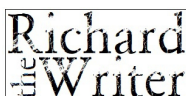


Lietapis Vosienskaj Savany

The Annals Of
Autumn Savannah

a new translation

Richard Jefferis



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aka Richard The Writer.

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› Sostaja Kazka ‹

~ The Sixth Tale ~

Chapter One

The evening sun touched lightly on the eyes of Xanos the Elder. He sat cross-legged on a shelf part way up an unnamed mountain, an old man lost in the vastness of the land. A warm breeze rising from the hot lands some distance below played with his thin straggly beard and the few remaining wisps of hair around the back of his skull. His pale green eyes, still lit with mischievous humour despite his age, lifted from the scroll on the thin board on his lap and he sighed. Off to the West, directly in front of him, Astauand was just touching the horizon. Below and to the North the Tenarkan River sparkled as it meandered its way to the sea beyond the horizon, a ribbon of shimmering silver across the mottled brown and green of the land.

Xanos eased the thin board from his lap and placed it gently on the ground beside him. He had finished his writing, save only for his signature, and wanted nothing more than to enjoy his last sunset. Astauand in all its glory was a fine sight and Xanos gave silent thanks. A line of clouds, once white and fluffy as they had crept in and up were now shades of pink as Astauand lit them from underneath. He had had a long life and this was a fitting ending.

“Like the wings of flamingos,” whispered Xanos to himself and chuckled happily. The simple fact that he had seen the wings of flamingos and knew of their pinkness confirmed his life had not been in vain. To experience the world is the purpose of life and he had much experience of the world.

“I have seen ugliness in my life,” he said aloud, his voice no longer as strong as it had been in his youth and middle summers, “and much beauty. I know your eyes are much better than mine, Cambul, but I do not envy you their clarity for you cannot see this sunset as I do.”

“Even if my eyes were as yours, Master Xanos,” said Cambul, similarly seated on the ledge not far away, “I would not see as you do for I have not your clarity of mind to understand what I see before me.”

“I no longer seek to understand,” said Xanos. He coughed gently and shifted his position slightly. “It is sufficient for me now to experience and enjoy. Mayhap understanding will come to me in time but the joy

of this sunset will remain the same.”

“Indeed, Master Xanos,” said Cambul, solemnly and they both fell silent.

Xanos felt Cambul was at times too solemn and too intent on analysis which was why he had blocked Cambul's formal transition to Krisana and instead brought him on this expedition to Neander. He had hoped that the exposure of Cambul to a wealth of new experiences would broaden his experience and deepen his capacities but as yet there had been little sign of it. Oh, Cambul was indeed highly able and skilled technically and would undoubtedly become a full Krisana on his return to the Esyup in Aferraron but he lacked the roundness to his edges that would mark him for anything other than the teaching of novices. All the skills of a Krisana are nothing if that Krisana cannot appreciate the simple beauty of rain drops on a spider's web, the music of dry leaves lifted by the breeze or the shifting shapes of orange redness in the glowing logs of a dying fire. The mind is the product of the senses and the senses shape the mind.

Astauand slowly sank, the pinkness of the clouds deepening to red against the darkening blue of the sky. The river below, too, changed. Its silvery shimmer losing its lustre and darkening to grey. The ever present calling of birds quietened then broke out anew as their final chorus of the day heralded the approaching night. A sudden motion on the ground in front of him momentarily distracted Xanos' contemplation of the sunset and he wished the small lizard well as it scurried to find a place to sleep the cool of the night away.

“Did you see the lizard, Opgarn?” asked Xanos.

“Yes Master Xanos,” said Opgarn his voice deep and creaky.

“What does a lizard think of sunsets?” asked Xanos, raising his eyes to watch a flock of bird silhouettes make their way across the face of Astauand.

“I can only imagine, Master Xanos,” said Opgarn, his voice squeaking momentarily before going deep then becoming high pitched again. He cleared his throat. “But I imagine the lizard thinks that it is the end of

the day's warmth."

"Can the lizard see beauty in the sunset?" asked Xanos.

"I imagine all things see beauty, Master," said Opgarn. He cleared his throat again. "In sunsets and other things."

"If the lizard's eye is the same as ours then likely it will see the beauty," said Cambul.

"What say you to that, Opgarn?" asked Xanos, his voice little more than a whisper.

"Only that if the lizard's eye is like ours it may see beauty as we do, Master," said Opgarn, the tones of his voice shifting like grains of sand in a storm, "but if it sees in a different way then I imagine it will see beauty in a different way as well. Perhaps the lizard will see more beauty in the sunset than we do for it may see things we cannot."

"And that is why Opgarn will become a great Krisana," thought Xanos, "when he has fully moved from boy to man. Cambul sees things clearly as they are yet Opgarn sees clearly how they might be otherwise. I hope Cambul does not destroy that clarity on their return journey."

"And what of Mookuku?" asked Xanos. He was starting to feel tired, drained.

"Mookuku cannot see the sunset, Master," said Cambul. "His eyes are covered by the woven fronds that cool his head."

"Mookuku can see the grass, Master," said Opgarn respectfully. "And perhaps he thinks the sunset is more magnificent than we do for I have put his fronds on my own head and they do not prevent all seeing. They split the light into many colours and mayhap he sees this sunset as a multitude of rainbows or as something else. He may well find that beautiful. Certainly he is calmly eating grass and not showing any distress."

"And the point of this?" asked Xanos.

“That we cannot truly know what others see, Master,” said Cambul, as though the point was obvious.

“Indeed,” said Xanos patiently.

“If you please, Master,” said Opgarn after a short pause. His voice was again deep and raspy.

“Go on,” said Xanos, revelling in the simple austere beauty of the final arc of Astauand as it wavered above the horizon.

“If we cannot truly know what others see,” said Opgarn, “then others cannot truly know what we see.” The last 'see' came out as a squeak again as his voice came to terms with the changes in his body as he grew.

“Indeed,” said Xanos patiently.

Opgarn thought some more then tentatively coughed again.

“Go on,” said Xanos.

“If we cannot know what others see,” said Opgarn, “and they cannot know what we see, then how is it possible for others to see ourselves as we see ourselves?”

“A good question,” said Xanos. He sighed as the last glimpse of his last sunset slipped below the horizon and felt a contentment spread slowly through his body. “So does the lizard know he is a lizard? Does Mookuku know he is a donkey? Or do they think of themselves in other ways to how we think of them?”

“I venture not,” said Opgarn. “The lizard will know what he is but the idea of being a lizard is what we think. Mayhap the lizard will think of himself in a different way to how we think of him.”

“We will talk no more on this,” said Xanos. “I grow too weary to talk and my time is near but do not stop thinking on it and talk with others when you can.”

“Can I get you some food, Master?” asked Opgarn, anxiously.

“Some shayi would be nice,” said Xanos. “I have no need of food any longer but my mouth is dry.”

“At once, Master,” said Opgarn.

He quickly made his way to the fire where some shayi was brewing.

“He is a good lad,” said Xanos to Cambul then wondered why he had said it. If Cambul agreed he would already know and if he did not then what Xanos said would make little difference. Truly how one person sees another has little bearing on how someone else sees that person.

“Indeed,” said Cambul. “Have you finished your letter?”

“All that remains is to sign it and seal it,” said Xanos. “You have the box ready?”

“I have the box,” said Cambul.

Xanos nodded and sipped the shayi Opgarn put beside him. It tasted strong but he could no longer discern any particular flavour.

“Prepare the wax,” said Xanos and Opgarn hurried back to the fire.

Xanos lifted his writing board onto his lap and scanned the scroll again. He nodded several times then picked up his quill and dipped it in the tiny ink pot. Then he hesitated, a small doubt passing through his mind. His hand trembled and he observed it dispassionately then firmly signed his name and laid down the quill. He bent forward a little and blew on his signature to help the ink dry then carefully rolled the scroll tightly and tied it with a grass stalk.

“The box,” he said.

Cambul passed the simple hand moulded mud box to Xanos who placed it neatly on his writing board. He gently inserted the scroll into the box through an opening he had left at one end.

“The stopper,” he said and held out his hand.

He was pleased to see it was no longer trembling. His hand was as firm and steady as it had been in his youth although the skin was now wrinkled and the veins stood out and the knuckles were swollen. Cambul passed him the stopper with a hand still strong and unwrinkled.

“I do not envy you your youth,” thought Xanos to himself and smiled.

He pressed the stopper into the end of the mud box and used the wax to seal it tightly against the predations of insects and weather.

“So, it is done,” he said quietly to himself and put the writing board back on the ground beside him.

Astauand was fully gone and the clouds were now dark red and the sky a luminous misty darkness.

“You mean to go through with this, then, Master,” said Cambul, his voice disapproving although none showed on his face.

“It is the right choice,” said Xanos, taking another sip of shayi. “If the predictions of Ameepavai are correct, then my letter will serve its purpose. If they are not then no harm will be done. It is a simple matter.”

“Then why seal the box?” said Cambul. “If Ameepavai is correct it needs no such protection.”

“It makes me feel better,” said Xanos with a smile. “Destiny will do whatever destiny will do but at this moment I live in the present and I ask nothing more than to feel good.”

“No one can do more than live in the present, Master,” said Cambul. “The past is gone and the future is yet to come. Have you written your poem?”

“Yes,” said Xanos. “Would you like to hear it?”

“I would be honoured, Master,” said Cambul.

“Call Opgarn,” said Xanos. “I would like him to hear it as well.”

He coughed gently again and lifted another scroll from his writing board. Cambul beckoned to Opgarn who came over and sat beside Xanos. Xanos smiled contentedly and unrolled the scroll and peered at it in the fading light.

“Alas the light is too dim for my old eyes,” he said, knowing he remembered every word of his death poem and did not need to read what he had written. “You will please read it aloud for me, Opgarn.”

He held out the scroll and Opgarn hesitated then took it. Opgarn cleared his throat and concentrated on keeping his voice as steady as possible even though he knew it was beyond his control. Xanos deserved the effort and the respect.

*Born into this world
Toothless and empty handed,
I now depart the same way.
Entering, leaving;
Two things of no consequence.
The illusion of me leaves.*

His words drifted down the mountainside and faded into the night.

The three sat in silence, the Elder, the Krisana and the Novitiate, silent and contemplating their inner thoughts. Xanos became aware that Opgarn was crying gently and reached out to put his hand, a light as a feather, on Opgarn's shoulder.

“The illusion of me leaves,” he said softly. “Remember, life is but a fleeting illusion. Its ending is of no consequence.”

The boy nodded, unwilling or perhaps unable to express that the passing of a life held consequence for others even if it had none for the one passing.

“That was beautiful,” said Cambul softly, surprising Xanos. He had expected Cambul to only comment on the classic structure of his final poem, five syllables then seven then seven then five, seven and seven again.

“Perhaps there is hope for him after all,” thought Xanos then dismissed the thought. He would not be alive when the dawn came and whatever hopes he had would die with him. His hopes could be the hopes of no one else, just as his perception of the sunset's beauty could not be anyone else's.

“It is time,” he said. “You both go to sleep and let me sit here in my final hours. I feel my death creeping upon me and I have no need of company. Truly, Plakill and Plifal will be my final companions.”

“As you wish, Master,” said Cambul but neither of them made any move to leave him.

Xanos slowly stood up and straightened his tunic then sat down again. He smoothed the cloth over his thighs then crossed his legs, his heels resting on top of his knees. He breathed in slowly and deeply and straightened his back, resting his cupped palms in his lap.

“I was born on a farm near Pirend,” he said quietly into the darkness. “At a young age I went to the Esyup and stayed there for many, many years until I became an Elder. 'Twas on that day that I realised that I knew not my place, save only that the Esyup was no longer my place. I ventured out that day and returned then again and returned. Many times I ventured out and each time I returned for each time I did not find my place. You, Cambul, and you, Opgarn, and you, Mookuku, are my companions on this my last journey. I shall not return to the Esyup for my journeying has ended. I have found my place. Here, on this shelf on an unknown mountain in a strange land. I have found my place, at last.”

His companions remained silent, for what was there to say?

Xanos lifted his head and his aged eyes probed the night sky.

“I have found my place,” he whispered.

He never spoke again. Cambul and Opgarn remained seated with him throughout the night. When the light of Astauand lit the sky again Xanos was still as he had been, cross legged with his head high and his back straight, save that he was cold and his eyes unseeing. Cambul felt his wrist then gently put his ear to his chest.

“He is gone,” he said quietly.

Opgarn nodded. “I will make shayi,” he said.

He made three cups and they left one in front of Xanos while they drank theirs. Then they gathered rocks and built a cairn around Xanos. Cambul kept two flat stones aside until the final stone was placed at the top of the cairn then he placed the smaller of the flat stones carefully in front of it so it faced the West.

“I know not what you wrote nor why you wrote it nor who you wrote it for,” he said, “but I honour your request.”

He picked up the mud box and turned it over in his hands until he found the inscription Xanos had engraved on one side while it was drying then laid the box on the stone with the inscription face down. He paused then gently pushed the box so it nestled against the stones of Xanos' cairn. Perhaps Xanos would know it was there and watch over it.

Cambul and Opgarn stayed two more days on that shelf on the side of the mountain while they took turns carving Xanos' death poem into the other flat stone. It was crudely done as neither had the skills of a stone mason but the result was legible and was marked with Xanos' name.

“Xanos chose you to read his poem,” said Cambul when it was done. “You should be the one to place it on his tomb.”

Opgarn blinked in surprise then picked up the stone and took it over to the cairn. He studied the cairn and its surroundings while deciding where to put it then carefully laid the stone so it rested in front of the mud box.

“All that remains,” said Cambul when it was done, “is to return to the Esyup and inform them. We will leave in the morning.”

Chapter Two

The hawk rode the thermals effortlessly. With the barest of twitches of the splayed feathers at the tips of its outstretched wings it rose or fell according to its whim, its keen eyes scanning the ground below. Slowly it circled then veered away to circle over another patch. Some way distant its brothers and sisters did much the same, each intent on their hunt but keeping track of the others. Who knows, if one found something there may be enough for several.

This hawk, though, for reasons known only within the family, had pride of place. It got to patrol the river, with its banks of vegetation and sustenance for a myriad of small creatures as well as the small settlement and surrounding fields a little further upstream. Away from the river the vegetation got sparser, dependent on occasional rainfall, and the pickings leaner but the river, ahh, the river. A broad sweep of water coming from the Skizze Mountains and flowing across the plain, bringing life. High above the river flew the hawk and today it was watching the two small figures.

They weren't targets though. The figures were too big and showed no sign of mortal injury or imminent death. But, through long experience, the hawk had learned that such figures often left edibles behind and it was easier to take their leavings than invest in the effort of catching and killing wary prey. The hawk stayed high and circled but the figures kept moving and showed no sign of discarding anything, least of all a partially eaten fish or rabbit. The hawk was patient though.

"I think that is the first hawk I have seen since we came to Neander," said Logan. He stood still and looked up at the sky. He had to shade his eyes with his hand but the tiny shape high above was clearly a bird and a large one at that.

"There is another, over there," said Autumn, also looking at the sky. "Perhaps they are mountain hawks. We are not far now from the edge of the Skizze Mountains so they could be coming from there."

"Looks like a big one," said Logan, watching the hawk. "Do you suppose it is watching us to see if we are about to die or do you think it will attack us?"

"I venture not," said Autumn. "We move too vigorously and unless it is a huge bird it is unlikely to want to attack us. It is most likely watching to see if we disturb any small creatures."

"It would seem to be getting closer," said Logan, "and it is definitely circling around us."

Autumn stood and watched the hawk circle. "No," she said after a few moments. "The centre of its circle is a little further to the North. I would think it has its eyes on something other than us."

"Hmm," said Logan.

He dropped his hand and started walking again, following two or three paces behind Autumn as she meandered between the clumps of grass and scrubby bushes. They were perhaps fifty paces away from the river. Within easy distance of it to use it as a guide but far enough away from the more luxuriant foliage that would slow them down. Not that they were in a hurry, but why choose the more difficult path when an easier one is available?

The hawk was in more of a hurry. That is not to say that it was hurried, but it was aware that neither it nor its chicks had eaten for a while and, although not yet urgent, that circumstance added a small intensity to its questing gaze. The merest shiver of a single wing tip feather and the hawk drifted a little to the North East, a little closer to the settlement, its eyes shifting hither and yon.

Then they locked onto a movement. A tiny movement, to be sure, but a movement that was out of place. There was something small going from tussock to tussock but not moving with the breeze the way the stems and leaves in a tussock did. One tip feather on each wing twitched and the hawk's circling descended. Whatever it was it was similar in colour to the dark muddy grey of the soil and the hawk wanted a closer look. There it was again. A quick scurrying movement then whatever it was disappeared under another tussock. The hawk started to descend more rapidly, its eyes locked on that patch of ground.

"I think it has seen something," said Logan, stopping to stare up into

the sky again. "It has dropped a lot lower. I can see its wings clearly now and its circle is getting smaller."

"So it is," said Autumn, stopping to watch. "I wonder what it has seen."

The hawk ignored them. It had kept its eyes tightly focused on the tussock where it had last seen a movement all the time it had been circling and descending and nothing had yet come out from underneath. The hawk circled once more, then again, debating whether to stay longer or whether to cut its losses and move on. One more circuit, the hawk decided. It dropped still lower, the tussock locked into the centre of its eyes. Nothing moved, save the gentle toing and froing of the grasses. Disappointed the hawk flicked its wing tips and started to ascend, seeking altitude so it could scan a broad area again.

The rat, for that was what it was, made a mistake. One more half second and the hawk's gaze would have moved on as it rose but the scent of the newly burst seed pod proved to be its undoing. The pod lay a grass stalk length away from the tussock and its smell was enticing. Underlying it was the smell of another rat, further away and the other side of the burst pod. The rat had competition and faced the dilemma of the wild; go for the food and risk attack or leave the food and risk hunger. Cautiously the rat edged out from under the tussock, its nose twitching and whiskers trembling. It could sense only the seed pod and the other rat. It was time to decide.

The hawk made no decision. It simply reacted. The corner of one eye caught the tiniest of movements and even as its eyes re-centred on the tussock, bringing the source of the movement into the magnifying centre of its focus it was wheeling over. No sooner had its eyes homed in on the rat than its wings folded back alongside its body and it turned from a floating bird drifting gracefully against a blue sky into a hurtling missile of death. The rat's neck broke before its nerves could tell its brain that there were talons in its body.

"Got it!" said Logan, impressed as always by the speed of a hawk. "Sploop, that was fast!"

The only thing he had ever seen that was faster than a hawk was Autumn and she couldn't fly. The hawk ascended with a flurry of wings then calmed again as it found a new thermal up-current and wafted up into the sky. It bent its head to check the rat was dead and adjusted its grip on the carcass then headed off home to where its two rapacious chicks were waiting. Back on the ground, the other rat, frozen in fear at the sudden appearance of the hawk, recovered and hurried off with the seed pod, unseen by hawks or humans. It, too, had hungry young to feed.

"Did you see what it caught?" asked Autumn, saddened as always by the death of something living but knowing that all life involves death.

"No," said Logan. "It was too far away but it was smaller than a rabbit and bigger than a mouse."

They watched the hawk disappear to the East where the first of the mountains lay on the horizon. One of the other hawks had noticed this one's kill and drifted over to see what else might be around. It was high overhead and circling, its gaze downwards. The other rat, however, with its seed pod gripped between its teeth, was back in its underground burrow. It was safe, at least for now.

"Well, you can be sure it wasn't after us," said Autumn, "unless you think this one is too."

"I wasn't serious," said Logan, watching the other hawk.

Autumn glanced at him and smiled to herself. She had come to understand that sometimes Logan used humour to hide his anxieties.

"I can see a spire of smoke," she said, pointing upriver.

"Where?" asked Logan, bringing his eyes back down to the ground.

"Over yonder," said Autumn. "You see where the river bends up ahead? Where that cluster of trees is? There is smoke coming up from beyond them."

"You have good eyes," said Logan staring intently. He could just make

out the faintest of smudges above the tops of the trees. "Is it a tree on fire, do you think?"

"Perhaps," said Autumn, "but there is a farm house around here somewhere for someone must farm these fields and I have seen no other signs."

"Then let us pay them a visit," said Logan.

* * *

"There are people on horseback," said Autumn a while later.

They were close enough to see that the cluster of trees numbered around ten and that on the other side, between the trees and the river, were several small huts on a cleared patch of ground. The smoke was clearly from a fire even though the fire could not be seen as it rose almost straight up in a thin column, wafting every now and then as a breeze played with it.

"It doesn't look right though," said Logan. He stepped on a tussock to try to get a slightly better view. "There seems to be an argument of some sort. One of the men on horseback looks like he is waving a stick or a sword but I cannot see who he is talking to. There's a hut in the way but I think I can hear him shouting."

Autumn quickened her step slightly although it would still take a while to get there if trouble broke out. Logan jumped off the tussock and followed her.

"It would seem the problem, whatever it is, is resolving itself," said Autumn a short while later. "The people on horses are leaving."

"They're heading East, along the river," said Logan. "Best we stop at the huts and find out what was going on. If they are bad men then it might be best if we hold back a little so they are long gone."

"Indeed," said Autumn. "There is no sense in looking for trouble, particularly as they no doubt know this area well and we are strangers. Mayhap they are just part of the family that lives here. It could be they

are off to hunt or visit a nearby village or some such but caution is usually a good approach. I still see no sign of any others however, which strikes me as odd. Are not farmers always tending their crops and animals?"

"They do seem to keep themselves occupied," said Logan, "although perhaps they are off in the fields and there is no one at the huts."

"We shall find out soon enough," said Autumn. "Perhaps they are away fishing the river. I can see what looks to be two boats at the water's edge. We have seen none on the river downstream today so perhaps they have gone upstream. Can you hear other voices?"

"Aye," said Logan, cocking his head. "Several men by the sound of it, and a baby wailing. I wonder why we cannot see anyone. Do you suppose they are inside the huts?"

"I confess I am becoming troubled," said Autumn. "A group of men on horses is of no significance by itself but when they leave and others talk but remain hidden and do not go about their business would bode ill to me. Perhaps they have had bad news and would not welcome the arrival of strangers."

"You think we should stay away then?" asked Logan.

"I do not know," said Autumn, stopping. "I would not give the impression of being unfriendly and would offer aid if they have need of it but at the same time I do not wish to intrude on their troubles, if indeed they have troubles, which they may not. It is not impossible that these people prefer to be left alone and do not welcome strangers at the best of times."

"I think the difficulty will be resolved any moment," said Logan, standing beside her as they both watched the little cluster of huts. "People seem to be moving around now and I venture we will be spotted very shortly."

A woman had emerged from behind the hut and was crossing the clearing towards the river. She pulled a small child behind her who didn't seem to want to go.

“Good,” said Autumn. “Let us wait here until we are seen and only go over if we are invited. We can easily skirt their dwellings if they would prefer that.”

The woman got the child to the water's edge and squatted to start washing the child. She was intent on her task and the child was intent on resisting and neither saw Autumn and Logan standing in the scrub some way off. Two more women emerged and headed down to the river to join the first, both intent on their discussion. They did not look around either. A few moments later another child emerged, older than the first, pulling a young goat on a length of twine. The two ran down to the river and the goat started to chew some of the green stuff on the bank. All seemed oblivious to the two strangers leaning on their staffs and quietly watching.

“I wonder if we should say something,” said Logan quietly. “Just to let them know we are here.”

“There are six huts,” mused Autumn, “yet only three women, two children and a goat. Where are the men? We know little of their customs but for certain we should not speak to the women until the men have at least acknowledged us. We will wait here a little longer.”

Very little seemed to happen. The three women continued to talk animatedly while the small child was thoroughly scrubbed. The older child, a boy by the look of it, pushed the goat into the water then jumped after it and the two splashed around until one of the women spoke sharply to the child. A murmur of other voices became apparent although it wasn't clear where they came from. Chastised, the boy climbed out of the water and pulled the goat after him. Then the boy looked up and saw Autumn. He froze and stared at her then pointed and said something. One of the women flapped her hand at the boy but none of them looked up. Then the boy spoke again and pulled at the robe of one of the women, his mother most likely. She looked up at the boy and said something and he jabbed his finger at Autumn. The woman looked over and for a few moments there was complete silence. Then she screamed and pandemonium broke loose.

All three women scrambled to their feet and the two children were snatched up, the goat dangling for a moment by the twine around its

neck before the boy let go and the goat dropped to the ground. It seized the opportunity to make its escape and hurried over to the patch of grass it had been chewing only moments before. The women started hurrying towards the huts. At the same time, there came a hubbub of voices from behind the hut that shielded them from sight and four men charged out with an older man limping more slowly behind, using a stick to support himself. All four carried makeshift weapons of some sort, most likely farming tools. The women started calling out in shrill voices and pointing and the men skidded to a halt. As one they all turned to stare at Autumn and Logan, holding up their weapons threateningly while the women disappeared among the huts. None of them spoke.

"I think they have seen us," said Autumn.

"Are you sure?" asked Logan.

"Of course I am ...," started Autumn, glancing at him. "Ahh, was that one of your jokes?"

"Yes," said Logan wryly. He took a deep breath. "Well, I suppose I should say something, you being a woman and all." He smiled broadly then ostentatiously laid his staff on the ground and held out both hands in what he hoped was a friendly gesture. "My name is Logan. I am a stranger in this land."

The men stared belligerently at him and at least one tightened his grip on his weapon.

"Umm, I come in peace and friendship," said Logan tentatively.

"We should kill them," shouted one of the men, brandishing a rather large, fearsome looking hoe.

"Yes, before they kill us," shouted one of the others. He held what looked like a cleaver of some sort.

"Umm," said Logan stepping backwards. This wasn't going the way he expected. "Um, who is your Magide?"

One of the others ran forward a couple of paces and hurled a hammer at Logan. Autumn instantly jumped forward and caught it by its heavy head with a sharp smacking sound. The men fell silent and watched to see what she would do next.

“Thank you,” whispered Logan.

“Take my staff,” whispered back Autumn.

Logan took her staff and she slowly walked forward, carrying the hammer by its shaft. The tension in the air began to build and the man who had thrown it nervously stepped backwards to rejoin his fellows. Autumn stopped one pace in front of him. She lifted the hammer and flipped it so the shaft pointed to the man. He flinched.

“This is yours, I think,” said Autumn. She smiled and held it out.

The man, all of two finger widths taller than Autumn, smiled nervously back and tentatively reached out to take the hammer.

“Please be more careful with it,” she said. “It is heavy and could hurt someone.”

“Umm, y-yes,” said the man, taking it cautiously. Up close it was apparent he was not much older than Logan.

“Now I do not know what is going on here,” said Autumn, spreading her hands in front of her, palms forward, “but Logan and I come in peace and offer you friendship and we have been polite. There is no need to attack us.”

“Give us none of your lies, you misbegotten turd of a camel,” growled the older man with the limp from behind the other four. “We may all die tomorrow but at least we can take these two with us. Kill them.”

Chapter Three

The four men surged forward and Autumn stepped rapidly backwards, turning so she was side on to them. Logan instinctively stepped forward then stilled himself. Autumn could easily deal with five men and he knew he would only get in her way but he picked up his staff just in case. The man with the cleaver slashed it towards Autumn's neck and she calmly leaned back so it whistled past then, as its momentum carried it onwards, she grabbed the blade and pulled it from his hand while twisting and dropping to trip him. The hoe, swung by another, passed harmlessly where her head had been.

She rolled on the ground and leapt to her feet and tossed the cleaver to land in front of Logan. The youngster with the hammer jumped on her and she twisted to let his weight pull him to the ground, relieving him of the hammer at the same time. That joined the cleaver in front of Logan. The man with the hoe had lost his balance and let the hoe touch the ground before he could lift it again, readying for another swipe. Autumn kicked the back of his knee, not hard enough to do damage but enough to make the knee give way and the man fell to the ground. She stamped on his hand and pulled at the hoe, tossing it to Logan in the same movement.

“Stand back,” growled the thickest set of the four, waving a small hand sickle in a figure of eight movement. The two on the ground picked themselves up and spread out while the one who'd lost his cleaver tried to edge around Autumn, with half an eye on jumping on Logan to retrieve it.

The sickle man dropped into a crouch and edged forward, switching the sickle from hand to hand in an attempt to confuse Autumn. This was a mistake as the sickle was curved and when it was in his left hand the curve did not follow the natural slashing direction of that arm. So, when he lunged at Autumn, feigning a slash with his right hand while shifting the sickle to his left to slice into her belly she didn't bother to even move out of the way. She simply grabbed his hand around the sickle handle and twisted it sharply forcing him to lurch awkwardly to his left with a strained gasp.

The other two jumped on her so she continued the move and spun

away, taking the sickle with her and narrowly evading the grasp of one of the men. The other caught her arm and she pulled him hard into the man who had had the sickle. Winded they both collapsed to the ground. Autumn jumped back two paces and was about to toss the sickle to Logan when she noticed he had his foot on the cleaver and his staff pressed into the youngest man's chest.

"Do not hurt him," she called and ran over to slap the man in his face to get his attention.

It worked and, enraged, the man lunged towards her. She sidestepped and he missed her completely, landing flat on his face.

"Catch," said Autumn, tossing Logan the sickle. He stepped back and let it fall to the ground in front of him.

The other three men started to advance, warily, on Autumn, and she backed away, one arm bent at her side ready to jab, the other held out in front. Two of the men lunged at her and she somersaulted backwards out of the way. The youngest got to his feet and joined the others and Autumn backed away another step. Then she suddenly lunged to the right, as though to make a run for it, but dropped to put one hand on the ground and swept her leg around, taking the legs of two of the men out from under them then she pivoted on her arm and leapt to her feet and went to the left instead.

There was a moment's confusion as the two fallen men cannoned into the other two and while they worked out where she had gone so Autumn calmly walked over to the older man who was leaning heavily on his stick.

"Tell them to stop or I may have to hurt someone," she said.

The man growled and lashed upwards at her with his stick. She dodged it easily and caught him as his leg gave way and gently lowered him to the ground.

"Do you really want this?" she asked as the man grimaced in pain.

"Stop!" he shouted, holding up his hand as the other four came

running over. They stopped, breathing heavily. "Help me to my feet."

Autumn helped him up and made sure his stick was supporting him before she let go. Then she turned to face the others.

"Are any of you hurt?" she asked. "I tried not to do any harm but accidents can happen."

The men muttered and looked embarrassed at being bested by a woman. Worse, by one who wasn't even trying.

"I take it that is a 'no', then," said Autumn. None appeared to be injured although one had a scratch on his face, no doubt from a small stone as he landed.

"Who are you?" demanded the older man. "What do you want with us?"

"I am Autumn Savannah," said Autumn, "and yonder is my companion Logan. We are strangers in this land and seek only peace and hospitality."

"Where are you from?" he said, scowling.

"Aferraron," said Autumn. She beckoned Logan over. He collected up the weapons and ambled across.

"Aferr ..., Aferaton," said the man, stumbling over the name. "I have not heard of that place. Where is it?"

"It is a land far to the North across the sea," said Autumn.

The man nodded and his eyes travelled over her body then he looked at Logan.

"Indeed, your manner of dress is strange," he said, "although he is dressed as one of us but he is too fair to be from this land. You speak truth? You are really from this place called Aferlon?"

"Aferraron," said Autumn. "Yes I speak truly. Logan, give them back

their weapons.”

“Are you sure?” asked Logan.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “They will not attack us again as they now know we are not who they thought we were.”

“Indeed,” said the older man. Then he hawked and spat on the ground. “And no doubt you will take them from us again as easily if we do for we are farmers, not fighters.”

He watched as Logan handed out the farm tool weapons.

“I am Outea,” he added as an afterthought. “These are my sons, Jabiv, Oglum, Bunkoru and Mika. Logan, you say? That is an unusual name, as is Autumn but women are often named after pretty things in the world and Autumn can be a time of prettiness. You must be a great and mighty warrior, Logan, if you have a woman such as this to deal with your little skirmishes.”

“Umm, yes,” said Logan, “something like that.”

“And, truly, you are not from Buhfa Ouoinel?” asked Outea, still looking suspicious.

“We came through Cim-Irsou and several small villages along the river,” said Autumn, “but I do not recall any being named Buhfa Ouoinel. Is it to the East, in the mountains?”

“Buhfa Ouoinel is a man,” said Outea shortly. He looked around then turned to survey the clearing and huts behind him. “Travellers, you say,” he said looking back at Logan. “We get few enough of those, this side of the river. You will take some shayi with us?”

Autumn looked at Logan as it was apparent that Outea expected him to do the talking. Logan glanced at Autumn for a clue even though he already knew she would want to understand what had happened.

“We thank you for your hospitality, Outea,” he said with a small bow.

Outea clicked his fingers and Jabiv, at least Logan thought it was Jabiv, hurried off to organise the women who were hidden in the huts. Outea hobbled over to the fire in the middle of the clearing and waved grandiosely at the ground. Logan laid down the staffs he was carrying and sat. Autumn took off her pack and sat beside him. Outea looked affronted for a moment but, as Logan clearly wasn't going to discipline the woman for seating herself in the presence of men, he had, in the name of hospitality, to put up with it. He eased himself down opposite Logan and the others arranged themselves, a little further back. Jabiv emerged from one of the huts and, as if on cue, a baby started to cry. No doubt its mother, told that the situation was no longer a danger, had uncovered its mouth. A woman, of an age of Outea, came out of the hut with a tray of cups and busied herself by the fire. Outea ignored her. The woman took frequent covert looks at Logan and, more often, at Autumn. A woman sitting with the men! Truly the day was turning out most strange.

Outea poked at the packed sandy soil with his stick several times as though lost in thought. Autumn and Logan sat patiently and the others watched them curiously.

"If you will forgive the directness," said Outea suddenly, "why are you here?"

"We were following the river," said Autumn. "We stopped only to greet you before we went on our way but there seemed to be some issue with men on horses so we stayed in case you should need aid."

The woman fumbled her cauldron at the sound of Autumn's voice but recovered quickly.

"Your woman speaks for you?" asked Outea, looking hard at Logan.

"Most of the time," said Logan with a grin. "She is better at talking than I am."

"Hmm," said Outea. A woman from across the sea who fights better than a man and talks whenever she wants? He was out of his depth here and knew it so he did the only thing he reasonably could. He addressed himself to Autumn.

“Why would you give aid to strangers when you are passing by?” he asked. “What business is it of yours?”

“It is none of our business, Outea,” said Autumn, “and we would not interfere if aid was not wanted. We waited merely in case it was.”

“And would you have given aid to the men on horses?” asked Outea.

“I would like to make it clear that we only give aid to those who suffer,” said Autumn, “and not those who are the cause of the suffering. I cannot know the rights or wrongs of any situation that we chance upon but should any appear to be suffering I would give them aid. So, yes, I would have aided the men on horseback if you and your sons were causing them suffering but not if they were causing you suffering.”

Outea nodded thoughtfully and the woman started to ladle shayi into the cups.

“Am I to understand that the men on horses were causing you grief?” asked Autumn after waiting a few moments for Outea to continue.

The woman picked up a cup of shayi and took it over to Logan. He smiled up at her and took it with a quiet 'thank you'. The woman seemed startled to be spoken to and hurried back to fetch another cup. She hesitated a moment, glanced at Outea then carried the cup to Autumn.

“Thank you,” said Autumn, taking it. The woman's dark eyes were filled with a thousand questions but none were uttered.

“How is it that you are this side of the river?” asked Outea. “Travellers in these parts usually take the road on the other side.”

“When we left Cim-Irsou the road East was very crowded and busy,” said Autumn, letting the brass cup warm her hands. “Neither of us likes crowds and we travel for enjoyment and have no need of speed so we chose to stay this side of the river. We have had no reason to cross as yet. In truth, there have been no bridges and the river thus far has been wide and seems deep and I cannot swim. Mayhap when we

come across a bridge or the river becomes narrow enough to ford we will cross but mayhap not.”

The woman handed the next cup to Outea who took it wordlessly.

“There is a bridge further East,” said Outea, “for those who wish to visit Idu Mountain and all the delights that that place enjoys but the road itself stays on the far side of the river and to the South of the mountains. You may find it easier to follow the road than travel through the mountains for few travel that way and there are little in the way of paths.”

“I thank you for that information,” said Autumn.

She sipped her shayi and pronounced it good even though it was somewhat on the weak side. It was likely that these farmers could not afford much shayi and used the leaves frequently. The fact that the huts were made from narrow bundles of water reeds bound together and stacked on their ends to form tall cones suggested their lack of wealth although it was quite possible that in a land with little rainfall this form of building was entirely adequate and commonplace. Certainly a new hut could be built or moved to another place very quickly.

Outea watched as the woman handed shayi to the others then disappeared back into the hut.

“And how is it that you come to be dressed in the manner of one from Neander if you are from another land?” he asked Logan.

Ahh,” said Logan, startled at being spoken to. “Umm, after leaving Aferraron we passed through the Zuit Islands and took their manner of dress. Umm, this is what Autumn is wearing, and I too wore the same. Then we arrived in Neander and travelled for a time with a trader crossing the Sabon Mutum Desert. He gave us some robes as a parting gift.”

“I have known a few traders,” said Outea, “but never have I known any give anything away.”

“We performed a small service for him,” said Autumn.

“And did that service involved the same skills you have shown us here?” asked Outea.

“In part,” said Autumn. In fact, helping Inyanasi against the bandits had not been the reason for his gift but it would be difficult to explain the unlikely friendship that had grown up between them; a male trader devoted to the acquisition of money and a female Krisana who could not understand the point of it.

“Indeed,” said Outea nodding. “And yet you do not wear the robes he gave you as a gift? He insulted you?”

“Oh no,” said Autumn. “The robe was a very fine gift. It was a delightful pale pink with red edging. Logan preferred the green one as you see but after wearing it for a short while I found I could not move as well as I would wish so I gave it away to a young woman on the streets of Cim-Irsou.”

“Our robes do not interfere with movement,” said Outea, looking puzzled.

“I fancy she means movements that we do not make, Magide,” said Jabiv. “I, for one, cannot raise my leg that high.”

“Ahh,” said Outea, “so you stayed with the clothing from these Islands. I see, but, and this will seem a strange question and I offer you a thousand apologies in advance for its unwarrantable intrusion, but you aided this trader with no expectation of reward?”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, suddenly realising the point of this strangely meandering conversation. “No, as I said, we give aid where aid is needed with no expectation of reward beyond the friendship of those concerned.” She put her empty shayi cup on the ground in front of her. “If I might be permitted to ask a question in return?”

Outea benevolently waved his arm as if welcoming a question.

“Was Buhfa Ouoinel one of the men on horseback that visited you

earlier?” asked Autumn.

There was a sudden sparkle of tension in the air as all five men stiffened. Even the baby in the hut stopped its noises although it could not possibly have any understanding.

“Did you not say that you did not know of Buhfa Ouoinel?” asked Outea, his suspicious look returning.

“Truly I do not,” said Autumn, glancing around, “but you did not speak of this Buhfa Ouoinel with affection and I have gained the impression in our conversation that you have some trouble that you think may be within our power to give you aid. Forgive me if I have jumped to a false conclusion.”

Outea contemplated her then stretched his injured leg out in front of him. The air of tension slowly subsided, although that could simply have been due to a cooling breeze from the South that had begun as Astauand touched the far off horizon. There was a faint odour of damp vegetation on the breeze, perhaps suggestion rain might not be far away.

“In my youth,” said Outea. He paused and finished his drink then put down the cup. “The road down yonder was heavily used. Traders between Cim-Irsou and Lizoote in the main although there were many seekers of the insights of Drasta. You know of Drasta?”

“Alas, no,” said Autumn and Logan shook his head.

“Ahh,” said Outea. He leaned forward and rested an elbow on his bent knee. “Drasta is a place where lives the seers. Truly you do not know of them?”

“I know of seers,” said Autumn. “We have them in Aferraron but I did not know there were any in Neander.”

“I did not know there were others,” said Outea, looking surprised, “but then we live in the shadow of Drasta so why would we look elsewhere?”

“Quite,” said Autumn, wondering why Outea was talking of this.

“No matter,” said Outea. “As I was saying, there were many travellers on the road in my youth but since then the number of traders has fallen. I know not why but perhaps those two places no longer trade with each other. But also in my youth Kapulkatavi died and Windustrama took his place and so the number of travellers did not much change for Windustrama built a great reputation.”

“As a seer?” asked Autumn. “Like an auger or an oracle?”

“Indeed,” said Outea. “I myself have not sought insight but from what I hear say, Kapulkatavi did little more than spout nonsense and after a time seekers lost respect. After his death some sought insight from Windustrama and word spread of the wisdom of Windustrama so as the number of traders dropped the number of seekers increased.”

“This is all very interesting,” said Autumn, “and if, as you say, Drasta is not far from here we may visit and seek insight ourselves, but what has this to do with Buhfa Ouoinel and your predicament?”

“I was coming to that,” said Outea mildly. He was beginning to enjoy talking to these outsiders with their strange ways and appalling ignorance. “Buhfa Ouoinel controls the Western mountains and all around. For as long as I can remember he and his father before him and his father before him have charged a toll for the using of the road but now there are few who travel and few who pay the toll.”

“Did you not say that as the number of traders dropped the number of seekers rose?” asked Autumn. “Do they not balance out?”

“They did, more or less, or so I heard,” said Outea. “But Windustrama died these five summers past and few seekers now travel this way and the few that do cannot pay the toll for it is too high and beyond the means of even the wealthy.”

“I see,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “so Buhfa Ouoinel is without a source of income?”

“Would that it were so,” said Outea, raising both hands to the sky.

“Astauand would smile on the happiest of lands if that were the case.”

“I do not understand,” said Logan interjecting. “If Buhfa Ouoinel is getting no tolls what then is his source of income?”

“Us,” said Outea sadly. “And we have until Astauand is at Its highest tomorrow to pay him or he will destroy the farm and kill us all.”

Chapter Four

“That is not logical,” said Autumn after Outea's sons had finished gesticulating and protesting that they would fight to the death to preserve their family. More for effect than anything as they were clearly not fighters and would stand very little chance against armed men on horseback.

“It is not logical to fight to protect your family?” exclaimed Outea, his eyes flashing.

“That is not what I meant,” said Autumn, “but no, it is not logical to do that either when you have very little chance of winning. It would be more sensible to take some other action.”

“What other action can we take?” demanded Bunkoru, the thickset one.

“You could give Buhfa what he wants,” said Autumn, “or move to another place or band together with others who face the same quandary.”

“We cannot give him what he wants,” said Outea. “He wants money and we have none. Mayhap after the market we will have a small amount but not before and he will keep returning for more.” He stared balefully at Autumn then spat on the ground. “And if we move to another place then we will have to begin farming all over again and we will have nothing to eat until the harvest which is many moons away.”

“We could talk to the others,” said Jabiv thoughtfully, “but that will take much time and time we do not have.”

“Actually it would not help much,” said Logan, and everyone looked at him. “Ahh, umm, well you will each have to stay at your farms so even if you were organised you would still be vulnerable to a surprise attack unless you posted watchers all around and I would guess you do not have enough spare people to do that. And, if the watchers did see attackers it would take time for word to get back and everyone to congregate. It would all be over long before you could do that.”

“Aye-yah!” exclaimed Outea, slamming his fist into the ground. “We are doomed! Curse that pestilential dung-infested, pox ridden bastard of a diseased whore!”

“I take it you have explained you have no money,” asked Autumn.

“A thousand times a thousand times,” said Outea bitterly, “but they do not care.”

“How many times have they been here, then?” asked Autumn, confused, as that seemed a lot of explanations.

“Three days ago and again today,” said Outea. “And tomorrow at Astauand’s height they will return for the third and last time and we will be no more. Will you help us?”

“I do not see that there is much we can do,” said Autumn. “We have no money and even if we did, as you say, they will most likely come back for more.”

“But they will slaughter my sons and grandsons,” exclaimed Outea then, as an afterthought, “and the women.”

“If they start to do harm then certainly I will step in,” said Autumn, “but there is nothing to stop them returning after we are gone and we cannot stay here forever. This Buhfa Ouoinel, will he be here tomorrow?”

“No,” said Outea. “He sends only a few of his men. No doubt he stays safely where he lives in the mountains.”

“That is unfortunate,” said Autumn, “for the only avenue I can see is to discuss the matter with him and seek to find a peaceful solution but if he is not here it will be more difficult. Do you know where he lives?”

“In the Land of the Undead if I had my way,” growled Outea, “but until then somewhere in the mountains but beyond that I do not know.”

“Mayhap if I speak with those that do come here they will take me to

Buhfa or at least tell me where to find him,” said Autumn.

“They will not wish to discuss things quietly with you,” said Outea. “In part because you are a woman and in part because they do not discuss things. They demand and they take and they kill and they know no better.”

“How many have died at their hands thus far?” asked Autumn.

“None that I know of,” said Outea. “Perhaps they have at another farm but if so word has not reached me yet.”

“Then all you know for certain at this time is that they demand,” said Autumn. “You do not know if they take or kill for either of those things have yet to happen and may just be threats to scare you. I am sure Buhfa Ouoinel is a sensible man. After all, he has had the good sense all these years to charge a toll on the road and has not slaughtered everyone who travels upon it.”

“Is that what you meant when you said it was not logical?” asked Logan.

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “The regular income from the tolls is disappearing and only a fool would kill those he seeks to replace that income with. A far more sensible solution would be to impose a tax on the farmers so that they can continue to provide his income in the future.”

“A tax?” Outea stared at Autumn in horror. “A tax! Do we not pay enough in taxes to that villainous cur in Cim-Irsou, Soros, may he live forever! Why are you saying that we should pay more in taxes? Are you sent from the Osaku? We put our trust in you and this is how you repay us? More taxes?” He leaned forward and flicked his thumb-nail under his front teeth at Autumn.

“I am not saying that is the case,” said Autumn calmly, “merely that it would be a more sensible solution from his point of view and a more desirable one from yours since it will mean you stay alive. However, be that as it may, it does give me another thought.”

“And what, pray, is that?” asked Outea sullenly.

“You pay taxes to Soros,” said Autumn. “I would imagine that he is therefore duty bound to aid you against threats such as this. After all, his income is at stake as well.”

“Pah!” exclaimed Outea. “Soros neither knows of us nor cares. My taxes, exorbitant though they are, will be as but a drop in the river to his income from all around. Why should he spend a bucket to protect a drop?”

“Well, there is the principle of it,” said Autumn, “but no matter. I shall talk with these men when they arrive tomorrow and seek to find a peaceful solution. Afterwards, Logan and I will move on and talk with your local Osaku for this matter should be brought to his attention. He is, after all, the representative of Soros in this area and Soros is the legal ruler not Buhfa Ouoinel, whatever he may think. Who is the Osaku and where would we find him?”

“Urudaqa,” said Outea grudgingly. “He is in Duuba, a day or so upriver in the foothills of Idu.”

“Excellent,” said Autumn. “We have a plan. Fear not. It is rare for things to turn out as badly as imagined. The mind is wondrously good at inventing a plethora of ill circumstances and the reality, when it happens, is never that bad. Are these men always armed with swords and on horseback?”

“Yes,” said Outea. “You do not think death is a bad outcome?”

“Indeed she does, Outea,” interjected Logan hurriedly. He was afraid Autumn would launch into her views on death as only an illusory transition from one state to another and the end of suffering in this world, which probably wouldn't help calm Outea and his sons. “She is only saying that because it is so unlikely that anyone will get hurt that it is not worth worrying about.”

“Hmmm,” said Outea, narrowing his eyes. “Five armed men on horseback against us and no one will get hurt? How is that possible?”

“There may be more than five,” said Autumn cheerfully, “but I doubt it. I expect they would consider five such men to be more than enough to deal with you. They will not be expecting any serious resistance so they will most likely not attack unless provoked.”

Logan sighed as Outea and his sons looked increasingly dispirited.

“But do not worry,” said Autumn, puzzled by their reaction. “I will greet them and talk with them. Once they understand the situation I am sure that this will all be settled peacefully. However, it is often better to be safe than sorry so as a precaution, Outea, as soon as they arrive, you and your sons should take your women and children and go into the river. Take long sticks with you. If trouble should begin stay in the water and if the men should come after you, use the sticks to trip the horses or unseat the riders. Stay in the water though, at least hip deep, whatever happens. Do not come out until they are gone.”

“Why?” asked Outea. “Will it not be more difficult to fight them in the water?”

Autumn smiled, perhaps a trifle bleakly

“For you, it will make little difference,” she said, “but you will find that a man who has come off his horse and whose head is under water will be confused and will not fight as effectively as he would on the land. Likely he will have dropped his sword as well and it is even possible his horse has fallen upon him. You will have the advantage.”

“Ayah!” exclaimed Bunkoru, looking vastly more enthusiastic. “And then we can kill them all and the river will run red with their blood!”

“I would prefer you did not do that,” said Autumn. “There is no need for anyone to get hurt. Now, where can Logan and I sleep tonight?”

* * *

“They are coming!” shouted Mika, running into the clearing from his watching post.

There was a sudden panic induced freeze as the men stopped their nervous pacing to stare off to the East.

“Everyone, to the river,” called Autumn, pointing towards it.

Outea gathered his wits and gave his orders.

“They are early,” said Autumn, as a quiet aside to Logan. She was as calm as ever despite being overly hot as she was wearing her robe over her malu, at Logan's insistence¹. “I fancy that means they are anxious.”

“Or perhaps in a hurry,” said Logan. “Mayhap they have another farm to visit after this one, or the last farm did not take as long as they expected.”

“Both fair points, friend Logan,” said Autumn, watching the men start to herd their women and children out of the huts, “but giving an ultimatum for Astauand's high point suggests otherwise. If they have another farm to visit it will likely be at sunset.”

“True,” said Logan. “Do you want me to go to the river as well?”

“No,” said Autumn. “Stay here with me for your counsel may be needed, particularly as these men may not take me seriously to begin with.”

“As you wish,” said Logan. He positioned himself beside Autumn and together they watched the five horsemen ride into the clearing.

The leading horseman reined in in front of Logan and the others spread out around him. He slowly looked around and smiled when he saw Outea and his family standing in the river. He nodded without saying anything then twisted to look behind him. Satisfied that there was no obvious ambush he scratched his beard and looked at Logan.

“So,” he drawled, looking down at Logan. “Who are you?”

1 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*. Autumn was given a ribbon as a gift by Mother Midcarn which she sewed to the hem of her robe. The ribbon has magical properties which enable objects, such as arrows and spears, to pass through her harmlessly while wearing it.

"I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup," said Autumn, "and this is my companion Logan."

"That sounds very impressive," said the man, shifting his gaze to look at her for the first time. "Is it supposed to mean something?"

"That depends on why you are here," said Autumn in a conversational voice. "Do you have a name?"

"It is Jampor," said Jampor, "although I have no fancy sounding words that go after it. You are not from these parts."

He urged his horse forward a little to stand in front of Autumn and used his riding crop to pull Autumn's robe open slightly. Whether to inspect the unusual garment a little more closely or to check that Autumn was indeed a woman was not clear. Either way, Autumn leant back slightly so her robe slid off the crop.

"No," she said. "We are from Aferraron. Am I right in thinking you are sent here by Buhfa Ouoinel?"

"Well now," said Jampor, twisting to keep his eyes on her as his horse danced a little. "You know of that name in Aferraron? My Magide will be most impressed with that news."

"I would like to speak with Buhfa Ouoinel," said Autumn. "Where will I find him?"

"As you have come all this way to see him," said Jampor with a hint of sarcasm in his voice, "I will take you to him. He is in the mountains over yonder. It is no great distance and I am certain he will be delighted to meet with a woman of such boldness."

"That is most kind of you," said Autumn. "Shall we go now?"

Jampor laughed. "Ahhh, you are impatient, my little one. Contain yourself, we shall go shortly. First I have a small matter to finish here. It will take but a few moments."

"It is on that business that I wish to speak with Buhfa Ouoinel," said Autumn.

"Indeed?" said Jampor, somewhat puzzled. "What have the people of Aferraron to do with the collecting of small debts here in Neander?"

"Nothing," said Autumn. "But when it is a matter of extorting money with threats then it becomes the business of all fair minded people. I would talk with Buhfa Ouoinel and ask him to reconsider his ways."

"Extorting money with threats?" said Jampor, rubbing his cheek with his crop. "Yes, well, I suppose you could call it that. Personally I call it fair payment for services rendered."

He turned and grinned at the man mounted not far away then looked back at Autumn.

"If I might ask," said Autumn, "what service do you render here?"

"Ahh," said Jampor, "a very good question that cuts right to the heart of the matter. I suppose you could say, in a manner of speaking, that we are life givers, seeing as how we give these good people in the river yonder the opportunity to live a little longer. Seems to me to be a very beneficial service. Very community minded, some might say, and our fees for this are very reasonable, very reasonable indeed."

Autumn smiled mirthlessly. "Well, that is open to debate, I dare say. Might I enquire what your fee is?"

"Ohh, we are not greedy," said Jampor, beaming. He edged his horse closer so its shoulder pressed against Autumn's. She stepped back a pace. "All we want is all they have, nothing more, nothing less."

"And if they have nothing?" asked Autumn. "What then?"

"If they have nothing to give then they have nothing to live for," said Jampor. "Stands to reason, but them, no, they are farmers. They have plenty to give. Like all farmers they have something put aside. Just a matter of finding where they've hidden it. Never met a farmer yet who didn't have some money stashed somewhere. I suppose they be telling

you they have nothing?

“Yes,” said Autumn, “but that is not the issue here.”

“Ohh,” said Jampor. He frowned. “What then is the issue?”

“By what right do you try to take anything,” said Autumn. “That is the issue.”

“Now I understand you,” said Jampor, waving his finger at Autumn. “Tell me, you are from this Aferraron place. Do you have a Karoi there?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, “although our Karoi is known as the Roinad.”

“I did not know that,” said Jampor. “Roinad, huh, interesting. And does your Roinad collect taxes?”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“Well then,” said Jampor. “Buhfa Ouoinel is just like your Roinad. He is collecting taxes too.”

“I am confused,” said Autumn. “By what right does Buhfa Ouoinel collect taxes? He is not the Roinad or Karoi here.”

“By the same right as the Karoi,” said Jampor, smiling happily.

“I am not understanding you,” said Autumn. “What right is that?”

“The right of power,” said Jampor. “Anyone who has the power can collect taxes and only them who has more power can stop it. It is very simple really.”

“So you are claiming that Buhfa Ouoinel has more power than Soros, Karoi of Neander?” said Autumn.

“Look around,” said Jampor, waving his arm in a circle. “What do you see? Where is the Karoi here? Point him out and I will gladly return to Buhfa Ouoinel empty handed but until then, Buhfa Ouoinel, or me at

any rate, has the power and I am here to collect the taxes. Now, my lovely, it has been most enjoyable talking with you. It isn't often I get a chance to have an intelligent conversation and much as I would enjoy continuing I do have a job to do and my Magide will not be best pleased if I spend the day chatting. You two just wait here for a while then we will see about taking you to see Buhfa Ouoinel."

He urged his horse forward and Autumn grabbed its bridle.

"I am afraid I cannot allow that," she said. "I will not allow you to harm these people."

Jampor sighed and looked imploringly at Logan. "You are from Aferraron as well?" he asked.

"Yes," said Logan.

"Perhaps they do it differently there," said Jampor meditatively. "Ah well. Let me explain how this works in Neander. I come to places like this and make all sorts of terrible threats which no one takes particularly seriously but they hand over the money and I go away and come back another day when they have some more money. No one is going to come to any harm unless they particularly want to and I have no desire to cause anyone any harm. It means having to clean my sword and most likely my clothes as well since blood spurts all over the place and the bodies have to be buried otherwise there'll be disease and then there will be no one left to farm this place, and if there is no one farming then I can't come back and collect more money, which is the whole point, after all."

"But if there is no money to collect?" asked Autumn, keeping hold of the bridle.

"Then there is nothing to collect," said Jampor with a shrug, "but you will appreciate I have to check. I can't just take your word for it. Oh, and speaking of harm, if it is me that comes to harm then someone else will be sent and like as not whoever that is will not have my peaceful nature. Just thought I would mention that. So, how do you want to move this forward?"

“My sole interest is a peaceful solution,” said Autumn, releasing the bridle. “Do you swear on your honour that no one will come to harm?”

“Most definitely,” said Jampor. He got down from his horse and tossed the reins to one of his companions. “I have no idea who you are beyond your name nor what harm you can do us but do you so swear as well?”

“I do,” said Autumn, stepping aside.

“Excellent,” said Jampor, “and them in the river can stay there for now.”

He wagged his finger at his companions and they got off their horses as well.

“Search the place,” he commanded and turned back to smile at Autumn.

There was a faint thumping, whacking sound and with a strangled gasp Logan hurled himself at Jampor.

Chapter Five

“I have to ask,” said Autumn as she and Logan watched the horsemen ride away. “Why did you attack Jampor? It was most unlike you.”

It had been so unlike Logan that Autumn had, most uncharacteristically, been taken by surprise and had failed to react until after Jampor had hit Logan in the face with his elbow and grabbed his sword hilt. Despite that she had, however, reacted quickly enough to knock Jampor's sword from his hand once it was drawn and from then on it had been a fairly conventional fight, by Autumn's standards at least, if not the horsemen's. Four of the men had been allowed to escape with their horses and she had thrown the fifth, semi conscious, over his horse and sent it after the others. Jampor's sword was still lying in the dirt, not far from where Logan was now sitting, rubbing the side of his head and looking around in bemusement.

“I did not attack him,” said Logan, looking up at her. “I would never attack anyone. Something pushed me from behind.”

He felt around the inside of his mouth with his tongue then probed with a finger to check all his teeth were still solidly rooted. Jampor had been bony and his elbow solid. Autumn rotated quickly then again more slowly, her eyes scanning and her ears probing. There was nothing there, save Outea and his family emerging from the river, soaking wet but with pleased expressions and gestures and cries of triumph.

“I see no sign of anything that could have hit you,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “and I venture none of them could have done anything. They are too far away and there is nothing here that was thrown. Could it have been a gust of wind?”

“Not likely,” said Logan, “and you would have felt it too. If you remember I was at least two paces away from him when he got off his horse. Something hit me and threw me at him.” He slowly got to his feet and groaned.

“Where did it hit you?” asked Autumn, going round behind him to inspect him for any signs. There was only some dirt from where he

had landed.

“Umm, everywhere, I think,” said Logan, thinking about it. “It was like running into a cliff face, only backwards, if that makes sense.”

“There are no marks or tears in your robe,” said Autumn. She looked thoughtfully at roughly where he had been standing then back at where he had landed then around at the landscape then up into the sky. “You heard nothing?”

“No,” said Logan. He raised his arms out sideways and twisted to stretch his back muscles. “Oh, yes, I remember. I heard a buzzing sound and looked up to see if it was a bee or wasp about to sting me then ... wham.”

“I venture no bee could throw you two paces,” said Autumn, “and now I think on it I seem to remember hearing a whacking sound as well, like someone hitting a hanging cloth with a stick, but no explanation is apparent. I think we will have to put this down to one of life's unexplained mysteries. There is not even a stone or root here for you to have tripped over.”

“I didn't trip,” said Logan. “I was standing still, listening to you talking with Jampor then something hit me.” He tried to spit but his mouth was dry. “Aghh, I'm going to get a drink.”

He turned and headed towards where Autumn had left her pack and their water bottle. Autumn looked around again, puzzled, before turning to follow him.

“Well now,” she said suddenly. “That is strange.”

Then Outea intercepted her, his thin robe dripping and a trail of muddy footprints showing his path from the river. The others were chatting excitedly beside the fire and clapping each others' shoulders. The women and younger children had disappeared. Presumably they were inside the huts again changing out of their wet clothes.

“Glory be unto you, oh mighty one,” he exclaimed, reaching out both hands to grasp Autumn's and jerking it up and down repeatedly. “You

have vanquished the jackals! See how they run from you! You are the scourge of the unforgiven! 'Tis a shame they still live but no matter, they will never dare to come back here and face your wrath again!"

"Yes, perhaps," said Autumn, giving him a hard look and pulling her hand back. "I want to talk with you about this."

"Most assuredly, Autumn the Victorious!" exclaimed Outea happily. "The women will make shayi and almond cakes and we shall celebrate and talk and sing of your prowess! Come!"

He turned to go over to the fire and stumbled as his stick had sunk a little way into the ground where the dripping had made it muddy. It made a soft squelching noise as he pulled it free.

"We shall join you in a moment," said Autumn. "I must speak with Logan first."

She marched over to join Logan as Outea headed over to the fire.

"Look," she said, pointing to the ground in front of him.

"What?" said Logan, looking at the ground. "I don't see anything."

"Your shadow," said Autumn.

"Oh!" said Logan in surprise. He stared at his shadow for a few moments then dropped to his knees to touch it. "Hello! I've missed you!"²

"I do not remember seeing your shadow earlier," said Autumn. "I wonder if its return is what hit you."

"I have no idea," said Logan, looking lovingly at his shadow. "I am just glad it is back." He slowly got to his feet again. "It has been, ohh, thirty days or more since we left Subota. I expected it back in only a day or two but I had given up hope. It has taken him long enough. "

2 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Fifth Tale*. Following an experiment by a magician, a number of people in Neander, including Logan, were separated from their shadows. The disjointed shadows became infected with a parasite from another world which lead to the deaths of a number of people.

“It is good it has returned,” said Autumn. “Perhaps this means the problems with the shadows are now ended.”

“Sploop!” said Logan suddenly looking alarmed. “Do you suppose one of those insect things is still in it?”

“I would think not,” said Autumn, gazing down at Logan's shadow. “Subota would not have rejoined it with you if it was still dangerous.”

“You are most likely right,” said Logan, his face relaxing. He started to twist and turn, all the while watching his shadow. “I suppose it is mine? How would I know if it wasn't?”

“That is a difficult one,” said Autumn. “It seems small and featureless as you would expect at this time of day and every feature squashed.”

She stood next to him, her shoulder touching his and they both studied their shadows.

“We are of the same height,” said Autumn, “and your shadow looks to be the same length as mine and slightly broader at the shoulder, as you are. Turn sideways.”

Obediently Logan turned sideways.

“It would seem to have your nose and chin,” said Autumn, looking from Logan's profile to his shadow's profile, “although distorted but the shapes seem right. We may see your features better towards sunset.”

Logan turned his head to look and, of course, his shadow nose disappeared. He scowled and scratched his head. His shadow did much the same although it was impossible to tell if it was scowling.

“I venture it is yours,” said Autumn. “It certainly resembles you and moves as you do and is joined to you at the feet.”

“And it does not have a big belly or a tail or anything else I do not,” said Logan. Then he snorted. “How stupid can we be? Even if it is not my shadow there is nothing we can do about it. Neither of us knows

how to separate it again nor where my shadow would be. From now on it is mine and that is the end of it.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Do you suppose Subota is up there watching?”³

“Ahh, I did not think of that,” said Logan. He looked up at the sky and waved happily. “I do not know if you are there, Subota, but thank you for returning my shadow!”

“Come, best we join Outea and the others,” said Autumn, looking over at them with a slight frown. “I believe they are preparing some sort of small celebration.”

“I am not surprised,” said Logan. “Although it didn't go as planned, because of me, you still saved them from the horsemen.”

“Do not blame yourself, Logan,” said Autumn, putting her hand on his arm. “The unexpected always involves itself in any venture, whether for good or ill.”

“I do not blame myself,” said Logan, “although it has just occurred to me that if Subota was flying up there and watching he may have returned my shadow at just that moment in order to force a confrontation.”

“For what reason?” asked Autumn, her frown changing to puzzlement.

“Who knows why any magician does what they do,” said Logan. “I doubt it though. I'm sure he has more than enough shadows to rejoin to worry about a silly little dispute somewhere. Will we move on after the celebration or do you want to stay and see if those men return?”

“I do not know, as yet,” said Autumn, the small frown returning. “I think that will depend on a small matter I wish to discuss with Outea.”

“Oh really?” said Logan but she was already walking over to the fire so he hurried after her.

3 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Fifth Tale*. Subota, official sorcerer to the Karoi, has the ability to astral fly although his body remains in the human world.

Jabiv jumped up to take her hand and kiss her knuckles while exclaiming his gratitude and the other three sons knelt in front of Autumn to touch the hem of her robe to their foreheads.

“Please, do not,” said Autumn, mildly embarrassed. “It was a minor skirmish and nothing more.”

She took a half step back to get out of their reach then undid the cord around her waist and slipped off her robe before looking around uncertainly. Outea's wife was stirring a fresh pot of shayi and one of the younger women was mixing chopped nuts into a bowl of what looked like flour and something sticky.

“Give it to me,” said Logan, so she did and he folded it neatly and held it on his lap when he sat down.

“I would speak with you, Outea,” said Autumn, still standing.

“Please be seated,” said Outea, waving to the spot beside him. “We can converse more easily with our heads at the same level. Cakes to honour you will be ready in a few moments.”

Autumn sat, cross legged but, unusually for her, with her heels under her knees instead of on top. There was a hiss as the younger woman slapped a lump of the sticky mixture onto a hot stone in the fire and flattened it with her fingers. Several more lumps were treated the same way before she turned the first over. The cakes smelt delicious and Logan's mouth began to water.

“I am unfamiliar with the customs of this land,” said Autumn. She put her hands neatly in her lap and leaned forward a little to look Outea in the eye. “I was informed by Jampor, however, that it is the custom among farmers such as yourself to keep a supply of money hidden. Is that indeed the case?”

Outea's sons tensed a little and his wife paused momentarily in her pouring of the shayi into cups. Outea himself stiffened and his face became a little wary. He didn't say anything, just raised his eyebrows and gave a small shrug. The younger woman began to peel the cooked cakes from the stone and arrange them on a plate before putting some

more on the stone to cook.

“Is this the case?” repeated Autumn. “Do you, in fact, have a supply of money hidden somewhere?”

“A small quantity only,” admitted Outea, his good humour dissipating. “Not enough to satisfy that rapacious viper.”

Autumn's jaw tightened.

“Jampor told me that he knows of this hidden money,” she said, her voice flat, “and that he desired nothing more than however much was there. He gave every indication of being a man of sense and knows the folly of killing or injuring those who have the money for there will be no money forthcoming after that.”

“He has no right to my money,” hissed Outea, his good humour now entirely gone.

Autumn's nostrils flared and her eyes narrowed.

“It is not for me to sit in judgement on taxes or who collects them,” she said, “or the rights and wrongs of taxes or, indeed, of money itself. The simple fact remains that it is the custom in this land that taxes are paid.”

“Taxes are a curse of Wahah,” exclaimed Outea, gripping the haft of his stick so his knuckles turned white.

“That is not my concern,” said Autumn, her face becoming hard. “My concern here is that you led me to believe that you had not the means to pay these taxes and that the consequences would be dire and that you were in great need of my protection.”

“And so it was,” said Outea, sitting up straight, his eyes flashing. “Thanks entirely to your intervention a catastrophe has been diverted. I am forever in your debt.”

The two women had stopped even pretending to prepare the celebration and were watching the exchange intently, both marvelling

inwardly at the audacity of this foreign woman to challenge the Magide. Outea glanced over at them and angrily clapped his hands. Both instantly busied themselves.

“You deceived me,” said Autumn, a cold anger forming inside her. “Jampor had no intention of harming anyone but you deliberately lied to me in order to manipulate me into fighting him and his men for your personal gain. I do not fight for money, I do not fight for personal gain nor the gain of others. I fight only in the direst of circumstances and only to prevent suffering or death. Yet you, knowing this, deceived me, hoping I would cause suffering. Mayhap even cause death. You had the means of a peaceful solution from the beginning and yet you lied to me and manipulated me for your own ends.”

She stared intently at Outea, the muscles of her jaw clenched and her shoulders stiff. The two women had again stopped what they were doing and Outea's sons were frozen in their places, each beginning to panic inwardly. Cautiously one of the other women peered out of her hut to see what was happening. From another, a baby's wail started, the tension in the atmosphere frightening him. He was quickly shushed. Logan sat quietly, only his fingers nervously picking at the edge of Autumn's robe betraying any sign of emotion. He had seen Autumn like this once before and it scared him.⁴

Beads of sweat started to form on Outea's forehead as he felt the power of Autumn's anger billowing around him. He began to quail inside and, even though he kept his eyes on Autumn, he was very conscious of his family watching him. His fingers kept grasping and ungrasping his stick.

“You will not speak to me this way,” he growled, jabbing a finger at Autumn, his entire body stiff with tension. He tried to force a bravery into his voice that he did not feel. After all, he had seen the skills of this woman, yet she was still only a woman and should not speak to him like this. He spat on the ground. “You will show me due respect and honour,” he said emphatically, glaring at her.

⁴ See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Fourth Tale*, in which a plantation owner tries to hire Autumn in the belief she was a professional assassin, a paid killer.

"I do not honour the dishonourable," said Autumn then, very deliberately, she spat on the ground at his feet, her eyes locked on his.

The tense atmosphere turned glacial.

Outea sat there in stunned silence, twisting his stick unconsciously in his hand. He had no idea what to do but never in his life had any woman dared to spit at him. A smell of burning almond cake wafted across the clearing but no one took any notice. Some beads of sweat collected in his eyebrows and trickled down the side of his face. "She is going to kill me," he thought. With that thought his strength of mind faltered and he looked away from her.

"I did what I had to do," he muttered. "That is not dishonourable."

"You lied to me for the sake of money and five men could now be lying dead on this spot as a consequence," said Autumn, her eyes still boring into him. "You think that is honourable?"

"I had to protect my family," protested Outea.

"Your family was not under threat," countered Autumn, "except from your greed. You call Jampor and Buhfa Ouoinel jackals and vipers but you are no better."

Outea dropped his stick on the ground and put his hand to his head. He felt the sweat for the first time and wiped his forehead with his sleeve then dropped his arm. He held his fingers out towards Autumn as though about to say something then changed his mind.

"I, ...," he started then stopped. Then he summoned up the courage to do something he had never done before. "I apologise," he said, his voice faltering.

Autumn sat in silent, wondering how to respond. She had not anticipated an apology, in fact she had not anticipated any of this exchange. She had merely sought clarification of the existence of money and her anger had risen as a consequence. Outea misunderstood her silence.

“Jabiv,” said Outea, keeping his eyes averted lest his shame be reflected in the face of his oldest son. “Fetch the box.”

“Yes, Magide,” said Jabiv, getting to his feet.

“Was that 'Magide' less respectful than usual?” wondered Outea. He cleared his throat. “I have not a huge amount of money in reserve,” he said, looking at Autumn, “but how much do you want for your services?”

Autumn exploded to her feet and Outea cowered before her.

“Have you understood nothing from this discussion?” she exclaimed heatedly. “Come, Logan, we are leaving.”

She stalked off into the afternoon sun and Logan ran to collect their staffs, her pack and their water bottle. He caught up with her some way down the river. She was walking stiffly and her jaw was still clenched.

Logan following silently behind, keeping a watchful eye on her. He didn't speak until he felt the moment was right and hesitated even then.

“'Tis a shame we will not be tasting those almond cakes, they smelt delicious,” he commented.

Autumn whirled around and stared at him then burst out laughing.

“Oh Logan,” she said, hugging him so tightly he feared for his ribs and spine, “what would I do without you?”

Then she started to cry.

Chapter Six

“Vogev, I’m sorry, what did I do, what did I do?” stuttered Logan, panicked that Autumn was crying. He had no idea what to do. “Calm yourself, calm yourself.” He patted her on the shoulders nervously. He had seen girls cry before but never had any idea why.

Autumn stepped back, willing herself to stop crying. She wiped her eyes with the hem of her malu.

“Take no notice of me, Logan,” she said. “I am just being stupid. Give me a few moments.”

“Take all the time you want,” said Logan. “Come over to the river and sit for a while. I’m sorry I made that stupid joke about the cakes.”

“Twas not you,” said Autumn. “Do not concern yourself with that.”

She walked to the river’s edge and sat cross legged on a convenient rock then started to breathe slowly and deeply with her eyes closed. Logan stood and watched, feeling a little confused then he sat down as well.

“Za zu simi u miri,” chanted Autumn after several breaths then she raised her arms and spread them wide, encompassing the universe. “Za zu simi u miri.”

She took a deep breath, held it for some time then slowly let it out while bringing her arms down to rest in her lap. Then she opened her eyes and looked around for Logan. She smiled.

“I apologise for that lapse,” she said. “I am myself again.”

“What was that thing you said?” asked Logan. “Zazu something.”

“Za zu simi u miri?” asked Autumn. “It means ‘I am at peace with all, or with everything. It is the Old Tongue. It helps me regain my calm.’”

“Ahh,” said Logan. He fell silent, wondering what to say next. He was concerned that he had somehow been the cause of Autumn’s crying

but was reluctant to bring it up again.

"I am going to bathe in the river," said Autumn abruptly. "I feel unclean." She stood up to take off her malu then saw Logan's face. "What is the matter?"

"I have never seen you cry," said Logan quietly. "Are you certain it was not me that caused it?"

"Ahh Logan, dear friend," she said sitting back down. She took his hand in hers. "No, it was most definitely not you for if you ever make me cry it will be with happiness not sadness. No, I foolishly allowed my emotions to overcome me with Outea."

"But you are certain it was not because of my silly little joke about the cakes?" asked Logan worriedly, "or because I started that fight with the horsemen?"

"It was definitely not about the fight," said Autumn, keeping hold of his hand. "No, that was a situation where tensions were high and Jampor reacted to you and I reacted to Jampor and things got out of hand very quickly. It could have been anything that started it and no, it was not your joke. 'Twas your joke that ended it for until that moment I was filled with self righteous indignation and unable to bring myself back from that precipice. Once again you were my saviour for who knows what would have happened otherwise. I wager it was my cursed vanity once again that lies at the root of this."

"Your vanity?" said Logan in surprise. "How so? Was it not Outea's deception that angered you?"

"That was my first thought," said Autumn reflectively. "But I do know that not everyone is open and honest in their thoughts and actions. Mayhap I permitted myself to fall into the trap of not enquiring further in order to put myself forward as their protector to bolster my self image."

"Decidedly not," said Logan. "You did not seek to fight nor did you even seek to become involved. As I remember it you tried not to and it was only with the greatest reluctance you even agreed to talk with

those men.”

“Mayhap you are right,” said Autumn. She let go of Logan’s hand. “I will think on it further but now I am going to bathe.”

She stripped off her malu and waded out into the water. After a while Logan went in search of a stick which he sharpened and went a short way upriver to try to catch some fish. When he returned Autumn was still in the water, floating on her back with a finger entwined in some grass so she did not float downstream.

“Ahh, you are returned,” she said, noticing him. She sat up and got to her feet.

“I caught one,” said Logan, holding it up. “It is not over large but it should suffice to keep hunger at bay. Did you enjoy your bath?”

“Very much,” said Autumn, wading to the bank. She had goosebumps from the water still cool from the nearby mountains. She sat down beside Logan and inspected her water-wrinkled fingers.

“I fancy once again you have the right of it,” she remarked then turned to rummage in her pack.

“The fish?” asked Logan.

“No, my vanity,” said Autumn, finding the ivory comb Dhru had bought for her at a market in Cim-Irsou before they had parted ways.

“How so?” asked Logan, reaching over to get his knife to start gutting the fish.

“I was lying in the water, enjoying the coolness of it,” said Autumn, starting to comb her hair, “and it occurred to me that perhaps I am too quick to blame my vanity. I know it is there and it is an easy target and the coolness of the water made me think there might be other, deeper reasons for my anger.”

“And what might they be?” asked Logan, scooping out the fish guts and throwing them as far away as he could so they attracted the

multitudinous flies away from where they sat.

“This heat, for one,” said Autumn. “I suspect this never ending heat is beginning to affect me. There is no escaping it save to jump into a cool river. It saps my strength and my will and it is a continuous effort to overcome that. How do you cope with it?”

“I have no will,” said Logan with a grin. “I merely follow where you go and waste not any effort thinking about it.”

“That would certainly be easier,” said Autumn. “But there is another factor which I think is beginning to affect me which like as not would not affect you.”

“What is that?” asked Logan, mixing a little river water with soil to make a mud coating for the fish.

“Ayah,” said Autumn and sucked her teeth. She paused in the combing of her hair. “I believe most strongly that it does not fall to me to be critical of the customs of other people but the customs of these people here in Neander may be pushing me into things I would not otherwise do.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan. He patted the mud coated fish and put it aside to cook later.

“The attitude of the men to the women,” said Autumn. “They treat them as being of no worth.”

“Ahh,” said Logan sitting back. “Yes, I know what you mean. It bothers me as well but how does that make you do things you would not do?”

“On the face of it,” said Autumn, resuming combing, “it should not. You and I travel and we should be able to continue much as always but the constant dismissal of me as being of no worth whenever we meet anyone is, I think, beginning to take its toll. I do not think it is just my vanity, I think it lies deeper than that. As a man you are welcomed but I, being a woman, have to prove myself in some way as at least equal to a man before I am even acknowledged. I am forced

into competition when competition should not be needed. I wager that I am reaching the point where I start competing in advance and that is a bad habit to get into.”

“I see what you mean,” said Logan. “I merely have to say hello to get a friendly face but you are ignored even after saying hello. It would annoy me, for certain.”

“It is wearing,” said Autumn. “I have been trying to be accepting of their customs but I confess I find myself struggling. I realise now that at every meeting with a stranger I am wanting to strike them to force them to admit I am there. I venture that may be at the root of my dispute with Outea. Not that he deceived me, for I know of deception and how it can underlie another’s words and deeds, but that he assumed that deceiving me would be of no consequence. He was angered not that I was calling out his deception but that I, a woman, was challenging his position as a man.”

“Yes,” said Logan, “I heard him tell you not to speak to him like that and that you should show him respect. I wondered at the time why you did not hit him. I wager many women in Aferraron would have.”

“Each encounter on its own is of no consequence,” said Autumn, staring out across the river, her combing forgotten. “But it is the never-endingness that is wearing. I wonder why the women here put up with it but I daresay they are born into it and know no better. For certain it is not possible for me to change anything. I can change the attitude of individual men towards me but I cannot change the attitude of all men to all women. It bothers me too that you are seen as somehow less of a man because you do not treat me as they do.”

“Yes, I know what you mean,” said Logan. “I have felt their unspoken derision but it does not bother me unduly.”

“How do you prevent it from bothering you?” asked Autumn. “You have not had the training I have and it bothers me. I would learn from you.”

“Oh it is easy,” said Logan with a laugh. “Whenever it happens I just imagine you twirling round and kicking their heads off with your foot.

It works every time. Also I know that I am no one special whereas you, yes, you are very special and worth a thousand times a thousand times all of them put together.”

“Oh surely not that many times,” said Autumn with a smile then she became serious. “But, alas I cannot do that. If I start to imagine besting them then it would soon enough become a reality and that would not be good.” She sighed and resumed combing her hair again.

“Have you thought of any solution yet?” asked Logan. “I do not enjoy seeing you treated this way but I have not said anything as I thought you did not mind. Now I know you do I want this to end.”

“No, I have not,” said Autumn. “Save only that perhaps we should leave Neander for I am certain that I will never find my place in this world here. Does that sit well with you?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “It is too hot and desolate here for me. I miss the green forests of Aferraron, aye, and the rain although I never thought I would say that. I fancy though that we will have to go all the way back to Cim-Irsou to find passage there. I would not put my trust in Fiau. No, I do not mean that, of course I trust Fiau. I mean I would not trust the currents to float us back.”

“I daresay we could go on to Lizoote,” said Autumn. “It is possible that the people are different the further East we go.”

“Do not count on that,” said Logan. “If anything they have got worse the further East we have gone from Cim-Irsou. Still, I have a thought. Why do we not continue to Lizoote as we had planned but instead of crossing the river and following the road, why not stay this side and go through the mountains? It should be cooler in the high lands and I wager there will be far fewer people. It will probably be easier to find Darius⁵ as well. I wager he will not live near the road.”

“That is a good idea,” said Autumn. “It will be nice to be cold for a

5 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*. Darius is, ostensibly a Neander Lynx from the Skizze Mountains which Autumn rescued from captivity and returned to Neander. In fact, Darius the lynx is a personification of the deity Ept and helped Autumn journey into the Land of the Undead to rescue Logan after he was accidentally killed.

while. Do you think there will be snow in the mountains? I have a hankering to see snow again.”

“I have no idea,” said Logan, “which seems like a good reason to go and find out.”

“Excellent,” said Autumn, visibly cheering up. “We have a plan.”

“There is just one problem,” said Logan, frowning.

“There are no such things as problems,” said Autumn, back to her old self again, “merely situations we do not know how to deal with yet. What situation do we not know how to deal with?”

“We went downriver after leaving Outea,” said Logan. “If we head for the mountains we will have to go back to Outea’s farm first.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, frowning as well. “That is definitely a situation to be avoided. I wager the way I, a woman, spoke to him will have led him to think he was in some way diminished in front of his family and his anger will have risen.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, “or perhaps if he sees you come back he may think you have come to attack him and be frightened. Frightened men can be unpredictable and more dangerous as a result.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “When I was floating in the river I did wonder if I should apologise to him but I do not think that will solve anything.”

“No,” said Logan, “and it is he that should apologise to you.”

“He did,” said Autumn.

“Only with words,” said Logan. “I doubt very much he meant it. He was just afraid you would hit him.”

“Ayah, this is indeed a sorry situation,” said Autumn. “Have you any thoughts on what to do? I doubt my judgement today.”

“I would have thought it obvious,” said Logan. “We camp here for the night and eat our fish then get up very early and go around the farm and be long distant before any of them are awake.”

“That would only be a solution if it was possible,” said Autumn, “but I cannot see how it could be achieved.”

“Why is it impossible?” asked Logan. “It seems entirely possible and practicable to me.”

“Oh Logan,” said Autumn, putting her hand on his arm again. “How is it possible for you to wake up before the dawn? It is entirely contrary to your nature. I have a better idea.”

“What is that?” asked Logan, a trifle grumpily.

“We cook and eat the fish here and wait for Astauand to go to sleep,” said Autumn. “Then we make our way past the farm tonight in the darkness. We can stay close to the river so we do not get lost and its noise will mask our passage. That way we can sleep further up river and you will not have to force yourself awake too early.”

“Excellent,” said Logan, cheering up. “I will make a fire.”

Chapter Seven

“Can I see Urudaqa the Osaku?” asked Logan, diffidently.

“No,” said Autumn. “Put some more authority into it. You are the Roinad even if you are keeping it quiet. Speak with more confidence.”

“I have no confidence,” said Logan, pushing out his lower lip. “I am always nervous with officials. It comes from when I was sentenced to be hanged back in Biasdo then later sentenced to death by the Roinad.”⁶

“Act confident,” said Autumn. “It is all about attitude. Your manner should command respect.”

“Oh,” said Logan. He thought for a moment then drew himself up straight. He banged his staff hard on the trunk of a nearby tree. “You! Bring me the Osaku! Now!” he commanded in a harsh voice.

“Too much,” said Autumn. “You want to speak with him, not have him executed. Try again.”

“Would it not be better if you speak with him?” asked Logan.

“We agreed that you would take the lead in discussions,” said Autumn. “At least with officials. You know how they look upon women and you yourself feel they do not take you seriously. Why are we going to the town?”

“We would speak with Urudaqa, Osaku of Duuba,” said Logan, quietly.

“Good,” said Autumn. “Now say it again as though you mean it.”

“I would speak with Urudaqa, Osaku of Duuba,” said Logan, looking up at Autumn from a bowed head.

⁶ See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*. Logan was convicted of repeated thefts in his home village of Biasdo and given the choice of death by hanging or exile. He chose the latter and soon afterwards met Autumn. Later the pair were brought before the Roinad, Obvia Vasagle, on various trumped up charges, including treason.

“Hold your head up and say it as though you expect to be obeyed,” said Autumn, pushing his forehead up.

“I would speak with Urudaqa, Osaku of Duuba,” said Logan, standing straight and looking Autumn directly in the eye.

“Better,” said Autumn. “Now, whoever you are talking to will probably want to know who you are before going to get the Osaku so what are you going to say?”

“Umm, Autumn Savannah and her companion, Logan?” said Logan.

Autumn just looked at him.

“Well I can't just say Logan,” said Logan. “The Osaku will have no idea of who I am.”

“If he has heard of me then he will have heard of you,” said Autumn, “and likely paid more attention to you but mayhap you are right. ‘Logan’ on its own does not seem enough somehow. Why not say ‘Logan of Aferraron’? It has a ring to it and says you are a traveller from afar. That should get his attention if your name doesn't.”

“If you say so,” said Logan.

Autumn tapped him firmly on the nose like a naughty puppy. “No, not ‘if I say so’. You are Logan of Aferraron and you have business with the Osaku. Be proud of yourself.”

“I have nothing to be proud of,” said Logan, “save being the favoured companion of Autumn Savannah, protector of the downtrodden and Krisana of the World.”

“And that alone puts you on par with Soros, Karoi of Neander and the employer of this Osaku,” said Autumn with a smile. “Try it again.”

“I would speak with Urudaqa, Osaku of Duuba,” said Logan, trying to project a confidence he did not feel.

“And you are?” asked Autumn.

“Logan of Aferraron,” said Logan, trying to act imperiously. “I have travelled far to speak with Urudaqa and my time is being wasted. Fetch him immediately.”

Autumn sucked her teeth. “Don't go too far,” she said. “We do not want to anger him and make an enemy. Just leave it as 'Logan of Aferraron'.”

“What if whoever I am talking to wants to know why I want to see Urudaqa?” asked Logan. “You know what underlings can be like. We agreed it would be best not to bring up Buhfa Ouoinel except with the Osaku himself. Should I say Soros sent me?”

“Ahh, that is a difficult one,” said Autumn. “Mention Soros too soon and it may cause Urudaqa to panic. Hmm. Ah, why not say that you are travelling through and wish to pay him your respects?”

“My respects?” said Logan. “I have little respect for him and I would prefer not to talk with him at all.”

“We have to,” said Autumn. “Soros' condition for our continued travelling in this land was that we report to the local Osaku everywhere we go, just as we have done on our way here.”

“But you spoke to them,” said Logan.

“Yes and you saw how difficult it was to get an audience with them,” said Autumn. “Now that we have agreed that you will do all the talking, you will have to talk to the Osaku as well.”

Logan grimaced. “Pay him my respects,” he muttered. “Right.”

“Try it again,” said Autumn.

“Do I have to?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn. “You wanted help with this but if you feel you have sufficient confidence then we shall leave it at that.”

“I have no confidence,” said Logan, “and all this is doing is making

me more nervous.”

“I am sorry,” said Autumn, “but the confidence will come by doing it for real. Talking to the trees is only for practice, just as I fight the trees in my exercises.”

“Likely you are right,” said Logan, “and thank you for your help. I suggest we camp here for the night and go and see the Osaku in the morning.”

“Astauand is barely at Its highest and the rest of the day stretches before us,” said Autumn. “I suggest we cross the bridge now and find the Osaku and get this over with. Then we can move on into the mountains while it is yet light. Putting it off until tomorrow will serve no purpose than to delay us.”

“Actually it serves a very great purpose,” said Logan.

“And what is that?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“It gives me more time to think of reasons why you should be doing this and not me,” said Logan with a grin.

Autumn sighed.

“As you wish,” she said. “I will do the talking. Come, let us cross the bridge.”

She shouldered her pack and picked up her staff and started towards the bridge. Logan watched her go then ran to catch her up.

“No,” he said, “I will do it. I am just nervous.”

“Be strong,” said Autumn, putting her hand on his shoulder. “And walk ahead of me. It seems to be their custom.”

Logan took a deep breath and stepped purposefully onto the bridge.

As bridges go it was not the widest, being just sufficient for a single hand cart, but it was sturdily built and high enough over the fast

flowing river to avoid most of the spray. Duuba was on the far side of the bridge, nestled against the side of a low foothill at the start of the Skizze Mountains. Just beyond lay the road that travelled along the Southern edge of the mountains and which meandered all the way from Cim-Irsou in the West to Lizoote in the East. It was a broad road, its earth hard packed and worn from the heavy traffic in years gone by. Now, though, there were few travellers on it and there were signs it was falling into disrepair.

Duuba itself was much the same. It was a decent size but with few people. Many of the dwellings were made from mud bricks and some were large but empty and falling into disrepair; a sign that the many travellers who had sought accommodation in times past were no longer passing through. An air of sadness hung over the town, of age and resentment. Gone were the crowds of traders and pilgrims and so too were gone the gaudy banners, the hawkers and the beggars. The large empty spaces on either side of the road that had once teemed with the horses and camels of passing caravans were now overgrown and returning to their natural state. Duuba was now just a small community of farmers incongruously occupying too large a place. In time the mud bricks would slip back into the soil from whence they had come and the place would become true to itself. A small village with goats in the roads and chickens in the yards and women washing clothes in the river below the waterfall.

“Excuse me,” said Logan, raising his hand to a man approaching the bridge after they had crossed. “Where would I find the Osaku?”

“Up there,” said the man, jerking his head to a large dwelling made of stone that was perched some way above the town.

“Thank you,” said Logan. He refrained from glancing back at Autumn. The man nodded at Logan, ignored Autumn and continued towards the bridge.

Looking up at the dwelling, Logan's eyes followed the path to it back down to where it joined the town. It ended in several steps and a narrow lane between two small mud huts.

“There is the path,” he said, “well, here goes.”

He headed over towards the lane, Autumn a pace behind him. A man clad only in a dirty loin cloth and a layer of dust lay in the shade between the huts, his back against one of them. He seemed asleep but opened an eye when Logan appeared.

“Whaddya want?” he said balefully.

“Umm, I, err, I want to go up there,” said Logan in surprise.

“Ain't nothing up there but some pompous old windbag,” said the man, scratching his armpit. “Got any coins?”

“Umm, no,” said Logan. He looked around anxiously. “I did not know we had to pay to see the Osaku.”

“Ain't for him,” said the man. “It's for me.”

“Do you work for the Osaku?” asked Autumn, stepping forward.

“Nah,” said the man. “I just live here,” and he jabbed at the wall behind him with his thumb. His open eye travelled up and down Autumn although the other stayed shut. “Wanna come inside, girlie?”

“Move on, Logan,” said Autumn.

“Yeah, move on, Logan,” said the man, closing his eye. “You're blocking my view.”

Logan stood there uncertainly for a few moments then moved forward and climbed the steps before stopping.

“Who do you think that was?” he muttered to Autumn.

“The world is full of strange people,” muttered Autumn back. “Mayhap he is a beggar taking a rest or some such. I doubt we will ever know but he is unlikely to have anything to do with the Osaku.”

“I confess I do not like this,” muttered Logan. “Shouldn't there be a guard or something like that?”

“Mayhap there is at the top of the path,” said Autumn, giving him a gentle push. “Let us go and see.”

Logan took a deep breath then continued up the path. It wound upwards for a while then doubled back on itself before ending at a wooden door set into a stone wall. The door stood open and the moss around it suggested it had not been closed for some time.

“Should we knock or just go in?” asked Logan, looking worriedly at the door.

“Let me see,” said Autumn.

Logan obediently stepped back and his foot slipped off the edge of the path. He grabbed at Autumn's shoulder to prevent himself falling. It didn't matter as Autumn's hand was already gripping the front of his robe.

“Sorry,” he said as she pulled him upright.

“Calm yourself,” she said. “You are nothing but anxiety today. There is nothing to fear.”

“I know,” said Logan, “but my belly tells me otherwise. Perhaps it is the fish we had last night.”

“Try breathing slowly and deeply,” said Autumn, turning back to the door.

She peered inside but there was no one there.

“It seems to be a garden of some sort,” she said, “but it looks deserted. Let us go inside.”

Logan nodded while continuing to breathe slowly and deeply. Autumn waited patiently.

“Why are we waiting?” asked Logan several breaths later.

“You should go first,” said Autumn.

“Oh,” said Logan.

His breathing speeded up again but he forced himself to step forward and inside the door.

“Ohh,” he said looking around. “It is quite nice here. Look, there is a pond.”

The garden was shady and pleasant although a little overgrown and was long and thin. It was enclosed by four high stone walls and some trees grew in a straight line along its centre. A path of small pebbles led from the doorway and gently meandered between the trees and some small flowerbeds and the pond to another door at the far end. That door was shut. Autumn pushed Logan forward and they walked along the path, the pebbles crunching slightly. There was no other sound although some butterflies flitted among the flowers that were in bloom.

“There are fish in the pond,” said Logan, pausing to look. “I can see four, no, five of them. They look like gold. Are they real fish, do you think?”

“I have never seen gold fish,” said Autumn watching them, “but they move like fish.”

She dabbled a finger in the water and the fish scattered in alarm to hide under some floating plants.

“I apologise for frightening you, little ones,” she murmured. “Come, Logan, let us leave them in peace.”

They moved on to the other doorway and Logan gave it a push.

“It seems to be barred,” he said. “Now what?”

“Knock on it,” said Autumn.

“What if the Osaku does not live here?” asked Logan.

“I doubt any but the Osaku would have a garden like this,” said

Autumn, “but if this is someone else's dwelling no doubt they will tell you where to find the Osaku if you but ask.”

“Oh, yes,” said Logan. He hesitated then knocked gently on the door.

“Try harder,” said Autumn after they waited a few moments.

Logan rapped harder on the door.

“Was that a voice?” he whispered.

“I fancy it was,” said Autumn in her normal voice.

There was the faint sound of feet on the other side of the door then that of a bar being lifted. Then the door creaked open and a narrow faced man with a short beard shaped to a point peered out.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Hello,” said Logan.

“Hello,” said the man, opening the door a little further. He was wearing a blue and white striped robe. His eyes took in Autumn but he did not acknowledge her. Instead he continued to look enquiringly at Logan.

“Ahh, umm,” said Logan, “I would speak with Urudaqa, Osaku of Duuba.”

He remembered at the last moment to draw himself up and act as though he had every right to be there.

“Oh yes,” said the man. “Why have you come to the back entrance?”

“Oh, sorry,” said Logan. “I did not know. I am a stranger here and followed the path ...,” he twisted and pointed backwards through the garden as though that explained everything.

“No matter,” said the man. “Come in.”

He pushed the door fully open and waited for them both to pass through before closing and barring it again. They were in another garden, although this was bigger and as long as it was wide. It also had a pond and there were plants and shrubs dotted all over the place with white and black stones laid out in patterns in between. Several trees provided patches of shade and Astauand streamed down on the rest. A faint sweet smell hung in the air and some small birds flitted among the branches and blooms. It was delightfully calm and peaceful.

“Come with me,” said the man and led them to a shaded area beside a wall. Four wooden chairs were arranged there around a small circular table. “Please be seated while I inform the Osaku. If I may ask your name?”

“I am Logan of Aferraron,” said Logan. “This is a nice garden.”

“Thank you, Logan of Aferraron,” said the man. “If you will excuse me for a few moments?”

“Of course,” said Logan, his confidence building.

The man walked unhurriedly away and Logan sat down. Autumn went over to smell some of the flowers then looked in the pond.

“There are more gold fish here,” she said, “and some red ones but they are all unfamiliar to me. Oh and there is a green one. How unusual. Come and see.”

Logan got up and joined her beside the pond. “I have never seen a green fish before,” he said, squatting down beside the pond. “Look, it is all frilly around the edges, like it is wearing a frilly dress.”

“It is a Veyhian fighting fish,” said a voice behind them. “I have brought you refreshments.”

Logan looked around to see a different man, younger and clean shaven and wearing a spotless white tunic, putting a tray with two cups and a jug on the table.

“Ahh, thank you,” he said. “Is that why there is only one of them in the pond? Because they fight?”

“Oh no, there are several,” said the young boy, “and they never fight. The others are probably in one of the other ponds. They are joined by tunnels.”

He smiled and bowed and silently withdrew. Logan picked up the jug and sniffed it.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked Autumn. “I do not know what it is but it smells of lemons.”

“Thank you, no,” said Autumn joining him.

He poured himself a drink and sat down again.

“It tastes like lemons as well,” he said, sipping it, “only sweeter.”

There was a footfall and Autumn glanced up to see the bearded man appear again.

“If I might enquire, Logan of Aferraron,” he said deferentially, “the name of your companion?”

“Oh, Autumn,” said Logan, “Autumn Savannah.”

“Thank you,” said the man and disappeared as quietly as he had arrived.

“It is all very nice and peaceful here,” said Logan. “There is no noise or hurry or anything.”

“Yes,” said Autumn, still standing. “Does it not strike you as strange?”

“In what way?” asked Logan.

“The other Osakus we have encountered have lived in dwellings similar to others in the town,” said Autumn. “How is it that this one lives in a place such as this whereas those in the town live quite

differently?”

“Hmm,” said Logan. “Perhaps this one is quite wealthy? Outea did say that this town used to be prosperous when there were a lot of travellers and I venture this place is quite old. You could not get a garden like this in only a few summers. Someone has worked long and hard to get it this way.”

“Perhaps you are right,” said Autumn, sitting down. “It is just that we have seen little but dry lands since leaving Cim-Irsou. Perhaps all this greenery is simply from water from the river. There is a peach tree over there.”

“Aye, and what looks like an apple tree the other side,” said Logan. “I have not seen apples since Zuit. Ahh, someone comes.”

The bearded man reappeared, followed by a larger, older man with a similar beard that was going grey.

“Osaku Urudaqa,” said the man, standing aside deferentially.

“Greetings,” said Logan getting to his feet.

“Greetings,” said Urudaqa. “You are Logan of Aferraron?”

“Yes,” said Logan.

“And you are Autumn Savannah, also of Aferraron?” asked Urudaqa, turning to look at Autumn.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “You have heard of us?”

“Indeed,” said Urudaqa. “You are both under arrest.”

Chapter Eight

Logan's freshly acquired confidence disappeared rapidly and his shoulders slumped.

“Voqev,” he muttered, aghast.

“On what charge?” asked Autumn, looking up from her seat.

“Assault and theft,” said Urudaqa. “Hamuz, fetch some guards.”

The pointy bearded man nodded and turned to leave but Autumn held up her hand.

“That will not be necessary,” she said.

Hamuz paused and glanced at Urudaqa who looked thoughtfully at Autumn through half closed eyes then switched his gaze to Logan who had flopped back in his chair.

“At least four, Hamuz,” he said, “they look like trouble makers even though they do not seem overly desperate.” Hamuz disappeared through a doorway and Urudaqa returned his gaze to Autumn. “You do not seem surprised by this. You admit your guilt?”

“I am not overly surprised,” said Autumn. “I take it you are referring to Jampor and four other horsemen at a farm yesterday?”

“Yes,” said Urudaqa. “The complaint was made to me this morning.”

“Was it made by Jampor or another?” asked Autumn.

Urudaqa scowled. “It is not for you to question me,” he said. “You will have an opportunity to face your accusers and ask questions during your trial although it will be a fruitless exercise. Your guilt is written on your faces and you have as good as admitted it to me.”

Autumn nodded. “Would you sit with us until the guards arrive? We would like to talk with you regardless of these charges for, if you remember, we came to see you and have not been hunted down. It is a

hot day. Have a drink with us while it is still peaceful.”

“Are you threatening me?” demanded Urudaqa, stepping backwards.

“By no means,” said Autumn. “All I meant was that when four guards arrive expecting to arrest us we will no longer be able to talk with you quietly. They will, of necessity, be somewhat aggressive.”

Urudaqa raised an eyebrow then snapped his fingers at a servant. A chair and a cup appeared rapidly.

“Very well,” said Urudaqa, sitting down but staying alert. “Say your piece.”

“I have something I would like you to read,” said Autumn. “It is in my pack,” and she patted it slowly with her hand. “If I may?”

Urudaqa nodded so Autumn slowly unslung her pack and opened it. She withdrew a small roll of waxed cloth and offered it to Urudaqa.

“You wish to add attempted bribery to your charges?” asked Urudaqa, not taking it.

“No,” said Autumn. “It is a letter, nothing more.”

Urudaqa hesitated then reached out and took the roll. He untied the thin leather thong wound around it and unrolled the cloth on the table. Inside was a slim scroll. He looked at it suspiciously then picked it up and inspected the wax seal. It was unbroken as the letter had not been read before and was unmistakable. He stiffened and looked at Autumn.

“What is this?” he demanded.

“Please read it,” said Autumn. “I hear the guards coming.”

Urudaqa stared at Autumn for several moments then broke the seal and unrolled the scroll and studied it. He let out a long sigh then read it again, more carefully.

Four guards burst into the garden with Hamuz close behind.

“Those two,” he said, pointing at Autumn and Logan.

Two guards advanced on them while the other two drew their swords and hung back, ready and waiting for trouble.

“Stop!” said Urudaqa, quietly

The guards stopped and one looked at Urudaqa, waiting for further instructions. The other three, being well trained, kept their eyes on Autumn and Logan. She ignored them although she kept them within her field of vision.

“Guard the doors,” said Urudaqa, still looking at the letter. “Let no one in or out.”

The lead guard motioned to the others and they made their way to the various doorways, clearly disappointed at not being able to arrest anyone. With the decline of the town their jobs had become somewhat dull and an arrest generally promised entertainment, particularly if those arrested weren't cooperative. Urudaqa laid the scroll on the table and watched it roll itself up then stared at it thoughtfully. Autumn watched him and Logan watched Autumn, relief and admiration written all over his face. Hamuz, on the other hand, just looked confused.

“Hamuz,” said Urudaqa, slowly. “It would seem our young friends here have a letter of some significance.”

“Indeed, Magide?” said Hamuz. He hung back as he wasn't certain if these two criminals were dangerous and didn't want to be in the way if the guards had to deal with them.

“A letter from the Great One, Soros himself, may he live for ever,” said Urudaqa still speaking slowly and thoughtfully and tapping the scroll with his finger. “It seems that the Great One is requesting and requiring that I render whatever aid is within my power to bestow to one Logan of Aferraron and one Autumn Savannah, also of

Aferraron.”⁷

“Indeed, Magide,” said Hamuz, the confusion not leaving his face.

“Hmm,” said Urudaqa, pursing his lips.

He looked up from the scroll at Logan then at Autumn then around at the guards.

“Hamuz!” he barked, picking up the scroll suddenly and wagging it in the air.

“Magide?” said Hamuz, nervously.

“Take this,” said Urudaqa, “and check the seal and the signature against other records. It could be a falsehood.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Hamuz. He took the scroll, quickly read it and raised both eyebrows in surprise. “Immediately.” He went over to the doorway and the guard blocked him. The Osaku had, after all, ordered that no one was to enter or leave. Hamuz hesitated for a moment. “Magide,” he said imploringly.

“Let him through,” said Urudaqa glancing over.

The guard stepped out of the way and Hamuz scuttled through.

“Well now,” said Urudaqa conversationally. “This rather changes the complexion of things, does it not.”

Autumn smiled but said nothing.

“If we assume the letter to be genuine,” said Urudaqa pensively, “it does not, of course, mean that you should be pardoned for any crimes. Soros, may he live forever, merely requests that I aid you where I can although I have difficulty seeing how the Great One will see me

⁷ See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Fifth Tale*. As part of the agreement between Logan, as Roinad of Aferraron, and Soros, Karoi of Neander, Autumn and Logan were allowed to continue their travels within Neander unhindered provided that they reported to the local Osaku of each district they visited. Additionally Soros gave them a letter requiring any and all Neanderers to aid them if requested.

convicting you in a good light. How is it that two people from Aferraron have such a friend?"

"A chance encounter in Ajoomi," said Autumn, "nothing more."

"There is more to this than meets the eye," said Urudaqa, "but I daresay none of it concerns me. I am merely a lowly Osaku of a rural district and not privy to higher things. What business have you in Duuba?"

"We are merely travellers passing though," said Autumn, "and Soros has asked us to inform the Osaku of each district we visit of our presence which is what we were doing."

"Why would Soros do that?" asked Urudaqa. "Are you of great importance in Aferraron?"

"We are of little importance," said Autumn, "but for some reason Soros is concerned for our welfare and we are most grateful for his concern."

"Yes, I am sure you are," said Urudaqa wryly.

"We also intended to report ..." started Autumn but Hamuz had appeared in the doorway and, after glancing at Urudaqa, the guard let him through. He had several scrolls in his hands.

"The seal and the signature would seem correct, Magide," said Hamuz, scattering scrolls over the table to show Urudaqa. "Here are some recent communications concerning taxation and legal matters."

Urudaqa picked up two or three and studied the seals and signatures and compared them with the letter Autumn had given him. Then he read the letter again before handing it back to Autumn.

"Thank you," she said, taking it. She wrapped it in its protective cloth again and slipped it back into her pack.

"How long do you plan to stay in Duuba?" asked Urudaqa. "I would be honoured if you will stay as my guests here in my humble home for as

long as you care to.”

“We planned to move on as soon as our business here is concluded,” said Autumn, “but we thank you for your hospitality.”

“But I insist that you allow me to offer you dinner this evening,” said Urudaqa aware that these two might be reporting back to Soros on their treatment, “and break your travels for one night at the very least. Duuba is known for its hospitality towards travellers and I would not like the town to leave you with an unfavourable impression.”

Autumn glanced at Logan who shrugged slightly.

“We would be honoured,” she said.

“Then it is settled,” said Urudaqa with an air of relief. “Hamuz, dismiss the guards and inform the staff.”

“Magide,” said Hamuz with a stiff little bow. He waved at the guards who filed out through the door.

Urudaqa sat back in his chair and inspected his cup as though surprised to find it there.

“My apologies,” he said looking up. “You were saying you intended to report something?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “We had intended to report the incident on the farm but it seems you already know of it.”

“I know one side of it,” said Urudaqa. “No doubt as favourites of Soros, your view is quite different.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “We were told that the horsemen were sent by someone called Buhfa Ouoinel who is, we were given to understand, using force to extract money from the local farmers. We sought only to offer our assistance when the horsemen came. Do you know of Buhfa Ouoinel?”

“Indeed,” said Urudaqa. “He maintains the road along the Western

part of the mountains and charges travellers a toll for their use of it. You say he is stealing from the farmers?"

"So we are told," said Autumn. "When I spoke with Jampor he readily admitted that Buhfa Ouoinel was behind this. Was it Jampor who made the complaint against us?"

"Yes," said Urudaqa. "He claimed that the two of you bested him and his four companions. I confess I did not take it over seriously."

"Then why arrest us without asking questions first?" thought Autumn but kept it to herself. "I confess to being curious," she said instead. "What was it that Jampor said we had stolen?"

"A much prized and valuable sword," said Urudaqa. "A family heirloom, I believe, handed down from father to son over many generations."

"Ahh," said Autumn. "I know of the sword. We did not steal it. Jampor dropped the sword and forgot to take it with him when he left. It is still with Outea the farmer. If you tell us where to find Jampor we will return it to him."

"I confess I do not know where Jampor is to be found," said Urudaqa, finishing his drink. "But now, alas, with the greatest of sadness and my most humble apologies I regret I have pressing matters to attend to and must leave you for a time. We will meet again when Astauand is low and talk of many things. Rooms have been prepared for you so if you desire you may retire there to rest or make yourselves at home in my gardens if you prefer. My bath house is, of course, entirely at your disposal and we have a most highly skilled masira in the town who can be sent for if you wish."

"That is most kind of you," said Autumn. "Although with your permission we would prefer to explore Duuba. Perhaps we can savour the delights of your bath house tomorrow before we depart?"

"My house is your house," said Urudaqa, rising to his feet. "I will have someone accompany you and guide you to the most interesting sights."

“You are most kind and generous, Urudaqa,” said Autumn, also rising to her feet. Surprised, Logan did the same. “But we are accustomed to wander and remain inconspicuous. I fancy any member of your staff will be well known in the town and draw attention to us.”

“As you wish,” said Urudaqa, appearing unconcerned. “If it should be that you lose your way, everyone knows my house and any will most happily bring you back. I look forward to renewing our acquaintance this evening.”

“As do we,” said Autumn, bowing her head respectfully.

Urudaqa returned her bow with a flourish and swept imperiously out of the garden. Autumn sat back down and tasted the lemony drink. It was surprisingly cool.

“What now?” asked Logan, finishing his.

“We go into the town,” said Autumn, looking around the large garden. She spotted a loitering servant. “Excuse me, how do we get out of here?”

* * *

“I really did think we were going to be arrested,” said Logan after they had been shown to the main entrance. It was more ornate than the back path they had followed to get to the Osaku's home. “I had forgotten all about Soros' letter. I was so relieved when you gave it to him.”

“I had a feeling it could be useful,” said Autumn, “but Urudaqa was quite right. Soros merely asked for us to be helped, it was not a pardon. I was intrigued by Urudaqa's reaction.”

“Why would he not drop the charges if Soros asked him to?” asked Logan. “I fancy if Soros says something then everyone runs to do his bidding.”

“Undoubtedly,” said Autumn. “But Soros is a long way away and this Buhfa Ouoinel is not. Urudaqa knows him and I warrant he knows

him very well.”

“Very likely,” said Logan as they walked along the road back towards the river. “Someone who gets the tolls on the only major road from East to West is likely to be one of the wealthier people in the area and the Osaku would make it his business to know all of them. I wanted to ask you, why is it that you were not surprised by our arrest?”

“I am not certain,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “but the thought came to me as I meditated this morning that even if Buhfa Ouoinel does take money by force from the local people he has a long history of legitimate business as a toll keeper and may well be an upstanding member of the community. That being so he may well decide to use his influence to stop us interfering so when Urudaqa tried to arrest us I was not surprised although there is much here that does not seem right and makes me wonder.”

“Wonder what?” asked Logan.

“Are Urudaqa and Buhfa Ouoinel one and the same?” said Autumn.

Logan stopped walking to look at her.

“The same?” he asked. “Why would you wonder that? Urudaqa lives here and Buhfa Ouoinel lives further East, in the mountains.”

“We have only been told this,” said Autumn. “We do not know it for certain.” She looked up and down the cross road. “Shall we go this way? There would seem to be some shops down there.”

“If you like,” said Logan. “Why would you think they are the same person?”

“I do not think they are,” said Autumn. “I only wonder if they are.”

Logan sighed. Autumn could be excessively pedantic when she wanted to be. “Why do you think they might be?”

“A few things,” said Autumn. “Consider this. We spoke with Jampor around mid day yesterday. If Buhfa Ouoinel is in the mountains I

would have thought it would take some time for Jampor to ride back to him and report what happened. Buhfa would then need to think about what to do and decide to have us arrested then send Jampor all the way back to Duuba to talk to Urudaqa. Yet when we spoke with Urudaqa he said he had had the report from Jampor this morning. It would seem too quick."

"Perhaps Buhfa is in Duuba at this moment," said Logan. "That would save a lot of time."

"Indeed," said Autumn. She stayed silent for a few paces. "But other things seem strange as well. Did you notice that when I told our side of it and said that Buhfa was using force to extract money from the farmers Urudaqa did not react. He most certainly was not surprised nor disbelieving nor did he protest Buhfa's innocence in any way and yet he knows Buhfa."

"I confess I did not notice," said Logan, "but now you mention it it does seem most strange. You would expect some reaction at least, even if they are enemies. In fact if that were so you would expect Urudaqa to be pleased to have something he could use against Buhfa."

"Indeed," said Autumn, "and that too struck me as strange. Friend or enemy, you would expect Urudaqa to ask some questions and try to establish the truth of the matter but he did not. He accepted my word for it over readily."

"Mayhap not," said Logan. "You had shown him Soros' letter by then so likely he decided to just let the matter drop."

"That too seems wrong," said Autumn. "No doubt Urudaqa is more than happy to drop charges against us to win favour with Soros but would he also not win favour by siding with us and bringing charges against Buhfa? He does not know we will not report him to Soros for not doing anything about it."

"That is a good point," said Logan thoughtfully. "But it is possible Urudaqa has not thought of it yet himself. Mayhap that is something he wants to talk about tonight."

“He did not strike me as slow witted,” said Autumn, “but you may be right. He is no doubt skilled in politics and may have to weigh the advantages of siding with Soros against Buhfa or the other way around, but it does seem to me that if Urudaqa is Buhfa then many, if not all, of these points disappear. For example, Jampor rides to Duuba, tells Buhfa what happened then we arrive and he decides on the spur of the moment to arrest us and tries to be rid of us that way. It removes the problem of the timing.”

“I follow your reasoning,” said Logan, “but it is not conclusive. It could simply be that Urudaqa is trying to protect Buhfa.”

“Agreed,” said Autumn. “Or mayhap they are in league together. But for certain Urudaqa did lie to us.”

“How so?” asked Logan.

“He said he did not know where to find Jampor so that the sword may be returned,” said Autumn. “How is it possible for the Osaku not to know how to contact someone who has brought charges and is the main witness? Without Jampor there can be no trial. So either he does know where to find Jampor and does not wish us to visit him or the idea of arresting us was a spur of the moment decision and not fully thought through and that would make sense of Urudaqa's speedy decision to drop the charges against us. If he genuinely believed that we were violent criminals would he not hold us and ask Soros for a judgement?”

“I am not so sure on that,” said Logan. “I have no doubt Urudaqa is vastly more concerned with his position in Soros' eyes than he is of the plight of a few farmers. No doubt as we are friends of Soros then he will allow us to do what we want with the local farmers.”

“A fair point,” said Autumn. “So why did Urudaqa not try to curry favour with us?”

“But he has,” said Logan. “He did not simply let us walk away. He has arranged it for us to dine with him and spend the night. No doubt he will try further to get our favour tonight.”

“Yes, true,” said Autumn. “I did not think of that.”

“It is interesting though,” said Logan. “I wonder which it is? Are Urudaqa and Buhfa one and the same or are they working together and sharing the profits or are they simply friends?”

“A good question, Logan,” said Autumn, “but it is not the most important question.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

“‘Twould seem to me that a more important question here is what do we do about it?” said Autumn.

Chapter Nine

Logan let out a low whistle and Autumn, who had already crossed the bridge, stopped and turned back to see what was happening. Logan tipped something into a small cloth bag and scampered across the bridge to join her. It was mid morning but Astauand had not yet appeared over the upper ridges of Idu which towered over them.

“He gave me some money,” said Logan. “Almost three grinar in small coins. I didn't want to look inside until we were out of sight of his home.”

He held out the little bag for Autumn to inspect but she merely smiled.

“I saw him give something to you but it is not for me to pry into your affairs,” she said. “Did he say why?”

“Merely that this was a small gift that would help on our travels,” said Logan, tying the bag to the cord of his robe and tucking it safely away inside.

“Most likely it is to pay tolls on the roads,” said Autumn. “Like as not Buhfa Ouoinel can read but his minions may not be able to and a document would do little but excite attention. Still, it is most kind of him. Shall we continue or do you wish to go back and thank him?”

“I thanked him when he gave it to me,” said Logan, glancing back across the bridge, “and three grinar may be a lot to us but I fancy it is but a drop in the river to him and he has already forgotten us.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” said Autumn moving off up the path. “I would not be surprised if his mind lingers for a long time on who we are and why we are here. I suspect few travellers here carry such requests from Soros and he will construct many scenarios explaining us and how we will impact him. No matter how many times we say we are but simple travellers he will not believe that for in his mind Soros' letter will carry great significance even though it has none. I would have preferred not to use it but the situation seemed to warrant it.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “Being arrested is never enjoyable. I wonder what the punishment would have been if we had been found guilty.”

“Best not to dwell on such things,” said Autumn, striding ahead as the path started to get steeper.

* * *

“Have they gone?” asked Urudaqa, looking up from his writing desk.

“Yes, Magide,” said Hamuz. “The man, Logan, stopped to count the money you gave him at the bridge then they crossed and are following the path to Drasta.”

“Good,” said Urudaqa. “Find Buhfa Ouoinel and tell him that these two, Logan and Autumn Savannah, are greatly interested in him and have the backing of the Karoi. They are on the path to Drasta and intend to continue through the mountains. Tell him I know not their true intent but that it bodes ill. Have you got that?”

“Yes, Magide,” said Hamuz. “What do you want him to do?”

“I leave that in his capable hands,” said Urudaqa. “As the Osaku of Duuba I must keep my nose clean.”

“Quite so, Magide,” said Hamuz. “I shall leave immediately.”

* * *

Some while later Autumn paused to admire the view from a flat section of the path. Astauand was edging slowly around the side of Idu and off to the North the dusty brown plains stretched all the way to the sea, although the sea was beyond the horizon even from this height. Here and there were green patches and flashes of pale blue from streams and small lakes. Occasionally birds floated in the air as they watched the ground for signs of movement while small white clouds floated over them.

“’Tis a desolate land, indeed,” said Autumn, leaning on her staff as Logan puffed up behind her. “It seemed less so as we travelled after

the desert but from up here, Mizule.”

“I do not know why,” said Logan, wiping his brow, “but there are a lot more grasses and plants on the mountain than there are down on the plains and it will not be long before we get among those trees further up. You would think that it would get hotter and dryer the higher we go but it seems to be getting a little cooler and the clouds are around the mountain, not further away over the plains.”

He sat down and fanned his face with his hand.

“It was the same in the Mapdil Mountains,”⁸ said Autumn, sitting down beside him. “Although they were far to the North but there was all that snow and ice and 'twas bitterly cold.”

“I can scarce remember snow and ice,” said Logan. “My mind tells me of that time but it seems so long ago, although it was no more than a round of seasons.”

He turned to look back at the way they had come and laughed. Duuba lay a long way further down, mud brown, small and somehow disconnected like a disused old wasps' nest.

“I had another thought on Urudaqa,” said Autumn, watching a bird slowly make its way across the land.

“Oh yes?” asked Logan. He took a long drink from the water bottle he carried slung over his shoulder.⁹

“He said at dinner last evening that he would look into our account of Jampor at Outea's farm and make enquiries of other farmers,” said Autumn, “and he promised to take appropriate action against Buhfa Ouoinel if it turns out that he is behind this.”

“Indeed,” said Logan, “and he has to since he is the Osaku, although what 'appropriate' means we will never know.”

“True,” said Autumn, “and it is possible he said that simply so that we

⁸ See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Second Tale*.

⁹ See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Fifth Tale*. This particular water bottle was a gift from Mother Midcarn and never runs out or needs refilling.

would report it to Soros, but if we take him at his word it could be he gave us, or you at any rate, coins to pay the tolls rather than a document saying he wanted us to have free passage so that we would be less easily identified.”

“I do not follow you,” said Logan, slapping at a fly that was walking across his forehead.

“If Urudaqa is truly going to investigate Buhfa and will take action against him,” said Autumn, watching another bird join the one she had been watching, “then documents giving us free passage may mark us as spies and cause us more harm than good. For certain they will draw attention to us and separate us from normal travellers and if we are searched then Buhfa will not be overly pleased to find the scroll from Soros. It will not go well for us if he thinks we are agents of Soros as well as Urudaqa.”

Logan groaned and screwed up his face. “You are right,” he said. “It is likely that if this Buhfa is doing something he should not then he will be anticipating some response from his local Osaku and have thoughts on how to handle it but if he thinks that the Karoi is involved that will come as a shock and may frighten him into doing something overly foolish.”

“And there may be repercussions on the local people, not just us,” said Autumn, “although likely not ordinary travellers. I imagine Buhfa still needs the income from their tolls.”

“Perhaps it is the tolls that are driving them away,” said Logan. “Urudaqa did say yesterday that many traders now prefer to travel by sea because of a new design of ship that can carry more goods without capsizing but I wager if it was cheaper many would still prefer the land route.”

“It is possible,” said Autumn. “I do not pretend to understand the intricacies of trade and there is little we can do about it. Urudaqa is now investigating, or claims to be, and he is better situated to resolve the matter than we are although I believe it is beholden on us to not make the situation worse, if possible.”

“You mean by avoiding the tolls?” asked Logan. “We do not need to as we have the coins.”

“No, I meant by searching for Buhfa,” said Autumn. “We are going to avoid the tolls anyway by staying this side of the mountains rather than following the road. If by some chance we meet Buhfa then mayhap I will talk with him and see if there is not a better solution to his predicament but I see no need otherwise.”

“But is there not a toll on this path?” asked Logan. “It is the path to the Drasta or are you planning to leave the path and head around the mountain?”

“I have in mind to visit the Drasta, if that sits well with you,” said Autumn. “If there is a toll then I would not before as we had not the means to pay it but now we have I confess I am curious. The only person I have met who can truly foretell the future is Mother Midcarn and she has great powers in bending space and moving through time for she is not a diviner but a mighty sorcerer. The fortune tellers we meet at markets do no more than spin a pretty tale for a few coins but I am curious if there is any substance to these Drastas and if there is how they do it. Mayhap they have powers like Mother Midcarn.”

“Well, if you wish,” said Logan. “Personally I would prefer to avoid sorcerers. I am always scared they might turn me into a frog or a snail or something if I say the wrong thing.”

“No doubt if that happened Mother Midcarn would turn you back into Logan,” said Autumn with a smile. “She has taken a liking to you and I am certain she would not let any harm come to you.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” said Logan, getting up. “More likely she sees you as part of her grand plans and I am just your sidekick.”

“Not so,” said Autumn, also getting up. “She gave you Fiau¹⁰ and the mittens¹¹ as well as your thinking stone¹².”

10 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*. Fiau being the spirit of Logan's staff.

11 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Third Tale*. The mittens having the power to enable the wearer to burrow through rock.

12 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*. Varaunik, a sorcerer in Kowloon,

“Well, there is that,” said Logan thoughtfully, “but I am far from living life as though I am blessed.”

“Which is a very sensible approach,” said Autumn, heading back up the path. “If you believe you are blessed you will end up in situations you cannot handle and I will have to come to your rescue.”

Logan burst out laughing and Autumn stopped to look back at him in puzzlement.

“I was wrong,” said Logan, shaking his head. “I am truly blessed as I always have you to come to rescue me whatever the situation, even though it is you who gets us into those situations more often than not.”

“Oh faff,” said Autumn. “We are both alive at this moment and what further blessing could any creature want?”

* * *

“Ahh, that explains it,” said Logan disappearing around the edge of a sheer cliff face. It was mostly a dense gritty rock but here and there were patches of moss and the occasional tuft of grass.

“Explains what?” asked Autumn, looking up from the plant she had stopped to look at.

Its small yellow green petals resembled those of the hamamielis tree which grew widely in Aferraron but which she had not yet seen in Neander. Hamamielis petals were good for cuts and injuries so that the cut did not go yellow or green itself and helped it to heal faster. Sadly this plant was not of the hamamielis family as one taste of a petal showed it was sour rather than bitter and so more likely to worsen an injury than heal it. Still, the petals of this plant were pretty and she was taking a few moments to appreciate the plant for its own

determined that Logan's thinking stone had magical powers which gives rise to the possibility, which is never clarified in *The Annals*, that Logan's thought processes are in some way enhanced by the stone. After all, he is remarkably intelligent for an orphan who grew up alone in a cow shed and relied on stealing food to survive. There are references in both the First and Second Tales to a new arithmetic system he devised and in the First Tale he shows a remarkable aptitude for reading and writing.

sake.

“I have been wondering who would charge a toll for this path,” said Logan, reappearing from around the bend, “when it is clearly just a path made by people walking this way and no effort has been put in to make it but now I see why.”

Autumn got off her knees and came slowly up the path, letting her fingers trail along the rough cliff face. On the other side the ground sloped away, undulating and thick with a variety of bushes and grasses. It was noticeably cooler this high up and there was a hint of moisture in the air.

“What have you found?” she asked.

“Steps,” said Logan, stepping to the edge of the broad path so she could pass. “There is even a rope fixed to the rock to make it easier to climb them.”

“Oh yes,” said Autumn, looking up at the steps cut into a crevice that ran down through the cliff.

The steps were steep and narrow but wide enough for a normal person. Someone with broad shoulders would need to twist a little. Some time in the past metal spikes had been driven into the side of the rock at intervals and a rope fixed to them. Not far up the steps the jagged end of a rusty broken spike stuck out and another, clearly newer, had been driven in a little below it.

“That must have taken some doing,” said Logan, appreciating the effort that had gone into cutting the steps to begin with. “I wonder how far up they go? They seem to go inside the cliff up there but it could just be a bend.”

“There is only one way to find out,” said Autumn.

She was about to start up the steps but paused and bent to look more closely then peered up the steps again.

“What is it?” asked Logan.

“There looks to be water staining on these steps and up the sides,” she said, pointing. “I venture when it rains this become a channel for the rain that falls further up.” She turned to look back out across the ground the other side of the path. “Ahh, look, see that depression in the ground? Where the vegetation is sparser? I wager quite a torrent comes down here and shoots out to land there. It must be quite a sight.”

“Mmm,” said Logan looking at the depression then back up the steps. “Do you think it is safe?”

“Very likely,” said Autumn cheerfully. “It isn't raining and likely hasn't this side of the mountain for a few days. The chances of it happening while we are climbing are very small. Come on.”

She ran lightly up the steps and Logan followed more cautiously, his ears listening for the sound of running water up ahead. All he heard was the clatter of Autumn's staff on the side of the crevice.

“Come and look at this,” came Autumn's voice from further up and around the bend.

“What is it?” called back Logan. He paused for a moment in case he needed to run back down the steps.

“The steps stop at a short tunnel,” called Autumn. “There are carvings or scratchings in the tunnel.”

“What sort of carvings?” called Logan, starting to climb again.

“Come and see,” said Autumn, her voice tinged with amusement rather than concern.

Logan rounded the bend and climbed the last few steps to the tunnel. It was more of a wide overhang than a tunnel and was barely two paces long and filled with light. The steps continued the other side and quickly disappeared up and out of sight.

“Where are the carvings?” asked Logan.

“Everywhere,” said Autumn, touching the rock with her fingers and peering at the sides. “They are even on the roof. Look.”

“Ohhh,” said Logan, as his eyes saw the carvings. He had been expecting images of large fearsome creatures such as those they has seen in Urbil’s cave in the Ahon Hara Mountains¹³ but these were mostly small and seemed to be pairs of curves coming together with an indentation at the top and a point at the bottom. Each had squiggles, usually to the sides but some were inside the curved lines and others above. “What are they?”

“They would seem to be hearts,” said Autumn, “and I venture the marks beside them are people’s names or initials although I cannot read this language.”

“Ooooh,” said Logan, looking around. “There must be hundreds of them. What do they mean?”

“Look at this one,” said Autumn, pointing to one large heart that had a lot of squiggles inside. “Either this is two people with very long names or whoever carved it has written a little poem. I would think many couples have come to Drasta and stopped here to proclaim their love before finding out from the seer whether it will last. Mayhap someone carved the first a hundred or more summers ago and others thought it a good idea and have followed in turn.”

“This one did not,” said Logan, twisted and hunched to be able to see one scratched in the roof above his head. “There is a thick line through the heart and the squiggles on the right have been scratched out. Mayhap she betrayed him while they were here.”

“Inevitably the love of some will not last,” said Autumn, “but why do you assume she betrayed him? It could as easily have been the other way around or mayhap one died and the other returned some time later and carved another with their new love, but look at this one,” and she laughed. “There are six no, seven, little people below the heart. Do you think that is the number of children they hoped to have?”

13 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Third Tale*. Urbil, in a personification of Mor’upita-sehen, had painted representations of Bar-Elan, tarc and other creatures from the Land of Un’izeq in a cave inside a volcano.

“Or already had,” said Logan. “Look, this one is in our language. It is worn and another cuts through it a little but it is still readable.”

“DK heart AF,” read Autumn. “I wonder how long ago this was and what happened to them?”

“’Tis a mighty statement,” said Logan. “Their love is still proclaimed here for all to see long after they are dead and buried. I wonder if any of their children or grandchildren have come here to look upon their parents’ declaration.”

“I suspect not,” said Autumn. “To cut such things here is more of a private statement to each other than a public one. That they would do in their home town. Still, all these declarations fill me with happiness. It is nice to be reminded that there is love in this world.”

“Aye,” said Logan then laughed. “Look, do you suppose Mother Midcarn was here once? It looks very old.”

“GP or GB heart MM,” said Autumn, tracing the barely visible lines with her finger. “Ahh, we must remember to ask her next time we meet.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” said Logan, “and for certain I would not tease her about it. I wonder who GP was?”

“We shall never know,” said Autumn stepping out of the tunnel. “Shall we move on? It would be an idea to get to the top of these steps before dark falls.”

“Aye,” said Logan, wondering if he dared to carve a heart of his own with his knife. He decided not to risk it and followed Autumn out of the tunnel.

Chapter Ten

“Greetings, Pilgrims,” said the woman. She seemed a little surprised to see Autumn and Logan come up the path but still put her hands together and bowed to them. “Drasta bids each of you thrice welcome. I am Farouta. I heard you coming up the path.”

She wore a simple white robe with a white cloth that covered her head and which was held by a silver pin beneath her chin. The hem of her robe covered her feet and was a little mud stained. In the shade of the trees in the early twilight she had an ethereal, ghost-like quality.

“Greetings, Farouta,” said Autumn matching Farouta’s welcome. “I am Autumn and this is Logan.”

Logan copied Autumn, as he usually did in unfamiliar situations.

“Why thrice welcome?” he asked when no one else seemed about to say anything.

“It is at this place that your past, your present and your future come together,” said Farouta, straightening up and letting her hands drop to her sides. She half smiled. “I welcome each of you in each of your three guises.”

“Oh,” said Logan, frowning.

Autumn noticed his frown and shook her head slightly to tell him not to pursue the matter so he didn’t.

“Drasta has retired for the night,” said Farouta, her voice soft and melodious. Each word was carefully enunciated and melodic as though she was reciting poetry.

“Indeed?” said Autumn, sounding mildly confused. “We understood there was no Drasta at this time. We came merely to visit this place and see what it is like.”

“There is always a Drasta,” said Farouta, “and this place is as you see.” She slowly waved a white draped arm to encompass the entire

area.

Behind her lay what appeared to be a small but deserted village. There were several dwellings but everything was silent and dark and there were no other people around nor fires burning.

The silence grew and Logan began to feel uncomfortable.

“I think, perhaps, we should be going,” he said, looking at Autumn.

“There is no need,” said Farouta. “We have plenty of room to accommodate you for as long as you wish. Perhaps in time you may change your minds and seek an audience with Drasta.”

“I had heard that none took the place of Windustrama after his death,” said Autumn. “Clearly we were misinformed.”

“Indeed,” said Farouta, “and in more ways than one. Windustrama was a woman not a man and Inuwabri is Drasta.”

“My apologies,” said Autumn, bowing to Farouta again. “We are strangers in this land and gather such information as we can as we travel. I meant no offence.”

“No offence is taken,” said Farouta, “for we are all travellers through life and none but Drasta has full knowledge. That is why those that seek to know the truth come here. Pilgrims in a world of ignorance and darkness.”

“Then mayhap we will seek an audience with Drasta,” said Autumn, “for we too seek knowledge.”

Farouta gave her half smile again and inclined her head. “As you wish,” she said. “You are the only pilgrims here at this time so you are welcome to stay in any of the dwellings that you desire. The fee is half a grinar per night and another half grinar if you desire food. I will speak with Drasta and inform you when your audience is granted which should not be long in coming. Perhaps even within the next ten days.”

“A grinar a day for ten days?” exclaimed Logan. “Is that not most exceedingly expensive?”

“What is money but a tool?” said Farouta, “and what price can be laid on knowing the unknowable? But you would appear to be decent people so perhaps if we say two grinar for three nights and food?”

“I do not see why we need to stay here at all,” said Logan. “We are happy to sleep further along the path and we have some food with us. We can come back tomorrow and find out if and when the Drasta will see us and return then.”

“There is no need for you to endure the hardships of sleeping in the wild,” said Farouta, a trifle anxiously. “It would be well if you were thoroughly at peace when the time comes for your audience. I am disposed to aid you all I can for I see that you are true seekers so what say you to two grinar for all food and accommodation and I will beseech Drasta to grant you an audience within three days?”

Autumn frowned as Logan laughed. “That would seem reasonable,” she said. “Farouta wishes to help us.”

“Take no notice of my friend,” said Logan. “She has little understanding of these matters. Is it expected that we make a donation at the time of the audience with Drasta?”

“The act of prophecy is a most exacting and arduous task,” said Farouta, “and not without its risks. It is customary for the seeker to go at least some way towards fair restitution with a small contribution.” She looked appraisingly at Logan. “Shall we say five grinar? That is some way less than is usual.”

“Come, Autumn,” said Logan, smiling at Farouta. “This is not a place of truth and knowledge. It is but a place of deception, intended to fleece travellers from their money and no better than any fairground fortune teller. Let us be on our way for we will learn nothing here.”

Autumn looked enquiringly at Logan then at Farouta. She still had her ethereal look but she also had a faint air of worry.

“When did the last pilgrim come here?” asked Autumn.

“You catch us at a quiet time,” said Farouta. “We normally have a constant stream of ...,” then she stopped and sighed. “Oh, what does it matter? It has been so long since our last pilgrim that I do not remember when it was. We used to employ twelve cooks and several other staff but now there is only me.” She shrugged and undid the silver pin under her chin and pulled off her headscarf. “Well, goodbye. It was nice to meet you, even if it was only for a short while.”

“And you,” said Logan. “Goodbye.” He turned to leave.

“Wait,” said Autumn so Logan stopped and turned back.

“Is this as Logan says?” asked Autumn. “Is this a place of deception or does the Drasta have genuine insight?”

“Inuwabri has genuine insight,” said Farouta quietly but with conviction.

“Then with your permission we will stay here and eat with you,” said Autumn, “and seek an audience with Inuwabri but we only have three grinar.”

“No we don't,” said Logan. “We have two grinar and nineteen osats.”

“Keep your money,” said Farouta. “Please stay as my guests for it gets lonely here and your company will be payment enough. I shall ask Drasta for an audience but I cannot promise that it will be granted. Drasta may not have anything to say.”

“Would the Drasta have something to say if we made a large donation?” asked Logan.

“Not necessarily,” said Farouta with a full smile this time. “Drasta does not know the size of the contribution before the audience.”

“It is enough that you ask for an audience,” said Autumn.

“Come with me,” said Farouta, turning and pointing through the little

settlement. "I live in that hut at the far end and you can have the hut next to mine for as long as you care to stay."

She started to walk towards it and Autumn fell in step beside her. Logan walked a little behind.

"So am I right in thinking that all these huts are for pilgrims?" asked Autumn.

"Yes," said Farouta. "When I started here they were all full every night and we had more camping beyond the huts."

"But now no one comes?" asked Autumn.

"As you see," said Farouta.

"Why is this?" asked Autumn. "Does the Drasta foretell bad things that people do not want to know about?"

"It is because he is a man," said Farouta.

"I do not understand," said Autumn. "My experience in this land is that it is women who are perceived as of little value not men."

"It is different with Drasta," said Farouta. "Traditionally Drasta is a woman and the men of Neander respect a woman Drasta for they fear women and they like to fear the Drasta but there have on occasion been men and they are never respected nor feared. Here is your dwelling, if only for tonight. Treat it as your own. I will start a fire and prepare some food. I regret there is no meat and I humbly ask your forgiveness."

"There is nothing to forgive," said Autumn. "We rarely eat meat for I will not kill an animal and Logan is no great hunter. We carry some fruit and vegetables we found on the way here which we offer freely to you."

"Thank you," said Farouta, "although this high up there is no shortage of things that grow. If you will excuse me."

She gave a half bow and retired inside her hut. Autumn went into the hut beside Farouta's and came out fairly quickly.

"The grasses for the bed are very old," she said in answer to Logan's enquiring look. "I could hear many things moving around inside it. Perhaps this one will be better."

"Most likely they do not lay fresh grasses when they are not expecting visitors," said Logan.

"Understandably," said Autumn going into another hut. She backed out almost immediately. "There is something not long dead in here."

"Let us sleep among the trees tonight," said Logan.

"Would not Farouta consider that rude?" asked Autumn. "'Tis rarely a good idea to reject another's hospitality."

"She did say we could sleep where we wanted," said Logan, "and if we explain that we are used to sleeping in the open I am sure she will not take it amiss." He moved off between the two huts in search of somewhere more suitable among the trees beyond. Autumn wavered for a moment then followed.

"What led you to think this was a place of deception?" she asked, catching up with him.

"The demand for money," said Logan, peering around as the dusk deepened. "Farouta already had fees in her head and high ones at that but what made it certain was her attempt to make us stay indefinitely in the hope of an audience. Most likely her work here is to decide when someone is about to leave and arrange an audience for the next day so that they will make a contribution. I knew a farmer many summers ago who did much the same with the promise of mating his prize winning hound."

"There is much I do not know of people," said Autumn. "Let us sleep here. It would seem clear enough of stones."

"Aye," said Logan, "this will do nicely. Did you not suspect something

was amiss when Farouta greeted us thrice?"

"I confess I did not," said Autumn. "I put that down to a lack of training in logic."

"Ahh," said Logan. "So that was why you signalled me to not dispute her statement."

"Indeed," said Autumn. "I saw no need to start a debate on such short acquaintance. Mayhap she truly believes that here is where each person's past, present and future come together."

"Ah well," said Logan. "Shall we go back and join her? I can smell the smoke of a fire and no doubt she is wondering where we have got to."

* * *

"Hello," said Farouta, looking up from a pot over a small fire. "I was wondering where you had gone."

"We decided to find somewhere to sleep among the trees," said Autumn.

"As you wish," said Farouta. "I have been remiss in the upkeep of the huts for it seems a worthless task when there are no visitors. The important thing is you have found somewhere that meets your needs."

"Our needs are very simple," said Autumn sitting down. "Tell me something of this place. We are from across the sea and had not heard of it until just recently."

"There is little to tell and much at the same time," said Farouta, stirring the pot. The light from the fire below made her eyes seem over large and solemn and gave them a wicked twinkle. "For several hundreds of summers the Drasta has been here and for much of that time people have sought the wisdom of Drasta."

"Are you the Drasta?" asked Logan.

"Iyali, no," laughed Farouta sitting back on her heels. "Why ever

would you think that?"

"There would seem to be no one else here," said Logan. "Where is Inuwabri if, as you say, he is the Drasta and the Drasta lives here?"

"Inuwabri lives further up the mountain," said Farouta. "In the Drasta."

"I am confused," said Autumn. "Sometimes the word Drasta seems to be a person and sometimes a place or even just an idea. I do not understand."

"Drasta is all three," said Farouta, "and as you are from far distant no doubt you do not understand the subtleties of our language. When I speak of Drasta I speak of the person and when I speak of the Drasta I speak of the place but both are more complex than that for Drasta is not a single person but many people stretching back over time and the Drasta is not a single place for it can mean the place where Drasta lives or this bigger place where people come together as pilgrims or even the whole mountain when people speak of the Drasta as somewhere far away or simply just the small patch of ground where Drasta stands."

"So Drasta as a word is used much like Karoi or Roinad?" asked Logan, "except that it also includes the Karoi's Palace?"

"I know not what a Roinad is," said Farouta, "but Karoi, yes. There is but one Karoi and yet many have been and will yet be Karoi. And yes, as you say, the Karoi lives in a Palace but one can also say that wherever the Karoi is the Karoi lives, if only for that moment."

"I see," said Autumn. "So Inuwabri is the person of the present Drasta and he lives further up the mountain which is part of this place which is on the mountain so all these places are the Drasta depending on the context. That makes much more sense."

"Yes," said Farouta. "And yet there is still more to Drasta than that for Drasta is an idea. If there was no person who is Drasta and no place that is the Drasta there would still be Drasta for Drasta is."

“Is what?” asked Logan.

“Just is,” said Farouta, “and was and will be.”

“I do not follow your meaning,” said Logan, frowning.

“I think Farouta means that the idea of Drasta exists independently of the physical person or place,” said Autumn.

“Oh,” said Logan. “You mean like the idea of the Karoi exists even if there is no actual Karoi at the moment?”

“Exactly,” said Farouta.

“I know what the idea of a Karoi is,” mused Logan, “but what is the idea of a Drasta?”

“Drasta is one who sees,” said Farouta.

“Do we not all see?” asked Logan, “except for blind people, of course.”

“We see only in the present,” said Farouta. “For you in the now, you cannot see what happened here yesterday nor what will happen here tomorrow. You may have a memory of what you saw yesterday and you may still be here tomorrow and will see then but neither can you see at this moment. Drasta can.”

“So Drasta is a seer?” asked Autumn. “An oracle, a soothsayer, a diviner?”

“Yes,” said Farouta. She leaned forward to stir the pot again and again her eyes reflected the dancing flames. “Those are some of the words that approximate Drasta. Others are auger, prophet, even fortune teller and this could be a fairground as Logan thinks. Each has a shade of meaning and all those shades combined are Drasta.”

“Is there only one Drasta?” asked Autumn.

“I think the meal is ready,” said Farouta. “One moment while I serve.”

She picked up a bowl and ladled some of the vegetable stew into it and passed it to Logan then did the same with another bowl for Autumn. Then she passed each of them a wooden spoon before serving herself. She tasted hers and pursed her lips and wrinkled her nose slightly to indicate that the stew was only passable and not to her usual standard.

“I do not know how precisely to answer your question,” she said after eating a mouthful thoughtfully. “There have been many Drasta in the past and many more will come but at any moment there is only one Drasta except that oft-times there are two or perhaps more. What is it that you are asking me?”

“I was asking if there are Drasta elsewhere,” said Autumn, “but I am curious about what you mean by there being two or three at any time.”

“I am unclear on this myself,” admitted Farouta. “My task here is to manage the pilgrims and tend to their wants and, yes, Logan, collect such money as I can.” She paused for a moment, her spoon halfway between her bowl and her mouth. “Now I think on it there is another aspect to the idea of Drasta which is that of a business. I had not thought of it before but in some sense I am part of the idea of Drasta as many see me as a figurehead for Drasta for that side of Drasta is left entirely to me. Drasta does not personally get involved. No matter. My point is that I came here to undertake this task after Inuwabri became Drasta and I was not present when Windustrama died.”

“I do not follow your point,” said Autumn, putting aside her empty bowl.

“Can I offer you more?” asked Farouta, putting her own bowl down immediately and reaching for Autumn's.

“That is most generous of you,” said Autumn, “but no, I eat sparingly.”

“Logan?” asked Farouta, holding up a ladleful of stew.

“Ahh, thank you,” said Logan, holding out his bowl.

Farouta tipped the ladle into his bowl and Logan smiled his thanks. She sat back again and picked up her bowl.

“Windustrama died a little more than five summers ago,” she said, “and Inuwabri replaced her but Inuwabri is a man of many summers in age and was when Windustrama died. I do not know if Windustrama passed the gift to Inuwabri at the time of her death or if Inuwabri had the gift before. If that were so then surely that would mean that there were two Drastas while they both lived?”

“Have you not asked Inuwabri?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Farouta. “I have never met him.”

Autumn gazed thoughtfully at her in the light of the dying fire. “How then do you know he is a man?” she asked after a while.

“I have been told so by pilgrims who have consulted Drasta,” said Farouta.

“Did you not meet him when he gave you this task?” asked Logan, putting down his bowl.

“He did not give me this task,” said Farouta. “It was given to me by Serea, the one who had this task before me. When I move on my final task is to find another to replace me.”

“So how do you ask Drasta about audiences?” asked Autumn, “and how do you find out which ones are granted?”

“Oh, we communicate through word left in a special place,” said Farouta. “If Drasta wishes me to know something or do something he leaves me a note and I, in turn, leave him notes. It is a strange system, I admit, but it seems to work although I have had no word from him for some time.”

“How do you know he is still alive?” asked Logan.

“Serea told me that when Drasta is near death he will leave word of who is to replace him,” said Farouta, “and when that person arrives I

am to ask if my replacement is to be found.”

“So you will meet the next Drasta but not the one you serve,” said Autumn. “It is a strange system as you say and one that is built on great trust.”

“I imagine Inuwabri knows everything that Farouta is going to do,” said Logan. “He would not be much of a seer if he did not.”

“I daresay that is true,” said Autumn. “So have you sent Drasta word yet that we desire an audience?”

“I have written it,” said Farouta, “but not yet put it in place. I can do it now, if you like.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “You have your manner of doing things and there is no need to change it because we are here.”

“I normally put any messages in place before I go to bed,” said Farouta, “and check again when I get up for any replies. If you give me a few moments I can leave your message then we can talk some more. I would ask of news of Duuba if you have any. I have not left here since I arrived.”

“In truth there is little we can tell you,” said Autumn, “for we were there but one night.”

“Then tell me of your travels,” said Farouta. “A moment.”

She retrieved a torch that was leaning against the side of her hut and touched it to the fire so it burst into life then headed off behind her hut. She was gone but a very short time before she came running back in great excitement.

“Truly you are most honoured!” she exclaimed. “Look! Drasta has already replied!”

Autumn looked at the note Farouta thrust upon her then handed it back.

“Sadly I cannot read your language,” she said. “What does it say?”

“My apologies,” said Farouta. “I assumed as you speak ... but no matter. It says that Autumn Savannah and Logan are to be sent to Drasta this very day, although that means tomorrow as Drasta knows I will not get the message until the morning.”

“How did Drasta know we are here?” asked Logan, his voice betraying his puzzlement.

“In much the same way as he knows my name is Savannah,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “even though I have not told Farouta that. It would seem that we have been expected.”

Chapter Eleven

“Are you sure this is the place?” asked Logan looking at the small hole in the side of the mountain. “It looks awfully small and dark and it smells funny.”

“It is as Farouta said,” said Autumn, pointing. “There is the sign with the two half circles back to back with the line through them carved on the rock and there is a hole in the side of the mountain where she said it would be.”

“It does not seem right though,” said Logan, squatting down to get a better look at the hole. “It seems barely big enough for either of us. Yet there must have been Aloidia knows how many visitors here and many must have been bigger than we are and some considerably bigger. How could they have squeezed in here?”

“Perhaps there is magic here that makes the hole big enough to fit the person wanting to enter,” said Autumn, “or perhaps it is a test to find out who is determined enough to get inside.”

“Or perhaps there are other entrances for bigger people,” said Logan sourly. “Most likely this is just a ploy to make sure pilgrims come before the Drasta on hands and knees and suitably humble. You would think that whoever went to the trouble of cutting steps in the path and building the huts would have made the entrance to this place bigger. Mayhap they cut three or four and there is one big enough for a Royal carriage to pass through when a Karoi decided to pay a visit. We get the entrance for the little people.”

“Oh Logan,” said Autumn with a laugh. “You really do not like this place, do you.”

“It all smacks of trickery and parting believers from their money,” said Logan, “but then I have the wrong attitude to begin with. I cannot grasp how someone can see what is going to happen in the future, and besides, if they really can then why not do it for the good of everyone? Why have all this malarkey? And if they really do just want to make money out of it, why not use their power for their own gain? 'Twould seem much more sensible.”

“Why does anyone do what they do?” asked Autumn. “Most often, it seems to me, they do what their fathers did before them and do not weary themselves thinking of alternatives. Mayhap in the long distant past when the first Drasta foretold something it was as you say but since then a tradition has grown and become embedded and cannot now be changed. Think back on many of the people we have met. How many of them would be able to abandon such skills they learned in their youth and throw over their way of life? Do not be too harsh on the present Drasta for the sins you perceive of his forebears.”

Logan looked back down the steep and narrow path they had ascended from the pilgrim camp then he sighed. “So we are going in?” he asked. “In there?” and he pointed with his foot.

“We are expected and it would be rude not to do so,” said Autumn, “and besides, we travel to experience the world and is this not an experience?”

“No, you travel to experience the world,” said Logan. “I travel for I have nothing better to do than go where you go.”

“You are free to do as you wish, Logan,” said Autumn quietly. “There is nothing binding you to me.”

“That is not what I meant,” said Logan, backtracking rapidly for, aside from the prospect of being parted from Autumn, he was beside a small dark hole high on a mountain in a strange land a very long way from anywhere he could by any stretch of imagination call 'home'. “What I meant was that we don't have to investigate everything simply because it is there.”

“True,” said Autumn. “Once again your powers of logic defeat me. Come, let us go.”

She started off down the path towards the pilgrim camp, its steepness requiring her to use her staff even though she was nimble and sure-footed. Logan stared after her open mouthed.

“But, ...,” he spluttered, “but do you not want to meet the Drasta?”

“You do not want to go in there,” said Autumn, stopping and turning to look back up at him, “and I confess I am not sufficiently curious to make it an issue for I am inclined to agree with you.”

“But do you not want to know how the Drasta knew your name?” asked Logan.

“Most likely Urudaqa sent word ahead of us,” said Autumn, “or some rumour has spread from Duuba. For certain my name could be known by some means other than the gift of foresight and I am content with that. For certain, now we have arrived at the edge of the Skizze Mountains I also have a desire to press on and find Darius if we can. It would be pleasant to renew our acquaintance.”

“Is this one of your ploys to make me want to go in that hole?” asked Logan suspiciously.

“I do not have ploys,” said Autumn. “Mayhap it is only my vanity but I like to think I decide to do things through the use of thought and logic and I would not resort to ploys as they hint of deception and I like to think that I am not a deceiver. Why do you ask? I had thought you knew me well enough by now.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “I do know you well enough to know you do not resort to deception or trickery. In fact you can be brutally honest at times.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “Let us return to the camp and make our farewells to Farouta. Come on.”

Logan didn't move.

“It is just that I am now curious,” he said, looking back at the hole. “All this talking has made me want to go inside and at least see what is there, even if I am not convinced by it.”

“That is unfortunate,” said Autumn, also not moving. “For if I now go into the hole with you it could be interpreted as me having used a ploy to change your mind. Perhaps I should wait here for you to return for I would not want you thinking ill of me or my motives.”

“Are you serious?” asked Logan. He suddenly felt empty inside and rudderless.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “For all my talk of seeking knowledge it would be very wrong of me to stop you doing the same when you have a mind.”

“But you never let me go anywhere unknown,” said Logan staring at her and trying to work out the implications of what was happening. “You always go first to protect me.”

“And if it is within my power I will always protect you, Logan,” said Autumn, “whether you want me to or not.”

“I do not understand,” said Logan, looking helplessly at Autumn. “You want me to go into that little hole all on my own?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I want to continue our travels and find Darius if we can but I am happy to delay for a time while you explore your curiosity.”

“But what if there is danger in there?” asked Logan.

“I would be very surprised if there is any danger in there,” said Autumn, “except perhaps the danger of you being stripped of your two grinar and nineteen osats but no matter. Would you like me to come with you?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “I would feel strange without you.”

“Then let us venture through that hole,” said Autumn, climbing back up the path again. “Shall I go first?”

“No,” said Logan in relief. “I will.”

He squatted down again and peered into the hole. It was dry and dusty and dark but as far as he could tell it didn't seem to get any narrower.

“Fiau,” he said, holding his staff in the hole, “can I have some light please?”

The tip of his staff burst into flame and he inspected the tunnel.

"It goes back some way," he reported. "I see no sign of its end but it seems to go straight. Well, here goes."

He went inside the hole on his hands and knees, his staff held awkwardly in front of him. Autumn slipped off her pack and hooked its strap over her foot and followed him, her pack dragging in the dust behind her.

"Do you see any marks in the dust?" she asked.

Logan stopped and inspected the floor of the tunnel in front of him. "There are some animal prints," he reported. "Why?"

"I was wondering if others have passed this way before us," said Autumn, "but it would seem not."

"Oh," said Logan. He thought for a moment. "Should I be worried about these animal prints?"

"Only if they are a mountain lion or bear," said Autumn.

"Ah," said Logan. He paused. "What do mountain lion footprints look like?"

"I have no idea," said Autumn. "I am a Krisana not a hunter."

"Right," said Logan. He delayed a few more moments then started shuffling forward again. "There seems to be a bend up ahead," he said a few moments later. "By the way, I did not think it was a ploy. I know you are not like that."

"Good," said Autumn. "But if it was, it was a good one for you are in this tunnel now and you are leading the way."

"Sploop!" said Logan. "So it was a ploy?"

"No," said Autumn. "My mind does not work that way."

"I know," said Logan. "If you want me to do something you just tell me to do it or give me endless arguments about why I should do it and wear down any resistance I might have."

"Am I really that bad?" asked Autumn. "You make me seem like a dreadful person."

"No," said Logan. "You are just very clear headed. If I really did not want to do something no argument of yours would ... aghh."

"What?" cried Autumn in alarm as Logan's foot suddenly jumped up in front of her face before disappearing. She grabbed for it but missed and the flickering light in front of him went out. Then it reappeared amid some scuffling noises and a dark outline of Logan's head appeared.

"I fell," said Logan. "There is a sudden drop here so take care. It seems to be some sort of cavern."

Autumn crawled forward and found the edge of the tunnel with her fingers. Curling herself into a ball she brought her legs forward and dropped the short distance to the floor of the cavern.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

"I banged my shoulder," said Logan, "but it is minor. It was more of a surprise than anything. Fiau, can we have more light?"

The end of his staff flared up brightly and lit the entire cavern. It was circular and the roof was rounded and its walls were smooth rock. There was a broad plinth near the wall on the other side and a large flat metal dish gleamed in front of it. Three or four small rush mats lay on the floor in no apparent pattern but there was no one else there.

"Hah," said Logan, his eye catching sight of another tunnel entrance further round the wall. "Look, I told you. That one is for the bigger people and I wager the arch behind the plinth is for Inuwabri."

"Ahh, so there is no magic involved after all," said Autumn, slightly

disappointed. "No doubt one of Farouta's tasks is to direct people along a path according to their size. Do we wait here or should we go through the arch or the other tunnel?"

"She said to go through the tunnel and wait," said Logan. "She did not say anything about other tunnels so I suppose we wait here. It is not very exciting, is it."

"I do not imagine many come here for excitement," said Autumn.

She pushed one of the mats over to the wall opposite the plinth with her foot and sat down with her legs crossed and her staff within easy reach. She closed her eyes and started to breathe deeply and slowly as she did when she began to meditate and composed herself for the waiting. Logan watched her then pulled over another mat and sat beside her. He, too, crossed his legs but with his heels under his knees as he had not yet mastered the skill of painlessly putting his heels on top of his knees. He wedged Fiau between his legs and leaned back against the wall.

"It is a little chilly in here," he said after a while. "Even though it is a lot cooler this high up you really notice the cold inside a cavern, don't you."

"Yes," said Autumn.

Logan yawned and looked around yet again then he checked his fingernails.

"At least it is dry in here," he said. "Have you noticed there is no dampness on any of the walls?"

"Yes," said Autumn.

Logan tapped a finger against the back of his other hand a few times and closed his eyes.

"I wonder if any animals come in here," he said a while later. "It would be a nice cave to pass out a storm. Mayhap even the whole winter but there are no signs. There isn't even any particular smell."

"I imagine someone keeps the animals out," said Autumn. "Why do you not sleep for a while? I will wake you when something happens."

"Sorry," said Logan. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

"You do not disturb me," said Autumn, opening her eyes. "I thought only to help you pass the time. Perhaps if you put out the light."

"What if we are attacked?" exclaimed Logan, leaning forward.

"That would be unlikely," said Autumn. "If we were to be attacked and robbed no doubt it would be on the path or at the camp, not in the Drasta's audience chamber. Besides, I venture I would hear anyone approach. There is only silence in here."

"Perhaps," said Logan, "but I would feel better with the light."

"As you wish," said Autumn. She closed her eyes again.

Logan looked around the chamber once more then scanned the roof.

"Oh well," he thought. "Fiau, put out the light, please," he said quietly.

In the sudden darkness Autumn smiled to herself but stayed quiet.

* * *

Logan nearly screamed when Autumn's hand clamped over his mouth a few moments or an eternity later, it was difficult to tell. He felt her lips against his ear.

"Someone comes," she breathed and released her hand.

"Fiau," whispered Logan.

"No," whispered Autumn. "Let us wait and see."

"That is not a good idea," thought Logan but stilled his urge to light the cavern. Instead he strained his ears. There was the faintest of faint scufflings coming from somewhere. He couldn't decide from where.

“Perhaps it is a mouse,” he thought, then tightened his grip on Fiau in alarm. “Or a scorpion.” He could almost feel its hard sharp little feet tapping on his skin. There came a faint rustle of cloth. “That is no scorpion,” he thought and the feel of tapping feet disappeared. Then silence descended once again. He sensed Autumn listening in the dark beside him and felt reassured until he started to wonder if it actually was Autumn and not some strange creature which had taken her place in the darkness. Cautiously he edged his hand over until it touched something. It felt like the silver ribbon on the edge of Autumn’s robe so he withdrew his hand.

With a sudden ‘wharump’ the cavern exploded into light and Logan jerked back in surprise, banging his head hard against the wall, making his eyes water.

“Owww,” he muttered, trying to rub the back of his head with one hand and shield his eyes from the light with the other. Fiau clattered to the floor.

“Calm yourself,” whispered Autumn. “Tis only a fire in the dish. Someone has just lit it.”

Logan uncovered his eyes but all he could see was a huge fire dominating the cavern and a large glowing head with dark staring eyes and writhing snakes for hair that hovered above the flames.

“Voqev,” he muttered and stopped rubbing his head to peer at it. It was scary but, for someone who had met Yammoe twice and still lived, not that scary. Besides, Autumn had bested Yammoe and she was next to him.¹⁴ He stole a sideways glance at her just to make sure.

The brightness of the flames died down as his eyes grew accustomed to the light and the glowing head grew a body. The body was encased in black cloth and sat cross legged, much as Autumn did, on the plinth. Its hands rested, palms upwards, on its feet. With his sight restored, Logan could see that the snakes no longer writhed, they just seemed to from the flickering of the flames. There was also something

¹⁴ See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale* in which Autumn bests Yammoe in the Land of the Undead in order to return Logan to the Land of the Living. See *The Third Tale* for their second meeting with Yammoe when Mor’upita-sehen calls on Yammoe and Zeeth to aid in returning Bar Ilan to the Land of Un’izeq.

in the air that tasted a little acrid.

"I wager that is a mask of some sort," he thought to himself.

Autumn cleared her throat.

"Do I have the pleasure of addressing Inuwabri?" she asked.

There was no reply. Not even a finger twitched. Autumn glanced at Logan then tried again.

"Are you Drasta?" she asked.

"The clear star that is yesterday benefits all that ride on towers of clay," said a thin voice that rose and fell and appeared to come from all around. "Who swims the mists of Zebaryon in a suffusion of intemperance?"

"I do not understand," said Autumn, glancing with a puzzled frown at Logan.

"A great silence lies ahead, what with the future yet to come," intoned the voice. "Talk, no talk, no noise of noise."

"I wonder if our necklaces are working properly," whispered Autumn. She reached up to touch her neck to make sure it was still there. "This makes no sense to me."

"This is Autumn Savannah," said Logan, frowning at the figure. "You should know that if you are the Drasta. You sent word for her to come here today. Why are you talking nonsense?"

The seated figure shifted slightly.

"Autumn Savannah," came the voice, drawing out the words. It sounded slightly strained. "Indeed. Ask your question so that I may yet reveal your destiny."

"Here is my question," said Logan, jumping up before Autumn could say anything. "What sort of game is this? You are not the Drasta, you

are just some cow pat in a fancy costume,” and he snatched at the snakes around the head.

The figure recoiled in shock and the mask fell off and clanged against the dish.

“Umm, hello,” said Inuwabri with a weak smile. “Actually I am Drasta. Are you well?”

Chapter Twelve

“Oh,” said Logan, rather taken aback. “Umm, I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

“I an unhurt,” said Inuwabri, sitting back up again. “It is fortunate I did not fall off the plinth however.”

He was of middle age and unimpressive in his appearance. One eye watered constantly and his face tapered to a blunt point rather than a definite chin. It didn’t help that he had a pronounced gap between his over-large front teeth and the hairs of his thin beard grew backwards rather than downwards making him look a little like a water vole. He was also unusually pale for a Neandern, no doubt because he rarely went outside.

Logan stooped and picked up the mask. It was made from a thin metal that had been beaten and burnished and was surprisingly light. One of the protruding snakes was bent and there was a dent where its cheek had impacted the solid metal dish.

“I, um, it seems to be slightly damaged,” said Logan, turning it over in his hands. “I am sorry.”

He bent the snake back so it seemed to be roughly where it should be then tried to push the dent back out but it didn’t work so he handed the mask to Inuwabri with a sheepish smile. Inuwabri sighed and took it. He stroked the dent with his finger then laid the mask on the plinth beside him.

“It is not the first time,” he said. “It is an old mask and it has been dented many times. It shouldn’t have fallen off but it doesn’t fit properly. I inherited it, you see.”

“Why wear it then?” asked Logan.

“It is all part of the image,” said Inuwabri. “You are Logan?”

“Yes,” said Logan, “and this is Autumn Savannah. Why do you want an image? If you are the Drasta and can truly foresee the future then

you should not need such false trappings.”

“I am Drasta,” said Inuwabri, trying to look stern, “not the Drasta. This place is the Drasta and it is I that foresees not this place.”

“We are not from this land,” said Autumn, “and there are subtleties in the language that we have not yet grasped. Please accept our apologies.”

“None are needed,” said Inuwabri. “Can I see your pot of ointment?”

“My ointment?” said Autumn, taken aback by this unexpected demand. “Why do you wish to see my ointment?”

“Your friend doubts I am who I say I am,” said Inuwabri, “so I, in turn, doubt who you say you are. Prove yourself with your ointment.”

“I doubted you first,” said Logan, “so you should prove yourself first.”

Inuwabri laughed. It was a high pitched laugh and seemed to lack any humour.

“Sadly I cannot until I am sure I am speaking with who I should be speaking,” he said. “If I must prove myself first then this goes no further.”

“I do not see that showing my ointment constitutes conclusive proof,” said Autumn, “but it is of little consequence. One moment.”

She untied the cord around her pack and rummaged inside to find her little pot of lip salve. She pulled it out and held it up.

“Give it to me,” said Inuwabri, holding out his hand.

Autumn hesitated then handed him the pot. He inspected it then pulled out the wad of folded leaves that stoppered it and sniffed its contents. He nodded and pushed the wad back in the neck of the pot and handed it back to Autumn.

“Thank you,” he said then shifted himself forward on the plinth and

got off. He was shorter than he had looked. "If you will come with me, Autumn Savannah, we will go to my dwelling. We can talk more comfortably there. You, too, I suppose, Logan."

He turned and stalked off through the archway behind the plinth and Logan curled his lip at him. Autumn dropped her pot of salve inside her pack and retied the cord with a faintly puzzled expression on her face.

"I have no idea what is going on," she remarked to Logan. "Let us follow and see where it leads."

"As you wish," said Logan, picking up their staffs and handing one to Autumn. "He does seem to like dark tunnels, doesn't he. Fiau, some light please."

The staff in Autumn's hand burst into flame and they quickly exchanged them then Autumn took Fiau back. "I will go first," she said firmly. "There is something amiss here although I know not what."

The tunnel was clearly designed for one person at a time and was barely high enough for either of them but its sides were fairly smooth. There was no sign of Inuwabri but he was some way ahead, assuming he wasn't lying in wait for them somewhere, and the tunnel curved noticeably to the right. It turned out to be quite long as well but they soon came to a curtain pushed to one side with light beyond.

"Ahh, there you are," said Inuwabri, glancing over as they came through. "Pull the curtain behind you, would you. There can be quite a draught. Shayi?"

"Thank you," said Autumn, stopping to look around as Logan pulled the curtain closed and whispered to Fiau to go out. Inuwabri appeared not to have noticed the burning staff.

This was another cavern, similar to the one they had been in but larger and filled with all the comforts of home. There was a large wooden bed with a well stuffed mattress, a comfortable looking armchair, decorative hangings on the walls, even some shelves with

scrolls and books on them. Light came in through some slits in one section of the wall.

“Go on through to the balcony,” said Inuwabri, as he stirred shayi leaves in a small cauldron over the fire. “Over there.”

Autumn glanced at Logan then went over to another curtain hanging near the slits in the wall. She cautiously pushed it aside.

“Ahh,” she said appreciatively. “A most excellent view.”

“I like it,” said Inuwabri, looking up as she stepped out onto the broad ledge beyond the wall. “I will bring out the shayi in a few moments.”

Logan followed Autumn to find himself high on the side of the mountain with a sweeping vista spread out before him. The side of the mountain dropped away sharply beneath the ledge but the foothills and the lands beyond stretched to the far off horizon. A ribbon of silver wound its way through the green and brown lands off to the right. A warm breeze came gently up the mountainside carrying with it hints of the world below.

“We must be facing South,” said Autumn, admiring the view. “Astauand appears to be further round the mountain.”

“You are almost right,” said Inuwabri, coming onto the ledge with some cushions. “That river over there is the Limbis River and heads more or less due West. Duuba is further round and you cannot see it from this balcony. Please, take some cushions and make yourselves comfortable but don’t go too close to the edge. It is a very long way down. I’ll just fetch the shayi.”

He returned to find Autumn and Logan sitting on cushions well back from the edge of the ledge. He sat himself then poured the shayi and handed them their cups.

“Thank you,” said Autumn. “I imagine the fact that we are here shows that I have proved who I am to your satisfaction?”

“Indeed,” said Inuwabri. A hawk called from somewhere in the

distance and his eyes scanned the sky looking for it.

“I do not see how but explanations can wait,” said Autumn. “Is it not now incumbent upon you to prove who you are?”

“I daresay it is,” said Inuwabri. He sipped his shayi then put the cup on the ledge beside him. “I hear you are a mighty warrior yet you do not look it. From appearances I would say you were a peasant and not one of the wealthier. No doubt you cultivate that look.”

“My manner of dress is simple for we lead simple lives,” said Autumn. “How would you have me look?”

“Indeed,” said Inuwabri. “Dress as a mighty warrior and you will instil fear in most and a foolish few will seek to challenge you for no reason other than you look like a mighty warrior. I have the opposite problem.”

“You think you look like a mighty warrior?” asked Logan.

Inuwabri looked at him scornfully then turned back to Autumn.

“I am Drasta,” he said, “and the business of Drasta is foretelling but make no mistake it is a business. People come to see me to know their destinies but if I dressed as you do many would not take my revelations seriously and few would pay well for them. For that reason, those who were Drasta before me learnt to create a performance so that there is a mystery that makes the revelations more acceptable. Without that mystery I could be their neighbour and carry no weight. The crawling through dark tunnels, the flashes of light, the speaking of nonsense, the mask and all the other trappings are falsehoods that help them believe the truth. Without the trappings they would not believe the truth if it smacked them in the face.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but that is no proof that you are Drasta nor that you have any gift of foresight. It proves only that you have the gift of deception.”

“Indeed,” said Inuwabri. “But how can I prove such a gift except by predicting then waiting for such prediction to come true?”

“I can see that that could be a difficulty,” said Autumn, “unless you can predict something that will come to pass quickly.”

“Yes, I can do that,” said Inuwabri, “although those with suspicious minds such as our friend here would claim there is sufficient in the present to allow a clever guess of what will happen in a short while, but even that is not possible with you.”

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“I cannot foresee your destiny,” said Inuwabri. “I have tried but it is shielded from me.”

Autumn stared at him for a few moments then put down her cup.

“That needs some explanation,” she said.

Inuwabri smiled bleakly. “For many who consult me I can see their lives mapped out in great detail, like the land below this ledge. For others, well, their destiny is vague or lacking in detail or too convoluted to follow or it may simply be that they have no destiny but with you, ahh, this is something I have not come across before nor heard of from my predecessors. Your destiny, your future, is blocked. It is like an impenetrable curtain laid before this ledge that I cannot see through. You have a destiny, much as there is a view beyond the edge of my balcony but I cannot see it.”

“How could this be?” asked Autumn.

“I do not know,” said Inuwabri. “I see destinies but I do not know how I see them, just as you cannot explain exactly how you see what is beyond your nose but you do. If someone puts a strap over your eyes you cannot see who did it and likewise I cannot know who has blocked you from me.”

“What about Logan?” asked Autumn.

“The same,” said Inuwabri. “If I could see his destiny then I could deduce yours, at least as far as your destinies intertwine, but his, too, is hidden from me.”

Logan started to laugh.

“Ohh, you are the master of deception,” he said happily. “You are asked to give proof of your gift of foresight and you spin a wondrous web about why you cannot as though it is proof. Rather than our destinies being blocked from you, a thing you admit you have no clue as to how, who by or why, would not a more reasonable explanation be that you do not have this gift and cannot predict a thing?”

“Yes,” said Inuwabri, looking at Logan with some disdain. “She did warn me that you were not as gullible as you look. No, my proof, such as it is, I have yet to give you but I need to explain about the ointment for as any fool would tell you, if I could know your destinies then I would know who you were when you arrived and not seek further proof of who you are.”

“This seems to be getting overly complex,” said Autumn, “with nothing actually being explained. Tell me about the ointment.”

“I had a visitor several days past,” said Inuwabri, “who left a message and a gift for you. She said ...”

“She?” interjected Autumn, a fraction before Logan did. “Who is this ‘she’?”

“Her name is Mother Midcarn,” said Inuwabri, “or so she claimed. I know her not.”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan, closing his eyes and putting his head in his hands. “I might have guessed she would be behind all of this.”

“You know her, then?” asked Inuwabri. “A short, fat, old woman who calls people ‘dear’?”

“Yes, that is her,” said Autumn. “She gave me the salve.”

“With a distinctive odour,” said Inuwabri. “I fancy made with exotic spices not of this land. She gave me some to smell so I would know you when you arrived. How is it that she knows your movements but does not wish to give you the message herself?”

“She likes to work in mysterious ways,” said Logan. “Mayhap she does that for the same reason you do, to make us take her more seriously.”

“We take her seriously because we know what she can do,” said Autumn. “She does not need deception on that score.”

“True,” said Logan. “So what was the message?”

“I confess I do not understand it,” said Inuwabri, “but then what messenger needs to understand the message? I am only to deliver it.”

“So deliver it,” said Autumn.

“Ahh yes,” said Inuwabri. “She said that a path is coming when she will not be able to see you and if you take that path she may not be able to help you.”

“Is that all?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Inuwabri. “She also left you a strange gift and said that when the time comes you will know what to do with it.”

“And where is this gift?” asked Autumn.

“Inside,” said Inuwabri. “I will fetch it. A moment.”

He got up and went inside his cavern. Autumn and Logan just sat there, looking at each other.

“There you are,” said Inuwabri, coming back out. He handed her a pine cone. “Is that not a most strange thing?”

“It is a pine cone,” said Autumn, turning it over and over in her hands and studying it. “’Twould seem to be a perfectly ordinary pine cone.”

“What is a pine cone?” asked Inuwabri.

“It is for the seeds of a tree which grows in our land,” said Autumn. “The seeds fit in these little pockets and when the time is right the tree drops the cone and the seeds spill out.”

“Oh,” said Inuwabri. “Is that all? I have never seen anything like it before. I was most intrigued by it.”

“Can I see?” asked Logan so Autumn handed him the cone.

“She said nothing else?” asked Autumn. “She gave no indication of what path or when it would start or what lies on it?”

“No,” said Inuwabri, “although it was she who told me you are a mighty warrior.”

“It is, as you say, an ordinary pine cone,” said Logan, tapping it on the rock ledge. “What are you supposed to do with it?”

“I have no idea,” said Autumn. “What do you do with pine cones?”

“We used to feed them to pigs,” said Logan, “but I don't see how that is going to be much help in a place where Mother Midcarn cannot see us. And if we are attacked by a pig, one cone isn't going to be enough to stop it eating us.”

“This is true,” said Autumn, “and the seeds have already gone so it will be no use for planting new pine trees. Still, no matter. I daresay as with all her gifts when we need it we will find out what it is for.”

“Ahh, so you have had other such gifts from her before,” said Inuwabri. “So, what manner of person is she?”

“It is difficult to say,” said Autumn. “She likes to talk a lot but says little about herself.”

“I ask because something in her message interests me,” said Inuwabri. “How is it that she can see you on a path that you are not yet on?”

“She cannot,” said Autumn. “That is what she said.”

“Actually, she said she cannot if you take it,” said Inuwabri, “meaning if you take any other path she will be able to see you. Is this Mother Midcarn Drasta also?”

“That is an interesting question,” said Autumn, “although she may have been referring to a path that does not pass near where she lives.”

“This pine cone is from another land?” asked Inuwabri.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“So I venture this Mother Midcarn is also from that land,” said Inuwabri, “or she would have given you something from this land.”

“Yes, we are all from Aferraron,” said Autumn.

“And yet she comes to me here to tell me you will be coming in the next few days and to ask that I give you a message about a path near where she lives?” said Inuwabri. “There is much amiss with that thinking.”

“I have a question,” said Logan.

“We all have many questions,” said Inuwabri. “Ask, although I suspect I will not have the answer.”

“A strange woman visits you and asks you to give a strange message to other strangers,” said Logan. “Why did you give us the message and not simply ignore it?”

“Well now,” said Inuwabri. “A question I can answer but in the answering I have to admit to a deception.”

“Oh really,” said Logan, a trifle sarcastically. “And what deception is that?”

“I told you I had not come across a blocked destiny before,” said Inuwabri. “This is not true for I have, once before, and only a few days ago.”

“Mother Midcarn?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Inuwabri. “Is this not an interesting coincidence? Now will you tell me what manner of person she is? If she is Drasta I would

dearly love to know how she can block destinies from the sight of other Drastas.”

“One thing I can tell you,” said Autumn, “is that it is not Mother Midcarn who is blocking the destinies. If it was she would not use you to give us a message telling us she cannot see ours if we follow whatever this path that she refers to is. No, she is not Drasta, she is a sorcerer. A most powerful one but not, as I had thought, the most powerful.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Logan.

“Someone or something is more powerful,” said Autumn, “else she would see through the blocking.”

Chapter Thirteen

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Logan. It was weak and hazy and lacked its usual bite, even this high on the mountain. He muttered to himself and rolled over and tried to go back to sleep but he could not. He felt something nagging at him, something demanding his attention. He groaned again and tried to ignore it but the feeling would not be ignored. He opened one eye reluctantly but the world looked much as usual so he closed it again and put his arm over his eyes. It was some moments before he realised that his arm was damp. Not the dampness that come from heavy rain but damp nonetheless. He let his arm drop and rolled onto his back and looked up at the tree towering over him. It seemed to lack a little of its former solidity and had a drabness about it.

“Oh,” he thought, although that little word barely describes the lack of awareness that went into his thought.

He reached up with both hands and wiped his face then scratched his head. His hair was damp as well.

“Oh,” he thought, this time with a little more energy. With a sigh he sat up and looked around.

There had been a mist or fog in the night and traces of it still clung to the foliage. A thin sheen of dampness coated everything and here and there was a sparkle as an occasional ray from Astauand made its way through the thin clouds and burst on a droplet of water.

“Good morning,” said Autumn from somewhere behind him. He waited for her usual “is it not a beautiful day?” but it was not forthcoming so he twisted round to look at her. She was sitting on the ground, wrapped in her robe and watching him, a small stick in her hand. She looked thoughtful.

“Good morning,” he said.

She looked back at the ground in front of her and resumed her drawing of abstract shapes in the soil.

“We had some fog?” he asked.

“Aye,” she said, not looking up. “It was a little thicker earlier but it is fast lifting.”

“Is all well?” he asked for she did not seem her usual self.

“Nothing that cannot keep until you are awake,” she said and drew a zigzagging line between some circles.

Logan's face stayed blank as his mind began to worry. Unproductively, of course, since his mind was not yet awake and fully functional but simple thoughts such as worry, anxiety and fear do not need the higher reasoning capabilities of the mind.

“What is it?” he asked at length.

“Break your fast,” she said, “and wake up. 'Tis nothing of great urgency and nothing to worry about.”

“Oh Voqev,” he said, getting to his feet. “Your very secrecy is what is making me alarmed. Tell me now.”

“'Twas just something that happened during my meditation,” she said, looking up at him. “I am not certain and want your thoughts.”

“But you are unhurt?” he asked.

“I am unhurt,” she said, “but I will say no more until you have eaten something at least. Your mind works better with food in your belly.”

“I feel there is an insult in that,” said Logan, heading over to a nearby tree to relieve his bladder. “Perhaps it somehow suggests I am a glutton or some such.”

“That was not my intent,” said Autumn. “Any action of the body requires fuel and thinking is as much an action as running or hewing wood.”

“Have you eaten anything yet today?” he asked, returning from the

tree.

“No,” said Autumn, “so let us eat together.”

She got gracefully to her feet and walked over to where Logan was taking their meagre supply of food from her pack. He took a long drink from their water bottle then sat down beside her.

“This bread of Farouta's is unusual but quite nice,” he said, breaking off a hunk and passing it to Autumn. “It would be better with some cheese.”

He broke off some bread for himself and started to chew it while studiously not watching her although out of the corner of his eye he saw her have a little of the bread before putting it down and picking up a piece of fruit.

“Did you do your exercises after meditating?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Autumn, “although I shall do some more later. I was not entirely happy with my performance.”

“Why do you think that is?” asked Logan, drinking some more water.

“A lack of diligence,” she said. “Sometimes I lose focus and my mind wanders and I do not push myself to my limits.”

“Was this because of what happened while you were meditating?” he asked.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. She tossed away the stone of her fruit and reached for her bread once again. “Sometimes when I meditate my mind stays on a single thought and follows it to a conclusion and other times my mind switches from one thought to another but all the time I have an awareness of what is going on around me but today was different.”

“How so?” asked Logan.

“I suspect it is a consequence of our discussions with Inuwabri

yesterday,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “for today my mind could not form a single thought before another came in and banished it. My mind became filled with a swirling mass of thoughts and none took on any semblance of a coherent structure which could lead to any conclusion no matter how trivial. Try as I might I had difficulty in constraining my thoughts, not even to link one with another and in the process of trying I allowed my awareness to drop so when something happened I did not realise for several seconds.”

“So what happened?” asked Logan.

“Something passed through me,” said Autumn. She picked a morsel of bread from the lump in her hand and looked at it contemplatively.

“What do you mean, something passed through you?” asked Logan, his piece of fruit forgotten in his hand. It was not unnoticed by a wasp, however, and it began to circle trying to locate source of the sweet scent.

“Exactly that,” said Autumn. “I was wearing my robe because of the chill.”

“You mean ...?” started Logan, his forehead creasing.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Something went through me that would have killed me if it were not for this robe.”

“Vogev,” breathed Logan. Absently he took a bite from his piece of fruit, narrowly missing the wasp which buzzed angrily at him. He didn't notice.

“I felt a shivery tingle and an emptiness pass through my chest,” said Autumn. “It was a little above and to the left of centre but I was engrossed in trying to control my thoughts and it was several moments before I became aware of the feeling then several more to realise that it was similar to the sensations I had when that tree fell on me near Shugsuo or the rockfall in the tunnels under the Ahon Hara Mountains.¹⁵”

15 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Second Tale* and *The Third Tale* respectively.

“Did a tree fall on you while you were meditating?” asked Logan looking around for a fallen tree. “Where were you meditating?”

“I was sitting on that rock, over there,” said Autumn, “and as you can see there is no sign of anything that has fallen. Besides, and it was a few more moments before I realised this as well, but if it was something falling it would have gone down through me but it did not. It went from my back to my front. Nothing falls that way.”

“But what could it have been?” asked Logan, oblivious to the wasp crawling over the bite in his fruit.

“What was interesting,” said Autumn, flicking her little ball of bread away and picking another morsel from the lump, “is that the realisation that something had passed through me helped to focus my thoughts. It was only then that I became aware that I had heard a faint twanging sound and a whirr just before whatever it was hit me but I had failed to react to them because of the confusion in my mind. I thought back and went to investigate where I thought those sounds had come from.”

“What did you find?” asked Logan as the wasp followed a trickle of fruit juice onto the ball of his thumb.

“I cannot be sure of either the direction or the distance,” said Autumn, “but I did find something of interest. Come.”

She put down the bread and got up and walked towards a copse of trees some way away and a little higher up the mountain. Logan jumped up and followed, the movement of his arm dislodging the wasp. It landed on the ground, momentarily stunned, then took flight, following the sweet smell.

“You see?” said Autumn, pushing aside a bush. “There is a flattening of the undergrowth here.”

“Some while ago,” said Logan studying the ground.

“You were sleeping soundly,” said Autumn. “I did not want to disturb you. The undergrowth was much flatter at the time.”

Logan looked back to where Autumn's meditation rock stood. It was quite visible.

"I cannot be certain this was the place that whatever went through me came from," said Autumn, "but it is an interesting coincidence, is it not."

"Well, whatever was here is not here any more," said Logan. "Did you hear or see anything else?"

"It was misty," said Autumn. "Not very thick like fog and in the light before dawn so nothing was clear but I fancy I saw something move away as I approached."

"What sort of something?" asked Logan. The wasp had found the fruit in his hand again and was crawling over its surface.

"I do not know," said Autumn, "but it or they went downhill and I am certain I heard four feet. Whether all four belonged to the same creature I cannot be sure. The pattern was irregular but that could simply be because of the uneven ground."

Logan remembered his fruit and lifted it to his mouth then dropped his hand as a thought struck him.

"They? You mean you think there were two people here?" he asked.

Autumn shrugged. "I cannot be sure any of these things are related," she said. "They could be all quite independent of each other."

"But you felt something pass through you," said Logan, "which likely came from here where there is undergrowth that has been flattened and you think you saw something run away from here and you heard it go downhill. That is a lot of coincidences."

"I know," said Autumn, looking back at the rock where she had sat, "but that is all they are, coincidences. None of it is certain."

"But you know what you are suggesting?" said Logan, lifting his fruit again then putting his hand down.

"I do have a thought which I do not understand," admitted Autumn, "but tell me your thoughts."

"Someone shot at you," said Logan. "That is the only thing that occurs to me, although I have no idea who or why."

"That was also my thought," said Autumn. "I am hard pressed to think of any other explanation which fits save that I imagined the feeling in the first place."

"It is unlikely," said Logan, "and you do have experience of that feeling." He lifted the fruit to his mouth again then paused. "Your rock is some distance away so if someone did fire an arrow at you we should be able to find it if we follow this line. It can't have gone much further."

"Sadly not," said Autumn then slashed her hand at Logan, knocking the fruit from his hand.

Logan gaped at her. "It was only an idea," he said. "I did not mean to anger you."

"You were about to bite into a wasp," said Autumn. "It was on your fruit. No, we will not find the arrow, if indeed it was an arrow."

"Oh, thank you," said Logan, retrieving the fruit. No self respecting wasp would still be on the fruit but he looked anyway before throwing it into the bushes. "Why not?"

"The rock was close to the edge," said Autumn. "If someone did shoot an arrow at me then it will be a very long way down and we have no hope of finding it."

"So we have no way of being certain," mused Logan. "Hmm, you are sure the feeling went through you not down? It could not have been a branch or something that fell over the edge?"

"It was quite distinct," said Autumn, "and if it was an arrow then the one who fired it is skilled for it did not widely miss my heart. From this distance in poor light? A good shot indeed."

“What is that?” asked Logan, pointing to something on the ground. He crossed the patch of flattened undergrowth and picked up a large crumpled leaf. He smoothed it out and studied it then looked at the trees in the copse. “This is not one of their leaves. Where did it come from?”

“Can I see?” asked Autumn, joining him. He handed it to her and she studied it as well then started to bend it. “Look at this, there are two deeper folds under all the creasing.”

“Oh yes,” said Logan peering intently at the leaf as Autumn folded and refolded it. “What does that mean?”

Autumn held the leaf to her nose and inhaled deeply then passed it back to Logan. “There is a smell of goat on it,” she said. “I would suggest this leaf was used to wrap something, meat most likely, and was crumpled and thrown away after it was eaten.”

“Voqev,” exclaimed Logan, staring at the leaf. “So you think someone sat here during the night watching us and ate something before trying to shoot you?”

“It is possible,” said Autumn, casting around to see if there were any other tell tale signs.

“Why then did they not shoot me?” asked Logan.

“You were lying on the ground,” said Autumn. “They may have thought you were a fallen tree or something but if they were watching they would have seen me get up and go to the rock. With me dead you would have been a much easier target. No, I cannot see anything else they have left behind so they likely were not here that long.”

“So who do you think they were?” asked Logan. “Bandits? Thieves?”

“That would be the most likely explanation,” said Autumn, “although why bandits would loiter near the Drasta when few pilgrims pass this way anymore I cannot say. Mayhap they are unable to alter their ways as circumstances change but it would seem more sensible to me to move across the river and seek out traders passing along the road.”

"I venture not," said Logan. "From what we have heard, Buhfa Ouoinel has likely stripped the traders of their spare cash before they get this far. Besides, would such a man permit bandits to operate in his territory?"

"A fair point," said Autumn., "but I do have one other thought on this but I wanted to see if you agreed with my view of what happened before mentioning it."

"You mean that one or two people watched you from here and tried to kill you?" said Logan. "Yes, 'twould seem that that is what happened. I am only thankful it was a cold night and you wore your robe. If you had not you likely would be dead now. What is your other thought?"

"Many of the thoughts that confused my mind earlier were thoughts on deception," said Autumn. "Mayhap Urudaqa is the one who is deceiving us with his talk of seeking out Buhfa Ouoinel and resolving the extortion of the farmers."

"In what way?" asked Logan.

"Mayhap those who sought to kill us, or me at least, were not bandits but in the employ of Urudaqa," said Autumn.

"Why would he do that?" asked Logan.

"To be rid of us," said Autumn, "and to be able to blame it on bandits or Buhfa and to keep himself unblemished before the Karoi."

"But why would he wish us dead?" asked Logan. "He is rid of us already. We have left Duuba and are heading East. We are gone."

"He may think we are the deceivers," said Autumn. "Do not forget that we carry the authority of Soros which will make our every word and deed suspect for no innocent travellers would have such a document."

"You may be right," said Logan, dropping the leaf on the ground. "But mayhap you could be wrong."

"Who else could it be?" asked Autumn.

“Mayhap these two are in the employ of Buhfa,” said Logan. “Mayhap he has had word of Urudaqa’s plans against him and blames us and wants to be rid of us. Urudaqa need not be involved at all.”

“Again a fair point,” said Autumn. “It troubles me that my mind is unclear today but there is yet another possibility.”

“Undoubtedly,” said Logan. “It is possible that we have stumbled into a blood feud between families and have been mistaken for someone else or that those who shot you were hunters and mistook you for a mountain bear or even that someone who is unhappy with Drasta’s predictions is seeking vengeance but what is your other possibility?”

“My wits are certainly addled,” said Autumn shaking her head in disgust. “I had not thought of any of those possibilities and there may well be others which are innocent. When you are shot at you tend to take it personally but that is still no excuse.”

“You are too harsh on yourself,” said Logan, “and we both know that this can be a harsh land and that oft-times people kill each other for little or no reason but you still haven’t told me your other thought.”

“It is of Urudaqa,” said Autumn. “What if he is in league with Buhfa and sent word to Buhfa about where to find us and Buhfa has sent others to kill us?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “That is a possibility as well but as yet we have no way of knowing. Should we return to Duuba and ask him?”

“I doubt he will tell us,” said Autumn, “or was that another of your jokes?”

“This is no joking matter,” said Logan. “As far as we can tell some unknown person is trying to kill us and there is little we can do about it save staying vigilant. Do you suppose this is the path Mother Midcarn warned of?”

“I venture not,” said Autumn. “But if it is then I have to confess I cannot begin to see how a pine cone will help.”

Chapter Fourteen

“No, you miss my point,” said Logan. “All I am saying is that if Drasta is right then that means we have no free will.”

They were walking alongside a stream in the valley between two mountains and the day was bright and sunny, warm as yet but not overly hot. Compared with the plains they had passed through before reaching the mountains this valley was lush and rich with trees, vegetation and wildlife but, compared with much of Aferraron, it was still fairly arid. One thing it did not lack was insects. There was an abundance of them in all shapes and sizes, ranging from clouds of small whining mosquitoes to huge droning beetles the length of a hand with fearsome pincers. Fortunately the beetles were solitary creatures as a cloud of them would have been perilous.

“I have to disagree,” said Autumn, ignoring the flies that circled her head. “It is simply a differing methodology and we have no real idea of how either works.”

“But Drasta sees only one future laid out long ahead,” said Logan, flapping at the flies. “If we assume that those events he predicts come to pass then the fact that they have been predicted means that that path through time has been followed which means that all the individual moments when free will could have been used to change the path were not used.”

“And therein lies your quandary,” said Autumn, “if we assume, but we have no reason to make such an assumption and it would be wrong to put your trust in that assumption. The difference between Mother Midcarn's predictions and Inuwabri's is Mother Midcarn watches possible futures through her Window and sometimes goes forward in time to look at events but, as she keeps saying, there is always great uncertainty because of the effects of free will. It is complicated by the free will of others who may be involved not just of the person whose future is being predicted. I know not how Inuwabri predicts the future but he does not seem to allow for alternatives and therein lies the option for free will.”

“But what if, as Inuwabri says, there are no alternatives?” said Logan.

“That would mean that fate is mapped out and it does not matter what choices we think we have because in reality we have no choices.”

“There are other factors to this discussion that need to be considered,” said Autumn, “and you seem to be forgetting them. One is that Drasta is running a business and no doubt his customers do not want to be presented with a long list of possibilities depending on what choices they make in the future. They want to believe in a certainty so Inuwabri gives them a certainty and takes the risk that it may not eventuate. I do not know what motivates Mother Midcarn but for certain it is not money and the adoration of others. And now I think on it, that would explain why some of the Drastas have a better reputation than others. I forget who said this but apparently Ameepavai was one of the most highly regarded Drastas whereas others have been very poorly regarded. That would suggest to me that some, such as Ameepavai, have better luck, or perhaps skill, in choosing which path to speak of from the many possible paths that lie before someone.”

“Well, that is possible,” admitted Logan a little grudgingly. “But then Ameepavai was here a long time ago and mayhap her reputation has grown in the summers since her passing.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Was not Ameepavai somewhere around two hundred summers ago? That is ample time for a legend to grow and flourish. Urudaqa told us that Kapulkatavi of some forty summers ago was a very poor Drasta and talked mostly nonsense. If all time was predetermined then surely Kapulkatavi would have as great a reputation as Ameepavai?”

“Not if it is pre-ordained that Kapulkatavi will have a poor reputation regardless of the accuracy of her prophecies,” said Logan. “That is the nature of fate and it has little to do with justice.”

Autumn laughed. “This is true,” she said. “Many incompetents have gained a great reputation and many highly capable have died in ignominy and it seems to matter little what they achieved or did not. I grant you that, at least.”

“And it is foolish of me to try to argue this point,” said Logan, glaring

at a fly that was determined to spend the rest of its life directly in front of his left eyeball. "It is a core point of your philosophy that everyone has a choice so it would be impossible for you to admit free will is an illusion. You would have it that you have a choice about everything at every instant."

"Not so," said Autumn. "I do not accept either the absolutes of fate or the apparent freedom of free will for neither is the case. Oft-times you have no choice."

Logan stopped to stare at her in astonishment. "But you always say you have a choice," he said. "You have been telling me this since first we met. How can you possibly stand there and tell me now that this is not the case? I had never thought you to be a hypocrite!"

"I hope I am not a hypocrite," said Autumn frowning. "It is possible to be such through inconsistency but I strive to be consistent in the application of my beliefs. In this case, however, I think you have misunderstood my meaning. When I say we always have a choice I mean only that we have a choice in how we respond within ourselves. Inevitably we cannot prevent what is not within our control. Take these mosquitoes, for example. If one lands on me and bites then I will lose some blood and my skin will itch where it bit. There is nothing I can do about that for that is the nature of things. Just as if you are struck by lightning you have no choice in how to react for the interaction of lightning and your body is such that you will be dead. No, when I say you have a choice my meaning is that it is your choice whether or not to scratch the itch of the mosquito bite. You have no control over the fact of it itching, just as you have no control over the fact of death from lightning. So it is with many things. Umm, suppose someone, for example, says something nasty. You have no control over whether they say that thing or not but you do have control over whether to be upset by what they say or not and by the same token that person has the choice to say that nasty thing or not but they have no control over how you respond. That is what I mean when I say you always have a choice."

"Oh," said Logan. He moved on again, following the trail through the grasses that ran between the stream and the beginnings of a wooded area. It was clearly a trail made by several large animals as there were

frequent places where it went to the stream edge and other spots with scat and it meandered around the occasional tree in a way that no human would have done. Autumn stooped to look more closely at a wild flower then followed.

“So are you saying you do not believe in free will?” he asked after walking for a while.

“Only in part,” said Autumn, two or three paces behind. “Much happens in the natural world that would happen regardless of whether we are here or not. A rock could come falling down the mountain and it is a matter of chance as to whether you are under it or not at the time it comes to rest. You have little choice unless you are very fleet of foot and have fast reactions. Equally, through no choice of your own, an army may unexpectedly sweep through this valley and kill us without giving either of us a thought. The first however has no free will unless you wish to argue that a rock has the choice of whether or not to throw itself down the mountain whereas the second does as it would seem reasonable to suppose that whoever sent the army had the freedom to choose whether or not to do so.”

“I confess I had not thought of that,” said Logan. “I was only thinking of free will in terms of my own ability to make choices but, of course, if I have that ability then everyone else does and so, presumably do all animals and fish and so on. But yet, as you say, there is much in nature that does not have that choice. Even if the rock was thrown by Looplab the rock itself does not have the freedom to choose. It just gets thrown. There is more to this than I had thought since if every living thing has free will then the result of everything making choices and reacting to the choices of others would get overly complicated very quickly and yet, on the other hand, if everything is laid down and set in advance by fate it would all seem rather pointless. And then there is the question of who decides what is to be done and what is not.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “This question has been debated at great length at my Esyup and ...”

Her voice broke off suddenly at a sharp thwanging sound and a tree behind Logan and to his left started to shake violently. A flock of

birds flew into the air, screeching their alarm and a wave of animal sounds spread through the wood. He leapt around, bringing his staff to the ready to find Autumn upside-down a little way behind him and seemingly hanging from a tree. As she swung, her long hair brushed the tops of the grasses and her pack and staff were on the ground beneath her. The lower part of her robe was also hanging down, partially obscuring her face and exposing much of her legs.

She hung there for a few moments, collecting her wits, then curled herself upwards to inspect the rope that was fast around her ankle, hooking her free foot around her trapped calf for stability.

“This is an intricate knot,” she called after a few moments. “I am unable to undo it.”

“I’ll get a knife,” said Logan, jumping forward to pick up her pack.

Autumn curled her lip, took hold of the rope and hauled herself up to sit precariously on the swaying branch. She inspected the knot around her ankle again then started to pick at it.

“I can undo it,” she called as Logan found his knife in her pack. “Now my weight is off, it is looser.”

Moments later she dropped the rope then proceeded to undo the end tied to the branch and dropped the rope so it fell into the grass like a thin snake. Then she slipped off the branch and hung for a few moments by her hands while choosing her landing spot before dropping neatly on the ground.

“Well that was unexpected,” she said, “and, although unplanned, a timely example of someone else’s free will removing my own freedom of actions.”

“Are you all right, though?” asked Logan as she smoothed down her malu and resettled her robe.

Autumn lifted her leg experimentally two or three times then bent to inspect her ankle.

"I have a sore muscle in my thigh and my hip joint aches," she reported, "and there is a rope burn around my ankle but nothing major. I will live."

She pulled her hair round in front of her and inspected it then bent to search the ground around where she had been hanging. It took several moments but with a happy grunt she picked up her leather hair thong.

"I should not be attached to mere things," she said, holding it up, "but I would miss this. 'Tis much easier than grass stalks."

Logan laughed and leaned against the tree as she retied her hair.

"So," he said with a gleam in his eye, "the mighty Krisana, Autumn Savannah, was trapped like a wild pig."

"Indeed," said Autumn, throwing her pony tail behind her. "A salutary lesson for both of us."

"So who do you think laid the trap?" asked Logan. "Those people who shot at you?"

"I wager not," said Autumn, looking around. "That was seven or eight days ago and we have heard nothing of them since that time. 'Tis unlikely they got ahead of us and laid a trap for it would have taken some time to set this up and they could not be certain we would come this way. I venture we have stumbled into a trap set by a trapper who is after whatever creature habitually uses this trail."

"I agree," said Logan, "especially as shooting at you suggests they did not want you alive, but you will still wear your robe, won't you?"

"Yes," said Autumn. "Even though it is warm I will wear it to keep you happy."

"As good a reason as any," said Logan, "since you do not seem to mind if you live or die."

"Death is just a transition to another phase," said Autumn, "and comes to us all sooner or later, but I fancy we are about to find out

who laid this trap. I would like to meet them for it was skilfully done. I saw no sign and walked right into it. Whoever it was will no doubt be along shortly to find out what they have caught.”

“Most likely it was my fault,” said Logan, “for I distracted you with my talking. So, we wait?”

“Unless you have a reason to continue,” said Autumn. She picked up one end of the rope lying in the grass and started to coil it around her elbow and hand. “This is a fine rope, thin and strong. ’Twould seem to be more of a plaited braiding than the simple twist of most ropes.”

She handed the coil to Logan. “Best you hold it. Our visitor may be resentful to find his prey has escaped.” Logan took the coil and she picked up her staff and brushed some earth from its end.

“We should not have to wait long,” she said, cocking her head. “Someone is coming now. I can hear him crossing the stream.”

“Sounds like just one person,” said Logan, also listening.

Whoever it was stopped splashing through the stream and started along the bank. They could hear the faint sounds become cautious as the person approached and realised that the usual sounds of an animal caught in the rope were not happening. The trapper most likely knew from experience that sometimes an animal escaped the trap but was injured and dangerous.

“Greetings,” called Autumn as the sounds got close. “I am Autumn Savannah. Is this your trap?”

The sounds stopped and it was clear the trapper was somewhat taken aback to be hailed by his prey.

“Greetings,” said a man, stepping out between two trees not far away. “Autumn Savannah, hey? I wager you be not from these parts. I be Qanas.”

He eyed Logan briefly before dismissing him to look at Autumn. He studied her with a more than cursory interest then pushed the very

large knife he carried inside his belt.

“This is Logan,” said Autumn. “You are from Aferraron?”

“For my sins,” said Qanas. “As be you both, by the look of it.”

“Aye, we are,” said Autumn. “We are travellers.”

“Of course you be,” said Qanas, “for no one lives here 'cepting me. What brings you this far from the road?”

“We prefer to travel through the mountains,” said Autumn, “and use only roads when we have to. We have no money for the tolls besides.”

Qanas tried to smile but he gave the impression he was not overly familiar with that facial expression. “Aye, and I hear they be rising. Be that my rope?”

“Probably,” said Logan, feeling a little left out as he had grown used to being the focus of a stranger's attention. “Did you set the trap?”

“Aye,” said Qanas, holding out his hand. Logan handed him the rope and he looked at its ends to see if it had been cut.

“I apologise,” said Autumn. “I stumbled into your trap without realising but untied myself without needing to cut the rope. 'Tis a well made one. Did you make it?”

“Aye,” said Qanas. “And you be doing well to escape it. You be unhurt?”

“A minor rope burn to my ankle,” said Autumn. “Nothing more.”

“Good,” said Qanas. He scowled and scratched his head, clearly not at ease with strangers, then he brightened. “Daresay I should be apologising but there be very few travellers along here. I been here, ohh, more than fifteen summers and I reckon you be the first. Makes sense you being from Aferraron and all, no Neandern sod would come this way.”

“If I may ask,” said Autumn, “what manner of creature did you set this trap for?”

“Why you asking?” demanded Qanas suspiciously. “You be planning on trapping around here and all?”

“No,” said Autumn. “We are travelling to Lizoote and have no desire to stay in these parts but we have heard that there are Neandern Lynx here and we have a desire to see one.”

“Lynx?” said Qanas, opening his eyes wider in surprise. “No, lovey, ain't no lynx around these parts.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. “These are the Skizze Mountains, are they not?”

Qanas laughed.

“Well, there be Skizze Mountains and there be Skizze Mountains,” he said. “You come in from Duuba?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “We came across the plains from Cim-Irsou and joined the mountains at Duuba.”

Qanas nodded. “Well now,” he said. “See that there mountain?” and he jabbed behind him with his thumb.

Autumn nodded.

“That be where I live and behind it be Jamokumu,” he said, “and behind that be Samnosura. Samnosura be the highest of the Skizzies. You keep going that way and when you be past Samnosura you be just about halfway to Lizoote.”

“So another eight to ten days would see us there?” asked Autumn.

“Mayhap,” said Qanas. “Now, thing is, see, if you be wanting lynx then you need to keep going after Lizoote. Them few as is left be in that part of the Skizzies.”

“I thought Lizoote was on the coast,” said Autumn. “Is it not just the

sea after that?"

"Aye, if you keep going West," said Qanas, "but the Skizzies don't. A bit before they gets to Lizoote they turns and heads South, see. That be where them lynx are. Ain't none this far North."

"Ahh, that is a shame," said Autumn. "I had not realised the Skizze Mountains were so vast. I though we were nearing their Eastern end."

"From Duuba in the East to Nagitere in the South you be looking at ohh, mayhap a hundred days if you be walking and not stopping for the sightseeing," said Qanas. "Summer'll be long over before then. And, even when you be in the parts where there be lynx, ain't likely you going to see one. They be almost as rare as hens' teeth and keep to themselves. First year I was here I tried to catch one cos they be fetching a small fortune but no luck. I gave up and came this way in search of easier pickings."

"The summer is a long way off," said Autumn. "'Tis only autumn and we have yet to have winter."

Qanas gave his strange, bleak, half smile half grimace again. "You be from Aferraron so I's reckons you be not knowing yet," he said. "Seasons be the other way round down here. When it be summer up there is be winter down here. This be spring, lovey, and not far off summer."

"The other way round?" said Autumn in surprise. "Why is that?"

"Ain't got a clue," said Qanas, "but even you must have noticed Astauand be going the other way. Reckon it has sommat to do with that."

"How strange," said Autumn. "Summer? What is it like here in the mountains in summer?"

"Cold," said Qanas. "mayhap even snow this far down from the peaks, although it ain't these four winters past. Reckon you'll be in Lizoote before then."

“So what do you trap here?” asked Logan out of curiosity.

“Ain't none of your business,” said Qanas gruffly, “and them as buys knows only to trade with me so don't you be getting no clever ideas.”

“We have no intention of trapping,” said Autumn firmly and a trifle coldly for she did not warm to Qanas, “nor of starting in business. We seek only to find a lynx named Darius.”

“A lynx names Darius,” said Qanas contemptuously. “Best you be going back to Cim-Irsou. I hear tell there be a thousand haystacks around there and you be better off hunting for needles in 'em than you will finding any lynx let alone one with a damn fool name like Darius. Pah.”

“None the less, we mean to try,” said Autumn, feeling a little disappointed for she had not realised just how big the mountains were nor how daunting the task of finding Darius was. “Come, Logan, let us not keep Qanas from his business any further.”

Chapter Fifteen

“That man is a deserter,” said Autumn quite suddenly, over their evening meal.

“Qanas?” asked Logan, pulling a small fish bone from his mouth.

He had caught a fish in the stream they had followed after meeting Qanas which, while fairly small, had made a welcome change from the somewhat flavourless kobi they had been eating for the past three days.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I have just remembered when I was still very young there was talk at the Esys of a war between Aferraron and Neander and that was probably fifteen summers ago or thereabouts. I paid the talk little attention as I did not know what a war was and had no grasp of nations nor politics but I remember the elders talking about it for some time when news arrived and there was much criticism of Oohoi, who was the Roinad before Obvia Vasagle. I can remember one of the Elders saying Oohoi should not have started a war he could not win and thinking that a war was a kind of game. It puzzled me for a while as I thought games were fun to play even if you knew you were going to lose. It was only much later that I found out that what I thought were games was actually training for fighting and that wars were fights between lots of people where the object was to kill rather than to out-manoeuvre. That was quite a revelation for me.”

“I imagine it would have been,” said Logan, “discovering that the games you were playing for fun would actually kill people. So why do you think he is a deserter?”

“Actually I found it was more fun to out fight the others without hurting them,” said Autumn, “because that meant they could play some more and would try harder but that is just my vanity speaking. Noxu made me practice losing deliberately while giving every appearance of being bested.”

“How did you make it look like you were bested when you were not?” asked Logan, intrigued.

“Oh, all sorts of ways,” said Autumn. “One I became particularly adept at was delaying avoiding a blow until the last possible moment then falling as though I had been hit when I hadn't.”

“I do not follow your meaning,” said Logan. “Were you hit or not?”

“Oh no,” said Autumn. She put down her soft, slightly over cooked kobi and jumped up. “Come, I will show you.”

Logan slowly got to his feet and Autumn made him stand sideways on to her.

“Now, swing your fist around and try to hit me on my jaw,” she said.

“But what if I do hit you?” said Logan. “I might hurt you.”

“You will not hit me,” said Autumn. “Try it.”

Reluctantly Logan spun round, rather slowly, and pushed his fist towards Autumn's face. She slapped it with her hand.

“Put some effort into it,” she said. “Do that again.”

Logan tried again, putting a fraction more effort into the blow. Again Autumn slapped his hand.

“Is that the best you can do?” she said, with a hint of contempt in her voice.

His pride stung, Logan lashed out viciously and Autumn stepped back and twisted so his fist sailed harmlessly past then she pulled on his hand, continuing his movement, so he over-balanced and landed on his back on the ground.

“Much better,” she said, helping him to his feet. “Now that is what I might do in a fight so you see you cannot hurt me. Now do it again and I will make it look as though you bested me.”

Logan resumed his sideways stance and turned his head to look at Autumn through narrowed eyes, trying to think tough fighter thoughts.

She smiled happily at him then he suddenly threw another punch. Autumn's head twisted and she flew backwards with a strangled cry to land in a heap on the ground.

"Voquey," exclaimed Logan, panicking. "I am so sorry, I didn't mean to hit you so hard."

He dropped to his knees beside her and gently rolled her over onto her back. She seemed to be unconscious.

"Oh no! What have I done?" he exclaimed, patting her face helplessly. "Autumn, Autumn, wake up!"

Autumn's eyes flashed open and she pushed him aside then did her strange backward arm somersault trick to jump to her feet in one movement. She laughed.

"I thank you for your concern, Logan Fighter," she said, "but worry not. Did you feel your hand actually hit me?"

"Umm," said Logan. He held his hand up to look at it and realised that not only had he not felt it hit Autumn but that if he had his hand would most likely be throbbing and painful. "No, I don't think I did."

"But you thought you had," said Autumn, a trifle smugly. She sat down again and picked up her kobi and looked at it distastefully before putting it down again. "That is what I mean. To all intents and purposes the fight was over and you had bested me."

"That was impressive," said Logan sitting down as well. "But why did Noxu make you do that?"

"He meant it as a painful lesson to my pride and vanity," said Autumn, "but in that he was wrong for I quickly learnt to take pride in appearing to lose. For some time my vanity was strengthened by my skill in appearing to be bested when I was not and it was not long before the others learnt that they were not besting me after all. If anything it increased my vanity and taught me a little of the powers of deception so after a time Noxu abandoned that approach."

“So how did you overcome your vanity?” asked Logan. “What new delights did Noxu think up to break you of that?”

“I have still not overcome my vanity,” said Autumn. She poked her kobi and sighed then picked it up again. “But I keep a constant awareness of my vanity and question my motives for my thoughts and actions but oft-times the distinction is small and it is difficult to decide. What I did just now is a good example. Did I give you a demonstration to answer your question or did I do it to show off my skills to you?”

“Would you have done it if I had not asked?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn, “but I confess I took pleasure in the demonstration and in your suffering when you thought you had hurt me. That is not good. Most likely a better explanation would have been sufficient.”

“It must be difficult being you,” said Logan looking thoughtfully at her. “You are exceptionally skilled at all sorts of things and yet you cannot permit yourself to take any pride or pleasure in them. That must be difficult.”

“Not at all,” said Autumn. She picked up her cold, soft kobi in her fingers and put it in her mouth. She chewed for a moment then swallowed with the appearance of one doing penance. “I take pleasure in many things although, alas, that kobi was not one of them. And pride, yes, I take pride in my skills and in the daily honing of them, but pride is a two edged sword. On the one hand, pride in a genuine achievement is good but on the other hand pride can be taken to excess and things may be done for prideful reasons rather than for necessity. 'Tis the same with pleasure. There is nothing wrong in taking pleasure of itself but if the pleasure comes from the suffering of another then it is wholly wrong.”

“I daresay you are right,” said Logan, “but I have no particular skills and have nothing to be proud of so I cannot really argue with you.”

“I am all astonishment,” said Autumn. “You have great skill in argument and I fancy you could argue with all the elders at the Esyup

and best them.”

“Surely you are joking,” said Logan, lying back. “You best me time after time in our arguments and I doubt I would last long at your Esyup.”

“It would be interesting to take you there and find out,” said Autumn. “Perhaps on our return to Aferraron we should visit there and you can test yourself against them.”

“I would rather not,” said Logan. “Much as I would like to see where you grew up I really do not want to challenge your elders. It would cause me a lot of suffering.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, “and most likely I put forward the idea for my own pleasure but you do not wish it so we will not. Aside from that though you have many skills and I have learnt and I am still learning much from you.”

“A sense of humour, for certain,” said Logan with a grin. “I have skills? You are definitely learning to tell jokes and that is a good one.”

“I am not joking,” said Autumn looking very serious. “I still do not understand these things. No, the skills I refer to are ones that are not visible and yet are there all the time.”

“I do not understand,” said Logan, “but please don’t leave it there. I am all agog to find out what skills I have. Explain how I can have invisible skills.”

“Mayhap if I do then you will become prideful in yourself,” said Autumn. “You may become vain and pompous.”

Logan burst out laughing. “I knew it,” he said. “I have no skills and you are forced to pretend that you hide them from me for my own good but really you can’t think of any. No matter. Tell me why you think Qanas is a deserter.”

“You do me an injustice,” said Autumn. “Very well. You speak of my skills but most of my skills are for use only in certain situations and

the world would be a better place if those situations never arose and my skills were useless. That is what I meant by visible. A certain situation arises and I do what I do and you and others see that and admire and say I am skilled. But few see the skills you have and yet they are constant and apply in all situations and, indeed, go some way to making the world a better place. If everyone had your skills mine would not be needed.”

“I can see now how you might think such skills would make me overly vain,” said Logan. “So what are these wondrous skills that I possess but know nothing of?”

“You are steadfast,” said Autumn. “You are loyal. You find contentment in almost everything and when you do complain it is with good reason. Even though you profess to be a thief you do not steal except in times of need and even then, I have noticed, more for my needs than yours even though I do not ask you to. You do not seek out power or wealth or glory. You may not be a great fighter but you are something far far better. You are a good friend and I cannot imagine a better companion. Such skills I would envy you if I permitted myself the luxury of envy. Yes, there is much I am learning from you and I am trying to put that into practice.”

Logan turned bright red.

“Oh Sploop,” he muttered, “Now I am all embarrassed.”

“Do not be embarrassed by the truth, Logan,” said Autumn, “and the truth is you have these skills and you should be proud of them. Stay true to yourself.”

“Can we change the subject?” said Logan. “I much prefer talking about you than me.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “Qanas may be a deserter and he may not be, I do not know but I suspect that is the case. For certain it would explain his attitude and why someone from Aferraron has chosen to live in such a remote part of Neander. I wager he came here with Oohoi’s army and took to the hills to avoid fighting and death and I cannot fault him for that. Would that everyone else were the

same.”

“You could be right,” said Logan, his face slowly returning to its normal colour. “You would have thought he would have been happier to meet others from his native land but he seemed afraid and antagonistic. Mayhap he thought we might report him or some such. Did you notice he was careful not to say anything about where he lived beyond 'this mountain'. He did not even name it and for certain there was no way he was going to invite us to dine with him or spend the night. He was vastly relieved to see us go.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and he asked for no news of his home land nor gave any indication of where in Aferraron he was from. Like as not Qanas is not his birth name either.”

“Well, good luck to him if he is,” said Logan, “or do you intend to do anything about it?”

“I?” said Autumn. “Absolutely not. He is free to live his life any way he chooses. I am just saddened that he may wish to return to Aferraron but feels he cannot. He did not seem to be content with his lot here.”

“I would not be so certain about that,” said Logan. “Most likely his discontent stemmed from his surprise at being confronted with us. If he was discontented with his life generally he would no doubt have moved on to pastures new before now.”

“You could be right,” said Autumn. “He does not wish our aid nor desire our company so we shall move on ourselves. Tell me, have you any thoughts on finding Darius? I must confess to having been foolish and unthinking thus far.”

“How so?” asked Logan.

Autumn snorted. “For some reason I thought no more than we would come to the Skizze Mountains and find him waiting for us,” she said, “which is absurd. If I had given it any serious thought perhaps I would have aimed for where we left him¹⁶ but, in truth, I have no idea where

16 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale* in which Autumn and Logan engage a fisherman to ferry them and Darius to Neander. When they make landfall, Darius says he knows his way home so they leave him there.

that was and 'tis highly unlikely that he would have stayed on that spot. Now I see my foolishness for even to search three or four mountains could take a lifetime and Qanas tells us that the Skizze Mountains are extensive. A hundred days, he said, to walk from one end to the other and that is not spending any time at each to search. I wager it will take several lifetimes.”

“I did wonder about that,” said Logan, “but I thought you had some clever scheme. Still, it is not as bad as you say as Qanas did say that there are no lynx in this part of the mountains. All we need to do is get to where they head South as quickly as possible and search from there onwards. Two lifetimes each will be more than sufficient I wager.”

“You see? I am learning from you,” said Autumn, holding up a finger in the failing light of dusk. “I can see that you intended that as a joke even though I do not see the humour in it.”

“The humour comes from the absurdity of seeing a benefit in the reduction from several lifetimes to just two,” said Logan, “but if a joke has to be explained then it wasn't funny to begin with. More importantly, why bother to search for him in the first place? All we have to do is call him and he will come, or so he promised.”

“I am very reluctant to do that,” said Autumn, “although it has crossed my mind. Darius said to speak his name three times if we are in great need and he will come to our aid but we are not in great need and I have no desire to tear him away from his life simply because of some fancy on our part. I do not imagine for one moment that he is sitting idling his time away waiting for us to call him. No doubt he is busy doing whatever such as he do.”

“That is a fair point,” said Logan. “I had not thought of it that way. It would be very annoying if things were the other way around for us to be repeatedly called away from our travels simply because someone we had met once wanted to say hello.”

“And that is another point,” said Autumn. “What if we are not the only ones he has promised to aid? What if he is in the middle of helping another when we call? What does he do then? Ignore us or

abandon those others in need? I would hate to be the cause of their suffering through my own selfish desire to renew an acquaintance. I would much prefer to send word of our arrival in his area and let Darius make the decision on whether or not he wishes to re-acquaint himself with us. It could be he may not wish to.”

“Why would he not wish to?” asked Logan. “After all, am I not a wonderful person by your account?”

Autumn gave him a long look.

“Was that the beginnings of vanity?” she asked, “or more of your humour?”

“’Twas humour,” said Logan, “although why I bother I do not know. Mayhap I am taking a leaf out of your book and setting myself up for deliberate failure.”

“Speaking of failure,” said Autumn, “one skill of yours I failed to mention is that of twisting something I have said and turning it into an incomprehensible joke.”

“And it is a skill in which I have some pride,” said Logan, “particularly as things you say that can be turned into a joke are few and far between.”

“Now you confuse me,” said Autumn. “Is that a complement or a criticism?”

“I would never dare criticise you,” said Logan. “You might lose your self control and hit me.”

“Yes I might,” said Autumn. “It is undeniable that possibility, however remote, does exist.”

“You see?” said Logan.

“See what?” asked Autumn.

“Never mind,” said Logan. “So, what shall we do? Continue our search

for Darius or abandon it and head for Lizoote or something else entirely?"

"I confess to growing weary of Neander," said Autumn slowly. "I should not but there it is. What say you we head for Lizoote and continue to make enquiries about lynx? If we happen to come across any we may be able to find out more about Darius' whereabouts but if not then shall we seek passage to Aferraron in Lizoote?"

"I have no objections to that plan," said Logan, "although I was looking forward to seeing the cat again. However, this is his land and mayhap he will hear that we are here and seek us out."

"Good," said Autumn. "So on the morrow shall we continue around this mountain and seek a pass between Jamokumu and Samnosura? If nothing else we will then have the highest of the mountains behind us, or would you prefer to dally here? Perhaps renew our acquaintance with Qanas instead?"

Chapter Sixteen

“What were you doing?” asked Autumn.

She was sitting on the ground a few paces away from Logan who was sitting beside a stream. She had stopped further down the mountainside to watch a beetle while Logan had continued the upward climb. The beetle was rolling a small ball of dried dung uphill and had encountered a small leaf that blocked its path. It made several attempts to push the ball over the curled edge of the leaf with no success then abandoned the ball briefly to explore the obstruction. With a better grasp of the situation the beetle had tried again, this time climbing over the leaf and gripping the ball in its pincers. Then it had backed up, trying to drag the ball rather than push. Impressed by the beetle's determination and willingness to experiment with alternate solutions, Autumn had surreptitiously helped the beetle get the ball over the edge with the tip of a thin blade of grass. Because of the size of the ball of dung the beetle would have been unable to see the grass pushing the ball and this observation led Autumn to start to speculate on whether the beetle believed that some insect deity had come to its aid.

Consequently, when she caught up with Logan, he had been sitting beside the stream for some time and appeared to be in a reverie of some sort. Unwilling to disturb him she had sat quietly and reflected on beetles, deities and the randomness or otherwise of life. She wondered if the beetle had prayed, in its own way, to whatever deity it believed in, if indeed it believed in any deities, and that deity had sent her to that spot at that time to answer the beetle's prayer. It was, in some ways, a disturbing thought for, if true, it implied that either she had been directed to that spot by that deity in order to help the beetle or that the deity had simply taken advantage of the coincidence of her passing and, had she been elsewhere at that time, would have found some alternate means of aiding the beetle. Either way it suggested that her actions were not wholly her own.

On the other hand, however, it was entirely possible that the beetle had simply gone about the business of shifting the ball of dung and had given no thought to deities. It may simply have been going through various strategies that it knew of and the boost given by

Autumn was entirely fortuitous. This would suggest that her action had been entirely of her own volition. Autumn would have liked to have asked the beetle of its thoughts on the matter of the obstructive leaf and its beliefs in deities but sadly her necklace did not have the power to translate the language of beetles into human terms. This in turn led to a whole raft of possible thoughts on the nature of language and communication between insects but Autumn put them aside for another thought had occurred to her. One which urgently needed her consideration. Had she, by virtue of aiding the beetle lift the ball of dung over the edge of the leaf, caused the beetle possible future suffering?

Clearly the beetle had some experience of these things as it was a dung beetle and spent much of its life rolling balls of dung around. However, if Autumn had not intervened the beetle might have abandoned the ball or elected to try some other approach for getting past the obstruction. However, because Autumn had helped the beetle get the ball past the leaf, without the beetle being aware of her existence or involvement, the beetle may now have a false belief in its own prowess which could, in a similar future situation, lead the beetle to struggle and fail and in some way suffer as a result.

Autumn had come to what was, in many ways, the only feasible conclusion, when Logan had come out of his reverie. He had looked around and spotted her and smiled. It was then that she had asked her question. "What were you doing?"

"I was watching the stream," said Logan, "and I noticed something I have never noticed before."

"That is excellent," said Autumn. "To look at familiar things through fresh eyes is to break the veil of old assumptions and rigid patterns of thought. What did you see?"

"I saw the waterfall over there," said Logan. "I have seen many waterfalls before but I suddenly realised that the water does not do what I expected it to."

"What did you expect?" asked Autumn, getting up and moving closer to look at the stream.

“I do not know, to be honest,” said Logan, “but if anyone had asked I would have said that the stream flows happily along and then suddenly falls over the edge to crash into the pool at the bottom but it does not. Look, you see where that rock edge is, where the water starts to fall over?”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“Is that the beginning of the waterfall?” asked Logan.

“I am not sure what you mean by beginning,” said Autumn, “but it would certainly seem a reasonable contender.”

“But look at the stream just before the rock,” said Logan. “There are eddies and swirls and back flows. And if you look a little further back there are other eddies and swirls and back flows and further back again there are others, only smaller. In fact, you have to go all the way back to about where that overhanging bush is to see the stream as it is further up, without the eddies and so on.”¹⁷

“Oh yes,” said Autumn, studying the stream. “You are right. It is as though the stream knows there is a waterfall ahead and is preparing itself.”

“Exactly,” said Logan. “So that's what I was thinking about. How does the water here know that there is a waterfall there?”

“You think the stream can predict its own future?” asked Autumn.

“I do not know,” said Logan, “but I do wonder why the water does this and does not simply run over the rock and fall. I wonder if this happens with all waterfalls or just this one and if it is just this one then what is it about this one that makes it different.”

Autumn plucked a blade of grass and tossed it in the water further up to watch how it moved with the stream. It did indeed sail happily down the stream then twirl around in an eddy before moving back upstream a little then moving down again to be caught in another

17 Interestingly Logan is here discovering the nature of turbulence and chaos within natural systems, an issue which has haunted physicists and fluid dynamicists for millennia.

eddy. It was some time before the blade of grass disappeared over the edge, longer than you would expect given the general speed of the stream.

“Do you see how the rock is a little higher than the bottom of the stream just before it?” she asked. “Mayhap these eddies and swirls are because the water coming downstream has to push itself up and over the rock before it can fall and mayhap once those eddies and swirls have started they cause the other eddies and swirls because the water is now disturbed and they in turn cause others.”

“It could be so,” said Logan, “in which case if the rock was lowered a little they would disappear and the stream would flow smoothly over the edge.”

“Which begs a question,” said Autumn, imagining the rock lower and the water flowing over it. “If the rock was lowered too much would that cause more eddies and swirls? Is there one perfect position for the rock that would give a smooth flow of water?”

“Have you ever wondered if we think too much?” asked Logan with a laugh. “It is a stream and it is doing what streams do.”

“I have thought about that as well,” said Autumn. “There are times when thought is important and other times when action is important and I daresay there are times when neither is important and it is best to simply live in the moment. You are right. The stream will do what the stream will do and has no need of our thoughts or actions. Shall we move on?”

“I wonder if fish in the stream think these thoughts,” said Logan. “Mayhap they already know of these things and use them to avoid being thrown over the waterfall.”

“I don't think they do,” said Autumn. “I am sure I have seen fish going over waterfalls before.”

“Actually, you are right,” said Logan. “There was that waterfall back in the Mapdil Mountains where that fish came over the waterfall and hit a rock and was killed. We ate it.”

“And no doubt you are hoping to find a fish in this stream as well,” said Autumn.

“I’ve already looked,” said Logan. “There aren’t any.” He looked away from the stream and the waterfall and brought his mind back to the realities of the present. “This seems a pleasant enough place. Shall we stop here for the night?”

“Hmm?” asked Autumn, still thinking about what fish might think.

“I asked if we will stay here for the night,” said Logan.

Autumn looked up at the sky then around at their spot beside the stream then up at the side of the mountain. “I have a mind to press on,” she said. “There is a vague disquiet within me and an urge to move and Astauand is still some way from setting. What say you we continue for a while? There would seem to be a flattish projection up ahead. Shall we aim for that and spend the night there?”

“As you wish,” said Logan. “We may find some fruit on the way.”

* * *

Astauand was barely a finger's thickness above the horizon when Autumn stepped out onto the shelf. It was free of trees and undergrowth although covered with moss and lichen and tipped very slightly upwards which was good as it was a long drop if one of them rolled in their sleep. Logan was only a few paces behind, a selection of small berries and a few roots nestling in a fold of his robe and protected by his arm.

“This is a delightful spot,” said Autumn, surveying the view. “It faces due West so we will witness the beauty of the sunset and it is high enough to be out of reach of mosquitoes.”

“Then it is a paradise,” said Logan wryly. “The mosquitoes in these parts have feasted well on my carcass.”

“I am glad you approve,” said Autumn. “You choose a spot and I will gather some wood for a fire. Perhaps over by the strange shaped rock

yonder.”

“As you wish,” said Logan, “although it will not rain tonight, there are no clouds.”

Autumn returned quite soon with an armful of sticks to find Logan slowly walking around the rock.

“Ahh, there you are,” he said as she approached. “This is indeed a strange rock.”

“How so?” she asked, dropping the sticks on the shelf.

“It is not a rock,” said Logan. “It is a pile of smaller rocks covered with moss.”

“That is strange,” said Autumn, squatting to arrange the sticks into a fire-ready pile. “How can it be that they formed a pile in this spot?”

“It is a solid pile,” said Logan, pushing against it. “It looks to have been deliberately made rather than simply rocks piling up against each other.”

“Indeed?” said Autumn, getting up to look more closely at the pile. “Why would someone make a solid pile of rocks here? It is a goodly size. It is chest high and nearly as broad.”

“And almost circular,” said Logan, “although there seems to be some flat rocks in front of it.”

“Where?” asked Autumn so he showed her.

“That is strange,” said Autumn, studying the side of the pile that faced West. “It is flat and seems to be placed so as to face the setting of Astauand. I have a feeling that it resembles a plaque or something like that.”

She reached out a hand and gently felt the edges of the moss covered rock then sat back on her heels.

“If someone made this pile of stones,” she said, “then they must have positioned this one carefully for it would seem an unnatural position if the rocks are from a rockfall.”

“But why would someone come all this way just to pile up some rocks?” asked Logan.

“Who knows what drives people to do what they do,” said Autumn. “Mayhap someone died here and his companions built this as a tomb or a shrine.”

“Ugh,” said Logan, stepping backwards. “You mean there is a dead body in there? I do not want to sleep next to a dead body.”

“I’d say the body is long gone,” said Autumn, “judging by the amount of moss. This was not built recently but we can sleep further away if the thought of old bones disturbs you.”

She reached out her hand again and lightly rubbed at the moss that covered the rock then began to scratch at it with her fingertips.

“Well, now,” she said softly. “There would seem to be something carved on this rock.” She stopped scratching and looked at the stone thoughtfully.

“What does it say?” asked Logan, squatting down beside her.

“I am reluctant to disturb it further,” said Autumn. “If there is a body inside and this is an inscription I am inclined to let whoever it is rest in peace. There is no need to disturb the dead.”

“You have made me curious,” said Logan, “and we are not disturbing the dead, merely looking at a rock in front of the dead. Why would that disturb him? Or her?”

“I wager we will not be able to read it anyway,” said Autumn. “Most likely it is in Janire.”

“Clearly it was meant to be read,” said Logan, “else it would have been put inside the tomb, not left outside. If nothing else let us show

our respect by uncovering the writing so it can be seen.”

Autumn contemplated the flat moss covered stone for a few moments then sighed. “You are right,” she said. “This was intended to be read and there may be others who can read it if we cannot.”

She got up and went around the other side to where she had left the firewood and returned with a piece of bark and proceeded to start carefully scraping away the moss.

“Now that is strange,” she said when the first word was uncovered. “It is in Onaman, it says 'Born'.”

“Born?” asked Logan. “Why say born on someone's tomb?”

“Perhaps it says something about when this person was born,” said Autumn. “Let me uncover some more.”

She continued scraping until part of the third line was uncovered.

“I have a feeling I know what this is,” she said. “I think this is a death poem.”

“What is a death poem?” asked Logan.

“It is a poem that some people write to show their attitude to life and death,” said Autumn. “Most of those from my Esyup who have died wrote a death poem and I have heard that the practice is common with other Esyups but why would there be such a poem here, on a mountain in Neander? Ahh, Mizule, can it be? Surely not.”

“What?” asked Logan. “What is it?”

Autumn ignored him and resumed her careful scraping, this time with a touch of urgency then let out a long sigh when the last word was visible.

“So it is,” she whispered. “Mizule and Vallume! By what strange fortune was I brought here?”

“What is all this?” demanded Logan, getting somewhat agitated. “What does it say?”

“It is the death poem of Xanos,” said Autumn reverently. She ran her fingers lightly over the inscription.

“Xanos?” said Logan. “Who is Xanos?”

“Xanos was an Elder from my Esyup,” said Autumn, her eyes fixed on the inscription. “He died while travelling in Neander but no one knows where. His companions returned and told of his death but knew not on which mountain he was interred. How can it be that we have stumbled on his remains by chance?”

“An Elder from your Esyup?” asked Logan. “Ahh, I am sorry for your loss. Did you know him well?”

“I did not know him at all,” said Autumn, “save as a topic for study for he died two hundred or more summers ago. He left many profound insights and is much revered to this day. Oh, Mizule, I know not what to say for I am overwhelmed by our discovery.”

“By the sound of it those at your Esyup will be pleased to know where he now lies,” said Logan.

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and I must get word to them as soon as possible. They may wish to establish a shrine to his memory here or return his remains to the Esyup.”

“If this place can be found again,” remarked Logan drily. “It is not easily found.”

“This mountain is named Jamokumu,” said Autumn, “and this is a shelf facing West. It should not be too hard to find again.”

“Are you sure it is your Xanos?” asked Logan. “It could be that Xanos is a common name in Neander.”

“I am sure,” said Autumn. “Xanos was interred on one of the Western Skizze Mountains and his death poem is in the classic style and

accords with his philosophy.”

She read the poem out loud:

*Born into this world
Toothless and empty handed,
I now depart the same way.
Entering, leaving;
Two things of no consequence.
The illusion of me leaves.*

“You see? Five syllables then seven then seven then the pattern is repeated and it gives him belief that life is as an illusion between birth and death and has no real substance. He also plays on the similarities between his infant self and his aged self, with no teeth and no possessions.”

“It is clever, I must admit,” said Logan. “Does everyone at your Esiyup write a death poem?”

“Almost everyone,” said Autumn, touching the plaque again. “Some die unexpectedly before they write one.”

“Have you written yours?” asked Logan. He was curious to know if Autumn seriously considered her death.

“It is incomplete as yet,” said Autumn. “I have been learning much of life on our travels and my thoughts and beliefs are changing in subtle ways.”

“How so?” asked Logan.

“It is difficult to say,” said Autumn, “and now is not the time. Mayhap when I decide my death poem is finished I will recite it to you.”

“I would rather you did not,” said Logan hesitantly, “for that would suggest that your death is soon to follow.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” said Autumn, “and although I am aware of my eventual death I confess I do not consider it a serious likelihood in the

near future so my death poem is of no great urgency.” She took a deep breath and released it suddenly. “Enough of this. Xanos has been dead these two hundred summers and no doubt has come to terms with it. I will light the fire and prepare our food and consider how to get word back to the Esys. I have no great desire to return there to tell them myself. Perhaps we can send a message from Lizoote.”

“Can I ask you make the fire at the other end of this ledge?” asked Logan. “I confess the thought of sleeping next to the bones of one of your Elders disturbs me. What if his ghost wakes me in the night and wants to debate philosophy?”

“I am certain you will best him in debate,” said Autumn, getting up. “After all, you are two hundred summers ahead of him, but we can move to the other end. Where did you put the roots?”

“They are back there, where we came onto the ledge,” said Logan. “I’ll fetch them.”

He moved off to get the roots and berries and left them with Autumn as she made their fire. Then he wandered back to look at Xanos’ death poem again. The carving was crude but legible and he wondered who had done it. Then he bent to take a closer look. There seemed to be the faint outline of another flat stone between the plaque and the edge of the tomb. He started to scrape away the moss and found that the rock was bare. Nothing had been carved on it. And yet ...

“Autumn,” he called, his voice suddenly urgent. “Come and look at this.”

“What is it?” asked Autumn, looking up from the small beginnings of the fire.

“I have found something else,” he said, holding up what seemed to be a small mud brick. “And it has your name on it.”

Chapter Seventeen

“My name?” exclaimed Autumn in total astonishment. She looked up from tending the fire then she sighed. “Do not practice your jokes on me at this time. My mind is filled with the finding of Xanos and I have not the inclination to wrestle with your humour.”

“I am far from joking,” said Logan. “There is another flat stone just above the plaque and this was sitting on it. It has your name written on the underside where there is almost no moss.”

She sat back and stared at Logan so he brought the mud brick over to show her. It was more of a flattened tube than a brick but it could have been a brick when it was first made.

“Look,” he said, handing her the brick. “It says Savannah, Autumn. See?”

Autumn stared at the deep etching in the side of the brick then slowly started to scrape the moss and lichen from the other sides. There was nothing else written on any of them.

“That is not my name,” she said after turning the brick over in her hands several times. “The words are the wrong way around and there is a mark between them which means they are just words and not a name.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, “but by Voqev, it is a stunning coincidence, is it not.”

Autumn took a deep breath and puffed out her cheeks then released her breath in a sudden blow.

“I confess my mind is in a whirl,” she said. “I am finding it hard to grasp that anything remotely like my name is written in a piece of mud so far from where I am from and written by someone so long ago. It beggars belief.”

“Well, it may not have been written by Xanos,” said Logan.

“Xanos,” said Autumn flatly. She put the brick on the ground and stared at it thoughtfully for a while. “Xanos is the key here, I think. If the plaque is true then Xanos was interred here and the plaque left and Xanos is from my Esyup. A curious coincidence but he and I must each be from somewhere and there is no obvious reason why we should not be from the same place. Either way, the Esyup is on the edge of the Viakaja Savannah so that may explain why Savannah is in the mud but then again, why not Viakaja if the place was on his mind, or the name of the Esyup?”

“And why Autumn?” asked Logan.

Autumn gave a crooked smile. “Autumn is a season as well as my name,” she said. “Mayhap that season had some significance. Mayhap it was autumn when he died or when he was born or who knows what.”

“You are determined to explain it away,” said Logan, “but you are missing the essence of this.”

“No,” said Autumn. “I am not. It may all be coincidence but Xanos died here leaving a piece of mud with the words Savannah and Autumn scribed on it and two hundred summers later, I, Autumn Savannah, find it. That is the essence of the matter.”

“Actually, I found it,” said Logan, “but that is neither here nor there.”

“Yes,” said Autumn, picking up the brick again. She peered at the inscription but it was getting difficult to read as the twilight departed. “You found it and it may well be that it was inscribed by a companion of Xanos but, as you say, the essence is undeniable. Somehow this ... thing ... is a link between Xanos and me, much as I try to explain it through chance. I wonder what it means. Fiau, can I have some light please?”

Logan's staff, leaning against the cairn at the other end of the shelf, burst into flame and Autumn looked at Logan with a raised eyebrow.

“I only propped it there for a moment while I looked at the plaque again,” said Logan apologetically. “I’ll get it, one moment.”

He jumped up and hurried over to the cairn and picked up the staff. He mumbled a quick apology to Xanos, just to be on the safe side, and brought Fiau back to Autumn.

“One end is different to the other,” said Autumn examining the brick in the light from Fiau. “This one is flat but this one has a lump on it.”

“That could just be extra moss or a dead snail or something,” said Logan.

“It could indeed,” said Autumn, scraping off the moss from the end with her fingers. “Well now, what is this?”

“It looks like mud,” said Logan.

“But it feels smooth and slippery,” said Autumn, “and it is softer than the mud. I wager this is a lump of beeswax.”

“You think this is a hive?” asked Logan, drawing back a little in case a swarm of angry bees suddenly poured out.

“No, I think it is a seal,” said Autumn. “It would seem to be holding the lump in place.”

“Ohhh,” said Logan, leaning forward again. “So you think there is something inside?”

“Very likely,” said Autumn, gently tapping the sealed stopper. “Although it may be Xanos’ final breath or some medicine he was taking for whatever illness killed him.”

“Are you not going to open it?” asked Logan. The suspense was beginning to wear him down.

Autumn sighed and put the brick back on the ground.

“I am reluctant to,” she said. “I seem to remember that Xanos’ had two companions and they both died soon after returning to the Esyup even though both were still young. There was some talk of a curse.”

“What sort of a curse?” asked Logan.

“I do not remember the details,” said Autumn, “although I do remember that the idea of a curse that killed people excited my imagination at the time. Now I am older I do not think that there are such things as curses. Magic, yes, but curses, most likely not.”

“So why not open it?” asked Logan.

“It could be that there is magic inside,” said Autumn, “or something as simple as a poison which killed all three. Mayhap it is slow acting but acted faster on Xanos because of his age. I would not wish to inflict that upon you.”

“Oh,” said Logan. He stared at the brick then lowered Fiau closer so he could see it more clearly. He pursed his lips then prodded the brick.

“No,” he said suddenly. “That is not logical. Why would Xanos die and leave something with your name on it unless it was meant for you? If it is dangerous there would be a warning. 'Do Not Open' or some such. Anyway, surely any magic that could kill two people in Aferraron from here would be strong enough to escape from a lump of mud?”

“And what if it is poison?” asked Autumn.

“Then I wager it would have leached through the mud by now,” said Logan, “and be all over our fingers. Mayhap we will wake up dead in the morning.”

“So you are saying to open it?” asked Autumn.

“Most definitely,” said Logan. “As you keep telling me, we are both going to die sooner or later and now is as good a time as any.”

“Then pass me your knife,” said Autumn.

“It is in your pack,” said Logan.

“Ah,” said Autumn and reached behind her for her pack. She opened it and took out Logan’s knife and picked up the brick again. Then she hesitated.

“I am still reluctant,” she admitted. “Is it caution or is it fear?”

“It is caution,” said Logan. “You are afraid of nothing.”

Autumn laughed. “How little you know me, friend Logan,” she said and prised the stopper out of the end of the brick.

They both held their breaths for a moment, tense and expectant.

“Well, nothing exciting happened,” said Logan, letting his breath out in a low whistle.

“So it would seem,” said Autumn. She peered into the hole with one eye then shook the brick. “There seems to be something inside.” She inserted a finger and rummaged around then upended the brick and shook it again. “I cannot get it out.”

“Let me try,” said Logan.

Autumn handed him the brick and he banged it hard on the rock of the ledge. The mud shattered and something fell out.

“Simple but effective,” said Logan. “It would seem to be a scroll.”

He picked up the scroll and shook it to get the fragments of mud off then blew on it before handing it to Autumn.

“’Tis a scroll of parchment,” she said, “and was once tied with something but that something is long gone now. See the mark it has left?”

Logan sighed. “Just read it,” he said. “Stop trying to deduce things and see what it says. It will be quicker.”

“Pah,” said Autumn. She started to gently unwind the scroll. “’Tis stiff, no doubt with age but is still in good condition. Bring the light more

this way. Ahh.”

“What does it say?” said Logan, shifting over so he could look at it as well.

“’Tis indeed from Xanos,” said Autumn. “Hold the light still and let me read it.”

“Sorry,” said Logan.

“That is better,” said Autumn. “The writing is weak but the lettering is well formed and the ink still readable. Listen.”

Xanos, Elder of Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup sends Greetings to whomsoever reads this. From my time of death to your time of life, howsoever long that span entails.

Greetings sent and Greetings received and now to purpose and intent.

Eight of us did voyage to this land, to garner the wisdom of their elders and much did we learn and teach besides. It so happened, in that early light that comes before the dawn I, and I alone, did one morning see a dragon. ’Twas far off to the East and low in the sky. No other was awake and no other saw and no other gave credence to my tale. Mine eyes are old and so it was explained as a distant bird. For a time I too so thought.

We journeyed to Drasta and spent some days with Ameenpavai, discussing much of interest to us and her alike. As we readied to depart Ameenpavai whispered in my ear that truly I had seen a dragon and Xanthous was its name. I was much startled by this disclosure and sent the others on ahead so I could speak with her alone.

Ameenpavai told she saw my future yet declared I had a choice. She told she could not divine which would be my final destiny. I enquired further and Ameenpavai divulged her seeings. The first she told was that I, with three companions

in whom I held full trust, would leave the group and seek entry to the world of Xanthous but that I would die in the trying and that not long. The second she told was that I would reject that path, return to my Esyup and live another eighteen summers.

Continue with life or die on a fruitless venture were thus the choices put before me and the choice seemed easy but I pondered long into the night. In time sleep overcame me and I dreamt of the land around my Esyup as it grew quiet in readiness for winter. A strange dream indeed and its significance I knew not save only that its essence, that of the Savannah and of the Autumn both were significant. I determined then to follow the path of Xanthous for no path is fruitless if followed to its ultimate end.

I chose my three trusted companions. I am shamed to admit I was amused that the others were offended by my choice for I trust Mookuku my donkey above all but it is truth and I cannot shy away from truth. Mookuku is loyal and faithful and I trust him above any human companion. As well I chose Cambul and Opgarn. We four travelled among the mountains for two summers, seeking that which we cannot find.

And so it is that my death is nigh. I feel it closing in upon me and I shall not see another dawn. As yet I know not the meaning of my dream but I leave those words upon the vessel that protects this account so others may ponder their meaning and, if so moved, take up the quest anew. The little I have learned I lay before you thus. Seek the Valley of the Pink. When Plakill and Plifal shine forth through the Eyes of Samnosura its gaze will fall upon the entrance to Miesca. Behind that entrance lies Xanthous and the Kastounasc. This is all I know and I cannot fault my trusted companions for not sharing my belief. I revere them for placing their trust in me, Cambul and Opgarn, both from my Esyup, and Mookuku from a market in Cim-Irsou. I wish them well. As do I you, reader and choice maker. I wish you well whatever your choice.

Xanos

High on a lonely mountain in the depths of Neander, two small figures sat in silence in a small pool of light from a burning torch.

“Cambul and Opgarn,” said Autumn after a time. “I remember those names now. I do not recall hearing of Mookuku but mayhap the donkey did not make it back to the Esyup.”

“Perhaps they did not think Mookuku's role important enough to remember him,” said Logan, “or mayhap they were jealous that Xanos favoured his donkey over the others.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. She let go of the scroll and it rolled itself up again with a faint snap. “Well, at least we know that my name was just a coincidence after all.”

“I would not be too certain of that,” said Logan.

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn. “Does not Xanos say that he dreamt of the savannah in autumn?”

“Aye, he does,” said Logan. He sat up straight and stretched to ease the tension in his shoulders.

“Do you see something I do not?” asked Autumn.

“That depends on how you look at this,” said Logan. “For certain we have heard that Ameenpavai was a great Drasta and skilled in seeing the future and she was correct in seeing that Xanos would die before seeing the end of his search.”

“And what has that to do with my name?” asked Autumn. She leaned forward to rest her chin on her hand and stared intently at Logan.

“Ameenpavai saw a future,” said Logan, “and told of it to Xanos who then dreamt of two things that, perhaps by coincidence, combine to give your name. Mayhap that dream was part of the path seen by Ameenpavai and that path continues to this day and ends with you being the one to find Xanos and his letter. Certainly Xanos seemed to think those words significant.”

“So you are seeing the hand of destiny in this?” asked Autumn. “That

even after two hundred summers the path is still clear?”

“Well, I cannot answer that,” said Logan, “but a thought does come to me. This letter has been sitting here for two hundred summers and if others have been to this spot, none have found it for the seal was still intact.”

“But their names were not on the brick,” said Autumn. “Why would they open that which is not addressed to them?”

“Exactly,” said Logan. “It was addressed to you. Even though Xanos had no idea who you are he had a dream which revealed the words of your name to him. Mayhap that dream was influenced by Ameepavai or mayhap the dream was part of whatever guided this path. Mayhap it is the hand of destiny but mayhap it is something else.”

“What sort of something else?” asked Autumn.

“I have no idea,” said Logan. “Perhaps there is magic here. I daresay it is even possible for someone skilled in such arts to place a spell on the brick so that it formed the words of the name of anyone who found it.”

“If that were so then would it not have had 'Logan' inscribed on it?” asked Autumn. “After all, it was you who found it, not I.”

“Fair point,” said Logan, “and I have no answer to that. I wonder why those companions of Xanos did not continue the search after he died.”

“Xanos says they did not believe in his quest,” said Autumn. “He was a much respected Elder so most likely they were merely following his instructions.”

“He could have instructed them to continue without him,” said Logan, “or have them take a letter back to the Esysup so someone else could be sent but he didn't. He wrote a letter to you. Does that not strike you as strange?”

Autumn gave a hollow laugh. “There is nothing about this that does not seem strange to me, but you are missing a simple point.”

“That does not surprise me in the least,” said Logan. “For certain I know nothing of the history that lies behind this, unlike you. I wager there is much else beside that I do not know. Which point in particular have I missed?”

“Presumably Xanos explained his intent to Cambul and Opgarn and gave his reasons,” said Autumn, “and still they did not believe him. All I have is this,” and she prodded the scroll on the ground, “and even less reason to trust him than they did.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, “so you are going to finish his quest, then.”

“Of course I am not,” said Autumn, with a rare flash of irritation. “You seriously think I am going to go off on a wild pig chase in search of a dragon simply because I have found an old letter beside a grave on a mountain in Neander?”

“Actually I did think that,” said Logan. “I thought you were just trying to find ways to justify it logically to yourself.”

“Justify it?” said Autumn scowling at him, “justify it? I, ..., Mizule! There are no dragons! Why would I go in search of something that does not exist?”

“Xanos did,” said Logan, “and he knew less about where to look than we do.”

“You mean this ‘Valley of the Pink’ and the eyes of whatever it was?” said Autumn. “They are hardly adequate directions. Most likely Xanos’ mind was straying with age.”

“As you say,” said Logan, “I just thought that your eternal search for knowledge would make you curious to know more about this Xanthous and the Kastounasc. I wager Mother Midcarn thought so too.”

“Mother Midcarn?” said Autumn, again greatly surprised. “What has she to do with all this? Don’t tell me she left a letter as well?”

“Of a sort,” said Logan. “Do you not remember the message she left

with Inuwabri? I fancy this search for this dragon will take us somewhere where she cannot see us, as she said.”

“Then that seems like a very good reason not to,” said Autumn. “Pah, the fire has gone out through lack of attention. I will light it again else we will have no dinner.”

“As you wish,” said Logan, “although we can always eat the roots raw and the berries need no cooking. By the way, what is the Kastounasc? I have never heard of such a thing.”

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “Neither have I.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “And are you not curious about that?”

Chapter Eighteen

Autumn pursed her lips and wrinkled her nose.

“Not especially,” she said. “Kastounasc is a word I have not heard before but that is of itself meaningless for it is most likely a word for something that does not exist. Given that it was used by Ameenavai a long time ago through some process I do not entirely trust and referred to by an old man who died not long after having searched fruitlessly for it, I confess I do not find it wholly credible. Particularly as it seems to have something to do with a dragon and, as we all know, dragons do not exist. They live only in tales told to small children. Why would I be curious about such a thing?”

“Why is anyone curious about anything?” said Logan. “I would have thought it exactly the sort of thing you would be curious about.”

“Why people are curious I cannot answer,” said Autumn, “but I am curious about the world and travel to find out more, but this? No, curiosity has to have some element of selection and my curiosity does not extend into baseless tales. Mayhap if we had some idea what this Kastounasc is we could judge the merit of any claim to its existence but we do not. All we know is what Xanos says. Behind the entrance to some place we have never heard of there lies a dragon and this thing. Indeed, it may not even be a thing, it could be simply the name given to this fabled dragon's farts.”

“Ha,” said Logan. He scratched his nose thoughtfully. “No, if it were farts Xanos would not refer to it as *the* Kastounasc. It must be a single thing.”

“Not necessarily,” said Autumn. “It could be an idea or a particular colour of the dragon's skin and *the* does not mean there is only one. It could be there are many Kastounasc's but that this dragon has one that is significant in some way, just as there are many staffs but you have *the* staff.”

“And does not that scent of significance excite your curiosity?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn, “for I doubt the rest of the tale on which it is based. Tell me what the Kastounasc is and it may excite my interest but likely not for there are no dragons so whether or not this Kastounasc exists it would seem fruitless to search for something that does not exist since the two would seem to be inseparable.”

“You seem unusually determined to resist this,” said Logan. “Why is that?”

“Because my thinking mind tells me it is a mere story,” said Autumn, poking one of the roots in the fire to see if it was cooked. It wasn’t quite.

“But Xanos, an elder of your Esyup believed it,” said Logan. “Would you go against your Elders?”

“That is how I was trained,” said Autumn, sitting back again. “We were always encouraged to question and dispute the Elders in all things, particularly where there was no evidence to support an Elder’s claims. Let me ask you a question in turn. Why are you so determined to accept this tale and keep us in these mountains indefinitely?”

“Not indefinitely, no,” said Logan, “but I confess that this tale and the manner of our receiving it has excited my imagination. Just think on it, two hundred summers ago your Xanos began a quest and has left it to us to finish it. Does that not intrigue and entice you?”

“Yes, it does,” said Autumn, “but leaving a message inside a ball of mud for two hundred summers does not make it true. And think on this, even if there was a dragon two hundred summers ago, what makes you think it is still alive?”

“There is that,” said Logan. “I have no idea how long dragons live, but mayhap it is still alive or it has descendants.”

“If that is so then why has no one else seen it or them?” asked Autumn.

“Mayhap they have,” retorted Logan. “We are strangers in a strange land. Mayhap they are sighted every day but no one thinks to talk of

them to us.”

Autumn shrugged and pulled the roots out of the fire one by one using the tip of Logan's knife.

“And another thing,” said Logan, “dragons may not exist but pictures of them can. All it takes is for someone to draw a picture of something that looks like the idea of a dragon and lo, there is a dragon.”

“I suppose,” said Autumn, “but what of it?”

“What if, as you say, there are no real dragons,” said Logan, feeling his excitement rising again, “but somewhere behind this entrance there is a chest or something with a drawing of a dragon on it and inside is this Kastounasc.”

“Tis an interesting idea,” said Autumn, thoughtfully. She picked up a root and tossed it between her hands to cool it a little. “But no, Xanos said he saw a dragon in the sky and Ameetpavai said it was true so it could not have been a drawing.” She bit into the root and started to chew.

“Pah,” said Logan, taking a root as well. “Mayhap it was a drawing that was being blown by the wind and that is what Xanos saw.”

“And mayhap it was a distant bird and his eyes were failing him,” said Autumn. “Think on that too.”

“So you are not going to do anything about Xanos' letter?” asked Logan.

“Yes I am,” said Autumn. “I am going to get word to the Esiyup about where we found it so that they know where he died.”¹⁸

“And nothing else?” asked Logan, biting into his root.

“I see little else to do,” said Autumn. “We are enjoined to search for a thing we know nothing about that is held by a dragon that does not

18 There is, in fact, no surviving record of where Xanos died so it is likely that Autumn did not inform her Esiyup or, if she did, that the information went astray.

exist in a place we have not heard of using directions that have no meaning. Tell me where to begin and I will consider it further.”

“I wager we could ask other travellers we meet and at any villages we come across,” said Logan, musingly. “Mayhap they know of this Land of Miesca.”

“Aye, and I am content to do that,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “If we find out more then perhaps it will become more than just a fool’s errand but, as yet, nothing has any substance.”

“Can I see the letter again?” asked Logan.

Autumn passed over the scroll and Logan studied it.

“It says the Eyes of Samnosura,” said Logan. “That is something of substance. Qanas said the next mountain after this one is named Samnosura.”

Autumn paused in her chewing for a moment to think. “Aye,” she said, “but does a mountain have eyes? Mayhap whatever it is with the eyes merely has the same name but whatever it is could be at the far end of these mountains or mayhap somewhere else entirely.”

“But it is a start,” said Logan. “Mayhap there is a village at the bottom of Samnosura where someone will know what the eyes are or will know of some other place or thing with the same name.”

“So you want to walk all around the base of the mountain in the hope of finding a village?” asked Autumn.

“It would be a start,” said Logan, “and who knows what we will find.”

“True,” said Autumn, “and we have no pressing engagements so it will not matter if we spend a few days doing this.”

“Tis better to try and fail than never to try at all,” said Logan, grinning.

“Arguable,” said Autumn. She looked over at Logan and her eyes

twinkled in the light of the fire. "But I have a better adage. 'Tis better to make Logan happy than unhappy."

"Ahh," said Logan. "Yes, that is a much better saying."

* * *

"Are you asleep?" whispered Autumn.

Plakill was high in the sky and Plifal not far behind it although both were some way off full. Still, they gave the shelf on which Autumn and Logan lay a faint, silvery grey sheen. Xanos' cairn, at the other end of the shelf, was lost in the darkness of the side of the mountain.

"No," whispered Logan. "My mind keeps thinking on this quest of Xanos and if we are being stupid to even think of beginning it. I wager you were right when you called it a fool's errand."

"I, too," said Autumn, sitting up. She wrapped her arms around her knees and gazed out over the fathomless dark of the valley beyond. "Except I was thinking the other way."

"You mean you think it is a good idea?" asked Logan, also sitting up.

"I would not necessarily go that far," said Autumn, "but it seems to me that if we could find out what this Kastounasc is then we will have a better idea of judging the value of the quest. 'Tis a shame Xanos did not explain further."

"Mayhap he assumed we would know," said Logan.

"Or mayhap he did not know either," said Autumn. "Mayhap he was searching for the dragon he thought he saw and gave no consideration to the Kastounasc. I know from experience that Elders from my Esyup have a strong desire to be right about everything and it would have delighted him to find proof that what he saw with his own eyes was not what they thought."

"It sounds like you are changing you mind back to it being a fool's errand," said Logan, reaching for the water bottle.

“Yes and no,” said Autumn. “It seems to me that we need to find out what this thing is first.”

“I daresay we can but ask those we meet,” said Logan. “Or do you want to return to Cim-Irsou and ask Subota? Mayhap he can get in contact with Mother Midcarn. If anyone knows, she will.”

“There is someone else who might know,” said Autumn. “Darius.”

“Darius?” said Logan, looking faintly perplexed.

“Darius, aye,” said Autumn. “This is his land and he is Ept, after all, and we are already looking for him.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, a note of doubt in his voice, “but I do not see the connection.”

“Groww,” said Darius, his golden eyes glowing in the darkness. “What ails you?”

“Voqev!” exclaimed Logan, diving to one side in panic and coming perilously close to falling off the edge of the shelf.

Autumn steadied him with the end of her staff for she, too, had reacted in surprise although she had caught up her staff and somersaulted backwards to land on her feet ready to defend against attack. At the familiar sound of Darius’ voice she had relaxed and noticed Logan near the edge.

“Is that you, Darius?” asked Autumn peering towards the golden glows, for it is difficult to see a black cat on a dark night.

“Groww, I am Darius,” said Darius, stalking over. “We meet again.”

“Ahh, hello Darius,” said Logan, a trifle nervously. “How are you?”

“I am well,” said Darius.

“It is good to see you again, friend Darius,” said Autumn beaming. She wanted to ruffle the fur on his head but felt that was being overly

familiar.

“What ails you?” asked Darius looking around and sniffing the air.

“Nothing ails us,” said Autumn, “although we have been looking for you as we are travelling through these mountains.”

“Why did you call me?” asked Darius, sitting on his haunches and looking coldly stern. The silver tip of one of his ears glittered eerily in the moonlight.

“We did not call you,” said Logan. “We were merely talking about you.”

“You said my name three times,” said Darius, his tail twitching from side to side. “You should only do that in times of great need.”

“Umm, I think not,” said Autumn, looking at Logan in confusion.

“I go,” said Darius. He stood up and turned to stalk off into the darkness.

“Wait,” said Autumn, a touch of urgency in her voice. “I apologise if we called you in error but we did want to see you again. Are we not friends?”

Darius stopped, only his hindquarters and silver tipped tail were faintly visible. Then his eyes glowed again as he turned his head.

“You travel through these mountains?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“Grrrr, when you come to Djikoska we will meet again,” said Darius.

“Where is that?” and “Is that your home?” asked Logan and Autumn simultaneously.

“Djikoska,” said Darius, his golden eyes disappearing as he walked away. He was swallowed up by the darkness but the silver tip of his tail

lingered.

“Wait a few moments,” called Logan and half ran forward a few paces. “I want to ask you something.”

Two golden eyes glowed again, some distance off. One blinked.

“Ask,” said Darius flatly.

“Do you know what the Kastounasc is?” asked Logan.

Darius snarled and leapt at Logan so quickly neither Logan nor Autumn had time to react. Four razor sharp claws sliced into his robe and Darius' nose banged into Logan's. His large golden eyes bored into Logan's smaller blue ones and his hot breath flooded over Logan's face.

“How do you know of that?” he snarled.

“Darius, no!” shouted Autumn, thrusting herself forward to pivot on her staff so both feet slammed towards Darius' side. Darius instantly crouched low, dragging Logan down and Autumn sailed over the top of him. A fraction of a second later the claws of his other front paw snagged the hood of her robe as she slid over the edge of the shelf. He let go of Logan and used that paw to brace himself then, with a bunching of the muscles of his hindquarters, Darius hauled Autumn back onto the shelf and deposited her in an undignified heap.

“Sploop,” said Logan, his white face gleaming ghost-like in the pale moonlight. “What did I say?”

Autumn leapt to her feet and tried to get into her defensive stance but her robe was tight up under her armpits and chin and was pulling her shoulders back.

“Let me go,” she demanded and Darius retracted his claws. Her shoulders flopped forward and she swung up her staff to point it at him.

“I do not know what just happened,” she said, a dangerous edge to her

voice, “but do you really want this?”

“What is going on?” asked Logan, looking from Autumn to Darius and back again.

“Grrowwww,” snarled Darius angrily and stalked over to the glowing embers of their fire. He lay down and stared at them, his tail swishing agitatedly from side to side.

Autumn watched him closely then started to relax. Logan became aware of a faint burning sensation on his chest and pulled open his robe to look inside.

“I am bleeding,” he said in surprise. “Would someone tell me what is going on here?”

“Darius attacked you,” said Autumn, staring at Darius. Darius stared back.

“But I saw him pull you from the edge of the shelf,” said Logan.

“I attacked Darius when he attacked you,” said Autumn. “I missed and went over the edge. Darius, I think you owe us some sort of explanation.”

“I could not let you fall,” he said in a throaty half growly voice. “You would never land.”

“I meant about why you attacked Logan,” said Autumn sternly.

“No, wait,” said Logan holding up his hand. “Why would Autumn never land?”

“She wears the ribbon of Mother Midcarn,” said Darius, as though that was a full explanation.

“I don't understand,” said Logan.

“If someone falls from this height the ground will kill them when they land,” said Darius. “The ribbon protects Autumn so the ground will

pass through her.”

“Oh,” said Logan. His face creased in puzzlement. “So what would stop her falling?”

“Nothing,” said Darius. “She would fall for eternity.”

“Ouch,” said Logan. “Thank you for catching her.”

“There is yet the matter of you attacking Logan,” said Autumn. “Had you not, I would not have gone over the edge.”

“I did not attack Logan,” said Darius. “Grrr, if I had he would be dead. Enough of this. How do you know of the Kastounasc?” His eyes narrowed and their gold began to glitter.

“So it is real then?” asked Autumn.

Darius just stared at her. Autumn stared back. Logan looked from one to the other and felt the power emanating from each as their wills fought in silence. It made him very nervous and he edged away.

“Stop,” hissed Darius.

“I, umm, I, err, was getting a letter,” said Logan nervously. “It is about the Kastounasc.”

“Grrrr,” said Darius, his upper lip curling and showing his teeth.

“Umm,” said Logan, edging over again. He bent and scabbled on the ground for Autumn's pack. “It is in here.”

“How do you know of the Kastounasc?” demanded Darius again.

“The letter,” said Logan, fumbling with the pack to get the letter.

“I will explain,” said Autumn, relaxing. “There is no need for all this, we are friends and friends should not fight.”

“The Kastounasc is forbidden knowledge,” said Darius. “One last time. How do you know of this?”

Chapter Nineteen

“Forbidden knowledge?” said Autumn. “What do you mean 'forbidden'? And who forbids it?”

Darius' eyes just stared at her relentlessly.

“Here,” said Logan, having found the scroll in Autumn's pack. “Here is the letter that talks of it.”

“Read it to me,” instructed Darius.

Logan asked Fiau for some light then read Xanos' letter to Darius.

“Who is Xanos?” asked Darius when he was done.

“An Elder from my Esyup,” said Autumn. “He died here some two hundred summers ago. His remains are in that cairn, over there.”

Darius looked over at the cairn then at the letter in Logan's hand.

“What is the Kastounasc?” asked Autumn. “Why do you act this way? What is its significance?”

“Grrr,” said Darius, his upper lip curling. He knocked the scroll from Logan's hand and put one paw firmly on top of it. “Wait here until I return.” He picked up the scroll in his mouth and stepped into nothingness.

“Where did he go?” exclaimed Logan.

“I do not know,” said Autumn. She stared thoughtfully at the spot where Darius had been. “But one thing is certain. Now I am curious.”

* * *

“Is it not a beautiful morning?” asked Autumn, as was her custom when she came out of her meditation.

“It is going to rain,” said Logan. “There are clouds building up to the

North.”

“Even better,” said Autumn. “Has Darius returned?”

“No,” said Logan. “How long should we wait for him?”

“For a while,” said Autumn, “but not indefinitely. He is not our keeper.”

“He may not like it if we are gone when he returns,” remarked Logan.

Autumn heard a faint rustle from further around the mountain, beyond their ledge, and half twisted her head to listen better.

“Mayhap that is Darius now,” she said.

“Why does he not just appear?” asked Logan getting up. He wandered over to the edge of the shelf behind Autumn, where the foliage began, and peered into it, expecting Darius to emerge.

“I do not know,” said Autumn. She continued to listen to the faint sounds then came two sudden twanging noises and a coldness rushed through her. She fancied she saw an arrow touch the side of Xanos’ cairn before careening over the edge of the shelf as she leapt up and rolled to change her position as quickly as possible.

“Attackers,” she whispered, studying the bushes beyond the shelf for any signs. She held out her hand behind her to warn Logan not to rush forward. “Get behind some cover.”

“Ahh,” said Logan weakly, “ahhh.”

“Over there,” hissed Autumn, pointing to where she thought she saw a flash of colour that did not fit. “You stay here. I shall return.”

She leapt forward and ran towards the edge of the shelf then stopped at a sudden commotion a little further around to her left. There was a lot of rustling and the sound of heavy feet.

“Autumn,” said Logan. There was a tremor in his voice.

“Two of them,” said Autumn, listening and tracking the sounds with her eyes. “They are running away.”

“Autumn,” said Logan again. “I have been hit.”

Autumn froze for a moment, cursing herself for not checking Logan first then whirled around and hurried over. He was kneeling on the ground beside a small tree, clutching his shoulder. The shaft of an arrow protruded from between his fingers and he was white faced and shaking. Relief flooded through her.

“’Tis not a serious wound,” she said. “Come, we must get you under cover in case they launch a second attack.”

“Yes,” said Logan. He took his hand from his shoulder and looked at the blood that caked it. Then he fainted.

“Excellent,” muttered Autumn and hauled him to his feet then slung him over her shoulder. She stepped behind the tree and into the undergrowth then worked her way around the shelf so she was beyond the cairn. That way she could see if anyone emerged onto the shelf. She lowered Logan to the ground and propped him against a tree then she crept back and studied the shelf and its edges. It was deserted and she could hear nothing beyond the normal sounds of birds and the breeze in the trees.

Cautiously, she made her way around the edge of the shelf, ready to leapt into the undergrowth at the slightest untoward sound or movement, until she was level with the remains of their fire then she darted out and collected her pack, the water bottle and their staffs before returning to the undergrowth. Still there was nothing untoward so she returned to Logan. He had woken and was feeling very gently around the part of the arrow that protruded from the back of his upper left arm, wincing.

“All seems quiet,” reported Autumn. “Whoever they were would seem to have gone. Let me look at your arm.”

“It hurts,” said Logan, breathlessly.

Autumn quickly inspected the arrow head that protruded.

"Tis poorly made," she said. "Be glad of that for a better head would have done more damage. I must pull the arrow out though and it will hurt more but not for long."

Logan swallowed then nodded.

"I am going to have to break the arrow," said Autumn. "Brace yourself."

She gripped the arrow shaft in front of Logan's shoulder with one hand and the feathered part with her other hand and, with a sudden movement, snapped the shaft. Logan yelped and jerked backwards.

"That was the hard part," said Autumn. "Now lean forward."

Reluctantly Logan leaned forward and Autumn quickly pulled the remaining part of the arrow through his arm.

"V-V-V-Voqev!" exclaimed Logan, jerking in surprise. Then he leaned forward and retched onto the ground. "Sploop, that hurt!"

"Now we must get your robe off your shoulder," said Autumn. "This may hurt too."

She gently helped Logan slip his arm out of his robe then she inspected the wound. It was still bleeding although not much and the moving of his arm told her that no bones had been touched.

"All finished," said Autumn. "Tis a clean wound through the flesh and would seem to have missed the bone. I will bind it and you will heal very quickly."

She lifted the hem of her robe and tore a long strip from the bottom of her malu. She pulled up a handful of grasses and made wads for either side of the wound then wound the strip of cloth around Logan's upper arm and shoulder to hold them in place.

"Is that all?" she asked, quickly looking over Logan's body.

“All?” exclaimed Logan. “Is that not enough?”

“Are you injured anywhere else?” asked Autumn patiently.

“No,” said Logan, twisting his head and shoulder to inspect the bandage. He flexed his arm very gently and winced. “Did you see who attacked us?”

“No,” said Autumn, “but I heard them run away. There were two of them, no more, and they went downhill.”

“Did you get an arrow as well?” asked Logan.

“I felt one pass through me,” said Autumn, “I venture one was aimed at each of us.”

She picked up the broken parts of the arrow and inspected them. “See? The tip is made of bone and small. Even though it is barbed it did less damage than a larger one would have. The shaft, too, is poorly made and has a slight bend to it. The shooter did well to hit you.”

“So no doubt you will be congratulating him when next we meet,” said Logan, a trifle sarcastically.

“I doubt he will live long enough to receive congratulations if he tries to shoot at you again,” said Autumn seriously. “You stay here and rest and I will see if I can find anything to help you with the pain and the healing.”

She was gone for some time and Logan fretted constantly until she returned.

“I found this,” she said when she reappeared. “I do not know what it is but it has a strong bitter taste so is likely to help with the healing. Mayhap it will help with the pain as well.” She waved a bunch of dark green leaves in front of Logan. “I am going to take off the cloth and clean the wound then put on some of these leaves. It may hurt.”

“Do you have to?” asked Logan.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Although the wound looked clean it may not be.”

“What if those leaves are poisonous?” asked Logan.

“Then I would be dead,” said Autumn cheerfully. “I chewed one and it tasted foul but I am suffering no ill from it, save for the taste in my mouth which soon passed. Come. Let me tend to this.”

She unwound the cloth and inspected the wound again. The entry point was already beginning to bruise and the exit wound was showing some early inflammation as Logan's body began to heal itself but the skin on both sides had closed and were clotting nicely. There was a little seepage from the exit wound but nothing to worry about.

Autumn poured some water on another handful of grass and dabbed at Logan's shoulder to clean off the drying blood. When she was satisfied she left his shoulder uncovered so it could dry a little while she shredded two of the leaves and ground them to a paste between two stones. Then she got some fresh grass and smeared the paste on it.

“Tell me if this burns,” she said and jammed one of the wads against the back of Logan's shoulder.

“Ouch!” cried Logan, trying to wrench away. Autumn was too strong.

“Does it burn?” she asked.

Logan thought about it then had to admit it did not. “It feels a little cool and soothing,” he said.

“Good,” said Autumn. She put the other wad on the front then bound them in place with the cloth and draped his robe over his shoulder.

“That is all I can do,” she said. “The rest is down to your body but I will keep a close watch on it. The leaves would seem to be healing leaves but I am reluctant to trust them too much as yet. Tell me if something feels ill about your arm, do not be brave and suffer in silence.”

“Trust me, I will not suffer in silence,” said Logan. “So now what do we do?”

“We sit and wait,” said Autumn. “I would prefer not to tarry here for our attackers may return but we should wait for Darius. It would be good for you to rest as well. Do you feel able to eat anything?”

“No,” said Logan. “I feel sick and shaky inside.”

“That will pass soon,” said Autumn.

“Who do you think they were?” asked Logan. “Do you think they had anything to do with Xanos' letter?”

“I doubt it,” said Autumn, sitting so that she could see the shelf. “I wager it was the same people as attacked us at the Drasta for they had the same style. An arrow from the bushes then a fast escape. I venture we will have to stay on our guard for a time until we catch them.”

“From the Drasta?” said Logan. “But that was some time ago. You think they have followed us?”

“Either that or this place is unexpectedly crowded,” said Autumn. “Why they are following us is something I will be asking when I catch them although I dare say they may not try again for several days but they may try again in the night when they realise we have not moved on. If nothing else they add a certain excitement to our wait.”

“An excitement I would prefer not to have,” said Logan. He moved his arm very cautiously and, unsurprisingly, it hurt. “What do you suppose Darius is doing?”

“I cannot begin to imagine,” said Autumn. “But I do wonder what other forbidden knowledge there is beyond this Kastounasc and how it has been kept hidden.”

Logan looked out between some bushes at the sky and the clouds that were building and let his mind drift.

“Did you not say something about a curse?” he asked suddenly.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “The companions of Xanos died soon after returning. Some thought there was a curse on them.”

“And Xanos died too,” said Logan, “and mayhap his donkey. Could it be they died because they knew this forbidden knowledge?”

“We do not know about the donkey,” said Autumn, “and Xanos was very old, but I suppose it is possible. I do not know when Ameepavai died nor how Ameepavai found out about the Kastounasc. Mayhap she saw it as Drasta. Mayhap this knowledge is not forbidden to Drastas, only us. There is too much that is unknown as yet. Your colour is returning to your face.”

“I am not shaking any more inside either,” said Logan, “but I am feeling tired. I think I might sleep for a bit.”

* * *

It was mid afternoon when Autumn shook Logan awake.

“Darius has returned,” she whispered.

“Ugh,” grumbled Logan sleepily. He sat up and winced as his shoulder moved but it wasn't too bad. He peered out between the bushes to see Darius sitting beside the remains of their fire, looking around and sniffing the air.

“He seems to expect us to be here,” whispered Autumn.

“Why would he not?” whispered Logan.

“Indeed,” whispered Autumn, “which suggests he had nothing to do with the attack this morning.”

“Ahh,” whispered Logan. He hadn't thought of that.

“You are returned,” said Autumn, pushing between the bushes to get onto the shelf.

“Why were you hiding in the bushes?” asked Darius. His tail lay neatly

curled around him.

“We were attacked this morning,” said Autumn. “Logan was injured.”

“You killed the attackers?” asked Darius, looking around.

“No, they escaped while I tended him,” said Autumn.

“’Twould seem a minor injury,” said Darius watching Logan emerge from the bushes.

Logan shrugged and winced.

“Tell me,” said Autumn, approaching Darius. “Is this Kastounasc cursed?”

“Why would you think that?” asked Darius.

“Several have died after learning of its existence,” said Autumn. “I would have too had I not been wearing my robe. Mayhap those who say this knowledge is forbidden are determined to keep it so.”

“You mean the companions of your Xanos?” asked Darius and Autumn nodded. “No, there is no curse. Howsoever they died was not because of this.”

“That is well, then,” said Autumn. “Where is my letter?”

“It is with Zeeth,” said Darius.

“Why?” asked Autumn, looking puzzled. “Is Zeeth the one who decides what knowledge is forbidden and what is not?”

Darius regarded Autumn but did not answer.

“I imagine that knowledge is forbidden as well,” said Logan after a while. “Well, Darius, what knowledge is available to us?”

“I have talked long with Zeeth,” said Darius, “for there are many ramifications to what has occurred here, not least of which is how

Ameepavai came upon this knowledge. But I would know your intentions.”

“What concern are they of yours?” asked Autumn. “If I am to divulge my knowledge should it not be a free and frank exchange?”

Darius snorted and lay down. “Perhaps I could have handled this better,” he said, “for I detect a touch of animosity in you but the deed is done and cannot be undone and it is beholden upon me to rebuild your trust. Sit with me and we will talk.”

Autumn looked at Logan who was about to shrug again but decided not to.

“Very well,” she said and sat down, placing her staff within easy reach.

Logan sat down as well but fell the last little way because of his shoulder. “Sorry,” he said to no one in particular.

“I knew Ameepavai,” said Darius conversationally. “She was a gifted seer. Not in the same way as Mother Midcarn but gifted none the less. How she came upon this knowledge I do not know but Zeeth is of the opinion that she knew of the existence of the Kastounasc but not of its nature.”

“Do you disagree?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Darius, “but it is a minor point. What is of more interest is given in your letter for I know not of the Valley of the Pink nor the Eyes of Samnosura nor of the Land of Miesca. It would seem that Ameepavai also did not know of these things.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Autumn.

“Because Xanos says that Ameepavai told him of Xanthous and the Kastounasc,” said Darius, “but later in the letter says he learned of the other things which suggests he was not told by Ameepavai.”

“Did she not foresee that he would seek entry to the world of Xanthous?” asked Autumn. “That would suggest she knew of Miesca

at least.”

“Perhaps,” said Darius, “but perhaps she merely referred to the place where Xanthous lived but knew not where it was.”

“Can I ask a question?” asked Logan. His shoulder was beginning to throb and his belly was beginning to rumble quietly.

“Of course,” said Autumn. Darius remained expressionless.

“You did not include the dragon in the list of things you did not know,” said Logan. “Does that mean you know of Xanthous?”

“No,” said Darius. “I do not know of Xanthous either. Will you now divulge your intentions?”

“In what regard?” asked Autumn.

“Do you intend to take up the quest or not?” asked Darius.

“That depends,” said Autumn. “Why do you ask?”

“Because if you do,” said Darius, “I will come with you.”

“Why?” asked Autumn.

“Because the Kastounasc belongs to Zeeth,” said Darius, “and Zeeth would like it back.”

“Why do you not go and get it yourself?” asked Autumn. “What do you need us for?”

Darius growled gently. It was almost a sigh.

“We cannot see this place where the Kastounasc is,” he said. “It would seem that Ameetpavai could, at least in part, and passed that knowledge on to Xanos who in turn has passed it on to you.”

“And Mother Midcarn,” interjected Logan.

“Explain,” said Darius, his eyes fixing on Logan.

“She sent us a message,” said Logan, breathlessly. “She said we were going to a place she could not see.”

“Ahh,” said Darius. “So you are taking up the quest.”

“No,” said Autumn. “We will not take up the quest until we know what is the Kastounasc. It would be foolhardy in the extreme to go in search of something in a place that no one knows of without knowing at least what that something is. How would we know when we have found it?”

“Zeeth thought you may take this attitude,” said Darius. “Do you swear on your honour, both of you, to never reveal any knowledge of the Kastounasc?”

“I do,” said Autumn.

Darius looked at Logan again.

“Oh, umm, yes, of course,” said Logan, beginning to feel sick again. His face felt cold and clammy as well.

Darius nodded. “So be it,” he said. “You know that all living creatures pass into the Land of the Undead when they die and cannot pass into the Land of the Dead until Zeeth has sat in judgement upon them?”

“Yes,” said Autumn and Logan nodded.

“The Kastounasc reveals the truth to Zeeth,” said Darius. “When Zeeth sits in judgement, the Kastounasc reveals their true nature. Without it Zeeth cannot be certain that only the worthy enter the Land of the Dead.”

“So I take it that Zeeth no longer has the Kastounasc?” asked Autumn

“It was taken several hundred of your summers ago,” said Darius. “There are unworthy now abiding in the Land of the Dead and no doubt some who are worthy are trapped in the Land of the Undead. Help us get it back.”

Chapter Twenty

“How is your arm today?” asked Autumn when she had finished her morning meditation.

“It only hurts when I move it,” said Logan, lifting his arm a little to show Autumn that it hurt.

“But no throbbing or burning?” she asked.

“No,” said Logan.

“That is good,” said Autumn. She walked over towards him. “Best I change the leaves.”

Obediently Logan slipped his shoulder out of his robe and Autumn unwound the cloth.

“Where is Darius?” she asked, discarding the old grass pads.

“He is hunting and looking to see if we are being followed,” said Logan. “It has been four days and we have had no sign of them as yet. Mayhap they have given up.”

“The back is still inflamed,” said Autumn inspecting the exit wound, “but looks healthy.” She bent her head so her nose was close and sniffed. “There is no odour of corruption although the scabbing is broken and it oozes a little. No, I wager they are still following. It was nigh on ten days between the Drasta and the shelf so they are patient if nothing else, if it is indeed the same people. Mayhap they aren't. Ahh, the dark purple at the front is starting to go green and the swelling has gone down a lot. This is most excellent. Uh uh, do not touch it!” and she slapped Logan's hand away.

“Tis itchy,” said Logan, straining his neck to look at his shoulder.

“That is a sign of healing,” said Autumn. “Now stay still and let Astauand dry the back wound while I grind some more liloparn leaves.”

She had nearly finished winding the cloth back in place on Logan's shoulder when Darius appeared on the far side of the small stream beside which they were camped. She tied the ends together as he dexterously jumped over the stream and strolled towards them in that insolently nonchalant way that only cats have. He carried a small, headless rabbit in his mouth which he dropped at Logan's feet.

"To strengthen your blood," he said, ignoring the flies that clustered around the remains of the rabbit's neck.

"Thank you," said Logan. He flapped at the flies to make most of them go away and slapped one of Autumn's leaves over the rabbit's neck.

"I found no sign of any tracking us," he said, lying down in the early warmth of Astauand, "but there is a village not far distant. It lies further upstream."

"Good," said Autumn. "Perhaps they know something that can help us. Shall we head that way when I have finished my exercises?"

Darius lazily licked a paw. "Wake me when you wish to leave," he said.

* * *

The village nestled between two rounded ridges not much taller than a short man on the shoulders of a tall man. The ridges tapered gently to merge in with the general landscape some way from the edge of the village. The lack of height of the ridges, however, was no particular disadvantage for the dwellings were less in height and thereby not visible unless a passerby chose, for some reason, to walk up the side of one of the ridges. It was unlikely that anyone would do that though, for the narrow, well trodden path skirted the ridges. That said, any passerby with even a hint of curiosity would wonder about the equally narrow and well trodden path that suddenly diverged from the path they were following to snake off between the ridges and into a copse of trees. Clearly there was something there that had the need for a path.

Autumn, Logan and Darius chose to follow the path that diverged for

their intent was to find the village. Certainly the village was in the area as any village generates a certain smell and, when the breeze is light and the day warm, that smell can become quite pervasive. Under such conditions, however, not even a cat can pinpoint the precise location of the source of an odour so the appearance of the diverging path was a useful pointer.

They followed the path as it meandered through the trees and emerged into a large clearing. Beyond the clearing lay a steep rock outcrop that rose up to become the Southern face of Samnosura but between the trees and the outcrop lay perhaps twenty low, circular dwellings that looked, in the main, to be made from interlaced twigs and branches with patches of mud. They were dotted around the clearing with only a handful close to the path. The path itself seemed to peter out and merge into a general large patch of trodden earth.

Autumn, leading the way along the path, paused for a moment. The village did not have the air of one that was prosperous but equally it did not have the air of one that was dangerous. It seemed, by way of a general feeling rather than any feature in particular, to be a group of people getting by a long way from anywhere else, content with their lot and not overly concerned about the impression they might give outsiders. Several of the dwellings had a thin spire of smoke rising up through the lattice of their roofs and there seemed to be a goodly number of chickens wandering all over the place and pecking at the ground. Autumn spied a small child, naked and watching them with its mouth open, its face creased in puzzlement as it did not recognise them. The child was sitting on the ground outside a nearby hut and had a small lump of something indescribable in its hand. She went over and Logan and Darius followed.

“Greetings,” she said to the girl, as was readily apparent when they got closer.

“Ca’,” said the child, pointing a grubby finger at Darius. “Ca’, ca’,” then she banged the lump on the ground.

“That is Darius,” said Autumn, “and my name is Autumn. May I ask your name?”

The small child looked up at her worriedly. "Ca'?" she said.

"Yes," said Autumn. "He is a cat. Pray tell me, what is the name of this village?"

The small child clasped the lump of whatever it was to her skinny chest and looked at Logan for reassurance. Finding none she looked back at Autumn then burst into tears and started to scream and drum her legs on the ground. Within a heartbeat a woman burst out of the hut and snatched the child from the ground with an expression of fear and anger. Then she saw Darius and her expression changed to fear and panic and she, too, started to scream and backed rapidly away.

"I apologise for ...," started Autumn, but two more women emerged from the hut and others started to emerge from the other huts, mainly women and girls but a few men as well. The women started to gather in a semi-circle around Autumn and the others, while keeping their distance. The men, on the other hand, rapidly assessed the situation and returned to their dwellings to re-emerge with various small hand tools such as hammers and grinding stones. As the hubbub grew more men appeared as well as some boys, having come in to the village from further afield, carrying larger implements such as hoes and crude scythes. One had an effective looking axe. They, too, joined the throng and pushed their way to the front. It was only a matter of moments before Autumn, Logan and Darius were confronted by a crescent of silent apprehensive people, thickest between them and the village and tapering off to a few daring individuals almost behind them.

"They would seem not to be overjoyed to see us," muttered Logan as he looked around at the hostile faces.

"I have no idea why," replied Autumn, scanning the faces for someone who had the appearance of leadership. "Mayhap they are scared of Darius."

"And rightly so," said Darius. He stared around haughtily then sat down and began to wash his chest.

"That is not helpful," muttered Logan.

“Smile,” muttered Autumn. “Try to look peaceful.”

Logan beamed at the villagers and the ones nearest to him backed away a little. Darius merely growled softly in the base of his throat.

“Greetings,” said Autumn in a loud, clear voice. She held out her hands in welcome and to show she carried no weapons although the staff propped against her shoulder may have rendered the approach a little less effective than it could have. “My name is Autumn and my companion is Logan.”

“Greetings,” said Logan, waving one arm. He tried to wave the other and grimaced in pain and his staff fell on the ground. There were mutterings among the villagers. They were not impressed. He bent to pick it up.

A thin faced man wearing a striped cloth around his waist stepped forward a half pace and the gap behind him filled instantly. He looked decidedly nervous. A few hands behind him pushed him and he lurched forward another half pace. Autumn turned a little to look at him, a welcoming smile on her face.

“We are poor,” said the man hesitantly. He half turned and smacked angrily at the hands that were pushing him then turned back. He cleared his throat. “We have nothing you could want.”

“We want nothing,” said Autumn, “save to talk. Can I ask your name? Are you the headman here?”

“I am Asio,” said Asio, very reluctantly. “We do not want any trouble.”

“Trouble?” said Autumn. “We do not want any trouble either. We come in peace.”

“What about the reward?” shouted a voice from somewhere behind Asio. There was a scattering of voices of agreement.

“There is much amiss here,” muttered Autumn to Logan.

“Definitely,” whispered back Logan.

“Umm,” said Autumn, not sure what to say. “I think there is a misunderstanding here. We are peaceful travellers passing through. We stopped only to ask directions.”

“The way out be that way,” said Asio, pointing back along the path through the trees.

“There be only two of 'em,” came the voice from the back again.

Darius growled again, a little more loudly, and looked around in disdain. He flexed a paw, showing his exceedingly sharp claws.

“'Tis just a big pussy cat,” came another voice. Its owner, a broad shouldered man carrying the axe, pushed forward. “I say we take 'em and claim the reward.”

“There is no reward on us,” said Autumn. “I fear you are confusing us with someone else.”

“You be Logan and Autumn?” asked Asio.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“Why does he not speak?” demanded the broad shouldered man. “He but shows his contempt for us by letting a woman speak for him.”

“What would you have me say?” asked Logan. “We come in peace and do not seek trouble, as Autumn says.”

The broad shouldered man tried to spit on the ground but he had no saliva.

“Perhaps we had better leave,” said Autumn.

“Aye,” said Asio.

“Nay,” said the broad shouldered man. “Think what we could do with the reward.”

More voices cried their agreement with that statement.

“What reward do you speak of?” asked Autumn.

“There be a reward for you two,” said Asio, gaining a little more confidence from the broad shouldered man even though they disagreed with each other. “From the Karoi himself.”

“The Karoi?” said Autumn in surprise. “Why would Soros put a reward on our heads?”

“Soros?” said the broad shouldered man. He hefted his axe. “I know of no Soros. Reward be from Buhfa.”

“Buhfa is not the Karoi,” said Autumn. “The Karoi is Soros. I have a letter from him.”

The broad shouldered man and Asio looked at each other then back at Autumn as she rapidly opened her pack and found the letter from Soros. There were mutterings from the assembled villagers.

“Here,” she said, holding it out to Asio. “It is a letter from the Karoi requesting all in Neander to aid us. 'Tis signed by Soros himself.”

Asio reached out and took the scroll, very cautiously. He looked at it but did not open it.

“Ah,” said Autumn. “Would you like me to read it to you?”

Asio just looked at her then held out the scroll. “Buhfa be Karoi,” he said. “We pays our taxes to Buhfa and that be the end of it,” and he dropped the scroll on the ground. Autumn raised her eyebrow but did not stoop to retrieve it.

“A question,” said Logan. He picked up the scroll and gave it to Autumn. The broad shouldered man watched him contemptuously. “Who told you there is a reward for us?”

“Fareki,” said Asio. “He brought us this news only yesterday morning and warned you be in the region.”

“Did he also say what the reward was for?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Asio. “You two be vicious killers who have left a swathe of death and destruction from coast to coast.”

“Indeed?” said Logan. “A swathe? Impressive for just the two of us. And how much is the reward?”

“Five grinar,” said Asio. “So don't you be telling me that you be innocent. No one would give a reward such as that for no good reason.”

“Five grinar is not much,” said Logan. “It would barely buy you a meal in Cim-Irsou.”

“Pah!” said the broad shouldered man forcefully. “Five grinar be more than I have ever seen in my whole life! It be a huge reward.”

“Oh,” said Logan, a little nonplussed.

“Come, Logan,” said Autumn. “These good people clearly do not want us in their village. Let us move on.”

She started to back slowly down the path. Logan did likewise and Darius got up and swished his tail.

“Oh no you don't,” said the broad shouldered man. He waved his axe and several men started to move around behind Autumn. The women in the group started to melt away back to their huts. “You stay right where you are. I wager we can get a grinar or two for the cat as well.”

Darius hissed at him and glared malevolently.

“Asio, you be getting some rope,” said the broad shouldered man. “We'll tie 'em up and hold 'em 'till Fareki comes back.”

“I would ask you do not do this,” said Autumn. She quickly glanced behind her on both sides and adjusted her grip on her staff. “We have two grinar and fifteen osats with us. What say you we give you the money and we leave peacefully?”

“Ho!” grinned the broad shouldered man, thinking that they were

afraid of him. "I have a better idea. We get the reward and we take your money both and we sell the cat. That way we be getting, umm, umm, how much, Asio?"

"Eight or nine grinar," said Asio, tapping his fingers to help him count, "depending on the cat."

"Sounds good to me," said the man, stepping forward and brandishing the axe. "Get the rope."

Asio turned and ran off.

"I cannot permit this," said Autumn.

"You ain't got a lot of choice, girlie," said the man. "Fareki said the reward be for you both dead or alive so the choice is yours."

"You, too, have a choice," said Autumn and struck the axe shaft with her staff.

The man dropped the axe and clutched at his hand. Autumn leapt around and parried a blow from a man with a scythe then used her staff to trip another man who was running at her with a hammer. He fell heavily on the ground just as Darius let out a mighty roar and rose on his hind legs to slash with both sets of front claws at two men who were edging towards him with their arms outstretched.

"Darius! Do not hurt them!" shouted Autumn, parrying another attack.

Darius retracted his claws but let his slashing moves continue and both men went flying. With an angry snarl he lunged around and ran swiftly behind Autumn, knocking another man to the ground. Logan stood and watched helplessly as the men seemed to be focused on Autumn and Darius and were, for the moment at least, ignoring him.

"Logan, run to the wood," called Autumn, twirling round, her foot ready to lash out if anyone ventured close enough. "Darius, you too."

She started to back away again, her staff raised and ready. Darius

stalked behind her, his head swinging from side to side and his golden eyes spitting fire.

“Logan!” shouted Autumn. “Move!”

Logan lurched forward just as the broad shouldered man jumped at him. Logan sensed the movement and twisted round, raising his arm defensively.

“Arghhhh,” he cried as the partially healed skin and torn muscle at the back of his shoulder ripped apart again at the sudden movement. He dropped his staff to clutch his shoulder just as the man crashed into him and they both went sprawling. In a flash Darius was on the man with his front paws on his shoulders, pinning him to the ground, and his jaws at the man's throat.

“No, Darius,” shouted Autumn.

Darius froze then reluctantly opened his jaws again. Four thin trickles of blood ran down the man's neck from the punctures caused by Darius' razor sharp incisors. Darius' golden eyes locked with the man's panic filled eyes and he roared in the man's face. The man fainted and Darius stalked away towards the trees, his tail thrashing violently from side to side. Logan got to his knees, clutching at his shoulder and Autumn ran over to help him to his feet.

“To the trees,” she commanded and Logan staggered off after Darius, his injured arm pressed tightly to his belly. Autumn followed, backing rapidly as she kept a close eye on the villagers. None followed. With the loss of the broad shouldered man and another who lay unconscious at Autumn's hand they seemed to have lost interest in the reward. They stood and watched her go, their makeshift weapons loosely held in their hands.

At the tree line Autumn turned and ran after the others, scooping up Logan on the way to help him run. They got back to the main path without mishap and continued for a short distance before Autumn pulled Logan off the path and behind a thick patch of undergrowth.

“I do not think they will follow us,” she said, pulling Logan's robe

from his shoulder. "They seem to have little spirit. Ahh, your wound is bleeding heavily again. Lie down."

Logan sank to the ground and lay back and Autumn made him roll over so he lay face down.

"I need to put pressure on the wound to stop the bleeding," she said, snatching up a handful of grasses.

She pressed the wad onto the wound and pushed down on it. Darius lay on the ground to watch, his amusement evident even though his features could not smile. After a time she tore up some more grass and added it to the wad on Logan's shoulder as blood was seeping through.

"It has almost stopped bleeding," she reported a little later. "How do you feel?"

"Disgusted with myself," said Logan, "and ashamed. I left Fiau behind."

"Mayhap I can go back for her after darkness falls," said Autumn. "If I call her quietly she may hear and come to me."

"I had not thought of that," said Logan, cheering up.

"Be quiet," said Darius. "Someone comes."

Autumn stiffened but did not release the pressure on Logan's shoulder.

"Is it one of the villagers?" she whispered, trying to look over the bushes.

Darius padded away silently then returned almost immediately.

"Yes," he said quietly, "and he is carrying Logan's staff."

Chapter Twenty One

Autumn hesitated then checked the bleeding under the grass pad she held against Logan's shoulder. She judged it had stopped sufficiently and whispered for him to lie silently then she crept away to watch whoever was coming along the path.

He was an older man, painfully thin and a little shorter than was usual for the men of Neander. His face was gaunt and lined and his hair and thin beard were long and straggly. He wore nothing but a simple loin cloth and was missing the toes and part of the side of one of his feet giving him a curious ungainly gait. He cradled Fiau in his arms and appeared to be hurrying without actually going particularly fast. Autumn watched him go past and he showed no sign of noticing her behind the bush. She let him travel on a few paces while studying the path along which he had come in case others were following. All was quiet so she stepped out onto the path.

“Greetings, friend,” she said, holding her staff casually. Judging by his appearance it was highly unlikely he would be aggressive and if he happened to be she could best him very easily.

The man stumbled in surprise then regained his footing and stood still on the path with his back to Autumn, his head cocked as if listening. He did not speak. Slightly puzzled, Autumn watched him for a few moments.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” she said.

The man started then hunched his shoulders and looked around at the bushes. Then he slowly turned. When he saw Autumn his face lit up and he smiled happily.

“I am Richid,” he said, “of Zay, back yonder. I have brought your companion's staff,” and he held it out.

“Greetings, Richid,” said Autumn. “Your intent is peaceful?”

Richid watched her face intently, his eyes wide.

“Most definitely,” said Richid, bowing and nodding. “I am filled with curiosity, nothing more. I would talk with you.”

That last remark seemed to amuse him and he giggled to himself and fumbled with the staff.

Autumn pondered for a moment but could see no way that this could be a trap so she smiled and held her hand out in the direction of the bushes. “Come, join us,” she said, “and mayhap we can each satisfy the other's curiosity.”

“Gladly,” said Richid, his eyes never leaving her face.

“This is Richid,” Autumn informed the others, “from the village. He comes in peace and he has brought your staff, Logan.”

Logan twisted his head as best he could to see Richid and mumbled a greeting. Darius just watched, his eyes unblinking, and Richid kept some distance away from him, eyeing him nervously.

“Let me finish tending Logan then we can talk,” said Autumn. “Sit if you will.”

Richid carefully laid Logan's staff down in the grass near him then backed up to the bushes again and sat, folding his thin arms and legs in the manner of a spider. Autumn went the other side of Logan so she could still see Richid and checked his shoulder. The blood was drying and no more was oozing out so she made some grass pads and bound them in place. The liloparn paste could wait until later.

“We have only water,” said Autumn, offering Richid the water bottle, “but you are welcome to drink if you are thirsty.”

“Thank you, no,” said Richid. “Your staff is undamaged, Logan?”

Darius' eyes narrowed.

“Why do you speak so strangely?” he asked.

Richid let out a shriek and lurched backwards, his limbs scrabbling

until he was stopped by the thick stem of the bush behind him.

“The cat talks!” he said, staring in wonder.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “What do you mean, Darius? Richid would seem to talk normally.”

“His voice is high pitched and flat,” said Darius, “and he misses parts of words. His speech is difficult to follow.”

“How so?” asked Autumn as Logan looked up from running his fingers over Fiau.

“The cat is right,” said Richid. “Do you not hear me?”

“I hear you well enough,” said Autumn. “Logan?”

“Richid sounds normal to me,” said Logan.

“Come out of the bush and talk to us,” said Autumn. “Darius will not harm you, will you Darius.”

Darius gave a small snarl but appeared to agree. Slowly Richid edged himself forward again.

“Please explain,” said Autumn.

“I have no hearing,” said Richid. “Many years ago I was wounded in battle and have not heard a sound since. Look.”

He leaned forward and swept his straggly hair over his face, exposing the back of his head. The lower third of his skull was hairless and badly misshapen and a long healed scar ran almost from ear to ear.

“You were most fortunate to survive,” said Autumn, shocked at the extent of the injury.

“Aye,” said Richid, tossing his hair back. “I was left for dead but survive I did and not a sound has entered my head since then, until today.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn.

“When you arrived in the village I did not hear any of the commotion,” said Richid, “but I saw and followed the others and I heard you speak. Then I heard Asio and Wasok and my heart was filled with wonder for I have never heard either of them before. Both were just babes when I lost my hearing.” He paused for a moment and fixed Autumn with his eyes. “And I watched with great interest for you did not speak as you spoke.”

“That makes no sense,” said Autumn.

“Aye, and to me neither,” said Richid, “but you are doing it now. Not saying what you are saying.”

Autumn spread her hands in mute enquiry. “Explain.”

“I follow what others say by watching the movement of their lips,” said Richid. “It was a skill that took long to learn but I have been doing it for longer. The shapes of your lips, and his, do not match the words I hear in my head. How can this be?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “Perhaps your hearing is coming back.”

“I hoped that to be so,” said Richid, “but it is not. When you left I heard no more voices but now I am with you again I hear you again. It is you.”

“Can you hear anything else?” asked Logan, “like this?” and he banged his staff against Autumn’s.

Richid watched then shook his head. “No,” he said. “I see the sticks but hear nothing.”

Logan nodded then fingered his necklace¹⁹ and looked significantly at

¹⁹ See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah – The Fifth Tale*. Mother Midcarn gifted Autumn and Logan a necklace each on their journey to Neander. The necklaces have the magical property of translating between languages although, as Autumn and Logan discovered through experimentation, the necklaces appear to work by translating the concept of the speech in the mind of the hearer rather than the sounds of the actual words. For example, Autumn could say something in the Old Tongue and be

Autumn who grasped its significance immediately. She, too, nodded.

“I think I may be able to explain,” said Logan, “but we, too, have questions. Perhaps we may be able to trade information.”

“What little I know is yours for the asking,” said Richid, “but I wager it will be nothing compared to the secret of being able to hear you speak. Ask me your questions.”

“Who was the big man with the axe?” asked Autumn. “I thought Asio was the headman of the village but that man did seem to usurp him time and again.”

“That be Wasok,” said Richid. “He is the younger brother of Asio and a right bully. He believes he should have been made headman and takes every opportunity to make Asio’s life a misery.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, “and Asio does not have the strength or cunning to counter him?”

“Zay is a small place,” said Richid, “and Wasok has his friends.”

“And who is Fareki?” asked Autumn, “the one who claims we are criminals. What is his authority?”

“I know not,” said Richid. “He and his companion Muhaban came to us yesterday saying they were from Buhfa and speaking of a reward for you two. I have never seen either before.”

“This Buhfa is Buhfa Ouoinel?” asked Autumn.

“The Karoi, aye,” said Richid.

“Why do you say ...,” started Autumn but then abandoned the question. In such a remote village it was hardly surprising that whoever was the most powerful in the area would be regarded as the Karoi and it was unlikely that Saros even knew this village existed. For certain he would not waste any effort ensuring his legal status would

understood by an Onaman speaker and a Janirian speaker simultaneously. It is a peculiar facility of the human mind that it dismisses the actual sounds spoken if the sounds it believes it hears sound correct.

be protected in Zay.

"I wager there is something amiss with them," said Richid. "I know something of killing and you two do not seem to be mighty criminals intent on destruction even though you have the skills. I watched you fighting and the care you took to make sure no one suffered any lasting harm. I wager you could have bested the entire village if you had the desire. Even your cat was kind which is unlike any other cat I have ever seen."

"You are right there," said Autumn, "for we are peaceful travellers and seek not to hurt anyone."

"Which is why you came asking for directions," said Richid. "Where do you wish to go? 'Tis a long time since I have left Zay but in my youth I travelled much. Mayhap I can guide you."

"We seek a place called the Valley of the Pink," said Autumn.

"There be many valleys in these mountains," said Richid, his eyes going vacant as he searched within his mind, "but very little that be pink, save the occasional flower or the eyes of a child when it sickens or blood in the water. Can't say as I've ever heard of a pink valley though. You sure it is in these parts?"

"No," said Autumn. "We cannot be sure but we are told that the Valley of the Pink has some association with something called the Eyes of Samnosura. This mountain is Samnosura, is it not? Or is there some other place that has the same name?"

"Has there been a big battle near here?" asked Logan. "It has just occurred to me that the Valley of the Pink may be a valley with a stream that was filled with blood after a battle. That could be why it is pink."

"No," said Richid thoughtfully. "At least not in my lifetime. Mayhap in the distant past for I have heard that others lived here before the Neanderns came along. There could have been battles in any of the valleys but none that I know of are still called pink."

“And the Eyes of Samnosura?” asked Autumn.

“Aye, this is Samnosura, all right,” said Richid, “and I ain't never heard of anywhere else by that name but that don't mean there ain't nowhere.” He pondered for a few moments then his face became crafty. “And then again, mayhap I do know. 'Tis just a thought, mind, and I ain't never heard that name used but it would fit.”

“What is this place?” asked Autumn.

“Seems to me I've been doing all the telling so far,” said Richid. “How about you give something back?”

“A fair point,” said Autumn. “You are right for we do not speak your tongue. We are from Aferraron and those words are the words we say. You hear Janire and, by the look of it, you do not hear with your ears but with your mind which is most interesting.”

“How can that be?” asked Richid. “'Tis as though I hear your voices loud and clear. Even that cat which astounds me.”

“Yes, but you still cannot hear other sounds,” said Autumn and she clapped her hands to demonstrate. “Did you hear that?”

“No,” said Richid sadly, “but to hear others speak would be a wondrous thing. How can it be made so I can and not just you two, or three?”

“We have a friend in Aferraron,” said Autumn. “She is a sorcerer and she gave us these necklaces. There is a magic in them that lets others hear and understand what is said in another language.”

“You are joking with me,” said Richid. “I did not take you for a cruel person who would make fun of the afflicted.”

“'Tis not a joke,” said Logan. He took his necklace off and showed it to Richid. “There is a difficulty, however, else we would give you one for we do not need them both. You see that letter in the centre stone?”

“Aye,” said Richid, “but I cannot read so I do not know what it says.”

“It is an 'L',” said Logan, “and “Autumn's has an 'A'.”

“Very nice,” said Richid, “but why can you not give me one?”

“Because it won't work for you,” said Autumn. “That is why they have the letter, so we know whose is whose. If we wear the wrong one we lose the power of understanding.”

“Can I try though?” asked Richid.

“By all means,” said Autumn, nodding at Logan.

Logan put the necklace around Richid's scrawny neck and fixed the clasp. Autumn took hers off and laid it on the ground beside her so it wasn't touching her.

“Can you hear me?” she asked.

“Sum?” said Richid, “Mem tamara hothane pharata joya,” except to Autumn and Logan it didn't sound like that. It was squeaky and disjoint.

“I do not understand you either,” said Autumn. She put her necklace back on. “Sadly giving you one of these necklaces will not help you.”

“I knew it was too good to be true,” said Richid. He fumbled with the clasp of Logan's necklace but couldn't undo it so he simply slid the necklace over his head. He studied it then reluctantly handed it back to Logan.

“We could always send a message to Moth ..., to our friend,” said Logan, looking at Autumn as he put his necklace back on. “Mayhap she would be willing to make another for Richid.”

“Is such a thing possible?” asked Richid, his face looking drawn and fearful, “or are you playing with me again?”

“I see no harm in asking,” said Autumn, “and now I think on it, it would seem a merciful goodness if such things were made available to all who suffer this affliction.”

“But there may be a reason why they are not,” said Logan. “We do not know how they are made or what goes into their making. Mayhap there is not enough of whatever this magic is to go around.”

“Still, we can but ask,” said Autumn.

“Will you ask?” asked Richid, his face pleading.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I have only the beginning of an understanding of what it must be like to be unable to hear but it would seem dire.”

“Thank you,” said Richid. He closed his eyes for a few moments and his lips moved silently.

“You had a thought on the Eyes of Samnosura,” said Logan when Richid opened his eyes again.

Richid pondered the merits of delaying the giving of his information until his necklace was in his hands then made his decision.

“On the other side of Samnosura,” he said, “high up and pointing to the North East there is a slab of stone that juts out from the mountain. 'Tis a different kind of rock to the rest and it be impossible to climb that high for I tried many years ago when I was but a lad.”

“Why would that be the Eyes?” asked Autumn.

“Ahh,” said Richid, “that be the clever bit. There be two holes in that slab. If you stand in the valley below and look up when Astauand is behind them they looks like two sharp little rat's eyes looking at you.”

“How did the holes get there?” asked Logan.

“I have no idea,” said Richid. “Mayhap Astauand or one of the others made them for no man could get up there and cut them. Still, I ain't saying that they be the Eyes of Samnosura but there ain't no place else I can think of. Could be they ain't there any more either. I didn't get that close but it looked to me that there was nothing supporting the slab so mayhap it has fallen down or Astauand has filled in the holes again. I have no idea.”

“It is certainly worth visiting,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “For sure we have no better ideas. You did not see any pink while you were there?”

“Ohh, can't possibly say,” said Richid. “It were that long ago and a bit of pink wouldn't stay in my memory. You won't be forgetting to ask your friend about one of those things for me?”

“No, we will not,” said Autumn. “It may take some time however, as we most likely cannot send a message until we get to Lizoote and it will take some time even then.”

“Well, I best be getting back,” said Richid, climbing awkwardly to his feet. “Wouldn't be helpful if someone comes looking for me and finds you. Don't reckon as how the others like you much. We be not fond of strangers at the best of times but criminals? And with a reward that they ain't going to be getting? No, best you be moving on before too long else trouble may come and find you.”

“You are right,” said Autumn, “and we will move on immediately. I thank you for your aid.”

“And for returning my staff,” said Logan. “I am greatly fond of it.”

“Aye,” said Richid. He turned to go through the bush then paused. “And thank you muchly for giving me back my hearing, if only for a short time. I had forgotten what it is like to hear another's voice.”

He slipped through the bush and disappeared.

“So,” said Logan. “Shall we head off around this infernal mountain again?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, getting up. “Do you suppose these Fareki and Muhaban are the ones who have been attacking us? 'Twould seem strange for some to attack us and yet others spread the word of a reward for our capture, dead or alive.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan. “And by the sound of it Buhfa is behind it although what we have done to incur his hostility, I do not know.”

“I should have thought to ask Richid which direction they headed in,” said Autumn. “Twould be unfortunate if we ran into them again going round the other side of Samnosura.”

Chapter Twenty Two

“This is no good,” said Autumn, pausing to look around. “I thought we would be at the tree line by now but all I can see are trees and more trees. I am not even certain we are still going in the right direction.”

“We must be,” said Logan, “since we are still going uphill and the slope is on the left.”

“So you would think,” said Autumn, “but we could have crossed a fold and be heading South again.”

“I suppose it is possible,” said Logan wearily. “I’m sure I would have noticed if we had gone downhill at all.”

He wiped the sweat from his face then held onto a branch while he leaned back to look directly up at the sky through the branches.

“We are definitely going to have a storm,” he added. “The air is very heavy and what sky I can see is dark with cloud. Best we find somewhere to shelter for the night.”

“This would not be a good place,” said Autumn. “It is too steep and likely we will roll down to the bottom in our sleep. Have you seen Darius?”

“Not for a long time,” said Logan.

“Hold my staff for me,” said Autumn, holding it out at arm’s length for Logan to take. “I’m going to climb a tree and see what can be seen.”

Logan took the end of her staff and let it slide through his hand to rest on the ground while Autumn peered up a few of the nearest trees to see which was the tallest. Selecting one she jumped to catch one of its lower branches then wormed her way upwards. She quickly disappeared from sight although sounds and shaking leaves marked her progress. Logan sat on the ground and stared unenthusiastically at the trees that filled the slope below him. They weren’t close together

but it was impossible to see far. The canopy formed by the trees' branches descended as steeply as the slope.

"We've been climbing all day and it still looks the same as when we started," said Logan. "Mayhap we've just been going round in circles."

"What was that?" called Autumn from somewhere above.

"Nothing," called back Logan. He sighed and rubbed his shoulder. The wounds were healing nicely but his shoulder still ached and the loose ends of the grass pads scratched.

He took a long drink from the water bottle then poured some over his head. Its coolness was refreshing but not for long. The hot dampness of the air soon brought back the sweat and the leafy canopy all around prevented any breeze from reaching him. A little further downhill there was a shimmer in the air as a swarm of tiny midges danced frantically around each other and some way over to the right something was moving through the foliage. Probably not Darius; it didn't sound big enough and Darius moved very stealthily. Logan listened intently, wondering if another attack was imminent then relaxed when he heard the faint bleat of a mountain goat calling its young.

He leaned back on his elbows and watched the midges as the swarm undulated slowly towards him. They moved too quickly and erratically for him to focus on any single midge but the swarm didn't have enough substance to seem like a single creature. They came quite close then, almost as though they made a collective decision, they veered away to the left and started to go back downhill again. Whatever it was that had been moving through the undergrowth had stopped. Whether because it had found something of interest or because it was in a clear patch it was impossible to say but with that sound gone the forest went silent. There was a strong smell of rotting vegetation and the air was like a thick damp blanket that blocked all sound and sapped all strength.

A leaf landed on his head and unthinkingly he reached up and tossed it away. Another leaf fell, spiralling downwards and delicately brushing his nose. He flapped at it then picked it off the front of his robe. He

snapped it in half and sniffed the leaf but couldn't discern any particular smell. He tossed that away as well. Then a small twig bounced off his eyebrow, making him start and jerk his head. It landed on the ground beside him and he absently reached for it. It was just a twig, dry and scabrous with a small patch of grey-white lichen. He used it to scratch the top of his head and two more leaves fell onto his chest. He watched them absently then yawned and tossed the twig away. Then he ran his fingers through his hair and knocked off several more leaves.

"That's strange," he thought and leaned his head back to look up at the branch above him. A fistful of leaves landed on his face and he jerked forward, spluttering.

"I wondered when you would notice," said Autumn, her face appearing from the foliage. She dropped from the branch to land beside him and sat in the same movement.

"Ha ha," said Logan drily. "Very funny."

He brushed the leaves from his lap then Autumn plucked one that had stuck to the sweat on his face.

"Cheer up," she said. "We have not much further to go. I could see the end of the trees from up there and there is a storm coming. There is so much cloud I could not see where Astauand is but I think we are still heading North."

"Did you see anywhere we can shelter above the trees?" asked Logan, trying to snare a leaf or two that had gone inside the back of his robe.

"There seemed to be an overhang of sorts," said Autumn. "I could not see it clearly but it seemed worth investigating. If it turns out not to be we can come back down to the trees and make a shelter. There looked to be a depression just above the edge of the trees but after that it gets very steep. I wager we will not be able to go much higher unless you want to climb rather than walk. 'Twould seem reasonable if we stay close to the tree line and continue around the mountain."

"Good," said Logan. "Did you see any sign of the slab of rock Richid

spoke of?"

"The light is poor," said Autumn. "It is late in the day and the clouds are dark and there is mistiness as well but there did seem to be an odd shape to the side much further up. It will be easier to see when the clouds are gone. For certain I did not see anything that could be eyes."

"Ah well," said Logan, getting to his feet. "I am sure things will be much clearer in the morning and we cannot be far away. With Aloidia's aid this overhang will give good protection. How long before the storm?"

"Difficult to say," said Autumn, getting up as well, "but not over long."

They reached the overhang just before the storm broke. It proved to be wide enough and deep enough to keep them dry and out of the slashing wind and driving rain, at least until Darius arrived. He was soaked to the skin and rivulets of water ran off him, pooling on the ground where they were to sleep. It was a miserable night.

* * *

Logan peered out from under the overhang. It was day but he could barely see the dark shapes of the trees not twenty paces distant through the mist. He hawked and spat then realised he was alone. He rolled out, getting more mud on his already damp and muddy robe and got to his feet. He stepped backwards to look over the top of the overhang to see where Autumn was and slipped. He landed on his face and slid perhaps two paces down the slope before his foot encountered something fairly solid. He got cautiously to his feet then said 'Chaahk be cursed a thousand times" with great feeling.

"Tis not the pleasantest of mornings," came Autumn's voice from somewhere above. "Are you hurt?"

"No," said Logan gruffly. He stood still and rubbed his chest and knees for a few moments then cautiously looked up while keeping his foot firmly against the stone. Autumn was a little way above the overhang, perched on another, much smaller overhang. She looked to

be as muddy as he was.

“What happened to you?” he asked.

“I fell over, much as you did,” said Autumn, “only several times. Then I abandoned my exercises. I have not the skill for fast moves with this much mud. You have mud on your face. Did you sleep well?”

“No,” said Logan. He wiped his face with his sleeve and spread the mud wider. “I was cold and wet and the wind howled all night and the thunder crashed everywhere and when it wasn’t crashing that flea infested cat was snoring in my ear. He tried to push me out twice. At least the rain has stopped.”

“I am not sure it has,” said Autumn. “I fancy I can hear the rain further down and over that way.” She flapped her hand vaguely. “So I think this mist is the cloud itself and we are inside it.”

“Oh joy,” said Logan. He wiped his face again then looked at his sleeve and cursed again.

“Calm yourself,” said Autumn, the epitome of calmness as she sat on her overhang. “This mist is thinning rapidly and I have no doubt we will quickly dry when Astauand appears. With all the water that fell in the night no doubt some has collected nearby and we can wash. I have some meat for your breakfast if you desire it.”

“Meat?” said Logan in surprise. He nearly lost his balance again. “How did you get meat?”

“Darius found it earlier,” she said. “’Tis a snake.”

“Ahh,” said Logan cheering up. “They taste like chicken but how will we cook it? Everything is sodden.”

“’Tis already cooked,” said Autumn. “I fancy it was hit by lightning in the night. There is plenty left for Darius prefers his meat raw. Can you climb up here?”

“I suppose so,” said Logan. “Where is Darius?”

“Down there,” said Autumn. She pointed to one of the trees further down the slope and off to the left where Darius was asleep, draped over a branch, indistinct in the mist.

“Typical,” muttered Logan and dug his toes into the mud. Surprisingly the layer of mud was thin and he could feel the gritty rock below it. He made his way back up to the overhang on tiptoe and collected his staff. Getting up to Autumn's overhang was easier as he could use the staff for better grip. Autumn shifted over and he sat beside her and she passed him the remains of the snake. It was well cooked.

“I have been sitting here for a while,” said Autumn, “watching the moving of the mist and I want your thoughts on something.”

“Oh yes?” said Logan, pulling off a strip of pale meat. He sniffed it then shovelled it into his mouth.

“The mist swirls and moves,” said Autumn, “and every now and then it parts for a moment before closing in. Keep your eyes over that way and tell me if you see anything. It may take a while.”

“I see mist and trees,” said Logan. “What else is there?”

“Just wait,” said Autumn.

So Logan waited. He kept his eyes in the general direction Autumn had pointed and picked the flesh from the snake and chewed. It was dull and his concentration wandered. Then there was a small gust of wind and the mist parted for a moment then swirled back in again.

“What was that?” he exclaimed, jerking his head round a little for whatever it was he had seen was off to the side of where he had been looking.

“That is what I would like to know,” said Autumn. “What did you see?”

“I do not know,” said Logan, watching intently. “There was just a flash of something through the mist.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “That is all I have been seeing as well. I daresay this mist will lift fully in time but it is frustrating at the moment.”

Slowly the mist thinned and Darius on his tree became more solid, turning from pale grey to black.

“There it was again,” exclaimed Logan pointing. “Did you see that? It looked like a flash of pink.”

“Ahh, you think so too,” said Autumn. “Good. I was not sure if my eyes deceived me.”

“What do you think it was?” asked Logan.

“I have no idea,” said Autumn. “It is too indistinct and I cannot even judge if it is close or distant.”

There was a muffled thump as Darius appeared to fall off the tree branch and Logan laughed before realising that Darius had, in fact, jumped. He made his way up to join them on the overhang, his four broad paws seemingly unaffected by the mud. although there were streaks of mud on his flanks.

“So,” he said, looking up at them from just below the overhang, “are those the Eyes then?”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn, her brow furrowing.

“Yonder,” said Darius, pointing upwards with his nose. “Behind you.”

Autumn and Logan both twisted round then leaned back to look up at the peak that towered over them. The mist rose another body length then the sky was clear. Some considerable way above them and on the side some rock jutted out like an ear. Near the top of the ear were two small circles of blue sky.

“Sploop,” said Logan in surprise. “Where did that come from?”

“I had not realised the mist was sinking not rising,” said Autumn, “but I suppose it makes sense for we are high up. You think those are the

Eyes Richid talked of?”

“They must be,” said Logan, peering up. “It is as he said, a slab that juts out with two holes in it. Judging by the look of it, it would seem to be sheer as well and nigh on impossible to climb.”

“We could ask Fiau to make us a ladder or climbing pole,” said Autumn. “It would be interesting to look at closely. I wonder how the holes were made. Do you think they are the same size?”

“Tis difficult to tell from this distance,” said Logan, squinting. “Do you really want to climb up there?”

“Where is your curiosity?” asked Autumn. “Why would I not want to go and see?”

“True,” said Logan. “You would not be you if you did not. Hmm. So, if, as Richid said, the rock juts out to the North East, then that would mean that Astauand is still behind the other mountain over there somewhere. It still feels early in the morning.”

Then a thought struck him and he slowly turned to look back to where he had thought he had seen something. Autumn turned as well as a similar thought struck her.

“What are you looking at?” asked Darius, turning his head because they did.

“That,” said Logan as the mist swirled and parted in the breeze again. It stayed parted with only tendrils wafting slowly.

Far off in the distance, across the valley between the mountains and part way up the side of Galmasar, almost lost among the bands of brown and green, for it was not much wider than a grass stem and no longer than a finger nail, was a hint of a thin streak of pink.

* * *

It took much of the day to climb down the side of Samnosura and find a stream to wash themselves and their clothes.

“My mind keeps thinking on it,” said Logan as he lay on the bank, drying himself in Astauand’s warmth, “but it must be the Valley of the Pink that Xanos talked of in the letter.”

“There is no must about it,” said Autumn who was sitting on the bank combing her hair. “It could be anything which is why we are going to look.”

“But surely you agree that the holes in the rock back there are the Eyes of Samnosura,” said Logan, “and Xanos did say that when Plakill and Plifal shine through the Eyes they will light up the Valley of the Pink. When they go behind that rock their light will shine directly onto that pink patch.”

“We do not know this for certain,” said Autumn. “The pink place would seem to be in the right alignment but it is difficult to judge from here and with all these trees in the way. And mayhap it is not a valley but another outcrop that happens to look pink. Mayhap also we are misremembering what Xanos said as well. I would prefer to read the letter again but we no longer have it.” She looked meaningfully at Darius who ignored her with sublime indifference.

“But is it not the most remarkable coincidence,” said Logan. “We have found two holes that could be eyes and for certain Plakill and Plifal will go behind them and their light will go over that way.”

“It is indeed,” said Autumn, “but coincidences happen all the time. There is another thought that bothers me.”

“And what is that?” asked Logan, rolling over to dry his back.

“Xanos searched for two summers and found little,” said Autumn, “whereas we have searched for only eight days. What is the likelihood that we have found the right place?”

“A fair point,” said Logan. “How much longer do I have to wear this cloth on my shoulder?”

“I would prefer a few more days,” said Autumn. “Tis healing well but far from fully healed.”

“No,” said Logan forcefully. He rolled back and sat up. “I disagree.”

“It may feel healed but the arrow went through,” said Autumn. “There is much healing inside to be done yet.”

“No, no, no, I do not mean my shoulder,” said Logan. “I mean the search. It took Xanos two summers but he had nothing to begin with and we know not if he spent long periods on the journey resting or visiting other places. We already knew of the Eyes and the Pink and no doubt he encountered people unwilling to talk just as we did. But we were aided by Richid who only aided us because of our necklaces. 'Tis unlikely that Xanos would have had that aid and without Richid we could travel around this mountain for many summers and not notice that rock.”

“These are valid points,” said Autumn. She retied her hair and stowed her ivory comb back in her pack. “I had not thought of it that way. Still, our path is not yet easy for it may be difficult to find the pinkness when we are among the trees on Galmasar. I wager we will not be able to see much of the Eyes to guide us either. It is also possible that whatever that pinkness is will fade away before we find it and we could spend many summers searching for what is no longer there.”

She reached over and felt her malu and robe to see if they were dry. The malu was so she got up and put it on and turned her robe over to let Astauand rid it of its remaining dampness.

“Your robe is dry,” she said, picking it up. “Do you ...?”

“Someone comes,” said Darius suddenly, his ears twitching. His head swivelled and he looked across the stream. “That way.”

Autumn tossed Logan's robe towards him and turned back to face the far side of the stream. She could see no one through the undergrowth. She sidestepped to where her staff lay on the ground then froze as a man emerged, his bow raised and drawn with an arrow pointing at Autumn's heart.

“Greetings,” said Autumn, deciding to let her staff lie. To pick it up

now might seem overly hostile.

“Pah,” said the man as another man emerged, also with his bow drawn. “Farewell would be a better word for I am not going to miss this time, not from this distance,” and he released the string.

Chapter Twenty Three

Autumn reacted instantly and twisted sharply to one side as the arrow zinged past, slicing the hem of her malu with its tip. She spun and crouched for a moment as the man fumbled for another arrow. At the same time Darius leapt up with a snarl and bounded across the stream. The second man quickly adjusted his aim and Darius collapsed in the water, red blood mingling with the stream as it flowed downstream. Autumn hurled herself up and across as the first man drew back his bow string and let loose another arrow. He missed by a wide mark and Autumn rolled on the ground and threw herself up in a kick at the second man's head. He wasn't there. She stumbled and crashed into a bush but rolled and leapt up again. The first man had gone as well. She could hear their crashing through the undergrowth, already some distance away.

“Darius!” shouted Logan, getting his wits together again after the unexpectedness of the attack.

He ran into the stream and Autumn stopped and turned back to look. Darius was just a black shapeless mass in the ankle deep water.

“Oh no!” exclaimed Autumn and ran into the water as well.

Together they picked Darius up and carried him to the bank, an arrow protruding from between his forelegs.

“Is he dead?” asked Logan, worriedly.

Autumn put her head to Darius' chest then peered into his dull, lifeless golden eyes.

“Sadly, yes,” she said. “That shot would seem to have got him in the heart.”

“Voqev!” snarled Logan and he stamped his foot on the ground. “Who were those people anyway?”

“I venture they are Fareki and Muhaban,” she said, gazing at Darius' inert body. “The two who told the villagers we were criminals and,

most likely, those who attacked us twice before.”

“But why?” demanded Logan, his eyes filling with tears for he was fond of Darius.

“That we will not know until we catch them,” said Autumn. She got to her feet and went to pick up Logan's robe.

“At least promise me you will wear your robe at all times until we do,” said Logan. “That man could have killed you.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “Here is yours,” and she held it out.

Logan did not take it. “I am serious,” he said. “Do not take it off even to wash.”

“That will be awkward,” said Autumn with a faint smile

“Less so than being dead,” said Logan trying to look commanding. He held up his hand. “No, do not say it. I know full well your views on death but do not forget that I do not wholly agree with them. I will miss you if you are dead.” He looked at Darius' body, forlorn and lonely on the ground. “What shall we do with him? It seems disrespectful to just leave him there.”

“I have no further use for it,” said Darius, strolling out from the bushes. “Leave it or whatever you will. It is of no consequence to me.”

“Darius!” exclaimed Autumn and Logan simultaneously. They both looked at the body on the ground and back at Darius as well. He seemed bigger, sleeker and the silver tips of his ears were more brilliant.

“But are you not dead?” asked Autumn.

“And you a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume,” said Darius with a discernable air of contempt. “You forget, I am Ept. I am immortal.”

“But ...,” said Logan, gesturing to the old Darius.

"Tis just my old body," said Darius, "and of no further use."

"But is not your new body the same?" asked Autumn. "How can it be that there are two Dariuses?"

"No, not the same," said Darius. "I had a fondness for that body so I made my new one a little bigger and with longer and sharper teeth and claws. Look."

He held up a front paw, which was noticeably wider than before, and extended his claws. They gleamed wickedly and the tips were fiendishly sharp.

"Did you not have four claws before?" asked Autumn, noticing there were now five.

"A whim on my part," said Darius, contentedly. "Leave the body here. Let it return to the earth from whence it came. Unless you want to eat it."

"Ahh, no," said Logan when Autumn looked at him enquiringly. "I think not."

"As you wish," said Darius. "Do we move on or stay the night here?"

"There is some while before Astauand sets," said Autumn, "what say you we continue for a while?"

"As you wish," said Darius. "I am tired, but not overly so."

"Why are you tired?" asked Logan. "Your new body hasn't done anything yet."

"It is an effort to construct a body," said Darius, "and my death was painful."

"This is true," said Logan, picking up his robe. "I remember when I was killed by an arrow through the chest.²⁰ That hurt for quite a while,

²⁰ See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*. While escaping from incarceration after being falsely charged with treason, Autumn was shot by a guard. Due to the protective ribbon on her robe the arrow passed through her and killed

but then, I did not get a new body. You are not wearing your robe, Autumn.”

“This is also true, Logan,” said Autumn. She picked hers up and slipped it on. “Happy now?”

“Yes,” said Logan, “ecstatic. Now the only one they can kill when they return is me. That is a happy thought indeed.”

“Ha,” said Autumn, “I will not let them, fear not.”

* * *

“I could just see the slab of rock on Samnosura,” said Autumn when she dropped out of a tree, “but not the Eyes. It is too far away. I think we have ventured a little too far South but it is difficult to be certain. It could be we are too far to the North. We have been climbing for two days and I would be surprised if we have stayed exactly on course.”

“Actually, we could be exactly right but not yet high enough,” said Logan, “or even too high. There must be a better way to find this pink without having to wander all over this side of the mountain.”

“The only way I can think of is to have someone over on Samnosura watching our progress,” said Autumn, “but I know not how they would be able to tell us which way to head.”

“Perhaps with a large arrow made from branches,” said Logan. “Big enough to see from here.”

“Mayhap that would be too big to move around,” said Autumn. “Now I am back down from the tree I am no longer certain which way to head. Doubts are in my mind now.”

“Then we shall head North in the morning,” said Logan. “We go with your first impression, the one before you started to have doubts.”

“I am not sure that is a good way to make decisions,” said Autumn,

Logan, thereby leading to Autumn's journey into the Land of the Undead to recover him.

“but it will have to do for now.”

“What say you, Darius?” asked Logan, starting to collect some brushwood to make a fire. “You are a deity. Is there not some way you can help find this place?”

“Sadly not,” said Darius. “My realm is the hearth. Chershooe or Musafir would be better placed to help us.”

“Can you not ask one of them?” asked Logan.

“I will if I have to,” said Darius, “but I am reluctant to as yet.”

“Why is that?” asked Autumn. “Is there not cooperation between you?”

“Alas, no,” said Darius. “There is little love lost between Chershooe and Musafir and myself for the realms of paths and travellers do not sit well with that of the hearth and there are many political ramifications besides. If I ask either for aid then return favours will be asked and debts incurred which will likely be beyond my willingness to grant. The politics among us is complex and never ending. No deity lightly asks another for aid.”

“But surely Zeeth has an interest in this venture,” said Autumn. “It is Its Kastounasc that we seek, after all.”

“Indeed,” said Darius, “but the Dead have no role here so Zeeth has no jurisdiction and will have no idea where this Valley of the Pink would be. Nor does Zeeth have any power or influence over Chershooe, Musafir or myself. We are immortal and will never be subject to the Lord of the Dead.”

“Your world seems overly complex to me,” said Logan, making a pile of his brushwood.

“As does your world to me,” said Darius. “All you humans seem to delight in over complicating things with morals and ethics and laws and such nonsense. You should be more like cats. Life is much simpler that way and when you live forever you crave simplicity.”

“Does not endless simplicity become tedious?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Darius. “It paves the way to other things.”

“What other things?” asked Autumn.

“That I cannot tell you,” said Darius.

“Because it is forbidden knowledge?” asked Autumn.

“In part,” said Darius, “but much requires knowledge no human has, save Mother Midcarn and a pawful of others who have dedicated their lives to unravelling the mysteries.”

“There are others like Mother Midcarn?” asked Logan, looking up from trying to light the fire.

“Three others I know of,” said Darius, “and perhaps a similar number following in their mindsteps.”

“Are they all sorcerers?” asked Autumn as the fire caught and Logan fanned it.

“None are sorcerers,” said Darius.

“Mother Midcarn is,” said Logan.

“No she is not,” said Darius. “Sorcerers have skills in magic but Mother Midcarn and her ilk have skills far beyond.”

“What skills?” asked Autumn.

“That I cannot tell you,” said Darius.

“It is forbidden?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Darius, “but the words do not exist. Such things are beyond words.”

“How is that possible?” asked Logan. “All you need to do is make up a

word then explain what you want it to mean. Like, oh I don't know, ericoori, say. Let us agree that Mother Midcarn is an ericoori rather than a sorcerer."

"If you wish," said Darius. "But to what purpose?"

"All that remains is for you to tell us what an ericoori is," said Logan.

Darius gave a peculiar growling laugh deep in his throat. "To do that I would need to make up a lot of new words," he said, "and to explain each of them would need more new words and them in turn. We may agree on ericoori but there are no words to say what it means."

"I do not understand," said Logan.

"I think I have an idea what he means," said Autumn. "I fancy it may be like our feelings. We have words for our feelings but these words do not explain what the feelings feel like."

"You talk in riddles as well," said Logan. "If this fire goes out I will be angry. Is that not an explanation of my feeling of anger?"

"No," said Autumn. "It is an explanation of the cause of that feeling. You are angry because the fire went out but I cannot know how you feel when you feel anger. I can only know what I feel when I feel anger but that may not be the same as what you feel. There are no words to show how you feel. It is like that flame. You can say it is orange and I can agree that it is orange but you may be seeing a different colour to what I see but we have no way of knowing beyond us both agreeing that what we see is described by the word 'orange' but I cannot see exactly what you see."

"I don't really follow that," said Logan, "for it seems to me that orange is orange regardless of who sees it and anger is anger regardless of who feels it but no matter. Is she right, Darius? Is ericoori like that?"

"No," said Darius, "for your words such as anger and orange can still be explained using other words even if you cannot be certain those other words apply. Erioori, or whatever word you make up for Mother Midcarn, cannot be explained in words."

"I give up," said Logan. "I am going to sit here quietly by myself and cook some food then go to sleep. For certain I will never have the skills to follow Mother Midcarn. Is Subota one of them as well?"

"No," said Darius. "Subota is a sorcerer."

"As I thought," said Logan. "Will you eat with us, Darius?"

"I will find something for myself," said Darius. "Cooked roots are not to my taste."

* * *

Logan woke with a start and sat up, wondering what had woken him. He looked around and listened but there was nothing apparent. The fire had gone out but there was enough moonlight to see that Autumn was not where she had been when he went to sleep. There was no shape that could be Darius either although he was probably off hunting. Autumn didn't hunt. He rubbed his eyes and looked around again. She definitely wasn't anywhere although what looked like her pack was on the ground.

"Autumn?" he whispered. There was no reply.

"Oh, Sploop," he muttered, suddenly feeling very lost and alone.

He got onto his knees and looked around again.

"Autumn!" he whispered again, only louder. "Where are you?"

"I am up here," came Autumn's voice loudly. She had spoken in her normal voice but it seemed very loud in the still of the night.

"Up where?" asked Logan.

"The tree," said Autumn.

"Oh," said Logan. He thought about that for a moment. "Why?"

"I could not sleep," said Autumn.

“Oh,” said Logan. He sat back down again and sighed. “That is an explanation of why you are awake, not why you are up a tree.”

“I wanted to look at Plakill and Plifal,” said Autumn, her voice seeming normal again now that they were conversing. “Join me, this is interesting.”

“In the dark?” queried Logan, somewhat perplexed.

“They are not here in the light,” said Autumn.

“Ask a silly question,” thought Logan. “Which tree?” he asked.

“The one I climbed earlier,” said Autumn.

Logan thought about that for a few moments then got up and went over to the tree. In the darkness it seemed to tower far more than it had in the light. He jumped half-heartedly but the lowest branch was too high.

“I cannot reach the branches,” he said.

“A moment,” said Autumn and the tree began to quiver and rustle then an arm appeared. “Take my hand.”

Logan reached up and grasped Autumn's hand then grunted as she deftly pulled him up onto the branch.

“Come,” she said and climbed higher.

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan as he grabbed the trunk for support. He looked upwards and could see branches outlined against the pale dark sky. He reached for one that seemed close and hauled himself onto it awkwardly, his injured shoulder protesting.

“Keep going,” said Autumn. “Get high enough to see over the trees.”

“I should have stayed asleep,” thought Logan as he climbed onto another branch. This one sagged a lot under his weight. “Unless this is just a dream.”

“Am I dreaming?” he asked.

“All life is a dream,” said Autumn, “but no, you are not asleep. Higher.”

Logan had to stand very close to the trunk to stop the next branch bending too far and he was now high enough to feel the tree swaying from side to side so he wrapped his arms around it.

“One more,” said Autumn, very close by. “I’m the other side.”

Gingerly Logan climbed onto the next branch and sat on it so his feet were on the branch below. He hoped that would spread his weight. It seemed to work.

“Hello,” said Autumn brightly. “Could you not sleep either?”

“Something woke me,” said Logan, looking around. “So what am I looking for?”

“You are facing the wrong way,” said Autumn. “Turn around.”

Logan clenched his teeth and reluctantly let go of the trunk of the tree. It swayed and he nearly lost his footing. He cautiously stood up and, very carefully, shuffled around so he faced the other way.

“Do you want me to sit?” he asked.

“Tis up to you,” said Autumn, “but you may be here a while.”

“That’s true,” said Logan. “I would prefer to wait until dawn before climbing down again. What did you want me to see?”

“Plifal,” said Autumn. “It is over there.”

“Oh yes,” said Logan looking. “Where is Plakill? Should it not be nearby tonight?”

“Plakill is behind the rock on Samnosura that juts out,” said Autumn. “Plifal is about to go behind as well.”

“Oh yes,” said Logan. He felt he was expected to say something of importance but couldn't think of anything.

“Do you not remember Xanos' letter?” asked Autumn. “When Plakill and Plifal go behind the Eyes of Samnosura their light will shine through.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, “now I follow you. When that happens the light will shine on the entrance to Miesca.”

“That's right,” said Autumn. “I was thinking about that earlier and I wondered how far apart Plakill and Plifal needed to be so I climbed up here to see.”

“How far apart do they need to be?” asked Logan.

“I do not know how to answer that in terms of distance,” said Autumn, “but it seemed to me that they are about the right distance apart this night, and most likely the next few nights as well. I saw Plakill shine through one of the holes earlier but it is now between them. If we wait a while it will shine through the other and mayhap Plifal will shine through the first one at the same time. That is if they are the right distance apart.”

“Ohh,” said Logan, leaning forward. “That was good thinking. All we had to do was climb a tree and see where the Eyes shine and we will know where the entrance is.”

“'Tis not as simple as that,” said Autumn. “As Plakill and Plifal move the light shining through will move across Galmasar.”

“So how does that help?” asked Logan. He scratched his cheek and his foot slipped causing him to clutch hurriedly at the trunk. “Why does Autumn never have these problems?” he wondered.

“It helps because we can see the line the light moves along,” said Autumn. “So we will know if we are too high or too low. Then in the morning we can go to the right height up Galmasar and, if the pink thing is the Valley of the Pink we should be able to find it so long as we stay at the same height.”

“Why didn't I think of that?” asked Logan.

“No doubt you would have if you had not been asleep,” said Autumn.
“Ahh, do you see?”

“See what?” asked Logan.

“Plakill is beginning to shine through the other Eye,” said Autumn. “I wonder if Plifal will.”

“Mayhap they are not yet the right distance apart,” said Logan, “or they were a few nights ago. Is Plifal catching Plakill or falling behind at the moment?”

“I fancy it is catching up,” said Autumn, “so if not tonight then in the next few nights. Ah! Do you see?”

“Aye,” said Logan, “There is light in both eyes now and I can see a lightening in the sky where the two travel.”

He shuffled around again so he could look back at the side of Galmasar and leaned back, holding on very tightly with both hands, so he could look up as well.

“We are too low,” he announced. “See? The Light from the Eyes is some way up there.”

“Yes,” said Autumn, “and you see that funny shaped crag just to the right and up a tiny bit further? If we head for that and stay just below it we should be able to find the Valley of the Pink.”

“Sploop,” cried Logan as his foot slipped again and he sat on the branch abruptly. The branch bent ominously then suddenly cracked and he plunged downwards.

“Logan!” cried Autumn, grabbing for him but missing.

“I landed on the branch below,” said Logan after a few moments of frantic rustling and shaking. Then there was a pause and a groan. “I think I am bleeding.”

“Badly?” asked Autumn. “I am coming to get you, hold on.”

She started to climb down to his branch.

“All is well,” said Logan. “I landed on a bird's nest. 'Tis egg, not blood.”

Chapter Twenty Four

“Vallume!” exclaimed Autumn, rounding the craggy edge of the outcrop. She stopped to stare in surprise.

“What is it?” asked Logan, catching her up. He, too, stopped to stare. “Sloop!”

Darius, a little further down and some way behind heard and bounded over to join them. His eyes narrowed to slits as he delicately sniffed the air. The faint and subtle aroma was intriguing.

They had spent half a day climbing the slope of Galmasar to get to roughly the level at which the light of Plifal and Plakill had fallen on Galmasar through the Eyes of Samnosura then spent the rest of the day and much of the next trying to head North while keeping at the same level. It hadn't been easy as there is a natural tendency when walking across a slope to veer downhill so staying level had entailed much looking back at the crag Autumn had noted for reference. As they got further from it Autumn frequently had to stop to climb trees to see the crag. And, of course, in time the crag had disappeared from view behind the curvature of the mountain.

Late in the afternoon of that second day Autumn, a little way ahead of Logan, had noticed that the trees further up the slope had thinned then disappeared as the steep slope gave way to an almost sheer outcrop of rock. Directly ahead the way was cluttered with trees and thick undergrowth and Autumn fancied that by going up to the base of the outcrop the way would be easier so she had changed direction and climbed higher. Logan, uncomplainingly, had followed.

As she had expected no trees grew along the base of the outcrop and there was little undergrowth. It was much easier to walk there and the base of the outcrop appeared to be fairly level. Moreover, there was the unmistakable sound of a small waterfall not far ahead and there might be a suitable spot nearby to camp for the night. She followed the outcrop, her eyes tending to look downward more than forward as she watched for a camping spot. With her mind on how and why the outcrop existed she was unprepared when the outcrop unexpectedly curved back into the mountain to reveal a cleft. It was not large

enough to be fairly called a valley but it was too large to be a ravine. Perhaps a gorge might be a better description. However, that was not what stopped her in her tracks and made her exclaim “Vallume!” for valleys, ravines and gorges are fairly commonplace on the sides of mountains.

What made her exclaim was that the gorge was pink. A brilliant, searing mass of pink. All the more so for being unexpected among the brown trees and green bushes and branches and the brown-grey of the rock even though they were looking for something pink. It was the sheer pinkness that overwhelmed the eye and the mind. Pink was seemingly everywhere.

It took some moments for Autumn and Logan to begin to discern other features and, by the time Darius joined them, they were becoming aware that not all was pink. The cleft was quite wide and there was a similar outcrop of rock on the far side. In fact, although it took a while to realise this, the cleft was within the outcrop and the sides of the outcrop continued backwards into the mountain, narrowing as they went, to join some way back. Somewhere between a third and halfway to the far side lay a stream, flowing out of the cleft. The stream launched itself into the air at the edge of the cleft and fell, twisting and tumbling, to land some way below.

“They are cherry trees!” said Autumn in wonder. “An entire valley of cherry trees!”

“I did not know cherry trees grew in this country,” said Logan, impressed by the sheer profusion of pinkness. “And this is Autumn, not Spring. They should not be blossoming.”

“I wager this spot is protected from the heat,” said Autumn, “and you forget that Qanas told us the seasons are reversed. It is Spring here now.”

“I suppose,” said Logan, “although I do not understand why. Still, I venture it is safe to say that this is the Valley of the Pink. ’Twould be hard to imagine anything pinker and it is a valley of sorts.”

“And somewhere in there lies this place we are looking for,” said

Autumn. "I wonder how far back it goes?"

"Does it matter?" asked Logan. "All we have to do is see where the light from the Eyes shine tonight."

"And therein lies the problem," said Autumn. "The Eyes are higher than we are so the light will shine down on some part of this valley but we are at the bottom and cannot see past the first few lines of trees. What if the entrance to Miesca is some way back? We will not be able to see it."

Logan's brow creased as he digested this thought. "I daresay we should be higher," he said after a while. "So we can look down."

"Yes," said Autumn, looking up the almost sheer face of the outcrop. "This is not overly high, mayhap twenty or so body lengths, but the footholds seem few and far between."

"Mayhap Fiau can help us here," said Logan. "Fiau, are you there?"

"How may I aid you, Logan?" asked Fiau, materialising out of Logan's staff.

"Can you take us to the top of this cliff?" asked Logan, pointing up in the air.

Fiau's multi-ringed green eyes shifted upwards then her thin neck bent so she could see the top of the outcrop.

"Assuredly," she said in her thin, quivery voice. "All three of you?"

"Darius?" asked Autumn.

"I, too, would like to see more of this place," said Darius.

"Yes," said Autumn.

"It shall be so," said Fiau, coalescing back into Logan's staff.

For a moment nothing happened then the staff began to quiver and

grow.

"I wonder how she plans to do this," remarked Logan. "A ladder, perhaps?"

"She is not getting any wider," said Autumn as she watched the staff get taller and taller. "Darius, can you climb a ladder?"

"I know not what a ladder is," said Darius. "Is it a human thing?"

"Yes," said Autumn. "It is several sticks laid flat one above the other so we can walk up."

"Then likely not," said Darius, "for I do not have hands and feet as you do although I should be able to climb this staff if it remains like a tree."

"She is just about level with the top, now," said Logan, leaning backwards to watch.

Fiau stopped growing and roughly halfway up a stout branch sprouted and several twigs at its end sought purchase on the rough cliff face. When she was satisfied she was secure, the top half of Fiau bent over and her tip flattened into a broad leaf shape. Fiau continued bending until the flat leaf part sat on the ground in front of Logan.

"Now what?" asked Logan.

"I venture you should stand on it," said Autumn.

"On that?" said Logan. "What do I hold onto?"

A spike grew out of the flat section.

"That," said Autumn.

"Are you coming too?" he asked.

"It does not look big enough for all three of us," said Autumn. "Go on. Fiau will not let you fall."

Gingerly Logan stepped onto the flat leaf and grasped the spike. With a slight jerk, the top of Fiau lifted off the ground and rose steadily, the leaf section staying level.

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan. He grabbed the spike with his other hand as well and tried not to look down.

The trip did not take long and Fiau deposited him on the top of the outcrop. Autumn appeared a few moments later.

“That was fun,” she said. “I have always wanted to fly.” She peered over the edge. “I wonder how Darius will fare?”

Darius fared well, except that he did not make use of the spike. He curled the claws of all four feet around the edges of the platform pressing his chest and belly tightly against the wood. His tail stuck out rigidly and he growled continuously for the entire trip. He leapt off as Fiau drew level with the top of the outcrop and stalked away to sit and groom himself as though this had been an every day experience. Finally the leaf shaped platform split into two and became arms and Fiau hauled herself onto the top of the outcrop before becoming a seemingly normal staff again. Then she fell over, as staffs do when you try to balance them on one end. Logan picked her up.

“Thank you, Fiau,” he said. The staff quivered briefly in his hand in acknowledgement.

Now they were some way above the cherry trees it was apparent that the cleft in the side of the mountain was flat and shaped somewhat like a shark's dorsal fin. The long edge faced North West, towards Samnosura and the other two sides came to a point some way back. The waterfall they had heard at the edge was fed by a stream that meandered the length of the cleft and supplied the cherry trees with all the water they needed. The stream was fed in turn by another waterfall at the far end, where the sides of the cleft came together. No doubt, when it rained, there was also an influx of water from higher up the mountain that cascaded down the sides. It was also apparent from the higher vantage point that there was a variation in the cherry trees. The ones near the front were fading and loosing their blossoms whereas those in the middle were still in full bloom and those furthest

back were just beginning to come into bloom.

"Tis a glorious sight," said Autumn, gazing out over the valley. "I wonder why there are only cherry trees here."

"Mayhap a cherry seed or two were carried on the wind and got trapped," said Logan. "If little else grows here then with all the cherries a tree produces it would not take long for hundreds of trees to grow, especially if no one comes here to collect them. So what do we do now?"

"We wait," said Autumn. She wandered over to the corner and settled herself so that she could see out over the pink valley and the big valley between Galmasar and Samnosura. The slab with the Eyes was a small unevenness on the side of that mountain from this distance.

"Shall I make a fire?" asked Logan.

"If you wish," said Autumn, "but I would counsel you to make it some way back and behind something. A fire on the edge of this rock will be visible a long way off and no doubt those who attacked us are still following."

"Ahh," said Logan, "would not the same be true of us talking?"

"No doubt," said Autumn, "but they know we are somewhere around here and voices on the wind are not so easy to locate as a fire in the night. Mayhap Aloidia will take our part and they will not think to hide their fire and I will see it from here. If so then I will have the opportunity to visit them and have a friendly discussion."

"Best you keep Fiau with you, then," said Logan. "You may need to get back down quickly. I will fetch her."

"Thank you," said Autumn.

* * *

Autumn woke to find Darius' golden eyes a finger's breadth from her own, Two seas of gold surrounded by black fur several shades darker

than the night. She was fascinated to see that this close up the patterns in his eyes resembled streams flowing across a golden landscape into the dark oval lakes of his pupils as seen from a great height and that the golden colour was most intense around the pupils and faded to a pale gold around the edges of his eyes. They seemed lit with an inner fire and, intriguingly, there was something in his eyes that suggested in subtle ways that what lay behind was definitely not of this world.

“The Eyes come,” he said quietly.

“Ahh, thank you,” she replied, just as quietly.

She lay for a few moments pondering the strangeness of his eyes then sat up and thumped Logan on the shoulder. He grunted and rolled over so she found the lobe of his ear and dug in with her thumbnail. Logan twitched and rolled back again.

“Wha?” he muttered, not opening his eyes.

“Time to wake up,” said Autumn.

Logan snored his reply so Autumn put one hand over his mouth and the other blocking his nostrils and started to count. She had reached sixteen before he started to gasp for breath then he jerked convulsively and both hands flew to his face to try to throw off whatever was suffocating him.

“Oh, hello,” he said, opening his eyes and seeing Autumn and Darius watching him. “Is it time?”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

He closed his eyes again and Autumn slapped him across the face, not overly hard.

“I’m awake,” said Logan, jerking into a sitting position. “Wide awake and girded for the rigours ahead.”

He yawned and rubbed his eyes.

“I expect there will be no rigours,” said Autumn. “We merely watch and see where the light goes then we go to sleep again. The rigours will come in the morning when we try to find where the light went on the ground.”

“Then you don't really need me, then, do you,” said Logan. “You two can watch as well as I can.”

“It would be good to have a third perspective,” said Autumn.

She got up and peered over the edge of the rock. There was a large, almost perfect, circle of light resting on the cliff face. A faint shimmer in the air could be traced back part of the way to where she remembered the Eyes were.

“It will not be long now,” said Autumn, “no more than a few minutes.”

“Then I shall go,” said Darius and he turned and padded off along the edge that ran inside the cleft.

“And I,” said Autumn. “Best you stand up again, Logan, else you may fall asleep again.”

“Yes,” said Logan, climbing to his feet. “Where is the water bottle?”

“Where you left it,” said Autumn. “Remember, watch the light and try to mark any distinctive features on the land.”

Logan held up his thumb in acknowledgement then stooped to pick up the water bottle. Autumn turned and followed Darius. Their plan was for each of them to observe from a different vantage point so that each saw the moving of the light from the Eyes in slightly different ways and, with Alodia's aid, make it easier to follow the path of the Eyes in the morning.

As it turned out such precautions were unnecessary. The circle of light bent around the edge of the rock as it entered the cleft and became a grossly elongated oval that swept just above the tops of the cherry trees. Then, when Plakill and Plifal aligned perfectly with the Eyes and the cleft, the elongated oval became a circle again. Regardless of their

viewpoints, Autumn, Logan and Darius all agreed on one distinctive feature that was bathed in the silvery light at that moment; the waterfall at the far end of the cleft. For a few moments the water turned into a silver grey thread that spun and twisted then the circle passed and became an elongated oval again as it swept across the far side of the cleft before bending around the far corner.

“This seems almost too easy,” said Autumn when they regrouped.

“Things only seem easy when you have knowledge of them,” said Logan. “Had we come upon this place and seen what we have just seen with no prior knowledge we would no doubt have thought it a pretty sight but nothing more. 'Tis only the knowledge of what Xanos said that makes this of any significance.”

“True,” said Autumn. “And in the morning we will go to that waterfall and see what is to be seen then decide what to do next. Mayhap there is nothing there except a waterfall.”

“Aye,” said Darius, “and mayhap there is nothing there until the light from those Eyes passes this way again. Who knows what magic lies there.”

“And do not make any pretence about it,” said Logan. “Decide what to do next, indeed. If there is an entrance there you will be going inside. That decision has already been made, I wager.”

“Not by you, Logan,” said Autumn with a smile, “nor, I fancy, Darius.”

“Faff,” said Logan. “You know what I will do. I will follow where you go as I always do, and so will Darius because that is why he came with us. I am going back to sleep now.”

Chapter Twenty Five

“So you still do not believe in dragons?” asked Logan as they splashed through the stream on their way to the waterfall at the inner end of the cleft. “Not even after finding out that the Kastounasc, the Eyes of Samnosura and the Valley of the Pink are real?”

“Now we know what they are, they are much more believable,” said Autumn. “The Eyes are a rock formation and the Pink is a wood of cherry trees. How they came about I do not know but rocks and woods are everywhere and no doubt there are many other unusual patterns that happen to line up with Plakill or Plifal at certain times and need not have any mystical or magical significance. I am not yet wholly convinced about the Kastounasc despite what Darius has told us. I find it difficult to believe that Zeeth would have need of such a bauble.”

“What say you to that, Darius?” asked Logan. Darius was trotting along the bank, weaving sinuously between the trees, reluctant to get his feet wet.

“Nothing,” said Darius. “Truth does not depend on opinion.”

“And what say you to that, Autumn?” when it became clear Autumn wasn't going to reply.

“Nothing,” said Autumn. “Truth is not demonstrated by a refusal to discuss something.”

Logan snorted. “But if we find the Kastounasc you will believe in it then?” he asked.

“That is a question I have been pondering,” said Autumn. She paused in her wading and pointed to a large stone that was half submerged. “If someone says to you that is the Kastounasc, will you believe them?”

“They used to say in my village,” said Logan, “that if it looks like an ariu, flies like an ariu and screeches like an ariu then it is an ariu. That looks like a stone and no doubt flies like a stone so most likely it is a stone.”

“Exactly,” said Autumn. “So how will we know the Kastounasc when we see it?”

“I assume Darius will know,” said Logan.

“I?” said Darius. “I have never seen the Kastounasc. It belongs to Zeeth and It permits no other to see or touch it.”

“And not overly well by the sound of it,” said Autumn, moving forward again, “else it would not have gone missing.”

“There is that,” said Logan. “You think Zeeth may be lying about it?”

“Zeeth cannot lie,” said Darius, disappearing for a few moments as he skirted a clump of trees at the stream's edge.

“And yet it would seem that Zeeth does,” said Autumn. “Unless my understanding is wrong.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

Autumn paused again, the cold water of the stream flowing around and over her feet, and leaned on her staff.

“My understanding is that Zeeth uses the Kastounasc to judge the truth of a creature's life,” said Autumn, “and thereby allow or deny it entry to the Land of the Dead. Yet the Kastounasc went missing many summers ago but Zeeth has continued to allow and deny entry. It would seem to me that if Zeeth says 'You are judged worthy, you may enter,' or whatever It does say, when It does not know the truth of the matter then It is lying.”

“Surely a judgement cannot be a truth or a lie,” said Logan. “It is a judgement, an opinion.”

“Not when the judgement is based on something that shows the truth,” said Autumn, “as the Kastounasc is supposed to.”

“It is not a lie,” said Darius, “merely a judgement not based on the Kastounasc. If Zeeth judged a creature not worthy but said 'You are

worthy' then that would be a lie.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “But it seems to me that you are now defining truth in terms of opinion and did you not say that truth does not depend on opinion?”

“And what say you to that, Darius?” asked Logan delightedly. It was nice to see someone else tangled in Autumn's logic knots for a change.

“I am tempted to say that it is not for humans to split hairs over the methods of deities,” said Darius, “but no doubt you would argue around that as well. What I will say is that throughout all of this you still miss the underlying essence.”

“And what is that?” asked Autumn.

“The Kastounasc is missing,” said Darius, “and here lies a possible path to finding it. Would it not be better to concentrate on finding this entrance that is said to lie somewhere here and see what is within rather than argue fruitlessly on whether something you have no knowledge of exists or not?”

“So you might think, Darius,” said Autumn, “but there is an even deeper underlying essence.”

Darius bared his teeth but retained his composure. “Say on,” he said, a touch heavily.

“We need something to occupy our minds until we reach the place to be searched,” said Autumn, “and it may be that in the use of our minds we find a better way to search or sufficient ground to not search at all. To search without thought would seem a fruitless endeavour.”

“I think Autumn has you there,” said Logan when Darius did not reply.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” said Darius. “I had moved on to other thoughts.”

“And will you share those thoughts?” asked Autumn.

“Only that you may be the wrong person to be searching,” said Darius. “Like as not you will deny the Kastounasc even when we have found it.”

“A fair point,” said Autumn, “and one which comes back to what I asked earlier. How will we know it when we see it?”

“I wager it will make itself known to us in some way,” said Logan, “just as Fiau did.”

“Let us hope so,” said Autumn and started wading again.

The sides of the cleft came to a point and the waterfall cascaded down there to collect in a pool that more or less occupied the end of the cleft. The place where the water spilled out from the pool to form the stream was about where the cherry trees began. Between them and the waterfall was very little. Just the pool and a narrow ledge that went around it; cracked in some places and missing parts in others but what was there was wet and slippery.

“Tis a lot bigger than it looked from the other end,” said Logan, standing at the edge of the trees and gazing up at the rock face. “I see nothing that looks like an entrance. No caves or anything.”

“Nor I,” said Autumn, “and if it is up there somewhere I see no way of getting to it. That rock face has even fewer toeholds than at the other end. Mayhap Fiau could lift us but I wager she will have difficulty balancing on the ledge and it looks likely to break away.”

“Perhaps it is as Darius suggested,” said Logan, scanning the cliff carefully for anything that might suggest a hole or a doorway. “The entrance is only there when the light from the Eyes is upon it. A magical entrance.”

“Or perhaps it is behind the waterfall,” said Autumn, “or under the surface of the pool.”

“Or there is another Pink Valley further along,” said Darius, studying

his reflection in the surface of the pool.

“Well, we can easily discount the pool,” said Autumn. “I cannot swim and Darius hates water so only Logan can get to something down there and if there is an entrance under the surface it will be flooded so he cannot explore it for long.”

“How deep is it, do you suppose?” asked Logan.

“I cannot tell,” said Autumn peering into the pool. “Although the water seems clear I cannot see any bottom although there may be something up under where the waterfall lands but the water is too disturbed to see.”

Logan picked up a smallish stone and tossed it into the water. They watched as it sank out of sight.

“Quite deep, then,” he said. “I confess I have no desire to jump in and go searching. What if I find a hole and go in and can't hold my breath any longer?”

“Exactly,” said Autumn. “I fancy that would be a fool's errand. You two stay here.” She slipped off her pack and robe and deposited them on the ground.

“Where are you going?” asked Logan.

“Behind the waterfall,” said Autumn. “All that falling water may be hiding something.”

“I will come with you,” said Logan.

“No,” said Autumn. “The ledge looks weak and slippery. Best only one of us tests it.”

“But what if you fall or are caught by the waterfall?” said Logan, looking worried.

“Then I fall in the pool,” said Autumn, “and you can either jump in and rescue me or ask Fiau to pull me out. What other harm can befall

me?”

Logan screwed up his face as he tried to imagine possibilities but he couldn't so he watched as Autumn walked along the edge of the pool to where it met the cliff and put one foot down to test the ledge. She pushed down on it then cautiously eased her weight onto that foot then brought her other foot down. The width of the ledge was barely half the length of her feet.

“‘Twould seem firm enough,” she said looking over and she began to sidle along the narrow edge on the balls of her feet, keeping her back to the cliff. When she came to a largish gap in the ledge she paused for a moment then tried to reach it with one outstretched foot but was a little short of the edge so she jumped and nearly fell in when one foot slipped on the wet rock. She landed on one knee and gripped the edge of the ledge with her hand then got to her feet and gave Logan and Darius a wave to reassure them before continuing.

She started to get wet from the spray when she was a body length from the edge of the falling water and the ledge became treacherous with running water and slime. She edged closer and got soaked when an unexpected twist of the water fell on top of her and tried to wash her away. Both feet slipped and she crashed downwards, hitting the ledge with her bottom before falling into the turbulence.

“Wait,” said Darius as Logan cried out and tried to jump in. “She is getting out again.”

Sure enough, when Logan looked up from disentangling the back of his robe from Darius' claw, Autumn had managed to retain a handhold on the ledge and was pulling herself out of the water. She got a knee on the ledge then eased herself to her feet while pressing close to the cliff. She paused for a moment then peered at the waterfall before nimbly turning around and waving. She shouted something.

“What did she say?” asked Logan, watching intently.

“I did not hear,” said Darius.

“We cannot hear you!” shouted back Logan. “What did you say?”

Apparently Autumn could not hear him either as she waved again then stepped behind the waterfall.

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan worriedly.

He watched the waterfall closely for any sign of her being thrown into the pool and forced deep with all the weight of the water on top of her but saw nothing.

“Where is she?” he demanded. “Why has she not come back out?”

“Do you not trust her skills?” asked Darius, watching unconcernedly.

“Of course I do,” said Logan.

“Then trust her now,” said Darius.

“’Tis easy for you to say,” said Logan. “Ahh, there she is! Yay!”

Autumn had reappeared on the other side of the waterfall and was cautiously edging her way along the ledge. It suddenly gave way and Logan gasped in horror but Autumn fell only a short distance. Her hands were tightly grasping some small protuberance. Another twist of water landed on top of her and she clung for a few moments, sodden. The remaining part of the ledge was some distance away and out of reach. She started to swing her legs from side to side then lurched and pushed off with her hands and just managed to get a toe hold on the edge. She teetered for a moment then, just as it seemed she had regained her balance, another twist of water caught her and pushed her forward and outwards and she tumbled, gracelessly, into the water and disappeared beneath the surface.

“Voqev!” exclaimed Logan and launched himself into the pool.

He landed with a mighty splash and started to swim as fast as he could, hampered by his robe which clung wetly to him. Unaware of Logan, Autumn came back to the surface some distance from the waterfall and, with a lot of noisy movement, struggled to the side of

the pool. She grasped hold of the ledge and hung there for a few moments, catching her breath and spitting out water. Then she was suddenly grabbed from behind and pulled violently from the ledge. She tried to lash round with her arm to ward off the attack but the water slowed her movements dramatically then her head went underwater.

"I've got you!" screamed Logan but she couldn't hear him and continued to struggle against Logan's grip. As her head surfaced again she half saw a large greenish body and lashed out and it screamed "My shoulder!" and let go of her entirely.

"Logan?" thought Autumn as she started to sink again.

She started to kick with her legs and rose to the surface again. The ledge was not far away and, kicking and lunging with her arms she made for it and made contact. Grabbing the ledge she pulled herself close and looked back. Logan was trying to swim, one armed, towards her. She reached out and grabbed his robe and dragged him to the ledge. They both hung there, gasping and spitting water.

"You can let go now," said Logan when he had his breath back. "Why did you hit me?"

"I did not know it was you," said Autumn letting go of Logan's robe. "I thought I was being attacked by some creature from the pool."

"I was trying to save you," said Logan.

"I thank you," said Autumn, "but I did not need saving. How is your shoulder?"

"Sore," said Logan. He looked at the ledge then up at the cliff face. "I don't think I can get onto this ledge. It is too narrow and there is nothing to hold on to."

Autumn pushed herself up with both hands and twisted so she sat precariously on the ledge then raised herself up on her arms and curled her body underneath her to get her feet on the ledge. When she was standing she reached down and hauled Logan bodily out of the

water.

“Can you make it along the ledge?” she asked “or would you prefer to swim back?”

“I will try,” said Logan and edged his way along.

It took a while but they made it safely back to Darius.

“That was entertaining,” he said. “You are both unhurt?”

“Aye,” said Logan, cautiously moving his arm to test his shoulder. It didn't hurt much; it had been surprise more than anything when Autumn hit him where he had been wounded.

“I apologise,” said Autumn.

“No harm done,” said Logan. “The important thing is that you are safe.”

Autumn half smiled then turned thoughtful. “I had always supposed that my fear of water was irrational,” she said, turning to look at the pool. “I begin to see now that it is entirely rational. 'Tis difficult to see and hear when underwater and to discern aid from attack. 'Tis even more difficult to fight. The water slows down movement and takes away the force of the blow and there is nothing solid to stand on.”

“It can kill you as well,” said Logan.

“Well, yes,” said Autumn. “That too.”

She stripped off her malu and began to wring it out. Logan stopped manipulating his shoulder and did the same with his robe.

“And what, pray, did you find behind the waterfall?” asked Darius.

“Did you not hear me?” asked Autumn. “There is a cave of sorts behind. It seems to go back some way but I did not explore for I feared Logan would worry.”

“We saw you waving,” said Logan, “but we couldn't hear you over the waterfall. Did you see anything in the cave?”

“No,” said Autumn. “It was dark and the entrance is small. I wager it is of no consequence but perhaps we should explore it.”

“That will be difficult,” said Logan. “You, most likely, can get back there along the ledge and I could probably swim over but Darius certainly cannot.”

“True,” said Autumn. “Perhaps Fiau can aid us again?”

“I can but ask,” said Logan. “Shall we make a fire and dry ourselves first?”

“I wager if Fiau can get us back to the waterfall we will get soaked again going behind,” said Autumn. “Let us ask first and make a fire if she cannot.”

Logan nodded and called Fiau and explained the problem.

“You say the ledge is weak?” asked Fiau, studying the far side. Autumn noticed that the rings in her multi-ringed eyes seemed to spiral in on themselves as she concentrated.

“Very,” said Autumn. “It gave way in places under just my weight and threatened to in other places.”

“And you know not how deep the water?” asked Fiau.

“No,” said Logan, “but it is deep here and no doubt deeper under the waterfall itself.”

“Then best I float,” said Fiau, “rather than make a bridge.”

“Near the waterfall the water is choppy and rough,” said Autumn. “It may be difficult to float there.”

“Then a platform, rooted against the sides,” said Fiau. “That should stay steady enough for you to cross.”

“That would seem a good idea, Fiau,” said Autumn. She glanced at Logan and Darius. “Shall we do this?”

Neither of them looked overly enthusiastic but neither voiced any objection either.

“When you are ready, Fiau,” said Autumn. “Come Logan, let us get dressed again.”

“And put on your robe,” said Logan. “We do not know what is in this cave.”

Fiau merged back into the staff and began to extend out across the pool. Part way she sent out two branches to brace her against the sides and then, as she neared the turbulence where the waterfall crashed into the pool, four more as a precaution. Soon there was a narrow pathway across the pool that extended all the way to the waterfall and touched the cliff just to the right of it, where there was still some ledge.

“We should have thought of this before,” said Autumn, stepping onto the platform. “It's much more sensible than creeping around on the ledge.”

Darius padded after her, sure-footed and Logan followed them across. Midway Darius paused and looked back, his nostrils testing the air.

“Someone comes,” he said after a moment. “The same smell as those who attacked us at the stream.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, turning back. “I would like to talk with them.”

“Best not,” said Logan. “We are too exposed here. Let us hide behind the waterfall until they are gone and follow them. That way we can take them by surprise.”

“A fair point,” said Autumn. “You have no protection from arrows. Come on, then, let's be quick about it. Fiau, start removing the platform behind us.”

The platform started to shrink away from the edge of the pool as they hurried across.

“Let me go first,” shouted Autumn over the roar of the waterfall. She stepped onto the ledge and disappeared behind the curtain of water.

“You go,” shouted Logan. “I must stay to collect Fiau.”

“Grrr,” said Darius distastefully. He squeezed himself onto the ledge, his fur clinging wetly and making him look considerably smaller. He too disappeared behind the waterfall.

“I hope there is enough room for us all,” muttered Logan as he stepped onto the ledge.

Fiau snapped back to her staff shape and Logan grabbed her before she was pushed away by the turbulence. He looked across the pool just as the two men emerged from the cherry trees. Quickly he ducked behind the waterfall.

“Where ...?” he started then stopped. Neither Autumn nor Darius was there, only a small dark hole in the rock barely big enough to climb through.

“How do I get myself into these situations?” he muttered to himself.

He tried to peer through the falling water to see where the men were but couldn't.

“Oh well, Alodia protects the foolish,” he muttered and squeezed into the dark hole.

There was nothing the other side and he tumbled through as though the hole was just a hoop. Fiau landed behind him with a faint muffled thud. For some inexplicable reason the cave was filled with light and he picked himself up and stared around in astonishment.

“Vogev,” he exclaimed. “Now what?”

Chapter Twenty Six

It was a beautiful day. Mild with plenty of sunshine and a respectable scattering of fluffy white clouds. There was a wind blowing, not strong but certainly enough to make their clothes flap gently and it carried a faint odour of far off rain and a hint of something exotic; spices perhaps or the perfume of flowers. Slowly Logan moved over to stand next to Autumn and Darius who were also taking in the landscape.

And what a landscape it was. The like of which they had not seen for a long time and completely unlike the dry, harsh landscapes of Neander. They were standing amid richly green grasses that grew straight and strong to mid calf and which spread out before them in a wide vista. Scattered here and there among the grasses were vibrant flowers of red, blue, yellow and white as well as patches of ferns and heather. Several butterflies lazily made their way, dipping briefly at the flowers before moving on, their bright colours cheerful in the sunlight. Ripples from the breeze moved across the grasses like swells on an ocean and rode up and down the gently undulating land. Some way off in the distance in front of them the ground rose to form rolling hills covered in tall leafy trees and, hazy with distance, beyond those hills lay the soft outlines of small mountains. Slowly, each lost in their own contemplation, they turned, drinking in the views all around them.

“Where are we?” asked Logan, his voice a mix of wonder and puzzlement. Somewhere to his left a bird called and another, further away, replied. A few others dotted the sky.

“I fancy this must be Miesca,” said Autumn, her voice betraying a similar mix. “Or so Xanos wrote. We must have found the entrance for this is nothing like Neander. ’Tis more like Aferraron and the grasslands near my Esyup.”

Darius growled in confusion and shook his head violently.

“How is this possible?” he demanded. “How is it possible for such a place to be inside these mountains? These are my mountains and I know everything that happens here! How is it that I have no knowledge of this place?”

“I wager this place is not inside the mountains,” said Autumn. “That hole behind the waterfall must be a pathway to another place and we are there. For certain this is no cave. Mayhap we have moved in time as well for Astauand seems to be less high than when we were in the valley.”

“Voqev!” exclaimed Logan. He turned around several times then started waving his arms in the air.

“What ails you, Logan?” asked Autumn. “Have you been stung by a bee?”

“Where is the hole?” demanded Logan, waving his arms again. “Where is the waterfall and the Valley of the Pink? How do we go back?”

“It should be just behind ...,” said Autumn, turning then she paused before turning full circle. “When I arrived I was facing that way,” and she pointed towards the far off mountains, “which means the hole must be ...” and she turned around. “But it is not.” She slowly walked forward in a slight crouch, carefully looking at the air and probing with her hands. “I do not hear the waterfall either although I fancy I hear running water some way distant.”

Darius started to pad softly around in ever widening circles, the grass brushing the underside of his belly. He kept sniffing the air and cocking his head to listen.

“In fact,” said Autumn, “I do not recall hearing the waterfall after I went through the hole.”

“This is not good,” said Logan worriedly. He looked all around again. “How are we going to get back?”

“I confess at this moment I do not know,” said Autumn, continuing to probe the air.

“That was not the answer I wanted to hear,” said Logan. He spun around a couple of times with his staff at full stretch as though hoping to hit the rocky hole.

“Have a care,” growled Darius as the end of the staff came perilously close to his head.

“Sorry,” said Logan. He put the end of the staff back on the ground and leaned on it dejectedly, staring at Darius. Then he frowned. “Why are you not wet?”

Autumn spun around to look at Darius who twisted to look at his own flanks. “You are completely dry,” she said. “How is that possible?”

“I am too,” said Logan, looking down at his robe. “I was soaking wet from the waterfall but now I am as dry as a bone. You are also,” he added, looking over at her.

“How strange,” said Autumn, looking down at herself. She opened her robe and felt her malu underneath. That too was dry.

“And your hair,” said Logan. “After falling in the pool it was all messed up and tangled but now looks as though you have just washed and combed it.”

Autumn looked at him with a frown then reached over her shoulder and pulled her long pony tail to the front. She inspected it then held it to her nose. “It smells of wildflowers,” she said in surprise then ran her fingers through it. There was not a single hair knotted. She felt behind her head and discovered her leather hair band was still there and pulled it off. It looked as new and shiny as the day Dhru had given it to her.

“This is surpassingly strange,” she muttered. “Darius looks freshly groomed as well, as do you, Logan.” She ran her eyes over his robe then frowned.

“What?” asked Logan as she stepped behind him.

“There was a faint bloodstain from your injury,” she said. “And another behind but both are gone. So are the tears in your robe where the arrow went through.” She pulled at the material with her fingers. “And it is not repaired. 'Tis as though your robe was never cut.”

Logan craned his neck to look at his shoulder and fingered the cloth as well. "Oh yes," he said then went still for a moment before slowly slipping the robe off his shoulder.

"There is no mark," said Autumn, probing his upper arm from behind as Logan ran his hand over the front of his shoulder. "Not even a scar. 'Tis as though you were never shot."

"Aye," said Logan, flexing his arm. "And it hurts not one bit. This is most excellent news."

"I do not know how this has happened," said Autumn, lifting his robe back over his shoulder and patting it, "but I am pleased." She walked back in front of Logan and looked critically at him.

"What now?" asked Logan.

"I was wondering if we had gone back in time to before you were shot," she said, "but you appear no younger than you were this morning."

"You think I have aged greatly since then?" asked Logan somewhat taken aback.

"No," said Autumn, "but for certain you are not as a child so if we have gone back in time it is only by a small amount."

"How else can we tell?" asked Logan.

"I know not," said Autumn. "We have no real way of measuring time except through our memories and I can remember the Valley of the Pink and the waterfall and going through the hole."

"As do I," said Logan thoughtfully. Then he grabbed Autumn's pack and untied it. "Aha!" he said triumphantly and pulled out a somewhat desiccated piece of fruit. "I was going to eat this for breakfast but did not so that means we have not gone back in time or it wouldn't still be here."

"Likely not," said Autumn. "So how has your shoulder been healed as

though it never happened?”

“My guess is magic,” said Logan. “How about your leg?”²¹

Autumn pulled up her robe and lifted her leg to inspect her calf. There was no sign that she had ever been injured there for the indentation and scarring was completely gone. She stood on one leg with the other leg in her hand and looked at Logan in astonishment. Then she dropped her leg and peered inside the front of her malu to look at her belly.

“I still have those marks,” she said. “The semi-circle of stars from the Salodkaja seeds. This grows curiouser and curiouser. Some injuries are gone yet others remain. Darius, do you have any injuries?”

“No,” said Darius. “This is a new body. Nothing has happened to it yet.”

“Of course,” said Autumn.

She turned to look around at the landscape then looked back at Darius critically. “What do you think, Logan? Does Darius seem a little smaller than he was this morning?”

“He looks much the same to me,” said Logan. “Why?”

“Oh, 'twas just a thought,” said Autumn. She rearranged her robe then retied the cord around it, all the while looking at Darius. “Show me your paw,” she said suddenly.

Darius lifted a front paw obligingly and Autumn held it in her hand.

“Fascinating,” she said, staring at it.

21 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Second Tale*. Autumn was stabbed in the calf with a poisoned thorn by Ta'umboq, an augetreinn from the Land of Cysciec, in an attempt to kill her. The thorn worked its way up towards her heart and Autumn was saved by the intercession of Khimera and Awendene, spirits from Havildar, who, in the process, implanted some Salodkaja seeds in her belly as protection. As a by-product those seeds imbued Autumn with some of the strength and suppleness of trees.

“What is?” asked Logan coming over to look at Darius’ paw. Darius’ head also bent over it then its four claws suddenly flashed out, razor sharp and looking as deadly as ever.

“You had five before,” said Autumn. “I wager you have returned to your old body.”

“Reaoughhhhh!” roared Darius, snatching his foot away. “Who dares to meddle with a body of Ept?” He glared around him as if expecting the interloper to appear. Nothing did. His face contorted into a snarl and he inspected his paw again then the others. His tail jerked back and forth in anger.

“There is much here that confuses me,” said Autumn slowly. She looked at her staff then carefully put its end on the ground and folded both her hands on top of it. “One thing seems certain however. There are strong forces at play here, be they magic or otherwise. ’Tis one thing to heal the wound of mortals such as you and I, Logan, but quite another to take the body off a deity and replace it with another.”

“And you have to wonder how whatever is doing this knew of the old body,” said Logan, “unless ...”

“Unless what?” asked Autumn.

“Unless Darius is not a deity here,” said Logan, “wherever here is.”

“Now that is an excellent point,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “And may have a bearing on whether we can leave. Darius, can you still cross over to the Land of the Undead?”

“Surely we do not want to go there?” said Logan. “It is not a nice place, if you remember.”

“I remember,” said Autumn, “but if Darius can take us there he can take us back to our world from there. Darius?”

Darius walked forward one step then paused and shook his head angrily and walked another step.

“Grrrr,” he muttered then tried again. “No,” he said looking disgusted. “’Twould seem I cannot.”

“Oh joy,” said Logan heavily, his hopes dashed as quickly as they had arisen. “So we are trapped here?”

“It would appear so,” said Autumn. She rested her chin on her hands on top of her staff and gazed across the grasslands. “No immediate strategy comes to mind,” she said after a few moments. “Do either of you have any thoughts on what to do now?”

“All I can think of is to lie down and wait to see what happens,” said Logan. “Not overly helpful I confess but it is all I can think of.”

“Darius?” asked Autumn.

“Grrr,” said Darius and stepped forward again. He remained in this world and angrily bit the head off a pale yellow flower and spat it out.

“Mayhap if we try to find the Kastounasc,” said Logan diffidently. “I cannot imagine how but perhaps if we do it will help.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “you have a point. The only reason we are here is because of our search for it.”

“But therein lies another thought,” said Logan. “After finding the Eyes and the Valley of the Pink we seem to have found the entrance to Miesca and Miesca itself. Most likely there is a dragon here. I know you do not believe in them, Autumn, but now we are here you have to wonder.”

“I still do not believe there are dragons in our world,” said Autumn, “but it seems we are not in our world any longer so who knows what lives here. Which way shall we go? ’Twould seem pointless to remain here.”

“Oh Sploop!” said Logan suddenly. “Fiau, are you there?”

“How may I aid you?” asked Fiau appearing.

“Oh blessed Aloidia, you are well,” said Logan in relief.

“Why would I not be?” asked Fiau, her green eyes remaining as expressionless as usual.

“Do you know where we are?” asked Logan.

“Yes,” said Fiau. “We are a long way from Havildar.”

“Indeed,” said Logan. “We are a very long way from where you grew but do you know how to get back to Havildar?”

“No,” said Fiau. “I cannot sense anything of Havildar here.”

“Ah, well,” said Logan. “No matter. Thank you.”

Fiau looked at him for a long moment then merged back into his staff.

“At least Fiau is unaffected here,” said Logan. He took the water bottle from his shoulder and pulled out the cork and peered inside. “And this is still full of water,” he reported. He took a long drink and peered inside again. “This seems unaffected too. Mayhap the magic on your robe works here as well, Autumn.”

“Let us hope it is never put to the test,” said Autumn, “but I am encouraged by this. It would seem that whatever forces operate here they are not to our detriment. If anything we are better off than before for our injuries are gone.”

“Not for Darius,” said Logan.

“True,” said Autumn, “although I wager the injury from the arrow to his heart has gone.”

She frowned and sniffed. “I smell wood smoke. Is this my imagination?”

“No, I smell it too,” said Logan and Darius' head came up as his nostrils quivered.

Autumn turned her head, sniffing the air and turned all the way around. "It seems to be coming from ... What? Where did that come from? Surely that was not there before?"

Logan and Darius turned to look where she was pointing. Some way off but clearly visible was a large dwelling with smoke coming from behind it. It was surrounded by cultivated fields and lay on the edge of a small wood.

"Where did that come from?" asked Logan. "There was no dwelling there just now."

"It looks just like ...," started Autumn then stopped and shook her head. "No, I must be mistaken."

"Looks like what?" asked Logan.

"My Esyup," said Autumn with a rueful smile, "but it cannot be and now I look more closely there are differences. There is only the one building but my Esyup had others behind it, for one."

"I wager the strangeness of what we are going through is playing tricks," said Logan. "Our minds are searching for something familiar to hold on to especially as you say this grassland is like that around your Esyup. Since it is there, what say you we head that way? There may be people there who can answer our questions."

"Indeed," said Autumn, "although I am puzzled as to why none of us saw it before."

"There was too much to take in, I expect," said Logan.

As they set off in the direction of the dwelling, some way off and out of sight a man appeared out of thin air and tumbled the short distance to the ground. As he got up and dusted himself down, another appeared. Each carried a bow and a full quiver of arrows. They seemed confused and uncertain, but their bowstrings were nicely dry.

Chapter Twenty Seven

“Is my mind deceiving me?” said Logan, pausing to look around as they neared the building, “or is the grass changing colour?”

Autumn stopped abruptly. She had been focused on the building and the lie of the land and was wondering at their pronounced similarity to her Esyup. She looked around with a faint air of puzzlement.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” said Logan, “but it seems to me that there is a blueishness to the grass that wasn’t there before.”

“I venture it is the changing light,” said Autumn after looking at the grass around her feet. “The day is moving on and Astauand is getting lower.” She gestured to Astauand in the sky then said “Oh” in a surprised tone. “How strange.”

Logan looked up to where he expected Astauand to be and found it wasn’t there. It was some way further over.

“I’m confused,” he said, shaking his head. “Is Astauand going back the right way again?”

“That would make sense,” said Autumn, “if ...” and she fell silent.

“If?” asked Logan.

Autumn pursed her lips. “That building ahead bears more than a passing resemblance to my Esyup and so do the fields and the shape of the land. See the savannah stretching off to the North and the wood not far to the East? I can also see the glimmer of a lake in the distance. It is where the lake behind the Esyup lies. It is from that lake that we got our water and the occasional fish. These fields are also laid out in much the same way and would seem to have the same crops. I do not know how it is possible but I have a suspicion that we are back in Aferraron.”

“Aferraron?” exclaimed Logan. “But how can that be?”

"I know not," said Autumn, "but if we are then it would make sense for Astauand to be going in the right direction again."

"And you think this is your Esyup?" asked Logan, looking at the building with increased interest.

Autumn shrugged. "Perhaps," she said. "If it is then there should be another building behind it which we should be able to see from here but there is not. 'Tis unlikely it has been removed since it was built when I was a child and was still solid when last I was there. There are other buildings as well but they are small and hidden by the main building from here. If they are there. They may not be for this may be somewhere that merely resembles the Esyup."

"Do you suppose whatever has brought us here has moved us back through time as well?" asked Logan. "After all, our injuries have vanished."

"Perhaps," said Autumn, "although if we are back before the new outhouse was built then by rights I should be a child again and you a babe and we are clearly not but that is by the by. What suggests this is not my Esyup is the absence of people. At this time of day there should be people tending the fields but there is no one around nor is there any smoke coming from the cooking area. 'Tis not long before the evening meal."

"Perhaps everyone is away at the moment," said Logan.

"Perhaps," said Autumn, "but it is unlikely. No matter. We shall be there soon and no doubt much will become apparent."

She started walking again and Logan fell in beside her. Darius was some way off to the side, following his own path and had taken no notice of their discussion.

"Do you suppose whoever is there will invite us to stay for a meal?" asked Logan hopefully. "We have only that small piece of fruit and I have seen nothing that would serve to feed us. The crops up yonder do not look ripe enough yet."

“We can but travel hopefully,” said Autumn, “and I have no doubt Darius will find something he will be willing to share.”

“Well, it would seem that whoever is there is getting ready for a meal,” said Logan. “Look, there is now smoke coming from behind the building.”

Autumn paused and regarded the column of smoke thoughtfully.

“It does not look like the smoke of a fire fresh lit,” she said, a puzzled look on her face. “Yet why did we not see smoke before?”

“And there are some people in that field over yonder,” said Logan, pointing over to the left.

“Clearly,” said Autumn, “and yet there were none there just now. Where did they come from?”

“Mayhap they were there all along and we simply did not notice them,” said Logan with a faint tone of hopefulness in his voice.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn in a tone of voice that disagreed with her statement.

“No, I don't think so either,” said Logan flatly. He turned and looked back the way they had come, their trail through the grass quite distinct. “There is something very strange going on here. I would suggest we turn back but we have nowhere to turn back to.”

“That is right,” said Autumn. She glanced back as well then returned her gaze to the building ahead. “We have no alternative but to continue and see what transpires.”

She walked on, her eyes and ears exploring the landscape ahead and Logan, after a short pause, caught up and walked beside her, his grip on his staff firm.

“Sploop,” he exclaimed suddenly after they had walked some distance. “Where did that come from?”

“What?” said Autumn, instantly dropping into a fighting crouch and scanning behind her, her staff raised and ready.

“There is another building behind that building,” said Logan, pointing. “We might have missed seeing some people in the fields but for certain we did not miss seeing that building. It is as clear as day.”

Autumn slowly came out of her crouch and scanned the landscape again before looking back at the buildings. She hissed in surprise.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” she said. “That building is of the same shape as the Elders’ dwelling at the Esyup and it is in the same place. I helped to build it.” She marched forward with an air of determination. “Come, there is much here that needs explaining. Buildings do not come and go in an instant.”

“Actually, they can do,” said Logan, catching up with her again. “You remember Mother Midcarn’s hut?”²²

“Do you think Mother Midcarn is here?” asked Autumn.

“I do hope so,” said Logan, “but I fear not.”

“Tis unlikely to be helpful if she is,” said Autumn, “as she is fond of not giving explanations but I confess the familiar is oftentimes more desirable than the unfamiliar. But why would she create a place that looks like my Esyup?”

“Perhaps she is trying to tell us that it is time you returned there,” said Logan.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but if so why not tell us directly? Besides, you are forgetting that we are likely in that place she said she could not see us.”

“But not definitely,” said Logan. “She may yet be able to see us and is creating these buildings to aid us in some way.”

²² See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*. When they first encountered Mother Midcarn, Autumn and Logan were surprised to discover her hut was bigger inside than out and that she could add or remove rooms at will.

"I venture another explanation is the more likely," said Autumn. "You are very quiet, Darius. Have you no thoughts on the matter?"

"Groww," said Darius, some way distant. He looked over then back at the buildings and declined to speak further.

"What shall we do when we get there?" asked Logan.

"Ring the gong," said Autumn, "if they have one, else knock on the door. Any other action would be disrespectful."

"Ask a stupid question," muttered Logan to himself, then more loudly "and if the door opens?"

"Talk to whoever opens it," said Autumn.

* * *

"Don't tell me," said Logan. "This is the door of your Esyup, is it not?"

"Tis a simple door," said Autumn, regarding it. "Made from rough hewn slats and tied to the upright with strips of animal hide. 'Tis a fairly common style. I could not say for certain that it is the door to my Esyup but it has a familiar look about it. The gong is also familiar and in the right place but where else would you put a door gong?"

"On the side of the door would seem sensible," said Logan, "rather than on a post an arm's length from the doorway. Where was the gong at your Esyup?"

"On a post away from the door," said Autumn. "A visitor once banged the gong too vigorously and the door post broke."

She reached out and touched the wooden gong with her forefinger. It swayed gently. She stepped back and surveyed the front of the building then stepped forward and grasped the stick of the gong firmly and struck the gong in the centre. It reverberated and Logan stepped backwards nervously. Autumn waited a few moments for the sound to die away then struck the gong a second time, then a third before dropping the stick. She looked at the door expectantly and

Logan edged a little closer to her. Darius remained a little way further back and tried to look nonchalant but there was a definite air of tension in the way his tail twitched.

“I hear no footsteps,” whispered Logan.

Autumn waited a few heartbeats longer then picked up the stick again and struck the gong. The rough hewn door jerked then swung open.

“Voqev!” exclaimed Logan as Autumn's grip on her staff tightened momentarily then she gasped.

A small man stood in the doorway. He was a little shorter than Autumn and of slighter build. His oval face was wrinkled with age and his hair was close cropped although his moustaches hung in two thin braids either side of his mouth. He wore a simple tunic of undyed homespun cloth.

“Greetings,” he said then stood patiently.

“Noxu?” said Autumn stepping forward. Her voice was filled with uncertainty. “Noxu? Is it you?”

“I am Noxu,” said Noxu. He inclined his head then looked at Logan. “Who are you?” he asked.

“Tis me, Autumn,” said Autumn, half reaching out to touch Noxu then dropping her hand. “Autumn Savannah. Do you not remember me?”

“I remember you,” said Noxu. “Why are you here?”

“I know not,” said Autumn, “and how we come to be here is a long tale, but tell me. Is this the Esyup? Are we back in Aferraron?”

“This place is as you see,” said Noxu, spreading his arms to encompass the area. “Come, for we have much to talk of.”

He stepped backwards and disappeared into the gloom inside. Autumn looked after him with confusion in her eyes.

“Do you know him?” asked Logan.

“Tis Noxu,” said Autumn. She looked around then back though the doorway.

“Noxu? That Noxu?” asked Logan. “You mean your Noxu?”

“Yes,” said Autumn heavily. “My mentor at the Esyup. The man who raised me.”

Logan gave a low whistle.

“Well now,” he said, rocking back on his heels and at something of a loss for what to say. “What is he doing here? Do you think we are really back in Aferraron? He did not seem overly pleased to see you again.”

“I know,” said Autumn. “I confess I expected ... if we ever met again he would be ...” then she fell silent.

“So what do we do now?” asked Logan, sensing Autumn's hurt. “Shall we go inside?”

“We have been invited,” said Autumn, her voice becoming formal and a little distant. “Twould be rude to ignore it. Come.”

She stepped forward and walked through the doorway and looked around. Noxu was standing beside another doorway on the other side of the building.

“What is through there?” asked Logan following her in.

“The eating place,” said Autumn as the door swung shut behind them.

They both looked around to see who had shut the door but there was no one there.

“Who ...,” started Logan then stopped in alarm as the door quietly banged against the doorpost then shivered before swinging open again. Darius padded in, his nose cautiously sniffing the air.

“I do not like this place,” he growled. “It smells of ... nothing.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. She also sniffed the air. “It should smell of ...”

“Come,” said Noxu and he raised a hand towards the doorway beside him.

Autumn raised an eyebrow then glanced at Logan and Darius before walking over. Noxu followed them through the doorway into a courtyard with several simple benches and tables. To one side was a fire with a cauldron suspended over it. Steam came from the cauldron but there was no one else in the courtyard.

“Who are you?” asked Noxu, looking at Logan.

“I am Logan,” said Logan. “Friend and companion of Autumn.”

Noxu nodded then looked at Darius. “And you?”

“He is Darius,” said Autumn. “A friend and companion also.”

Noxu nodded again. “Why are you here?” he asked.

“Do you not remember me, Noxu?” asked Autumn. “You found me on the savannah and raised me. Are you not pleased to see me again?”

Noxu just gazed at her. There was not even a flicker of recognition.

“Apparently not,” said Autumn. She glanced around then went over to one of the benches and sat down. “This is where I sat for meals. Next to Didiza. Is she still here?”

She laid her staff firmly on the top of the table and kept one hand on it.

“All who should be here are here,” said Noxu. “Why are you here?”

Logan sidled over to the bench and sat beside Autumn.

“Where is 'here'?” asked Autumn.

“You know this place,” said Noxu.”Why are you here?”

“I know this is not my place,” said Autumn. “But I wonder if it ever was my place. Why are you here?”

Noxu shrugged but didn't respond.

“What is going on?” whispered Logan.

Autumn ignored him.

“Where is everyone else?” asked Autumn. “They should be coming in from the fields for the evening meal. Where are the other Elders?”

Noxu simply gazed at her expressionlessly.

“And what of our, your hospitality?” asked Autumn. “In my time the Esys always offered refreshments to travellers. Why do you stay silent and stray from the customs?”

Darius padded over to the cauldron and sniffed the air around it then backed away and circled behind Noxu who stood silently, watching Autumn.

“So,” said Autumn. “You are not forthcoming. Mayhap if I tell you something of our tale it will change your mind?”

“Why are you here?” asked Noxu.

Autumn sighed.

“I do not know why we are here,” she said. “As I said I do not know where 'here' is. However, we were exploring a valley in the Skizze Mountains and came upon a waterfall. Behind the waterfall was a cave. We went inside the cave and found ourselves in this land”

“Then go back from where you came,” said Noxu. “You are not welcome here.”

“We cannot,” said Autumn. “When we arrived in this land the cave

disappeared. Do you know where it is?”

“Why are you here?” asked Noxu.

“He seems a little obsessed with that,” muttered Logan.

“Is there another way back?” asked Autumn. “We would gladly leave if you or someone else would show us the way.”

“There is no way back to your land,” said Noxu. “And there is no way into this land from your land. Why are you here?”

Logan groaned. “I knew it,” he muttered.

“The Noxu I knew would never say something like that,” said Autumn conversationally. “You clearly admit we are not from this land and we are clearly here so there must be a way from our land to your land else we would not be here and not be having this ... exchange. Noxu would not be that foolish for he was skilled in logic and deduction. Who are you and why do you pretend to be Noxu?”

Noxu's eyes narrowed.

“I want to know why you are here,” he said. “If you do not tell me then things will get unpleasant for you.”

“Oh Sploop,” muttered Logan, shaking his head. “I just knew there would be trouble.”

“I cannot tell you,” said Autumn. She stood up and pointedly lifted her staff. “And your threats are not going to aid you in that respect. It is not possible for me to tell you what I do not know.”

Logan also stood up and tried to back away and tripped over the end of the bench. His staff clattered to the ground but neither Autumn nor Noxu spared him a glance.

“I do not want to be involved in any unpleasantness,” said Autumn, “and I do not believe that you do either.” She carefully laid her staff on the bench and stepped away from it and sat down in the centre of

the courtyard. “I know not where we are but we come in peace. It is clear that our presence is not welcome so please sit with me and let us calmly talk about this situation. We would welcome whatever aid you can give us on how we may be gone from this place and return to our own lands.”

Logan was leaning on the bench in the process of getting to his feet when it dissolved into nothingness and he fell over again so he didn't see the rest of the courtyard disappear nor Noxu turn into a dirty grey-white serpent as he lunged at Autumn but he did hear the serpent's snarling hiss of rage.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Autumn was fast but the serpent was faster and its fangs stabbed into the fold of her robe just below her neck as she twisted violently out of the way. She rolled with her twist and the forward thrust of the serpent and managed to get one hand around its body, high up and somewhere near its head. The serpent locked its cold black eyes on hers as it tried to rip the cloth while its long thick body lashed out, trying to grab her from behind. Their momentum rolled them further and, just as Autumn managed to get a grip with her other hand the serpent's fangs came free from her robe and the tip of its tail wrapped itself around her neck. She squeezed tightly with both hands and the serpent's beady eyes bulged but its grip around her neck grew tighter and the tip of the tail began to work its way down to encircle her chest. Struggling to breathe, Autumn fought to get her knee under the squirming, thickly muscled bulk of the serpent's mid section. Then the serpent spat in her face and she momentarily lost her grip with her hands. The serpent's head broke free and it managed to wrap two more coils around her body, trapping one arm and forcing her raised knee into her throat. Sensing victory the serpent began to squeeze and Autumn felt her consciousness begin to fade as the fangs stabbed towards her eyes.

Then suddenly the crushing grip around her chest and neck relaxed and a hot, sticky wetness covered her face and she collapsed on the ground gasping for breath and coughing. She stayed there for three heartbeats then tried to lash out and leap to her feet but managed only to roll over.

"Stay down," came Logan's urgent voice and she felt something press down on her shoulder. Weakly she lashed out with a hand and made contact.

"Owww!" cried Logan. "Don't hit me!"

"Logan?" gasped Autumn.

"The serpent is dead," said Logan, his blurred face coming into view. "Stay on the ground until you get your senses back. I think you lost consciousness for a few moments. Are you hurt?"

“What serpent?” asked Autumn, lying back and shaking her head to clear it.

“Are you hurt?” asked Logan. His face was still blurred around the edges but his features were definitely recognisable.

“No,” said Autumn. She paused for a moment trying to think then added “I think I was stunned and my mind is thick and woolly. 'Tis like a sodden blanket inside my head.”

She sat up and grimaced and wrapped her arms around her chest gingerly.

“I am in error,” she said and tried to take a deep breath and grimaced again. “My chest hurts.”

“Are your ribs broken?” asked Logan. His face was now clear and unblurred and was deeply worried.

“A moment,” said Autumn. She lay back down again and started to gently probe her chest with her fingers, testing each rib for any sign of untoward movement. Finding none her fingers moved up to test her neck then further to her face.

“What is this?” she asked sharply, looking at the pale yellow stuff on her fingers and palms.

‘Tis from the serpent,” said Logan. “Are you hurt? Tell me!”

“I feel crushed,” said Autumn, sitting up and wiping her hands over her face, “but nothing is broken. What happened? What is this about a serpent? Where is Noxu?” She stared at the congealing yellow goo on her hands. “Ugh, this stuff is all down my robe as well.”

“I am not sure what happened,” said Logan, “but you are sure you are unhurt? You are not hiding any injury?”

“Why would I hide injury?” asked Autumn, wiping her hands on the grass around her.

“Because you always do,” said Logan, sitting back on his heels. “For some reason you cannot admit weakness.”

Autumn paused in her hand wiping to look at him. “You may be right,” she conceded, “and that is in itself a weakness but beyond some muscle pain I am uninjured. No ribs are broken and clearly my windpipe is intact. Ahh, is that this serpent you speak of?”

She pointed to a mound of what looked like a twisted entangled dirty grey-white tree trunk.

“Yes,” said Logan. “Darius killed it.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn looking around. Unconsciously she rubbed her chest. “And where is Darius?”

“Behind you,” said Darius. His voice carried an element of distaste.

Autumn twisted around to see Darius’ head, neck and front paws covered in the same pale yellow stuff as her hands and face.

“That worm tastes foul,” he said and continued trying to clean himself.

“I thank you for killing the worm,” said Autumn. “It had bested me.”

Darius twitched some whiskers in acknowledgement and continued to groom himself.

Autumn watched him for a few moments then looked around.

“Where is Noxu?” she asked. “Where is the Esyup?”

“I do not know,” said Logan. “When you got up from the bench I got up as well but I fell over. I was getting up again and leant on the bench when suddenly it disappeared and I fell over again. The next thing I knew you were fighting that serpent and it was wrapped around you and seemed to be crushing the life out of you then Darius bit its head off. That yellow crud is its blood or guts or something. Noxu has disappeared somewhere.”

“That worm is Noxu,” said Darius, pausing in his grooming. “He turned into the worm and attacked you.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn. “And the building disappeared at the same time?”

“Yes,” said Darius.

Autumn nodded thoughtfully then inspected her hands. They were still smeared with yellow stuff which was now drying and becoming crusty.

“Do we still have the water bottle?” she asked then put her hands to her throat.

“Umm, ...” said Logan, looking around. “Ahh, yes.”

He jumped up and went over to where Autumn's pack lay in the grass not far away. He brought the water bottle back and poured some water over Autumn's outstretched hands.

“Tis all over your face and chest,” he said as she scrubbed her hands. “And in your hair.”

Autumn sighed then took off her robe and proceeded to wash her face and neck as best she could. Logan offered Darius some water but merely got a scornful look in reply so he busied himself scrubbing Autumn's robe with a handful of grass.

“Look at this,” he said, holding up the neck of her robe. He waggled two fingers through the tears. “I wager it was aiming for your throat.”

“Most likely,” said Autumn then she frowned. “I remember Noxu, or what was passing for Noxu, threatened some unpleasantness and I sat in the middle of the eating area and said neither of us wanted any unpleasantness then the next moment I was simply reacting to something that attacked me but it was too fast to follow what was happening. I wager Noxu turning into the serpent and attacking me was the unpleasantness but it makes little sense. He seemed most anxious to know why we were here and killing me would not answer that question.”

“Mayhap he was no longer interested and simply wanted you gone,” said Logan, resuming scrubbing Autumn’s robe. “No doubt he would have got rid of Darius and me as well.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “and for certain it was not Noxu. How clean is my face?”

“You are still yellow around the sides,” said Logan. “Here, let me,” and he started to wipe around Autumn’s face with a handful of wet grass while she sat there placidly and let him.

“There,” he said a short while later. “That’s about the best we can do until we find a river or stream.”

“Thank you,” said Autumn. She got up and inspected her robe and picked off a few crusty bits that still remained then put on the robe. “Again my thanks,” she added then walked over to inspect the remains of the serpent. Logan tossed away the handful of grass and joined her.

“Tis a big bastard,” he said, giving it a kick. A lump of yellow oozed out from where its head had once been.

“I wonder what manner of creature it is,” said Autumn. “Is this its natural form and how was it able to take on the appearance of Noxu? Indeed, why Noxu in particular?”

“And why your Esyup?” added Logan. “How did it even know what your Esyup looked like? You don’t suppose we actually are in Aferraron, do you, and that it knew your Esyup and Noxu?”

“If that were so then it would also have to know me and my relationship with Noxu,” said Autumn. “It could have taken the form of any from the Esyup so clearly it knew Noxu has some significance to me. Tis a puzzle, but for certain we are not still in Neander.”

“How do you know?” asked Logan, “ahh, yes, I follow you. If we were in Neander you think it would have paid you no attention?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. She abandoned the serpent and looked around. “Why did the creature not take a form of significance to you

or Darius? There are too many questions and, as yet, not a single answer. It looks like rain is coming. There are some trees over yonder. What say you we seek shelter under them for the night and see what the new day brings?"

"Hopefully there will be something we can eat over there as well," said Logan. "The fields and their crops disappeared when the Esys did and Darius says this snake is foul and hungry though I am I am still far away from being hungry enough to try to eat it."

* * *

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Logan and he groaned, or it could have been his stomach that groaned for his belly was empty and had been for some considerable time. He clenched his eyes and groaned again but try as he might sleep would not come. It had rained much of the night and, despite the cover of the trees, the ground was squelchy. He was cold, decidedly damp and very hungry. That said, there was something wrong with the sun. Though he rarely saw the first light, even through clenched eyes he could sense something was wrong. He opened them.

"Oh Voqev," he muttered and clenched his eyes again and put his arms over his head. How could Astauand be green?

"It can't be something I have eaten," he thought, "since I have not eaten anything and it can't be hunger as I've been hungry before and Astauand has always been yellow. I must be asleep and dreaming. Yes, that's it. I am asleep." He smiled to himself.

"I have never had a dream where I am dreaming before," he thought. "And if this is a dream why am I dreaming I am hungry and wet? Wouldn't a dream about being warm and full be better? And why am I thinking sensible thoughts while dreaming? Aren't dreams always strange and inexplicable things?"

He let his arms flop down on the ground and opened his eyes again. Astauand was still green.

"Oh joy," he thought. "And the sky is light purple. What kind of dream

is this?”

He rubbed his eyes and Astauand and the sky stayed the same disconcerting colours. He groaned again. The leaves of the tree above him were a rather bleak shade of blue and the branch they were on was a dark streaky yellow. So was the trunk of the tree.

“I am definitely dreaming,” he thought. “I wonder what colour Autumn is?”

He sat up and looked around. Off to his right, on the edge of the copse, surrounded by blue stalks of grass he could see the familiar blue-black of Autumn's robe with its silver ribbon around the hem. She was sitting cross-legged as she usually did in the early mornings contemplating whatever thoughts came into her mind. The hood of her robe was down and he could see her blue-black ponytail nicely contrasted against the purple sky and bright blue grass.

“Sploop,” he muttered and wondered if he should, in his dream, go over and ask if Autumn could see the same colours. He decided not to. He had never interrupted her morning meditations and, to tell the truth, he was a little afraid of how she would react.

A guttural snorting snore dragged his eyes upwards and to the left and he saw Darius' familiar black fur with silver tipped ears sprawled over a low hanging branch. A familiar sight except for the unfamiliar colour of the branch.

“I wager he is hungry too,” thought Logan as his stomach growled again. “He went hunting and couldn't find anything. What kind of place is this where there is nothing to eat at all?”

Logan screwed up his face, shook his head a few times then slapped his cheeks then opened his eyes again. Everything was still the strange colours, except Autumn and Darius. They were their usual colours. He looked down at himself and he, too, was his usual colour.

“Autumn always says I have a choice,” he muttered. He looked around then said decisively “I choose to accept this.”

He contemplated this thought for a moment then repeated it and felt happier. He looked over at Autumn again then at Darius but neither showed any sign of being aware of his early morning profundity so he reached for the water bottle and took a long drink. It did nothing to relieve his hunger but at least he wasn't thirsty anymore. He put the water bottle back on the ground beside the small pile of leaves and twigs they had collected before the rain began to make a fire. Despite his and Autumn's every effort the leaves had refused to ignite. Not even Fiau had been able to get them burning.

"Perhaps it is their colour," he thought, "although it would be interesting to see what colour flames come from blue leaves. If green leaves produce yellow flames then maybe blue leaves will make green flames, like Astauand. If it is Astauand."

He got up and wandered over to a tree to relieve himself then stood gazing out across the blue grass. When he'd been looking for something edible in the darkness he'd come across a steep slope but hadn't explored it because it was dark and he couldn't see what was at the bottom. Now, in the light, if you could call the green light light, he could see the slope was part of a hollowed out patch and the ground, or at least the grass, came back up a little way beyond.

"You never know," he thought, scratching his belly, "there might be something to eat down there. Maybe a different sort of plant with roots or maybe ..." and he got a little excited by the thought, "... there's a pond at the bottom with a fish or two in it."

He looked over at Autumn again, wondering if he should interrupt her to tell her where he was going but decided not to.

"It's not far and it will only take a little time to explore. It would be good if she came out of it to find some food waiting for her."

Cheered by the thought he sauntered over to the edge of the depression. At some time in the past the ground had sunk and exposed the earth, if that murky yellow stuff could be called earth, in great streaks. It had to have been fairly recently as none of the blue grass had started to grow in the bare patches.

“It's quite deep,” he thought, “two, mayhap even three body lengths, and if I am not very much mistaken those things down there look like melons.”

He studied the melons and they seemed, at least from this distance, to have the usual mottled grey-green skin of a ripe melon so he walked along the edge of the depression to look at them from the side. They still looked like melons. Four of them, attached to their stalks at the bottom of the depression.

“Melon for breakfast would be nice,” he thought and his belly rumbled its agreement.

He looked back at the copse to see if Autumn was still meditating but he couldn't see her as she was on the other side of the copse.

“Well, only one way to find out,” he said and put one foot over the edge onto a fairly solid looking lump of earth. It shifted a little under his weight but seemed reasonably secure. He bent down and grabbed a handful of grass then extended his other leg. The next solidish looking lump was a bit of a stretch but he kept a grip on the grass and touched it with his toes before letting go. When his heel went down the lump shifted in a squelchy, muddy way but, again, not too far.

“It could be a little awkward getting back up,” he thought, “especially with my hands full of melons.”

He tried going back up to the first foothold and it seemed to work so he put his foot back down on the second and cautiously lowered his first foot to join it. It seemed solid enough and he glanced at the melons to see if they still looked like melons. They did. Emboldened he took another step down the steep slope. So far so good. He glanced back and already, after only three steps, his shoulder was level with the top of the depression. He looked down and selected his next foothold. It wasn't as solid as its companions and gave way. With a startled cry Logan lurched sideways and grabbed at the exposed soil but his fingers found only soft mud and slowly and inexorably he started to slide down the muddy slope.

“Oh well, it's not far,” he thought.

Except he was wrong. He didn't stop at the bottom, he just sank into soft mud that went over his head and he began to choke and claw frantically, trying to get back up but the mud wasn't forgiving.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Panicking, desperately trying to suck in air through the glutinous mud in total darkness, Logan kicked out with his feet while frantically clawing handfuls of mud. He could feel his heart pounding and a burning in his chest as his lungs screamed for air. His arms faltered, their strength giving out, and with one final despairing lunge he kicked hard with his feet again. There was no resistance, not even mud. Dimly he was aware of this and tried again. It seemed as though his legs were entirely free of the mud.

“Wha’?” he thought but his brain, deprived of air, could formulate nothing more coherent. Then he gave up struggling and simply slid down through the mud. He could feel the mud slide over his hips then his chest then, with a sucking belching sound, the mud released its hold on his head and he fell a short distance onto a cold wet bed of mud that did not give way. He lay there for a few moments gasping before realising that he was getting air into his lungs. Not pure clean fresh air admittedly, but air that reeked strongly of earth and other things but air nonetheless, with small lumps of mud in it. He spat in the darkness, then again, then tried to wipe the mud from his mouth with mud encrusted fingers with little success. Still, any air is better than no air and slowly he calmed down enough to try to wipe the mud from his eyes. It was impossible to tell if he had succeeded as the darkness remained unchanged.

“Oh Sploop,” he muttered mournfully to himself. At least he hoped it was to himself. There was no way of knowing what else was down there in the darkness with him. Still, he seemed to be alive.

Slowly Logan felt around with his hands. He seemed to be lying on a bed of mud that tipped slightly downhill. At least, his head seemed to be lower than his feet. He dug his hand into the mud and felt hard rock perhaps a hand's breadth below.

“Hmmm,” he thought.

Then he raised one hand and probed the air above him. Almost at arms length, directly overhead, he could feel the wetness of a large globule of mud. Half sitting up, one elbow underneath him, he

explored the edges of the globule. It was surrounded by rock.

"I wonder if I have slid through a funnel of mud," he thought. "How in Voqev's name do I get back?"

Cautiously he rolled over and got onto his knees. He could feel the mud on his back and, yes, there was definitely a slight slope.

"I suppose whatever mud comes down through the hole makes its way down the slope," he thought. "That means if I go downhill I'll just end up in more mud." He spat again but his mouth still tasted very earthy. His nose seemed blocked as well and he tried to clear it with a finger but only managed to pack more mud inside.

"Blah," he muttered sourly then shook his head as his ears seemed to be blocked as well. This was more successful as he fancied he heard some blobs of mud land on the bed of mud beneath him.

"Right, turn around," he thought and edged his way around on hands and knees until he felt he was more or less facing uphill. Cautiously he extended an arm in front of him and felt around. There didn't seem to be any sort of wall so he edged forward, keeping his arm extended. After what seemed a long way on hand and knees but was probably only two or three paces had he been walking upright, he felt the mud underneath him give way to a hard, rocky surface which was definitely encouraging, until he hit his head on a rock wall.

"Owww," he muttered, rubbing his head.

He looked at his hand to see if his head was bleeding but it was a fruitless exercise in the total darkness so he cursed then felt the wall. It seemed to go more or less uphill so he followed it, stopping every few moments to wave his other hand in case a wall was appearing on the other side. Then he had a thought and waved his hand above him. There seemed to be empty space up there so he cautiously got to his feet and slowly stood up. There was rock above him but if he kept his knees a little bent he could walk upright.

"That's easier," he said then smiled when he heard his own voice. "Hello!" There seemed to be a faint echo but there was still no sign of

any wall to the left. Staying a little bent and with his right hand against the wall at head height, Logan slowly walked forward.

“I wonder where I am going?” he thought. “I wish I had some light. Why didn't I bring Fiau with me? Pah, why didn't I bring Autumn with me? I wonder if she has noticed I'm not there anymore? Is she looking for me? I wonder if this path or whatever it is will bring me to the surface? Oh Sploop, what if she follows me down that hole and gets caught in the mud?”

He paused and half turned, almost expecting Autumn to have dropped through the funnel as well then thought better of it.

“She'll have followed my trail through the grass to the depression,” he thought, “and seen that my trail doesn't come out again so she'll be exploring very cautiously. She's not so foolish to be caught the way I was.”

“Voqev!” he exclaimed a few paces further on. He jerked upright and banged his head on the roof. He rubbed his head. “What if she has seen my trail go into the mud and she thinks I have been swallowed up and I'm dead! What if she moves on? Takes Darius and goes somewhere else? What if they go back to Neander and leave me here? Surely Autumn wouldn't just abandon me like that? No, of course she wouldn't. But then, she has no way of knowing I'm alive under all that mud. She has no way of knowing I'm in some sort of tunnel and her logical brain ... I need to get out of here and find her.”

He started walking again, this time a little faster.

* * *

There was no way of knowing in the pitch blackness how much time had passed but it seemed like it had been a very long time when Logan realised that there was a light of sorts up ahead. Not enough to actually see anything but a general awareness that there was a shade of darkness that wasn't quite as dark. More to the point though, it didn't seem to get any brighter although Logan kept heading towards it. Or maybe it was getting a little brighter?

“Autumn would say that there is a big difference between no light and some light,” whispered Logan, trying to reassure himself, “but only a small difference between some light and some more light.”

It wasn't a particularly reassuring thought, especially when coupled with the unknown that was causing the light, however little it was. Still, there was no option but to keep going.

“It is definitely getting brighter,” thought Logan after a while. “It seems to have a greenish tinge. I wonder if that means it's the sunlight from before or if it's just something else that's green? Whoa!”

In the very faint green light it looked as though the floor of the tunnel, or passage or whatever it was, suddenly disappeared and he managed to stop himself falling forward by the simple expedient of jamming both arms against the walls. He felt the ground ahead of him with a foot and couldn't feel anything.

“This is ... worrying,” he thought and squatted down. Yes, there was definitely an edge to the ground and the walls seemed to have run out as well.

“Now what?” he wondered. “What would Autumn do?”

He pondered for a few moments then cautiously sat down and hung his legs over the edge. His feet didn't touch anything. Leaning forward and probing with his hands he could feel the walls of the tunnel opened out sideways as though he was now in a cave.

“Hah! She would toss a pebble to see how far the ground below is,” thought Logan suddenly. Feeling pleased with himself he felt around for a pebble or something else to drop. There wasn't anything.

“Sploop,” he thought mournfully then froze. Something had rustled nearby. Over to the left a little. Logan strained his ears and thought he heard a faint whistling but he wasn't sure. Very slowly he reached up and scratched some of the dried mud from his ears.

“There it is again!” he thought. “Definitely a rustle. Oh Voqev, now what?”

Then the light got brighter. Considerably brighter. It was as though the cave he was in was suddenly filled with sunlight, although it was still green. Logan jerked back and hurriedly pulled his legs after him. Nothing much else happened so after nervously waiting he cautiously leaned forward and peered out.

The light was coming from over to his right and it looked as though he was on the side of a largish cave. The floor of the cave was perhaps half a body length below him, an easy drop if he needed to jump down. The roof was a fair way above and the far side was quite a way away. Most of the cave looked to be dark yellow but it was difficult to tell with the green light streaming in. Over to the left the end of the cave looked to be more of a greenish grey in colour which was strange.

"There is a definite edge to the colour," thought Logan. "I wonder what it is."

He glanced around the cave again but it seemed to be deserted so he looked back at the greenish grey patch. This time when the rustle came he saw the patch move and jerked back inside his tunnel. There were more rustles and some scrapings and what sounded like, but couldn't possibly be, someone or something breaking wind. Then a sound similar to Darius opening and closing his mouth as he washed himself, only quite a lot louder.

Hugging the wall of his tunnel, Logan edged his head forward so he could peer round with just one eye. The greenish grey shape was now etched with white lines in a pattern of shapes that looked a little like the scales of a snake. More worryingly, if that was possible, many of the shapes were starting to take on colours of their own. It was like they were pulsating with colours and each of the scales was also slowly changing colour. It was difficult to make out if there was any overall shape or pattern or if it was just a myriad of shapes working independently.

Somewhat mesmerised Logan edged round a little further so his other eye could see as well and he watched as the coloured scales grew stronger and more vivid. Then, unexpectedly, the shape moved. What looked to be two large wings unfurled from the front and stretched wide, the tips touching each of the side walls of the cave. A sinewy

neck stretched out and a large square head with two small horns swung forward then a large body stepped away from the wall. Logan jerked back into his little tunnel, his blood pounding noisily. He held his breath and tried to quieten his heart. It didn't work as he could hear footsteps coming from the cave and the scraping of wings against the walls.

One wing scraped over the entrance to the tunnel and Logan nearly fainted with the effort of not crying out in fear. But the wing passed and the creature made no sign of being aware of his existence. In fact the noises stopped after a few moments. Logan held his breath and waited but everything stayed quiet. Very cautiously he let out his breath and drew in another. There was no noise from the cave.

“Mayhap it has gone,” thought Logan, “and if it has then mayhap there is a way out through the cave. Mayhap that was Astauand shining in, if it is still green.”

“Sayiya.” The voice was not loud but it was clear.

Logan locked his chest against any more breaths and pressed himself tightly against the wall of the tunnel. His leg started to tremble and he jammed the side of his knee into the rock. Ever so quietly Logan opened his mouth and let the air in his lungs trickle out then, even more slowly, tried to draw in a breath. His throat whistled gently.

There were some scraping sounds from the cave then a different voice, deep and a touch whispery. “Creator. You slept well?”

“I slept well, Sayiya,” came the first voice.

This voice was somehow bigger even though it was not loud. It was clear and had a shiny shimmering quality. Logan opened his mouth wide and let out his breath in a rush and sucked in another quickly then held it again.

“What news, Sayiya?” came the shimmery voice.

“Strangers have come from outside, Creator,” came the whispery voice.

There was a loud scratching as though the wings of the creature, or one of them at least if the other was the same, had scraped the walls in agitation.

“Why?” shimmered the voice.

“I know not, Creator,” whispered the other voice. “Kaurind asked the question and is now beyond.”

“This bodes ill,” shimmered the voice.

“Perhaps, perhaps not, Creator,” whispered the other. “Kaurind was a fool and lacked subtlety. Alas I was elsewhere and did not return in time.”

“Then find out, Sayiya,” shimmered the voice.

“Creator,” whispered the other.

There were some more scraping sounds then the cave fell silent. Logan held his breath for a few more heartbeats then took another breath as quickly and quietly as he could. There was still no noise from the cave. Logan counted to ten then to another ten just in case then quickly exhaled and took a deep breath. There was still no sound from the cave. He peered around the edge of the tunnel then jerked back when he saw something large and multi-coloured against the green light streaming into the cave.

There was no sign that he had been spotted, however. As he clung to the wall there were no sounds, no voices raised, no running feet. Logan muttered a short prayer and peered around the edge again.

The cave was empty.

“What?” exclaimed Logan in surprise. He leaned further out and scanned the cave from one end to the other. It was definitely empty.

“Should I take this opportunity?” he wondered. “If I wait it could be that one or other of the creatures will return but what if they return when I am out in the open? Maybe it would be better to wait but they

could come back anytime. I wonder if the one who went beyond was the serpent who attacked Autumn? Oh Sloop, what to do, what to do?"

He looked around the cave again. It was still empty but this time he noticed at the back of the cave was a large ledge. Clearly this was a ledge that one of the creatures had been sleeping on.

"What would Autumn do?" he wondered then gave a short derisive laugh. "Autumn would walk out into the open and not hide like a scared child. Pah! Pull yourself together, man, and be brave. You want to get out? Then go out!"

He looked around the cave again then dropped to the ground and hurried towards what was probably the entrance since that was where the green light was coming from. His last two or three steps were cautious and when he reached the entrance he leaned against the wall and peered out anxiously.

"Ahh, there is that green Astauand," he thought fairly happily as it showed he was back at the surface again. "But how do I get back to Autumn and Darius?"

He peered out again and could see that the entrance to the cave was near the top of a gentle slope. The hill side seemed to slope down a long way and there looked to be a stream at the bottom. It meandered like a stream and it was in a valley as a stream should be but it seemed to be mauve rather than blue but then nothing in this land had the right colour. More to the point, there were no trees in sight which was a shame as they had camped for the night under some trees so finding some trees would seem to be a good starting point for finding Autumn again.

"Well, standing here will do no good," muttered Logan. "Best I go to the top of the hill and see if I can see any trees from there."

He glanced back inside the cave then around at the strange land of blue grass, yellow sun and mauve rivers before venturing out of the protective overhang of the cave. He started up the hill and a movement caught his eye, high above him and some way off to the

right. He turned to look and gaped in astonishment.

“Unless my eyes deceive me,” he said aloud, “that is the thing of many colours that was in the cave.”

He watched the thing soar off into the distance, changing colours as it went.

“There be dragons,” he said, holding a hand above his eyes as if that would help his seeing, “for that can only be a dragon. For certain it is no bird. Oh my word, I have seen a dragon!”

He watched until it grew too small to see then slowly turned and continued up the slope again. To his relief, some way off there was a copse of trees. He looked back to see if the dragon was returning but there was no sign of it.

“I hope Autumn saw it,” he thought to himself as he marched towards the copse. “And I pray to Aloidia that she is still at the copse and is not swimming in a mud pit looking for me.”

As the copse got closer he could see Autumn sitting at the edge and broke into a run, relief flooding through him.

“Greetings,” called Autumn, letting her arms fall to her sides. “Is it not a beautiful day? Why are you covered in mud?”

Chapter Thirty

“Oh Autumn!” cried Logan rushing up to her. He hugged her and danced a few steps. “I am so glad to see you again!”

Autumn smiled and let him hug her then gently prised herself away.

“Why are you covered in mud?” she asked. “It is all over you. Has something happened?”

“Did you not notice I was missing?” asked Logan, a slight discomfiture penetrating his vast relief. “Have you not been looking for me?”

“I have only just finished my meditating,” said Autumn. She looked around then walked over to the water bottle. “I was aware you went walking but you have not been gone long. I presumed you were looking for food as the day is yet still young and you are not normally awake at this time. Here, wash yourself.”

She offered Logan the water bottle and he took it and rinsed his mouth then drank deeply before spitting several times. Then he washed his hands and face.

“Ahh, that is better,” he said, shaking his head to try to dry it. “I can see you properly now. Where is Darius?”

Autumn pointed to the branch where Darius lay, oblivious to the world around him.

“Oh Autumn!” cried Logan, excited again as he remembered what had happened. “I saw a dragon! I fell into some mud getting melons and there was this big thing in a cave with lots of colours and I think there was another one and anyway it left and so did I and then I saw it flying. It was a dragon and I saw it and it wasn't a bird!”

“Where did you see it?” asked Autumn sharply.

“Over there,” said Logan waving his arm vaguely behind him.

“Where?” asked Autumn peering into the sky in the general direction

he had pointed.

“Oh, it's gone now,” said Logan. “I watched it fly away but the cave is over there.”

“I don't see a cave either,” said Autumn cautiously. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I am sure!” cried Logan, bouncing a little in frustration as clearly Autumn didn't believe him. “Come on, I'll show you where the cave is.”

Autumn looked steadily at him for a few moments then around the sky.

“I will get Darius,” she said finally. “'Twould be best if we do not get separated.”

She turned and stepped towards Darius' tree.

“Yes,” said Logan. “I was worried about that when I was in the tunnel.”

“What tunnel?” she asked, pausing to look back at Logan.

“The tunnel I was in after I fell through the mud,” said Logan impatiently. “Come on!”

“There is much here that needs explaining,” said Autumn, “but it can wait until we see this cave. Stay here.”

She marched over to Darius and reached up and pulled his tail. Darius opened an eye and looked balefully at her.

“Come,” said Autumn. “We are going to look at a cave.”

“Groww,” said Darius, curling his upper lip and showing his teeth. He slowly jumped down from the branch and stretched while Autumn collected her pack and the staffs.

“Which way?” she asked returning to Logan, who had walked several

paces and was looking out over the grassland.

“This way,” he said, moving forward. “It becomes a slope after a little walk. I think there is a stream at the bottom as well.”

The walk to the cave took longer than he expected but Logan was quietly relieved when he found it. He had been worrying that he had imagined it, although the entrance was smaller than he remembered. It was not much higher than he was although it was a good fifteen paces wide. There were bare patches of earth around the front.

“And the dragon flew off that way,” he said, pointing.

Autumn nodded then looked inside the cave.

“I wonder if it has come back,” she said thoughtfully. “There is only one way to find out,” and she marched inside. Darius padded after her, his head swaying from side to side.

Logan blinked in surprise then hurried after her.

“It is darker in here now than it was,” he said. “Astauand must have been shining directly in when I was here. Fiau, can we have some light?”

His staff burst into its familiar, comforting yellow flame.

“How strange,” remarked Autumn, looking at it, “but then the colour of our clothing has not changed either.”

“There is the tunnel,” said Logan pointing. “And when I first saw the dragon it was over there, against that wall at the back. It was just a greenish patch with white lines at first then the scales began to change colours and it started to glow. Then it talked to someone.”

“Talked to someone?” said Autumn. “No, wait. This cave would seem to be empty so let us go outside and you can recount your adventure in full for it is making little sense at the moment.”

They trooped back outside and sat on the ground above the entrance

to the cave while Logan recounted what happened. Then Autumn made him go through it again.

“You definitely heard two voices?” she asked. “Do you think there were two dragons?”

“I only saw one,” said Logan, “and one of the voices sounded like a servant of some sort. It could have been a dragon but it could easily have been something else.”

“And you understood their words?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Logan, “although there were some I did not understand.”

“Those were probably names,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “and therefore unfamiliar but this confirms something I have suspected as it is too much to expect that the creatures living in this place would speak our language and Fiau is still able to give light. Mother Midcarn’s magic seems to still work here even though Darius has lost his powers.”

“Your robe does not work,” said Logan. “That serpent was crushing you to death.”

“True,” said Autumn frowning, “although it could be that the serpent had its tail inside my robe. I do not remember.”

“Neither do I,” said Logan. “So what shall we do now? Go back and try to find those melons?”

“I very much doubt they were melons,” said Autumn, “as you said they looked like melons yet nothing in this place looks right. Most likely they were rocks or bubbles in the mud or some such. I think we should wait for the return of this dragon. You could understand its speech so mayhap we will be able to get some answers and even possibly aid in returning to our own world.”

“But what if it is dangerous?” asked Logan, looking up at the sky in case the dragon was even then readying to attack.

"I venture not," said Autumn. "You said one of the voices said that another creature had asked why we are here and is now beyond. Most likely that was the serpent which the speaker seemed to think was stupid. I venture that the speakers hold no ill intent and once satisfied we are no threat will do us no harm. For certain we are going to need help if we are to leave this place."

"I suppose you are right," said Logan. He plucked a stem of blue grass and was about to start chewing it when he changed his mind and twisted it round his finger instead. "What do you think, Darius?"

"How certain can we be that we are no threat to them?" asked Darius. "I have already killed one of their number. That may be threat enough."

"A fair point," said Autumn, "and one to which I have no answer." She paused. "But what alternatives have we?"

Logan and Darius pondered this.

"Come," she said when it became apparent neither had any alternative suggestions, "let us go and investigate this stream. Mayhap it is a stream and we can wash properly. Logan is still muddy and I have yet to rid myself entirely of the serpent's remains. We can keep watch on the skies and if this dragon returns to this cave no doubt we will see it."

She got up and for want of any alternative Logan and Darius got up as well.

"That is strange," said Logan, looking down at the stream some way below them. "It was mauve when I saw it earlier. Now it is decidedly pink."

"The grass is becoming purple as well," said Autumn, "and unless I am much mistaken Astauand has a bluish hue as well."

"I do not like this place," said Darius.

"Neither do I," said Logan, "although I could put up with the

changing colours if there was some food around.”

* * *

“Someone comes,” said Darius, sniffing the air.

Autumn stopped combing dried serpent entrails from her hair and Logan jerked upright from where he'd been lying, his own robe almost entirely mud free.

“Where?” said Autumn.

“Upwind,” said Darius. “I can smell a faint odour of people, some way distant.”

“People?” exclaimed Logan. “Do you mean us?”

“No,” said Darius, sitting up and sniffing the breeze. “The smell is different to yours.”

“How many?” asked Autumn, looking upriver. She got to her feet.

“I do not know,” said Darius, “but I have smelled that smell before. Before we came to this land.”

“In Neander?” asked Autumn.

“At the waterfall,” said Darius after a few moments contemplation, “and perhaps before that as well.”

“Ohhh,” said Autumn. “You mean those two men who were following us and trying to kill us. Mayhap they followed us behind the waterfall. I would speak with them. You two stay here.”

“Do we not have troubles enough without two men trying to kill us?” grumbled Logan. “Why not let Darius get rid of them and be done with it.”

“You know I cannot allow that to happen,” said Autumn, “unless there is great need, but think, Logan, if they came here from Neander then

there is a passing chance that they know how to get back.”

“There is that,” said Logan also getting to his feet and looking upstream. “I dare say it is worth the risk.”

“I fancy I see something moving up yonder,” said Autumn quietly, dropping into a crouch so she wouldn't be visible above the top of the grass. “You two stay here out of sight and I will be back shortly.”

She dropped onto her hands and knees and disappeared into the thick grass that grew along the bank. Logan stood watching her progress until a large heavy paw on his shoulder dragged him down.

“Ahh, yes, sorry,” he whispered and crawled over to get his staff then sat at the edge of the grass so he could see part way up the stream. A silence descended and Logan began to feel very alone. There was no sign of Darius and not a sound beyond the quiet murmuring of the stream and his own breathing.

“Not even a bird,” he thought, glancing up at the sky. “In fact I don't remember seeing any birds since we got here. No fish either.”

He sighed then cut it short when he heard himself and let the silence descend again. He parted some grass stalks to look upstream. There was no one there. Absently he scratched an itch on his leg then looked around to see if he could see Darius. He couldn't.

“I wonder if Darius is still here or if he followed Autumn,” he thought. Then he heard a voice and froze.

He couldn't make out the words but it was definitely a man's voice then a woman's, most likely Autumn. Then the man's voice again and another exchange of words then a short sharp shout that sounded, to his imagination if nothing else, like “get her!”

“Oh Sploop,” he muttered at the sound of splashing then there was a sudden cry of pain and then silence.

“Was that a man's cry or Autumn's?” he wondered then slapped his knee. “Don't be absurd. Could only be one of the men. Even if

Autumn was hurt she would not cry out and how likely is it that two men would be able to hurt her?"

Still, he sat there fidgeting and anxious until more splashing sounds suggested several people were walking through the stream. The sounds were definitely coming closer.

"She brings them," said Darius in Logan's ear and he jumped in alarm and twisted round to see Darius right behind him.

"Don't do that!" he exclaimed. "You nearly frightened me to death!"

Darius just looked at him in a way that Logan felt was scornful then he walked out of the grass to stand in the stream.

"Curse that damned cat," muttered Logan.

He got up and saw two men walking towards him with Autumn behind them. One of the men was rubbing his thigh and grimacing. Logan went to join Darius and one of the men pointed and said something to the other.

"Keep going," he clearly heard Autumn say. "They will not harm you."

"Did they give you any trouble?" asked Logan when they were close.

"No," said Autumn. "Although 'tis best you look after these for now."

She handed Logan two bows, two narrow sacks of arrows and three knives and Logan grinned. He pulled out one of the arrows and inspected it.

"This looks very much like the arrow that hit me in the shoulder," he said, cocking an eye at the men.

"Aye," growled one of them. "'Twas your lucky day for I don't often miss. What is this place and why is everything funny coloured?"

"We do not know," said Autumn. "Sit and we will talk."

The two men looked at each other then one of them shrugged and sat down. The other reluctantly sat next to him. Logan put the weapons on the ground well out of their reach and pointedly sat with one leg resting on top. Autumn sat closer to the men and Darius disappeared into the grass behind them. One of the men watched him disappear. The other looked appraisingly at Logan.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn. “This is Logan and Darius is the cat. What are your names?”

The two men sat silently and watched her.

“I wager you are Fareki and Muhaban,” said Autumn. “Which of you be which?”

“How do you know our names?” asked one of the men. He was the younger and fitter of the two.

Logan shifted his leg slightly to get more comfortable and felt a rock behind him. He leaned back against it as this promised to be a mildly enjoyable discussion.

“We heard that a reward was being offered for our capture by two men of those names,” said Autumn. “Which are you?”

“I am Fareki,” he admitted grudgingly.

“I am pleased to meet you at last, Fareki,” said Autumn, “and you too, Muhaban. How long have you been following us?”

Muhaban gave her a long stare then took a deep breath and released it in a long whistling sigh.

“Tell her, Fareki,” he said. “Most likely she already knows and there is little point in keeping up a pretence now.”

Fareki pursed his lips as though about to protest then relaxed. “We were told you would be visiting the Drasta,” he said, “so we waited for you there.”

“Ahh, so that was you two as well,” said Autumn. “You have been following us for a long time. Your need must be pressing.”

“Indeed,” said Fareki. “We were paid to, umm, deal with you and we could not return until then.”

“By 'deal with' you mean 'kill'?” asked Autumn, pleasantly.

Fareki glanced at Muhaban before admitting that was what he meant.

“Can I ask why it took you so long before your second attempt?” said Autumn.

“We lost you,” said Muhaban. “It took us a long time to find your trail after the Drasta.”

“I commend you on your tenacity,” she commented then glanced at Logan. “Many would have given up and gone home.”

Muhaban gave a wry smile. “We are paid by the day with a bonus on, ahh, completion,” he said. “The longer it takes the better we are paid.” He paused for a moment. “Besides, it was something of a holiday as well. Neither of us have travelled in those parts of the Skizzies before.”

“And who is paying you?” asked Autumn.

The men looked at each other but didn't answer.

“I wager it is Buhfa Ouoinel,” said Logan. “Either him or Urudaqa. Unless they are the same person.”

Fareki shrugged. “They are friends,” he said, “and work together in the making of money. I cannot rightly say which of them was paying us but our orders came from Buhfa.”

“Why did Buhfa want us dead?” asked Autumn.

“Can't rightly say,” said Fareki. “We being just the hired help so to speak but I venture you have annoyed one or both of them.”

"I daresay you are right," said Autumn. "Still, it is of little consequence now. You followed us into the cave behind the waterfall?"

"Yes," said Fareki. "What is this place?"

"I do not know for certain," said Autumn, "but I fancy this may be a place called Miesca." She watched them closely but neither showed any reaction to the name. "You have been here before?"

"By the beard of Musafir, no!" exclaimed Muhaban. "A place where the sun is green and the grass is blue? I have never even heard of such a place and would call any who talked of it a liar."

There was a sudden movement as Logan fell over backwards. Autumn instantly reacted but managed to keep her foot from hitting him. Both Muhaban and Fareki gawped at her in amazement.

"Sorry!" exclaimed Logan, pink with embarrassment. He sat up again and looked behind him. "I was leaning against a rock and it must have rolled ... ahh, there it is." He pointed to a large rock a pace or two away. "Sorry."

Autumn settled back into her sitting position and smiled at Logan.

"I imagine you intended to kill us here," she said, returning to her conversation with Fareki and Muhaban. "How did you intend to return to Neander when you had done so?"

Logan stole a look at the rock. Although it was quite large and humped it had a flat looking base. How could it have rolled away? And so far?

"We don't know," said Fareki. "The hole behind the waterfall disappeared as soon as we'd gone through it. That is why we haven't tried to kill you here yet. We were hoping you would know."

"And if we told you you would have gone ahead and killed us?" asked Logan, bringing his attention back to the men. "That isn't very nice!"

"We're not paid to be nice," said Muhaban. "We have a job to do."

“I would suggest that you put that task to one side for the time being,” said Autumn. “I venture it would be most productive if we cooperated in finding a way to return. We do not know how to return to Neander either.”

“Perhaps I can be of some assistance in that matter,” said the rock in a deep whispery voice. “My name is Sayiya, welcome to Miesca.”

Chapter Thirty One

Autumn was the first to react. By the time the rock had uttered the word 'assistance' she had grasped her staff, twisted around and up onto one knee and had the staff pointing at the rock. Darius was a little slower but in two bounds had emerged from the grasses and was beside the rock with both front paws raised and claws fully extended when it said its name. Logan was slowest. He blinked in surprise then tried to get up and got his foot entangled in a bow string. By the time the rock had finished speaking he was falling back to the ground. Fareki and Muhaban on the other hand simply failed to react. They just sat there frozen, overwhelmed by one too many strange surprises.

Thereafter, no one moved for several heartbeats except Logan and no one paid him any attention. Fortunately in the falling he had missed the three knives and the points of the arrows although one of the bows had snapped when his knee landed on it.

The rock was the first to move. Four short legs with long flat feet emerged from its sides then a small leathery head on a short neck emerged from the front before jerking rapidly back inside as Darius' paw slashed down.

"No, Darius!" commanded Autumn as the claws skittered harmlessly over the edge of the rock. She jumped up and pushed Darius back. He glowered at her but did not resist.

"We mean you no harm, ahh, Sayiya," said Autumn. "We apologise and plead surprise as our only excuse."

The head cautiously peeked out of the rock and noted Darius was further away. It looked around for further danger and, seeing none, came out again.

"Thank you," said Autumn. "My name is Autumn Savannah and my companions and I mean you no harm. We are lost in a strange land and tensions are high."

She ostentatiously laid her staff on the ground and sat down again, her hands open in front of her.

“Darius, sit with Fareki and Muhaban where our guest can see you clearly,” said Autumn.

Darius padded over to sit with the men, not taking his eyes off the rock.

“Thank you,” said the head. “My name is Sayiya.”

“Greetings, Sayiya,” said Autumn. “That is Logan over there and these are Darius, Fareki and Muhaban. Are you of this place or a traveller like ourselves?”

“I am of this place,” said Sayiya, “and you are correct. This is Miesca.”

“Excuse me,” said Logan. “As Autumn said we are strangers here and unfamiliar with everything. Are you a rock or a tortoise?”

Sayiya contemplated the question for a few moments. “I am, I think, what you would call a turtle in your world.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “Thank you.”

“What is a turtle?” whispered Muhaban to Fareki.

“Tis a tortoise that can swim,” muttered Fareki looking sideways at him

“Are they good eating?” whispered Muhaban.

“I do not think that is helpful,” said Autumn turning to give Muhaban and Fareki a stern look. They both fell silent. Autumn nodded and turned her attention back to Sayiya.

“We have only encountered one from this world thus far and that did not end well,” she said. “Our intent is peaceful and would ask if your intent is likewise.”

“I know something of that encounter,” said Sayiya, “and I regret that I was not available to intercede. Kaurind was well intentioned but misguided.”

“Kaurind was the serpent?” asked Autumn.

“Indeed,” said Sayiya. “One of the more lowly assistants to Xanthous.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. She recognised the name but felt reluctant to admit that as yet. “Are you also an assistant to Xanthous?”

“I am the Messenger of Xanthous,” said Sayiya. He adjusted his shell so it lay more evenly on the ground and pulled in his legs a little. He was clearly feeling more relaxed and less threatened.

Autumn pursed her lips for a moment wondering which way to take the conversation.

“Do you bring us a message from Xanthous?” she asked, “or are you here in some other capacity?”

“I am here to take back a message,” said Sayiya. “There are certain things about you that Xanthous would like to know.”

“We will endeavour to answer any questions you may have,” said Autumn. “Will you, in turn, answer ours?”

Sayiya blinked slowly. “That is a reasonable request.”

“It may be a reasonable request,” thought Autumn, “but it does not follow that you will carry it out.”

She waited a few moments to see if Sayiya would continue but he did not.

“Then, if I may,” she said, “who or what is Xanthous?”

“Xanthous is the creator of this world,” said Sayiya.

“Then Xanthous is a deity?” asked Autumn.

“Who but a deity can create worlds?” asked Sayiya.

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Does Xanthous take the form of a dragon?”

“If, indeed, you are unfamiliar with everything here,” said Sayiya, “why would you think Xanthous takes the form of a dragon?”

“My companion, Logan, saw a dragon in a cave up yonder,” said Autumn, pointing up the slope. “I wondered if that was Xanthous.”

Sayiya looked at her speculatively. “That was Xanthous,” he conceded. “You have more questions?”

“I have questions beyond number,” said Autumn with a smile, “but what of yours? Shall we take turns?”

“I have only two,” said Sayiya, “although other questions may arise from your answers. The first is how do you come to be here?”

“I can only answer that question in part,” said Autumn. “We were travelling in our land when we came upon a cave behind a waterfall. We went into the cave and found ourselves here. As to how we crossed from our land to this through the cave I do not know.”

“And where is this cave now?” asked Sayiya. “Is it the one in which your companion saw Xanthous?”

“I think not,” said Autumn. “When we passed through the cave disappeared behind us and we have been unable to find it to return to our world. It was some way distant, across the plain.”

“I see,” said Sayiya. His head weaved slowly from side to side as he digested this information.

“If I may be permitted to ask,” said Autumn, “Kaurind asked that question as well and was not happy with my answer. Surely others have crossed between these worlds before?”

“No,” said Sayiya. “The Creator does not permit it so, if as you say, you came through by chance then there is a fault in the Creator’s creation that should not exist.”

“Ahh, yes, I can see now why that would be a concern,” said Autumn. “Speaking of Kaurind, do you know why he took the form of someone

from my land?”

“I do not know,” said Sayiya, “although Kaurind had a small ability to see images in another’s mind. I venture Kaurind felt you would be more forthcoming if you believed yourself to be talking with one you know and trust.”

“I can see the reasoning behind that thinking,” said Autumn, “but it is flawed for I would not trust someone I used to know who appeared with no explanation in a strange land.”

“Kaurind had his limitations,” admitted Sayiya. “No matter. What is done is done and like as not will not be undone unless Xanthous feels a special need to restore Kaurind.”

“You have another question?” asked Autumn. “I venture I know what it is as Kaurind kept asking it and would not accept my answers.”

“Why are you here?” asked Sayiya.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “And Kaurind would not accept that we came here by chance.”

“As do I not accept that answer,” said Sayiya. “Before I made myself known to you you spoke of Miesca. How would you know the name of this land if you arrived here only by chance or are you going to claim that Kaurind told you?”

“Is it not possible that Kaurind told us that name?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Sayiya, “for Miesca is not the name we use for this land. It is a name from times long past that few of us here know and Kaurind was not one of them. How, then, do you know of it?”

“I have not lied to you,” said Autumn, “but I admit I have been sparing with the truth and not told the whole of it.”

“As is apparent,” said Sayiya. “And will you now tell me the whole of it?”

"If I do will you aid us in returning to our land?" asked Autumn.

"I have neither the knowledge nor the power," said Sayiya. "Only Xanthous can do that."

"Can we talk with Xanthous and seek Its aid?" asked Autumn. "Truly we do not wish to be here and 'twould seem our presence is not desired here either."

"I can but take your message back to Xanthous," said Sayiya.

"For that alone you will earn our gratitude," said Autumn then paused.

"Will you tell me the whole of your tale?" asked Sayiya after waiting a few moments, "or do you wish me to convey to Xanthous that your tale will be told only as part of a bargain?"

"That thought crossed my mind," said Autumn, "but I venture Xanthous may be more generous if we are generous beforehand."

"You appear to have much wisdom," said Sayiya wryly, insofar as turtles can speak wryly.

"I and my companion, Logan, travel widely in our world to learn what we can of it," began Autumn, "and, one day in Neander ..."

"You will forgive the interruption," said Sayiya, "but are not these others your companions also?"

"No," said Autumn. "Darius is but has been only for a short time. These other two are not."

"But they came through this cave at the same time?" said Sayiya. "How do you explain such an improbable coincidence?"

"They did not come through the cave at the same time," said Autumn. "They came through a short time later for they were not with us. They were following us."

“In order to find their way here?” asked Sayiya turning his gaze onto Fareki and Muhaban. Neither would meet his gaze.

“No,” said Autumn. “They were following us to ...” and she paused, wondering how exactly to put it. “... to discuss a perceived wrong from earlier in our travels.”

Sayiya extended his front legs and pushed the front part of his carapace up then relaxed again.

“I accept what you say but it concerns me,” said Sayiya. “If whatever fault permitted you and your companions through allowed others to follow later then it is possible that more will come through in the future. Continue.”

“As I said, Logan and I were travelling in search of knowledge and understanding,” continued Autumn. “On our travels we came across an old letter which gave the names of Xanthous and Miesca and exceedingly vague directions on how to find them. We decided to spend some time trying to find this place.”

“For what purpose?” asked Sayiya. His rear legs had now emerged and the short blunt claws on those feet were tapping on the ground.

“For no purpose other than to know and understand our world better,” said Autumn. “We did not know then that Miesca was another world. We thought it was a place within our world.”

“You say it was an old letter?” said Sayiya. “How old?”

“Some two hundred summers,” said Autumn.

“This is most worrying,” said Sayiya. His front feet emerged and their claws started tapping the ground as well. “For it means that the fault has been known to your world for at least that long and its existence has been even longer. I must return to the Creator immediately.”

He started to fade but when only a vague outline was visible he came back until he was semi-solid.

“You say you and Logan found this letter?” he said, his voice thinner and more whispery than before.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“And Darius became your companion later?” asked Sayiya.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“Why?” asked Sayiya.

Autumn glanced at Darius. “When he learned of the letter he chose to come with us to find this place,” she said.

“Because of a desire for knowledge and understanding?” asked Sayiya.

“No,” said Autumn. She paused then made her decision. “Because of the Kastounasc.”

Saiya shimmered briefly then, with a faint 'crack', became completely solid. He stood rigidly on all four legs and stared at Autumn. There was a quiet throbbing in the air, almost as though Saiya was vibrating with agitation.

“How do you know of the Kastounasc?” he demanded.

“Its name was given in the letter,” said Autumn, “but I know not what it is beyond some device that belongs to Zeeth.”

“Then you are woefully ignorant,” said Saiya. The throbbing of the air died away.

“Please enlighten me,” said Autumn.

Saiya merely grunted then faded away and disappeared.

“’Twould seem that he has gone,” said Autumn.

“I wager he has gone to report back to Xanthous,” said Logan. “This can only bode ill, of that I am certain.”

“It may but it may not,” said Autumn. “We have no way of knowing. No doubt we will find out in time.”

“Tis a shame you did not ask him about food before he went,” said Logan.

“I was going to,” said Autumn, “but the conversation went in a different direction. Mayhap we can ask when Sayiya returns.”

“If he returns,” muttered Logan. “They may just leave us here to starve.”

“I am certain he will return,” said Autumn, “or, if not, Xanthous Itself will come to talk with us. They do seem to be very concerned with how we entered this place. Now, Darius, I would speak with you.”

“As you wish,” said Darius.

“Sayiya said I was woefully ignorant when I said the Kastounasc belonged to Zeeth,” said Autumn. “Is there something you have not told me?”

“I have told you what Zeeth told me,” said Darius. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn, tapping her fingers on her knee. “And yet I sense that a lot remains untold.”

“You know what this is all about, don't you,” said Logan, getting up and starting to pace nervously. “This is just a dispute over some bauble between deities and we are caught in the middle of it. We're going to die!”

“Well if it is a dispute I do not see how we can resolve it,” said Autumn. “I suppose all we can do now is wait and see what happens. For certain I feel more cheerful now that the sky is pink and no longer purple.”

“I am glad you are more cheerful,” said Logan, pausing in his pacing, “for I am less so. A blue Astauand makes me decidedly uncheerful.”

* * *

Astauand was past its peak when Muhaban suddenly cried out and lurched forward. Autumn spun round with a leg raised, ready to kick, thinking that he was attacking but dropped her foot when she saw Sayiya had reappeared behind him. Logan, some way away watching the stream for signs of fish, merely turned in surprise to see what was going on then started splashing up downstream towards them.

“Greetings, Sayiya,” said Autumn.

“Greetings,” said Sayiya, then somewhat unnecessarily, “I have returned.”

“With good tidings, I trust,” said Autumn.

Saiya looked at Muhaban then Fareki before moving away to sit on the edge of the stream.

“I bring a message from Xanthous,” said Sayiya. “The Creator wishes to talk with you.”

“That is good tidings, indeed,” said Autumn. “Where and when?”

“In due course,” said Sayiya. “In the meantime I am instructed to fulfil your request.”

“To return to our world?” asked Logan hopefully, joining them. His feet and ankles were magenta coloured from the water.

“That is for Xanthous to decide,” said Sayiya. “Your request for enlightenment.”

“Ahh, you mean the matters of which I am woefully ignorant,” said Autumn. “Thank you.”

“You say you know not of Xanthous,” said Sayiya, “so you must know not of the creation of your world.”

“’Twas created by the deities,” said Autumn. “Zeeth, Yammoe, Vallume and the others.”

“Not so,” said Sayiya. “When time was yet young, Xanthous the Creator created this world from the frozen void. It breathed Its fire-breath and brought warmth and light to the cold and dark and Miesca was born. 'Twas not an easy task for the cold and dark fought back and on occasion won a minor victory. On one such occasion the Creator's fire-breath was caught and congealed and from that congealing your world and Zeeth were born and from that birth there was great enmity between them. Xanthous shed bitter tears over that catastrophe for Xanthous abhors enmity. But from those tears your other deities were born and because they were born from the tears shed for Zeeth, those deities congregated around Zeeth and Zeeth grew stronger.”

Darius made faint growling sounds in his throat but otherwise stayed silent.

“And in growing stronger,” continued Sayiya, “Zeeth sought to wrest what It believed to be Its world from Xanthous and many battles raged between them until one day Zeeth had power enough to do injury to the Creator. I was not there but I hear tell that it was the mightiest battle that ever was and ever will be and raged for many aeons as each sought to vanquish the other and gain dominion over all worlds. But there was no victor. Each was well matched with the other and countered blow with blow until, with treachery and deception, Zeeth tore at the tail of Xanthous and ripped off the tip. Raging at Zeeth, Xanthous limped back to Miesca and sealed it so none but It would pass between.”

“What happened to the tip of Xanthous' tail?” asked Logan, fascinated. “Did Xanthous get it back or was it left behind?”

“Indeed,” said Sayiya. “Zeeth claimed a mighty victory and kept the tip of Xanthous' tail and it remained in the world of Zeeth until Xanthous had the strength to wrest it back again.”

“Oh Mizule!” exclaimed Autumn as the significance of this became clear to her. “And the tip of Xanthous' tail is the Kastounasc!”

Chapter Thirty Two

“Yes,” said Sayiya.

“Well now,” said Autumn. “That is interesting.”

“Can I ask a question?” asked Logan.

“Yes,” said Sayiya.

He got up from where he was sitting and went over to sit next to Autumn, moving her pack to one side to make room. It fell open and a few things rolled out.

“Is the Kastounasc important to Xanthous?” he asked.

“Everything is important to Xanthous,” said Sayiya.

“Oh,” said Logan, somewhat taken aback. He glanced at Autumn. “What I meant was, is the Kastounasc of any particular significance? Is it not merely the tip of Its tail?”

“Do you not consider the tips of any of your appendages important?” asked Sayiya, closing one eye and regarding Logan bleakly with the other.

“Well, yes,” said Logan, “but, I mean, is it important for any reason other than being the tip of Its tail?”

“I am not clear on what you are asking me,” said Sayiya, opening his eye again, “but Xanthous does need the tip of Its tail for stability in flight.”

“But it has no significance beyond that?” asked Logan. “After all, Xanthous did go back and take it from Zeeth so it must have some special significance. I know I am only a mere mortal and though I might be sorry for the loss of the tip of one of my toes I very much doubt I would go back into danger to retrieve it.”

Saiya sighed. “I venture not but there was pride at stake as well.

Xanthous could not permit Zeeth to retain such a thing. Do you have any further questions?"

"Umm, no," said Logan, sensing he was being dismissed.

Saiya looked inquiringly at Autumn.

"How will we know when we are to meet with Xanthous?" she asked.

"You will know," said Saiya. He began to fade. "We shall meet again."

"Wait!" said Logan. "I have another question."

Saiya re-solidified with an almost audible sigh. "Yes?"

"Is there anything we can eat here?" asked Logan.

"This is not your world," said Saiya. "If you require nourishment, return to your own world." He started to fade again.

"But we can't ..." began Logan but Saiya disappeared.

"Oh faff," he said disappointedly. "If Xanthous is the Creator why cannot It create something for us to eat?"

"Mayhap It can," said Autumn, frowning, "and if it should be that we have to stay in this world no doubt Xanthous will make arrangements for us. The information Saiya gave us about the Kastounasc was interesting but I do not see that it moves us forward in any way."

Logan absently flapped at an insect that was buzzing somewhere beside him. "And I venture that Xanthous has every right to it as it is part of Its tail. I do not see that Zeeth has any claim beyond, perhaps, it being a spoil of war even if It does have a greater need for the thing than Xanthous." The buzzing faded then returned and he flapped again absentmindedly.

"I venture all we can do is talk with Xanthous and endeavour to persuade It to give the Kastounasc back to Zeeth freely," said Autumn, "although I wager that will not be an easy task."

Logan shrugged and looked around for the cause of the irritating buzzing. He couldn't see anything but it had stopped anyway.

"Ahh, I am sorry," he said, noticing. "I knocked over your pack."

He picked it up and returned Autumn's ball of sewing thread and her wooden spoon that had fallen out then reached for the pine cone which had rolled a little further.

"And I cannot see that this thing from Mother Midcarn will be of any use," he added holding it up. "Unless we can offer it to Xanthous to go on the end of Its tail in exchange for the Kastounasc."

There was a sudden buzz as the pine cone vibrated in his hand and he dropped it in surprise.

"There must be an insect inside it," he said and picked it up again.

He held it upside-down and shook it to see if anything fell out. Nothing did but it continued to buzz irritably. He gave it another shake then peered inside.

"That is most odd," he said, staring at the pine cone.

"What is?" asked Autumn, coming back from her contemplation of meeting with Xanthous.

"This pine cone said 'hello'," said Logan. He held it to his ear and listened then stared at it before listening to it again. "Can you hear it?" He held it out to Autumn.

She raised an eyebrow but took the pine cone. It buzzed at her so she held it to her ear.

"Most strange," she muttered. "I do not know what to make of it but I venture it is not a pressing matter at this time. Put it back in my pack."

Logan took the cone and held it to his ear again.

"Tis definitely a 'hello'," he said then put the cone near his mouth. "Hello!"

He lifted it to his ear then scowled.

"I am Logan," he said to the pine cone. "Who are you?"

The cone buzzed quite loudly with a quite discernible note of anger.

"I do not know what is happening," he said after a few moments listening, "but it wants to talk to you."

"Me?" said Autumn in surprise. She stared at the cone for a few moments. "Did it say what its name is? Is it Xanthous?"

"A moment," said Logan. He put the cone to his lips and asked "are you Xanthous?"

The pine cone fairly crackled with angry buzzing.

"Ah," he said and blinked a few times. Then he said "yes, I will" to the cone then held it out to Autumn. She started to reach for it but Logan snatched it back and said "umm, goodbye," before holding it out again.

"Tis Mother Midcarn and she wants to talk to you," he announced.

Autumn gawped at him. "Mother Midcarn?"

"Yes," he said, "and she seems rather angry."

"But," said Autumn, "but ... how can this be?"

Logan shrugged and wiggled the pine cone. Autumn slowly reached out and took it, very gingerly. She held it to her ear and said "hello?".

"Hold it to your mouth," whispered Logan, waving his hand in front of his mouth.

"Oh, umm, yes," said Autumn and moved the cone down to her lips

before saying “hello” again. She quickly moved the cone back to her ear and went wide eyed in astonishment.

“Tis Mother Midcarn,” she told Logan. Logan snorted.

“Yes, this is Autumn,” said Autumn, holding the cone to her ear then realised and dropped it to her lips and repeated herself. She listened intently to the cone for several moments. “We are meeting with ...” then, slightly irritably, she dropped the cone to her lips, “we are meeting with It and I will try.” She listened some more. “I can do no more than try.”

Logan watched her in frustration.

“Yes, I will,” said Autumn. “Until then.”

Slowly she reached out and put the pine cone on the ground in front of her and stared at it.

“Was it really Mother Midcarn?” asked Logan. “What did she say?”

“It certainly seemed to be Mother Midcarn,” said Autumn, “although how it is that she is inside this cone is beyond my comprehension.”

“But what did she say?” asked Logan, fidgeting with impatience.

“She said we must persuade Xanthous to meet with Zeeth,” said Autumn, “although she had no suggestions on how to achieve that.”

“I venture that will be no easy task,” said Logan. “Is that all she said? There seemed to be a lot of buzzing.”

“She also said to keep the cone uncovered at the meeting,” said Autumn, “and she is going to do something so she can hear better.”

She picked up the cone and peered between its opened splines and turned it over several times before putting it down again.

“I do not think she is inside,” she said. “I venture there is some strong magic here.”

* * *

Fareki and Muhaban sat side by side, not talking. They tried not to move much either and when they did they moved slowly and deliberately for Darius lay not far away, one eye fixed on them at all times. In truth they had little to talk about as their minds, limited in many respects, were unable to comprehend what was happening. A woman with immense fighting skills, while outside their experience, was conceivable as fighting and killing were their particular skills and such a woman was imaginable but creatures that talked? A world of constantly changing colours? A dragon? These things their minds could not accept.

Logan, on the other hand, sat watching Autumn. His mind was more occupied with the absence of food and even though he would have liked to talk with Autumn he accepted her need to retreat within herself and contemplate. No doubt she was even now creating a plan which would solve everything for his experience was that Autumn generally did solve problematic situations. In any event he had no constructive ideas himself. How do you persuade a deity to give up part of its tail to its direst enemy and return the persuader to their home world with no ill feeling?

Autumn sat facing the stream, her back to the others. Her feet rested on her knees, her hands stayed relaxed in her lap and her eyes were closed. She looked to be the essence of peace and calmness but her mind was in turmoil, thoughts flying everywhere and crowding in on each other. No particular thoughts, however, coalesced into anything that could be remotely considered a base on which to build other thoughts.

Then her eyes flashed open. She had felt some slight change in the air on the back of her head which disturbed her awareness. The surface of the stream in front of her was strangely rippled for the ripples came not from somewhere in the stream, as from a stone falling in or a fish taking an insect, but radiated outwards from where she sat. It was most strange and she looked behind at Logan to see that he was staring fixedly at something further behind her, a look of awe on his face. She knew without needing to ask what he was looking at for it was not wholly unexpected. She took a deep breath, held it for a few moments then slowly let it out, willing her suddenly fast beating heart to slow down. Then she stood up and turned to face Xanthous.

“Greetings, Xanthous,” she said formally, putting her palms together in front of her and bowing. “I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup and Founder of the Yeinoba Vyliacennie im Rozum ny Duch Esyup. I bid you welcome and thank you for this meeting.”

Xanthous' head towered over the group for It was at least two heights of a man to the top of its head. It furled its wings and she could see that Its body was long and thin, barely the width of a fat man, although its length could well have been ten paces. It stood solidly on four legs and every scale on Its body gleamed a different colour.

“I did not know there were so many colours,” she thought to herself but kept her face expressionless as she waited for a reply.

Xanthous' head bent down to sniff Muhaban.

“What ails this one?” It said. Even Its voice scintillated.

Autumn glanced at Muhaban who lay prostrate on his back then at Fareki who was still sitting but shaking rather violently.

“I fancy he has fainted,” she said.

The large multi-hued head nodded slowly and what looked to be Its eyes, for they had a glitter not apparent elsewhere on the head, shifted to Darius. The fur on the back of his neck was standing up and his tail was held out stiffly behind him.

“You look familiar,” said Xanthous. “I have seen you before. Who are you?”

“I am Ept,” said Darius.

Xanthous hissed and Its tail fluttered briefly. “You are not welcome here,” It said.

Darius didn't reply although he half-bared his teeth and backed away a pace. Xanthous contemplated him briefly then swung his gaze to Logan then back to Autumn.

“Why are you here?” It asked.

Autumn hesitated for a moment but could see little point in being anything other than direct.

“I am here to ask you to meet with Zeeth,” she said.

Xanthous' wings half extended in surprise and Its front legs momentarily lifted off the ground.

“Then all your efforts have been wasted,” It said. “For such a thing is impossible.”

“Surely not impossible,” said Autumn, latching on to a point of logic for want of any other avenue. “You have both met several times in the past. Is it not possible to meet again?”

“We have met and fought many times,” conceded Xanthous. “You seek to provoke another battle?”

“Most definitely not,” said Autumn. “I seek not only that you meet but that you meet in peace.”

“Impossible,” said Xanthous. There was a sense of finality in Its voice.

“Why so?” asked Autumn. “Can you not contain your emotions and refrain from battle?”

“Tis not I who seeks to do battle,” said Xanthous. Its tail started to swish. “Zeeth is the precipitator of conflict and seeks to usurp me. I desire only harmony in all my worlds and I must protect what is mine.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. She thought for a moment. “But if Zeeth could be persuaded to refrain from provocation you would be willing to make a meeting?”

“Impossible,” said Xanthous. “No mortal nor deity could persuade Zeeth to deny Its fundamental nature.”

“I do not understand this,” said Autumn. “In my world Zeeth is the deity of peace and harmony and attends to the welfare of all who are worthy in death.”

“You accuse me of being the provocateur?” demanded Xanthous, Its eyes flashing as It lowered Its head to stare directly into Autumn's eyes.

“My apologies,” said Autumn, standing her ground. “I sought only to tell you of my lack of understanding. 'Twas not my intent to accuse you.”

Muhaban stirred and groaned and Xanthous swung Its head to look closely at him. Muhaban sat up and opened his eyes to see Xanthous' glittering eyes barely an arms length from his. He gasped and fainted again. Fareki sat with his arms over his head and his head sunk on his chest. He was muttering quietly to himself and rocking backwards and forwards.

“I accept your apologies,” said Xanthous, swinging back to look at Autumn. “What ails these two?”

“I fancy they are exceedingly frightened,” said Autumn.

“Of me?” asked Xanthous.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“Why?” asked Xanthous, puzzlement apparent in Its voice.

“I cannot know the inner thoughts and feelings of others,” said Autumn, “but I wager that a deity such as yourself is so far out of the experience of such as these that their minds are unable to accept your presence with equanimity.”

“Then I must remedy that,” said Xanthous, “for I dislike being the cause of suffering.”

It lowered Its head and breathed gently on Fareki and Muhaban. Fareki stopped rocking and lifted his head. He saw Xanthous and

smiled happily. Muhaban stayed prostrate but his body relaxed and his face took on the expression of one enjoying a pleasant dream.

“A useful skill,” commented Autumn.

“And you?” asked Xanthous, turning back to look at her. “You are frightened of me also?”

“Autumn is frightened of nothing,” blurted Logan. “She has bested Yammoe!²³”

“Who is this?” asked Xanthous, looking at him.

“My companion, Logan,” said Autumn, “and I fear he is giving you a misleading impression. I did not best Yammoe in battle.”

“But he does not speak untruth,” said Xanthous. “Explain.”

“I was killed and Autumn went into the Land of the Undead and brought me back,” said Logan. “She refused to let Yammoe have me.”

Xanthous regarded Autumn thoughtfully. “There is more to you than meets the eye.”

“It is of no consequence, ...” said Autumn.

“Tis to me,” muttered Logan under his breath.

“... and has no bearing on the present,” she continued. “What say you to meeting with Zeeth if you are given every assurance that Zeeth will not provoke any hostilities?”

“Hah!” exclaimed Xanthous derisively. “And you can give such assurance?”

“I was only trying to establish a point of agreement,” said Autumn. “I do not know if I can give that assurance but if I could, would you be willing to meet with Zeeth?”

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“I begin to see how you could have bested Yammoe,” said Xanthous. “You have a great strength of purpose.”

Autumn smiled and held out her hands. “Please?”

The silence grew and became palpable. Then all of Xanthous’ scales flashed and changed colour in a wave that travelled the length of Its body.

“Very well,” said Xanthous softly.

“You will meet with Zeeth?” asked Autumn, not quite believing what she had heard.

“Yes, I will meet with Zeeth,” said Xanthous, “but only if you give me your absolute assurance that Zeeth will not provoke any hostilities.”

Autumn exhaled sharply and nearly sagged with relief but drew herself up again instantly.

“Thank you,” she said.

Xanthous extended Its wings and lifted off the ground with only the faintest movement of air and without a sound. It hovered some way above Autumn’s head.

“But not here,” It said. “I will never permit Zeeth to enter this world. Inform Sayiya when you can give me your assurance. Until then, fare well.”

With a sinewy wave of Its tail, Xanthous flew off with a sparkling of bright colours against the darkening pink sky.

“Well,” said Logan with a drawn out drawl. “That went better than I expected.” He looked at Autumn proudly.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn looking very thoughtful. “But how am I going to talk to Zeeth if I can’t get out of here and Zeeth cannot come in?”

Chapter Thirty Three

“Why not talk to Mother Midcarn?” asked Logan.

Autumn gave him a startled look then exclaimed “Mizule! I forgot all about the pine cone!” She looked around wildly. “Where is it?”

“Where you left it,” said Logan, picking up the cone.

“Ahh, thank you,” said Autumn, taking it.

She settled herself back down on the ground and breathed deeply a few times to recover her composure then held the cone to her lips.

“Are you there, Mother Midcarn?” she asked and held it to her ear for a few moments then smiled.

“Ahh, greetings to you also,” she said, holding the cone to her lips again. “Were you able to hear the discussion?”

This time she kept the cone to her ear and Logan watched intently as she nodded several times, said 'yes' three times and 'I understand' and listened quite a lot. He found it frustrating but it was not long before Autumn carefully laid the cone on top of her pack.

“She heard the discussion sufficiently,” said Autumn, lifting her feet onto her knees, “but she has not yet been able to arrange for us to hear her clearly. Apparently it is a complex matter of converting energy to frequencies, whatever that means, but hearing us would seem to be much simpler. That is not our concern, however, as we have not the skills of sorcery to assist. What is our concern is that she will intercede with Zeeth and endeavour to persuade It to meet with Xanthous.”

“That is good news indeed,” said Logan. “Did she say how we will return afterwards?”

“She made no mention of it,” said Autumn, “but I imagine arrangements will be made as 'tis unlikely Xanthous will cherish our continuing presence here regardless of the outcome of such a meeting,

assuming Zeeth is in agreement.”

“So what do we do now?” asked Logan.

“We wait,” said Autumn. “Mother Midcarn will let us know the outcome of her discussions with Zeeth.”

“Let us hope that outcome is soon known,” said Logan, “for it is nearly night again. How will we know when she speaks?”

“A good question,” said Autumn. She raised an eyebrow and gazed thoughtfully at the pine cone. “Tis unlikely she will now find the time to do what needs doing with these energies. I shall stay awake and hold the cone in case it buzzes.”

Logan thought about that for a while. “No,” he said. “Twould be better if I did and you slept. I have a fancy that you will need to be refreshed and alert for who knows what the morrow will bring.”

“You are a good and caring friend, Logan,” said Autumn. “This has been a day of much stress and I confess I am tired. What say you we take turns?”

“Groww,” said Darius, the fur on his neck almost back to its normal sleekness. “The night is my domain. I will guard the cone and wake you if it does anything. I would return to my world at the earliest opportunity. Sleep and keep your mind at rest.”

“I thank you,” said Autumn.

“I shall stay awake as well,” said Logan. “Twould be safer if two are listening.”

“As you wish,” said Darius, coming over to lie beside the pine cone on Autumn's pack.

Autumn continued to sit and contemplate the day for some while then composed herself for sleep when darkness fell. It was a long and uneventful night.

* * *

Autumn ended her morning meditations when she heard Sayiya greet Logan and Darius and Logan's startled reply. She exhaled slowly then looked around. Sayiya was resting beside the stream looking at her.

"Greetings, Sayiya," she said. "What news?"

"I have none," said Sayiya. "I have come seeking news from you."

Autumn looked at Logan and he shook his head sadly.

"Alas, we have none," she said, "but we wait in hope."

"Xanthous anticipated this," he said. "Indeed, the Creator holds out no prospect of Zeeth agreeing to a peaceful meeting."

"We can but try," said Autumn. "How goes it with you? You are well?"

"I am well," said Sayiya. "The Creator also sends a gift." His small head extended on its leathery neck and twisted to point at some bundles of black leaves nearby.

"Please give our thanks to Xanthous," said Autumn. "Any gift given freely is most precious."

Logan looked enquiringly at Autumn and she nodded so he got up and walked over to investigate.

"Aloidia!" he exclaimed, unwrapping one of the bundles. "'Tis bread!"

Excitedly he broke off a piece and popped it in his mouth. A look of supreme happiness spread over his face as he chewed.

"There is one for each of you," said Sayiya.

Logan distributed the packages and Fareki and Muhaban received theirs with delight. Darius merely looked at his disdainfully then ignored it.

"Your bread tastes very much like ours," said Autumn after tasting hers. "Where does it come from? We have seen no enmern thus far in

our travels here.”

“It is from your world,” said Sayiya. “The Creator sent me there to find sustenance for you.”

“That is most kind of both of you,” said Autumn. “Was this your first visit?”

“I have been there before,” said Sayiya. “I have performed errands for Xanthous there infrequently.”

“How do you like it there?” asked Logan, feeling magnanimous now his belly no longer screamed at him.

“I confess I find it a drab place,” said Sayiya. “How do you manage in a world where everything stays the same colour? Is it not exceedingly dull?”

“We like it,” said Logan, his good cheer receding slightly. “We find your constantly changing colours disturbing. A red sky is, I suppose, tolerable as we have red skies on occasion but a purple sun and pink grass? No, much as we like colours we like things to stay the same.”

“Each to their own, I suppose,” said Sayiya. “No matter. I shall return at dawn tomorrow. Mayhap you will have news then.”

“Will you not stay with us a while?” asked Autumn. “We have questions aplenty and more besides.”

“If your questions concern Miesca,” said Sayiya, “then I shall not answer them as this is not your world and knowledge of it will serve you no good. We shall meet again at dawn.” He began to fade.

“Wait,” snarled Darius.

Saiya's half faded form backed away as rapidly as it could but did not fade any further.

“The thing buzzes,” said Darius.

“Excellent,” said Autumn, jumping up to collect the pine cone. “Sayiya, we may well have news for you momentarily.”

Saiya solidified again but kept a wary eye on Darius as Autumn listened to the cone for some time.

“So I can give Xanthous my assurance of that?” she asked then her body went rigid as she concentrated. “But how does that help?” she demanded after a few moments, her face a study of concentration and her eyes open but unseeing. Unconsciously she pulled her ponytail in front of her and began running her fingers through it. “I see,” she said after a lengthy period of listening. “I can but put it to Xanthous.” She nodded several times then said “Yes, Its messenger is with me now.” Then she put the cone back down on her pack and stroked her ponytail a few times before tossing it over her shoulder.

“Sayiya,” she said. “You may tell Xanthous that Zeeth has agreed to a meeting and that I can give my assurance that it will be peaceful.”

“The Creator will be most interested to receive that news,” said Saiya noncommittally.

“There is, however, one minor difficulty,” continued Autumn, “and I am confident that Xanthous will continue to extend Its benevolence.”

“What is that difficulty?” asked Saiya.

“The location of the meeting,” said Autumn. “Zeeth refuses to permit Xanthous into Its world.”

“I will take your messages to Xanthous,” said Saiya. He paused. “I am only the messenger and it is not for me to express an opinion but I would remind you that the Creator did forbid Zeeth entry to Miesca.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and therein lies the difficulty for neither will permit the other into Its world.”

“You say it is a minor difficulty,” said Saiya, “but 'twould seem insurmountable. Where then can this meeting take place?”

“There is one possibility,” said Autumn, “and failing that then we will have to prevail upon one or other deity to make a concession on entry and I strongly suspect neither will. Please convey the existence of this possibility to Xanthous and my respectful request that I be permitted to discuss it with It.”

“I shall deliver your messages,” said Sayiya. “Do you wish to give any details of this possibility?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I will explain directly to Xanthous if It is willing to listen.”

“As you wish,” said Sayiya. He looked at Logan as if expecting a sudden question but none was forthcoming so he faded away, taking the black leaves that had wrapped the bread with him.

“I daresay that was not wholly unexpected,” said Logan pensively, “although I, for one, did not expect it. No doubt if Xanthous agrees to let Zeeth enter this world then Zeeth will do the same and there will still be stalemate. So there is some place that is not in either world?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “I am too lacking in knowledge of these things but Mother Midcarn did have a suggestion and we can but see if it is acceptable.”

“Where is this place?” asked Logan.

“A remarkably pertinent question,” said Xanthous in Its scintillating voice as it landed directly in front of Autumn.

“Greetings, Xanthous,” said Autumn, bowing with her palms together in front of her. Logan did the same because he generally copied Autumn when he didn’t know what to do. “You honour us with your presence so quickly.”

“Greetings, Autumn Savannah,” said Xanthous. “I was not otherwise engaged and the possibility of somewhere that is not in either world piqued my curiosity. Where is this place?”

“The dwelling of a friend of ours,” said Autumn.

“This friend is in your world?” asked Xanthous.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“And how is it that your friend dwells outside your world?” asked Xanthous.

“That I cannot answer,” said Autumn, “for I have no knowledge of these things and I wager I would have no understanding even if I had full knowledge.”

“You play games with me,” said Xanthous. “Explain now or never.” It extended Its wings in preparation for departure.

“Our friend is a great sorcerer,” said Autumn. “She has skills in manipulating space and time and no doubt is able to create a place that is outside both your world and that of Zeeth. She proposes that you both meet there.”

“You try my patience,” said Xanthous, rising into the air. “None have such power except me. Fare well.”

“Please stay a moment longer,” said Autumn urgently. “Because of my lack of understanding I am no doubt explaining myself badly. I would ask that you speak with her directly.”

“She is here?” demanded Xanthous, hovering overhead. “I can only sense you five.”

“She is not here,” said Autumn, “but we are able to speak with her.”

Xanthous slowly settled back on the ground and lowered Its head to look directly into the eyes of Autumn.

“You can speak with another across the barrier?” It asked slowly.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

Xanthous' scales slowly changed colours in waves along the length of its body and specks swirled hypnotically in its eyes.

“How?” It demanded.

“With this,” said Autumn, bending to pick up the pine cone. She held it out to Xanthous and the cone buzzed.

“What was that noise?” asked Xanthous.

“That was my friend speaking,” said Autumn. “Unfortunately it does not work fully so you have to hold it close to your ear to make out her words.”

Xanthous looked disbelieving but moved Its large head close to the cone as Autumn held it up. Judging by the positioning, Xanthous' ear was midway between his eye and horn. The cone buzzed and Xanthous' expression became inscrutable.

“Your name,” demanded Xanthous. The cone buzzed briefly.

“I know not that name,” said Xanthous. “Where are you?”

It cocked an eye at Autumn. “What world is Glead?” It asked.

“’Tis a small village in my world,” said Autumn. “Mother Midcarn's dwelling is nearby.”

“How is it that this Glead is both within and without your world?” asked Xanthous.

The cone buzzed briefly and Xanthous stared at it.

“Magic?” It said, contemptuously. “And that is all the explanation you will offer?”

There was another brief buzz from the cone and Xanthous bent Its hind legs to rest the lower half of Its body on the ground. The silence grew and the tension mounted then Xanthous' scales burst into a brilliant display of green, pink and gold sparks as it laughed.

“I know not the truth of this,” It said, “but your friend intrigues me. I would meet with her and if, as she claims, she is able to arrange this

then I will meet with Zeeth also. Sayiya, you will come with me.”

“As you wish, Creator,” said Sayiya. “And these? What would you wish with them?”

“Hmm,” said Xanthous. “These two are not your companions?” It waved Its tail at Fareki and Muhaban.

“No,” said Autumn. “They followed us here for reasons of their own. Oh! Where are they?”

“I have sent them back from whence they came,” said Xanthous. “Worry not, they are unharmed. They have no place in this world.”

“And us?” asked Autumn. “What is to become of us?”

“You gave your assurance that Zeeth will come in peace,” said Xanthous. “You will come with me to make good that assurance.”

“Willingly,” said Autumn, “but please send my companions back to our world. The assurance is mine not theirs.”

“As you wish,” said Xanthous.

“No!” shouted Logan. “I go where Autumn goes!”

“Is that your desire?” asked Xanthous, looking at Autumn,

“You could be in great danger, Logan,” said Autumn. “We have no idea what this place is like.”

“I don't care!” exclaimed Logan running up to Autumn and grabbing the sleeve of her robe. “I will not go back to our world without you!”

“I admire your courage and determination,” said Xanthous. “So be it. I will not separate you two but the pussy cat does not come with us. Begone, Ept. You defile my world with your every breath.”

Chapter Thirty Four

Darius disappeared but before either Autumn or Logan could exclaim the pink grass disappeared as well. They found themselves on a muddy track in the rain but before either could take in any details the muddy track and the rain had been replaced themselves by a small cosy room with a warm fire crackling in a corner.

“Ooops,” cried a short fat figure pressed hard against a wall by the long sinewy body of Xanthous. “My mistake! A moment!”

The walls of the room rapidly expanded sideways so the room became greatly bigger, big enough to accommodate Xanthous, a turtle and three people as well as an untidy collection of books, cauldrons, furniture and copious quantities of parchments, both rolled and flat.

“I am most grievously sorry about that,” said Mother Midcarn, rubbing her chest. “I was concentrating on not leaving you outside any longer than necessary and forgot to adjust this room to fit.”

Xanthous peered around cautiously then studied the woman.

“You are Mother Midcarn?” It asked, its voice seemingly out of place inside an apparently normal, if somewhat large, room.

“At your service,” said Mother Midcarn, attempting a clumsy curtsy.

“Your voice is different to when we spoke through that device,” said Xanthous.

“Ah, well, that is because of the shape of the thing,” said Mother Midcarn somewhat vaguely. “Do you still have it, dear?”

“I, um ...” said Autumn. She stood quite still for a moment then felt behind her back. “I do not have my pack with me.”

“It is over there,” whispered Logan hoarsely. “I’ll get it.”

Her pack, the pine cone, their staffs and the water bottle were in the same place relative to where they had been in Miesca but were now

underneath a small table on which a large ornate candle with symbols cut into its side burned.

He rummaged under the table and brought out the cone and held it out to Autumn. Mother Midcarn snatched it and showed it to Xanthous.

“You see these opened splines?” she said, pointing with a somewhat grubby fingernail.

“Ye-es,” said Xanthous slowly, peering at the cone.

“They are arranged in a pattern of great magical significance,” said Mother Midcarn, “but that is not important. What is important is that when the splines are open they pick up sounds and make them echo inside. ’Tis a fairly simple matter to collect those echoes which is how I could hear what you were saying. For you to hear me I had to put echoes inside the cone which is more difficult. What I have not yet worked out satisfactorily is how to have the splines make my echoes louder.”

“I see,” said Xanthous then jerked its head around sharply as Logan knocked the table over onto Sayiya while trying to retrieve Autumn’s staff.

“Sorry!” exclaimed Logan. He quickly dropped the staff and righted the table then busied himself picking up the scrolls and other bits and pieces that had fallen on the floor. The candle had gone out but he picked it up and tried to position it back on the table where it had been. Sayiya moved further away, muttering to himself.

“A little closer to the corner,” hissed the candle and re-lit itself. Logan jerked his hand away and peered suspiciously at it. The flame jabbed in the direction the candle wished to be moved. “That way.”

“Oh, never mind the candle, dear,” said Mother Midcarn. It blew a puff of smoke at Logan and giggled quietly. Logan backed off and used his foot to pull Autumn’s staff a safe distance away before picking it up. Mother Midcarn absently tossed the cone to Autumn just as Logan was handing her the staff and she caught the cone and

took the staff at the same time.

“We were on a track in the rain for a moment,” said Autumn, “before we came into this room. Where was that?”

“That was just outside, dear, by the crossroad” said Mother Midcarn. “I trust you did not get wet?”

“No, we are not,” said Autumn, “but I am curious. Could we not have come straight to this room from Miesca?”

“Oh dear me, no,” said Mother Midcarn. “I have not the power to break through the barrier. I had to wait until Xanthous brought you through then as quickly as possible get you all out of the world before Zeeth noticed as Xanthous is not permitted there. That is why I didn't make this room big enough.”

“So we are not in your hut?” asked Autumn.

“Yes, you are in my hut,” said Mother Midcarn. “Humble though it is.”

“And is your hut not still in Aferraron?” asked Autumn.

Mother Midcarn clasped her hands together under her chins and looked a trifle anxious.

“Yes, as you say, my hut is in Aferraron, dear” she said, “and you are inside my hut but it is quite wrong for you to assume that being inside my hut means you are in Aferraron. Just because one thing is inside another in a place it does not follow that the first thing is also in that place.”

“But how is that possible?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“Trust me, dear,” said Mother Midcarn. “It's easier that way. Xanthous, do you agree that you are not in your world?”

“Decidedly not,” said Xanthous.

“And do you agree you are not in the world of Zeeth?” she asked.

“I sense none of the world of Zeeth here,” said Xanthous. “Nor Zeeth Itself.”

“Then will you meet with Zeeth here?” she asked.

“Do I have Autumn Savannah’s assurance that Zeeth will come to this meeting in peace?” asked Xanthous.

“As far as it is possible for me to give that assurance,” said Autumn.

“She means ‘yes’,” said Mother Midcarn hurriedly before Xanthous could take umbridge at Autumn’s less than full assurance. “You have my assurance as well, for what that is worth.”

Xanthous’ head swung from Autumn to Mother Midcarn then back to Autumn and Its scales faded a little then returned.

“Very well,” It said. “You will inform me when Zeeth arrives and I shall return.”

“Can you not wait for Zeeth?” asked Mother Midcarn. “It will be here shortly.”

“Absolutely not,” exclaimed Xanthous in a loud voice that lacked much of its normal scintillation. “I will not be seen as a supplicant to Zeeth!”

“A fair point,” said Mother Midcarn soothingly. “Umm, how shall I inform you of Zeeth’s arrival?”

“Sayiya, bring the cone,” said Xanthous.

Saiya tried to pick up the cone with its front leg but could not grip it properly so Logan picked it up and wedged the end of it under his carapace on the back of his neck.

“Thank you,” muttered Saiya.

Xanthous twitched slightly then glared at Mother Midcarn.

“Do you try to trap me here?” It demanded.

“Oh dear me, no,” exclaimed Mother Midcarn, looking flustered. “My apologies. I have to return you to the outside before you can return to your world. Do you wish to go now?”

“Yes,” said Xanthous softly as all its scales started to glow pale red. “Now!”

Mother Midcarn's lips moved then she waved her hand and Xanthous and Saiya disappeared. She paused for moment concentrating on something then relaxed.

“Xanthous is back in Its own world,” she said with relief. “’Tis always a worrying moment.”

“You have done this before?” asked Autumn.

“Not really, dear,” said Mother Midcarn, “but its usually best not to let deities know that. Would you like something to eat or drink before I call Zeeth?”

“Yes, please,” said Logan just as Autumn said “no, thank you.”

He looked at her with a slightly pained expression.

“I fancy it would be best to get this over with,” said Autumn looking at him. “Then you can eat and drink all you want.”

“As you wish,” said Mother Midcarn and Logan shrugged.

“What do you want us to do while this meeting takes place?” asked Autumn.

“It is your meeting,” said Mother Midcarn. “I am only providing the place.”

“My meeting?” exclaimed Autumn. “But it was you who told me to persuade Xanthous to come.”

“And you succeeded beautifully,” said Mother Midcarn. “Both deities respect you and you have a very real chance of returning the Kastounasc to Zeeth and establishing a peace between them, however uneasy.”

“Me?” said Autumn, looking aghast. “But what have I to do with this? Why me?”

“That is a difficult question to answer,” said Mother Midcarn, “but 'twould seem that you have been chosen.”

“Chosen? By whom?” demanded Autumn. “Why was I not consulted before this choosing?”

“That I cannot say,” said Mother Midcarn, “but I suggest we get this meeting started and I will tell you what I can afterwards. 'Tis best not to keep deities waiting unduly.”

“But, ...” said Autumn, feeling trapped, “... but ...”. She looked around for some means of escape.

“Autumn,” said Logan, reaching over and taking her hand. “Autumn, if anyone can do this, you can.”

Autumn stared into Logan's eyes and what she saw helped calm her.

“Ahh, Logan,” she said quietly, putting her other hand on top of his. “Would that I had your faith in me. I thank you.”

Logan smiled and put his other hand on top of their three already intertwined hands. “Surely it cannot be any worse than facing your Elders at the Esysup and debating nonsense with them?”

“Oh, I wager it could be much, much worse,” said Autumn. “There were fights during those debates but none would compare with Xanthous and Zeeth if either should lose their temper. This may not end with only bloodied noses.”

“I mean that only as a silly joke to lighten your mood,” said Logan. “'Tis best not to dwell on what may happen if it should come to

blows.”

“True,” said Autumn. She pulled her hands away and took a deep breath. “Very well, Mother Midcarn. Bring them here.”

“May Aloidia be with you,” said Logan, edging towards the door. “I have no role here so I shall just wait outside.”

“You will stay beside me,” said Autumn firmly. “I may need your counsel and for certain I will need your support.”

“Ahh,” said Logan just as a shimmering column of gold appeared. He scuttled back to stand beside Autumn.

“Where is that monstrosity?” demanded Zeeth. “Why am I kept waiting?”

The room expanded once again and Mother Midcarn sank into the darkness of a corner.

“I am here, warmonger,” said Xanthous appearing on the other side of the room. Its scales matched Zeeth's gold for brilliance.

“Greetings to you both,” said Autumn a little nervously.

“I want my Kastounasc back,” demanded Zeeth, Its column of gold leaning towards Xanthous dangerously.

“Never,” exclaimed Xanthous, glaring at It. A small trickle of flame licked around Its jaw.

“Please!” said Autumn loudly. “You are both here on the promise of peace. Would you have It said that deities cannot keep their promises?”

“Pah!” exclaimed Zeeth but Its column leaned back again and dimmed slightly.

Xanthous said nothing but the flame flickered and died.

“Thank you,” said Autumn, sensing both understood the need for a solution but were unwilling to be the first to back down. “Now, we are here to discuss the Kastounasc.”

Neither deity reacted but the atmosphere in the room started to hum and crackle.

“Please,” said Autumn loudly. “Let us discuss this calmly!”

The hum and crackle faded away.

“There is nothing to discuss,” said Xanthous. “I will not permit that to have any part of my body.”

“This is a pointless exercise,” said Zeeth. “I am leaving.”

“I beg you stay,” said Autumn. “Nothing has been discussed as yet.”

“Then get on with it,” said Zeeth.

“I am trying to,” said Autumn. “Now Zeeth, do you know what the Kastounasc means to Xanthous?”

“’Tis only a part of Its tail,” said Zeeth. “’Tis not even the entire tail, just the tip.”

“But you would agree that Xanthous is entitled to Its whole tail?” said Autumn. “Much as you are entitled to your entire column?”

Zeeth's column quivered but did not reply.

“Do you not agree?” asked Autumn.

“I agree,” said Zeeth reluctantly.

“Good,” said Autumn. “And Xanthous, do you know what the Kastounasc means to Zeeth?”

“’Tis a trophy,” said Xanthous. “A symbol that Zeeth bested me.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “Do you truly not know?”

“What else is there to know?” said Xanthous.

“It is much more than that,” said Autumn. “In the world of Zeeth, when mortals such as myself or Logan die we pass through what we call the Land of the Undead which is the domain of Yammoe and face the judgement of Zeeth. Those who are judged worthy move from there into the Land of the Dead which is the domain of Zeeth Itself and those who are judged unworthy remain in the domain of Yammoe.”

“I do not concern myself with the details of their world,” said Xanthous. “What has this to do with my tail?”

“Zeeth cannot make this judgement alone,” said Autumn, “or, at least, that is my understanding. Zeeth, is it not true that you need the Kastounasc in order to make that judgement of worthiness?”

“It is true,” admitted Zeeth.

“So you are inadequate as a deity!” exclaimed Xanthous. “I knew it all along!”

“Please,” said Autumn, holding up a hand. “To be impolite is to provoke anger and if I might remind you, you have both sworn peace here.”

“I withdraw my remark,” said Xanthous. “I will not let it be said that I provoked that usurper.”

“I am no usurper!” roared Zeeth.

“Please!” shouted Autumn.

Both deities quietened down.

“Thank you,” said Autumn. “Now Xanthous, when I was in your world you were concerned that those two who were not my companions were afraid of you. Is it true that you did not want to be the cause of their

suffering?”

“Yes,” said Xanthous. “I abhor needless suffering.”

“As do I,” said Autumn, “but that is by the by. More to the point, with Zeeth unable to make the correct judgement of worthiness, there will be some mortals who have died but are forced to remain in the Land of the Undead because Zeeth is unable to judge that they are truly worthy to go to the Land of the Dead.”

“I did not know this,” admitted Xanthous.

“Then you will not know that you are the cause of their suffering?” asked Autumn.

“How so?” asked Xanthous.

“The Land of the Undead is a land of eternal suffering,” said Autumn, “whereas the Land of the Dead is a land of eternal contentment.”

“Is this truth?” demanded Xanthous.

“It is truth,” said Zeeth.

“So the Kastounasc is the means by which suffering is alleviated and the dead move into the Land of the Dead?” asked Xanthous.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

Xanthous sat down heavily on Its back legs and Its head drooped. “I did not know this,” it said mournfully.

“Do you understand now why Zeeth wants the Kastounasc back?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Xanthous, quietly. “So much suffering, so much suffering.”

Autumn stayed silent to give Xanthous time to think about it.

Xanthous lifted Its head and looked at Zeeth. “If I give you the

Kastounasc, what do I get in return?"

"What do you want in return?" asked Autumn.

Xanthous thought for many moments. "Two things," It said. "Firstly, I need a replacement else I have no stability in flight. Secondly I desire that the Kastounasc be known as the Kastounasc of Xanthous hence forth."

"That would seem fair," said Autumn. "What say you, Zeeth?"

"I have nothing to replace it," said Zeeth, "but I am willing to call it any name Xanthous desires."

"So all we need to do is find something to replace the tip of your tail," said Autumn. "That should not be too difficult."

Logan tugged on Autumn's sleeve and whispered in her ear.

"A fair point," said Autumn and turned back to face the deities. "Would it be possible to see the Kastounasc? I have no idea what it looks like."

Xanthous swung Its tail around and offered the tip to Autumn. "'Tis the grey part at the very end," It said. "It never changes colour."

Autumn frowned. "But that looks just like ...," she paused. "Logan, my pack."

Logan grabbed her pack and passed it to her and she rummaged inside and pulled out her snake stone.

"This is my snake stone," she said, "my thinking stone. 'Tis a stone I use to soothe and comfort me when my mind is greatly troubled. If I am not much mistaken it would seem to be the same size and shape as your Kastounasc."

Xanthous peered at the stone. "It has a green streak," It said.

"Is that of significance?" asked Autumn.

“I know not,” said Xanthous. It swung Its tail around again and neatly dropped the Kastounasc at Autumn's feet. “See if it fits.”

Autumn tried her stone in the gap at the end of Xanthous' tail. The stone fitted.

“The weight would seem about right,” said Xanthous, swishing Its tail from side to side. “But I would test it in flight.”

The walls and roof of the room receded suddenly into the far distance and Xanthous launched Itself into the air. It swooped and soared at length before returning. The walls and roof closed in again.

“I like the green streak,” It said, admiring Its tail. A number of other scales along the tail developed a green streak as well.

“You may have the stone if you desire,” said Autumn. “Can I give the Kastounasc to Zeeth?”

“The Kastounasc of Xanthous,” said Xanthous.

“My apologies,” said Autumn. “Can I give the Kastounasc of Xanthous to Zeeth?”

Xanthous swished Its tail and gave Zeeth a long appraising look.

“Very well,” It said.

“And will you both promise eternal peace from now on?” asked Autumn, feeling emboldened.

“I will not be the one to break it,” said Xanthous.

“Nor I,” said Zeeth.

“Excellent,” said Autumn. She walked over to Zeeth. “Here is the Kastounasc of Xanthous. May it always help you judge truly.”

A stream of gold extended from the column and grasped the Kastounasc and held it in the air.

“I thank you, Xanthous,” said Zeeth. “Let the Kastounasc of Xanthous be forever the symbol of peace between us.”

Xanthous swished Its tail again. “Yes,” it said then they both disappeared. Mother Midcarn emerged from the corner.

“Woo-hoo,” cried Logan doing a little dance. “I knew you could do it, Autumn, I knew it.”

“I did little save keep the peace,” said Autumn. “I think they both knew the time had come to resolve their differences.”

“Mayhap,” said Mother Midcarn, “but to you alone can go the credit for making it possible.”

“We will find you another thinking stone,” said Logan. “You can have mine if you like.”

“Thank you but no,” said Autumn. “Yours is for you alone. I will find another that accords with me. Mother Midcarn, you said you would tell me why and by who I was chosen for this.”

“I do not fully know,” said Mother Midcarn, “but you remember the letter from Xanos in which he talks of his companions on his quest?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Cambul and Opgarn.”

“There was another,” said Mother Midcarn. “The donkey, if you remember.”

“Mookuku?” said Autumn. “Yes, Xanos trusted it more than the others. What of it?”

“Mookuku was, in fact, Daumico Ka Zim Dumfugwa,” said Mother Midcarn. “The greatest sorcerer of the time.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn. “You mean there was a donkey that was a sorcerer?”

“No, dear,” said Mother Midcarn patiently. “Daumico merely posed as

a donkey to travel with Xanos. After Xanos died he returned to human form.”

“Oh yes,” said Autumn. “Well no doubt he had good reason. What has this to do with me?”

“I do not know the details,” said Mother Midcarn, “but Daumico left a message in time which I found. Apparently Daumico had had dealings with Ameepavai the Drasta and believed that Xanos would be the one to break through the barrier to Miesca. When it became clear that Xanos would not live long enough Daumico encouraged Xanos to write you the letter.”

“So it was for Autumn, after all,” exclaimed Logan. “I knew it!”

“But why me?” asked Autumn. “How did Daumico know I would one day exist?”

“That I cannot say, dear,” said Mother Midcarn, “for as much as the Drastas claim they can see the future it is always very obscure and tenuous. Some future event depends so much on the actions of many which they may or may not take that the event may never come to pass or may be in a very different form to that which was foreseen.”

“But two hundred summers?” said Autumn. “That is a very long time.”

“That said, I have given it a lot of thought,” said Mother Midcarn, “and you are the only likely candidate so I wager that the two hundred summers was by the by. Daumico knew you would come along sooner or later and put a protection spell over the box and the letter so it would not decay or be disturbed until you arrived to collect it.”

“We did think it strange that the letter was still intact after so long,” said Autumn, “but it still does not answer the question of why me.”

“Well, dear, you are special,” said Mother Midcarn. “In fact you are alone in this for there is no other past, present or, I daresay, future who can match you.”

“In what way?” asked Autumn. “Come, you are speaking in riddles.”

“No,” said Mother Midcarn, “I am just not explaining myself well. There are four things that make you special and some of this I know from the message Daumico left for me. Firstly you are a Krisana of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup, as was Xanos which is what lead Daumico to work with Xanos and that means you have exceptional skills and discipline. Moreover, you had the skills in sorcery of both Daumico and myself to aid you as well as something above and beyond that. The magic of Havildar.²⁴ All four combined made it possible for you and you alone to breach the barrier into Xanthous’ world.”

“But I was not alone,” said Autumn. “I had Logan and Darius with me and those two others who followed later.”

“You went first, dear, and made it possible,” said Mother Midcarn. “The others followed before the effects died down.”

“I find this very difficult to accept,” said Autumn.

“I can understand that,” said Mother Midcarn, “but there is no hurry. You are back in Aferraron now. Why not spend a few days with me and relax and we can talk of these things and more besides? This is not your place but that is not a reason to not tarry for a while.”

* * *

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Richid the Deaf. He felt the sun but could not hear the birds welcoming the dawn nor the nearby villagers preparing for the new day. He rolled over and tried to return to sleep but sleep was gone. He rolled back and sat up on his thin bed of straw and gazed around his humble dwelling with distaste. It may once have been humble but, in truth, it was now a hovel. Many years before he had a woman who tended their dwelling but when he eventually returned from battle with the wounds that had taken his hearing she had left him. In fact she had left Zay and gone to seek her fortune beyond the mountains. Richid bore her no ill will and hoped, on those rare occasions when he thought of her, that she had fared well.

²⁴ See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Second Tale*. After being stabbed with an evil thorn, Autumn's life is saved by the dryad Awendene who implants five seeds in Autumn's belly and which give her some of the power of trees.

There was something amiss but Richid could not place what it was. He scratched what remained of the back of his head and belched. He couldn't hear it, of course, but he felt the distension in his belly subside. He gazed around again. Something was not as it should be. Although the place was a mess he knew every little part of it well.

Aha! That was it. Over beside the half rotten post that had once supported a simple woven door was a small bag. Richid did not have a small bag and even if he did he had nothing to keep in it. In fact, if he had ever had a small bag he would have traded it with one of the women of the village for food or some small luxury to ease his life a little. So where had that bag come from?

It took some effort but Richid got out of his pile of straw. He was getting old and his knees and back hurt. It only took three paces to reach the bag for his hut was small but the pain in his back meant it took longer to bend down to retrieve the bag than it did to get to the doorway. Still, he picked it up and felt it. There was something inside. Hard but loose, like money but Richid knew there was no money in it. What little money there was in the village was hoarded by the few who had it and none ever came his way. The bag was tied with a thin thong and his fingers picked at the knot until it opened. He upended the bag and emptied it into the palm of his hand. It looked familiar.

It took several moments but then he remembered the strangers who had come to the village a while before. The villagers had tried to entrap them but the woman had fought them off and they had made their escape. Richid had run after them and spoken with them.

Spoken with them!

What a glorious day! After almost a lifetime of silence Richid had heard them speak.

With shaking hands Richid uncoiled the necklace and stared at it. Was it possible? He had lived in hope for many days after they had gone but that hope had slowly died. Today it flared up again.

Richid slowly lifted the necklace to his scrawny neck and, after several fumbles, managed to get the ends together. The necklace felt cold and

heavy. Then Richid froze. Had he heard something? He bent and twisted, trying to remember how to listen to a far off sound. He stumbled out of his humble hovel and listened intently. He could hear a voice from one of the nearby dwellings.

“Oi, you god-forsaken bitch, get me some damned food.”

Richid fell to his knees with tears of joy streaming down his face and thanked every deity he could think of but most of all he thanked the woman named Autumn Savannah. The stranger who had given him back his hearing.

Glossary

{Pronunciations given in curly brackets}

(In round brackets, OT refers to Old Tongue terms, N to Neander terms)

[where an entry is specific to a particular Tale, that Tale is in square brackets]

Ameepavai {am-ee-pa-va-ee} [6]: One of a line of oracles at Drasta and who operated within that role some two hundred years before the time of *The Annals*. Ameepavai is regarded by all except a handful of fringe pseudo mystics as the most gifted of all Drastas although no direct records of her insights have been preserved.

Asio {az-ee-oh} [6]: Headman of the village of Zay.

Buhfa Ouoinel {boo-fa oo-oy-nel} [6]: A war lord (or, more likely, a bandit leader with considerable local influence) of the West Skizze Mountains who extracts tolls from travellers and 'protection money' from the local populace.

Bunkoru {bun-kor-oo} [6]: Son of Outea the farmer.

Cambul {ka-am-bu-le} [6]: Travelling companion of Xanos and a Krisana of Morath from the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup. Cambul renounced the Order citing doubts three years after returning from Neander. He was killed by an arrow during a raid by bandits later that same year on the village of Biasdo. It is coincidental that Biasdo is also the birthplace of Logan but likely not of any significance as Biasdo was one of the villages within a few days travel of the Esyup. It is likely that Cambul reached Biasdo after leaving the Esyup and found no reason to move on.

Daumico Ka Zim Dumfugwa {dow-um-ik-oh ca zim do-um-fu-ge-wa-he} [6]: A sorcerer contemporaneous with Xanos who endeavoured, while in the guise of Mookuku the donkey, to facilitate Xanos' entry into Miesca in order to retrieve the Kastounasc. When it became apparent that Xanos would die before locating Miesca, Daumico Ka Zim Dumfugwa caused Xanos to leave a letter passing the quest to Autumn Savannah.

Djikoska {ji-ko-se-ka}: A mountain in the Skizze Ranges and the (presumed) home of Darius.

Drasta {de-ras-ta} (N) [6]: A term referring both to a line of oracles or seers stretching back into antiquity and the physical location from which they operated on Idu Mountain. The reputations of each seer

varied with some being regarded as little more than fraudsters while others attracted great respect. Sadly, no direct written records were kept of Drastan prophecies although there are a number cited in the biographies and histories of those persons who consulted them. There is considerable doubt as to the accuracy of many of these as it is not unknown for individuals and groups to 'invent' a Drastan prophecy before an event to motivate their followers or subsequently to justify their actions.

Duuba {du-oo-ba}: A town on the Limbis River in the foothills of Idu.

Eyes of Samnosura [6]: A distinctive rock formation high on the North Eastern side of Samnosura Mountain in the Skizze Ranges. A vertical sheet of metamorphic rock averaging some 1.3m in thickness and 24m high juts out from the surrounding limestone. Due to weathering there are two holes in the sheet approximately 3m from the top. The two holes are side by side although one is slightly larger and some 20cm lower, giving the 'Eyes' a lopsided squinting appearance when viewed from the side.

Fareki {fa-rek-aye}[6]: One of the two men sent by Buhfa Ouoinel to find and kill Autumn and Logan.

Farouta {fa-row-ta} [6]: The manager of the pilgrim site for the Drasta.

Galmasar {gal-ma-sar}: A mountain in the Skizze range.

Hamuz {ha-moo-ze} [6]: Assistant to Urudaqa, Osaku of Duuba.

Idu {ee-do}: The Western-most of the Skizze Mountains.

Inuwabri {ee-nu-wa-bri} [6]: The member of a line of oracles at Drasta that is contemporaneous with Autumn's visit there. Inuwabri is male and consequently largely ignored as a Drasta.

Jabiv {ja-biv} [6]: Eldest son of Outea the farmer.

Jampor {jam-por} [6]: Leader of a party sent by Buhfa Ouoinel to extort money from Outea and his family.

Jamokumu {ja-mo-ku-mu}: A mountain in the Skizze Ranges and the final resting place of Xanos.

Kastounasc {ka-st-oo-un-as-ke} [6]: A stone-like object which facilitates the assessment of life truths by Zeeth when sitting in judgement of the dead at the entry to the Land of the Dead.

Kapulkatavi {ka-pul-kat-avi} [6]: One of a line of oracles at Drasta

who was reputed to have spouted nothing but nonsense.

Kaurind {cow-awe-rin-de} [6]: A minor servant of Xanthous,

Kobi {ko-bi} (N): A cruciferous vegetable found throughout the middle reaches of the Skizze Mountains. Somewhat larger than a Brussels sprout but smaller than a cabbage. Kobi thrives in such cooler, moister conditions but cannot cope with frost. Kobi is high in fibre, vitamin C, vitamin K, iron and potassium but a little lower in protein than comparable vegetables.

Liloparn {lil-op-arn} (N): A fibrous plant that grows in the higher altitudes of Neander. Its dark green leaves have antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties

Miesca {mi-es-ca}: A world created by Xanthous which is normally inaccessible to those in the world of Zeeth.

Mika {mi-ka} [6]: Youngest son of Outea the farmer.

Mookuku {mu-ku-ku} [6]: Ostensibly the donkey ridden by Xanos in his travels in Neander but in reality a persona taken by the sorcerer Daumico Ka Zim Dumfugwa in order to assist Xanos in locating Miesca and the Kastounasc.

Muhaban {moo-ha-ban}[6]: One of the two men sent by Buhfa Ouoinel to find and kill Autumn and Logan.

Oglum {oh-gl-um} [6]: Son of Outea the farmer.

Opgarn {op-ga-re-ne} [6]: Xanos' personal assistant and an acolyte from the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup. The Esyup's records from the time of Xanos are incomplete but a scroll with decayed edges states that someone whose name ended with '~garn' "... of an ill that did eat the very flesh from his bones did pass into ..." some four summers after Xanos' death in Neander. It is likely that this entry refers to Opgarn. Modern tropical disease specialists suggest the likely cause of his death was a form of *necrotizing fasciitis*, most likely contracted while travelling in Neander.

Osat {os-at} (N): One twentieth of a Neandern grinar.

Outea {ow-te-a} [6]: A farmer on the Tenarkan River, a little to the West of the Skizze Mountains.

Qanas {ch-an-as-e} [6]: A trapper who lives in the Skizze Mountains. Originally from Besl-oor in Aferraron, he deserted from the army and

fled to Neander where he lives alone.

Richid {ri-ch-id}[6]: A deaf man from Zay who helps Autumn and Logan find the Eyes of Samnosura.

Samnosura {sam-no-su-ra}: The tallest of the Skizze Mountains.

Sayiya (say-ee-ya)[6]: The Messenger of Xanthous who takes the form of a turtle.

Serea (se-re-ah) [6]: The manager of the pilgrim site for the Drasta before Farouta.

Tenarkan River {ten-ar-kan}: A river in Northern Neander which has its source in the Skizze Mountains and flows North to join the Looncan Sea.

Urudaqa {oo-ru-da-ka} [6]: Osaku of Duuba and surrounding area.

Valley of the Pink [6]: A valley on the North Western side of Galmasar Mountain which is heavily wooded with cherry trees. The 'Pink' refers to the pink blossoms that fill the valley each Spring. The valley aligns perfectly North West to South East and is in direct line with the Eyes of Samnosura. Consequently, at certain times of the year, Plakill and Plifal align with the Eyes and light up a section of the Valley of the Pink.

Veyhian Fighting Fish {vey-hi-an}: A species of fresh water fish, similar to the Siamese Fighting Fish of Earth, that are notable for never fighting. The origin of their name is uncertain but it is likely that it derives from a mispronunciation of the Old Neandern word for "pretty". The tail fins of the Veyhian Fighting Fish are greatly exaggerated and extend like a fan over the fish's back and belly.

Wasok {wa-sok}[6]: One of the villagers of Zay.

Windustrama {win-dus-tra-ma} [6]: The Drasta who immediately preceded Inuwabri and who was widely renowned.

Xanos {za-nos}[3, 6]: An elder at the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esysup who died while travelling in Neander some two hundred years before the time of The Annals of Autumn Savannah. There is a single line in his record of his travels that refers to a possible dragon sighting while among the Skizze Mountains but the writings and diaries of the other members of the caravan make no mention of it. Largely because of his advanced aged and failing eyesight it is generally held that he, in fact, saw a large bird of prey.

Xanthous {zan-th-oo-se} [6]: (aka The Creator) The deity and creator of Miesca. Interestingly there is a creation myth within Miesca by which Zeeth and the world of Zeeth were created from the frozen fire-breath of Xanthous. There is no corresponding creation myth within the world of Zeeth. However, the Kastounasc, as described within *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Sixth Tale* would suggest that there is substance to this creation myth in that the Kastounasc has powers of great significance within the world of Zeeth but is of only prosaic significance in Miesca.

Zay {zay}: A village in the Southern foothills of Samnosura.

Zebaryon {ze-ba-ree-on} [6]: Nothing is known of Zebaryon although contextually it is by implication a place. Many scholars take the view that the word Zebaryon is used by the Drasta purely for dramatic effect and has no meaning.