“These cloths are dry,” said Autumn, laying the two strips of cloth over her knee and smoothing them down. The square piece she laid neatly on her other knee. “If they had been on the trunk for long they would be wet which means she's only just put them there. While you were pissing.”

“Oh,” said Logan, frowning. “I hope I did not offend her.”

“I wager not,” said Autumn. “Doubtless she has seen men pissing before. ’Tis difficult to avoid sometimes. Mayhap that is what she meant although I doubt it.”

“Meant what?” asked Logan.

“That you could see clearly so you did not piss on her,” said Autumn. “Is this all there was?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “The three pieces of cloth with a stone on top. Do you think I actually pissed all over her?”

“Likely not,” said Autumn, holding up one of the strips and peering at it, “and even if you did she has ways of getting rid of the stuff. You are sure this is all there was?”

The strip was almost the length of her arm and perhaps a thumb's length wide. It was of a coarse weave, light brown in colour and the edges were a little frayed. She held it to her eyes and looked around then laid it on her knee again and inspected the other.

“Are you sure there was nothing else?” she asked, putting both pieces on the ground.

“No,” admitted Logan. “I saw the square piece and read it then nearly pissed myself again. What do you think it means?”

“I know what it means,” said Autumn, “but it makes no sense. I'm going to check. There may have been something else which you did not notice.”

She put the square on top of the other pieces and left the shelter of the tree roots. Nervously Logan reached over and picked up all three pieces. He re-read the message then inspected the other two. Much as Autumn had done he covered his eyes with one. He could see through the coarse weave but it certainly did not make seeing things clearer.

“I couldn't find anything else,” said Autumn, slipping back inside the shelter. Her robe was damp from the rain and she took it off and hung it on a nearby protrusion.

“So what does it mean?” asked Logan.

“It means Mother Midcarn sees some sort of difficulty ahead of us,” said Autumn, “and has given us a gift to aid us. Can I see her message again?”

“Certainly,” said Logan, handing her the square.

Autumn took it then turned it over and frowned.

“It has gone,” she said. “Look.”

“What?” exclaimed Logan and snatched the piece of cloth from Autumn’s hand. He turned it over several times but the embroidery had gone. “Where did the writing go?” He looked at Autumn in confusion. “It was there just now.”

“I fancy where the cloth is going,” said Autumn, pointing at the cloth. “Look.”

The cloth was now giving off a faint blue smoke and was starting to crumble. With a yelp Logan tossed it on the ground and they both watched as it withered then disappeared, leaving only a faint sweet smell that quickly dissipated.

“Well now,” said Autumn. “I venture that means the cloths did come from Mother Midcarn.”

“You mean that she knows we’ve got the message and its gone back to wherever it came from?” asked Logan.

“Very likely,” said Autumn, “or the message is not meant for another to see.”

“Why would she not want others to see the message?” asked Logan. “They’re usually on a scrap of parchment.”

“I have no idea,” said Autumn, taking the other two pieces from Logan’s lap. “Mayhap she has just run out of scraps of parchment.”

“But surely she could just magic some more up,” said Logan, scowling.

“Mayhap that’s what she did,” said Autumn, “and now the magic has gone. These are most strange, are they not?” and she held up the two strips.

“They look like ordinary cloth to me,” said Logan, “which means nothing of course. Fiau looks like an ordinary staff but she isn’t.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “How will these help us see more clearly?” She held one up in front of her eyes again. “’Twould seem to me they make seeing more difficult, not clearer. You try. Mayhap both are for

you.”

“I already did,” said Logan, “and they didn't. Anyway there are two pieces. One is clearly for you.”

“I am not certain,” said Autumn, pursing her lips. “Did her message say 'you' or 'you both'?”

“Ahh,” said Logan, thinking. “No, I am fairly certain it said 'you both' and there are two of them. Is there anything on them to say whose is whose? Like our necklaces?”²⁰

“Let me see,” said Autumn, studying one of the strips closely. “No there is nothing on this one.” She passed it to Logan who studied it while she studied the other. “No, neither piece has any sign on it either so I wager whatever they do will work for either of us.”

“So what do they do?” asked Logan, holding his strip up in front of his eyes again.

“Doubtless we will find out when the time comes,” said Autumn. “That is the way with all her gifts. Never once has she given any explanation of what they do or how how to use them.”

“True enough,” said Logan. “Oh!” and he tossed the strip away in alarm. “Do you suppose we are both to be blinded this time.”²¹

“Who can say,” said Autumn cheerfully, winding her strip into a roll. “But do not be alarmed if that is to be so. If we are both blinded then Mother Midcarn has likely given us the means to overcome such an affliction but the message does have another meaning.”

“How so?” asked Logan.

20 It will be remembered that the two necklaces which Mother Midcarn gave Autumn and Logan which translate languages had an 'A' on one and an 'L' on the other. If either wears the wrong necklace then the translations do not work. The necklaces were gifted in *The Annals ~ The Fifth Tale*.

21 In *The Annals ~ The Ninth Tale* Autumn was permanently blinded by a seskyvi. Her sight was ultimately restored through the gratitude of Xanthous for Autumn's aid, given in *The Sixth Tale*.

“Seeing is not only done with the eyes,” said Autumn. “It can also mean seeing a meaning in the sense of understanding or even seeing the truth of something. If I say something and you say ‘I see’ that does not mean you are looking at me. It means you have understood what I have said.”

“Oh,” said Logan. He paused then wrapped his strip around his fist and held his hand in the air. “Show me the truth of Cindue and Mikn Chap.” He closed his eyes and a look of strong concentration came over his face. After several heartbeats he exhaled loudly.

“Did it work?” asked Autumn, deeply intrigued as she always sought understanding.

“No,” said Logan and shrugged. “That business still makes no sense to me.”

“’Tis a shame,” said Autumn. “Let me try.”

She held her rolled up strip of cloth in her hand and raised the hand in the air.

“Show me the truth of Cindue,” she declaimed with her eyes shut.

She stayed in that position for more than twice as long as Logan had then slowly lowered her hand and opened her eyes.

“No, nothing new has come to me,” she said. “’Tis as you say. There is no consistency nor am I any clearer about what to do.”

“So what do you suppose these are for?” asked Logan, fiddling with his piece of cloth, “and what ills are we facing? When will it happen, whatever it is?”

“I know not,” said Autumn. She stared down at the roll in her hand then slowly tucked it inside her pack. “Although we can be certain the need for these lies in the future and not the past. ’Tis not Mother Midcarn’s way to give us gifts after the need has arisen and, never forget, with the aid of her gifts we always prevail.”

“I was afraid you'd say something like that,” said Logan. “I was looking forward to a nice feast of fish and a dry night's sleep but I can't eat now nor will I be able to sleep for the worrying.”

“And that worries me greatly, Logan,” said Autumn, looking at him with some concern on her face. “Never have I known you not be able to eat. Not even a little cheese?”

“Not even a little cheese,” said Logan sadly. “My belly is all twisted and tied in knots. Even if I did force a morsel down my throat I wager it would not get as far as my belly.”

“Mayhap some water would help,” said Autumn, reaching for one of their water skins.

“I think not,” said Logan, pushing her hand away. “If I did drink I'd just piss it straight out again. You have forgotten the bracelet Mother Midcarn gave you.”

“The one that was taken from me in Schtei?” asked Autumn. “What has that to do with you drinking water?”

“It was a gift from Mother Midcarn,” said Logan, “but it did not work. That's why Toby had to ask Kanikapila for aid when the Chanwars attacked us with their army.”²²

“That was a defect of Toby's magic,” said Autumn, “not Mother Midcarn's.”

“And who is to say that whatever magic is in these cloths was not put there by Toby or another,” countered Logan. “We cannot be certain the magic on them came from Mother Midcarn and sooner or later her magic may well fail anyway.”

“Oh Logan, Logan,” said Autumn, shaking her head. “You are determined to go through life thinking the worst, are you not? You

²² See *The Annals ~ The Seventh Tale*. Mother Midcarn created a bracelet with charms on it that were intended to become replicas of Autumn when the need arose. The magic on the charms was to be instilled by the sorcerer Orgajatoby before he gave the bracelet to Autumn. Sadly Orgajatoby was unable to comply and requested Kanikapila, the manifestation of Iuo, to aid Autumn instead.

know troubles lie ahead of us because troubles lie ahead of everyone, even Roinads, but unlike most we have the blessings and aid of Mother Midcarn. I grant the possibility that something may go wrong but look to the past. We have come this far unscathed and that is a most magnificent thing considering the ills that have befallen us. If now is to be the time her aid fails us then so be it. Cast away your doubts and fears and let us have no more of this ill thinking. Everything will turn out for the best, of that I am certain.”

“You may be certain Autumn,” said Logan, screwing up his nose, “but I am far from certain.”

“Then let us hope some of this nice fish in your belly will restore your good humour,” said Autumn, pulling her robe back on. “I shall go for a piss myself then let us eat. The fish is doubtless overcooked by now but that is better than under cooked.”

“Oh, very well,” said Logan, reaching forward to knock the mud coated fish from the fire. “But I will not be able to eat a morsel.”

“Then there will be more for me,” said Autumn with a smile.

She bent to go under a protruding root then disappeared around the side of the trunk into the darkness. A heartbeat later there was a sudden whooshing noise and a faint thud which made the tree vibrate ever so slightly.

“Autumn?” exclaimed Logan, jumping up. He cracked his head on the solid tree root but didn’t notice as he launched himself round the side and snagged an arrow head with his sleeve. “Autumn? What’s happened? Oh Voqev!”

Chapter Twenty One

When the cold shivery tingling passed through her chest, Autumn froze, sinking into her defensive posture with her back against the tree trunk. Her eyes and ears searched the deepening gloom for signs of her attacker but she sensed nothing. With a sudden movement to her right and Logan's cry of "Autumn?" she leapt upwards and back, over the trunk of the tree, and landed on a bush with prickly splines. Ignoring the unexpected hurts she hurried around the roots of the tree and grabbed the back of Logan's tunic. Dragging him forcibly, banging his head and shoulder against two of the protruding roots, she pressed him to the ground behind the tree.

"Wha?" exclaimed Logan, struggling, her knee in his chest and his backside pressed hard into the prickly bush.

"Shh!" hissed Autumn, clamping her hand over his mouth. She listened intently for a few moments then bent her head to his ear. "Stay here, stay silent."

Logan tried to nod his head but her grip was too strong. She felt his movement, however, and released him then melted silently into the night. Her weight gone, Logan eased himself off the bush and onto his hands and knees. As quietly as he could he edged forward to peer around the trunk then picked up his staff. Still on hands and knees he crawled into the bushes beyond the trunk and twisted onto his backside. Instantly he jerked up with a barely stifled yelp as the broken off splines jabbed further into his bottom.

"Not good, not good!" he muttered as he crawled further. Finding sanctuary behind a nearby tree he climbed to his feet and listened intently. Beyond the sound of his own breathing and the sounds of the river he could hear nothing.

"I hope Autumn is all right," he thought and peered around. Save the dark shadows of trees, a pale greyiness over the river and flickering shadows from their fire which was itself hidden by the fallen tree's bulk he could see nothing. The wounds in his backside, however, were sending sharp little reminders as his small movements snagged the cloth of his tunic on the splines.

“Ignore it,” he muttered, his anxiety growing. “As Autumn says, 'tis only pain and a small pain at that.”

Clutching his staff tightly but unable to wield it as she had taught him because of the tree, he very cautiously stepped around it and edged over to another tree. A faint rustle made him jerk around, swinging his staff up. It banged against the tree and the sound seemed to echo and reverberate. He froze, every muscle taut and his ears and eyes straining. Nothing.

Carefully he lowered one end of the staff so it was more or less vertical then he brought it close to his body. He stepped forward, intending to circle around the fallen tree, and roughly in the direction Autumn had gone. In retrospect it was a foolish move as his back lost the protection of the tree behind him and, moments later, a hand clamped over his mouth and another pressed the staff tightly to his chest. He had barely begun to react when he felt something brush against his ear.

“’Tis only me,” whispered Autumn and only slackened her grip when she felt his body relax. Not much admittedly but enough to show he'd realised who held him.

“Go to the river and make your way upstream,” she whispered. “I will find you shortly.”

He nodded and she released him fully.

“Go,” she whispered and tapped him on the backside in encouragement. Logan winced and stifled a yelp.

Logan gone with Aloidia's aid to a place of safety, Autumn crept back to the tree roots, staying behind and out of the light of the fire. Pressed against the trunk she reached around the roots and felt for one of the sticks they'd gathered for firewood. Grasping one firmly in her hand she peered around with one eye and used the stick to scatter the sticks of the fire so the flames no longer leapt and danced but faded to a red glow. There was still no sign of their attacker, almost certainly one as two or more would have pressed the attack further, so she edged around the roots, keeping as far as possible in their

shadows. Gathering her pack and staff she brought them around into the lee of the trunk then reached back for the water skins and, as an afterthought, the mud coated fish. She hesitated for a moment then decided the fire, now separated into several smouldering sticks, was unlikely to set fire to the woods and abandoned it.

“What are you doing?” she asked when she caught up with Logan at another clearing some way further upstream. He was leaning against a tree with his tunic down and bare backside exposed to the faint silvery glow of the now rising Plakill.

“I sat on something and my backside is full of prickles,” said Logan, feeling around with his hand. “I’m trying to get the Sploop cursed things out. Did you find anyone?”

“Alas no,” said Autumn. “I saw nor heard nothing although I did smell something unfamiliar but it was soon gone. Fiau, could you give us a very faint light?”

A moment later the end of Logan's staff glowed but it was barely enough to distinguish it from the rest of the staff.

“A little more if you please, Fiau,” said Autumn and the glow increased to that of an enfeebled firefly. “A touch more. Ahh, that will, I fancy, be sufficient.”

“What do you need light for?” asked Logan, pulling up his tunic as he felt somewhat exposed and undignified despite having been naked in front of Autumn countless times before.

“To inspect your backside,” said Autumn, holding Fiau close to Logan. “Bend over.”

A short but painful time later Logan's backside was free of prickles and Autumn deemed his injuries insufficient to need neither ointment nor binding. She sat down and proceeded to pick out the splines that she'd collected when landing on the bush. Her feet and calves boasted many such, with several under the soles of her feet deeply embedded from where she'd walked on them. Logan watched, his brow furrowed.

“How do you do that?” he asked after she dug one from under her big toe with her needle.

“I grip the end and pull,” said Autumn, tossing the spline into the bushes. “’Tis fortunate they are not barbed.”

“No, I mean walk when your feet are full of them,” said Logan. “Do they not hurt? My backside was bad enough but under my feet? Ugh.” He gave a little shudder.

“Ahh, ’tis simply that I ignore the hurts,” said Autumn. “They are minor and not disabling although I am happy to be able to remove them. It would be irksome to go through life with these things in my feet.”

“Voqev, yes,” said Logan with feeling. “That would indeed be a trial. Do you have any idea who attacked us?”

“No,” she said, pausing to look at him in Fiau’s dim glow. “Although I fancy ’twas either a bandit or someone who had followed us.”

“Ahh, Mikn Chap,” said Logan, nodding. “I thought the same.”

“Why do you think of Mikn Chap?” asked Autumn, concentrating on a spline that had gone deep between her toes.

“If he lied to us about his work then I suspect he may have followed us or had us followed,” said Logan. “I warrant he does not take kindly to questions being asked and doubtless wants rid of us.”

“’Tis a possibility,” said Autumn, managing to extract the offending spline. She held it close to Fiau and examined it. “See this, Logan? ’Tis a simple but effective illustration that size is not important in besting an enemy. A handful of these tiny things would, I venture, bring even a giant to its knees.”

“But not you,” said Logan.

“I am not a giant,” said Autumn, tossing the spline with the others. “If Mikn Chap wanted us dead why did he not do the deed at his house?”

She bent to attack the last which was in the ball of her foot and the most deeply embedded.

“Likely that other man who was with him saw you fight in the square,” said Logan, “and told him of you before we arrived. ’Twould have been foolish of Mikn Chap to attack you knowing you had just bested three others.”

“Aye, true enough,” said Autumn, concentrating on her foot. “And in his house with his almost there as well. Doubtless he would think he would be putting her at risk as well.”

“If not him or the man he was with then who else?” asked Logan. “Bandits would have attacked in number, not just fired one arrow and left. They would be after our belongings. I would say whoever it was wanted you dead.”

“Aye, likely enough,” said Autumn, squeezing the ball of her foot between her thumbs. “He saw the arrow strike me full in the chest and assumed I was dead so left. That would suggest that he was not interested in you which would in turn suggest it was not Mikn Chap for we both spoke with him. I suspect it may have been that man who said you took his coin pouch.”

“Ahh, I forgot about him,” said Logan, frowning.

“Hah! Got you, you little pest!” exclaimed Autumn, pulling out the last of the splines. She flicked it into the bushes then wiped some spit over the entry point which was bleeding slightly. “Thank you, Fiau. We have no need of light any more.” The tip of the staff faded and went out. “Still, I venture we will have no more excitement this night. Let us sleep and be on our way in the morning.”

“Do you not want to return to the waterfall when it is light?” asked Logan.

“What for?” asked Autumn. “I have brought the fish.” She looked around then patted the ball of mud which Logan hadn’t seen or if he had, had supposed it to be just a ball of mud.

“Ahh! Most beloved Autumn, you are the Roinad of the deities!” exclaimed Logan, pouncing on it. “I had supposed it left behind.”

“’Tis just a fish, Logan,” said Autumn. “Was that why you wanted to go back to the waterfall?”

“In part,” said Logan, breaking the mud apart to reveal a slightly overcooked fish. “But also to see if there is anything that points to Mikn Chap or the sleeveless man or someone else.”

“Well, if you wish,” said Autumn, taking the lump of cold fish Logan passed her. “But supposing there is, what do we do about it? Go back and start another fight? What purpose would that serve?”

“Well, if it is Mikn Chap,” said Logan around a mouthful of fish, “doubtless when he hears you still live he may try again.”

“And how will he find out I still live?” asked Autumn, picking at her fish. “I do not anticipate returning to Oas’tal.”

“Who knows,” said Logan, “but word has a way of spreading and if he thinks you are putting his business at risk then Sploop knows what he will do.”

“I think you are over thinking this,” said Autumn, “but we shall return to the waterfall for I do not see Mother Midcarn’s gift to you. Mine is in my pack but yours, I fancy, is still back at the waterfall.”

“Sploop!” exclaimed Logan. “I forgot all about it. I know not what use a strip of cloth will be but I daresay ’tis best not to lose it.”

* * *

“Do you see anything?” whispered Logan, peering through the bushes the next morning.

“No,” whispered Autumn, “but I am pleased to see there is no sign of fire. I left our fire smouldering and I was afraid it might set fire to the tree.”

“Why did you not put it out?” whispered Logan.

“Someone may have been watching,” said Autumn. “Just because I didn’t find anyone does not mean no one was there.”

“True enough,” whispered Logan. “I do not see my cloth however.”

“Most likely it is still among the roots,” said Autumn. “Come.”

She stood up and walked through the bushes to the tree roots. Logan hesitated then joined her.

“Aha!” he exclaimed, pouncing on the strip of cloth underneath one of the burnt sticks from the fire. Fortunately the stick had gone out before the burn had reached the cloth. He shook the cloth to get rid of any dirt then smoothed it in his hand. “Can you carry it in your pack, Autumn? I fancy ’twill be safest there.”

“I am happy to,” said Autumn, wandering over to look among the bushes and trees around where the arrow had likely come from, “but I think it not the best idea.”

“Why’s that?” asked Logan, rolling the strip of cloth into a neat little sausage as he walked in her direction.

“If when the need for the cloths arises and we have been separated,” said Autumn, “it will not be able to aid you if both are with me.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. He frowned. “How is it best to carry it then? ’Tis so small it will be easily lost.”

“Tie it around your neck or something,” said Autumn. “’Tis long enough.”

“That is good thinking,” said Logan, tossing the rolled up cloth from one hand to the other. He dropped it and bent to pick it up. “That is strange.”

“What is strange?” asked Autumn, glancing over.

"Tis a footprint in the mud," said Logan, squatting down to get a better look. "But unlike any I have seen before. 'Tis like those of camels in Neander but with three toes instead of two and much smaller."

"Let me see," said Autumn, coming over. She bent to study the print then started walking away looking for others. "There is another here and several over there. I fancy whatever made these stood there for a while, likely watching. For certain there are none heading for the river so it was likely not a creature coming to drink. They seem fresh enough too so they were not made several days ago. Some time after the rain started last night I expect."

"But what do you think made them?" asked Logan, going over to look at the other prints.

"I have no idea," said Autumn, studying them again. "I have not seen their like before. I wonder which way round they go. Was the creature going towards us or going away?"

"I fancy going towards us," said Logan. "The print is a little deeper at the tip of the toes so likely that is where its weight was as it went forward."

"Mayhap you are right," said Autumn. "I have only seen birds with toes behind their feet and these do not seem to be the marks of birds."

"You think they were left by the one who fired the arrow at you?" asked Logan.

"Twould seem likely," said Autumn, parting the bush directly in front of her. She could just make out the smear of black against the tree trunk where she thought the arrow had struck. "I can see the arrow from here. Likely whoever fired it waited behind this bush until he saw me then fired." She looked around again. "And went that way. There is another print over there but going the other way."

"I think you are right," said Logan, bending over to look himself. His hair fell forward over his eyes and he brushed it away. "But what

manner of creature is it? I reckon 'tis not Mikn Chap or the man with the coin pouch.”

“Bend over again, Logan,” said Autumn watching him.

“Why?” asked Logan.

“Your hair is getting long,” said Autumn. “’Tis falling in your eyes and over your face when you bend over.”

Logan blinked at her several times and fingered some of his hair then dutifully bent over.

“Aye, so it is,” he said, sounding surprised. “I had not noticed. Does it matter?”

“Likely not,” said Autumn, looking around at the woods again, “but if we are being stalked then ’tis best if your hair does not get in your eyes if a fight becomes needed. Mayhap you should tie it back as I do. Why not use that cloth from Mother Midcarn?”

“’Tis an idea,” said Logan. “Umm, how do I do it?”

“Comb it back with your fingers and gather it tight behind your head,” said Autumn. “Then wrap the cloth around several times and tie it in a knot.”

“Like this?” asked Logan, doing as she bid.

“Aye, like that,” said Autumn. “You can have it higher or lower, whatever feels comfortable.”

“But how do I get it off?” asked Logan, fingering the knot he’d tied. “I cannot see the knot to undo it.”

“Just slide it off,” said Autumn, demonstrating with her own hair tie. She undid it then put her hair back in its customary ponytail.

“Ah yes,” said Logan, trying it. “I have seen you do that countless times but gave no thought as to why.” He made another ponytail, this

time lower so it sat comfortably between his shoulder blades. "It feels most strange."

"You will not notice it soon enough," said Autumn, "and it will feel strange when you wear your hair loose but should you have to fight it will serve you better tied back."

"Aye," said Logan, tossing his head around experimentally. "Yes, I see what you mean."

"Good," said Autumn. "Well, I think there is nothing more to see here unless we try to track this creature but I fancy it is long gone now."

"It may come back," said Logan, following her to the clearing where the fallen tree still lay.

"And we shall deal with it when it does," said Autumn.

She checked all the remaining sticks from their fire were fully out then scraped them together with her foot before scraping soil over them in case one or other was still smouldering inside. Then she jumped onto the top of the trunk and walked out to where it overhung the waterfall simply to experience what it was like to see a waterfall from above. Some spray damped her feet but she didn't find the waterfall particularly interesting from that perspective. The view of the pond below and the trees beyond, however, were pleasant and she called Logan up to see for himself.

"Aye, 'tis pleasant enough," said Logan when he'd clambered on top of the tree as well. "I would like it better if there were not strange creatures in these woods."

"And perhaps we are wrong in thinking that," said Autumn, making her way back to the roots of the tree. "Perhaps those prints were made by a normal man with something on his feet to disguise his footprints."

She jumped off the tree and went round to look at the arrow still embedded in it.

“You think?” asked Logan, walking along the tree with his arms outstretched for balance. “’Twould seem a lot of effort for little purpose unless he expects us to compare everyone’s feet to the prints left behind.”

“Actually no,” said Autumn. “I think ’tis a creature from another world. Perhaps even Land of the Cysciec.”

Logan stopped walking and stared down at her in shock.

“What do you mean?” he asked, a slight quiver in his voice.

“As I said,” said Autumn. “Come and look at this arrow. ’Tis not human made, that is for certain.”

Chapter Twenty Two

In his haste to get down from the top of the tree trunk Logan slipped in the mud. He fell backwards with a squawk and much flailing of arms and legs among the roots of the tree and the ashes that remained from their fire. It didn't help that his backside was still a little sore from the splines.

"Are you hurt?" asked Autumn as her face appeared under the remains of the canopy they'd made over the top of the roots.

"I don't think so," said Logan, looking round with a bemused expression. "I think I slipped."

"Aye, 'twas a mighty feat, Logan the Acrobat," said Autumn, reaching down. She hauled him out from the tangle and set him on his feet. "Most impressive. Never have I seen you move so fast on your feet."

"Now you are making fun of me," complained Logan, twisting to ease the pains in his back and shoulders.

"Perhaps," said Autumn, "and that is wrong of me. 'Twas an accident and accidents happen to all. Come, look at this arrow."

With a last easing of his shoulders Logan followed her along the fallen tree, slapping himself to get off the dirt and ashes.

"Have you seen such as this before?" asked Autumn, pointing to the arrow that jutted out.

"No," said Logan, peering at it. "I know little of arrows but those I have seen are long and made of wood. This is short and made of I know not what." He tapped it with his finger nail. "'Tis definitely not wood nor bone. 'Tis more like bronze but isn't. And these are not feathers."

"Indeed," said Autumn. She grasped the arrow and pulled it from the tree.

"No!" exclaimed Logan suddenly and dashed the arrow from her

hand. "Don't touch it!"

He pushed her so she stepped back a pace and kept his arm out so she did not step forward again to pick it up.

"It could be magicked," he said by way of apology. "Twould seem to be not human made and you said the creature could have come from the Land of the Cysciec."

"Ahh," said Autumn, staying where she was. "A fair point and one I had not thought of."

She stared thoughtfully at the arrow on the ground for a few moments then looked at her hand. It seemed much as it always had been and showed no signs of being altered in any way by magic, not that magic necessarily manifested itself in obvious ways. She clenched and unclenched her fist a couple of times then looked at the arrow again. It just sat on the ground and looked a little muddy.

"Fiau," said Autumn. "We desire your aid."

"What manner of aid can I provide?" asked Fiau in her thin wavery voice as she materialised from Logan's staff.

Her tall slender silvery form contrasted sharply with the dark thick trees that surrounded them. Interestingly her mossy hair seemed to have grown since last they saw her.

"Greetings, Fiau," said Logan. "Are you well?"

"I am well, Logan," said Fiau gravely. "You have the manner of one in pain however."

"Tis nothing," said Logan, faintly embarrassed although he didn't know why. "I just fell among the roots and hurt my back a little."

"Ahh, unfortunate," said Fiau. She surveyed the fallen tree and her expression seemed a little sad. "And you, Autumn? You are well?"

"I am most well, Fiau," said Autumn. "I apologise for disturbing you

while you slept but I was wondering if you sensed any magic on this arrow.”

“What is an arrow?” asked Fiau.

“This,” said Autumn, squatting down and almost touching the arrow with her finger.

With some difficulty, Fiau stiffly bent over and passed a twig-like hand over the arrow. Her multi-ringed green eyes appeared to pulsate and the rings merged into each other for a few moments.

“There is none I sense,” she whispered, passing her other hand over the arrow as well. “Alas I am but a fallen branch from the forests of Havildar and am not learned in such matters. I may be wrong. For certain there is no strong magic on this twig. From where did it come?”

“We do not know,” said Autumn, looking into her stern but calm face.

“Then best it be treated with caution,” said Fiau.

She eased herself back upright again and gazed searchingly at Logan.

“What?” he asked uneasily.

“There is magic on you, Logan,” said Fiau. “I can feel it.”

“Sploop!” exclaimed Logan, jumping back. “Where? I didn’t touch the cursed thing!” He started brushing his arms and torso with his hands as though he could wipe off any magic.

“Tis on your head,” said Fiau, passing her hand over Logan’s head. “T’would seem to be this strange moss that grows behind your ears.”

“Behind my ...?” exclaimed Logan with a touch of panic. He started slapping at the back of his head. “Get it off me! Get it off!”

“Calm yourself, Logan,” said Autumn, grabbing his hands. “I fancy ’tis only the cloth from Mother Midcarn.” She reached behind his head

and slid the tied strip off. "Is it this, Fiau?"

Fiau looked at the cloth and the green circles in her eyes started to swirl.

"Tis of the one who fashioned me," she said reverently, holding both her hands over the cloth. "Aye, I feel her magic most strongly."

"Good," said Autumn. "'Twas a gift from her and its magic is not unexpected. Can you tell what the magic does?"

"Alas no," said Fiau. "'Tis beyond my ken."

"No matter," said Autumn, handing the cloth back to Logan. "'Tis sufficient to know that it is from Mother Midcarn and will doubtless aid us when the time comes. Is there anything else you can tell us of the arrow?"

Again Fiau bent stiffly to look at it.

"Tis of no tree," she said after studying it. "I sense soil but I know not what that means."

"Soil?" said Logan, retying his hair. "That would be the mud on it I expect."

"No, not the mud," said Fiau. "There is mud all around. No, I speak of the twig itself. There is soil in it, or so I sense. I cannot be certain however."

"Which is right puzzling," said Autumn. "Soil? In an arrow?"

"Sadly I cannot aid you any further," said Fiau.

"You have been very helpful," said Logan. "Thank you."

Fiau hesitated for a moment then merged back into the staff.

"Well now," said Logan. "What do you make of that?"

“At least we know it likely has no magic on it,” said Autumn, “and it was wrong of me to say it was from Cysciec. I have no reason to suppose so. Mayhap it is a new type of arrow that is made in these parts.” She bent to pick it up and examined it closely. “That is strange.”

“What is strange?” asked Logan, coming closer to look at it himself.

“It feels much like my new bowl,” said Autumn. “’Tis hard and smooth and has a gloss under the mud yet it is light, much like wood and not as heavy as metal. I venture ’tis some manner of pottery. And there is what looks like hair on the end rather than feathers, but the hairs are stiff and not like hair. Look,” and she passed the arrow to Logan.

“Oh yes,” said Logan, inspecting the arrow closely. He fingered the tuft of hair at the end then peered more closely. “’Twould seem to be hollow and these hairs feel like they have been stiffened with resin from a tree or some such. Here, take it back.”

He gave the arrow back to Autumn then hurried over to snatch up one of the water skins. He brought it over to show Autumn where he had bent the skin of the rabbit’s leg over and sealed it with sap so water did not escape.

“Indeed,” said Autumn, comparing the rabbit’s resin coated fur with the tuft on the end of the arrow. “How strange. Why would anyone put a tuft of hair on an arrow rather than feathers?”

“I know not,” said Logan. “I don’t even know why they put feathers on arrows.”

“That is to help the arrow in flight,” said Autumn. “So it flies straight and does not go off to one side or another. I know not why it works but it works for birds and arrows the same.”²³

“And it is very short,” said Logan. “’Tis barely the length of your

23 Translator’s note: The purpose of feathers or ‘flights’ as they are more usually called is to give aerodynamic stability to the arrow in the air and to ensure the arrow always lands point first. Any tendency of the arrow itself to lose stability is countered by the drag on the flights. Without them the arrow is simply a stick and would tumble and rotate.

hand. Most strange. The bow which fired this must be very small. Do you suppose the creature that fired it was tiny but with big feet?"

"It must be not much higher than my knees," said Autumn, "unless it is fired by something other than a bow."

"How else would you fire an arrow?" asked Logan. "That's why they are called bows and arrows after all."

"There is likely an error in your thinking, Logan," said Autumn, still looking at the arrow in puzzlement. She looked up at him and saw the silent query in his face. "Ahh, what I mean is that you are right in saying that arrows are fired from bows but your error lies in supposing this is an arrow. That is what we are calling it but it is sufficiently unlike any other arrows we have seen to make me think it is not an arrow but something else. And, if we accept it is not an arrow then it follows it need not have been fired from a bow."

"Oh," said Logan. "Well I suppose you are right. If it is not a small arrow then what is it?"

"I do not know," said Autumn, "but it is a killing device that is certain. If it were not it would have hit me in the chest. That my robe made it pass through me would suggest that the robe believed it to be about to kill me."

"And that is why you must never to take your robe off again!" exclaimed Logan. "Tis dangerous for you to do that! You never know when you will be attacked. It could happen at any time, like last night!"

"Ahh, Logan," said Autumn, putting her hand on his arm. "I thank you for your concerns but they are impractical. There are times when I must take off my robe, when it is too hot or when I wash myself or whatever. Besides, as we have agreed many times we know not if the magic on the robe²⁴ will last forever nor will we know when it is spent save that I am killed when we would not expect me to be. I grant the

24 Translator's note: Technically speaking, the magic is in the silver ribbon that Autumn used to hem the robe. The ribbon was given to her by Mother Midcarn in *The First Tale* and continues to work satisfactorily despite having been removed, in *The Eighth Tale*, from Autumn's old worn out robe and sewn to her new one.

robe protected me this time but the next time? We know not.”

“It has been nigh on three summers now,” said Logan, “and it still works. The longer it works the less likely it is that it will not work.”

“A false logic,” said Autumn. “’Tis like saying we have always taken water from the water skin so it will continue to give us water forever but that is absurd. It will only give us water until there is no more water. Likely ’tis the same with the robe. It will only protect me for as long as it has magic upon it. When that runs out it will no longer protect me, save from cold and rain.”

“And there is a false logic in that as well,” said Logan, scowling at Autumn. “With the water skin it will continue to give us water as long as we continue to refill it when it gets low. Likely Mother Midcarn knows when the magic on your robe gets low and replenishes it.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but we cannot know this and it would be entirely wrong to believe it to be so when it is not. ’Tis just as likely that Mother Midcarn does not replenish the magic. Mayhap it never needs replenishing but we cannot assume that. Sense tells us that sooner or later it must run out as is so with all things.”

“Your logic annoys me at times,” said Logan, wrinkling his nose in irritation.

“Aye, it annoys me too sometimes,” said Autumn. “But that is the way of things.”

“Does it really?” asked Logan. “Or are you teasing me?”

“I know not what teasing is,” said Autumn, “save that it is some way close to jokes which I do not fathom either, but yes. There have been occasions when I want to do something but logic would dictate otherwise. Where to go next is a good example.”

“Hah!” exclaimed Logan, pointing an accusatory finger at Autumn. “I know your tricks! Do not think that changing the subject will get you out of wearing your robe!”

“And once again you confound me, Logan,” said Autumn in surprise. “That was no trick. I thought we were done on the matter of the robe and I sought only to give an example of when there is a discrepancy between my desires and my actions.”

“We are not done with your robe,” said Logan. “As this ...” and he tapped the arrow, “... bears witness you are at risk at any time. Therefore, and you will agree the logic is flawless, you must wear your robe at all times until such time as we know that either there is no future risk of anyone trying to kill you or we know the magic on the robe has gone. Where we go next is of little concern.”

“I beg to differ, Logan the Emphatic,” said Autumn. “I accept your logic on the matter of the robe and I agree to wear it at all times except when it is inconvenient to me. Doubtless you will accept the logic of that as you seem to be in an overly logical mood today. However the matter of where to go next is of concern. Great concern to me at least even if it doesn't concern you.”

Logan scowled as he worked out what Autumn had actually agreed to then relaxed his scowl as he realised that was probably the best concession he was going to get from her. Also, he conceded to himself, it would be onerous for Autumn to wear the robe at all times and she wasn't attacked that often after all.

“So why does where we go next concern you?” he asked.

“Because of the risk,” said Autumn. “When I saw this arrow I realised it was no ordinary attack as by bandits or whoever and it reminded me of the time I was stabbed by a magicked thorn on the way to the Sauizuxu Copper Mine which is why I spoke of the Land of the Cysciec. You recall Ta’umboq at the mine was an augetreinn from Cysciec?”²⁵

“Recall?” exclaimed Logan. “I will never forget that Voqev forsaken shit!”

“Well, likely not,” said Autumn. “But there are certain similarities to our present situation which is what made me think of it.”

25 See *The Annals ~ The Second Tale*.

“What similarities?” asked Logan, confused.

“Then we were taking supplies to the mine,” said Autumn, “which was in the Forsaken North and discovered the horrors the mine was unleashing.”

“Actually we weren't,” said Logan. “You were stabbed with the thorn before we took the job of delivering supplies.”

“In that you are a little mistaken,” said Autumn. “Yofa had already made the offer of employment. Doubtless we were set on that course even though we had not yet agreed and so Ta'umboq stabbed me so that I would die before getting to the mine.”

“Actually I think you are right,” said Logan. “What of it?”

“This time we were heading to the Forbidden Domain to return Cindue to her place,” said Autumn. “Cindue left us but still we continue to the Forbidden Domain and I am again attacked by something that is not human and likely not from this world. Much as I desire to continue to the Forbidden Domain and find out why it is forbidden and who forbids it, logic would dictate otherwise.”

“Now that surprises me,” said Logan, leaning against the tree. “Normally you twist and bend logic so that it justifies what you want to do.”

“Aye, you have accused me of that before,” said Autumn, “and I was forced to agree with you that that was my way but no longer. 'Twould seem possible that something does not want me to go to the Forbidden Domain and it would be wrong of me to continue journeying there.”

“Whoa!” exclaimed Logan. “This is not the Autumn I know speaking! If it is indeed the case that something does not want you to go to the Forbidden Domain then there is a reason for that. There must be some wrong that needs righting that only Autumn Savannah can do and surely that drives you more than anything.”

“It is certainly a factor,” said Autumn.

“And, don't forget,” said Logan, holding up a finger to emphasise his point, “Mother Midcarn has gifted us gifts. I know not what they do but she would not have done that if we were going somewhere for a look around then leave because there was nothing for you to put right.”

“And again I cannot fault your thinking on that,” said Autumn. “Her gifts are indeed a factor also.”

“So why are you turning tail and running away?” asked Logan. “It is most definitely unlike you.”

“’Tis because of my robe,” said Autumn, toying with the arrow between her fingers.

“Your robe?” said Logan, puzzled. “I do not follow. What has your robe got to do with this?”

“Not my robe as such,” said Autumn, “but the magic on it that protects me from mortal injury.”

“Oh Sploop!” exclaimed Logan, pushing himself violently away from the tree. “You think the magic has run out, don't you!”

“Actually no,” said Autumn, holding up the arrow. “This arrow tells me that it continues still.”

“Then I am lost,” said Logan, throwing up his hands in despair. “You think there is something trying to stop you going to the Forbidden Domain because there is some wrong there that only you can put right and Mother Midcarn has given us gifts to help with that and, moreover, you believe the robe still protects you. What else can you call it but running away?”

“Do you not see, Logan?” said Autumn, tapping his chest with the tip of the arrow. “Something did try to kill me last night and only the robe protected me as it was an excellent shot. I felt it go through my heart,” and she tapped her own chest roughly where her heart was. “It would certainly have killed me. But think on this. If it is indeed the case that something is trying to stop us going to the Forbidden

Domain, it will try again, will it not?"

"Very likely," said Logan, "but what of it? You have your robe to protect you."

"And there you have the crux of the matter," said Autumn. "The robe protects me."

"You speak in riddles," said Logan, beginning to lose his patience. "It protects you! So what is the problem?"

"It protects me, Logan," said Autumn. "Think on that. It protects me, not you. If we continue to the Forbidden Domain then next time it may be you that is shot, not me, and I will not have you put at risk no matter what wrongs are being committed in the Forbidden Domain."

Chapter Twenty Three

It was mid morning when Autumn and Logan emerged from the woods beyond Mikn Chap's dwelling. Autumn instantly froze then pulled Logan back into the trees.

"Shh," she whispered. "Is that not the man who was with Mikn Chap yesterday?"

"It looks like him," whispered Logan as the man walked through the garden towards the path that went to the bridge. "I wonder where he is going."

"I venture it is not our concern," whispered Autumn, "but I confess I have doubts about the pair of them."

Dar Nidri glanced towards the woods when he reached the path but clearly did not see any sign of them as he stepped onto the path and ambled towards the town.

"Follow him, Logan," whispered Autumn. "If they are involved in slaving there is a small chance he is going to check on those already captured."

"What about you?" asked Logan, wondering how he could follow Dar Nidri on an open path without being spotted.

"I shall have another talk with Mikn Chap," whispered Autumn. "I am interested to know his thoughts on this arrow," and she tapped her pack. "Go. We shall meet again at the bridge. Take care."

"Aye," muttered Logan. He looked around for an alternative route but there was none, save going to the water's edge and passing through the gardens of those who lived in that row. He'd likely be spotted quickly and challenged so that was not a good option. Still, Dar Nidri did not appear in any way concerned nor, importantly, did he look behind him. Logan swallowed then took a deep breath.

"May Aloidia be with me," he muttered then hurried out onto the path.

Dar Nidri turned onto the bridge at that moment but raised his hand and called out a greeting to someone on the other side. Logan pulled his blanket roll around and slung it over his shoulder to hide his face.

“What if he stops to chat?” he wondered. “He will surely see me when I reach the bridge.”

Nervously he hitched his blanket roll a little higher and quickly peered under it before sighing with relief. Dar Nidri had reached the other end of the bridge and the person he'd greeted was heading downstream. Dar Nidri continued walking into the town without glancing back and Logan followed, trying to act nonchalant and hoping no one would recognise him from the fight the previous day.

Fortunately it seemed to be market day and the town square was filled with stalls and people milling around inspecting goods and bargaining spiritedly. Dar Nidri meandered through the market making the occasional greeting and only once looked back. Logan immediately turned to inspect a stall laden with a variety of vegetables.

“Them be finest okimum,” said a voice. “Fresh in today. Only two bans a handful.”

“No thank you,” said Logan, glancing at the vendor, a short, plump man with a ruddy face and an impressive beard on his otherwise hairless head.

“Then kindly do not be fondling them,” snapped the man. “They be bruising easily.”

“Oh, sorry,” said Logan, only then realising he had an okimum in his hand. He put it back carefully and gave it a gentle pat by way of apology. The vendor sniffed and gave Logan a filthy look before turning his attention to a woman who was squeezing some tomatoes.

Glancing back into the square, Dar Nidri had disappeared.

“Voqev!” exclaimed Logan under his breath and hurried over to where he'd last seen Dar Nidri. Still trying to act casually he looked around and quickly turned away when he spotted the big farmer who'd

accused him of taking his coin pouch. Fortunately the man was intent on another who was inspecting some fleeces.

“Aha!” thought Logan, spotting someone who had the shape and clothing of Dar Nidri disappearing down an alley. He quickly followed and lurched into a doorway when the man glanced back. It was indeed Dar Nidri.

“Who be you?” demanded a thin older woman, peering at him. She paused in her pounding of a rather unpleasant looking strip of dried meat and waved her hammer at him. “What be you wanting, eh?”

“I, um, stumbled,” said Logan. “I apologise for disturbing you.”

“I seen you before, ain't I,” exclaimed the woman, her face grim. “You be that one what picks pockets, ain't you.” She advanced on Logan, her hammer raised and ready to strike him. “Get you gone afore I call me lads to sort you!”

“I'm going, I'm going,” said Logan, quickly back-stepping out of the doorway and into someone walking up the alley.

“And don't you be a-coming back,” exclaimed the woman, her voice rising to a screech.

“Noften watch yourself you clumsy oaf!” exclaimed the man, pushing Logan roughly aside. He glared at Logan and half raised his hand aggressively.

“My apologies,” exclaimed Logan. “I did not see you there.”

“Check your pockets,” called the woman from the protection of her doorway. “That 'un be a pick pocket and a thief!”

“A thief is it?” snarled the man, quickly checking his pockets.

“’Twas an accident!” exclaimed Logan, backing away and bringing his staff around just in case. To his relief the man found nothing was missing.

"You'd better be nofting watching yourself, me lad," he said, jabbing his finger at Logan. "We don't be taking kindly to thieves around here."

"And rightly so," said Logan, retreating down the alley still further. "Thieves be the scourge of honest folk like yourselves. My apologies again for walking into you. Fare well!"

He turned and walked quickly away, half expecting a blow or shouts but nothing happened. Importantly, however, Dar Nidri had disappeared once again.

Logan glanced back and the man and the woman were standing side by side in the alley watching him. He smiled and waved then ducked down a side alley.

"Now what?" he thought. "I've lost him. Shall I keep looking or go back to the bridge?"

He came to where another alley joined and peered down it. There was no one in sight but there was no one in sight in the alley he was in so he decided to turn down this new one and see where it lead. With Aloidia's aid it went down to the river which would mean he could get back along its bank to the bridge rather than go back the way he'd come and risk meeting that woman again.

"Aloidia is smiling on me today!" he thought when he reached the end of the alley. It was the edge of town and directly ahead lay a field of sheep with a ramshackle old building in the far corner. To the right ran the river. More importantly, to his left, he could see Dar Nidri striding along a path that followed the edge of the field. Usefully also there was strip of waste ground covered with long grass and bushes between the path and the next field in which he could hide should Dar Nidri turn around.

"Which raises another difficulty," thought Logan as he hurried after Dar Nidri. "What if he is going a long way? How far should I follow? Autumn will be worried if I do not return soon enough."

'Twas a worry but one that soon resolved itself as Dar Nidri stopped

at the ramshackle building to piss against its side while Logan thrust himself into the hedge. When Dar Nidri had finished he looked up and down the path then went inside the building.

“I wonder what he's doing,” thought Logan, watching from the bush he'd leapt behind.

Dar Nidri emerged a short while later and started walking back to the town. Logan shifted further into the bushes and crouched down. He held his breath as Dar Nidri walked past and very slowly let his breath out as the man's footsteps receded.

“So do I follow him back to the town or look inside the building?” he wondered. “He took nothing in nor did he bring anything out so why did he come here? Mayhap he was checking on something inside. I'll just have a quick look then follow him again.”

Moving quietly Logan edged over to the building. It was of simple branch and mud construction, not much bigger than the dwellings on this side of the town and much of the mud was badly cracked and falling away in places. Staying with his back to the wall so he blended with the shadows, Logan peered cautiously through the door-less doorway. There were no windows and the place was dark and smelled rank. Cautiously he edged in.

“Can I have some light, Fiau?” he whispered.

Obediently the staff spluttered into flame and he held it up. Mayhap at one time it had been used to shelter sheep or store hay but there was nothing there now. Just a filthy dung strewn earth floor and a few piles of mud that had fallen from the walls, some with tufts of sheep wool attached.

“Hmm,” thought Logan, turning full circle. “It's completely empty.”

He went back to the door and was about to tell Fiau to stop when he heard a voice.

“Logan!” it said, very quietly but with a sense of loudness, like a shout from a great distance. “Logaaan!”

Logan whirled quickly but there was no one there. The building was still deserted and there was nothing for anyone to hide behind.

“Must have been some wind through the holes in the wall,” thought Logan, circling the inside of the building with his staff held high. As if to confirm this he felt a breeze on his neck which seemed to come from a mud-less section.

He had another quick look around then hurried out through the door, telling Fiau to stop burning. Dar Nidri was nowhere in sight.

“Logaaaaan!” came the voice again, even fainter than before.

“That definitely came from inside,” muttered Logan and peered back inside the building. It was still deserted. Logan shivered, perhaps from nerves, perhaps from a sudden chill breeze, it was difficult to say.

“Is anyone there?” he asked quietly. It felt wrong to speak more loudly and he also felt more than a little foolish talking to an obviously empty derelict building.

Much to his relief no one answered so he backed out again. It seemed pointless to return to the town to try to find Dar Nidri again as he could have gone anywhere so Logan followed the path back to the edge of town then crossed the field to the river. A little way upstream he could see the bridge and a small figure sitting beneath it at the water's edge. It was a comforting sight and he hurried along the bank.

“Ahh there you are,” said Autumn as he drew near. “I was beginning to get worried.”

“There was nothing to worry about,” said Logan, sitting down beside her. “How went you with Mikn Chap?”

“That was interesting,” said Autumn. “He was clearly greatly surprised to see me again. When I asked why he said he had thought that our talk of the day before had fully satisfied my curiosity but I found that unconvincing. Surely it would not have been unreasonable to have returned with another question or two to clarify things?”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, “unless he was certain that you would never return.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Still, 'tis not entirely impossible that he dismissed me from his mind after that meeting and gave me no further thought.”

“And what of the arrow?” asked Logan. “Did you ask him of it?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Again he did not react as I had expected. He claimed to not have seen such a thing before but it was readily apparent that he was familiar with such things as he gave it only a cursory look and did not examine it closely. He did ask how I came by it and when I said it had been fired at me but missed he asked if I knew who had fired it.”

“Well, that's not an unreasonable question,” said Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but he seemed relieved that I did not know rather than concerned that there is someone nearby who fires unusual arrows at strangers.”

“So you think he was involved?” asked Logan.

“I do not think he fired the arrow,” said Autumn, “but I would not be surprised if he knew who did and had been told I was dead. However, I am only speaking of my impressions. I have nothing solid on which to base such a judgement. I am inclined towards two thoughts though. One is that he knows more than he has told us and the other is that he has spoken some untruths but I am reluctant as yet to call him out on that without any evidence save my opinion which could easily be in error. How fared you with Dar Nidri?”

“I lost him,” said Logan with a shrug. “I followed him through the town and out the other side where he went into a derelict building for no apparent reason. For certain he took nothing inside nor did he bring anything out. After he'd left I went inside but there was nothing there. When I came out he had disappeared so I came back here.”

“How strange,” said Autumn, frowning. “Why would he go to a

derelect building then leave again? Could it be he was inspecting it with the intent of buying it or considering it for some purpose he has in mind?"

"Tis possible," said Logan, "although he was inside for only a few moments. I would think he'd have spent longer if he had some use for it. I confess I found it a little scary when I went in. It was dark and smelled most foul and ... well, that's it really."

"And what?" asked Autumn, looking at him with a raised eyebrow. "There was something else?"

"Ahh, 'twas just my imagination," said Logan, dismissively flapping his hand.

"What was it you imagined?" asked Autumn, twisting so she faced him.

"I thought I heard someone call my name," said Logan, curling his lip at his own imaginings. "Likely it was just the wind blowing through the cracks in the walls."

"Hmm," said Autumn and pursed her lips.

"What?" asked Logan. "You think there was a ghost in there or something?"

"Ordinarily I would be inclined to agree it was just the wind," said Autumn. "Would you do me a kindness?"

"Of course," said Logan. "What do you want me to do?"

"Put the piece of cloth Mother Midcarn gave you over your eyes and tell me again what was inside the building," said Autumn.

Logan stared at her.

"You think that is what she meant by seeing clearly?" he asked.

"Perhaps," said Autumn. "Tis an unusual coincidence is it not? You

are not given to hearing imaginary voices and yet you hear one only a day after being given a cloth by Mother Midcarn that she says will help you see more clearly.”

“But hearing is not seeing,” said Logan. “The two are different things.”

“Undeniably,” said Autumn, “but do not forget that seeing can mean understanding as well as looking. Perhaps the cloth will help you understand what you heard more clearly.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, looking unconvinced. “But did she not give us two cloths?”

“You think I should put mine over my head as well?” asked Autumn. “Tis not an unreasonable suggestion for we know not how to use them. Come, let us try it.”

She rummaged in her pack and pulled out her piece of cloth. Logan watched as she draped it over her head then slowly pulled his from his ponytail.

“Mayhap we should put them over our eyes,” he said. “She did say ‘see’.”

“Tis worthy trying,” said Autumn, tying her piece of cloth over her eyes. “You do the same.”

“As you wish,” said Logan. He hesitated then tied his piece of cloth over his eyes as well. “Now what?”

“Tell me what you saw inside the building,” said Autumn, “and what you heard.”

“When he came out I went over and peered inside,” said Logan, feeling a little foolish. “It was very dark so I asked Fiau for some light. There was nothing inside save a lot of sheep dung and spiders and such so I left.”

“And when did you hear the voice?” asked Autumn. “When you first

went inside or when you left?"

"Umm, I'm not sure," said Logan, trying to remember. "For certain it was after Fiau lit up and I don't think she'd gone out when I first heard my name."

"First?" exclaimed Autumn. "You heard someone call your name more than once?"

"Aye, twice I think," said Logan. "No, 'twas three times. Twice inside and again as I was leaving."

"Interesting," said Autumn.

"So do you see more clearly?" asked Logan. "I confess I do not."

"No, I do not see more clearly either," said Autumn, taking her blindfold off. "'Tis strange that you heard your name thrice in an empty building. Was anything else said?"

"Umm, I asked if anyone was there," said Logan. He saw through his cloth that Autumn had taken hers off so he did as well.

"And did anyone reply?" asked Autumn, staring thoughtfully at the cloth in her hand.

"No," said Logan. He laughed. "I'd have pissed myself if anyone had."

"And that is all that was strange?" asked Autumn.

"Yes," said Logan, "although it was strange that Dar Nidri went all that way to look inside a derelict building and only stayed for a few moments. He didn't take anything there nor did he leave with anything."

"Aye, that is strange as well," said Autumn softly. She slowly rolled up her piece of cloth then got to her feet. "Come, show me this building."

"What, now?" asked Logan.

“Do we have anything more pressing?” asked Autumn.

“I suppose not,” said Logan. He thought for a moment then tied his hair back again and got up. “We’ll go along the river bank. There was a woman in the town who recognised me and thinks I did steal from that man yesterday.”

“Then it is probably best we leave this town soon,” said Autumn. “But first I would like to see the building.”

Logan lead her along the river then along the path. The building was still there and seemed no different to before.

“As you say,” said Autumn as they stopped beside the doorway. “It would seem derelict and abandoned.” She peered inside. “Fiau, can we have some light.”

As always, Logan’s staff burst into flame and he pushed the end through the doorway.

“And it seems to be deserted,” said Autumn, going inside. Logan followed her. “Just dung and mud.”

“Autumn!” came a voice, far distant and faint. “Logaaan!”

“Did you hear that?” exclaimed Logan, freezing.

“Aye,” said Autumn, cocking her head and listening intently. “Did you hear my name before?”

“No, just mine,” said Logan, looking around.

“Interesting,” said Autumn. She looked at the rolled up cloth in her hand for a few moments then unrolled it and put it over her eyes. “Mizule!”

Chapter Twenty Four

“What?” exclaimed Logan, spinning round and raising his staff sharply. It banged against one of the walls and dislodged a large chunk of mud.

“Yes, Cindue, 'tis truly me,” said Autumn, still holding her cloth over her eyes. “I know not what is happening but I will release you in a moment.”

“What do you mean, Cindue?” said Logan, still poised in his defensive posture with his back to Autumn. He was moving his staff from side to side in case of a sudden attack and the flame from Fiau wavered and flickered. “Is she here?”

“Logan, put your staff down and look through your cloth,” said Autumn. “Cindue is here with two others.”

“Where?” demanded Logan, lowering his staff and twisting around to scan the building.

“Logan! Put your cloth over your eyes!” exclaimed Autumn, her voice a little tense.

“My cloth?” said Logan, finally seeing Autumn looking at a patch of nothingness in front of her with the cloth over her eyes. “You mean that thing from Mother Midcarn?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, still staring at the nothingness. “With it you will see Cindue and the others clearly.”

Logan scowled then propped his staff against the wall. He slipped the cloth from his ponytail and held it over his eyes and looked around.

“Vogev!” he exclaimed. “’Tis Cindue!”

With the cloth over his eyes he could see that there were six stout posts embedded in the earth floor of the building, three on each side. Cindue’s wrists and ankles were held fast by a strong metal chain to a post at one end of the building and two other unfortunates, both

female, were likewise chained to other posts. All three were filthy and befouled and Cindue's new blue tunic was ripped and tattered. The other two girls were sprawled with their backs to their posts and staring with a curious mixture of fear and listlessness at Autumn and Logan.

"Aye, 'tis me," cried Cindue, rattling her chains. "I prayed to Vallume you would come and find me Logan and you have!"

"But what are you doing here?" asked Logan, staring in astonishment. "This place was empty but a moment ago!"

"That can wait," said Autumn, now recovered from the surprise of seeing Cindue. She lowered her cloth and the scene faded so she quickly returned her cloth to cover her eyes and tied it behind her head so her hands were free. "First we must free Cindue and the others."

"Ah, yes, absolutely," said Logan, a little flustered. He, too, lowered his cloth and the scene disappeared. Confused, he put it back over his eyes and the scene reappeared. He hesitated then also tied the cloth behind his head.

"'Twould appear to be a simple chain," said Autumn, studying Cindue's shackles, "but mayhap these be magicked as well."

She ran her forefinger over the shackles around one of Cindue's ankles then, finding the joint, she ripped it apart.

"That seemed to work," she said and proceeded to do much the same with the other anklet and Cindue's wrist shackles.

"Ohh, that is a relief," exclaimed Cindue, rubbing her wrists and ankles but avoiding the sores caused by the shackles. "Thank you, thank you!" She tried to get to her feet and staggered. Logan caught her and held her steady. "Aye, and thank you too, Logan my sweetness." She engulfed Logan in a bear hug which nearly broke all his ribs and parts of his spine. Autumn, meanwhile, broke the shackles of the other two girls and helped them to their feet.

“What are your names?” she asked.

“I am Hadzie and this is Loti,” said Hadzie, slowly getting to her feet. Like Cindue both girls started rubbing their wrists and ankles as well. “We thank you whoever you are.”

“Aye,” said Loti. “Thank you muchly.” Animation was returning to both their faces.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, “and my companion is Logan. There is much I would ask you but now is not the time.” She leapt around with her arms raised and ready as Logan seemingly attacked the wall. Sensing her movement Logan also leapt around to face her, the burning end of Fiau narrowly missing Autumn's face, not that that would have harmed Autumn as Fiau's flames could cause neither any injury, but the light blinded her for a few moments, despite the cloth. Fortunately Logan stepped back and moved Fiau well away, allowing Autumn to see again.

“What were you doing?” asked Autumn.

“Fiau was setting fire to the twigs in the wall,” said Logan apologetically. “I saw them starting to burn.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “Good. 'Twould not be desirable for this place to burn down with us inside. Cindue, come with me a moment.”

“Gladly,” said Cindue, stepping forward.

Autumn cautiously went to the doorway and peered out. With the cloth still over her eyes the path and fields looked much as they had before. Carefully she stepped out then turned and beckoned to Cindue. Cindue also stepped out cautiously and blinked several times in the daylight.

“Ahh, that feels good,” she said, taking a deep breath and turning to face Astauand. “Fresh air and light! Vallume, that is good.”

“What is also good is that you can leave this place,” said Autumn. “I was afraid that whatever magic that kept you hidden from view would

also keep you trapped inside.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Cindue, slapping her hand over her mouth. “I did not think of that! But then, I did not know there was magic here. I wondered why it was you did not see or hear me when you came in,”

“Look inside but stay outside,” said Autumn. “Can you see Logan, Hadzie and Loti?”

“Ooooh!” exclaimed Cindue, peering in. “I can only see Logan. Is that not the strangest thing?”

“Loti, Hadzie, come out,” said Autumn. “You too, Logan.”

The girls crept out of the hut rather stiffly as their movements had been constrained for some time and their limbs were stiff. Logan followed.

“Good,” said Autumn. “One final test remains.”

She pulled her cloth from her eyes and gestured for Logan to do the same.

“Ahh, that is most excellent,” she remarked. “I can see all three of you.”

“So can I,” said Logan. “That must mean that whatever magic there is here is only inside the hut.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “So it must be magic of not seeing rather than of hiding another place within this place.”

“Oh that is not necessarily so,” said Logan. “It could be another place entirely but one that is within the hut but hidden from us normally.”

“Then if that were so,” said Autumn, frowning, “it would mean ...”

“Enough!” exclaimed Cindue, holding up her hand. “This is not the time for you two to have one of your endless discussions! We need to get away from here!”

“And in that you are absolutely right,” said Autumn. “But first I want to destroy those posts and chains so they cannot be used again.”

“Why not just burn the place down?” asked Cindue. “Twould be easier, would it not?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but that would attract attention and, moreover, if Logan is right and magic hides the place you were chained there may be other places also hidden within. If we burn the hut then we may be burning other people who are in those places. I did not see any other places but mayhap the magic we have does not reach that far. Logan, take Cindue, Loti and Hadzie to the river so they may wash. I will join you shortly.”

“You're going back inside?” asked Logan, frowning.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I am going to pull down the posts and break the chains.”

“Then we stay here,” said Logan, “and I shall go inside with you. We have no idea what other magic lies inside and you may become trapped yourself.”

“I fancy not, Logan,” said Autumn, “for Cindue and the others are now outside and if there is magic that traps me then it will trap you likewise. You stay outside.” She held up a finger to stay his protests. “Do not think to argue.”

“Very well,” said Logan heavily. “But I shall watch from outside with the cloth on.”

“Good,” said Autumn.

She retied the cloth around her eyes then marched back inside the hut. Logan watched while she repeatedly attacked the six thick posts until they broke then ripped the chains apart. The girls stayed in the warmth of Astauand but kept worried eyes on where the path joined the town in case someone should appear.

“There, 'tis done,” said Autumn, emerging from the hut. “Let us go to

the river and you three can wash and I will attend to your injuries.”

“Can we get some food first?” asked Cindue. “I have not eaten for five days and Hadzie and Loti for longer as they were already here when I was brought here.”

“That is not good,” said Autumn, frowning.

“I will go to the market and get food,” said Logan. “Will you head upstream or down?”

“Downstream,” said Autumn. “Upstream lies Mikn Chap and Dar Nidri and I do not wish to encounter either just yet. You have money still?”

“Only three banuuls,” said Logan with a grin, “but I also have these,” and he waggled his hands.

“Take care you are not caught,” said Cindue. “I may not be able to find you again if you are.”

“I always take care,” said Logan. “I have learnt that lesson. I will find you downstream soon.”

“What did he mean?” asked Cindue as Logan walked away. “He has learnt that lesson?”

“I fancy he was referring to why he had to leave his home,” said Autumn. “Come, let us go to the river.”

“Why did he leave his home?” asked Cindue, helping Loti to walk as her legs were slow to regain their strength.

“He was offered a choice,” said Autumn. “Exile or hanging. He chose the former which is how we first met.”²⁶

“Logan was to be hanged?” exclaimed Cindue in dismay. “Vallume! That would be terrible!”

26 See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*.

“Ahh, there you are,” said Logan, peering down at them from a small ridge beside the river. “I have bread, cheese and fruit and a chicken for later.”

He half scrambled and half slithered down the ridge to join them then started pulling food from inside his tunic. Still naked, Cindue, Loti and Hadzie fell on the bread and cheese and only started on the fruit when the rest was entirely gone. All three were now fairly clean and their clothes were wet and drying over bushes. All three also had leaves tied around their wrists and ankles and doubtless Autumn had put some healing herbs over their sores. Hadzie and Loti also had sores on their buttocks which Autumn had attended to. All three had fresh bruises, mainly on their upper arms, backs and legs.

“Hadzie is from Bedegd,” said Autumn, “which is some way east of here, near the Ghabat Kathifa. Loti is from Isdurkn which is also to the east. We have discussed it and both intend to return to their homes after they have eaten.”

“Is it safe?” asked Logan.

“Like as not,” said Autumn. “They will travel together to the Gadse River where Loti has a brother and he will aid them from there.”

“As they wish,” said Logan. “How is it they come to be here and in chains?”

“I was returning alone from the market,” said Loti, looking up from chewing a large apple. “A man with a cart stopped and asked me for directions to Isdurkn. When I was pointing out the way he hit me over the head. I woke to find myself bound and gagged in the back of his cart and I was brought here and chained and I thought I would die.”

“With me 'twas different,” said Hadzie, chewing her way through the remains of the bread. “I had a big fight with my man and stormed out of our hut to sleep in the fields. A passing man asked if I needed aid and when I said nay he hit me and we struggled but he was too strong. Like Loti I found myself bound and gagged and brought here.”

“And what of you, Cindue?” asked Autumn. “You disappeared from our camp and we knew not where you had gone.”

“I got up in the night to piss,” said Cindue. “In the light of Plakill I spotted a bush with ripe berries so I came back to get my bowl to collect them for our breakfast and something came upon me and bore me away. I fought back and lost a fingernail but it was too strong and hit me several times until I lost consciousness. What is most strange is that when I came to I was in a cart driven by that man who came in just before you did the first time, Logan. My bowl, the one you gave me, I have not seen since which makes me sad.”

“You mean Dar Nidri?” asked Logan, startled. “You saw him?”

“Aye,” said Cindue. “And you. I called out to you but you did not hear me nor did you see me. I was bereft and much dismayed but then you came back with Autumn. I was greatly relieved to see you both!”

“Let me be clear on this,” said Autumn, leaning forward. “You could see me, Logan and Dar Nidri but we could not see you?”

“You and Logan could not but that other man could,” said Cindue. “He came every day to give us water but he would not give us food nor talk to us. If we spoke or did anything he did not like he would beat us.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “And is this man the same one that imprisoned you the first time?”

“No, 'twas not Mikn Chap,” said Cindue. “'Twas another man.”

“His name is Dar Nidri,” said Autumn. “He is a companion of Mikn Chap. I do not know if one works for the other or if they both work together but it is clear that they both are involved in this taug cohm and take people to be sold as slaves. What puzzles me is how they knew where Cindue was.”

“I fancy they didn't,” said Logan. “'Twould seem to me that either Mikn Chap used to capture people and passed that task over to Dar Nidri or they take turns but likely Dar Nidri did not know Cindue

when he spotted her. He just took her because she was alone.”

“No, it was Tioksen who took me first,” said Cindue. “He gave me to Mikn Chap.”

“Ahh, yes, Tioksen,” said Autumn. “How does he come into all this and where is he now? I also wonder how it is that you put up a fight when you were taken but we did not hear a thing.”

“’Twas the same with me,” said Hadzie. “I was not far from our dwelling when I was taken and I fought and screamed but my man did not come to my aid. I cannot believe he did not hear but I cannot believe he refused to aid me either. It has been much on my mind.”

“What I don't understand is how I came to hear Cindue in that hut,” said Logan. “If the inside was indeed another place and hidden by magic I should not have even heard her.”

“So you did hear me then, Logan?” said Cindue, scowling. “Why did you not aid me right away?”

“I thought I was imagining it,” said Logan. “’Twas only faint and I thought it was the wind or something. For certain I did not recognise your voice.”

“I think I may be able to explain it,” said Autumn. “You had your hair tied back with your cloth, did you not, Logan?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “But it was not over my eyes else I would have seen Cindue.”

“But was it over your ears?” asked Autumn.

“I don't think so,” said Logan, reaching up to touch the cloth tying his hair. “I think it was much as it is now.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn, frowning. “I had thought that mayhap it was over your ears which is why you heard Cindue but you say not.”

“Actually, you may have a point,” said Logan thoughtfully. “As I said,

Cindue's voice was faint and distant. It could be that one end of the cloth was touching my ear but not covering it. That may explain why I heard only a faint cry rather than a shout."

"Tis a definite possibility," said Autumn. "I fancy the only way we can test it however is to go back to the hut which, I think, is not a good idea."

"And having your hair like that suits you, Logan," said Cindue, reaching over to touch his arm. "Tis very manly."

"Thank you," said Logan, a little embarrassed.

"I do not follow all this talk of magic and these men and stuff," said Hadzie. "What is going on?"

"Tis not clear to me either," said Autumn, "but it seems that Dar Nidri, the man who captured you is in league with Mikn Chap and someone called Tioksen to sell you into slavery. What is apparent is that they keep those they have captured for a time in great misery to break your spirits, doubtless to make you more easily controlled once you are sold. The magic would appear to be a means by which no one can find you."

"And yet you did," said Loti, her voice much stronger now she had a belly full of food.

"Aye," said Autumn, "but only because we have a friend who is much skilled in magic herself."

"You know," said Logan hesitantly. "I have had a thought."

"That does not surprise me," said Autumn. "You are a thinker. Tell us your thought."

"Cindue was taken when we were nearby," said Logan. "Hadzie was likewise taken with another nearby and yet no one heard anything. Could it be that somehow the same magic that hid the inside of the hut also hid the fighting? Mayhap like a bag or something that was cast over Cindue and Hadzie so no one outside the bag heard

anything?"

"An intriguing thought," said Autumn. "For certain it fits what little facts we know and, moreover, makes sense. Magic is involved and given that magic it would make sense to use it also to do the capturing. If Dar Nidri or Mikn Chap do their capturing while alone they would doubtless not like anyone coming to the aid of their victims."

"But that then begs a question," said Logan. "If it was indeed Mikn Chap or Dar Nidri who fired that arrow at you why is it that I heard it? Would it not have made sense to use their magic to envelop you before firing the arrow?"

"A good question," said Autumn, nodding, "although I fancy the difference lies in the intent, if it was indeed one or other of them. There is a difference between taking someone who will likely put up a struggle and scream and shout and a simple killing. I see no particular need to use magic to hide the firing of the arrow at me. All that was needed was a little stealth to get close then fire the arrow and run."

"Ah well," said Logan. "'Twas just a thought."

Chapter Twenty Five

“Tell me,” said Autumn. “Who is in charge in Esu'taw?”

“What do you mean?” asked Hadzie.

“I am a stranger to Us-Iota,” said Autumn, “so I know not how your towns and villages run but there is likely someone who upholds the law and deals with complaints and what have you.”

“Ahh, you mean the Monahi,” said Hadzie, nodding. “There is one in every town but I know not who it is here.” She glanced at Loti. “Do you?”

“No,” said Loti, shaking her head. “I am from Isdurkn in Ahi'aktes. Such things there are dealt with by the headman.”

“So you are going to see the Monahi about Mikn Chap and Dar Nidri?” asked Logan.

“If needs be,” said Autumn with a sigh. “Tis my intent to confront them with Cindue, Hadzie and Loti and give them an opportunity to change their ways. If they choose not to then I see no other option than to take this matter to the authorities.”

“Twould be easier to just kill the bastards,” exclaimed Cindue. “That'll put a stop to it.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, “mayhap not, but killing is not my way and rarely solves anything.”

“I would prefer to just go home,” said Hadzie, worriedly. “If that sits well with you, of course.”

“As do I,” said Loti. “This is not my place and likely I will be arrested when they find I am from Ahi'aktes. There is no love lost between the two mintikas.”

“That is your choice,” said Autumn, “and I will not try to persuade either of you otherwise. Will you at least grant me leave to use your

names should the need arise?”

“Gladly,” said Hadzie and Loti nodded. They looked at each other and it was clear some sort of unspoken agreement passed between them.

“And with that,” said Loti firmly, “’tis best we leave now and start making our way. I thank you Autumn. I thank you Logan. You have done us the greatest kindness and if you are ever in Isdurkn you will find the warmest of welcomes.” She stood up and started pulling on the remains of her clothes.

“And I also thank you both from the depths of my heart,” said Hadzie, also standing up. “My home is your home whenever you find yourself in Bedegd.”

“I wish you both the best of fortunes on your journeys,” said Autumn, rising to her feet. “May Izmosic guide your way and keep you safe.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “Fare well.”

They watched as Hadzie and Loti waded across the river and disappeared into the woods with a final wave.

“I can understand their desire to return to their homes,” said Autumn. “And you, Cindue? Do you desire to return to your home now or will you come with us to speak with Mikn Chap?”

“I will come with you,” said Cindue. “I would see that bastard get what is coming to him.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “Let us go now or would you prefer to let your clothes dry fully?”

“Get it over with, I say,” said Cindue. “I grant ’tis a bit chilly as these clothes are still damp but it will pass.”

“Then take my robe for now,” said Autumn, slipping it off. “’Twill keep you warm until you are fully dry.”

“Umm ...,” started Logan, perturbed.

“No, Logan,” said Autumn, holding up her hand. “I have spoken with Mikn Chap twice now. He is a talker and will be no threat. Would you have Cindue suffer needlessly?”

“Well, I suppose not,” said Logan reluctantly, “but what if you threaten to go to this Monahi? He may turn nasty then.”

“I wager he will be more inclined to make promises he will not intend to keep,” said Autumn, shrugging. “Sadly there is nothing I can do about that but mayhap he may feel honour bound to keep those promises. Come, let us go. We can only do what we can and the rest is in the hands of the deities.”

* * *

“You again?” sniffed Witibea when Autumn knocked on her door. “Mayhap you would like to rent a room here?”

“Why would I want to do that?” asked Autumn, mystified. “We are travellers.”

“You don't seem to be doing much in the way of travelling,” said Witibea. “I suppose you be wanting to see Mikn again, then?”

“If I may,” said Autumn. “Although I fancy this will be the last time.”

“Let us hope so,” said Witibea. “Him I've seen before but her? She with you?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Cindue is a friend of ours.”

“Hmm,” said Witibea, frowning. “Best you be coming in then. Mikn's in the back room.”

She left the door open and marched along the corridor.

“That woman be back again,” she announced through a doorway.

“What woman?” asked Mikn Chap, looking up from the table where he sat.

“The one that was here earlier and yesterday,” said Witibea as Autumn, Logan and Cindue waited behind her.

“Oh, not again,” exclaimed Mikn Chap. “This is fast becoming a joke. Where is she now?”

“Right behind me,” said Witibea. She stepped out of the way and Autumn took her place in the doorway.

“Greetings,” said Autumn.

“And what accusations do you bring me now?” asked Mikn Chap. “I confess I have no idea what I have done to you that makes you plague me so.”

“Tis the same as before,” said Autumn, going inside the room. Logan and Cindue followed. It was apparent that Mikn Chap recognised Cindue but covered it well.

“The lad I have met before,” he said, not standing up, “but the girl?”

“This is Cindue,” said Autumn. “The one you sold into slavery.”

“Indeed?” asked Mikn Chap, raising his eyebrows. “I confess I have never seen her before. Tell me, if I sold her into slavery how is it she is here with you now? Have you bought her?”

“She escaped,” said Autumn, “and was recaptured and imprisoned by your associate Dar Nidri. We have just come from that place of imprisonment.”

“Is that so?” asked Mikn Chap. He scowled then called for Witibea.

“Witibea, my sweet,” he said when she appeared a moment later. “Ask Dar to come here, would you petal.”

Witibea nodded and left without a glance at Autumn.

“I would offer you refreshments,” said Mikn Chap as they waited, “but I fancy you will not be here long.”

Cindue stared at him and he returned her gaze calmly and with a lot less hostility.

“You wanted me?” asked Dar Nidri, appearing in the doorway. He carried what looked like a walking stick but made no attempt to lean on it.

“Do you know this girl?” asked Mikn Chap, gesturing at Cindue.

She turned to look at Dar Nidri and he jerked back slightly in surprise.

“What is she doing here?” he demanded.

“That is what I would like to know,” said Mikn Chap.

“We found her in that derelict building on the edge of town by the river,” said Autumn. “Cindue was chained to a post along with two others.”

“Impossible,” said Dar Nidri. “I know that building and it is completely empty.”

“Logan saw you go inside the building and come out a few moments later,” said Autumn patiently. “When we went inside we found the three girls and six posts and chains. Doubtless ready for others.”

“You are very much mistaken,” said Dar Nidri. “That building is empty and falling down.”

“I know that building as well,” said Mikn Chap. “It is indeed empty. Why do you bring such clearly false charges against us?”

“I accept it seems empty,” said Autumn, “but you and I both know it is not.” She paused for a moment. “Come, let us end this pretence. You, Mikn Chap, and you, Dar Nidri, are both involved in taking people to this building where you hold them for a time, chained to a

post and without food until you deem them ready then you sell them under the guise of this taug cohnm business to be what is in effect unpaid labourers at the mercy of those who purchase a debt from you. Given what I have heard of this practice, I am of the opinion that the debt itself is not real. I confess I do not know but I suspect that it is simply additional gain for you both.”

Mikn Chap leaned back in his chair and gazed at her.

“Tis you who are the one pretending,” he said. “You make up this entire story and then lay the blame on me. What are you after? Money?”

“All I want,” said Autumn, “is your word that you will end this practice. Now.”

“I cannot give my word to end something I am not doing,” said Mikn Chap with a pleasant smile on his face. “How about you, Dar?”

“I am with you on this, Mikn,” said Dar, still standing in the doorway. “I cannot give my word either as I am not doing what I am accused of doing.”

“So you see, um, Autumn,” said Mikn Chap, spreading his hands. “There is little we can do to aid you in this.”

“I confess I expected as much,” said Autumn. “I will ask you once again, however, to end this peacefully.”

“Or what?” asked Mikn Chap. “Are you going to threaten me? I know something of your skills for Dar saw you best those men in the square yesterday but I assure you that your threats of violence will not persuade me to end something I am not doing. Not even the deities themselves can do that.”

“Then you leave me no alternative,” said Autumn. “I shall go to the Monahi of Esu'taw and lay all I know before him as will Cindue.”

“That is your choice,” said Mikn Chap, his smile broadening to a cheerful grin. “I would like to point out three things, however, that

will go against you. With your permission, of course.”

“What three things?” asked Autumn.

“Firstly, you are a known troublemaker,” said Mikn Chap. “Resnan will attest that you started a fight with him and his two companions yesterday and caused him grievous injury through the loss of his finger and thumb and likely his ability to farm his land.”

“That is not correct,” said Autumn. “One of the three falsely accused Logan of theft and they started the fight. I merely came to Logan’s aid.”

“And doubtless Resnan will confess the truth of that,” laughed Mikn Chap. “Be that as it may, I fancy that any who go to this building to verify your claim it is filled with chains and posts and what have you will find it an empty derelict building for it is an empty derelict building. No one will be able to see what you say you have seen for there is nothing there to see.”

“We shall cross that bridge when we come to it,” said Autumn. “There are ways of showing things that are not immediately apparent. And the third?”

“Ah, yes, the third point,” said Mikn Chap. “Yes, this is likely the most important thing you have overlooked and will make it impossible for you to press your case. You see, my dear Autumn, I am the Monahi of Esu’taw and I have heard all your evidence against me and find it lacking. Case dismissed. What have you to say to that?”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, taken aback. “I was not aware of that.”

“I rather thought that was the case,” said Mikn Chap. He got to his feet and scowled at her. “Get out of my house now, you filthy blackmailer, or I will have you arrested and executed! Begone!”

With a smile on his face, Dar Nidri stepped a little to the side so they could leave.

“I admit this does change things somewhat,” said Autumn, frowning.

“Come, Logan, Cindue. This needs no little rethinking.”

“What?” exclaimed Cindue loudly. “You mean you're going to let these noften shits get away with it?”

“I confess I see no other alternative for the moment,” admitted Autumn.

“Ragghhhh!” screamed Cindue, snatching Logan's knife from his waistband and pushing him into Autumn. She hurled herself at Mikn Chap who cowered backwards in shock. Pushed off balance by Logan, Autumn spun and tried to grab Cindue but missed by a hair's breadth. Dar Nidri, slower to react but expecting trouble, quickly raised his stick to his lips and blew hard. Autumn used her momentum to spin again and was able to grab Cindue before she plunged the knife into Mikn Chap's chest. They both fell to the floor as Logan sprang back, readying his staff.

“No!” exclaimed Autumn, pinning Cindue to the floor. “This is not the way!”

“Urghhhh,” gasped Mikn Chap, clutching his chest.

“I'm going to kill that foul excrement!” screamed Cindue, writhing and struggling. The knife came perilously close to slashing Autumn's face.

“Yxcn!” exclaimed Dar Nidri, rushing forward as Mikn Chap collapsed on the table, causing its legs to give way. He wrenched Mikn Chap over and stared at him in dismay.

“Stop this!” exclaimed Logan, also jumping on Cindue. He held her legs tightly as Autumn managed to wrest the knife from Cindue's hand. Cindue tried to head-butt Autumn and Autumn jerked her head back instantly, hitting Logan hard on the side of his head.

“Owww!” he exclaimed and let go of Cindue's legs. Instantly Cindue kned Autumn in her back but Autumn did not let go of her.

“Stop this!” exclaimed Autumn. “Now!”

She was aware that Dar Nidri suddenly rushed past her but sensed no immediate threat. Logan leapt up, rubbing the side of his head, and gave chase but managed to catch both sides of the doorway with his staff and was thrown back inside the room.

“Oh Vogev!” he exclaimed and lay still for a few moments, collecting his breath and his wits.

“Cindue!” said Autumn sternly. “I shall not release you until you promise to calm down.”

Knowing she was bested Cindue merely spat in Autumn's face then grimaced.

“Very well,” she said, her face showing she had no intention of calming down in the immediate future.

“Good,” said Autumn and released her arms. Cindue stayed put so Autumn slowly got off her. “Are you able to get up?”

“Yes,” said Cindue grumpily. She got to her feet then snatched at the knife in Autumn's hand. Autumn jerked it out of reach and held up her other hand in warning.

“Do not do that again,” she said, staring at Cindue.

“What's going on in here?” demanded Witibea, peering in and breaking Cindue's return stare.

“I think there was something of a disagreement,” said Logan cheerfully, getting to his feet.

“What has happened to Mikn?” asked Witibea. She moved between Logan, Autumn and Cindue to stoop over Mikn. “Ah.”

“What is it?” asked Autumn, realising Mikn was not moving.

“He is dead,” said Witibea tonelessly.

“What?” exclaimed Autumn. “How is that possible? Cindue did not ...

ah.”

“What is it?” asked Logan going over as Cindue joined them. “Where did that come from?”

He pointed to an arrow protruding from Mikn Chap's chest.

“It must have come from Dar Nidri,” said Autumn. “None of us have any arrows. Witibea, I apologise most abjectly for the death of your almost. 'Twas not intended but that will doubtless not provide you with any comfort.”

“Pah!” exclaimed Cindue, pushing Mikn Chap's leg with her foot. “Not intended? I regret only that this was not done by my hand.”

“Cindue, please,” said Autumn, putting her hand on Cindue's arm. “Do not add to Witibea's grief. She is, well was, his almost.”

“My apologies,” said Cindue, her anger abating. “I offer you my sympathy, Witibea.”

“There is no need to apologise,” said Witibea. “You have done me a service. Now I am free at last.”

“What?” exclaimed Logan.

“Aye, that needs some explaining,” said Autumn, staring at Witibea.

“Are you the one who bested those men in the square yesterday?” asked Witibea. “Dar said you were.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “What of it?”

“Mikn was the Monahi here,” said Witibea. “His death will need some explaining. Are you staying or leaving?”

“We will be leaving as soon as possible,” said Autumn. “How can we aid you?”

“Then I can report that a stranger came to Esu'taw,” said Witibea,

thinking through what she could say in her account. "There will be witnesses to what happened in the square and I can say that Mikn arrested that person and was killed by her under questioning. Good. That is simple and easy to believe, especially as the witnesses will attest that this stranger bested several before arrest. This is most excellent good fortune! Leave everything as it is and untouched. I will call for aid and they will say Mikn is dead and the room left in array and the table smashed."

"Witibea, explain yourself," demanded Autumn. "Why are you not upset? Your man lies dead before you at the hand of a friend."

"Dar was no friend," snapped Witibea, "and in truth I hated Mikn. He was a foul man and I spit on his corpse!"

"Then why are you his almost?" asked Logan.

"You know of his business?" asked Witibea.

"Aye," said Autumn. "He was engaged in selling people."

"Indeed," said Witibea. "And I was one of them. I was taken by him and Dar and treated most harshly then before I was to be sold that scum," and she kicked Mikn's body between his legs, "offered me my freedom if I became his era'owen. I was not his almost even though he told people I was for an almost is not bound the way an era'owen is. 'Twas three summers of foulness but likely some way better than it would otherwise have been. Now it is over. I thank you, Eashiq, for you have done me a great kindness by releasing me from that bond."

"I know not what to say," said Autumn, "although it is pleasing that some good has come of this."

"Aye," said Witibea, smiling for the first time. "And I get this house and all his money! 'Tis a most beautiful day and I apologise for being rude to you. I did not know you were to be my benefactor."

"Ahh, 'twas not me," said Autumn, stooping to pull the arrow from Mikn Chap's chest. "That is interesting. His clothing meant the arrow barely scratched his chest. I do not see how it could have killed him."

“The tip is poisoned,” said Witibea. “Dar told me to be most careful should I ever have need to touch one of these arrows.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, dropping the arrow on the floor. “And do you know the manner in which he shot it? I saw no bow.”

“He carries a hollow stick,” said Witibea as Logan left the room. “He would put an arrow inside the stick then point it where it was to go then blow through it. He preferred it to a bow as it appeared to be just a stick.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn, squatting down to look closely at the arrow. “So it was Dar Nidri who tried to kill me last night.”

“You did not tell me of this!” exclaimed Cindue.

“We have had little opportunity,” said Autumn, “and, as he did not succeed, it was of little importance. Where is Logan? I wager 'tis best we leave now and let Witibea gather her witnesses and make her report.”

“I think he went outside,” said Cindue.

“Which way do you intend to go?” asked Witibea.

“North,” said Autumn.

“Then I shall say the woman who did this was seen going south,” said Witibea, “and I shall describe her as a large woman with fair hair and unpleasant countenance and in the company of at least five others although no search will be made. It will take at least ten days for my account to reach Sid and I doubt any action will be taken beyond the sending of that description to the other Monahis. Can I aid you in any other way? Food, money, clothing?”

“I thank you, no,” said Autumn as Cindue coughed. “Ahh, perhaps you have some clothing for Cindue? Sadly her treatment has left her clothing in need of repair.”

“Aye, doubtless I will have something that will fit,” said Witibea.

“Come with me child.”

Cindue slipped Autumn's robe off and handed it to her before following Witibea from the room. Autumn took the robe and gazed thoughtfully at it for a few moments then squatted to study the arrow on the floor. Aside from its great similarity to the one she had in her pack it was otherwise unremarkable. She tore a strip off Mikn Chap's trouser leg and wrapped both arrows in it before putting the bundle in her pack.

“Autumn!” exclaimed Logan, bursting into the room. “Come and look at this! Where's Cindue?”

“Getting some more clothing,” said Autumn, rising to her feet. “What do you want to show me?”

“Dar Nidri ran away after he saw Mikn Chap was dead,” said Logan, hurrying back outside again. “I tried to chase after him but tripped. I venture he ran across the garden but look at these tracks in the mud.” He pointed to four footprints that clearly had only three toes.

Chapter Twenty Six

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Logan as he lay nestled between the exposed roots of a large tree. He sighed a little and his leg twitched momentarily as a beetle of no great size but of lustrous shiny colouring crawled over his toes. The beetle however experienced a severe quake and landed on its back a short distance away, dazed and confused. It lay there for several moments gathering its thoughts then started moving its legs in circles searching for something, a blade of grass perhaps or the edge of a pebble, to grip onto. Finding nothing its legs moved to wider circles then wider still until, at last, one of its hind legs touched an obstacle. Unaware that it had encountered the tip of Logan's staff, and unappreciative of any significance in that anyway, the beetle paused in its movements then moved just that one leg, testing the obstacle for strength and stability. Deeming it sufficient the beetle felt around delicately until it found a gripping point then pulled, levering its rigid body until a second leg could find purchase. With two legs thus engaged it was but a matter of moments for the beetle to pull itself upright on its hard back end then topple forward so all its four other legs were on the reassuring ground again. There the beetle rested, four legs on the ground and two on the staff, its body at a fairly sharp angle. Then, doubtless with relief for beetles do not take kindly to being trapped on their backs, the beetle marched forward, bringing its two back legs down to the ground. A battle of life and death for the beetle yet unnoticed by Logan.

Something brought Logan's sleep filled awareness to the edge and his eyes opened. Above him a broad swathe of green swam then resolved into a canopy of leaves, interspersed with small patches of blue. A grey parrot of some kind with red flashes on its wings and a yellow chest was perched on a branch some way above him and stared down in fascination.

"Humph," thought Logan, gazing at the bird.

He scratched an itch on the side of his head then lifted it a little to look around. All seemed quiet. Too quiet in fact as there was no sign of Autumn or Cindue. His head dropped back and he wiped his face with both hands. Then, with a little groan he tried to sit up. The

effort was too much for such a short time after awakening so he collapsed back on the ground again and took a deep breath. Gritting his teeth he tried again and managed to get his torso sufficiently upright so it naturally leant forward. A small creature, larger than a mouse but smaller than a rat and covered with short spines rather than fur, which had been investigating Cindue's discarded blanket, squeaked in alarm and hurried off into the undergrowth. Cindue, however, was not there. Nor was Autumn who had been a little further around the tree, beyond where Cindue had lain.

“Oh,” thought Logan, unusually alert for this time of day.

He closed his eyes, yawned and scratched the back of his head then opened his eyes again. There was Autumn! Sitting on a small sandy patch of ground beside the river with her back to him. Her knees stuck out either side so doubtless she was in the depths of her meditating so Logan did not call out a greeting for he never disturbed her during this time. Cindue's absence was a little puzzling but doubtless she was off doing something and would be back soon. Relieved, Logan sank back onto his elbows and gazed at Autumn. He found it relaxing.

Without warning there was a sudden whoosh and a long black arrow embedded itself in Autumn's thigh. With a half scream and an explosive lurch she hurled herself upwards and backwards and tried to land on her feet but her injured leg gave way and she crashed to the ground. Logan gasped in horror and tried to thrust himself upright but he seemed stuck to the ground.

“Autumn!” he shouted, one arm reaching out as though to grasp her and pull her to safety.

It was fruitless however. As Autumn rolled to her side and tried to scramble away from the exposed patch another arrow slashed in from somewhere among the trees and embedded itself in her back.

“Logan!” screamed Autumn, even as her back arched in agony, “Logan! Run!” One arm stretched out towards him, her fingers splayed and rigid.

“Noooooo!” screamed Logan, trying desperately to get to his feet.

Another arrow slashed in, ripping through Autumn's outstretched upper arm and pinning it to the ground. Then another, this time from the other side, embedded itself in her other leg. Then three more, all from different directions, One pierced her leg and the other two her back. In desperation Autumn forced her body to roll onto her side, ripping the arrow through her arm from the ground. but to no avail. Five or six more arrows ripped through the air and plunged deep into her belly and chest.

“Logann!” screamed Autumn, blood frothing at her mouth.

“Autumnn, nooooo!” screamed Logan, managing at last to get up. He half tripped on a root and scrambled over to Autumn on his hands and knees and gathered her in his arms, heedless of the dozen or so black arrows that protruded grotesquely from her body.

“I have found my place,” whispered Autumn, blood trickling obscenely from her mouth and nose and onto his tunic. “Come with me, Logan, come with me. 'Tis a better place than this.”

“Oh Autumn, Autumn, no,” blurted Logan, tears trickling from his eyes as Autumn took one final breath, her eyes locked on his. Then slowly the air escaped from her lungs and her body went limp in his arms.

“What ails you, Logan?” asked Cindue, pushing his shoulder. “Everything is all right. Do not worry.”

Slowly Logan looked up at Cindue.

“She is dead,” he whispered. “She is gone.”

“Who is gone?” asked Cindue, puzzled.

“Autumn,” said Logan, looking down at Autumn's blood smeared face. He wiped her face as best he could with his sleeve but there was too much blood. It was everywhere.

"I am not gone," said Autumn. "I am right here."

"Do you not see?" demanded Logan, too bereft to be angry. He looked up at Cindue but she had Autumn's face. And, strangely, she was wearing Autumn's robe.

"See what, Logan?" asked Autumn. She looked at him anxiously.

"'Tis you!" exclaimed Logan, letting go of the body. "Oh Autumn!"

"I fancy 'twas only a bad dream," said Autumn, stroking Logan's cheek. "Are you awake now?"

"But you were killed!" exclaimed Logan, pointing to Autumn's body on the ground. It wasn't there. Just his blanket, all scrunched up and covered in dead leaves and small twigs.

"No one has been killed," said Autumn. "Or not here at least. Doubtless many have died during the night all over this land, but not here."

"Oh Autumn, it was the most foul dream!" exclaimed Logan. "I was watching you at your thinking then a score or more of horrid black arrows hit you. Your robe did not protect you! You were covered in blood and died most horribly!"

"I fancy death by a score of arrows would not be a pleasant way to die," said Autumn, sitting back on her heels. "But as you see I am alive and well and there have been no arrows. 'Twas only a dream, Logan. Have some water."

She proffered the water skin and Logan took a deep drink.

"Aye, it must have been a dream," he said, handing the water skin back. "But it seemed so real."

"Eat this," said Autumn, handing him some of the bread Witibea had given them. "'Tis interesting that you dreamed of black arrows. Were they short and without feathers?"

“No, they were long and had black feathers,” said Logan. He shuddered. “’Tis my worst fear, I confess. I know your robe protects you from being killed but it will be no protection from a multitude of arrows or spears or whatever where each alone would not kill you but all together they would.”

“Aye, there is that,” said Autumn watching him. She had never seen such a look of horror on his face before and was both perturbed and intrigued by it. “Much like when Chanwar Two stabbed me in the side.²⁷ As we know the robe does not protect me from injury and mayhap such injuries could prove fatal. ’Tis interesting however that you dreamt of black arrows. Mayhap the arrows fired by Dar Nidri are the cause of this dream.”

“Aye, likely so,” said Logan. “Where is Cindue?”

“She is downstream,” said Autumn. “She said she still feels dirty and wished to thoroughly cleanse herself.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “So she is safe as well?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I hear the occasional splashing. ’Tis good she is away for there are some things I would like to talk with you about in her absence.”

“Oh yes?” said Logan, reaching for some more bread. Now he knew Autumn was alive and well and it had only been a dream his appetite was returning..

“One is my robe,” said Autumn. “Did you see what happened yesterday when Cindue attacked Mikn Chap?”

“Not really,” said Logan. “She shouted something then pushed me into you and jumped on him. I was too busy trying not to hurt you and get up without worrying about what Cindue was doing.”

“Understandable,” said Autumn. “I tried to grab her but missed.

27 See *The Annals – The Seventh Tale*. Autumn was ambushed by bandits led by Chanwar Two in Wase and, after besting them Chanwar Two managed to stab Autumn before being herself bested. As the injury was not of itself life threatening Autumn’s robe had not protected her.

However, I did see Dar Nidri put that stick to his lips and blow something at Cindue and moments later Mikn Chap was dead.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, looking at Autumn quizzically. “And she was wearing your robe, was she not?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I did not see the arrow pass through her but it likely did for she was between him and Mikn Chap and he was aiming at her.”

“So 'twould seem that your robe protects whoever is wearing it and not just you,” said Logan thoughtfully. “Have you asked Cindue if she felt anything pass through her?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I thought it best not to.”

“Aye,” said Logan, nodding his head. “Even though I am sure Cindue would not run off with it, 'tis best that word of its powers does not spread else hordes will try to take it from you and mayhap kill you in the process. Sploop! Doubtless many would pay a fortune and more for such a thing.”

“And doubtless some would use it to kill others while remaining themselves protected,” said Autumn. “'Tis not something I would willingly let others use without good explanation of their need.”

“Most definitely,” said Logan. “Your robe protects you and that is the end of the matter.”

“Well, perhaps not the end,” said Autumn. “It has protected me many times and now 'twould appear to have protected Cindue so likely it will protect you also.”

“Absolutely not!” exclaimed Logan, thrusting his hand up as though to push Autumn away. “In any situation where I am likely to need a robe such as this you will be with me and I will not permit you to take off your robe and give it to me. Such a thing is not even worth thinking of!”

“I understand what you say, Logan,” said Autumn, “but you will

doubtless agree that in such a situation I am better able to protect myself than you are.”

“That I would not dispute even for a moment,” said Logan, “but equally you are able to give me more protection than that robe ever could. Besides, you are forgetting something very important.”

“Which is?” asked Autumn.

“Mother Midcarn gave the ribbon to you,”²⁸ he said, “for you to sew to your robe. She did not give it to me. It follows that she created the ribbon for you and intended that it protected you. If Mother Midcarn felt I needed any protection she would have done the same for me.”

“A point I admit,” said Autumn, “but it could also be that she gave me the ribbon to protect me when I ran from Lord Loheckle’s tent and she had no thoughts beyond that.”

“Now that is an absurd argument and not worthy of you, Autumn,” said Logan. “All but the biggest of fools would see that by protecting you from Lord Loheckle’s arrows you would be left open to other dangers later. If her intent was only to protect on that one occasion then doubtless the robe would have lost its power shortly afterwards.”

“True enough,” said Autumn, “and that the arrow did not kill Cindue would indicate the robe has lost none of its power.”

“And another thing,” said Logan, quite heatedly as the prospect of Autumn not wearing her robe and being killed alarmed him greatly, “if we are attacked and you try to give me your robe it will only make the attacker’s job easier. He will kill us both while we argue over who wears the robe. No, I will not be swayed in this. You wear the robe and if you ever try to make me wear it I will simply throw it over you for you need its protection. I do not.”

“I confess that is a point I had not considered,” said Autumn, frowning. “Hmm.”

“What else did you want to talk about?” asked Logan, sensing he’d

²⁸ See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*.

won a small victory here.

“Ah, yes,” said Autumn. “Did you hear what Dar Nidri said when he realised he had killed Mikn Chap by mistake?”

“I heard him exclaim something,” said Logan. “It sounded like vixen or some such.”

“Why would he say vixen?” asked Autumn, frowning. “It sounded more like iksing to me. Still, it puzzles me.”

“Who knows why anyone says anything,” said Logan. “Does it matter?”

“Likely not,” said Autumn, “but I had a thought earlier. You know our necklaces translate other languages for us²⁹ but has it ever occurred to you that even with them we know not what horses and dogs and other creatures say?”

“I confess it hadn't,” said Logan, shrugging. “What of it?”

“After each of the small arrows were fired we found three toed footprints,” said Autumn. “Now, that could be simple coincidence but 'tis likely that Dar Nidri fired the arrows on both occasions. So, if we assume the footprints are more than just coincidence then it is possible that the footprints were left by Dar Nidri.”

“But he does not have three toes on his feet,” said Logan, frowning. “He has ordinary feet does he not?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “I have not looked at his feet. But there is another thing. Someone put magic on that building so that Cindue and the others were hidden. What if that someone is Dar Nidri and he also has magic that makes his feet look like ours. After he killed Mikn Chap he left us quickly so mayhap he used his magic to hasten his escape and left footprints with three toes in his wake.”

“An interesting thought,” said Logan, frowning. “I have become so

29 See *The Annals ~ The Fifth Tale*. The necklaces were a gift from Mother Midcarn when Autumn and Logan first ventured out of Aferraron.

used to Mother Midcarn's magic that I did not give the building any thought save for thanks that her cloths enabled us to see beyond."

"As did I," said Autumn, "but these thoughts came to me while I was thinking as you slept."

"So you think Dar Nidri is a sorcerer?" asked Logan.

"I fancy not in any great way," said Autumn. "If he had skills even half those of Mother Midcarn he could have banished us with but a click of his fingers. The fact that he ran away and likely felt the need to change his form to do so suggests that his skills are not great."

"But even changing his form is a measure of some skill," said Logan. "And why three toes?"

"And this is where my thinking took me," said Autumn, looking around to see if Cindue was returning. "There would seem to be little need for one such as us to change the shape of our feet to run away. We are used to running with the feet we have and I do not see how three toes would be any better than five toes."

"So why change his form?" asked Logan, puzzled, "if indeed he did."

"And that is a big if indeed," said Autumn. "There is nothing but the footprints to say he did and, as I said, it could simply be coincidence. But what if he did? Why would three toed feet be better than the five toed feet he uses normally?"

"I cannot see ..." started Logan then he stopped. "Oh Sploop! What if it is the other way around?"

"Indeed," said Autumn. "What if it is the three toes that he is used to and not the five toes?"

"That would make sense," said Logan. "He is used to three toes so when he had to get away quickly he went back to three toes."

"That was my thinking," said Autumn. "And something else follows from that."

“What the rest of him is like?” asked Logan.

Autumn nodded and Logan whistled in thought.

“So you think Dar Nidri is not human?” he asked.

“Tis a possibility, nothing more,” said Autumn. “There is very little evidence to say that and much to say he is human.”

“I sense a but there,” said Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Which is why I want to know what he said just before he left.”

“And there you lose me,” said Logan. “What does it matter what he said? It could just as easily have been Voqev or whatever word he uses when he makes a big mistake.”

“True enough,” said Autumn, “but iksing does not sound like Voqev.”

“I am missing something here,” said Logan, his face creasing as he strove to understand.

“Our necklaces do not translate other creatures utterances,” said Autumn. “If he had said something in Selti doubtless we would have understood it as we do when anyone speaks to us in this land but I did not understand what he said.”

“I thought he said vixen,” said Logan.

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and you likely have the right of it. Likely too he was simply referring to Cindue. But let us speak of it no more for Cindue is returning and I do not wish to trouble her with my thoughts.”

“Oh Sploop!” exclaimed Logan, suddenly realising what Autumn was getting at. “You think Dar Nidri is not human? You think he is some creature from another land?”

“Hush now,” said Autumn quietly. “Say nothing to Cindue. She has

troubles enough.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

“Ahh, is that not a most beautiful sight!” exclaimed Autumn as she breasted the top of the hill.

She gazed down into the valley below then around at the lush green hills with craggy mountain peaks beyond and the clear blue of the sky above. Astauand's benevolence made the air warm and clear and the stream at the bottom of the hill sparkled. Scattered throughout the as yet still only knee high grasses were patches of brilliant whites, blues and pinks as petalled flowers sought their share of the life giving light. A gentle breeze kept the grasses swaying and bees and butterflies busied themselves amongst the flowers. Down in the valley, fields spread out along the sides of the stream and up the lower reaches of the hills on either side. Further up where the hills were steeper, cattle, sheep and goats roamed.

“Aye,” said Logan, puffing a little as he came to stand beside her. “Tis very pleasant. I venture that village below would be a nice place to live.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” said Autumn, turning to look for Cindue. She had stopped for a few moments rest during the uphill climb. She'd followed in Logan's footsteps so there were only two trails through the grasses not three.

“What did you say?” puffed Cindue, reaching the top of the hill.

“Autumn said this is a beautiful place,” said Logan, gazing around, “and I agreed with her.”

“Oh,” said Cindue. She bent to put her hands on her knees as she caught her breath. “Pouf, that was a long climb.”

“Do you recognise that village?” asked Autumn.

Cindue stood up straight and studied the village nestled at the bottom of the hill.

“No,” she said. “It does not bring back any memories.”

“No matter,” said Autumn. “’Tis getting late in the day. What say you both that we camp here for the night and visit the village in the morning? Doubtless someone there will be able to give us directions to Esu'taw and we will be fresh to climb the hills and mountains beyond. I venture we are near the end of the foothills and the mountains will soon begin.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “That next hill is some way higher than this one. What is the name of these mountains?”

“I do not recall,” said Autumn. “Someone did tell me but it has gone from my mind. There is a flattish hollow over there. ’Twould seem a goodly place to camp.”

“’Tis the Majmueat Kabira range,” said Cindue. “Do you think it will rain in the night?”

“Likely not,” said Autumn. “There are no clouds. How do you know the name of these mountains? Is your memory returning?”

“I do not know,” said Cindue with a shrug. “The name just came into my mind when you asked.”

“Then mayhap it is,” said Autumn.

They wandered over to the hollow and settled themselves. There was no need for a fire as the night promised to be comfortably cool rather than cold which was fortunate as there was no wood with which to make one. Nor did they have any food that needed cooking. Their stock, some bread, quite hard and dry but palatable, two or three small boiled roots and some early berries, was small but would be sufficient. Doubtless there would be some food to spare in the village below. ’Twas just a matter of asking.

“What are you doing?” asked Logan as Autumn wandered off to investigate a clump of some strange looking plants.

“Exploring my curiosity,” said Autumn.

“Why does she say things like that?” asked Cindue. “Why can she not

give a straight answer?"

Logan laughed.

"She did give a straight answer," he said. "It's just that her mind points in a different direction to everyone else so it does not always seem straight. For certain she has great curiosity and something has caught it so she is exploring what it is."

"So why not just say she has gone to look at that plant?" asked Cindue, curling her lip.

"Because that is not all she is doing," said Logan. "Yes, she is looking at the plant but she is also looking to see if she can understand why it grows here and not over there, say, and what it will be like when it is full grown and what it was like when it was but a seed and how it relates to the other plants and grasses and the insects and the hill, the air and light and doubtless a multitude of other things. To say 'I am looking at this plant' would not even begin to describe what she is doing."

"And 'exploring my curiosity' does?" asked Cindue.

"To her, yes," said Logan. "I know what she means and if others do not understand, well, that is their problem."

"You like her greatly, do you not?" said Cindue.

"Aye," said Logan, turning his face away from her as even that simple admission brought a certain pinkness to his face.

"More than any other?" asked Cindue quietly.

"Aye," said Logan.

"So you two will stay together for ever, do you think?" asked Cindue. "Or only until you meet another? Or Autumn does?"

Logan did not answer.

“So could another ever reach into your heart, Logan?” asked Cindue, speaking very softly but watching him intently.

Logan sighed.

“No, I think not,” he said, looking squarely at Cindue. “She is most extraordinary and why she puts up with me I do not know but as long as she does I will stay by her side.”

“I see,” said Cindue. Her face became somehow blank as her intensity drained away. “Well, that is clear enough.”

“Why do you ask?” asked Logan.

“Just exploring my curiosity,” said Cindue and shifted slightly away from him. “Nothing more.”

Logan sensed he had missed something of significance but Autumn chose that moment to return.

“Look what I have found,” she said, wagging a short length of stick.

“What is it?” asked Logan, looking up.

“Tis a hollow stick,” said Autumn. “I have been looking for one. What is wrong, Cindue?”

“Nothing is wrong,” said Cindue. “Why do you ask?”

“Your face looks unhappy,” said Autumn.

“Then I apologise for my face,” said Cindue, forcing a smile. “Truly I am as happy as I have ever been.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn.

“Why have you been looking for a stick?” asked Logan. “There are sticks everywhere.”

“But not hollow ones,” said Autumn, squatting down and opening her

pack. She took out the little roll with the two arrows in and laid it on the ground.

"Have a care," said Logan quickly. "Witibea said they are poisoned."

"Aye," said Autumn. "I will be careful."

She put the stick to her eye then broke a piece off the end before looking again. The stick was now somewhere between a hand's length and a foot's length long.

"Seems straight enough," she muttered. "'Tis a bit dirty inside but I wager it will do."

"Do for what?" asked Logan. He glanced at Cindue but she seemed lost in her own thoughts.

"Dar Nidri used a stick to shoot these arrows," said Autumn, pushing her little finger inside the stick to try to clear some of the dirt. "I have never before even heard of such a thing so I want to try for myself."

"Ahh," said Logan.

"That will have to do," said Autumn, holding the stick to her eye again. She carefully picked up one of the arrows by its tuft and inserted it inside the stick. It slid through and fell out the other end, narrowly missing her leg.

"'Twould seem a tighter fit is needed," she remarked before holding the stick level and putting the arrow back inside. She put the stick to her lips and blew gently. Nothing appeared to happen.

"I fancy you should blow harder," said Logan.

"That would make sense," said Autumn, "but I did not want to blow too hard to begin with. This is a learning experience."

"Indeed," said Logan.

Cindue twisted to watch as well, curious despite her inner hurt.

This time Autumn blew quite hard and the arrow slid through the stick and fell out the end.

“Mayhap a sharp blow would be better,” said Logan. “Strong and sudden.”

Aye,” said Autumn absently. She inserted the arrow again and studied how it fitted.

“That would make sense,” she said suddenly.

“What would?” asked Logan.

“I was wondering how someone would make a stick such as this narrower,” said Autumn, tipping the arrow out backwards so she could run her thumb over the tuft. “Then it struck me that there is no need. I wager this tuft of fur is there to make the arrow fit whatever thickness the stick is so my blowing does not simply go around it.”

She snapped off a grass stalk and wrapped it around the tuft of fur then pushed it back inside the tube. It was too thick this time so she unwrapped part of the stalk and broke it off.

“Let me try this,” she said and blew hard.

The arrow shot a full body length from the stick.

“Better,” she said, “much better. Now I begin to understand this weapon.”

She tried again with the other arrow and a much harder blow. This time the arrow went nigh on two body lengths.

“Good,” she said. “And 'tis easier to aim than a bow. 'Tis simply a matter of pointing the stick in front of the eyes. 'Tis quite an impressive device although I fancy few would be able to blow hard enough to seriously injure anyone, unless it caught them in the eye.”

“Which is likely why they are tipped with poison,” said Cindue. “Even a scratch would let the poison inside.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, getting up to retrieve the arrows. “And if time is spent making the arrows fit properly then I fancy the range will be considerable. Yes, a goodly weapon and easier to use than a bow, spear or sword and the poison would make it deadly every time. I wonder what poison they use? For certain Mikn Chap died quickly.”

“Can I try?” asked Logan.

“Of course,” said Autumn, passing him the stick and arrows. “But have a care.”

* * *

“Greetings,” said Logan when they came down the hillside the next morning.

The man who was tending his field stopped what he was doing and turned to look at them.

“Greetings,” he said, giving them a quick scan but studying Cindue.

“I am Logan and these are Autumn and Cindue,” said Logan.

“Cindue, be damned!” exclaimed the man. “I thought you looked familiar! You be all grown up now and looking real fine.”

“Umm, do I know you?” asked Cindue nervously.

“Do you know me?” exclaimed the man. “I be Agio and you’ve known me since you were a babe! Please be not saying you’ve gone and forgotten old Agio?”

“Ahh, I am sorry,” said Cindue, glancing worriedly at Autumn. “So much has happened these past few summers. I did not recognise you for a moment. Please forgive me.”

“No worries, lass,” said Agio. “Well now, what a fine strapping lass you be now. Looks like Tafa’ul’s been good for you.”

“Tafa’ul?” asked Cindue.

“Did you not go to Tafa'ul?” asked Agio, scratching his head. “I be sure Makat be saying you'd gone to Tafa'ul for your learning.”

“Ahh, that Tafa'ul,” said Cindue with an embarrassed little laugh. “No, I never quite got there.”

“Oh aye?” asked Agio. “Where you bin then?”

“Travelling,” said Cindue. “With my friends Autumn and Logan.”

“Tis all right for some,” said Agio with a laugh. He eyed Autumn and Logan in a friendlyish sort of way. “So you back a-visiting your old ma and da or staying like?”

“I do not know for certain,” said Cindue hesitantly. “Umm, are they well?”

“Aye, well enough,” said Agio. “Your da broke his arm last summer but he be over it now.”

“That is good,” said Cindue. “Um, I mean it is good he is healed not that he broke his arm.”

“Oh I be knowing what you be meaning,” said Agio. He gave her a level gaze. “You be changed, lass. More than just growing up. There be sommat in your eyes. You had a hard time of it?”

“Umm no,” said Cindue, stepping back slightly. “No I don't think I've changed much. Well, it was nice to see you again, ah, Agio. Where would I find ma and da?”

“Oh get on with you lass!” exclaimed Agio. “Your da be in the fields and your ma be at home. Where else would they be?”

“Well, things may have changed,” said Cindue. “They could have moved house.”

“Nay lass, no one moves here,” said Agio, looking at her a little strangely. “You know that. They be still in their old place, down at the end there.” He nodded downstream.

“Good,” said Cindue. “Well, I won't be keeping you Agio. I'm, ah, anxious to see ma and da again.”

“Course you are, lass,” said Agio, “course you are. Be good seeing you again. Chiuon will be right happy, I reckon.”

“Good,” said Cindue. “Umm, until later then.”

“So, 'twould seem we have stumbled upon Esu'taw,” said Autumn quietly as they walked towards the village. “Do you remember anything now, Cindue?”

“Not a thing,” said Cindue. “I have never seen that man before even though he said he knows me.”

“This is not encouraging,” said Autumn, “although it does explain something.”

“What's that?” asked Logan.

“Why no one looked for Cindue when she went missing,” said Autumn. “Agio said Cindue had gone to Tafa'ul to learn something so likely Cindue was captured on her way there.”

“Would she have been sent there on her own though?” asked Logan. “It would seem a foolish thing to send a young girl on her own all that way.”

“And I know nothing of this Tafa'ul,” said Cindue. “I do not know where it is nor why I would go there.”

“Well, doubtless we will find out when we find your parents,” said Logan. “I venture 'tis this way.”

He headed off along the row of squat dwellings that followed the stream and the others followed although Cindue did so with great reluctance and trepidation.

“Down at the end, he said,” said Autumn. “I wonder if he meant the very end or near the end?”

“I venture if he meant the very end he would have said it differently,” said Logan, gazing at an isolated dwelling some way further ahead. “I will ask at this one and doubtless they will know.”

“I am not sure I want to know,” said Cindue, staring at the hut. “I do not remember any of this. What if I don't remember my parents? Who is this Chiuon? What if he is my era'owen and I do not remember him either?”

“Aye, I understand your fears,” said Autumn, “although I fancy he is not your era'owen. You would not have gone to Tafa'ul if he was or he would have gone with you if the need was pressing.”

“Which does not ease my fears,” said Cindue, trembling in agitation. “Everything here frightens me! I cannot take it. I'm going.” She suddenly turned and ran off through a field. Logan glanced at Autumn then chased after her and enveloped her in a hug while Autumn watched from the track. Her skills lay in other directions than bringing comfort to those in distress and she knew that full well.

“There now,” he said quietly. “Calm your fears. No one will hurt you and if they try Autumn and I are here to protect you. Dry your eyes. I wager much will return to you soon enough and, once explained, your parents and everyone else will understand. Trust me. All will be well. You are home now and among those who care for you.”

“Do you not care for me, Logan?” asked Cindue, looking up at him.

“Aye, I do,” said Logan, “but your place is here.”

“And yours is with her,” said Cindue bitterly.

“Indeed,” said Logan. “Come. 'Tis time to meet your parents.”

Cindue's shoulders sagged and Logan slowly lead her back to the track. Autumn looked questioningly at him and he nodded.

“Good,” said Autumn. “You stay here and I will ask.”

She marched up to the dwelling at the end of the row and knocked on

the door. After some moments a plump pleasant faced woman with her hair coiled in a pile on the top of her head appeared.

“Who be you?” she asked, surprised at seeing a stranger at her door.

“Are you by any chance the mother of Cindue?” asked Autumn.

“I am,” she said. “Why do you ask? Who are you?”

“Is that girl your daughter?” asked Autumn, pointing to the girl looking lost and dejected beside Logan on the track.

Frowning the woman looked to where Autumn was pointing and gasped.

“Cindue?” she exclaimed. “Cindue! Is that you?”

She started to hurry over but Autumn caught her arm.

“A moment,” said Autumn as the woman looked at her in confusion. “Cindue has lost her memory. My companion and I found her and have brought her back to Esu'taw but she has no memory of this place nor, I wager, of you. Please be considerate of that.”

“No memory?” exclaimed the woman, her hand flying to her face. “What did those bastards do to her?”

“Which bastards?” asked Autumn.

“Those ones in Tafa'ul,” exclaimed the woman. “Let go of me! I must go to her.”

Autumn let her go and she ran up to Cindue. Logan stepped out of the way as the woman embraced Cindue but it was readily apparent that Cindue only permitted the embrace but did not reciprocate. Logan looked over at Autumn and slowly shook his head.

“You do not remember me?” asked the woman, releasing Cindue after a time. She held her at arms length and stared at Cindue intently. “I am Heema, your ma. Remember?”

Slowly Cindue shook her head and Heema let out a long slow breath.

“Well, you are my Cindue all right,” she said. “You be all grown up and a woman now but you ain’t changed all that much although your hair be a sight. Come. Let us go home and we will talk.”

Anxiously Cindue looked at Logan.

“Tis all right,” he said. “This is your mother. Autumn and I will stay for a time and see you are safe. If that sits well with you, Heema?”

“Aye,” said Heema, taking hold of Cindue’s hand. “You and her be both bringing my Cindue back?”

“Yes,” said Logan.

“Then stay as long as you want,” said Heema. “You will always be welcome in my house.”

Logan followed Heema and Cindue back to the dwelling and Autumn followed them inside.

“Biatha!” shouted Heema. “Where be you, girl?”

A girl looking similar to Cindue but three or four summers younger appeared in the back doorway.

“Yes, ma?” she said then saw Cindue. “Cindue! You be back!” She ran over to hug Cindue and Cindue backed against the wall, her emotions overwhelmed.

“Biatha, go find your da,” ordered Heema. “Cindue be unwell and needs looking after.”

Biatha looked from Cindue to her ma then back again several times then scampered off outside.

“Sit,” said Heema, “and I will make some food. Sit, all of you.”

She started to busy herself around her hearth then stopped and

looked at Autumn.

“Who are you?” she said. “Where did you find my girl?”

“I am Autumn,” said Autumn, “and this is Logan. We are travellers and we found Cindue some way south of here, past a place called Etenen.”

“I know it not,” said Heema. “But I give you all my thanks for returning her to us. What was Cindue doing in that place?”

“It is a long story,” said Autumn, “and one best left for when her father is here as well. If I may, why was Cindue sent away from home? I understand she was only fourteen summers or thereabouts.”

“That’s right,” said Heema. “But she was gifted, see, so her da and me decided to send her to this place in Tafa’ul so she be learning proper like and not making a mess of things here.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan who was quietly sitting beside Cindue who was clearly taking some comfort from his proximity. “Gifted in what way?”

“Sorcering,” said Heema. “She were able to move little things around and make things appear and disappear. Tioksen said she had natural talent and said we should send her to the university of sorcery in Tafa’ul.”

“Tioksen!” exclaimed Autumn as both Logan and Cindue jerked in surprise.

“Aye, Tioksen,” said Heema, puzzled. “He said he’d take her there himself. Why? Do you know him?”

Chapter Twenty Eight

“There is much here I do not understand,” said Autumn as she and Logan walked along the track that lead to Tioksen's house the next day. Heema and Makat had told them that Tioksen's home was but a half day's walk further in the mountains and had pointed out the track to get there.

“Aye,” said Logan. “If I have it right, Tioksen proposed that Cindue go to the place in Tafa'ul to learn the arts of sorcery and offered to take her there himself. Heema and Makat agreed, as did Cindue herself I suppose, which suggests they had no little trust in Tioksen.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “And yet it appears that their trust was misplaced for when they reached Oas'tal Tioksen gave Cindue to Mikn Chap who then sold her which suggests that was his plan all along and that arrangements were already in place with Mikn Chap. Moreover, somewhere before Oas'tal Cindue lost her memory.”

“Could she not have lost it when imprisoned in Mikn Chap's hut?” asked Logan.

“Likely not,” said Autumn, “for she has memories of Tioksen taking her through the mountains so she must have lost her memory before reaching Oas'tal but after leaving Esu'taw else she would remember her family.”

“Ahh, good point,” said Logan. “I had forgotten that.”

“But it is the coincidence of events that concerns me,” said Autumn. “Are we to suppose that Tioksen had planned this? Why? Why not simply take Cindue while she was in Esu'taw? And, moreover, did Cindue lose her memory because of something Tioksen did to her?”

“It could be that he had had designs on her for some time,” said Logan, “but because she was always with her family he could do nothing about it. Then, when she showed signs of ability in sorcery, he seized the opportunity to suggest Tafa'ul so he could take her there himself. Mayhap there is no such university in Tafa'ul.”

“Likely there is,” said Autumn, “for Mother Midcarn went to such a place in Uli-Rratha but it is the matter of Cindue's memory that disturbs me more.”

“You have told me a blow to the head can do such a thing,” said Logan. “I venture he hit her over the head then gave her to Mikn Chap.”

“Tis possible,” said Autumn, “and let us hope it was so.”

“You hope Cindue was hit over the head?” asked Logan in surprise. “That is not nice.”

“I would prefer that she was not,” said Autumn, “but such a thing is preferable to an alternative.”

“What alternative?” asked Logan, frowning.

“I do not know,” said Autumn, “but I am also concerned about the possibility that Dar Nidri may have been a creature from another land. Likely I am wrong but what if I am not? Could it be that Dar Nidri somehow took Cindue's memory from her?”

“Voqev!” exclaimed Logan, stopping to look at her in alarm. “You think Dar Nidri stole her memory?”

“I expect that is not the case,” said Autumn, continuing walking. “Tis only supposition that Dar Nidri was from another land and I know not by what means he would take someone's memory yet leave them otherwise intact. I venture not even Mother Midcarn could do that.”

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

“No, I think not,” he said. “Cindue did not know of Dar Nidri until she was taken from us at that lake. 'Twas Mikn Chap who chained her the first time then sold her. If Dar Nidri had taken her memories then she would remember him as well as Mikn Chap or she would remember neither of them.”

“Likely you have the right of it,” said Autumn. “’Tis much easier to suppose that Tioksen hit Cindue over the head before taking her to Mikn Chap and that caused her to lose her memory. For certain Cindue’s family and her intended Chiuon believed her to be safe in Tafa’ul. Doubtless when Tioksen returned he told tales of her delivery there and of her joining the university.”

“What did you think of Chiuon?” asked Logan.

“He seemed a nice enough lad,” said Autumn. “Makat said he is hard working and the fact he chose to wait for Cindue to return from Tafa’ul rather than find another girl suggests both great attachment to Cindue and tolerance of her abilities. With Aloidia’s aid that tolerance will include her loss of memory for it shows no sign of returning.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “He was most upset that she did not remember him.”

“Let us hope that she will, in time, regain her affections for him,” said Autumn. “Let us hope also that she is able to find peace in Esu’taw again or failing that that she is able to return to Tafa’ul and become a sorcerer. I do not like the idea of her leaving her home in search of somewhere that would ease the discontent in her mind.”

“You mean like you?” said Logan with a grin.

“Not so,” said Autumn. “I did not leave my Esyup through discontent but through logical necessity.”

“But did not that logical necessity lead to discontent in your mind?” asked Logan.

“I accept that there may be similarities,” said Autumn after a few moments thought. “If that is the case then let us hope she quickly finds a Logan to aid her for otherwise her search will be arduous.”

“So you think I have eased your journey thus far?” asked Logan. “That I am not a burden to you?”

“You desire reassurance from me?” asked Autumn. “I had thought we

were done with that.”

“You know, we are much alike in that respect,” said Logan, still grinning.

“You think I am in need of frequent reassurance?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“No,” said Logan, “but you are in constant battle with your vanity as I am with my need for reassurance.”

“And once again you expose the essence of things,” said Autumn, clapping him on the shoulder. “My vanity and your perception of inadequacy. We are a well matched pair.”

“You think I am inadequate?” asked Logan, hurt.

“Not in the least,” said Autumn. “I think you are more than adequate. 'Tis you who thinks you are inadequate and doubtless I used the wrong word anyway. Your desire for reassurance stems, I suspect, not from a feeling of inadequacy but more from a lack of security doubtless caused by your childhood and having to fend for yourself when your parents died.³⁰”

“Oh,” said Logan. He paused for a moment. “So you think I am only adequate?”

“No, Logan,” said Autumn, stopping to look at him intently. “Do not do this. I am not getting bogged in this debate. We have a task ahead of us which is to meet with Tioksen and find out what is going on and, if possible, find some way to end it.”

“And you think you are the one to do that?” asked a voice from behind them.

Both Autumn and Logan whirled around, Autumn somewhat faster than Logan, and both dropped into their defensive postures.

³⁰ Both Logan's parents died of illness when he was about 10 years old. Unable to find his sister who had gone to live with her partner, Logan was obliged to survive as best he could. A local farmer gave him shelter in a cowshed but Logan had to find his own food.

“Dar Nidri!” exclaimed Autumn, recognising him instantly.

“The very same,” said Dar Nidri. “Uh uh, do not move. I know you too well and I am not alone.”

He made a strange clucking noise and four others stepped out from behind bushes along the track. Each had a blowpipe poised and ready and pointing at the two of them.

“Well now,” said Autumn, relaxing ever so slightly. “I was not expecting you to be here which was remiss of me.”

“Indeed,” said Dar Nidri. “That was remiss of you. I, on the other hand, have been expecting you for several days. Where is the girl?”

“She is where she belongs,” said Autumn as Logan looked at Dar Nidri’s feet. He was wearing sandals and it was apparent that he had fairly normal looking feet with five toes on each although his big toes seemed a little on the large side.

“Not so,” said Dar Nidri. “She belongs to Shina Ganam. No matter. She will be returned to him in good time. Come with me.”

“Where are we going?” asked Autumn as Dar Nidri went around them.

“You are on the path to Ilaa,” said Dar Nidri. “I wager you plan on meeting Tioksen so I will take you to him.”

“What is Ilaa?” asked Autumn as she and Logan turned to follow Dar Nidri. The other four lined up behind them, staying at a safe distance. Clearly Dar Nidri had warned them of Autumn’s skills.

“Tis the home of Tioksen,” said Dar Nidri. “Tis but a short distance ahead.”

“You know Mikn Chap is dead?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Dar Nidri. “That was a mistake on my part. It will not happen again.”

“What poison do you use?” she asked.

“A mixture of venom from Yellow Tail Ponits and tree sap,” said Dar Nidri. “’Tis exceedingly effective for whoever it hits is dead in but a few heartbeats.”

“Ponits?” asked Autumn. “What are they?”

“Spiders,” said Dar Nidri.

“Interesting,” said Autumn. “Doubtless they have yellow tails. I do not know of these spiders. Where are they found?”

“Under rotting bark and leaves,” said Dar Nidri. “Like most spiders.”

“I meant where in this land,” asked Autumn.

“Ahh, on the northern side of these mountains and beyond,” said Dar Nidri.

“And the purpose of the tree sap?” she asked.

“It keeps the venom on the dart,” said Dar Nidri, “and sticks to the skin so the venom’s effects are assured. You ask too many questions.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “’Twas the way I was brought up. You are not the first to complain of that.”

“But likely I will be the last,” said Dar Nidri with a laugh. “Not even you, Autumn, can dodge four darts at the same time.”

“Likely not,” said Autumn. “’Tis not worth putting to the test however.”

“A sensible answer,” he said as they walked around a bend in the track. A short way ahead sat a large stone building set in a clearing on the edge of a precipice. “Wait here. I will tell Tioksen you are arrived.”

“’Tis a pleasant view, is it not?” asked Autumn, looking out over the

valley to the mountains beyond.

"I dare say," said Logan, keeping an eye on the four men arrayed behind them.

"Tell me," said Autumn, turning to look at them. "Is this place very cold in winter? Does it snow a lot?"

None took any notice. They just watched with their blowpipes level and close to their lips.

"No matter," said Autumn after a few moments of silence. "I was just curious."

"Come," called Dar Nidri from the entrance. "Tioksen will see you now."

Autumn gestured for Logan to go first and she followed. Glancing behind she saw the four men come into the corridor as well but, because of its width, they came in one by one, their blowpipes still raised.

"In here," said Dar Nidri, gesturing to an open doorway.

"So," said a tall slim man standing beside a large ornate fireplace, "you are Autumn and you are Logan?"

"Yes," said Autumn. "You are Tioksen?"

Interestingly Dar Nidri and the four men followed them in and arranged themselves against the far wall.

"I have that distinction," acknowledged Tioksen. "Please," and he gestured to a pair of comfortable looking chairs beside a large table, "sit yourselves."

"As you wish," said Autumn.

She went over and sat in one of the chairs. After a moment's hesitation Logan sat beside her. She propped her staff against the

table and Logan did likewise.

"I would offer you refreshments," said Tioksen, "but I don't expect you will be here long enough to enjoy them."

"Perhaps not," said Autumn. "You know why we are here?"

"Dar has told me of your meetings with Mikn Chap," said Tioksen. "I fancy your intent with me is much the same."

"Are you in the same business as Mikn Chap?" asked Autumn.

"He worked for me," said Tioksen, "and the answer is no."

"What was the question?" asked Logan, a little taken aback by Tioksen's attitude.

"Will I stop?" said Tioksen, smiling. "That was going to be your next question, was it not Autumn?"

"Along those lines," said Autumn. "Permit me to ask another instead."

"If you like," said Tioksen, "although you are running out of time."

"Why do you do it?" asked Autumn, ignoring the implied threat. "Why do you capture people and sell them?"

"Oh that is just a side line," said Tioksen, waving a hand dismissively. "Just something by which I can profit from their bodies."

"I see," said Autumn frowning. "If I may, what is your primary intent?"

Logan glanced anxiously at the men lined up against the wall with their blowpipes raised and pointing at Autumn. There was no doubt in his mind that she could easily best the four of them as well as Tioksen and Dar Nidri but there was a distinct possibility that in the process a poison arrow or two might come his way.

"And there we come to the crux of the matter," said Tioksen, walking

over to stand in front of Autumn so he could look down on her. “I have made enquiries. You are Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup in Aferraron, are you not?”

“I am,” said Autumn.

“And you left that esyup some four summers past in order to travel the world and experience many strange and wondrous things?” asked, Tioksen.

“Yes but it was only three summers ago,” said Autumn, “not four.”

“No matter,” said Tioksen. He bent down and gazed into Autumn's eyes. She returned his gaze steadily. “What memories you must have inside that pretty little head of yours,” he murmured.

“Is that what this is about?” asked Autumn sharply. “Memories?”

Tioksen slowly stood upright again then returned to the fireplace.

“I was born with a deficiency,” he said. “For some reason I have a poor memory and much of what I have experienced in my life I do not remember. It is not an impediment that bothers me in my day to day activities but of an evening, when I sit beside my fireplace or outside, looking over the magnificence of the mountains beyond, I feel the lack. My mind stays empty when I should be reminiscing.”

“So you wish to hear tales from my travels?” asked Autumn, puzzled. “To what purpose if you cannot remember them?”

“Indeed,” said Tioksen, “to what purpose?”

He walked over to a shelf set on the wall past the fireplace. It was stacked with cylinders, much like scroll holders, each made of some smooth shiny substance.

“You see these?” he asked, stroking the top layer of tubes. “These are my memories.”

“You mean you desire my tales to be written down for you to read at

your leisure?" asked Autumn, getting up and walking over. Logan jumped up as well but Dar Nidri put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him back down. All four of the blowpipes followed Autumn as she crossed the room.

"In a manner of speaking," said Tioksen.

He waited then held up a hand when Autumn was still a little beyond arm's reach so she stopped.

"I am aware of your skills," he said. "Come no closer."

"As you wish," said Autumn. "I merely wanted a closer look at these writings."

"Yes," said Tioksen. "They aren't writings as such. What was the name of that girl you took?"

"Cindue," said Dar Nidri, his hand still on Logan's shoulder.

"Ah, yes, Cindue," said Tioksen. He ran his finger over the tubes and selected one. "Here she is." He pulled it from the shelf and handed it to Autumn.

The tube was featureless, save for some writing in a language she did not understand. The tube was sealed at both ends and there was no obvious way of opening it.

"I do not understand," said Autumn, turning the tube over and over in her hands.

"This contains Cindue's memories," said Tioksen softly. "I took them from her and sealed them in that."

"Ah," said Autumn, blinking in surprise.

Logan edged his hand towards his staff and Dar Nidri gave his shoulder a warning squeeze so he dropped his hand again.

"And all these others contain the memories of those you have

captured?” asked Autumn. There must have been nigh on fifteen of these tubes on the shelf.

“Yes,” said Tioksen. “After I have taken their memories they serve no purpose so I give them to Mkn Chap to dispose of. Gave, I should say. Dar here will be taking over that task.”

“I see,” said Autumn. She shook her head slightly. “I still do not understand. What is your purpose in taking their memories and keeping them in these containers?”

“I relive them,” said Tioksen. “I sit by my fireplace and relive the memories of those contained herein. They entertain me for, as I said, I have no memories of my own.”

“How?” asked Autumn.

“I have a friend,” said Tioksen. “He is elsewhere but he arranged for me to be able to take these memories and relive them whenever I wish to do so. Precisely how it is done I do not know but that is the way of magic. Only those skilled in the arts know the hows and whys of it.”

“Who is your friend?” asked Autumn. “I would like to meet him.”

“Oh that doesn't matter,” said Tioksen with a laugh, “and you will never meet him.” He reached out and took Cindue's tube back. He patted it gently then put it on the shelf with the others.

“So now you know,” said Tioksen. “Is your curiosity assuaged?”

“Not in the least,” said Autumn. “You have only pricked the surface of my curiosity. Tell me, how will you be returning these memories to those to whom they belong?”

“I have no idea,” said Tioksen, “but I do not intend to. They are mine now.”

“But they can be returned?” asked Autumn.

“I imagine so,” said Tioksen. “If I can relive them then doubtless

those from which the memories were taken can relive them again themselves. I don't imagine it would be overly difficult." He smiled again. "If you have the skill, of course."

"Indeed," said Autumn. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you intrigue me, Autumn Savannah, Krisana and traveller," said Tioksen. "I fancy there is much in there that is fascinating," and he pointed at Autumn's head.

"No!" exclaimed Logan in alarm, jumping up. "I will not let you take Autumn's mind!"

Instantly Dar Nidri grabbed him and held him tight.

"Calm yourself, Logan," said Tioksen. "I will not take her mind, only her memories. And you need not fear for yourself for I have no interest in you. My interest lies only in the memories of women. Men bore me beyond belief and I have no desire to relive their drinking and pissing contests and what have you. You will simply be sold as you are and will have to live with that. Autumn, however, will be sold with no memory of her past and will be content with her new life for she will know no better."

"No!" shouted Logan, struggling against Dar Nidri's grip. "No!"

"I regret I cannot permit that," said Autumn calmly.

"I do not need your permission," said Tioksen. "Dar told me what happened to Mikn Chap so you know the effect of those," and he waved his hand at the four men. "Greatly diluted, however, the same poison will simply put you to sleep for a while which is how I will take your memories. When you wake up you will, naturally, have no memory of this. Dar, take them to the back room. I will join you shortly. The time for talk is over."

Chapter Twenty Nine

Still maintaining his grip on Logan, Dar Nidri pushed him back out into the corridor. Autumn followed quietly and the four men filed out, keeping their distance and their blowpipes raised. Dar Nidri released Logan and gave him a shove, pushing him into the wall. Logan glared at Dar Nidri but he was already stalking off along the corridor.

“Go,” said Autumn, also giving Logan a push but more gently.

He scowled then began to follow. Two steps later Autumn tapped Logan's heel with her foot then stumbled forward as if to catch him as he tripped but pressed down hard between his shoulders so he collapsed on the floor. At the same time she kicked up and back, catching the leading pipe man in the throat. He lurched backwards into the man behind, throwing them both against the wall. The third man jerked sideways just in time and blew hard through his pipe at Autumn. She felt the arrow pass through her.

“Stay down,” she called to Logan as she grabbed the upper arms of the first man and threw him against the wall then head butted him in the face. He was collapsing even as she twisted round and elbowed the second man in his throat then lashed her knee up as he doubled over and threw him into the third man who was desperately scrabbling to push another arrow into his pipe. The fourth man had backed away and was hopping from side to side, trying to aim his pipe around the third man.

Unable to twirl in the confined corridor, Autumn inelegantly snatched the pipe from the third man's hands and rammed it into the wall, shattering it. Surprised, he leapt on her and she used his weight to roll backwards. She managed to get her shin under his thighs in the process and, as her shoulders hit the ground, she kicked upwards and the man crashed into the ceiling then fell limply on top of Logan. With his aim now clear the fourth man let fly with his arrow at Autumn but again she felt it pass through her. It skittered off the stone floor and broke in half even as she continued the roll and jumped to her feet.

This time, three paces distant from the fourth man, who was

desperately fumbling for an arrow, she had some room to twirl as she leapt forward. 'Twas not a full twirl, however, as the corridor was not wide enough. Instead she twirled with her knee raised and foot held close in to her body then bent over to touch the floor with her hand as she kicked out at the man. His reactions were somewhat better than those of his comrades and she missed his head by several hairsbreadths. Instantly she tried to swap to her other foot but that foot banged into the wall and threw her off balance. 'Twas enough for the fourth man, however. With a strangled yelp he threw his pipe at Autumn and fled through the front door.

“What is going on?” demanded Tioksen, appearing in the side doorway. He had a small vial in his hand.

“This ends now!” exclaimed Autumn, pushing herself off the wall.

With remarkable acuity, Tioksen noted the bodies on the floor and threw the contents of the vial into Autumn's face. She tried to spin away to avoid the liquid but some splashed on her face even as her hand grasped Tioksen's tunic. He jerked back and Autumn let go and collapsed on the floor.

“Logan!” she exclaimed.

“Bastard!” screamed Logan, having extricated himself from under the body of the third man.

He lunged at Tioksen with his arms outstretched. Tioksen gave him but a glance before fleeing through the front door after the other man. Logan gave chase but caught his foot on the hem of Autumn's robe and crashed headlong into the second man who was collapsed on the floor, moaning and clutching his throat. Logan's elbow caught him on the side of his head and he passed out. Scrambling to his feet Logan ran through the front door then skidded to a halt. Even as he watched, Tioksen jumped into the air as though over a fallen tree and simply disappeared into nothingness.

“Pah, good riddance!” exclaimed Logan. He watched for another two or three heartbeats in case Tioksen reappeared then hurried back inside.

The man whom Autumn had headbutted was on his hands and knees, moaning in pain and dripping blood from his face. The others lay motionless. Logan ignored them all and hurried over to Autumn. She had rolled over after crying out and now lay still.

“Oh Autumn!” exclaimed Logan, tears pricking his eyes. “Autumn, no!”

He dropped to his knees and grabbed her wrist as she had taught him. To his surprise and relief he could feel a strong rhythmic pulse. Dropping her hand he put his own on her chest.

“Yes!” he exclaimed as he felt a slight rising and falling showing she still breathed.

“So what has happened to her?” he thought, studying her face. “Ahh, what is that?”

He peered at the small dampness on her cheek then wiped it away with his sleeve.

“She still lives,” he muttered and sagged with relief. “Praise be to all the deities, she still lives. Think, you fool, think! What has happened?”

Carefully he rolled Autumn the last little bit so she lay flat on the floor and straightened her limbs so she was comfortable.

“Aye, she still lives,” he thought, sitting back on his heels and studying her face. “She breathes easily and shows no sign of distress. If she were hit by one of those arrows then she would be dead by now. Dar Nidri said it takes but a few heartbeats. So what ails her? 'Tis almost like she is asleep. Ahhh! Did not Tioksen say he was going to make her sleep while he took her memory? That must have been what was on her face. That stuff to make her sleep. Sploop! I hope that is so.”

Autumn snored then rolled onto her side with one arm under her head and her knees brought up almost to her belly. She looked peaceful and contented.

“Aye,” said Logan out loud. He smiled fondly at her and brushed

some hair from her face. “She sleeps. But for how long?”

He sighed and looked around. There were three bodies lying prostrate and unmoving on the floor and the other was still on hands and knees and moaning.

“Pah!” exclaimed Logan grimly. “I have not Autumn's compassion.”

He got up and stood beside the moaning man, staring down at him in contempt. Sensing his presence the man looked up at him fearfully.

“If you are able to return from whence you came,” said Logan, impressed at how firm his voice was, “go now otherwise you die.”

The man stared at him for a moment then fell sideways against the wall and disappeared.

“Sploop!” exclaimed Logan, impressed with himself. “It worked!”

He spun round when he heard a groan, readying himself for an attack but it was only one of the men regaining consciousness.

“Worth a try,” muttered Logan and stalked over.

“Can you hear me?” he said coldly.

The man looked at him without answering then he too twisted and disappeared.

“This is too easy,” thought Logan.

He checked Dar Nidri and the other man but they were both dead and looked unlikely to disappear. He left them where they were and returned to Autumn. She still slept peacefully.

“Now what do I do?” he wondered. He watched her breathing for several moments then went into the room where they'd talked with Tioksen. Their staffs and Autumn's pack were still on the table as was his knife. Dar Nidri must have put it there. Wandering back into the corridor he saw Autumn's eyes flutter then open. She rolled on her

back and sat up, her eyes unfocused.

“Autumn,” he cried and knelt down in front of her. “How do you feel?”

“Tired,” she said, looking at him vacantly.

“Oh Sloop,” he muttered. “Let it not be so. Who am I?”

“Let me sleep,” muttered Autumn, closing her eyes.

He grabbed her shoulders and shook her.

“No! Do not sleep,” he exclaimed. “Who am I?”

“Who do you think you are?” said Autumn slowly. She opened her eyes and gazed at him.

“Tell me who I am,” he said, shaking her again. “Tell me!”

“Is this a joke, Logan?” she asked. “I do not find it funny. Let me be.”

“Tell me what Mother Midcarn looks like,” said Logan, afraid her mind had been taken but some vestige of her last few moments were still in her memory.

“She is a short stout woman with grey hair and pale blue eyes,” said Autumn, her eyes coming into focus. “Why do you ask?”

“I was afraid your memory had already been taken,” said Logan, letting go of her shoulders. “’Twould seem not.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. Her eyes became unfocused again as she turned her mind within. “No, ’twould seem my memories are intact. I remember Noxu and my esyup and many other things.” She looked up and down the corridor. “I count only two. Were there not four? And what of Tioksen and Dar Nidri?”

“Dar Nidri is dead,” said Logan, “killed by his own poison I wager for an arrow passed through you and hit him. That other one is also

dead. You were right about them being from another land or some such for Tioksen and the other three have disappeared.”

“What do you mean, disappeared?” asked Autumn, growing ever more alert as the effects wore off.

“Tioksen saw all this and ran out the door,” said Logan. “I gave chase but he jumped up and disappeared. I wager the fourth man did much the same when he was left alone to face you.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn. “And the other two?”

“Both were injured,” said Logan. “I fancied they were from another land after Tioksen disappeared so I offered them the choice of returning there or dying. Both returned.”

“Would you have killed them?” asked Autumn, curious. “despite our many conversations on that subject?”

“Aye,” said Logan, resolutely. “I have not your compassion for someone who tries to harm you.”

“Good,” said Autumn and got to her feet. “Where is my pack?”

“Good?” exclaimed Logan. “You astonish me. You think it is good that I was willing to kill them?”

“No,” said Autumn, “but that would have been your choice. I meant it is good that you know your own mind and are willing to act upon it without waiting for my approval. Have you seen my pack?”

“It is in that room,” said Logan pointing. He was unexpectedly filled with delight at Autumn's words. “I'll get it for you.”

“'Twould be a kindness,” said Autumn. “I still feel weak, much as I was after suffering the au'ai.”

Logan hurried to fetch her pack and returned to find Autumn bent over Dar Nidri.

“Thank you,” she said and rummaged inside. She took out her piece of cloth from Mother Midcarn and held it to her eyes.

“Ahh, interesting,” she said, looking at Dar Nidri’s feet. “Look.”

Intrigued, Logan pulled his cloth from his hair.

“Sploop!” he exclaimed. “He has only three toes!”

“And look at his hands,” said Autumn, moving over to look at the man with the broken neck.

“And but three fingers,” exclaimed Logan. “And no thumb.”

“And this one is the same,” said Autumn, pulling up the leg of the man’s tunic. “His legs are much as ours only a little thinner. What is that yellow stuff on the floor?”

“What yellow stuff?” asked Logan, looking around.

“There,” said Autumn, pointing to a congealed yellow mess on the stone.

“I cannot imagine,” said Logan, going over to peer at it. He looked up and down the corridor trying to visualise what little he’d seen of the fight. “Ahh, you hit one of them in the face with your head. When I told him to return to his place he was on his hands and knees about here with blood dripping from his face. I fancy this must be what his blood really looks like.”

“Yellow blood, interesting,” said Autumn. “I have not seen yellow blood before. I wonder where they came from?” With her eyes still covered she walked into the room where her pack had been.

“Likely we will never know,” said Logan, following her into the room.

“This looks much as I remember,” she said looking around. “Ahh. Those containers. I had forgotten about them.”

“Indeed,” said Logan, looking where she was looking. He went over to

inspect the shelf and touched one. It was smooth and hard and like nothing he'd seen before. He dropped the cloth then held it to his eyes again. "I cannot read what is written on them either with the cloth or without."

Autumn came over and tried as well.

"Aye, 'tis not written in the Old Tongue, that is certain," she said. "We have something of a problem here."

"There is nothing we can do," said Logan, re-tying his hair with the cloth.

"I confess I cannot think of anything myself," said Autumn, shaking her head slowly. "Aye-yai-yai, I still feel weary and 'tis a struggle to think."

She went over and sat on one of the chairs.

"There are thirteen," said Logan, counting the containers. "Was this one Cindue's?" He held one up.

"No," said Autumn, "'twas the one next to it, I fancy."

"This one?" asked Logan, replacing the first and picking up another.

"Aye," said Autumn. Holding it carefully, Logan walked over and sat next to Autumn.

"'Tis strange knowing I am holding her memories in my hands," he said as Autumn put her cloth back in her pack. "It would be a right goodly thing if we could somehow return them to her."

"But how?" asked Autumn. "We have not the skills."

"Mayhap Mother Midcarn does," said Logan. "We could ask her."

"Aye, we could," said Autumn. "If we knew where she was and how to get a message to her."

“Aye, 'tis a problem,” said Logan, contemplating the container. “Mayhap we could return this to Cindue. She could look after it until we find Mother Midcarn. Sploop, mayhap she will resume her studies and find out how to restore them herself!”

“’Tis a possible solution,” said Autumn, “but not the best. Even if Cindue does find a way we cannot read what is written so we will never know whose memories are in each. Likely one contains Witibea’s although she never said she had lost her memory.”

“’Twas not something that came up in our talk with her,” agreed Logan, “and doubtless she prefers not to talk of such things. I wonder if there is anything to eat here?”

“Even if there is 'tis best you don't eat it, Logan,” said Autumn. “It may not be safe to eat.”

“A good point,” said Logan, frowning. “How do you feel?”

“Much improved,” said Autumn. “I grow stronger with every heartbeat and my mind is clearing. I have a thought. Hysleria was able to get a message to Mother Midcarn when he needed to find you to sign that treaty in Tafa’ul.³¹ Mayhap we could get a message to him. He will surely do so if you ask.”

“’Twould take many moons to get a message back to Uli-Rratha though, would it not?” said Logan, idly stroking Cindue’s memories. He briefly wondered if any memories in the container were of him then laughed at himself. She’d lost her memory before she’d ever met him.

“Aye but it is a way forward,” said Autumn. She frowned then slapped her forehead. “Of course!”

“What?” exclaimed Logan, looking at her in alarm.

“Darius!” exclaimed Autumn, jumping up and starting to pace. “Darius is Ept, is he not. A deity! Surely a deity would be able to restore these people’s memories?”

31 See *The Annals ~ The Tenth Tale*.

“Tis worth a try,” said Logan, excitement building inside him. “If nothing else he will likely be able to find Mother Midcarn.”

“Yes,” said Autumn. She stopped pacing and stood quite still. “Darius, Darius, Darius,” she intoned, her voice solemn but clear.³²

“Groww,” said Darius, appearing in the doorway, his silver tipped ears stiff and alert. “What ails you, Autumn and Logan?”

“Tis good to see you again, Darius,” said Autumn. “You are well?”

“Aye, old friend,” said Logan. “Tis a delight to see you again.”

“I am well,” said Darius. “What need do you have of me?”

Quickly Autumn explained the situation and Darius went over to examine the shelf of cylinders.

“There is strong magic here,” he said. “I am not familiar with it. You say these contain people's memories? Can they not live without them?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “they can live without their memories of the past. Indeed those that have lost them are building new memories as we speak. However, the lost memories are here and I presume they are intact and unchanged. It would be a shame if they could not be returned to their rightful owners.”

“I have not the power,” said Darius, swishing his tale, possibly in irritation at his apparent deficiency, possibly not.

“Then that is that,” said Autumn. “If you cannot then you cannot. You say there is strong magic here so mayhap Mother Midcarn has that skill. Are you able to find Mother Midcarn and give her a message.”

Darius' large golden eyes stared at her for some time without blinking. Autumn met his gaze then dropped her eyes fearing he might think

32 Darius the lynx is a personification of Ept who, amongst other things, helped Autumn find Logan in the Land of the Undead after he'd been killed by an arrow meant for her. See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*. In parting, Darius told Autumn and Logan that if they ever needed Its aid they were to say his name three times and he would come.

she was challenging him.

“Grrowwww,” said Darius and tossed his head. “I shall return.” He vanished as quickly as he had appeared.

“Well, that was short and sweet,” said Logan. “Do you think he was pleased to see us again?”

“Perhaps not,” said Autumn. “He did not ask how we were but then again, we did call for his aid so mayhap he saw no great need to be polite.”

“Ah well,” said Logan. He picked up his knife and put it back in his waistband then hefted his staff. “Do you suppose he has gone to find Mother Midcarn?”

“If he has he did not wait for a message,” said Autumn. “I wonder how long we should wait and if he will return here or wherever else we are.”

“Best we wait for a time,” said Logan, sitting down again. “’Tis not as though we have anywhere pressing to go. Not now.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, also sitting down. “I wonder how Cindue is getting on? ’Twould be a great shame if she does not like her family now she is returned with no fond memories of them.”

“Mayhap she has run away again,” said Logan with a laugh. “That will make it difficult to give her her memories back if Mother Midcarn is able to.”

“Able to what?” asked Mother Midcarn, appearing on one of the other chairs. Her legs were too short to reach the floor.

“Mother Midcarn!” exclaimed Autumn. “You have come!”

“’Tis never a good idea to refuse the request of a deity,” said Mother Midcarn, looking around as Darius padded over and jumped onto the table. “What place is this? I have not seen it in my Window.”

Again Autumn explained the situation.

“And the cloths worked?” asked Mother Midcarn. “That is good. I can never be certain of these things. Is that one of those memory containers, Logan?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “’Tis Cindue’s.”

“Give it to me,” commanded Mother Midcarn, holding out her hand. Logan carefully handed it to her, afraid he might drop it. She peered at it. “No, ’tis likely not Cindue’s. This one has Nena written upon it.”

“’Twas my mistake,” said Autumn. “You can read the writing?”

“Aye, ’tis the language of the T’naagi,” said Mother Midcarn. “I am familiar with it.” She hoisted herself off the chair and her feet clumped on the stone. A little stiffly she walked over to the shelf and replaced the cylinder then started reading the writing on the others.

“Who are the T’naagi?” asked Logan.

“They live in a place called Gauygao,” said Mother Midcarn. “I have not been there but I have heard of it from others.”

“And they have skills in magic and can take people’s memories?” asked Autumn.

“Clearly they have skills in magic,” said Mother Midcarn. “I can feel their magic all over this room but I have never heard of anyone being able to take memories away and hold them in a little box. Ahh, this one is Cindue’s.”

“Oh,” said Autumn, a little disappointed with her error. “So you are not able to restore these memories?”

“Alas no,” said Mother Midcarn, walking back with Cindue’s cylinder. “I fancy only the one who took them or perhaps another skilled in such arts could. I cannot.”

“So that is it then?” asked Logan. “There is no way Cindue and the

others can have their memories back?"

"I did not say that," said Mother Midcarn. "Only that I cannot. If that is what you desire then you must go to Gauygao and find one who can."

"And where is this place?" asked Autumn.

"Tis in the Land of Yxcn," said Mother Midcarn.

"Yxcn?" said Autumn thoughtfully. "Is that not what Dar Nidri exclaimed when he realised he had killed Mikn Chap?"

"I do not know," said Logan. "I didn't hear him."

"I am certain it is," said Autumn. "Who or what is Yxcn?"

"Yxcn is the deity of transitions," growled Darius.

"Transitions?" said Logan frowning. "What manner of deity is this?"

"Beginnings and endings," said Mother Midcarn, "which includes boundaries, walls, gateways and whatever else you can think that is along those lines. The lines themselves too I imagine although I have never met It."

"I see," said Autumn frowning. "And how do we find this place?"

"Doubtless there is a gateway near here," said Mother Midcarn. "You say several of these people disappeared? They must have gone somewhere."

"And you intend us to go there, Autumn?" asked Logan with a sigh.

"Unless we can prevail upon Mother Midcarn or Darius to do so," said Autumn.

"Alas I cannot," said Mother Midcarn. "I am too old and fat for such adventures."

“Nor I,” said Darius. “The memories of humans concern me not at all nor would I willingly trespass in the Land of another deity uninvited.”

“You have been to the Land of the Undead with us,” pointed out Autumn. “You were not invited then.”

“All go to the Land of the Dead at some point,” said Darius. “No invitations are needed there.”

“Oh well,” said Autumn, looking over at Logan. “So be it then.”

“So be what then?” asked Logan suspiciously.

“Tis your choice, Logan,” said Autumn. “I confess I am greatly curious about a land of transitions and whatnot and if I can find someone who is able to restore these memories that will be an added benefit. What say you?”

“Take this with you,” said Mother Midcarn, handing Cindue’s cylinder to Logan. “It might come in useful.”

“Oh Sploop!” exclaimed Logan, quickly putting his hands behind his back. “Why do you always leave it up to me?”

Glossary

[Pronunciations given in curly brackets]

(OT refers to Old Tongue terms, N to Neander terms, W to Wase terms, S to Sassese'lte terms)

[Where an entry is specific to a particular Tale, that Tale is given in square brackets]

Adagu {ad-ah-goo} (S): A four legged mammal native to Sassese'lte. Adagus typically stand between 1m and 1.3m in height at the shoulder and weigh between 30 and 45 kilograms. Notably adagus have long necks and small heads similar to that of a llama. At the time of *The Annals* their hair was woven for warm clothing although their skin was not suitable for leather, being thin and easily torn. Adagus are protected from minor cuts and other skin damage by a double layer of fur.

Aeid {ay-id} [11]: A seller of glazed pottery in the village of Etenen.

Agio {ag-ee-oh} [11]: A neighbour of Cindue's family in Esu'taw.

Agneida {ag-nay-ee-da} [10]: Daughter of Geenate aibna Rispath, Sarkane of Tersees and Saamrat of Sassese'lte.

Ahi'aktes {ah-hia-ke-tez}: The northern-most Mintika of Sassese'lte.

Ahtolgo {ah-tol-le-go}: A village in Aferraron of some 30 people.

Aisitou abn Busno {aah-is-it-oo-you ab-en be-us-no}: Sarkun of Us-Iota.

Alacsa {al-ac-sah} [11]: A middle ranking member of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup in Autumn's early years there who died of some form of tubercular disease.

Au'ai {ah-uwa-eye}: A viral infection similar to influenza. Typically the symptoms, intense aching in the joints and major muscles, headaches and severe congestion in the respiratory pathways, begin within an hour or so of infection and build rapidly. Au'ai generally lasts three to five days and symptoms usually clear to acceptable levels within twenty four hours or so of starting to recede although full recovery can take another five to ten days. Au'ai is rarely fatal although the congestion can become problematic in sufferers with a pre-existing respiratory problem, such as asthma. Immunity quickly develops however and repeat cases of au'ai are virtually unknown. Incubation can last thirty days before symptoms appear and approx 15% of those infected carry the virus but never develop symptoms.

Ban {ba-ne} (S): The principal unit of currency in Sassese'lte. One ban comprises twelve banuuls.

Banuul {ba-nu-ul} (S): A unit of Sassese'ltian currency, being one twelfth of a ban.

Bedegd {be-ed-eg-de}: A village in eastern Us-Iota on the border with Roaaut, with a population of approximately 50 people.

Biatha {bee-at-ha} [11]: Cindue's sister.

Chiuon {ke-hi-you-on} [11]: A male friend of Cindue specified in *The Annals* as her 'intended' implying some form of betrothal agreement. However, as the formal era'owen relationship was prevalent only among the higher social ranks it is likely that their relationship was more of an unspoken agreement which would ultimately lead to 'almost era'owen', ie living together, status in time.

Cindue {ke-in-doo-eh} [11]: A girl, aged seventeen at the time of *The Annals*, who was captured by Tioksen around the age of fourteen. Tioksen took her memory then sold her to Mikn Chap for on-selling into indentured servitude under taug cohm.

Citwyn {key-it-why-ne} [11]: An old man on the path to Fus in Us-Iota.

Cysciec {ky-se-ki-ek}: A Land beyond the Land of the Undead wherein dwells those spirits, entities and essences that are too monstrous or evil even for Yammoe.

Damare {da-ma-re} [11]: An archaic game played in Sassese'lte that has not continued into modern Sassese'lte. Little is known of the game but, going by what is revealed of its nature in *The Annals*, it would seem to be similar to the Earth based game of dominoes in that both consist of small blocks with dots that are joined together when the number of dots correspond. Of the other rules of the game nothing is known.

Danornor {da-no-re-no-re}: A large island in the Southern Wasian Sea. At the time of *The Annals* Danornor was under the political dominance of Wase.

Dar Nidri {dar ne-id-ree} [11]: One of the T'naagi from the Land of Gauygao who was directly involved in the capture and sale of women.

Darius {da-ry-os} [1,6, 11]: One of a species of wild cat native to the Land of Neander. Broadly similar to Earth's Central Asian Lynx or Siberian Lynx but with a black and silver colouring and are mid-way

between a domestic cat and a lion in size. Darius is also the personification of the deity Ept.

Defut {dee-foo-te} [11]: An acquaintance of Hanres who lives in Fus.

Dinaj {di-na-je}: The Sassese'ltian name for Voqev, the deity of evil things.

Duef {de-you-ay-ef} [11]: One of Shina Ganam's farm hands.

Eashian/Eashiqua {esh-ee-an / esh-ee-ka} (S): Formally, the title Lord or Lady, but for one subordinate to the Sarkun or Sarkane. When used less formally it is a polite form of address.

Enk Wido {eh-ne-kay we-do} [11]: A sleight of hand trickster at the market in Fus.

Ept {ep-te}: The deity of hearths and fire. See also *Darius*.

Esu'taw {ee-soo-ut-awe}: The home village of Cindue. A village in northern Us-Iota on the Hrea River with a population of approx. 80-90 people.

Esyup {es-you-pe}: A school or commune dedicated to one, or sometimes two, deities. Esyups have a specific focus in addition to their religious and philosophical regimen, such as medicine or martial arts.

Etenen {eh-te-nay-ne}: A village in eastern Us-Iota near the farm of Shina Ganam. Etenen had a population of approx. 25 people.

Ferea {fe-ray-ah} (S): An extremely crude Sassese'ltian term referring to a woman's private parts.

Fus {fuss}: A small town on the Gadse River, not far from the Sidysmis Tafki in Sassese'lte.

Gadse River {ga-de-say}: A major river originating in the Majmueat Kabira Range and flowing through Us-Iota, Ahi'aktes and Tersees to join the Azour Sea at Tafa'ul.

Gauygao {ga-you-ay-gah-oh}: The land of the T'naagi, located within Yankin Haramun (The Forbidden Domain) but hidden by a veil of magic.

Hadzie {ha-de-zee} [11]: A young woman from Bedegd who was captured by either Dar Nidri or Tioksen, *The Annals* are unclear, and imprisoned in Oas'tal pending sale under taug coh. Hadzie was

rescued by Autumn and Logan.

Hanres {ha-ne-res} [11]: A farmer on the track from Fus to Oas'tal.

Heema {hay-ee-ma} [11]: Cindue's mother.

Hrea River {hay-ray-ah}: A minor river originating in the Majmueat Kabira Range to the north of Esu'taw and joining the sea at the western Us-Iota coast.

Hysleria {hi-sley-ray-ay} [1, 10]: Piers Sakratar to the Roinad of Aferraron and effective 'power behind the throne'.

Ifgez {if-guz} [11]: The head man of Shina Ganam.

Ilaa {eye-lar}: Tioksen's house in the Majmueat Kabira mountains, a half day's walk north of Esu'taw.

Imred {im-re-de} (S): The head of the legal apparatus within the mintika of Us-Iota. Appointed by the Sarkun, the Imred is primarily a political position and generally held by a relative of the Sarkun.

Isdurkn {is-doo-re-ke-ne}: A small village in the north western reaches of Ahi'aktes. Population unknown.

Loti {low-te} [11]: A young woman from Isdurkn who was captured by either Dar Nidri or Tioksen, The Annals are unclear, and imprisoned in Oas'tal pending sale under taug coh. Loti was rescued by Autumn and Logan.

Majmueat Kabira Range {maj-mu-eat ka-bi-rah}: The range of mountains in the North of Sassese'lte. The Majmueat Kabira Range marks the effective limit of inhabitation of Northern Sassese'lte. To the North lies the frozen wastelands of Yankin Haramun, colloquially known as The Forbidden Domain.

Makat {ma-ka-te} [11]: Cindue's father.

Mash {mah-shh} [11]: A young lad at the Fus market who tries to beat Enk Wido in the Three Husk Challenge.

Mikn Chap {my-ke-ne ke-hap}: Stated by *The Annals* as the originator of taug coh, but see *taug coh* for further discussion of this. Mikn Chap was based in Oas'tal and was head of the taug coh business and receiver of women captured by Tioksen and Dar Nidri for on-selling. Whether or not Mikn Chap was involved in the actual capturing of women is unclear but his principle role was to discipline victims (ie break their spirit and make them subservient and tractable)

and sell them

Mintika {min-ti-ka} (S): A semi-autonomous region within the Sassese'lte, ruled by a Sarkun or Sarkane and broadly equivalent to a State in the USA or Australia.

Mizirlai Tafki {me-zir-la-ee taf-ki}: A large lake in western Tersees, one of several large lakes on the Gadse River.

Monahi {mo-na-hi} (S): The designated Keeper of the Peace in a village or town in Us-Iota. Broadly equivalent to a Sheriff and appointed by the Imred to the Sarkun.

Neiter {nay-eet-er} [11]: One of two farmer brothers from Rudailk who bought Cindue from Mikn Chap and later sold her on to Shina Ganam.

Nena {nay-nah} [11]: The sole reference to Nena in *The Annals* is that of an identification mark on a cylinder in the dwelling of Tioksen. It must be assumed, as Tioksen refers to these cylinders as holding the memories of those women he has captured and sold into servitude, that Nena is one of those unfortunates.

Noften / Nofting {nof-ten / nof-ting}: A Sassese'litian swear word.

Noxu {no-zu}: Autumn's mentor at her Esyup. It is unclear from *The Annals* whether Noxu found the abandoned infant and named her or became her mentor at some later point. What is clear, however, is that Noxu was the closest person to a father that Autumn had.

Oas'tal {oh-ah-sta-ul}: A town in northern Us-Iota which is a trading hub for the wider farming district. Oas'tal is notable primarily for being the base of operations of Mikn Chap. Pop: approx 230.

Okimum {oh-ki-mu-em}: A type of chilli common in southern Sassese'lte but, at the time of *The Annals*, only rarely shipped to the north because of difficulties with preservation. They were much prized as a result and could command high prices.

Omastem {om-ah-st-em} (S): A middle ranking officer in the Us-Iota military. Broadly equivalent to a sergeant.

Piers Sakratar {pi-er-se -sa-cra-ta-re}: First Secretary, Chief Advisor and Commander in Chief to the Roinad of Aferraron.

Ranta {ra-ne-ta} [11]: A soldier who accosts Cindue at a market in Etenen.

Resnan {re-es-en-an} [11]: One of three men who accuse Logan (falsely) of pickpocketing and who subsequently lost his finger and thumb in the subsequent fight with Autumn.

Ridoradi {ry-do-ra-de} [11]: Maker and seller of games at a market in Fus.

Roinad {ro-in-ad}: The monarch of Aferraron although conceptually more a ‘first among equals’ with the Opsablepsia being the ‘rest among equals’. This role is attained through prowess in the Mundulgen and not by divine right. It is not restricted to men.

Rudailk {ru-da-ile-ke}: A small farming community in central Us-Iota and home to the farmers Sayam and Neiter who bought the girl Cindue from the trader Mikn Chap then sold her on to Shina Ganam some two years later.

Sarkun/Sarkane {sark-un / sark-ane} (S): The ruler of a mintika, Sarkun being male and Sarkane female.

Sassese’lte {sa-se-sel-te}: The land of the Oboulco, to the West of Aferraron across the Azour Sea.

Sayam {say-ah-me} [11]: A farmer based in Rudailk who purchased Cindue from Mikn Chap then sold her on to Shina Ganam.

Seibi {se-eye-beee} [11]: The omastem of one of the two detachments of soldiers undergoing training at the village of Etenen.

Selti {sel-ti} (S): The language of the people of Sassese’lte.

Shina Ganam {shy-nay ga-na-me} [11]: A farmer with a large property between the Atafa River and Mizirlai Tafki in the east of Us-Iota. After meeting with Tioksen, Shina Ganam purchased the taug cohmm contract of Cindue from the Sayam and Neiter brothers to exploit her as an indentured servant on his farm.

Sid {sid}: The capital of the mintika of Us-Iota in Sassese’lte.

Sidysmis Tafki {si-de-ee-ss-my-se taf-ki}: A large lake in north eastern Us-Iota, one of several lakes on the Gadse River.

T’naagi {tun-ah-ag-ee}: A tribe of three toed, three fingered creatures who dwell in Gauygao, a land within Yankin Haramun (The Forbidden Domain) but hidden by a veil of magic.

Taug Cohm {ta-ug co-hem} (S): The name given to a particular form of employment ~ broadly similar to indentured servitude ~ that

existed in the northern parts of Us-Iota as well as western Ahi'aktes and western Tersees for a brief period. In essence the employee was contracted to work for the employer for a wage but under *taug coh*m the employer had the right to deduct the costs of employment from those wages until such time as the costs were fully recovered from the employee. In practice the costs, including food, accommodation, travel and clothing, were levied at a rate higher than the wages meaning, in effect, the employee was enslaved. In *The Annals* Mikn Chap claims to have originated the idea of *taug coh*m. This is disputed by some authorities as there are indications that *taug coh*m pre-dates *The Annals*, and therefore Mikn Chap, by a generation. Furthermore Tioksen says that he passes the women to Mikn Chap after he has taken their memories. The argument is that Tioksen likely originated *taug coh*m as a means of disposing of his victims, delegating the management of it to Mikn Chap. It is, however, equally possible, that Tioksen made use of an existing practice or even, conceivably, that Tioksen and Mikn Chap developed *taug coh*m jointly. Moreover, with a somewhat ironic twist, it has been suggested by several scholars that the practice of *taug coh*m became widespread throughout Sassese'lte as the bardic tales that comprise *The Annals* themselves began to spread which would suggest *The Annals* were a driving factor. Interestingly, legal historians maintain that *taug coh*m was not banned by law until some two generations after *The Annals* which would strongly indicate that the removal of Tioksen, Mikn Chap and Dar Nidri by Autumn did not bring *taug coh*m to an end.

Tefkuu abn Atlras {te-fe-ke-oo ab-en at-el-ras} [10]: A fairly notorious pirate. Although born in the Us-Iota mintika of Sassese'lte, Atlras operated largely from a base in the swamps of the Ghabat Kathifa forest of southern Roaaut with the indirect support of the Sarkane of Roaaut, Maelle aibna Pamyła.

Three Husk Challenge: A sleight of hand trick whereby a nut is placed underneath one of three coconut husk halves before the husks are rapidly moved around. Wagers are placed on where the nut will end up. The skill to the trick lies in the performer flicking the nut to a different husk unobserved.

Tioksen {tie-ok-se-ne} [11]: One of the T'naagi from the Land of Gauygao who was directly involved in the capture and sale of women. Tioksen's primary interest was in extracting the memories of women and re-living them for his private pleasure. Once the memories were

removed, Tioksen then passed the women to Mikn Chap for selling-on as part of the taug coh̄m scheme. See *Taug Coh̄m* for a discussion on Tioksen's involvement in origination taug coh̄m.

Us-Iota {oo-see-oh-tah}: A mintika within the Sassese'lte union.

Waad {wa-ah-de} [11]: A soldier who accosts Cindue at a market in Etenen.

Witibea {wi-ti-bee-ah} [11]: Era'owen to Mikn Chap. Witibea was an early victim of taug coh̄m who 'bought' relative freedom by undertaking to become his full era'owen rather than his almost. Undoubtedly Mikn Chap chose this option as the era'owen relationship carries a number of legal ties and obligations that the informal almost era'owen does not. It is not known whether Witibea was one of the women whose memories were taken by Tioksen. With the death of Mikn Chap, Witibea inherited his wealth and property.

Wona {wo-na} [11]: A maker of cheese in the village of Etenen.

Xomerin {zom-eh-rin} [10]: Assistant to Zytote, the Principle Aide to Hysleria.

Yaaiaab {ya-yay-yi-ab} (S): A mammal native to Sassese'lte which is related to the deer family but comparable in size to a badger or a medium sized dog. Typically yaaiaabs have a covering of short hair which varied from grey to tan to red with patches of yellowish-white. They are herbivores and are only rarely found outside wooded or forested areas. Unlike deer, yaaiaabs do not have antlers.

Yankin Haramun {yan-kin ha-ra-moo-na}: The largely uninhabited far North, beyond the Majmueat Kabira Range. Still referred to in archaic Selti, Yankin Haramun translates literally as 'The Forbidden Domain' although there is no record, written or oral, concerning who or what forbids the land or why. It is widely accepted amongst historians and geographers that the most likely origin of the name is simply due to the extreme conditions. But see *Gauygao*.

Yellow Tail Ponit {po-nee-te} (S): A species of spider found primarily in northern Sassese'lte, in the region then known as Yankin Haramun. Typically the female is 30-45mm in leg span with a venomous bite rated as Level 1 (extreme) in toxicity as 0.01g is sufficient to kill a 100kg man within 2-3 seconds. The male is considerably smaller at 11-15mm leg span and is not venomous. Both have a distinctive yellow stripe across the end of their abdomen.

Yofa Bewelc {yo-fa be-we-le-ke} [2]: A trader from Ahtolgo who supplies the Sauizuxu Mine and who employs Autumn and Logan.

Yook {yu-ke} (S) [11]: A contemptuous term in Us-Iota equivalent to 'cur' or 'scum'.

Yxcn {ick-sin}: The Deity of Transitions which includes gateways, portals, boundaries, fences, beginnings, endings and so forth. A minor deity.

Zytote natal Ammen ab Pimel {zie-toe-teh na-tal ah-mem-en ab pim-el} [10]: The Principal Aide to Hysleria.