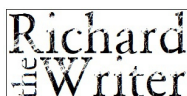


Lietapis Vosienskaj Savany

The Annals Of
Autumn Savannah

a new translation

Richard Jefferis



Self-published in Australia by Richard Jefferis,
aka Richard The Writer.

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› Treciaja Kazka ‹

~ The Third Tale ~

Chapter One

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Urbil Qandi as he stood at the entrance. He stared for a while then grunted and moved over to sit crossed legged on a large stone outside his cave, smooth from half a lifetime of his bottom upon it. Nearby a cypei called, lost in the dense foliage. Urbil picked up the bone that sat on the stone beside him and studied it, turning it over between his fingers. He looked up and curled his lip; they were still there. Too far away to disturb him but too close for comfort. Urbil liked to be alone.

“Too whit whit too,” called the cypei.

Urbil picked up his piece of flint and carefully ran it along the inside edge of the bone, deepening the curve. A sliver peeled off and dropped on his beard which was carelessly folded in his lap. He fastidiously picked it off and flicked it into the bushes. Again he looked at the bone and adjusted its angle minutely before peeling off another sliver.

They were still there. Two figures on the edge of the river. Not doing anything, just sitting and disturbing his tranquillity.

“Too whit whit too,” called the cypei.

A gentle breeze moved the foliage and it whispered, calm and reassuring. A sudden flash of red and gold told of the cypei changing its position. Urbil watched the sky but it had already found a new branch. The figures were still there. Urbil's nostrils flared. He ran the flint along the bone again and another sliver peeled off, but not cleanly. It broke at the end and left a small jagged edge which offended Urbil. He grunted again and sniffed with displeasure then flicked the sliver into the bushes.

“Lulerain damn them,” he thought idly and gently scraped the tiny jagged edge with the flint to smooth it flat.

He glanced up again. One had moved. It was now lying down although the other was still sitting.

“Too whit whit too,” called the cypei from its new position.

Far off in the distance came a faint “whit whit too whup”.

There was silence.

Cautiously, as though disbelieving, the cypei called again. “Too whit whit too.”

The world stopped to wait.

“Whit whit too whup.”

Excitedly the cypei called again. “Too whit whit too.”

“Whit whit too whup.” Was it a little closer or just a little louder?

There was another flash of red and gold as the cypei flew off in the direction of the response.

“Too whit whit too.”

“Whit whit too whup.” Definitely closer.

The cypei moved further away, its calls getting fainter as the responses got nearer.

Urbil listened with his head cocked and a smile on his face. The cycle of birth and rebirth was likely to be going through another cycle fairly soon. He went back to his carving and glimpsed the figures again. His smile dropped. Birds, animals, insects, they were good but people? People were trouble.

Urbil took a deep breath then exhaled slowly, clearing his mind then returned his attention to the piece of bone. He turned it over, studying it, feeling its width and smoothness. Yes, it would do. The curve was just about right. He bent over it, concentrating on the exact placement of the barb. Not too close to the tip so that the hook would break but not too far down that the barb would not catch in the fish's mouth. Experience had been a good teacher and he had had a lot of

experience. It was precise work but his mind was on the figures on the river bank. They weren't close but they preyed on his mind. Urbil didn't like strangers, although he disliked the people he knew more. He looked up and his eyes narrowed.

The one lying down was still lying down but the one that had been sitting, much as he was, was now standing. Intrigued he put down his hook and flint. Were they about to move away? He watched but little happened. Apparently they were not moving away as the one lying stayed lying. Urbil sighed, then he tensed. The standing stranger had started to make chopping motions with its arms and hands. Intrigued he climbed off his stone and stood to watch.

The figure started to kick, as though fighting off an attacker although there was just the two of them and Urbil knew there were no insect hives near that part of the river. Annoying though their presence was, it was still unusual. With a hint of nervousness, Urbil crept closer, keeping inside the foliage.

The figure started to do somersaults and twirls then attacked the one lying down but danced away without the one lying down seemingly reacting.

"Mayhap it be asleep?" wondered Urbil, creeping closer, "but if it be asleep why then attack it?"

At the edge of the foliage Urbil stopped. If he went closer he would lose his cover but he was close enough. Both figures were slight and the one lying down was definitely a man. Young enough to not have a beard but a man nonetheless. The other could have been a woman but Urbil wasn't sure. It had some of the shape of a woman but not all of the shape and it had no beard which meant it could be a woman or it could be a lad, younger than the other. On the other hand it had long hair, gathered in a pony tail in the manner of a woman. For all that, the figure was clearly agile.

The girl, Urbil was fairly sure it was a girl, suddenly did a high somersault on the bank, landed and did a twisting jump to face the other way then did a double kick. She landed on her back, rolled and came up holding a staff which had been hidden in the grass. Without

stopping she ran three paces then planted the pole in the ground and climbed it, pausing, balanced, at the top for three full breaths then jumped down and hit the lying figure over the head.

Urbil gasped. Surely that blow had been a killer blow? But the staff remained, a finger's width from the man's head, unmoving.

"Oh no," groaned Urbil silently to himself. The girl was staring at him. She must have heard his gasp.

"Greetings," she called, lifting the staff from the other's head. "I am Autumn Savannah."

Urbil crouched there, frozen, not knowing what to do. The man sat up, his eyes scanning the foliage, looking for whoever Autumn had spoken to.

"We have only peaceful intent," he called, looking some way to Urbil's left. "We are sorry if we disturbed you."

Autumn pointed towards Urbil and said something quietly. The man's eyes searched further across and passed Urbil without seeing him. Autumn put down her staff and slowly walked towards Urbil.

"Please," she said. "Show yourself. We mean you no harm."

She stopped a few paces away and squatted. Urbil could not retreat and hide in his cave, he would be seen and the location of the cave's entrance identified. Cursing his foolish curiosity silently he stood up and stepped forward. Autumn smiled.

"Hello," she said. "'Tis nice to meet you at last."

"I am Logan," said Logan from his place beside the river. "Would you like some bread and cheese?"

Urbil stared, his eyes flicking suspiciously from one to the other.

"Come," said Autumn, still squatting. "Join us. What is your name?"

Urbil stared at her.

“Ahh, my apologies,” she said gently. “You have not the gift of speech. I did not know.”

“I can talk,” blurted Urbil, his voice surprising him. It had been some while since he had spoken last.

“Come, join us,” said Autumn, gracefully getting to her feet and holding out a hand invitingly.

Urbil took half a step forward so Autumn turned and walked over to where Logan still sat. Against his better judgement, Urbil slowly followed.

“’Tis simple fare,” said Autumn, sitting cross legged on the bank, “but wholesome. I venture it will make a change for you from fish.”

“Fish?” blurted Urbil.

Autumn held out a piece of bread and Urbil took it, not knowing what else to do. He looked at it suspiciously.

“What do you mean, at last?” he asked.

“I do not understand,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan. He gave a slight shrug.

“You said ’tis nice to meet you at last’,” said Urbil. He sniffed the bread.

“Ahh,” said Autumn, smiling. “You have been watching us for some time, from further back in the undergrowth.”

“Ahh,” said Urbil.

“Mayhap some cheese be more to your taste,” said Logan, breaking off a piece and holding it out. Urbil looked at it but did not move to take it. After a long pause Logan popped it in his own mouth and chewed it thoughtfully.

“I venture we are not welcome here, Logan,” said Autumn. “Our new friend is not comfortable.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan. “Mayhap he saw you exercising and he is scared of you.”

He grinned wolfishly.

“Is that what you were doing?” asked Urbil. “Exercising?”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“What manner of exercising be that?” he asked. “My Ma used to go walking for exercise when I was but a young lad. That be many summers ago.”

“I be a Krisana,” said Autumn. “They be special exercises that be part of that life.”

“Oh aye,” said Urbil.

He broke off a small piece of bread and studied it then put it in his mouth and sucked it as he had no teeth.

“What be a Krisana?” he asked.

“She be a warrior philosopher,” said Logan proudly.

“Oh aye,” said Urbil, unimpressed. “One of them as sits around arguing about how many devils can dance on the head of a pin?”

“Something like that,” said Autumn.

“Seems like a waste of time to me,” said Urbil. He sat down, cross legged like Autumn. “Be more useful to talk about how many fish can you get on a fish hook.”

“Well, yes,” said Autumn, “in a practical sense. A lot of philosophy is not very practical.”

Urbil slowly ate the rest of the bread.

“So I reckon that be where the warrior side comes in useful,” he said, licking his lips and brushing crumbs from his beard. “For when you be losing the argument. Fight a lot, do you?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I fight as little as possible and only when there is no alternative.”

“That I do not believe,” said Urbil. “I was watching you. You seem very ... I know not what the word is but it speaks of a lot of fighting.”

“I exercise a lot,” said Autumn, “and when I do fight I work hard not to do any harm.”

“A warrior what does no harm and a philosopher what be not practical,” mused Urbil. “I venture you be travellers then as there be little else you can usefully do.”

Autumn laughed.

“He be right, Logan,” she said. “Do not look so insulted.”

“I do not like to hear anyone say bad things about you,” said Logan.

“They are not bad things,” said Autumn, “and all he says is true so take no offence.”

“Hmm,” said Logan. “Be you living near here?”

“He lives up yonder,” said Autumn, pointing in roughly the direction of the cave.

Urbil scowled. “How be you knowing that?” he demanded.

“I heard you come down through the bushes,” said Autumn, “and the sounds started over there where there is that small cliff.”

“I be a poor man,” said Urbil, “and I have nothing that would be worth taking.”

"We do not want to take anything," said Autumn, "save some water from the river and mayhap a fish if Logan here can catch one. Why do you live alone?"

Urbil scowled at her.

"What makes you think I be alone?" he asked.

"I have heard no one else," said Autumn, "and you have not the manner of one used to people."

"You know a sight too much," said Urbil, suddenly irritated. "Goodbye."

He got up and stalked off, his progress marked by movements in the undergrowth.

"What did I say that upset him?" asked Autumn, puzzled.

"Sploop knows," said Logan. "Mayhap he not be liking that you know where he lives or that he be living alone. Mayhap he does not like strangers. If he do live here alone then that likely be the case as it is a lonely place and I venture he lives here through choice. Mayhap he just be a crazed old man. So you want me to catch some fish?"

"I said that to try to put him at his ease," said Autumn.

"Well, it be a good idea," said Logan. "We walked a long way yesterday. It would be nice to stay here for a while and catch a fish or two."

"I venture 'twould be best if we moved on," said Autumn. "I do not wish that man more upset than he is already."

"Perhaps a compromise," said Logan. "He knows we want to catch a fish so let us do that then move on a short distance so he does not smell the fish as we cook it."

* * *

Urbil climbed back on his stone and watched them through the gaps in the foliage that hung in front of his cave. It irritated him that they were still there. Worse, they were showing no sign of leaving.

“What be he up to?” he wondered, watching Logan get up and start searching for something.

He picked up his fish hook and flint and started to sharpen the tip, his lips pursed and sulky. He glanced at the strangers again. Logan had found a thin stick and was sharpening one end with a small knife.

“Be he making a spear?” he thought, nervously. “Be they getting ready to attack me?”

He got off his stone and peered more closely through the foliage.

“You be an old fool,” he thought. “If they be wanting to attack you they do not be wanting any little stick. That girl be easily able to kill you and mayhap the lad too.”

He grunted and sat back on his stone, not entirely happy, and watched Logan wade into the water with the stick held ready.

“Ohhh,” he thought, “he be fishing. Damned fool.”

He spat on his fingers and rubbed the tip of the hook in it then held it up in a shaft of bright sunlight and inspected it. It gleamed and the point looked very sharp.

“Fish in this river be not waiting to be speared,” he thought. “Them two ain't as clever as they think they are.”

He cackled then looked around guiltily in case the strangers had heard. They didn't appear to have done. He saw Logan fruitlessly spear the river again and Autumn was sitting on the bank, washing her feet.

“Why did she scare me?” he wondered. “Now I think on it, it does not seem unreasonable for a young lass with keen hearing to have heard me. I am an old man and not as stealthy as I once was.”

Urbil reached out and moved the foliage in front of the cave but could not hear it.

“Well, mayhap I be not hearing as well as I used to,” he thought.

He tapped the flint on his stone and nodded when he heard the clacking sounds. Logan was still trying to spear fish and Autumn had taken off her clothes and was washing the rest of her body.

“Aye, 'tis definitely a lass,” muttered Urbil.

He leaned back and rummaged around behind his stone and found another flint. It was long and thin and he started to bore a hole in the broad flat end of the fish hook. He managed to refrain from looking at the strangers again until he had finished. Logan was still trying to catch a fish and Autumn was now sitting in the sun, running a nekmit frond through her hair.

“Mayhap if I help them catch a fish they will leave sooner,” thought Urbil. “Strangers frolicking nearby be right unpleasant.”

He thought this over and couldn't find a flaw in the strategy so he got up and went inside his cave. He emerged moments later with a length of twine and a small piece of dried fish.

* * *

“He is coming back,” said Autumn quietly.

Logan glanced over towards the foliage then climbed out of the river.

“The fish be too fast for me,” he said. “Mayhap if you try.”

“Certainly,” said Autumn, taking the stick.

“Ain't going to catch fish with that,” said Urbil, stepping out from the undergrowth.

“'Twould seem you have the right of it,” said Autumn. “Logan has had no success so far.”

Urbil grunted and stood there watching them closely then he shook his head.

“Fish here like to be wooed,” he said. “Slow and gentle, like. You be never spearing one, 'cept mayhap one that be diseased and slow and you ain't be wanting to eat one like that.”

“Then we shall move on, fishless,” said Autumn.

“You need a hook and line,” said Urbil, holding out his newly finished fish hook, securely tied to the twine, then he cursed his impetuosity.

“Do you throw it?” asked Logan, looking dubiously at the hook.

“Aye,” said Urbil. “You put a little bit of old fish on the hook then throw it in the water and pull it back out. Oft-times a fish tries to eat it and comes out with the hook. Watch.”

He walked upriver a short way then put the dried fish on the hook and threw it to the far side of the river. Slowly he pulled the line back and then suddenly there was a large red and grey fish flapping desperately on the river bank.

“See?” chuckled Urbil, very pleased with himself.

He took the fish off the hook and banged its head on the ground to make it stop flapping and carried it over to Logan.

“Thank you,” said Logan, nonplussed.

“How many be you wanting?” asked Urbil.

“This be a big fish,” said Logan. “Just the one will be enough for us.”

“Good,” said Urbil. “So you be finished here? Be you moving on?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “We will not impose on your solitude any longer. I apologise if we have caused you any grief.”

Urbil stared at her suspiciously.

“Be you making fun of me?” he asked.

“Why would we make fun of you?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“I know not,” said Urbil. “Although when people do come here and find me they make fun of me and throw things. I know not why.”

“Mayhap it be because you wear no clothes,” said Logan.

“What need have I of clothes?” asked Urbil, baffled. “It be warm here.”

“Tis your choice,” said Logan, “although I venture some people make fun of those who are not like them and most like the wearing of clothing of some sort.”

“Is that why you were upset when I said I knew where you lived?” asked Autumn.

Urbil narrowed his eyes then turned and went to a small outcrop of rock where he squatted and regarded them solemnly then put his fish hook in his mouth to clean it.

“I be living here more than forty summers,” he said. “Ain't no one knows where I be living 'cept you. That does not sit well with me. Be you a devil or some such?”

“I am no devil,” said Autumn, “nor is he. My name is Autumn Savannah and he be Logan. We be but simple travellers. What is your name?”

“Can't say as I rightly remember,” said Urbil. “Ain't used it for a very long time.”

He put the end of his beard in his mouth and chewed on it, all the while staring at Autumn.

“Urbil,” he said at length. “Urbil Qandi.”

Chapter Two

Urbil had an air of puzzlement about him, as though he wasn't certain that was his name or if he had said it correctly. Autumn had an air of puzzlement about her as she picked up Urbil's puzzlement and wondered why he was puzzled. Logan, on the other hand, had an air of contentment, knowing he was going to have a nice fat fish for dinner. The fish, on the other hand, had a slight air of fishiness but was otherwise lifeless. No one spoke for a while although Logan dipped the cheese cloth in the river and wrapped the fish so it stayed moist.

"Ahh," said Urbil.

"Yes?" said Autumn.

"Hmm," said Urbil, and scratched his chin then fumbled with his beard.

"Nice fish," said Logan.

"Mmm," said Urbil.

"Best we be on our way, Logan," said Autumn. "We be tarrying here too long. Urbil Qandi be wanting his peace and quiet again, I wager."

Urbil separated the end of his beard into two tufts and casually tied them together then put the knot in his mouth.

"Uth," he said.

Autumn picked up her robe and put it on while Logan rolled up their blankets. She picked up her pack and Logan retrieved his staff.

"'Twas nice meeting you," she said.

"Thank you for the fish," said Logan.

They hesitated momentarily but Urbil just watched them mournfully, then Autumn turned and walked slowly off down river. After a half

wave of his hand, Logan followed. Autumn pushed aside the leaves of a large bush that grew close to the water's edge and ducked under. Logan paused and looked back at Urbil. He was still squatting on the stone, watching them, the end of his beard in his mouth. Logan turned back, ducked under the bush and let it fall behind him.

"He be living on his own too long, I wager," he said to Autumn.

"We do not know of his life," she replied. "Mayhap it be how he wants to live or mayhap it be not. We do not know and should not judge him."

"Aye," said Logan. "He knows how to catch fish, that be certain."

There were rustles in the undergrowth a little off to the side but they stayed at the water's edge where it was relatively clear.

"Tis nice to be back in the mountains," said Autumn. "The plains be pleasant but get wearisome on the eyes."

"That one be a strange shape," said Logan. "It looks like Looplab cut the top off. We should have asked Urbil what the river and the mountain be called."

"There be a village near here," said Autumn, "we can ask there."

"How do you know?" asked Logan, stepping over a small gully.

"Urbil said people sometimes come to see him," she said. "I venture few would come a long distance."

The rustling stopped and Autumn twisted to look in its direction. The undergrowth looked undisturbed, save a slight waving from the breeze then she felt Logan stop and nudge her. Instantly she dropped into a defensive posture then slowly relaxed. Urbil was standing beside the water a few paces further ahead with a small bunch of flowers in his hand.

"We meet again," she said.

“Lamb's tail,” he said.

“Indeed,” said Autumn, giving Logan a slightly curious glance.

“What be lamb's tail?” asked Logan.

“This be,” said Urbil, holding up the flowers. “They be nice.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, nodding.

Logan leant on his staff, trying to hide a smile while Autumn and Urbil looked at each other.

“I think Urbil has picked you some flowers,” he muttered to Autumn.

“Oh,” she said and hesitated. “Why are you showing us these flowers, Urbil?”

“They be for you,” he said.

He lifted the end of his beard and dusted the flowers then held them out to Autumn again.

“That be right kind of you, Urbil,” said Autumn, stepping forward to take them.

“Fish,” he said with a nod.

“Ahh, you want the fish back?” asked Autumn. She turned and beckoned to Logan. “Logan, give him the fish.”

Logan stepped forward and handed the fish to Urbil, which he'd been carrying under his arm. Urbil took it and stared at it then handed it back to Logan.

“Lamb's tail,” he said and snatched the flowers from Autumn and presented them to Logan.

“Wait,” said Autumn. “I do not wish to be rude but we are not understanding. Why are you giving us the flowers?”

“For the fish,” said Urbil, looking as confused as they were.

“But you gave the fish back,” said Logan. “Do you want it?”

He held out the fish again and Urbil hit it with the bunch of flowers then thrust them in Logan's face. Logan wrenched them out of his hand and Urbil stepped back and cackled then squatted down, looking up at them.

“Twould seem he does not want the fish,” said Logan and handed the flowers to Autumn. “I think these are meant for you.”

“Urbil,” said Autumn gently. “Why are you giving us flowers?”

“For fish,” he said, scratching his thigh. “Tastes nicer.”

“Ohhh,” said Logan, “you mean to cook with the fish? I thought you were giving Autumn the flowers because, well, because she's a girl.”

Urbil stared at him then looked at Autumn. Slowly he stood up and selected one flower from the bunch of lamb's tail flowers and solemnly presented it to Autumn.

“Thank you,” said Autumn.

Urbil squatted down again and regarded her thoughtfully.

“How do you do it?” he asked.

“How do I do what?” asked Autumn.

“Stand on a stick,” said Urbil.

“I do not understand your meaning,” said Autumn.

“Back there,” said Urbil, flapping a hand upriver. “You stood on that stick,” and he reached out and touched Logan's staff.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “When I was exercising?”

Urbil nodded several times.

"It takes a lot of practice," said Autumn, "and needs an open space. Come, I will show you."

She turned and led them back to the clearing where they had spent the night, barely twenty paces away. She took off her pack and put it on the ground and carefully laid the lamb's tail flower on top. Urbil perched on his rock again, expectantly.

"Tis simple to explain," she said, "but difficult to get the knack. Logan, give me the staff."

Logan tossed his staff to her and she caught it neatly.

"What you do is plant the staff on the ground," said Autumn, "then jump on it so that the top is caught by the top of your foot and the other foot pushes down."

She lightly ran two or three steps then planted the staff and caught the top with one foot, at the base of her toes, and balanced for a moment with her other foot pushing down on the staff a little lower. Then, as the staff started to topple she jumped off and caught the staff with her hand.

"With practice you can get the balance just right," she said.

"Again," said Urbil so Autumn did it again.

Urbil slapped his hands on the rock in delight.

"You can do this?" he asked Logan.

"Me?" said Logan. "No."

"Hmmpf," snorted Urbil dismissively. "Again."

Autumn did it again, this time with a variation in which she held the end in one hand and put both feet on the staff. Urbil cackled delightedly. Then he frowned and stared at Autumn.

“I think it be time to go again,” said Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn, puzzled by Urbil's reaction.

She tossed the staff back to Logan and bent to pick up her pack. Urbil's arm shot out and he put a hand protectively on it, so Autumn stepped back, alert and curious. Urbil gently touched the lamb's tail flower then looked at Autumn.

“Come,” he said and marched off into the undergrowth.

Autumn picked up the flower and looked at it then picked up her pack.

“We seem to have been invited somewhere,” she said to Logan. “I wonder what awaits us?”

* * *

Urbil was waiting for them in front of a high bank covered thickly with hanging creepers. He was twisting his beard into a grey rope and looked nervous. When they reached him he said nothing, just pulled aside some creepers and disappeared into them.

“Do you suppose he wants us to follow?” asked Logan.

“Yes,” said Autumn, pulling aside the creepers.

“Wait,” said Logan, putting his hand on her arm. “Best I go in first in case he be lying in wait.”

“If you wish,” said Autumn, “but I venture I will deal with it better than you.”

“Especially if you are forewarned,” said Logan and he stepped behind the foliage.

Urbil was waiting, sitting on his smooth stone under the rock overhang. He looked mournful.

"Tis a cave," said Logan, looking around.

Autumn slipped in behind him.

"Is this where you live?" she asked.

Urbil gazed at her then jerked a knee towards a large hole in the rock beside his stone.

"In there," he said.

"We are deeply honoured by your trust in us," said Autumn, putting her palms together and bowing to him.

"Yes," said Logan, trying to mimic her and dropping the staff.

It clattered against the side of the bank and Urbil jumped and glowered at Logan.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

The hole was a little way off the ground and narrow. Urbil squeezed through and Autumn tried to follow him but her pack snagged on the side so she slipped it off and Logan handed it to her when she was through.

"What shall I do with the fish?" he asked.

There was a pause and muffled voices then "bring it in, Urbil says to cook it inside," so he passed the fish through with the bunch of lamb's tails then squeezed through himself.

"Ohhhh," he said, looking around when he got to his feet. "This be a nice cave!"

The cave was large and lit, in part, by a small fire that crackled merrily off to one side. Above it Astauand's rays came down in a broad shaft and the smoke from the fire gleamed silver grey as it wafted up and out. The floor was dry hard packed earth.

Urbil padded over to a corner and squatted on the ground, smoothing his beard and hair over his knees in a protective shroud. He watched as Autumn looked around then back at him.

“You be first,” he said, with a small quaver in his voice.

“Your first visitors?” asked Autumn.

He nodded.

“We honour and respect you and your dwelling,” she said quietly, then jabbed her elbow into Logan’s side. “Don’t we.”

“Oh, erm, yes,” said Logan, rubbing his ribs. “Definitely.”

“Please to sit down,” said Urbil, picking at his toes.

“What shall I do with the fish?” asked Logan.

“Leave it by the entrance for now,” said Autumn. “Let us just sit and appreciate Urbil’s generosity.”

She moved over to sit on the floor near Urbil, careful not to get too close and sat down, patting the ground beside her to show Logan where to sit.

“This reminds me of my Esyup,” she said conversationally. “The elders would sit on stools with the others on the ground around them and we would talk of many things.”

“What is your Esyup?” asked Urbil.

“’Twas a place where I received much learning,” said Autumn.

Urbil relaxed slightly, enough to stop picking at his toes.

“I was at a place of learning when I was a lad,” he said. “’Twas nothing like this. Ayah, it were a very long time ago and I remember little of it now. Tell me, learned Autumn, what am I supposed to do when I have visitors in my dwelling? It has been so long I cannot

remember.”

“Tis the custom to offer a drink,” said Autumn, “although much depends on the reason for the visiting.”

“A drink?” said Urbil, his eyes lighting up. “Ahhh.” Then he frowned. “What manner of drink be you wanting?”

“Whatever least inconveniences you,” said Autumn.

“No drinking be least inconvenient,” snapped Urbil then slapped the side of his head. “You be visitors and I be deficient. Mayhap some nuts, they be comforting in times of difficulty.”

“That would be most excellent,” said Autumn, politely.

Urbil grunted and shook his hair from his knees and went over to a battered, blackened cauldron sitting beside the fire.

“How be we drinking nuts?” whispered Logan.

“Living is learning,” whispered back Autumn. “Experience it and accept.”

Urbil poured some water from a clay pot into the cauldron then looked over at them and poured in a lot more then set the cauldron on the fire.

“Be you making that pot yourself?” asked Autumn. “That be a right useful skill.”

Urbil didn't answer. Instead he scooped some small black beans from another pot onto a flat stone and pounded them with another stone. When he was satisfied he brushed the powder into the cauldron.

“Oh,” he suddenly exclaimed, stopping his stirring. “I be not thinking properly. I have only one bowl for the drinking.”

He rushed over to a rough hewn table covered with pots and started taking off their lids and peering inside, muttering to himself.

"Tis no matter," said Logan. "We have bowls of our own."

Autumn got up and fetched her pack, carefully setting the lamb's tail flower on the ground beside the fish. She got out their bowls and held them out to Urbil who ignored her so she put them down beside the fire. Angrily Urbil slammed a pot down and went back to the fire.

"I be no good at this here visiting," he muttered. "First and last time I reckon."

He sniffed and looked sideways at them then stirred his cauldron again. The end of his beard touched a hot ember and the smell of burning hair started to fill the cave. Urbil jumped back and slapped at his beard with a hand then dipped the smouldering ends in the cauldron. He muttered irritably to himself.

"Grrr," he said and glowered at Logan as though it was his fault.

Logan covered a laugh with his hand and Autumn glowered at him as well.

"Pah, it be good enough," snarled Urbil, dipping their bowls inside the cauldron.

He brought them over and handed them to Autumn and Logan then went back for his own.

"Thank you," said Autumn and Logan sniffed his suspiciously.

She sipped hers cautiously.

"Tis bitter," she said, "but pleasant none the less. What beans are they?"

Urbil sat back on the floor grumpily and didn't answer. There was an air of tension inside the cave.

"So," said Autumn, after having some more of the drink, "what manner of learning did you have as a lad and how did you come to be here?"

“They be calhouny nuts,” he said then drank some of his. “My da paid for me to learn a trade but I did not like it so I ran away. He was angry and beat me so I ran away from there as well and wandered this land for several summers. Then I be finding this place and I have been here since.”

“Why did you not like it there?” asked Autumn sipping her drink. After the surprise of the first bitterness it was not unpleasant.

“’Twas full of foul smells and loud noises and much confusion with people coming and going all the time,” said Urbil. “I have a taste for peace and quiet and simplicity.”

“We are the same,” said Logan. “We desire no more than to wander and avoid crowds when we can. Where are you from?”

“Uli-Rratha,” said Urbil. “’Tis a great stink of a place.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “we have been there and left very soon after. What trade did your father want you to follow?”

“I was put to learn with a sorcerer,” said Urbil. “He was a horrible man, much given to rudeness and the cheating of his customers. I ask you, what possible use is there for the eye of an olm in a love philtre? Hmm? Olms do not have eyes!”

“That was unfortunate,” said Autumn. “Sorcery is an honourable skill. I have met two and they both be people of great learning.”

“Oh I do not deny Run’gegeric had great learning,” said Urbil. “He spent many years at some wondrous place in Uli-Rratha but he were more concerned with paraks.”

“How long did you stay?” asked Logan.

“Two summers,” said Urbil. “I was very slow to learn and was treated badly and the work was not to my nature. ’Twas a mistake from the beginning.”

“Surely you learnt something in the time you were there?” said

Autumn.

"A little," said Urbil, "but most of what I tried to do went wrong. Run'gegeric would show me how to, oh, I know not, mayhap move a pot without touching it and it would fly across the room and land with the greatest delicacy but when I tried, like as not it would explode or what was inside would disappear in a cloud of evil smelling green vapour or some such mishap. I know not why. Then he would beat me and not feed me thinking that such would aid me to learn faster but it did not. Hunger concentrates the mind but only on the stomach, not on higher things."

"Then you did the right thing," said Autumn. "If you are not in the right place then you must leave that place and find the place that is right for you."

"Be you talking about destiny?" asked Urbil.

"No," said Autumn. "Destiny be the things that will happen to someone, be they good or bad. The right place is what is good for you. 'Twas your destiny to be with Run'gegeric for a time but it was not a good place for you. I wager here be your place, unless you have a desire to leave."

"Mayhap you be right," said Urbil. "I have thought on this before. I did learn something of sorcery and as the summers have passed I have come to realise that the things I did learn were those things that are of use here. Love philtres be no use to me, there be no one to use them on and in truth I would not want someone with me here and why would I want to move a pot with sorcery when I can easily use my hands? I have learned that oft times learning a skill with my hands brings great satisfaction, like my fish hooks. Many summers past I found a dead rabbit, almost eaten away and rotten and little but the bones. I collected the bones and boiled them and use the bones to make fish hooks. I take great pleasure in the doing of it even though as a sorcerer mayhap I could make as many fish hooks as I want in the blink of an eye. There be little satisfaction in that."

"I am curious," said Logan. "If that be so then what sorcery can you find useful here?"

Urbil set down his bowl and started to run his fingers through his beard.

“You see how light it is in here?” he asked. “There be a break in the roof of the cave which lets in the light of Astauand which be a great blessing. I would not want to live in a dark hole in the ground.”

“Aye, I can see the benefits,” said Logan. “But sorcery?”

Urbil clicked his finger and the shaft of light from the roof disappeared to leave only the light from the fire.

“Holes in roofs be less of a blessing when it rains,” said Urbil in the gloom.

He clicked his fingers again and the shaft of light reappeared.

“That be right useful,” said Logan.

“Aye,” said Urbil. “Cepting when it rains for a long while then this place be filling up with smoke. I never did learn how to get rid of smoke. Would have saved me a beating or two if I had but no matter. I like my life here. Peace and quiet and fishing when I need to. 'Tis a simple life and lets me chase the dreams when I have a mind.”

“Chase the dreams?” said Autumn. “What be that?”

“The dreams?” said Urbil. “Oh, they come from the back of the cave. Sometimes they stop and talk with me but oft-times they pass on by and pay me no never mind.”

Chapter Three

“What comes ...?” started Logan but stopped.

Urbil had pulled his beard over his head and was tapping his feet. Logan looked at Autumn and she looked back at him, expressionlessly, then she looked away, towards the back of the cave, beyond the light of the fire or the shaft of Astauand.

“Umm,” said Logan.

“Urbil,” said Autumn.

He took no notice, unless humming tunelessly was a reply.

“Urbil?” said Autumn again and she reached out to tap his bouncing knee.

Urbil lunged forward and scurried on hands and feet across the cave to a pile of grasses and bracken and buried himself.

“I think he be finished talking for now,” said Autumn.

A gnarled hand popped out of the grasses and pulled a handful over a patch of grey head.

“Should we go?” asked Logan quietly.

“I do not know,” whispered back Autumn. “I do not understand what he is doing but I venture he would just tell us to go if he wanted it so.”

“Only I was thinking I might cook the fish while there is a fire,” whispered Logan. “Fish goes bad quickly.”

“Would that not be rude?” asked Autumn. “I do not pretend to fully understand people but to cook over Urbil's fire without his permission would seem an intrusion.”

“Methinks we are already an intrusion,” whispered Logan, “although he did say to cook it inside when we were outside.”

“True,” said Autumn. She tapped a finger a couple of times on her other hand. “Do what you think best. I am uncertain of what to do and we can invite Urbil to share the fish with us.” She looked over at the pile of grasses. “If he be coming out again.”

Logan frowned then nodded. He got up decisively and took the fish outside to gut and clean it and to find some mud to bake it in. Autumn watched the grasses for a few moments.

“Urbil,” she said. “Be it well with you if we cook the fish?”

There was a long pause then Urbil's head appeared.

“Lamb's tails,” he said and buried himself again.

“I will take that as a yes then,” said Autumn and relaxed.

She leaned back against the rough wall of the cave and looked around. Urbil seemed to live more comfortably than many who had mud or wood dwellings. The pile of grasses was clearly a bed. He had a hearth for cooking and a table with pots of things which were no doubt important to him. The place had no particular smell beyond a hint of fish and the lingering smell of that unusual drink. More to the point there was no smell of waste and no sign, as yet, of any lice, fleas or other bugs.

“Can I explore your cave?” asked Autumn.

A hand appeared and waved around vaguely but in a manner that was clearly not an abrupt 'no' so Autumn got to her feet. There was a sound of scraping and Logan appeared in the entrance. He put a pile of mud on the ground then scrambled in after it.

“Do not forget the lamb's tail,” said Autumn.

“I put it inside the fish,” he said, carrying the mud caked fish over to the fire. “The flowers smelt nice when I broke one so I crushed some and stuffed them inside its belly.”

He found a stick and pushed two or three glowing embers from the

flat stone in the middle of the fire and laid the muddy bundle on it.

“Be he still in there?” asked Logan quietly, nodding towards the grasses.

“Aye,” said Autumn.

She picked up a stick from the pile behind the fire and held it in the flames until it was well alight.

“I am going to have a look at the end of the cave,” she said. “Do you wish to come with me?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “The fish will be a while,” he lowered his voice, “and he be a little ...” and waggled his hand.

Autumn shrugged. “Bring your staff as well,” she said and stepped out of the light and into the darkness, her torch held high and Logan not far behind.

The cave narrowed quickly to a low tunnel where they had to edge forward, bent double and with bended legs. The rock was rough and uneven but soon opened up into another cave. The flame of the burning stick was poor illumination and the walls were lost in darkness although the roof was not as high as in Urbil's cave although higher than in the tunnel. They could both stand straight although there were many lumps to bang their heads on if they were not careful.

“I can hear dripping,” said Autumn, cocking her head. “It be coming from that way.” She pointed into the blackness further along.

She started off towards the dripping then jumped back startled.

“What is it?” cried Logan urgently, jumping forward.

“I know not,” said Autumn, stepping forward and bringing the burning stick close to the wall. She reached out and touched it. “Look at this.”

In the dim light of the flame Logan could see yellow and red smears

on the wall.

“What be that?” he asked.

“I know not,” said Autumn, peering closely and moving the stick around. “’Twould seem to be an outline of some sort. We need more light. Would you ask Fiau?”

“Fiau,” said Logan, tracing one of the yellow lines with a finger, “can we have some light in here, please?”

“Yes, Logan,” said his staff and one end started to burn brightly.

“That is better,” said Autumn, staring at the wall. “Ohhh, I think it be an outline of a deer. Look, these are its legs and those its antlers. And there be a fish, I think, although it be as big as the deer.”

“Looks like a fish,” said Logan, “but what be these? Hands?” He shifted his staff over a little to light up some more of the wall.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and below is what looks like a woman with a child. Oh Mizule! Hold your staff up high, Logan.”

Everywhere they looked there were drawings on the walls and roof. Some were recognisable, animals, people, hands, feet, but most were strange. Twisted shapes and patterns of splodges. Slowly they looked around then followed the wall.

“Be those spiders?” asked Autumn, pointing.

“They look like spiders,” agreed Logan “but they have only six legs not eight. What do you think these blue things are?”

“And this be a big hairy thing, but I know not what,” said Autumn. “Oh, do you think it be Urbil?”

“His body be not hairy like that,” said Logan peering at it, “and he be skinny. Ugh, that one be frightening.” He pointed at a broad flat leering face with two rows of sharp red teeth and yellow eyes.

“What be this winding white line?” asked Autumn, “and the yellow dots beyond it?”

“And these,” said Logan moving further along. “These be arms with hands, lots of them. What does this all mean?”

“I know not,” said Autumn, crossing to the other side of the cave, “but there be more here and I have found the dripping.” She gave a half laugh.

“What?” asked Logan, going over with his burning staff. “Oh! That be funny.”

Water was dripping from a small rocky knob hanging from the roof into a large clay pot positioned underneath it. Around the rocky knob was a drawing of a man so it looked like he was pissing.

“There be more down here,” said Autumn further down the cave. “Be this dogs?”

“Be that four dogs?” asked Logan, “I see four heads but only four legs and it looks to have lizard feet not paws.”

“There be a lot more of these white things,” said Autumn, “and some more of those spiders. Oh, Mizule, I do not like the look of that one.”

They had reached the end of the cave and it was entirely covered with a single painting. A very large man, entirely red with outstretched wings instead of arms and three large staring eyes above a gaping toothless mouth. They stared at it for a while. It seemed to move disturbingly in the flickering light of Logan's staff.

“I do not like this,” said Logan, beginning to feel anxious. “Can we go now?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “’Tis not a pretty sight. This be the end of the cave anyway. There be nowhere else to go.”

“Do you think Urbil painted these?” asked Logan as they made their way back.

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “There be a lot of them but he has been here a long time.”

She paused at the entrance to the tunnel.

“What I be wondering though,” she said slowly, “is if these are the things he was talking about. The dreams that stop and talk to him.”

“You think he comes in here to talk to these paintings?” asked Logan.

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “Or mayhap he talks to these things then comes in here to paint them.”

* * *

Urbil had taken the fish out of the fire when they got back to his cave. He had split the mud apart and was picking small flakes off and slowly eating them.

“That be a goodly light,” he said when they emerged from the tunnel. “How do you do that?”

“It be my staff,” said Logan. “You can stop now, Fiau.”

The bright flame on the end of the staff flickered and died, leaving the staff unblemished. Urbil stuffed his beard in his mouth in surprise and stared at the staff then he spat his beard out.

“Be it a magic staff?” he asked, round eyed.

“Something like that,” said Logan. “I was given it by a sorcerer.”

Urbil cautiously reached out and prodded the staff with a finger then quickly pulled his finger back. Nothing happened so he cautiously reached out again and touched it.

“Nice staff,” he crooned soothingly. “I not be hurting you.”

Still nothing happened so he stroked it gently then gripped it and pulled it towards him. Logan let go and Urbil scampered over to squat

in the shaft of light to examine it closely.

“Have you a magical staff as well?” he asked Autumn.

“No,” said Autumn. “I used to have a staff but we got caught on a bitter night and burnt it for warmth. That was when we discovered that this staff would burn without burning.”

“Mayhap it can do other things,” said Urbil, sniffing the staff then licking it. “I be feeling some sort of presence inside it.”

He used a handful of hair to polish it clean.

“How do you get it to burn?” he asked, holding it up and squinting along its length.

“I ask it to,” said Logan.

“Staff, burn,” said Urbil, holding it at arm's length.

Nothing happened.

“Show me,” said Urbil, thrusting the staff at Logan.

Logan took it back and glanced at Autumn. She nodded slightly.

“Fiau, would you please burn for me,” he asked.

The end of the staff burst into flame and Urbil jumped backwards then cackled and rubbed his hands together gleefully.

“Stop now, Fiau.” said Logan and the staff flickered and died.

Urbil reached out and cautiously touched the end that had been burning.

“It be cold,” he said, surprised.

He pulled the staff from Logan and peered closely at it again.

“Fiau be its name?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Logan.

“Fiau, would you please burn for me,” said Urbil.

Nothing happened.

He tried again and still nothing happened.

“Do it work for you?” he asked thrusting the staff at Autumn.

“It be Logan's staff,” said Autumn. “It were a gift to him, not me.”

Urbil lost interest in the staff and tossed it back to Logan.

“Fish be cooked,” he said.

“Will you share our meal?” asked Autumn.

“That be right kind of you,” said Urbil, grinning. “Don't mind if I do. Let's be eating outside so the bones be not making a mess in here.”

He picked up the halves of mud and climbed through the cave's entrance and sat on his stone, humming quietly. Autumn and Logan wriggled through and sat on the ground.

“This be a good place,” said Autumn, looking between the creepers. “You can see the river and them as passes but they cannot see you.”

Urbil nodded several times and stuffed his mouth with fish.

“The lamb's tail is good with it,” said Logan, eating some. “It gives the fish a bitter sweetness. I like it. Do you like it, Autumn?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “'Tis a little like lemons and ginger. Tell me about the paintings on the walls in the other cave, Urbil.”

Urbil stopped chewing and stared at her silently.

“Did you do them yourself?” she asked.

Urbil's head twitched and his hair and beard shivered. It could have been a shake to mean 'no' or it could have been something else. He swallowed his mouthful and slowly took some more fish, his eyes never leaving Autumn's face.

“I apologise,” said Autumn. “You do not wish to talk of these things and it is wrong of me to pry deeply. We are guests in your home and we must respect your wishes.”

Urbil stuffed the fish in his mouth and flicked a flake that had fallen onto his beard into the bushes then he pulled a fish bone from his mouth and inspected it. It followed the flake. He looked at Autumn while he chewed then looked at Logan. Then he jumped off his stone and disappeared inside the cave. Moments later Autumn's pack and Logan's staff flew through the opening.

“Go now,” he called through the hole. “Take fish and go. Goodbye.”

He disappeared.

“What be the matter with him?” asked Logan in surprise.

“Ahh,” said Autumn sadly. “Twould seem I have caused offence.”

She looked through the creepers to the river and sighed.

“Once again, I apologise,” she called through the hole. “We shall leave now. Thank you most kindly for your hospitality, Urbil.”

There was no reply although their wooden bowls came flying through the hole. Logan gathered them up and put them inside Autumn's pack.

“We had best be off,” said Autumn. “We have overstayed our welcome. Come on.”

* * *

Astauand's orb had sunk below the mountain in the distance when they stopped for the night. They had come across a small grassy patch beside the river with a narrow strip of silvery yellow sand at the water's edge. It was warm and the sky was cloudless and there was no need for a fire. Small yellow flowers dotted the green grass. On the edge of the clearing were some bushes with large purple flowers that gave off a faint but rich perfume. Several bees explored the flowers, sipping the nectar that lay deep within. Off to the East a thin spire of smoke rose in the still air. A dog barked, a long way distant.

Autumn took off her robe and folded it neatly beside her pack. She knelt to wash her face and hands in the cool clear river water. The river was wider here but further along it seemed to enter a narrow canyon and, very faintly, she could hear the rush of water as it tumbled through that place. Some mosquitoes appeared and Logan flapped at them.

"Why do they never bite you?" he grumbled.

Autumn smiled.

"They do," she said.

"Then why do you never itch?" he asked, slapping his ankle.

"Because I let them feed," said Autumn. "Whatever it is that makes the itch they suck out again. You squash them before they have had their fill and the itch remains."

"I do not like mosquitoes," said Logan, "and I resent my blood on my skin when I squash them."

"Then do not squash them," said Autumn. "They have as much right to feed off your blood as you do to feed off roots and fish and whatever else you feed off. You have plenty of blood. Surely you can spare a drop or two?"

"They will drain all the blood from my body," said Logan, taking a deep breath. "But for you I will try to be philosophical about them."

His hand twitched as if to slap at another mosquito and he visibly restrained himself.

"Tis your choice," said Autumn. "Mayhap if you do something to distract yourself?"

Logan wrinkled his nose at her back and started to fiddle with the blades of grass in front of him.

"I like rivers and trees and mountains," said Autumn, settling back on her heels and gazing round. "Even though I do not know my place I am sure that my place will never be in a village or town. Mayhap one day I will end up like Urbil, alone in a cave."

"You want to be alone in a cave?" asked Logan.

"Twould seem to be a day for me to offend people," said Autumn. "I did not mean that I would wish you gone, friend Logan. I was merely thinking of the quiet pleasures of solitude in a pleasant setting undisturbed by strangers and their troubles. If you choose to stay with me I welcome your company."

"I confess I cannot imagine being with another," said Logan. "Ohh, look, I have found a five leafed clover! That is a certain sign of good luck."

"Let it live," said Autumn. "You do not need good luck and I venture it be bad luck for that clover to be found and killed simply because it has five leaves."

"I did not pick it," said Logan. "I know you too well and I am coming to understand your way of thinking. You are right, of course. Simply because the clover has been found there is no need to kill it. If I let it live it will mayhap bring forth many others also with five leaves and bring good luck to all who find them."

"I venture if there be many clover with five leaves then they will no longer be good luck," said Autumn. "The luck be in the finding of something rare. If it be commonplace then there be no luck in it. Mayhap a four leaf clover will be seen as lucky when all the others

have five.”

“And 'twas my good luck to be befriended by you,” said Logan with a laugh. “One who confronts my good fortune with logic and takes it away from me.”

“So you would prefer the solace of superstition to that of clear thought?” asked Autumn, getting up and going over to sit by him.

“I was joking,” said Logan, “although I know not why. Never have I known you to find one of my jokes funny and yet I persist.”

“’Tis part of your nature,” said Autumn, leaning forward to pick off a fleck of something white that had landed on her tunic, “and one that I would not change even though I have no understanding of it. Mayhap I will know my place in this world when I learn to understand your humour.”

“I wager I should say something funny in reply to that,” said Logan, “but, alas, I cannot. Mayhap it be your destiny to wander this world trying to understand my jokes.”

Autumn smiled. “Perhaps,” she said. “’Twould be good to leave this world with greater understanding than when I entered it. What are these?”

She waved her hand at some small white things that wafted gently in the air. Logan caught one and looked closely at it.

“It looks to be a small cobweb,” he said. “Shaped like half a ball.”

He tossed it into the air but it stuck to his hand and he picked it off and it stuck to his fingers.

“They look like snow,” said Autumn, watching the small white webs as they floated on the gentle breeze coming across the river. “’Tis a pretty sight.”

Another settled on her tunic and she picked at it. Some more drifted across and landed on her tunic as well.

“They be right sticky things,” said Logan, picking at some that had settled on his chest. “At least the mosquitoes have gone.”

“I can't get rid of them,” said Autumn, watching as a cloud of the webs settled on her legs. She tried to brush them off but they stuck to her hands.

“They are all over your hair as well,” said Logan, slapping at his chest and legs which were becoming coated with the white webs. “I will get these off me then clean them off your back.”

“This be right strange,” said Autumn, getting to her feet.

The air was now thick with the tiny white cobwebs and a few settled on her face.

“I can't get up,” said Logan urgently. “They be binding my legs together.”

Half panicked he started to claw at the webs covering his legs.

“Oh Sploop!” he cried. “My hand is stuck to my leg!”

Autumn spat as several webs tried to get inside her mouth then clawed at her nose as they covered it.

“What is happening?” she cried. “My hand is stuck to my face!”

“Floworowgh,” mumbled Logan.

Autumn twisted to look at him, half blinded by webs over her eyes. His face was a mask of pure white.

“I cannot ...” said Autumn as she lost her balance and fell to the ground, the tiny white webs enshrouding them both.

Chapter Four

Autumn's eyes suddenly snapped open, Astauand's early light waking her. 'Twas after dawn! She always meditated at dawn and got up before dawn to make sure of it.

She stretched then sat up. Logan was awake and returning from the bushes.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked. "I slept like a log."

"Aye," said Autumn, getting up. "'Tis after dawn though. I must have slept right well to be getting up so late."

She went over to the river and scooped up a handful to drink.

"I had a strange dream though," she said, squatting by the river. She looked up at the sky then around at the bushes. "I dreamt I was covered in small white cobwebs."

Logan stopped what he was doing.

"'Tis strange," he said, looking over at her. "So did I. They floated across the river and settled on me and my hand stuck to my leg then they covered my face. I dreamt I could not breathe."

"How odd," said Autumn. "Now you say it, I remember looking at you and your head was covered then my mouth was full of them and I fell over. How can it be that we had the same dream?"

"I know not," said Logan, squatting down beside her. "But I tell you something else that be strange. In my dream we were talking and we were going to eat that fish ..."

"Yes, as with me," interrupted Autumn. "We were talking about living in caves."

"Yes," said Logan, "but the strange thing is that I have no memory of eating after that little we had with Urbil and my belly tells me the truth of it. I was looking for the fish when you woke up but there is no

sign of it. Not even the mud. If we had eaten it but I am not remembering, surely there would still be the pieces of mud nearby?"

"I confess to being hungry as well," said Autumn, "and I do not remember eating either. Mayhap we both went to sleep and some animal ate the fish in the night."

"The mud too?" said Logan. "It must have been a very hungry animal to eat the mud but not try to eat us."

"Tis right strange," said Autumn. "No matter, 'tis not the first time we have gone hungry and there be a dwelling of some sort nearby. You saw the smoke over there yesterday or did I dream that as well?"

"I saw the smoke," said Logan, "but mayhap we both did dream. As you say, it matters not. The fish be gone and that be the end of it. I was looking for some roots just now but I have not found any. 'Tis trees and bushes around here. Nothing to eat, save some grass stalks. Are you going to do your meditating and exercising?"

"Yes," said Autumn, settling herself in a comfortable spot on the river bank.

"I shall look for more roots then," said Logan. "Tis more useful than watching you and listening to my belly."

* * *

"I found some roots," said Logan when Autumn finally decided she had had enough exercising. "I know not what they are but they taste well enough uncooked although they be a strange colour. I left you some."

He handed her a dark purplish root and Autumn sniffed it then bit into it.

"It has a strange taste," she said, "but no doubt it will fend off hunger. I had a thought when I was meditating."

"I have something to tell you as well," said Logan, "but tell me your

thought first.”

“It is but little,” said Autumn, “and I did not take it any further but mayhap it might explain why we both had the same dream. You remember the cave of paintings?”

“Aye,” said Logan.

“There were many small white things on the walls and roof,” said Autumn.

“Indeed there were,” said Logan thoughtfully. “And that place be enough to give anyone a bad dream. But why would we both dream of the white things? There were many other things either of us could have dreamt of. Unless ...” He tailed off.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I thought that ‘unless’ as well but my mind decided to go off in other directions and would not return.”

“Were you afraid?” asked Logan.

“I did not feel afraid,” said Autumn. “Although I venture I might have. After all, if the paintings be of real small white things then what does that say about the other paintings? No, it was more as if my mind wanted to think of more pleasant thoughts.”

“So you be thinking that this might not have been dreams?” asked Logan.

Autumn sighed. “I would need to know more before I reached that conclusion,” she said. “After all, we have both seen many cobwebs and the white paintings were not much like cobwebs. They looked more as though they had been put on the walls with a thumb with no sign of the strands in a web. Anyway, if they were not dreams how is it we are both able to freely move and there be no sign of webs now?”

“Mayhap they dissolved in the light of Plifal,” said Logan.

“’Twould be unusual for a web to do that,” said Autumn. “’Tis more usual for them to collect the morning dew and shimmer like rainbows

in the sun.”

She finished her root and reached for another.

“These be not unpleasant,” she said, using her thumbnail to scrape off a stubborn patch of earth. “What was it you wanted to tell me?”

“Did you move our things in the night?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn. “Why?”

Logan pointed to where her pack, her robe, their blankets, his staff and their waterskins were neatly arranged under a bush on the other side of the clearing.

“Tis not where we left them,” he said. “At least, not that I remember. And I found a footprint, or half a footprint at least.”

“Not one of ours?” asked Autumn.

“Not mine, at least,” said Logan. “It be a little narrower than my foot.”

Logan led Autumn over to the small patch of mud on the river bank a little further upstream where the footprint was.

“The toes seem longer than mine,” said Autumn, comparing her foot with the print. “Be you thinking that someone came in the night and moved our things and took the fish?”

“The footprint may not be fresh,” said Logan. “There is spray from the river all over this part so it could have been left some days past. There is no way of knowing. Oh, nothing is missing from your pack. I checked.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn after they had inspected the lone footprint again and moved back to where they’d been sitting. “I wonder if it was Mother Midcarn again? She does seem to like to watch us through her Window.”

“I wondered that,” said Logan, “but if it was her she left no gift or

note.”

“She usually does not,” said Autumn. “You remember how my pack kept following us when we were involved with Lord Loheckle and the guard who was knocked unconscious?”¹

“Aye,” said Logan. “Mayhap her hand be in this. She does like to be mysterious. Oh Sploop, I do hope not though. If Mother Midcarn be doing this then there be trouble ahead for us. ’Twould be much better if we just had a bad dream.”

“Well, be they dreams or not,” said Autumn, “we are both well rested. Shall we search out the source of that smoke or shall we keep following the river and see where it takes us?”

“Aye-yai-yai,” said Logan. “I be not hungry now so let us follow the river and leave this place. Mayhap we can catch another fish further on.”

* * *

The village was quite small and mostly on one side of the river but there were several dwellings on the far side. A narrow track led in from the East and continued to the West with no obvious means of crossing the river.

“No doubt we shall find out in time,” said Autumn when Logan pointed this out. “This is part of the pleasure of coming to new places. There be little puzzles and conundrums to tease the mind which be obvious and commonplace to them as lives here.”

“Aye,” said Logan as they walked along the river bank. “But a village means people and people means bread and cheese and mayhap other delights in the way of food.”

“Do not get too excited,” said Autumn. “Did you not tell me a while back that we had no paraks left?”

“Yes,” said Logan, “they have all gone.”

1 See *The First Tale of The Annals of Autumn Savannah*

“So we have not the means to buy food,” said Autumn. “Are you intending to steal some?”

“Tis only fair,” said Logan. “We had many paraks when we left the North but you kept giving them away to people who said they needed them. Now we have none they can start giving back.”

“I confess I do not understand truly the ideas of ownership and money,” said Autumn, “even though you have tried to explain them to me. This idea of hoarding beyond your immediate needs and not sharing with others in need seems fruitless to me. Especially paraks as they seem to have no purpose other than to be given away. Why hoard something whose only purpose is to be got rid of?”

“The purpose of paraks is to be exchanged,” said Logan, “not given away. There is a difference.”

“And what of exchanging paraks for another's aid?” asked Autumn. “Is that not a productive exchange? There are many with no paraks and some with a lot. 'Twould seem beneficial all around if those with plenty shared with those with none.”

“Them as has plenty would take a different view,” said Logan. “Not being one I cannot be sure but I venture they would argue that by not giving them away they have more for the future. For certain we have given ours away and have none for the future.”

“And yet still I do not grasp it,” said Autumn, shaking her head. “Suffering is now so why not do something about it now? Do them as has plenty of paraks think that somehow suffering will be less in the future so their paraks will be more widely distributed?”

“No,” said Logan. “I very much doubt that. I wager it be in case they have some future suffering. That way they will have the paraks when they need them.”

“But what if they die?” said Autumn. “They cannot take their paraks to the Land of the Dead.”

“Mayhap they think they can,” said Logan. “Or more likely they do

not expect anyone will give them paraks when they are in great need so they build up a store for themselves.”

“And there you lose me again,” said Autumn. “Surely if people did not hoard paraks but gave them away freely to those in need then they would get them back at such time as they need them themselves?”

“As one who has no paraks, I need no convincing,” said Logan. “’Twould be best if you held this discussion with one who has a mass of paraks when next we meet one. Mayhap they understand their own motivations better than I do.”

“Do you wish we had not given away the paraks?” asked Autumn.

“That be a difficult question,” said Logan, stopping on the edge of the village to think about it. “On the one hand I take pleasure in the joy of others when we have given them paraks and in knowing that that has given you satisfaction as well.”

“And on the other hand?” asked Autumn.

“’Twould be nice to have some left,” said Logan. “’Tis much easier to buy bread and cheese than it is to steal them. People be not getting so upset.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I do not understand that either. How is it that people are happy to be given paraks but are unhappy to give them to others? Even if, as you say, their function is to be exchanged, people seem to want to be given a lot of paraks in exchange for as little as possible yet at the same time give as little paraks as they can for as much as possible. Does it not seem contradictory to you?”

“I confess my understanding of the world is little better than yours,” said Logan, “but one thing I do understand, as I have had to work with it for much of my life, is that I have neither paraks nor food. At such times the only practical solution is to take one or other from someone who has. ’Tis more of a practical philosophy than a moral one but it delays my renewed acquaintance with Yammoe.”

“Was that another of your jokes?” asked Autumn, resuming walking

into the village.

“Hunger is no joke,” said Logan tagging alongside her, “nor is being hung for stealing.”

“We be not hanging people for stealing in this village,” said a gruff voiced man propping up a mud brick wall.

“’Tis nice to hear,” said Logan. “What place is this?”

“It be named Veobad,” said the man, unpeeling himself from the wall, “and I be Ajoin. Who be you?”

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, “and this be Logan. We are travellers and strangers here.”

“I know you be strangers,” said Ajoin. “Cos I ain’t seen you before and I knows everyone. Do you not want to know what we do with stealers here?”

“Give them a good meal and a fond farewell?” asked Logan.

Ajoin gave a big belly laugh, appropriately enough as he had rather a big belly.

“Ahh, you be a joker, lad,” he said happily. “Nay, we pegs ’em out and spills their guts for the birds to feed on. ’Tis a kind of a fond farewell although there be little point in a good meal beforehand.”

“Ahh, right,” said Logan, somewhat nervously. “It be good to know that. Not that I am a thief, mind.”

Ajoin grinned at him.

“I be joking,” he said. “Them as is caught stealing be sent to Userko, downriver a bit for the Sheriff to talk to.”

He punched Logan’s shoulder in a friendly way and leered a little at Autumn.

"I like you," he said, turning his attention back to Logan. "Your wench be nice looking, too, although a sight too skinny for my taste. You have anywhere to stay while you be here?"

"We know no one in Veobad," said Logan. "Our intent is to find some bread and cheese and move on before dark. We will find somewhere to camp beside the river."

"Ohh, this be a right friendly little place," said Ajoin, "although the inn be expensive and there be dangers aplenty in the land around. 'Twould be my pleasure if you stay the night with me. I be not much of a traveller but I do enjoy a good chat with them as does. Makes me feel I knows a little of the world without the need to go off myself."

"That is most hospitable of you," said Autumn, "but it would be wrong of us to trespass on your kindness."

"Oh, 'tis no trespass, lass," said Ajoin. "Don't you be worrying your pretty little head about that. Now, I be having one or two little errands to do so you go off and get your bread from old Oca over there and meet me when you be done down at the crossing. I be living across the river and Fogma, my almost-era'owen, be making the best cheese in the region."

* * *

Logan sauntered round the side of the mill with a small sack of flour under his arm. It had been surprisingly easy as Oca had been tipping a sack of grain into the grinder as Logan arrived and had dropped the sack. With precious grain spilling everywhere he hadn't paid much attention to the stranger who walked in then out again although when he did notice a sack of flour missing his cursing was renewed with great vigour. He ran out into the village to see if he could spot anyone with a sack of flour but it was pointless asking if anyone had seen anything. Like most millers he was widely believed to be the biggest cheat in the area, supposedly over-weighing the sacks of grain and under-weighing his share for doing the grinding. Whether it was true or not, few, if any, would be to willing help him find someone who had stolen from him.

Autumn waited for Logan down by the mill wheel. Logan preferred to work alone as Autumn had even less of an understanding of how to steal than she did of money. Besides, Autumn had seen a family of ducks there that she wanted to talk to.

“Too easy,” he said with a smile, sitting down beside her.

She nodded distractedly and continued to watch the ducks who had come over and were watching to see if she had any food.

Logan opened Autumn's pack and put the bag of flour inside and she took the pack off him and retrieved a small handful of flour. She added a few drops of river water and mixed the coarse flour then started to break the dough into pellets, tossing them to the ducks.

“What did you think of Ajoin?” asked Logan.

“He seemed a little too friendly,” said Autumn, tossing a pellet close to one of the ducklings so it had a chance of getting some food.

“That is what I thought as well,” said Logan. “He was not as friendly with the locals that he passed after he left us.”

“I noticed that as well,” said Autumn. “Though it be bad to assume he cannot be trusted. There may be many reasons why the locals did not speak with him. Mayhap he be one who has friends and enemies in equal measure.”

“Shall we go on with just the flour and not meet with him as arranged?” asked Logan.

“Therein lies the dilemma,” said Autumn. “If he be as he says he is then 'twould be rude and I wish no insult to either him or his almost-er'owen. But, if he intends us ill for whatever reason then mayhap he will follow and take some action after dark. He knows this area better than we do.”

“And we will not have any cheese,” said Logan, “if indeed there be any cheese.”

“And we have not the means to pay for it either, if he wants payment,” said Autumn. “Little as I understand ownership and stealing I am not content with taking cheese for no exchange unless the offer be freely given.”

“Mayhap the tales of our travels be enough to exchange for a small cheese,” said Logan, “or mayhap he be willing for us to work in some way for a time.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “On balance my desire is to trust him and not insult him. After all, he knows we be travellers and not burdened with sacks of paraks or things of value.”

“Then it is decided,” said Logan jumping up. “Let us venture forth with tales of far flung places and hopes of cheese in our hearts!”

“On the other hand,” said Autumn, staying sitting, “is it right for me to go to his home knowing that I may well cause him grievous harm should a fight start? Would it not be best to avoid such a situation?”

With a sigh, Logan squatted beside her.

“We are not going in order to fight,” he said. “We are going because we have been invited. You will not start a fight so if there is to be a fight then it will be from his choice.”

“True,” said Autumn, “but I venture he does not expect either of us to put up much of a fight if there is to be one.”

“That is easily overcome,” said Logan. “When we get to the crossing tell him you are a Krisana. That way if he does choose to fight he knows what he will be up against. Besides, are you not forgetting something?”

“What?” asked Autumn.

“Your desire to trust him and not insult him,” said Logan. “Is it not a most grievous insult to assume he be planning to fight us?”

“You make a good argument, Logan,” said Autumn, dusting her

hands. The ducks lingered expectantly. “Let us go to the crossing and let the future unfold. Besides, I am curious as to how they cross this river. There be no bridge and the water seemed too fast and deep for a ford. All I saw was a rope.”

Chapter Five

There were two men waiting with Ajoin as Autumn and Logan approached the crossing. Both were younger than Ajoin and one was larger whereas the other looked more built for speed. The smaller carried a sickle loosely in one hand. They were looking upriver at a woman washing some clothing at the water's edge.

"I do not like the look of this," whispered Logan.

"We must not judge by appearances," whispered back Autumn, "but if there be trouble, get out of the way."

"Shall I take your pack?" he asked.

"Tis no impediment to me," whispered Autumn, "but it may slow you down."

"There they be," said Ajoin, glancing round. He turned and pointed.

The smaller companion had a long ragged scar running from his forehead and down one cheek and that eyebrow drooped down towards the corner of his mouth which twisted up. The larger had a flat belly and forearms like prize hams and a ripe black eye. The eyebrow above it bulged under a partly healed split. They were an evil looking pair.

Logan hesitated in his step then determinedly walked on, half a pace behind Autumn whose walk had become perceptibly more cat-like.

"Greetings and welcome," called Ajoin, moving forward to meet them.

The other two hung back and the smaller man touched the blade of his sickle.

"Greetings," said Autumn with a friendly smile. Logan nodded.

"These be two friends of mine," said Ajoin, "Nirwa and Euet."

The two men nodded. They looked a little tense.

“They be coming to hear your tales, if that be acceptable to you,” said Ajoin.

“They are welcome,” said Autumn and the two men relaxed a little.

“Did you get bread?” asked Ajoin, looking at their hands.

“I got flour instead,” said Logan. “We can make our own bread.”

“A small sackful, was it?” asked Ajoin, scratching his cheek.

“Yes,” said Logan. “Our needs are small.”

“Oca be complaining someone stole a small sack of flour,” said Ajoin conversationally. “I hope he be not overcharging you as a result.”

“I am sure he did not,” said Autumn.

“He is a tight fisted old bastard,” said Ajoin. “How much did he charge you?”

“Oh, umm, three peks,” guessed Logan.

“Ohhhh, so it be you what stole his flour, then,” said Ajoin, raising an eyebrow. “Small sack of flour, he usually charges seven peks or more if he can.”

“It may have been seven,” said Logan, a little flustered. “I sometimes get confused.”

Ajoin roared with laughter and the other two smiled and looked a lot happier.

“Be you not worrying, lad,” he said, slapping Logan's shoulder so hard Logan stumbled slightly. “Old bastard can afford to give away flour to needy travellers however much he be bitching about it. We won't be telling him. Come with us and meet Fogma. She be across the river and up along a bit.”

He turned and headed for the wooden jetty beside the length of rope

that stretched across the river, followed by Euet and Nirwa.

“How do we get across?” asked Autumn, following. “Do we swing across on the rope?”

Ajoi laughed. “Nay, lass,” he said. “I be pulling us across. Stand on the float with us. You too, lad.”

Logan stepped onto the wooden jetty and found, to his surprise, it wobbled slightly. Ajoi grasped the rope in his hands and started to haul on it. Autumn watched in fascination as most of the wooden jetty started to move across the water.

“Ohh,” she said. “It be a boat!”

“More of a raft,” said Ajoi, “it being flat and all.”

“Ahh, I thought this was a jetty,” she asked. “Why does it not float downriver?”

“There be two shafts underneath,” said Ajoi. “One at the front and one at the back. They fit into a wooden channel and stop the float moving sideways or twisting. Them as wants to cross just stand on the float and pull on the rope.”

“That be right clever,” said Autumn. “Can it take carts and wagons or just people?”

“That be why it is flat,” said Ajoi. “Couldn't be getting a cart on it if it were a boat.

“I was wondering why there was no bridge,” said Autumn as a small wave broke over the edge of the float and wet her foot.

“There was a bridge,” said Ajoi. “’Twas here for many summers but rotted and got washed away. This be not a rich village and we could not afford to build another so I built this and ferry people across for five peks.”

“Oh, said Autumn. “We have no money. We cannot pay you.”

“You be my guests,” said Ajoin. “I not be charging guests nor village folk, only them as be traders carrying goods across, and that bastard Oca, not that he ever leaves his shit infested mill.”

“So is this how you make a living?” asked Autumn.

“Nay, lass,” said Ajoin, slowing on his pulling as the floater approached the small ramp on the far bank. “I be a carpenter by trade. It be not much of a living either but the two together be satisfactory.”

“What do you do?” asked Logan of Euet.

The small man brandished his sickle and Logan flinched, but covered it by pretending to stumble as the floater bumped into the ramp.

“I be labouring on a farm,” he muttered. “’Tis reaping time.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “So what happened to your face?”

Euet ran his thumb over the scar on his face.

“’Twas an accident,” he said. “I were helping me Da with the reaping when I were but small and his sickle caught me.”

“That must have hurt,” said Logan sympathetically.

“Aye, it did,” said Euet. “Nearly killed me Da though,”

“How so?” asked Logan.

“Me Ma be not impressed,” said Euet, grinning. “Da said she damned near cut his throat for it.”

“And you?” asked Logan. “Looks like you were in a fight.”

“Humph,” growled Nirwa. “If I be in a fight I be not getting a hit like this. It be the other that be bloodied and bruised, not me. I were flailing² the enmern and the joiner broke. End caught me in the face.”

2 A flail is two long poles joined by a short cord or chain and is used to beat cereal crops to separate the seed from the husks.

He touched the lump over his eye gingerly.

“Have you put hamamielis on it?” asked Autumn.

“Of course not,” scoffed Ajoin. “He be thinking he be too manly for things like that. ’Tis a mere scratch or so he says.”

’Tis your choice,” said Autumn, “but I have a little in my pack if you have a mind and no one will think any the less of you.”

“If you be tending to it, I will allow,” said Nirwa. “I fancy you have a gentle touch and be not like them ham fisted bastards.”

“Have you no era’owen?” asked Autumn as they walked to Ajoin’s house.

“No,” said Nirwa sadly. “She be dying in childbirth two summers past, the babe as well.”

“Ahh, ’tis a most unfortunate thing,” said Autumn, patting Nirwa’s arm. “And you, Euet?”

“Mine were taken by the flux,” he said. “Left a babe. She be with my sister in Userko. She be having five of her own so another be making no difference. I goes to see ’er whenever I can.”

“You both have my sympathy,” said Autumn. “And your Fogma, Ajoin, be she well?”

“Judge for yourself,” said Ajoin. “This be my dwelling. Come inside.”

“You brought them idle good for nothings back here again?” called an amused voice from outside the back of the place.

A large, clearly robust woman with a basket of wet clothing came in and stopped.

“Ooops, begging your pardon,” she said. “I be not realising we had visitors. I be Fogma, ohh and what have you done to your face, Nirwa?” She dumped the basket on the ground.

“He broke a flail with it,” said Ajoin. “These be Autumn and Logan. They be travellers passing through.”

“Sit you down,” said Fogma, gesturing to the table with two benches flanking it. “I suppose he promised you food and a bed for the night?” She started to inspect Nirwa’s face, now it was more on a level with hers.

“If that be no imposition on you, Fogma,” said Autumn. “’Tis a simple matter for us to move on.”

“Oh no,” said Fogma, “I be used to it and always ready. The imposition be on you two. Ajoin charges a heavy price for our hospitality.”

“We have no money,” said Autumn, “but we will gladly share what we have with you.”

Fogma laughed and gave Nirwa’s cheek a firm pat, making him wince. “You’ll live, boy. No, Ajoin be not taking your money, he will rob you of any sleep and peace and keep you up all night with his never ending demands for tales of other places. Amazes me why he has never gone off to find out for himself.”

“It be right simple,” said Ajoin with a laugh. “This ’un won’t be letting me go. Every time I tries to escape she be hauling me back by my britches.”

“Get on with you, man,” said Fogma. “I be pushing not pulling, but you won’t be letting go of my apron strings. Hang on like grim death, you does.”

They both smiled at each other, clearly content in their relationship.

“I promised I would put some hamamielis on Nirwa’s face,” said Autumn. “Do you have anything I can use for binding?”

“Aye,” said Fogma.

She rummaged inside a stout wooden box in one corner of the room

and pulled out an old piece of cloth and tore off a strip.

“So you be travellers, then,” she said while Autumn dealt with Nirwa's face. “What be you doing when you are not travelling?”

Autumn glanced at Logan. “I am a Krisana,” she said, deftly wrapping the length of cloth around Nirwa's head.

“A Krisana?” exclaimed Euet. “We be having another Krisana here one time. When was that, Ajoin?”

“Ohh, three summers ago, near enough.” said Ajoin. “He be a right strange man and no mistake.”

“In what way?” asked Autumn, tying a knot in the strip.

“Thank you kindly,” said Nirwa. “It be feeling better already.”

“Oh, he was talking some damned fool nonsense about the river,” said Euet.

“I will get some food,” said Fogma, bustling over to the hearth where a large cauldron sat near the fire.

“That be right,” said Ajoin. “I said something about, what was it? Oh, aye, about how I crossed the river many times a day.”

“That be it,” said Euet. “And this here Krisana come back saying he can only cross the river the once. Damned fool. Ajoin be going across and back all the damned time.”

“Five peks a time,” said Ajoin. “Wouldn't be worth doing if it were only the once.”

“I think that Krisana was playing games with you,” said Autumn. “That is the sort of thing we talk about at the Esiyup but 'tis foolish to just say it outright without explaining the why of it.”

“And you know the why of it?” asked Nirwa.

“If you are not careful, Autumn will keep you up all night explaining the why of it,” said Logan with a laugh.

“Ho! So you not be finding enough ways to keep her mind on other things at night then, Logan lad,” laughed Ajoin and the other two snickered. Fogma glanced over at Autumn and raised her eyes to the roof with a snort.

“Logan be my friend and travelling companion,” said Autumn. “Nothing more.”

“Poor sod,” said Ajoin, nudging Euet and they both laughed again. Nirwa looked at Autumn speculatively. Logan smiled sheepishly.

“So, what be the why of it?” asked Nirwa.

“The river be full of water?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Ajoin. “No need for the floater if it isn’t.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and the water flows downriver?”

“Aye,” said Ajoin, “see for yourself, yonder. Flows all the way to Userko and beyond. Travellers past be telling me it goes all the way to the Azour Sea.”

“And if you take a scoop of water with your hand,” said Autumn, “does not the place where you scooped fill with water again?”

“Aye,” said Euet. “That be what water does. What be the point of this?”

“Oh, just making sure we are agreed on the basics,” said Autumn. “So if you throw your scoop of water back in the river, what happens to it?”

“It mixes back with the river,” said Ajoin.

“And does it stay where you left it?” asked Autumn, “or does it go downriver with the rest of the water?”

“Can't say as how I've ever watched,” said Euet, “but I reckon as it would. Same with leaves and sticks and stuff what be in the water.”

“So, tell me, Ajoin,” said Autumn, “since you live beside the river, does the water ever go the other way? Back where it came from?”

“Nay, never,” said Ajoin, looking puzzled.

“So you would agree that the water has come from upriver somewhere, gone past your dwelling and headed off downriver and never come back?” asked Autumn.

“Well, yes,” said Ajoin, “clearly.”

“That is what the Krisana was trying to say,” said Autumn. “The water that we floated on when we crossed is not there anymore. It has gone downriver and is somewhere else. If we float across the river now water that we would be floating on is different to the water we floated on before. It was upriver when we crossed and is now here when we cross again and will be downriver if we try to go back.”

The three men frowned at Autumn and Fogma turned to look at her as well. Logan just smiled. He'd had many conversations like this with Autumn before.

“But it be the same damned river,” protested Euet after a while.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “This be why that Krisana should have explained what he was saying. You are thinking of the river as a thing which sits over yonder and never changes so you can cross it many times. The Krisana was thinking of the river as moving water and the water you cross this time is different to the water you cross at any other time. This time it may have a fish in it and next time there may be no fish but there be a leaf.”

“I say it be a load of old tosh,” said Euet. “It still be the river and if you fall in and drown you still be dead even if the water is further downriver. Mayhap you be downriver with it but you still be drowned in the river.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. She waited a few moments while they thought some more about the river. “I have a question, though. What be the name of this river?”

“It be the Sehenhara River,” said Nirwa.

“So if you and the others in the village decided to call it the Veobad River, would it still be the same river?” asked Autumn.

“Of course,” said Ajoin. “Why would it not be?”

“I was only asking,” said Autumn. “Another question, if I may?”

Ajoin nodded and Euet looked sceptical.

“If the people of the village dug a channel around the village and diverted the river through the channel so it went around Veobad rather than through it, would it be the same river?” she asked.

“Aye,” said Euet. “There be only the one river here so of course it be the same river.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “You are right of course. But, if you do not mind me asking, what if only half the river was diverted through the channel around the village and the other half carried on as it was before. Would it still be the same river?”

“Yes, of course,” said Euet. “Why would it not be?”

“Because there now be two,” said Autumn. “One going around and one going through. How can it be that the river is in two places at the same time?”

“But it be the water that is in two places, not the river,” said Ajoin after thinking about it.

Fogma brought over some wooden bowls and dumped the cauldron on the table. She started ladling stew into the bowls.

“That smells delicious, Fogma,” said Logan as she handed him a bowl.

“Thank you.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “’Tis a delight for the stomach.”

She ate a spoonful of the stew and smiled her thanks at Fogma.

“So, if I am not mistaken, Ajoin,” said Autumn, “what you are saying is that it is the water that makes a river, not what it be named, where it is or how many parts it be split into?”

“Aye,” said Ajoin, “that be how it seems to me.”

“It makes sense to me,” said Autumn. “Euet, Nirwa? How say you?”

“He be right,” said Euet. “Ain’t a river if there be no water.”

Nirwa just grinned. “She ain’t finished yet, I reckon,” he said.

Logan laughed and finished his stew.

“What she be going to say,” he said, licking his spoon, “is that if the river be the water and the water that we crossed on be not there anymore, how can you be crossing the river again? It be different water, so it must be a different river.”

Euet scowled and Ajoin looked thoughtful. Nirwa just smiled at Autumn and carried on eating his stew.

“This be why I am travelling,” said Autumn. “At the Esiyup we sit and argue these things all day until we convince ourselves of the right of what we are saying and miss the important point.”

“And what be that?” asked Ajoin.

“It does not matter if it is the same river or not,” said Autumn. “If you be on one side and have to get to the other you will get wet or give Ajoin five peks to keep you dry. That be the truth of it and that is what I am learning as I travel. I left the Esiyup with my head full of fine principles that worked well enough at the Esiyup where nothing ever happened except ever more debating on things of which we actually

knew little. Outside the Esyup life is much more complicated.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ajoin, gesturing to Fogma to refill everyone's bowls.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “Very well. One principle I used to hold above all others was not to kill except when my own life was about to be taken. That seemed a very simple principle to uphold.”

“Aye,” said Nirwa. “Seems simple enough.”

“But what if many will die by another's hand when I am not myself threatened?” said Autumn. “As a Krisana I have some skill in fighting and I had it within my power to kill that one and thereby save the lives of many others. My principle said that as I was not myself threatened I should not kill but by not killing this one I would have been killing many others. 'Twas a dilemma.”

“I venture this were a real enough situation,” said Fogma. “How did you resolve that dilemma?”

“I killed the one,” said Autumn, “and in doing so saved the lives of many. Did I do right? I do not know but I do know that only by leaving my Esyup was I able to put my long cherished principles to the test and I found them wanting.”

Chapter Six

“That was a right good evening,” said Logan the next morning as they made their way towards Userko.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Although I think they were more interested in the fighting we have been through than the principles that were at stake.”

“And can you blame them?” asked Logan. “They were ordinary folk with ordinary problems not people who have spent their lives in a remote place debating the rights and wrongs of abstract things. They have fed their families and lost loved ones. Can you blame them for wanting a little excitement in their lives without the risks that go along?”

No, I do not,” said Autumn, “and if they be content with our tales in exchange for their hospitality that sits well with me.”

“What was it that Nirwa wanted to talk with you alone about?” asked Logan. “Although if it be secret I apologise for prying.”

“He said nothing about keeping it secret,” said Autumn. “No, he asked me if I would be willing to stay in Veobad as his almost-erawowen.”

Logan stopped and stared after Autumn in pained surprise.

“That does not surprise me,” he said, pulling himself together. “I could see he was captured by you and I venture it was not your philosophical arguments that impressed him. Umm, what answer did you give him?”

“I declined the opportunity,” said Autumn continuing walking. “Aside from anything else, Veobad is not my place nor, I venture, would Nirwa want me there for long. Such attractions as I may hold for him I wager lie in my being a stranger and unfamiliar. He would be best suited to a local girl not one who will bring him troubles because of my outlandish ways.”

“I be right glad to hear that,” said Logan, catching her up again.

"'Twould be lonely on the road without you. Umm, but you did give his idea serious consideration?"

"I give all ideas serious consideration," said Autumn. "'Twould be very wrong of me to accept or reject his proposal without it."

"Well, yes, I suppose so," said Logan. "Umm, so you, umm, are prepared to venture into, ahh, such an arrangement? Umm, perhaps in the future? With someone else?"

"Who knows what the future may bring," said Autumn. "At this time I am searching for my place in this world but when I find it, mayhap it will be alone or with someone else. Fear not, friend Logan, if and when that time arises I will let you know. If you are still my companion, of course."

"What do you mean, if?" asked Logan. "Why would I not be? Do you tire of my company?"

Autumn gave him a puzzled glance.

"You know my vows," she said. "I wager you will be breaking our company far sooner than I. Mayhap in Userko there be a pretty maid who captures your attention and you end your travels there and become a farmer or some such."

"I do not think that likely," said Logan, turning pink.

"Why not?" asked Autumn. "'Tis I who be searching for my place, not you. I venture you will tire of this long before I do."

"I will not break our company until you tell me to," said Logan. "I like this travelling and I like your company. Besides, ..." and he tailed off.

"Besides?" asked Autumn.

"I know not how to talk to girls," said Logan, his pinkness getting deeper.

"I am a girl and you know how to talk to me," said Autumn. "We have

talked many times or have I been imagining this?"

"Oh, you know what I mean," said Logan. "You be different to other girls."

"Well, I wager that be true," said Autumn. "Most Krisanas be men but I do not know what you mean about talking."

"Oh, umm, well," said Logan, casting his eyes around for something to change the subject to. Unfortunately this part of the river was very much like the last part. "Umm, if I try to talk to a girl she be laughing at me."

"I do not understand," said Autumn. "Do you not want girls to laugh at you? You be always saying I do not laugh at your jokes. Does it not please you that others do?"

"No, they be laughing before I tell a joke," said Logan sadly. "Often before I say anything, which be a terrible thing and I confess I cannot think of any jokes to tell them anyway. My mind goes blank and I start to stammer nonsense and they laugh at me and go away. 'Tis much easier not to talk to them at all."

"Oh," said Autumn and carried on walking for a while in deep thought. "This be a subject I know nothing of but I venture it be amenable to logic like any other. Mayhap if we apply our minds to serious consideration of ..."

"No," interrupted Logan. "Thank you but no. 'Tis a subject I would prefer to leave well alone."

"As you wish," said Autumn, "but I shall make a point of watching you talk with girls from now on and mayhap I will be able to see wherein lies the problem and we can talk of it in detail."

"Oh Sploop," exclaimed Logan. "Please do not do that. 'Tis hard enough to talk to a girl without having you watching me. Besides, since I am with you I am not wanting to talk to girls."

"You do not want to talk to me?" asked Autumn, looking confused.

“You would prefer we walk in silence?”

“No, I meant other girls,” said Logan. “I like talking with you, just not other girls.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn, “although 'tis my nature for my mind to dwell on things that I do not understand.”

She stopped and frowned.

“Now what is it?” asked Logan, stopping when he realised she had stopped. “You are not going to make me stop and talk to every girl we meet, are you?”

“When did we cross the river?” asked Autumn.

“Last night,” said Logan. “When we went across with Ajoin and the others. Why?”

“When we came to Veobad yesterday the river was on our left, was it not?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Logan. “It has been on our left all the time we have been following it.”

“And we crossed last evening,” said Autumn. “And when we left Veobad it was on our right.”

“Indeed,” said Logan, then it dawned on him. “Ahh. When did we cross the river? It be on the left again.”

“Could we have crossed it without noticing?” asked Autumn, staring at the river.

“I do not see how,” said Logan. “'Tis wide and quite deep. Mayhap there was a bridge we used without noticing.”

“Why would anyone build a bridge across a river where there are no people nor paths?” asked Autumn.

“Could it be we are going in the wrong direction?” asked Logan. “I wager not as Astauand is to the right and heading for the West so we still be going South,”

“And we are still going downriver,” said Autumn, “unless the river has changed direction. And why is Astauand heading for the West? We have not been walking that long. It should still be some way to the East.”

“Mayhap we became engrossed in our talk and the time has passed without us knowing,” said Logan, “although it does not feel overlong that we left Veobad.”

“Tis strange but we still be heading downriver so I venture we must have talked longer than we thought,” said Autumn, “and at some point crossed the river. Mayhap it disappeared underground for a short distance and we walked over the top of it without noticing.”

“Yes, that must be the truth of it,” said Logan. “No matter, let us keep going. I wager Userko be quite near.”

* * *

“This be Veobad,” said Autumn, standing on the edge of the village. “I though the path we followed along the river was familiar but there lies Veobad. See, there is the crossing and beyond is Oca’s mill.”

“How is this possible?” said Logan. “We left this morning on the right side of the river heading South and now we have come full circle and crossed the river to end up where we started and have spent the whole day doing it! This is absurd.”

“It is a puzzle,” said Autumn as they rounded the side of a dwelling to join the main thoroughfare. “Look, there is Ajoin. Mayhap he knows where we went wrong.”

They went over to where Ajoin was leaning against the side of a mud brick building.

“Greetings again, Ajoin,” said Autumn. “We are back although I know

not how.”

“We be not hanging people for stealing in this village,” said Ajoin, looking at Logan.

“So you told us yesterday,” said Logan. “Somehow we have lost our bearings and instead of going South we have come back here from the North.”

“It be named Veobad,” said Ajoin, prising himself away from the wall, “and I be Ajoin. Who be you?”

Logan gave Autumn a puzzled glance and saw she was frowning.

“Tis Logan and Autumn,” he said. “We stayed with you last night. Do you not remember?”

“I know you be strangers,” said Ajoin. “Cos I ain't seen you before and I knows everyone. Do you not want to know what we do with stealers here?”

“You send them to Userko,” said Autumn. “Do you not recognise us, Ajoin?”

“Why would I recognise strangers?” asked Ajoin.

“Mayhap it would be best if we talked to Fogma,” said Autumn.

“And how be you knowing Fogma?” asked Ajoin suspiciously.

“We met her yesterday,” said Autumn. “Do you not remember? You took us across the river on the floater you made and we met Nirwa and Euet.”

Ajoin scowled. “You strangers know a sight too much about me and my business,” he said. “Best you be gone from here right quick or I be getting angry. Go on, begone from here.”

“Ajoin,” started Logan but Autumn pulled on his sleeve.

“We beg your pardon,” she said politely. “We mistook you for someone else. Please forgive us for disturbing you.”

She turned and walked away and, after a moment, Logan followed.

“Mayhap he be playing some kind of joke,” said Logan, “but I know not what and it is not funny.”

“There be little point in pursuing it,” said Autumn. “If it be a joke then it is for him to stop it and acknowledge us but I venture there be something deeper here.”

“There are Nirwa and Euet,” said Logan, pointing up the main track that led to the West. “Shall we speak to them?”

“Let us wait here and see if they recognise us as they pass,” said Autumn.

Euet barely glanced at them and Nirwa ran his eyes over Autumn but otherwise ignored her. They went down to the crossing and a few moments later Ajoin joined them.

“Tis right strange,” said Autumn. “What be happening yonder?”

Oca had run out of his mill and was scanning the street, cursing.

“What be the matter, Oca?” called Ajoin.

“Some bastard be stealing a sack of flour,” called back Oca. “Be you seeing anyone carrying a sack?”

“Was it a big one or a small one?” asked Ajoin, strolling over.

“A small one, but what do that matter?” snarled Oca, stamping his foot. “Thieving be thieving no matter what the size.”

“I not be seeing anyone carrying a sack, big or small,” said Ajoin. “How about you lads?”

Nirwa and Euet both shook their heads and Euet muttered something

to Nirwa and he laughed.

“Mayhap you be miscounting,” said Ajoin. “Go back and count again.”

“It was probably you, you pack of thieves,” snarled Oca and stamped back into his mill.

Ajoin watched him go and made a rude gesture with one hand then sauntered back to join the others. A woman came out of a nearby dwelling with a basket of clothes and exchanged pleasantries with them before starting to wash the clothes in the river.

“Is that the same woman as was washing there yesterday?” asked Autumn.

“I did not pay close enough attention,” said Logan. “I was more concerned about Ajoin and the others.”

They stood watching Ajoin, Nirwa and Euet down by the crossing for a few moments. They seemed to be waiting for someone but no one appeared.

“Come,” said Autumn. “This is very strange but as they do not seem to know us now I see little point in staying here any longer. Let us head South again but on this side of the river.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “Astauand be setting soon so we may as well find somewhere to camp. Mark that the river is on our left. Mayhap we will see if we end up on the other side.”

They headed off downriver and Oca gave them a very suspicious look from the entrance to his mill as they passed but did not say anything.

“Mayhap Ajoin has a very short memory,” said Logan as they left the village behind, “but how is it that Nirwa did not recognise you after asking you to be his almost-erawen only this morning?”

“Are you hungry?” asked Autumn.

“No, not particularly,” said Logan. “Why? Are you?”

“No,” said Autumn and relapsed into thoughtful silence.

* * *

“This seems a good place to stay for the night,” said Logan when they came across a clearing a while later. “Shall we stop here?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and the river still be on the left so we have not crossed.”

“You have been very quiet,” said Logan, sitting down on the bank and putting his feet in the water.

“I have been thinking about the day,” said Autumn.

She put the pack on the ground and slipped off her robe before sitting next to Logan.

“Aye, so have I,” he admitted.

“And what thoughts have you had?” she asked.

“None worth having,” said Logan, plucking some grass and tossing the blades into the river. “I have no understanding of the day at all. How have you faired?”

“I have a possible explanation,” said Autumn slowly, “although I have no explanation for the explanation.”

“This does not sound good,” said Logan. “You have an explanation for which there is no explanation? You are not at your Esyup now.”

Autumn smiled. “I mean that I have a possible explanation for today but I cannot begin to explain why it has been happening.”

“Mayhap you are going to follow that other Krisana that Ajoin told us about and say that this is a different river and a different village with different people in it because the water is further downriver,” said Logan, lying back to look up at the sky.

“Actually quite the opposite,” said Autumn. “I venture this was the same river with the same village and the same people and the same water.”

“How can it be the same water?” asked Logan. “The water has gone downriver.”

“It has since yesterday,” said Autumn. “But I am thinking this is yesterday again.”

Logan groaned and lay on his back with his arm over his eyes. Autumn got a piece of cheese from her pack and quietly chewed on it while watching a butterfly sunning itself on a nearby stone.

“Why do you think it is yesterday again,” said Logan after a while.

“Because things happened the same,” said Autumn. “We arrived in Veobad, Ajoï spoke to us, he met his friends, the miller had a sack of flour stolen, 'twas all the same.”

“No it was not,” said Logan. “We said different things and no one recognised us.”

“Aye, that be the strange part,” said Autumn. “It was as though the day was being played again but we were different but it does explain several other things.”

“Such as?” asked Logan, rolling over onto his elbow.

“How we crossed the river without crossing it,” said Autumn. “How we went South and ended up North again. And, I venture, it explains why we are not as hungry or as tired as we should be if we had been walking the whole day.”

“How does it explain that?” asked Logan.

“You remember when we noticed we were on the other side of the river?” said Autumn. “Astauand was much further across the sky that we expected. I venture at some time late this morning we jumped backwards to mid afternoon yesterday. To a time not long before we

arrived in Veobad and met Ajoin.

"I suppose it might be an explanation," said Logan, screwing up his face. "But why would this be so?"

"That I cannot explain," said Autumn.

Logan plucked a stem of grass and rolled onto his back again and started chewing on it.

"It did not happen exactly the same," he said, spitting out some grass. "When we first arrived in Veobad, Ajoin was friendly but the second time he was not."

"Aye," said Autumn. "Mayhap that be because we did not play our parts right and he got upset. I wonder if we had said the same things the rest of the day would have gone the same way?"

"Mayhap," said Logan. He sighed and sat up. "So why did we not say the same things? How is it that everyone else went through yesterday again but we did not?"

"As I said," said Autumn shrugging, "I have no explanation for the explanation and 'tis only an idea anyway. I know not the truth of it."

"Well," said Logan, "we can be sure of one thing. 'Twas not Nirwa who did this hoping to get a different answer from you. If he had then he would have recognised you and asked again."

"Aye," said Autumn. "But we do know one who has powers such as this, although I am not saying she be the one who has done it."

"Mother Midcarn," said Logan, tossing the remains of his grass stalk in the river. "Why does this not surprise me?"

"It may not be her," said Autumn, "although if my thought be right then I hope it was her doing."

"Why?" asked Logan. "If Mother Midcarn be behind this then there is bound to be trouble."

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “But if it be someone or something else then I venture the trouble be a whole lot worse.”

Logan groaned and collapsed back on the ground and covered his eyes. Then he suddenly sat up.

“The river was on our left when we stopped, was it not?” he said, staring at the river.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and it still is.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“We are still sitting where we were sitting,” said Autumn, “and the river still be right here in front of us.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “but when we sat down it was flowing from left to right. I threw some grass in and it went that way. But it is now flowing the other way.”

“Are you sure?” said Autumn, frowning at the river.

“Yes,” said Logan. “We came upon this clearing and sat down, neither of us have turned around so the water should be flowing from left to right as it was on our left to begin with but it is now flowing from right to left.”

“But how can it suddenly start to flow backwards?” asked Autumn, squirming backwards so her feet were no longer in the water.

“There be only one way,” said Logan. “We have crossed over to the other side without noticing.”

“But we are still in the clearing,” said Autumn.

“Look yonder,” said Logan. “There be a similar looking clearing on the other side.”

Autumn stared at the clearing on the other bank then twisted to see if her pack was still behind her. It was, and so were the waterskins and

Logan's staff.

“That be right strange,” she said, leaning forward to pick a small piece of fluffy white cobweb off her tunic. She crumpled it up and started to toss it away then froze.

“Cobweb,” she said, staring at the little ball of web stuck to her finger then looked up to see others floating in across the river. “Mizule!”

Chapter Seven

A passing pink crested Ahon waterhen, returning to its nest, circled to investigate the floating cobwebs and the two strange creatures flapping at them. It decided the small white things were probably edible and flew lower, preparing to land at the water's edge where the mud was thick. The cloud of webs grew thicker and seemed to be moving towards the creatures rather than float on the breeze. Puzzled, the waterhen landed, its long toes barely indenting the surface, and it craned its head from side to side, studying the webs first with one eye then the other. A stray web flew over and landed near the waterhen's feet. It hopped over and pecked at the web but it didn't taste good so the waterhen dropped it. It was still a fascinating sight and there was still the possibility of food so the waterhen lingered.

Suddenly the waterhen rose into the air with a hasty flapping of wings and a raucous “kwak-kwak-kwaak”, its pink crest flat atop its head as it panicked. First one then the other creature had leapt into the river, splashing water everywhere. The waterhen climbed rapidly then circled again at what seemed to be a safe height. The cloud of webs was thinning, disappearing back to wherever they had come from. Curious, the waterhen circled lower, looking this way and that, until the webs had all gone. Losing interest it circled one last time then flapped its way upriver again, its nest calling. A final “kwaaak” dismissing the whole strangeness to the oblivion of forgotten memories. It did not see the two creatures slowly emerge from the water, dripping.

“They seem to have all gone,” said Autumn, standing calf deep in the river.

Logan was further out, only his head and one shoulder visible above the water as he crouched on the river bed. He looked around and slowly rose to his feet, knee deep. A pale butterfly flitted past and he ducked.

“Where did they go?” he asked.

“I know not,” said Autumn.

She waded through the water and onto the river bank, dripping. Her hair in a plastered tangle down her back. She stripped off her tunic and started to wring it out. Logan followed. He, too, stripped off and wrung out his tunic.

“So,” he said after laying out his tunic in the afternoon sun, “’twas not a dream the other night.”

“No,” agreed Autumn, sitting on the ground.

She wrung out her hair then reached for her pack for her nekmit frond to comb it.

“It seemed to me,” she said, “that the webs were coming directly for us. I did not see any settle on my robe or my pack beside it or on the grass or bushes, only on me and you.”

“Aye,” said Logan, sitting beside her. “And they would not come off. They were very sticky. It was a good idea of yours to get under water.”

“They were covering us,” said Autumn, leaning to one side with her head tilted to comb her hair. “We had to get under cover quickly. The water seemed easiest.”

“Did you see what happened to the ones on us?” asked Logan. “Did they melt or did they wash off?”

“I fancy they dissolved,” said Autumn. “There were none that I could see on the water when I came out. Did you notice which way the breeze was blowing?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “’Twas from behind us, a little downriver. Which makes me wonder.”

“How the webs blew across the river at us?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Logan.

He blew his nose then tousled his hair to help it dry then sneezed.

“Shall I say it or will you?” he asked, looking out over the river.

“They were attacking us,” said Autumn, calmly. She put her frond back in her pack.

“So it would seem,” said Logan. “Mayhap it be they attack living creatures and we are the only ones here.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but did you see the bird?”

“What bird?” asked Logan.

“There was a bird watching us,” said Autumn. “It tried to eat some of the webs but did not like them but they paid it no attention. It flew away when we jumped into the river. Why did the webs not attack the bird?”

“The other night,” said Logan pensively, “if it were not a dream, why were there none when we woke up?”

“Tis a good question,” said Autumn. “We did not take refuge in the river so mayhap they dissolved in the dew. We both woke after dawn you remember.”

“Yes, I had forgotten,” said Logan. He scratched his chest. “But in my dream, and in yours I think you said, our faces were covered and we struggled to breathe. If we could not breathe how did we survive the night?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn.

Suddenly she jumped up and checked her robe and the waterskins.

“What are you doing?” asked Logan.

“I have just remembered,” said Autumn, pointing to where Logan's staff lay. “That night, when we woke up, our things had been neatly arranged under a tree and the fish we had cooked was gone. Everything here is where we left it. Nothing has been moved. Why be that different?”

“Mayhap it be because the webs did not cover us,” said Logan. “Maybe they only rearrange things when they have finished what they set out to do.”

“Which begs the question of what they were intending,” said Autumn, sitting back down, “and who sent them.”

“Ye-es-ss,” said Logan slowly. “And I venture we have no way of answering that yet, if we ever do. Mayhap it just be something in this area.”

“Aye, mayhap,” said Autumn. She fished one of the blankets from her pack and wrapped it around herself. “Do you want a blanket?”

“Aye, thank you,” said Logan, absent-mindedly. He took it from her hand and let it lie in his lap. “We also found a footprint.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “I had forgotten that. You think the footprint was related?”

“It could be,” said Logan. “Mayhap someone came upon us and somehow cleaned the webs from us and arranged our things while we slept.”

“Tis possible,” said Autumn. “The webs came just before dark and we did not wake until after dawn so it even be possible that someone washed us with river water and left us to dry. It was a warm night.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “But who? There was no one anywhere near. Could it be the one who came in the night was also the one who sent the webs?”

“Why would they send webs to cover and suffocate us then clean them off?” asked Autumn. “That makes little sense.”

“None of this makes any sense,” said Logan, “so a stranger doing strange things in the night be no less sense.”

He sighed and slowly wrapped the blanket around his shoulders. Then Autumn stiffened.

“Look at the river,” she said slowly. “It has changed direction again.”

“Oh Sploop!” said Logan.

He got up and went to the water's edge to peer at the water then looked across to the clearing on the far bank then back at the clearing they were in.

“Are we going mad?” he asked Autumn. “Mayhap we have been travelling too long and our minds are becoming warped and addled.”

“’Tis possible,” she said, “but how would we know?”

“Many would say that repeating days and watching rivers change direction and being attacked by floating cobwebs would be a sure sign of madness,” said Logan.

“I know little of the madnesses that afflict people,” said Autumn, moving her legs into her cross legged position and rearranging her blanket, “but it seems to me that while we both might go mad ’tis unlikely that we would both experience the same things while being mad. And besides, we have both experienced folds in time in the Land of the Undead³ and rivers changing direction when Khimera and her kin cleansed Cymogene's valley⁴. And cobwebs floating in the air be nothing new. The only thing that is different here is that the webs seemed to be guided to us but we may be wrong in that.”

“Aye,” said Logan, sitting down again and pulling the blanket tightly around him. “But not all at the same time. I confess I do not like it.”

“We still have some time before dark,” said Autumn. “Shall we move on and find somewhere else for the night?”

“I would like to,” said Logan, “but I see little point. If the webs be guided then no doubt they will find us wherever we are. At least here we are close to the river and can jump in again. If we move on we may lose track of the river. Let us stay here the night and hope that tomorrow we move out of this Voqev riddled place.”

3 See *The First Tale of The Annals of Autumn Savannah*.

4 See *The Second Tale of The Annals of Autumn Savannah*.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I share your feelings on this. I venture the webs may return while we sleep and try to smother us before we wake so 'twould be a good idea to build a shelter. We cannot rely on another passing stranger to help.”

* * *

“Are you asleep?” whispered Logan.

“Yes,” whispered Autumn.

“Sorry,” whispered Logan.

He tried to roll over and ended up pressing against Autumn so he rolled back.

“We should have made the shelter bigger,” he muttered. “Tis not wide enough.”

“What ails you?” muttered Autumn sleepily.

“Nothing,” he said, trying to roll the other way and got a faceful of leaves and a small twig in the side of his nose. He snorted and rubbed his nose.

“You be right fidgety,” muttered Autumn. “Can you not sleep?”

“We should have made the shelter wider,” said Logan. “There is no room to move in here.”

Autumn wriggled further over to her side.

“Is that better?” she asked.

“I suppose so,” he said, now wide awake. “I cannot sleep.”

“Tis not something you can force,” said Autumn. “Go and look at the stars and have something to eat. Mayhap you will fell sleepy after a while.”

“I do not want to,” muttered Logan.

He lay there silently while Autumn's breathing grew quieter until he could bear it no longer.

“Sploop,” he muttered quietly, but with feeling, and, as quietly as he could, crawled out of the shelter.

Plakill was high overhead and Plifal low to the East. The clearing was bathed in cool, ghostly grey light and crossed with faint shadows from the surrounding trees. An owl turned its head around completely to watch this strange phenomenon rooting around in a pack. The cheese did not smell of mice or other small rodents so the owl blinked slowly, twice, and turned its head back to face the other way. A fox, on its way to drink, paused when it caught the scent of humans and hesitated then went further downstream.

Logan sat near the water's edge, a piece of cheese in his hand. A nightjar swooped low and let its feet trail through the water with a hiss then rose and its dark shadow doubled back and went high over the trees. There were faint rustles and whispers from the undergrowth.

Logan sighed and bit into his cheese then twisted at a footfall behind him. Autumn sat down beside him.

“I cannot sleep now either,” she said.

“Do you want some cheese?” he asked.

He saw her faint profile shake 'no' in the moonlight.

“The river is still going the right way,” he said.

“Which is the right way?” asked Autumn. “Everything be topsy-turvy so which way is which?”

“It is flowing to the South West,” said Logan, “unless Plifal be rising somewhere else tonight.”

Autumn nodded then leaned forward onto her knees and scooped up

a handful of water to drink. She settled back down with her legs crossed in her usual position, her heels on her knees.

“Have you slept at all?” she asked.

“I have,” said Logan. “I slept for a while then woke up and my mind started to work and then I became uncomfortable and could not go back to sleep.”

“But you have seen no sign of the webs again?” asked Autumn, stifling a yawn.

“No,” said Logan.

“That is good,” she said quietly.

They sat for a while, listening to the quiet sounds of the night. A faint whir suggested the owl had changed branches and was hunting in another area.

“Do you really believe what you were saying about the river?” asked Logan unexpectedly.

Autumn jerked awake.

“What was I saying about the river?” she asked.

“Last night,” said Logan. “When you were explaining to Ajo and the others about not being able to cross a river twice.”

“It depends what you mean by believe,” said Autumn and yawned again. “And on what you mean by river.”

“A yes or no would be enough,” said Logan.

“Then yes,” said Autumn. “If I am here and I want to go there then come back here again then in a loose sense it be fair to say I crossed the river and then crossed it again coming back which is enough for ordinary use but in truth it is not the same river so 'tis wrong to say otherwise.”

“I thought you would say something like that,” said Logan. “But surely even if the water has moved on, the river it flows in is still in the same place.”

“Is it?” asked Autumn. “Are you sure of that?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “It be over there. Despite changing its direction by some strange means it is still where it was.”

“Mayhap you be right,” said Autumn, and yawned again.

“You do not agree, do you,” said Logan.

“Ahhh,” said Autumn. “So be it. Would you agree that as the water moves between the banks it picks up soil and things from the banks?”

“Well, yes,” said Logan.

“And that over a length of time it wears away the rocks?” asked Autumn.

“I am not certain of that,” said Logan. “I have heard it be so but I have not seen it.”

“But you agree that a large rock being carried by the water can hit against the banks and the river bed and knock pieces away?” asked Autumn.

“Yes, I agree on that,” said Logan. “But what does this have to do with the river being in the same place?”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “I be coming to that. Have you noticed that some parts of a river be flowing faster than others and that where it is slower it is usually thick with mud and where it is faster the mud and stones are washed away?”

“I suppose so,” said Logan. “It makes sense anyway.”

“So if you were to watch a river for a long time you would see that it is slowly moving its banks,” said Autumn. “Which means that the river

is not in the same place. Mayhap if we come back to this very spot in twenty or thirty summers the river will have moved.”

“Well, I suppose so,” said Logan, “but it will not have moved far.”

“But it will have moved,” said Autumn, “if only by a tiny amount. It has moved in the time we have been here but I venture by an amount too small for us to see.”

“Then what does it matter?” asked Logan.

“It matters because once you grasp that, your view of life and death changes,” said Autumn.

“How did we go from where a river is to death?” asked Logan. “That be a mighty big jump.”

“No, it is not,” said Autumn. “It is the same thing. Once you accept that the river is slowly changing, little by little, you begin to see that everything changes, little by little. Even you, Logan the Sleepless. You are not as you were when you were born. You are not as you were when we met. You are not as you were yesterday. Every day you change a little, your body and your mind and once you grasp that you will come to understand that nothing stays the exact same from one moment to the next.”

“I accept that I am growing older,” said Logan, “but birth and death changes everything, does it not? When I die my life is ended and that be all there is to it.”

“You are too hasty in your thinking,” said Autumn. “You are here, now. Tomorrow you will be older and you will have changed a little. At some point in time you will die but think about the moment before death and compare it with the moment after death. What has changed?”

“I died,” said Logan, puzzled.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but in the instant from before death to the instant after death your body has remained the same. Yes, some time

after death your body will rot and eventually pass into the earth but that is merely a continuation of the same process. In the same way your essence will pass from this world to the Land of the Undead and from there to the Land of the Dead but again it is a continuation of the same process, just as the water of the river moves on one way and the path of the river moves in another way. Likewise birth. A baby does not suddenly appear as if by magic. It is created through natural processes and nurtured by the mother before it is born. Birth is not a beginning and death is not an ending. Both are merely instants in a continuous process that involves everything.”

Logan sat and pondered this. He was about to raise another objection when Autumn's head fell against his shoulder and she snored softly. He smiled and very gently eased Autumn so she lay curled on the ground with her head in his lap and, barely moving, he tucked the blanket around her.

“Sleep,” he whispered, very quietly and gently stroked her head. Autumn slept.

* * *

“I do not like the look of this,” said Autumn the next day.

They had continued to follow the river downstream and, in the middle of the afternoon, they had come across a village.

“Nor do I,” said Logan. “This looks to be Veobad again. This is becoming absurd.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “The first time was a curiosity but the second be a nuisance. Do you suppose we have become trapped in an endless cycle of leaving this place and returning to it?”

“Oh, I do hope not,” said Logan. “Veobad be a pleasant enough village but I wager returning to it every day will soon become tedious, especially if no one ever remembers us.”

“There is a possibility it is not Veobad,” said Autumn. “It looks the same from here but it is not impossible that Userko or some other

village looks the same. We had best go in and see. It occurs to me also that if it is Veobad that there is a chance we will be remembered.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “but my gut tells me otherwise.”

They rounded the side of a dwelling to join the main thoroughfare. Ajoin was leaning against the side of a mud brick building.

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan.

“We be not hanging people for stealing in this village,” said Ajoin, looking at him.

“It be Veobad, all right,” said Logan, “and they do not remember us again. Now what do we do?”

“It be named Veobad,” said Ajoin, prising himself away from the wall, “and I be Ajoin. Who be you?”

Chapter Eight

Logan turned his back on Ajoin, who muttered something rude and scowled then ambled off. As they watched, Nirwa and Euet came down the track and loitered by the crossing, to be joined moments later by Ajoin. The washer woman came out to wash her clothes and Oca came running out of his mill.

"It be happening again," said Autumn, "just like before."

"Aye," said Logan, wondering if, with Oca running around in alarm and then talking with Ajoin, it would be a good opportunity to take another sack of flour. It occurred to him that, if this happened again, he may be able to go into the mill and take the same sack of flour a second time which begged the question of whether it would be actually thieving. After all, taking something he'd already stolen wouldn't really be stealing it again, would it? An interesting point.

"Why do we not see ourselves?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" asked Autumn.

"This be the third time we have been here at this time," said Logan. "Why do we not see ourselves from the first two times? Why do we not see ourselves down by the river feeding the ducks or crossing with Ajoin?"

Autumn blinked several times then looked around.

"Ajoin, Nirwa and Euet be doing things different to the first time," she said thoughtfully. "Mayhap we are not really here. Or if we are then our previous times aren't here."

"But we have been here this time," said Logan. "Oca be searching for his sack of flour which I took the first time we were here, which was after talking with Ajoin. This time we did not talk to Ajoin and I did not take the flour so why is Oca searching for it?"

"That is a very good question," said Autumn. "I wonder if the flour is gone or if Oca is just looking for it as he thinks he should be even

though it still be there.”

“Shall we go and see?” asked Logan. “I be right curious.”

Autumn pulled her pack round and opened it to check the sack of flour was still in it. It was, and it was half empty because they'd been using it.

“So am I,” she said, “now that you raise the matter. I am intrigued.”

They sauntered over to the mill, trying to act casually. Oca was still complaining to Ajoin and didn't see them go inside.

“Where was the sack?” asked Autumn.

“It was here,” said Logan, pointing to where three small sacks of flour sat on the floor. “There were three of them and there still be three.”

He picked up the one he had already stolen to see if it had substance.

“That makes sense,” said Autumn. “The sack could not have been taken before we got here and this time you did not come inside and take it.”

“So why be Oca bitching about a missing sack of flour when it is not missing?” asked Logan, reluctantly putting the sack of flour back on the ground. He had a feeling that it was now rightfully his since he had stolen it two days previously, and quite possibly the second time as well.

“’Tis beyond my comprehension,” said Autumn. “Come, let us go.”

“Can I be helping you?” asked Oca, coming back in.

He glowered at them as though he already knew Logan had taken a sack of flour.

“I wanted a sack of flour,” said Logan smoothly, “but I am reminded I left my money behind. We shall return later.”

He turned to leave but Oca spotted there were three sacks.

"There be three sacks," he spluttered, running over to double check.

"We were only wanting the one," said Logan.

"Did you put it back, you thieving bastard?" demanded Oca, turning on him.

"Come, man," said Autumn. "My companion only lifted it to check its weight. 'Tis not right to call someone a thief for putting it back down again."

Oca scowled at her. "Get out of here," he spluttered, spitting with frustration. "Be not coming back unless you have paraks."

Angrily he turned his back on them and went back to collecting the spilled grains from the burst sack, cursing and muttering. The mill's river wheel creaked and groaned outside. Logan and Autumn walked out into the lane again.

"I felt you do something with my pack," she remarked when they were out of earshot of Oca.

"I swapped the half sack for a full one," he said smiling happily. "Oca seemed too angry to notice."

"The half empty one was still in my pack?" asked Autumn.

"Yes," said Logan.

"This be right strange," said Autumn. "This time around there be two sacks where there be only one before. I know not how we be going through this again but how is it possible that there be an extra sack of flour? Where did it come from? Does this mean that more enmern has been grown and ground and that another sack was made?"

"I know not," said Logan, "but mayhap if we are trapped in an endless cycle and keep coming back here we can set up in business selling flour if it be magically appearing each time through. 'Twould be all

profit and no cost.”

“There is always a cost,” said Autumn, “if not always in paraks.”

“And what be the cost here?” asked Logan.

“I know not,” said Autumn, “but it worries me.”

She stopped by the crossing to watch Ajoin, Nirwa and Euet as they hauled themselves across the river then turned to the woman washing the clothes in the river.

“Excuse me,” she said.

The woman paused her beating and looked over.

“Aye?” she asked.

“We be strangers in this place,” said Autumn. “I hear if we follow the river we come to Userko?”

“That be right,” said the woman, brushing a strand of hair out of her eyes.

“Be there any villages further to the West?” asked Autumn. “Towards the mountain?”

“There be Dotuke,” said the woman. “It be part way up Wut'qiui, on the South side.”

“Wut'qiui be the mountain?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said the woman.

“And what lies beyond?” asked Autumn.

“I know not,” said the woman. “I have never been to Dotuke, let alone further.”

“Can we get to Dotuke if we follow the track West?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said the woman, “although it be a long way. Dotuke be on the South side and the track goes round the North. I am told there is a path that branches off the track a little way out of Veobad which leads to Dotuke. Not many go there.”

Autumn smiled and thanked her and she looked curiously at them for a moment before returning to beating the clothes on a rock.

“Are we going to Dotuke?” asked Logan.

“It does occur to me that each time we set off for Userko we end up back here,” said Autumn, “and that the webs may be somehow linked with the river. Mayhap if we head off across the mountains whatever strangeness is happening will pass.”

She glanced over to where Ajoin, Nirwa and Euet were getting off the floater on the far side. Nirwa was looking over so she smiled and waved. Nirwa immediately looked away then back again, cautiously. Euet said something and laughed uproariously and Nirwa scowled at him then looked back at Autumn again. Logan scowled back. He wasn't impressed with Nirwa's attentions, even though he did not remember Autumn.

“Seems like a plan,” he said, turning to look at Wut'qiui. “Looks mighty steep though. It be all uphill.”

“Twill be downhill on the other side,” said Autumn.

* * *

They emptied and refilled their waterskins before following the track heading West, away from the wide river valley. It slowly wound up through the foothills. The sun was warm and the trees, though not dense packed, provided leafy shade. In time the track started to head more to the North, going round Wut'qiui rather than up its slope.

“I have a good feeling about this,” said Logan, striding along, the track dry but not yet dusty.

“Yes, it be a pleasant change from the river's edge,” said Autumn. “Do

you suppose that is the path to Dotuke up ahead?"

"I have seen no other," said Logan. "We may as well take it as we want to head South whether or not we get to Dotuke."

The path that curved away to their left was much narrower than the track and was pleasantly grassy. It wound invitingly between the trees. Birds called, unseen amongst the foliage, but otherwise it was quiet. The rush and tumble of the river some distance away. The gentle slope upwards got steeper for a time then it levelled off again. Then, without warning, the trees gave way to a broad clearing on the edge of a steep cliff.

"Aloidia," exclaimed Logan. "I had not realised how high we had climbed!"

They gazed out over the vast panorama. Far below the river wound its way like a silver ribbon through the valley. Over to the left was a smudge that was Veobad, distant and looking lonely amongst the green. Off to the right was the edge of another mountain. In the far distance dark clouds were forming.

"It looks like a storm is coming," said Autumn, "although it will be some time before it reaches here."

"I venture it be heading more to the South," said Logan. "Shall we stay here and wait for it or move on?"

"Let us rest for a while and enjoy the view," said Autumn. "Astauand be barely past its highest so there is no rush although I would prefer to be away from this clearing before dark, especially if the storm does head this way."

They sat for a while, enjoying the splendour. Some crickets chirruped and occasionally birds flew up the cliff and soared overhead into the trees. A small green lizard with dark brown markings appeared after a while and sat on a rock nearby, watching them and absorbing the warmth of Astauand, its tongue flicking every now and then. Another lizard joined it then both scurried away.

“Up here we seem so far away from the worries of the world,” said Logan. “’Tis as though everything here is remote and timeless and the rushing to and fro of the people below so far away and unimportant.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I have never understood why they do that. Well, ’tis their choice, I suppose.”

“That be true,” said Logan. “Shall we move on? The storm seems fixed on its path South but I agree, ’tis not a good idea to camp on a cliff edge in the darkness. Much as I like to see the moons above I like the comforting surrounds of trees as well.”

“Aye,” said Autumn.

She collected her pack and a waterskin and Logan shouldered the other and gripped his staff.

“Mayhap I shall find a suitable branch along this path,” said Autumn. “Now we are climbing a staff would be useful and we are back amongst hardwood trees again.”

“I shall keep my eyes open for one,” said Logan. “Would you like to use mine?”

“No,” said Autumn. “Yours was a gift to you from Mother Midcarn. You should keep it with you.”

They started to follow the path again which descended gently for a while then went up steeply before levelling off and meandering through the trees. Some brilliant white flowers caught Autumn’s attention and she paused to inspect them. They had a strong musky smell, strange but sensual. She inhaled deeply, savouring the scent then stroked a flower and moved on.

Logan was several paces ahead when the entire mountain shook violently. Autumn stumbled as the ground moved beneath her feet and she half fell, one hand reaching out to stop herself falling to the ground.

“Sploop, what was that?” she heard from Logan up ahead.

Barely had Autumn regained her feet than another tremor shook the ground but she was more prepared and did not fall. She glanced behind as some rocks fell through the undergrowth some way back.

“Arghhhhh!” cried Logan and she whirled but he had disappeared.

A jagged rent split the path ahead, gaping. A tree lurched and threatened to fall into it.

“Logan!” cried Autumn running forward, her heart suddenly beating faster.

She peered over the edge, earth spilling into the depths. There was Logan, clinging to a thick exposed tree root a short way down. Desperately Autumn threw off her pack and the water skin and hurled herself flat on the ground, her arm stretching as deep as she could go, her fingers scrabbling.

“Can you grab my hand?” she shouted.

“I cannot let go!” shouted back Logan.

Autumn edged further forward so she could see over the edge. More earth spilled over and some pebbles clattered and bounced off the rock sides as they fell. Logan was a little over to one side so Autumn scrambled backwards, her arm seeking him.

“Can you see my hand?” she shouted.

“Yes,” called Logan back, through gritted teeth, his neck tendons standing out as he clung to the root.

One foot had a narrow toehold on the edge of a rock that protruded and the other struggled desperately to find another toehold.

“Try to take my hand,” shouted Autumn, waving her hand, clutching at empty air.

With a gasp Logan let go of the root with one hand and started to reach for hers then grabbed at the root again.

“Oh Voqev!” cried Logan as another tremor shook the ground and a wave of loose earth fell on his head.

He shook the dirt out of his eyes and rammed his loose foot as hard as he could into the side of the crevasse and leapt upwards, one hand gripping the bending root the other reaching blindly for Autumn. Their fingers touched and Autumn's hand grasped convulsively. She jerked upwards and released his finger and instantly grasped it again, this time getting a good grip on most of his hand. His fingers curled tightly around her wrist and she heaved with all her strength.

Too strongly, perhaps, as Logan shot out of the crevasse as far as his ankles and landed heavily on the path, his upper legs banging into Autumn's chest as she rolled over with the pull. His waterskin hit him on the head.

“Ye gods!” muttered Logan as he lay there on the path, gasping.

“Are you all right?” demanded Autumn, pushing his legs off her.

She jumped up and grabbed his shoulders, pulling him away from the edge.

“Owww,” cried Logan, clutching at his bruised knees and toes then at his wrenched shoulder.

“Talk to me,” demanded Autumn, feeling along the length of his legs, searching for broken bones.

“Just bruised, I think,” said Logan.

He sat up and gingerly moved his arm.

“I think you may have dislocated my shoulder,” he said, lifting his arm above his head and wincing. “Voqev, you be stronger than a ox! I fairly flew out of that damned hole.”

Autumn bent to probe his shoulder with her fingers and Logan yelped in pain.

“No, it is not dislocated,” she said, “but I venture you may have a torn muscle.”

She let go of his shoulder and slumped to the ground beside him.

“Vallume, you frightened me,” she said. “I thought I had lost you.”

“I though I had lost the world,” said Logan. “It suddenly disappeared from underneath my feet.”

He sat up and hugged Autumn violently.

“Thank you, thank you,” he whispered, squeezing the breath out of her.

“I could not let you fall,” she wheezed when he finally let her go. “Oh my, you do look a sight! Your face is covered in mud and your hair be full of earth!”

Logan wiped his face, making it worse, and started to run his fingers through his hair only to find his hands were shaking violently. He stared at them then at Autumn and they both started to laugh.

“Ohh,” said Logan wiping muddy tears from his eyes with a filthy hand. “I think I am going to be sick.”

“Tis only the shock and the fear,” said Autumn. “Twill soon pass. Just sit and relax and think joyful thoughts.”

Another tremor shook the ground but it was not as strong. Birds started to tweet again, some, no doubt, having lost their homes.

“Have some water,” said Autumn, untying the spout of one of the water skins.

Logan took a mouthful and spat mud then another and swallowed.

“Ahh, that's better,” he said, relaxing. Then he suddenly went rigid. “I dropped my staff, when the ground disappeared. Oh no. Fiau, I hope she is not hurt.”

He looked around agitatedly.

“Calm yourself,” said Autumn. “Fiau is a long staff, mayhap she got caught on roots like you. You stay here and I will take a look.”

She went on hands and knees to the edge of the crevasse and peered over.

“Ahh, I think I see her,” she called back. “She is a long way down. It looks like she is wedged crossways.”

“Let me see,” said Logan scrambling over. “Ahhh, thank Seiliu she be unbroken and not fallen into the depths.”

“Twill be difficult to get her out,” said Autumn, studying the sides of the crevasse. “There are not enough toeholds to get down that far.”

“You are forgetting this is be no ordinary staff,” said Logan. “I venture she can grow enough to reach to the top where we can grab her and pull her out.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Call to her and tell her what to do.”

“Aye,” said Logan.

He spat then took another mouthful of water.

“Fiau,” he called. “Fiau, are you uninjured?”

Fiau started to materialise from the staff then uttered a loud rasping squawk as she realised she was hanging above a gaping crevasse with nothing underneath her. Even more so than humans, trees, and tree spirits, like solid ground beneath them. Her long thin fingers gripped the staff as her long thin body hung suspended over the depths. The moss in her hair trembled.

“By Mielikki, what have you done to me, Logan!” she cried, her thin, quavering voice made more so by the nature of her predicament.

“You are wedged in a crevasse,” called down Logan. “You are too far

down for us to reach. Can you get yourself out?"

Fiau tilted her head back as far as it would go, which was not far, and regarded Logan mournfully. She adjusted her grip on the staff then raised her legs, her long thin root-like toes searching for cracks to grow into. Slowly she found footholds and, with a visible effort, released her hands from the staff. Then she started to grow taller until she was able to plant her hands on each side of the crevasse. She gazed at Logan and raised one knotted eyebrow then disentangled her toes from the sides of the crevasse and entwined them around the staff then her body started to contract again, drawing the staff up. Finally she lifted the staff over the edge and placed it neatly on the ground beside Logan then levered her body out.

"If this should happen again," she said, in her thin quavery voice, "please have the goodness to warn me before I come out."

"I am sorry," said Logan, "but it does my heart good to know you are safe."

"I am glad to hear that," said Fiau quietly and merged back into the staff.

"Well," said Autumn. "I think you have just been told off."

"Aye," said Logan, "and I deserved it. I should have thought before calling her. I am right glad she is safe though. 'Tis a long way down and Sploop knows what be at the bottom."

He stroked the staff then moved it further away from the edge before peering over. He froze.

"Vogev," he whispered. "Would you look at that."

"What?" said Autumn and scrambled over to look for herself.

Most of the inside of the crevasse had disappeared, save just the top layer of rock and earth. Below was black nothingness with small points of light dotted here and there. It seemed to go on forever.

“Tis like the night sky,” muttered Autumn. “What has happened here?”

There was another tremor and with the groan of a million souls in torment the edges of the crevasse shivered and closed.

Chapter Nine

“That was close,” commented Autumn, rubbing her scraped ankle.

They had both been leaning over the edge when the edges started to close and had managed to scramble clear just in time. The fissure was now a narrow trench, barely two hands breadths across, where the earth had fallen away but under the soil layer the rocks were once again reunited. The tree which had lurched when the fissure opened was now completely collapsed on the ground, the closing having finished the job of uprooting it. No doubt many other trees along the line were also down.

Autumn got up and inspected the trench across the path and poked and prodded its sides.

“It appears solid enough now,” she reported, “but there be no telling if it be opening again.”

She looked over at Logan, half sitting, half lying on the path, still pale faced and a little shaky from his ordeal. The blanket of silence that had been thrown over the area when the first tremor shook and the rift appeared had now lifted and every bird, animal, insect, tree and plant was now in discussion with its friends and neighbours in a cacophony of twitters, squeaks, buzzes and rustles.

“Mayhap there be some mourning going on,” thought Autumn as she looked around. “Aye, and some planning for lost homes.”

“’Tis always a revelation to me,” she said quietly to Logan, going over to see how he was.

“What is?” he asked, trying to hide his shaking hands.

“How quickly all life starts to recover after a disaster,” she said, pulling his chin up so she could look into his eyes. “Aye, and you will recover soon enough. Watch my finger.”

She move a finger across his vision and watched the tracking of his eyes. All was well. A few scrapes and bruises, a possible torn shoulder

muscle and a memory of a chasm were all that remained. The last perhaps lingering the longest.

“We shall stop for the night,” said Autumn. “Mayhap two or three, there is no hurry to be anywhere.”

She looked around and saw her pack was still intact and both waterskins were nearby and plump.

“We have food and water and no doubt I will find more food if we need it,” she said cheerfully. “You stay here and relax for a while and I shall scout around for somewhere reasonably flat we can sleep.”

She started to rise and Logan's hand gripped hers.

“In a bit,” he said quietly. “Stay with me for a little while. I feel most strange.”

“Of course,” she said and knelt down again.

Logan's face had gone very pale and his brow was beaded with sweat. Moments later his body started to shake. Autumn wiped his brow with the dirty sleeve of her tunic then put her arms around him.

“Twill soon pass,” she said soothingly. “Tis just your body dealing with the excitement. Let it happen and do not fight it.”

“I cannot fight it,” stammered Logan.

Autumn stroked his head and held him against her.

“Tis all over,” she said quietly. “There now, there now.”

Slowly Logan's shakes passed and colour returned to his face and she let him go.

“Thank you,” he said, a little embarrassed at his display of weakness. “I be well now.”

“Sit and rest,” said Autumn, getting to her feet.

“Why do you not get the shakes like this?” asked Logan.

She sat down beside him. “I know not how it happens but in times of sudden fear the body prepares to flee or fight. When the situation be over the body has to return to normal. ’Tis the same for everyone.”

“You do not,” said Logan.

“I used to,” said Autumn. She sighed. “Part of my training has been for my body to learn to be prepared to flee or fight at all times. It was not easy but I am at that level all the time. I do not shake when a situation be over for it is no ending for me. I am as alert to danger now as I was before the tremors and during. Mayhap when I find my place and end my quest I will fully relax and have the shakes but I know not.”

“How did you learn how to overcome them?” asked Logan. “It would seem a useful skill.”

“Best you do not know,” said Autumn with a smile. “Let us just say that at the Esyup, Noxu and others kept us all under constant threat of attack and sudden danger and always prepared, even when asleep. A few summers of that and you learn not to completely relax, ever.”

“It seems a very harsh life,” said Logan. “What was the purpose of living in such a way?”

“Have you watched a master sword-smith make a finished sword from a casting?” asked Autumn.

“Nay, not a master,” said Logan, “but I have seen a blacksmith make one.”

“Then you have an idea of the work that must be done on the casting to remove imperfections and get a sharp edge,” said Autumn. “The casting be the easy part and no doubt the sword suffers under all the hammering and grinding but in the end the sword be fit for purpose. A master sword-smith labours harder and longer than a blacksmith and gets a much better sword at the end. So it was with me. Noxu was a master at his art and I am the end result.”

“And what is your purpose?” asked Logan.

“That I will know when I find my place,” said Autumn. “For certain it is not here on this path. You rest and I shall return shortly. There will be somewhere nearby suitable for the night.”

* * *

There was a sudden rustle in the tree branches overhead. Logan looked up just in time to see Autumn run nimbly along a branch and drop to the ground two paces back down the path.

“I have found a cave,” she said. “It be a little way off the path and secluded. I did not fully explore it but I looked inside and 'twould seem it has not been occupied for some time.”

“Are you sure?” asked Logan.

“Nothing in life is certain,” said Autumn cheerfully, gathering her pack and the two waterskins. “but it did not smell of much. Mayhap there be a few bats in the cave but what of it?”

“It be not bats I worry about,” said Logan. “Bears like caves as well.”

“The opening was too small for a bear,” said Autumn, “at least a large one anyway. Mayhap there be another entrance that is large further along which you could worry about.”

“What a pleasant thought,” said Logan getting up.

His shoulder ached and the getting up sent a stabbing pain through it. The rest of his body was a little stiff and he was still covered in dried mud.

Autumn laughed. “If there be a big bear nearby then mayhap you should not be in the open,” she said. “Did you not think of that?”

“I try not to think of bears at all,” said Logan. “No matter, I fancy an enraged bear trapped in a small cave with you will leave right quickly.”

He bent to pick up his staff. "Right," he said. "Lead on."

Autumn led the way up the path a short distance then disappeared into the undergrowth and reappeared moments later atop a narrow ledge above Logan's head.

"Up here," she called, looking down. "Go round the side, the climb be easier."

Logan forced his way into the undergrowth and made his way up the steep face and clambered onto the ledge. It was barely wide enough to stand on.

"Tis along here," said Autumn, staying close to the rock face as she followed the ledge.

A little way further along a large tree grew close to the face and one branch, thick with leaves, covered the entrance. She pushed the leaves aside and bent to go through the opening. Logan followed. It was dim inside, the leaves dappling the floor with shadows. More importantly there was no sound of snarling or the scratching of sharp claws on stone. In fact, now that he was listening, Logan couldn't hear anything except the sound of his own breathing and the gentle scraping of the leaves around the entrance.

"You are right," he said. "There is little smell except a faint mustiness."

He stepped forward and tripped on the rough floor, falling against Autumn who caught him and set him upright again.

"Sorry," he said. "Fiau, could we have some light please?"

The end of his staff burst into flame and he sighed with relief.

"Looks like Fiau has forgiven me," he muttered and held the staff up to look around.

The cave was fairly narrow and seemed to go back a way. The roof was high enough to stand upright and the ground rough and uneven

with two or three patches that looked flat enough to lie on without too much difficulty.

“Do you think we could have a fire in here?” he asked, “or would it be too smoky? I prefer to only burn Fiau in an emergency.”

“I venture if we build a fire near the entrance much of the smoke will go out,” said Autumn, “unless the wind blows directly in. I will find some wood.”

She went out of the entrance and jumped onto the branch then climbed down the trunk. Moments later she started to toss dry fallen branches up onto the ledge as she moved around at the bottom of the rock face.

Logan explored the end of the cave then returned to the entrance. He brought several of the branches inside and built a fire and lit it with his staff. When the wood was burning well he thanked Fiau and let her go out then busied himself bringing in the rest of the wood and stacking it on one side. It was a while before Autumn returned.

“See what I have found,” she said, looking pleased. “Some early budding waslebane.”

“Oh yes,” said Logan, looking at the dull green sprig. It had lumps on it that could, at a stretch, be called buds. “What is waslebane?”

“It is good for sore muscles,” she said. “I will grind the buds into a paste and massage it into your shoulder. It will hasten the healing and ease the pain.”

“Ahh, thank you,” said Logan.

Autumn had brought a stone in with her and she broke the buds off and started to grind them on the ledge outside the cave.

“I went the full length of the cave with the light,” said Logan watching her. “There be no other entrances. Phrawgh, that be a right strong smell.”

"It will pass after a while," said Autumn. "Did you find anything in the cave?"

"Only some old bones," said Logan. "I venture something crawled in here some time ago and died. One of the bones was broken. It looked to be a leg bone."

"Was it a bear?" asked Autumn.

"If it was it was a small one," said Logan. "Mayhap the size of a fox."

"I hope that has set your mind at rest," said Autumn. "Now take your tunic off and sit here with your back to me."

She smeared the paste over Logan's shoulder and started to massage it into his skin.

"It burns," he said, trying to pull his shoulder away.

"Be still," commanded Autumn giving him a gentle slap across the back of the head. "The heat be going into the muscles and 'twill ease them."

Her fingers dug deeper and Logan winced.

"Do you need to do it so hard?" he asked, teeth gritted. "The muscle be hurt enough already."

"I need to get the paste in deep," said Autumn. "It only hurts because of the damage done already. There. That should be enough. Stay out here for a while until the heat goes and your shoulder starts to feel cool."

"Will it be healed when it feels cool?" asked Logan twisting his head to try to look at the back of his shoulder.

"No, it will take a day or two," said Autumn. "When it feels cool the smell will have gone and you can come back inside the cave else you will stink the whole place."

“It feels better already,” said Logan, flexing his shoulder a little. “I be thinking you do not know how strong you are. You fairly flung me out of that hole.”

“I have been thinking that for some time,” said Autumn, waving her fingers in the air to try to speed up the fading of the smell of the waslebane. “I did not used to be.”

“It must be all that exercising you do,” said Logan leaning back against the rock face.

“I do less than I used to,” said Autumn. “I seem to be more supple than I used to be as well. And faster. Ah well, no matter. If it had not been so urgent I would have been more gentle. Tell me, what did you see in the hole in the ground?”

“’Twas only my imagination,” said Logan. “I venture it be just my fear and the pain. It was a deep hole in the ground.” He flexed his shoulder again and winced.

“Leave it be,” said Autumn. “’Twill never heal if you keep working it. So you saw only split rock and tree roots and things?”

“I reckon that be so,” said Logan. “Why? What did you see?”

“That be the strange part,” said Autumn. “When I was looking for you I saw nothing, save only you when I saw you, and when I was looking for your staff I saw rock and roots and falling earth. But when you were out and I looked over the edge it was all different.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. He went quiet and still. “So you saw it too?”

“’Twas like the night sky,” said Autumn. “’Twas like a thin layer of ground over a yawning abyss of blackness with dots of light. It seemed to go on forever.”

Logan didn't react. He just sat there looking at the tree branch.

“Is that what you saw?” asked Autumn after a pause.

“Aye,” he said. “So you be saying I did not imagine it?”

“At any other time I would say that we both imagined similar things,” said Autumn. “After all, we can only share what we see through words and words are but a poor imitation of that so we may have seen different things but use the same words to describe them.”

“And this time?” asked Logan.

Autumn sniffed her fingers then started to wave them again.

“We both thought we dreamt the cobwebs,” she said. “Then it turned out that they were real. We both thought we went back to Veobad and relived the day but I venture we both think that actually happened, twice. And now, soon after, we both think we saw a black vastness through a hole in the ground. I venture it was not your imagining, nor mine.”

“I was afraid you would say something like that,” said Logan. “That be why I did not talk of it until you did.”

“’Tis wrong to deny the evidence of our eyes for fear of what it might mean,” said Autumn. “That way lies falseness in thinking. ’Tis better to admit what we saw and confess a lack of understanding. Mayhap in time and with thought new understanding will come but it never can through denial.”

“So what do you make of it?” asked Logan. He started to flex his shoulder again then stopped.

“Seems to me there be two possibilities to start with,” said Autumn. She twisted round to face outwards and slipped her feet over her knees to sit cross legged. “Either we saw something and mistook it for a black vastness or we saw a black vastness.”

“’Tis possible I mistook it,” said Logan. “All was not well with me and my mind could have been playing tricks but I venture you were your usual self and saw it clearly.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I am inclined to agree. You were out of the hole

and safe. My mind was alert and not pressured.”

“So you think we really did see it?” said Logan. “What do you think it was?”

“I know not,” said Autumn. “Although it looked like the night sky so I do wonder if what we saw is the home of Astauand. Mayhap this land we live on is between two skies. When Astauand be above us, the sky below is black and when Astauand is below us the sky above is black. Mayhap if we looked in that hole at night we would see Astauand in a blue sky.”

“It makes sense,” said Logan, “although it bothers me greatly that this land we live on be only a leg length in thickness. It seems that it would be easy to break and things would fall through. I would rather there be another explanation.”

“I venture there is,” said Autumn. “If my idea be correct then why did we not see the black vastness each time we looked? It was not there when we were looking at Fiau. Your staff was wedged between two walls of rock and there be no mistaking that. The blackness was only there at the last moment before the sides closed in again. Mayhap the closing and the blackness be related in some way.”

“Twould be easier to just say it was my imagining,” said Logan. “There be too much strangeness going on around here.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “But if something is easy is it worth the effort?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “Why look for something difficult when easy works well enough?”

“But it does not,” said Autumn. “The easy explanation simply does not work at all. We did not imagine it, of that I am certain.”

* * *

The morning sun peeped around the side of Wut'qiui and made the woods to the side of the ledge gleam. Autumn sat cross legged on the ledge, her eyes closed and her body relaxed. Her mind was far away

although her senses monitored the feel of the breeze and the occasional leaf that brushed against her, the smells of the early morning and the sounds of the mountainside awakening to a new dawn. There was a faint taste of waslebane on the air but that was only to be expected. Everything else was perfectly ordinary. There was nothing amiss.

Inside the cave there were stirrings then the sound of someone drinking, followed by a groan as Logan tested his shoulder. Moments later he came out of the cave, paused to look at Autumn then crept along the ledge. Autumn did not even twitch an eyelid at the sound of liquid splashing on the undergrowth below. Such things were part of the normal pattern of life and, as such, were to be expected. Logan crept back along the ledge, trying not to disturb Autumn, and went back inside the cave. There came the faint sounds of something being eaten and the fainter smell of cheese. Then silence.

A family of rabbits crept out of their burrow almost directly below the cave. Very cautiously they started their foraging, very aware of the strange smell above them. A squirrel jumped energetically along a branch then clambered up the trunk a short way, its long bushy tail streaming out behind it. It jumped onto a higher branch then froze at the sight of Autumn. Its tail curling protectively over its back.

Autumn did not move. She hadn't seen the squirrel but she had heard its faint sounds and knew it was harmless. The squirrel was not so easily convinced. It tested the air, confused by the lingering waslebane then crept slowly forward, its whiskers twitching. Still Autumn did not move, save a slight rising and falling of her chest as she slowly breathed. The squirrel crept along the branch until it was barely an arm's length from her. It sat back on its hind legs and scratched the side of its head with a foreleg, staring unblinkingly at Autumn. Its thick tail twitched.

Autumn's eyes snapped open and, alarmed, the squirrel shot along the length of the branch and launched itself onto the next tree and disappeared.

"Go in peace, little one," whispered Autumn.

She stretched out her arms to her sides then lifted them above her head and brought them down to her lap with her palms together. Then she breathed in very deeply and slowly exhaled.

Logan's head appeared in the entrance.

"Ahh, you are finished," he said and came out to join her. "Where are you going to do your exercises? This ledge seems a little too narrow."

"Tis a glorious morning," she said with a happy smile. "Ahh, no. I shall go down to the path. There may come a time when I have to fight on a narrow ledge like this, but until then it is not worth the risk of falling."

"I am glad to hear it," said Logan. "I am not happy just walking along it."

"How is your shoulder this morning?" asked Autumn, gazing at what little of the world she could see through the leaves of the branch with an air of contentment.

"Tis still a little sore," said Logan, "but moves more freely."

"That is good," said Autumn. "Shall we rest here another day? I like this place."

"Aye," said Logan. "Tis peaceful. I am in no hurry to move on."

"Good," said Autumn then she froze, a puzzled look on her face.

"What?" said Logan, becoming alert quickly. "Have you heard something?"

"There is no other entrance to this cave," said Autumn.

"No," said Logan, peering through the leaves. "Why?"

"I can feel a sudden draught on my back," said Autumn. "It is coming from inside the cave."

Chapter Ten

"Tis probably just the wind bouncing off the rock face," said Logan, turning to glance behind him at the cave entrance.

Autumn twisted round as well, uncrossing her legs at the same time.

"The fire is flickering towards us," she said, "and the draught be stronger than the breeze. I am going inside to see."

She got up and went inside; there was definitely a breeze on her skin from inside the cave. She skirted the fire and picked up a burning stick. Logan followed her down the cave.

Where the cave had narrowed and come to an abrupt end yesterday, there was now an opening, or rather, a continuation of the cave.

"How strange," said Autumn, looking puzzled. "There are no rocks or signs of a fall."

She inspected the walls but could see no sign of where the end had been, although the old bones were still where they were.

"Twould be sensible to leave this place altogether as this be yet another strange happening to add to a pile of other strange happenings," said Logan, "but I wager you be going to explore in there. You have that look about you."

"It is only strange because we are unfamiliar," said Autumn. "Mayhap this be happening in caves all the time."

"Do you really think that?" he asked, peering into the darkness that lay beyond the flickering light.

"No," said Autumn. "Rock is known for being solid and strong and not for just disappearing. It can break and fall apart but it leaves a mess of pieces. This disappearance is right strange. Besides there is a draught which means there is another opening somewhere. Are you coming with me or will you wait here?"

"I am coming with you," said Logan. "If it all goes to Yammoe you will be needing someone to rescue else you will explore forever. You have more curiosity than good sense I sometimes think."

Autumn smiled. "Mayhap you be right," she said. "In that case we had best take our things with us. If there is another opening we may decide to leave through it. It could be a short cut, although to where I know not."

"Aye," said Logan. "And if this end of the cave fills in again, 'twould be a good idea to have food and water with us."

"And best we put out the fire," said Autumn. "We do not want sparks to set the woods outside alight."

They went back and put out the fire, scattering the ashes, and collected their things. Logan lit his staff and, with trepidation in his heart, he led the way back down the cave. Sadly the end was still open.

The opening narrowed into a tunnel and sloped downwards a little. Before too long they were crawling on hands and knees, Logan's staff thrust out in front and the water skins and pack dragging behind them.

"'Tis going to be a squeeze to turn around," said Logan, as the tunnel got narrower. The sides were brushing his shoulders. "Mayhap we should turn back soon."

"But the breeze be stronger," said Autumn. "It seems fresh although there be no smells of the outdoors. Keep going for a bit longer."

The tunnel curved sharply to the right and got narrower still.

"It be too narrow now," he said. "I am too wide to get through."

"How does it look further on?" asked Autumn from behind.

Logan held his staff at arm's length through the gap.

"I am not sure," he said after moving his head to look from different angles. "It could be the tunnel continues or mayhap it gets wider again. 'Tis difficult to see."

"Let me have a look," said Autumn. "Lie flat and let me climb over you."

It was awkward but Autumn managed to crawl over Logan and he wriggled backwards to give her room to manoeuvre. She picked up the end of the staff and pushed her head into the narrow gap.

"I think it opens up," she said. "Just beyond the end of the staff the flame stops shining off the rock."

"I thought that was more likely a change in the colour of the rock," said Logan. He wiped his face as it was hot in the tunnel despite the breeze.

"I am going to see," said Autumn.

"Do you think that is a good idea?" asked Logan. "What if you get wedged?"

"A fair point," said Autumn, looking at him under her arm. "Hmm. My gut tells me that this tunnel opens out but my mind says to be cautious and go no further. 'Tis a dilemma."

"Not really," said Logan. "Remember you made a vow to protect your sanctity. You are coming perilously close to breaking that vow."

"Mayhap you are right," said Autumn, sounding disappointed. "Very well, let us go back."

"I do not think I can turn around here," said Logan. "I will have to crawl backwards to where it is wider."

He started to move backwards on his hands and knees. Autumn started to back up as well then stopped at a sudden sound.

"What was that?" she asked.

"'Twas only a small pebble," said Logan. "Your foot knocked it."

"Ahh," said Autumn. She edged back a little further. "A pebble? Pass it to me."

"What do you want a pebble for?" asked Logan.

"To throw," she said. "Find it and toss it under me."

Logan sighed and felt around for the pebble.

"There," he said, tossing it so it skittered along the ground under Autumn.

"Thank you," she said, pulling the staff back so she could see better. She found the pebble, moved forward again then threw the pebble hard into the tunnel ahead of her so it bounced off the side. The expected second clack of the pebble against the opposite wall was definitely a little later than it should have been.

"It widens up ahead," said Autumn. "I am certain. I am going to try to get through."

"Oh Sploop," said Logan. He grabbed Autumn's ankle. "You go no further than your leg," he said. "I have to be able to pull you back."

"As you wish," said Autumn and rolled onto her side to wriggle through the gap, her foot just missing Logan's face as she moved.

"'Tis barely half a body length," she reported a moment later. "It seems to open up into a large space. Let go of my leg."

Logan sighed and reluctantly let go. Autumn disappeared and the light from the staff started to move around.

"Is all well?" he called.

"All is well," said Autumn. Her face appeared further down, lit by the staff. "You can get through on your side. There is plenty of room at this end. Come on, 'tis only a half body length."

Logan closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Coming,” he said and lay on his side. He started to wriggle through then stopped.

“What be taking you so long?” asked Autumn after a while.

“I have caught my tunic on the rock,” said Logan. “A moment.”

He felt around with his fingers and worked the material off the small point that jutted out from the side of the tunnel then edged forward again. Then he felt the floor disappear from under his shoulder.

“You are almost there,” said Autumn, bringing the light over. “The bottom drops away a little bit, just keep going.”

Logan wriggled some more then, with a pronounced sense of relief he was free of the tunnel. Even better, he was able to stand and could not touch both sides with his arms outstretched.

“Ahh, that is much better,” he said, looking around.

It was a cavern of sorts. It stretched beyond the light but one wall was close and the other could be seen. The further wall gleamed darkly in patches and lightly in others. The air felt a little damp.

“There is life down here,” said Autumn, “look.”

She took him over to the wall.

“These white patches be some kind of moss,” she said, “and the dark patches be damp rock. I wager there is moisture soaking down from above. Mayhap we be under a river.”

“I wonder how deep we are?” said Logan, looking up at the ceiling. There were more patches of moss there too. “And how far have we come?”

“I know not how to reckon it,” said Autumn, “but we have been crawling downhill for a time so I wager we be deep enough. For

certain Astauand has never been in here. Did you bring my pack and the skins?"

"No," admitted Logan. "I did not think of them. I was too worried about getting stuck."

"No matter," said Autumn. "Take your staff, I will go back and get them."

She wriggled through the narrow gap then tossed her pack and the water skins through before wriggling back.

"I wager we are near another entrance," she said. "There is still a breeze from along there," and she pointed into the darkness.

"At least we can walk upright, said Logan. "All this crawling and wriggling has not been good for my shoulder."

"Does it pain you again?" she asked, looking concerned.

"A little," said Logan, "but 'tis more that it is stiff and does not move freely and I do not have full strength in it."

"When we get out I will find some more waslebane," said Autumn. "Mayhap Looplab be kind to us and there are no more narrow tunnels. Come."

"If we get out," muttered Logan darkly, following her.

* * *

"There be an opening," said Autumn, pausing. "Look."

The narrow cavern carried on in darkness but a little further ahead on the right was a large dark patch to the side.

"'Tis a strange shape," said Autumn, going up to it. She put her hand out; it was definitely a hole in the rock rather than simply a dark patch. "It looks like an archway."

“How could it be an archway?” asked Logan.

He looked up and down and had to admit that it did look like an archway.

Autumn stepped back then came forward again.

“The breeze is coming through here,” she said, “not from the cavern.” She sniffed then inhaled deeply through her nose and held her breath for a moment. “I can smell things as well.”

“What sort of things?” asked Logan, sniffing the air. He couldn't detect anything in particular.

“I am not sure,” said Autumn. “I think there is a hint of ... fish?”

“Fish?” Logan stepped back quickly from the archway. “Be we coming up inside a river?”

“Of course not,” said Autumn. “This place would be full of water if we were.”

“Oh, yes,” said Logan, shamefaced. “Why would this place smell of fish?”

“Better fish than bear,” said Autumn. “Come on, unless you would prefer to scramble back up the other way.”

She took the staff from Logan and stepped into the archway.

’Tis only two paces and ... ohhhh,” she said.

“What?” said Logan, plunging through the arch.

Autumn was standing just off to one side staring around at the walls.

“They be covered in pictures,” she said. “Just like Urbil's cave.”

“They be on the roof, too,” said Logan. “See? There are some of those small white things.”

“Oh yes,” said Autumn, going over to peer closely at them. “Hmmm, Logan, come here. Now I see them again, yes, they do look more like those cobwebs than I remember. I thought they were just smudges made with a thumb or some such but, see? There are definitely thin lines like the webs and the shape is more like a U than an O, very like the webs.”

“You be right,” said Logan, studying the painting. “And look, there be more that side than this. Like a swarm going that way.”

“Who do you suppose painted these?” asked Autumn. “We are three days travel from Urbil's cave.”

“Aye,” said Logan. He touched one of the white webs on the roof then looked around. “There be some more of those six legged spiders, over there.”

“Oh yes,” said Autumn, looking over. “That be strange.” She looked back at the webs. “Then mayhap not. Spiders make webs, so what be so strange about paintings of spiders near paintings of webs?”

“This be strange though,” said Logan. “Look over there. That be the same painting of dogs. I still cannot make out if it be one dog with four heads or four dogs, but why would the same painting be in another cave?”

“Let us look further along,” said Autumn. “I have a feeling about this.”

They moved further along then Autumn stopped and pointed.

“Look,” she said. “This is the same painting again, only this time there be no water dripping.”

“’Tis the pissing man,” said Logan. “But ...? Oh Sploop. Do you think this is Urbil's cave?”

“I did not see the painting of the red man with wings,” she said. “Do you remember where it was?”

“It was at the end,” said Logan, “which would be ...” he looked around

to orientate himself then pointed. "Over there. Ahhh."

"So," said Autumn. "Either this be a different cave but filled with the same paintings, or the red man is now the archway."

"I did not look at that painting for long," said Logan, staring at the archway. "It frightened me and I was anxious to leave, but if my memory serves me, the red man had wings and no arms and the wings were part way opened."

"Aye," said Autumn. "I remember that too although I do not remember it clearly. I be fairly sure the wings were not fully open and they went above his head."

"They were curved," said Logan. "They curved up and met above his head, like an arch. Oh Sploop, I have a bad feeling about this."

He looked around anxiously. In the flickering light from the staff all the paintings he could see seemed to move and dance.

"Come on," said Autumn decisively.

She turned around and marched off up the cavern, away from the archway.

"Where are we going?" asked Logan.

"Tis right easy to find out if this be Urbil's cave," she said. "Let us see if Urbil is at the other end."

* * *

"Look," said Autumn, stopping as they neared the far end of the cavern.

"It looks like the tunnel to where Urbil sleeps," said Logan, "but I have to confess holes in rock look much the same to me. I wager it could as easily be the one at the end of our cave."

"Aye," said Autumn, "but that is not what I meant. Look at this. I do

not remember this one.”

She veered over to the left and pointed at another painting of the white cobwebs.

“I think I remember one like that about there,” said Logan. “Was it not the first we saw?”

“Very likely,” asked Autumn, “but the one we saw did not have these. I am certain of that.”

She pointed to two solid white shapes inside the swarm, although there were faint strokes in a dark colour underneath the white.

“Ahh, I do not remember those,” said Logan, going over and peering more closely. “So you think this is not Urbil’s cave?”

Autumn held the staff close to the painting and traced the dark lines in the solid shapes with a finger.

“If my eyes do not deceive me,” she said, “I think these be humans. Look, two people, lying down. These be legs and these be feet. This one looks like it might have an arm joined to one of the legs and the other seems to have an arm growing out of its head, although both the heads are completely covered in white.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, studying the shapes closely, “but mayhap not. ’Tis not clear exactly what they are. They could be anything.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but they are not bears or fish or people at a market.”

“I suppose not,” said Logan. “If it were a market there would be a stall of some sort.”

“Logan, look at that painting,” said Autumn. “Did you not say after we thought we dreamt about the webs that your hand was stuck to your leg?”

“I may have,” said Logan cautiously.

“And I remember that my hand was stuck to my face,” said Autumn, “although I do not remember if I told you that or not.”

“I do not think you did,” said Logan. “I only remember you said your face was covered.”

“Well, it was,” said Autumn.

Logan realised he was holding his breath and exhaled sharply.

“Voqev,” he said. “We both had dreams about these webs then we were attacked by webs and decided they may not have been dreams and now you think we have found a painting of what we thought we dreamt? You think we dreamt this painting or is this painting what we dreamt?”

“I do have a thought,” said Autumn, “but first I need to find out what lies beyond that hole in the wall.”

Logan looked at the painting again and ran his finger over the faint dark lines inside the swarm then turned to look into the darkness towards the far end.

“I do not know what I be hoping is through the hole,” he said slowly. “If it be Urbil then what that might mean I would greatly desire not to know, but if it be not Urbil, oh Sploop, it may be a whole lot worse.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I know what you mean. There be some very strange things happening these days past and I cannot make any sense of them. I do not even know if we left Urbil three days ago or five as we seem to have repeated two days. I do not know how to reckon it.”

“Mayhap it be five for us and three for others,” said Logan, “although how that is possible is beyond my wit as well. Still, much as my gut tells me to go back to our cave as quickly as possible and leave this entire Aloidia forsaken realm behind, I venture we have come too far to turn back. Let us go through this cursed hole and Voqev take the consequences.”

He marched over to the entrance to the tunnel and bent double to

enter. Autumn grabbed a handful of his tunic around his bottom to pull him back and he jerked up in surprise, banging his head on the rock.”

“Owww,” he said, rubbing his head. “What did you do that for?”

“We know not what is at the other end of this,” said Autumn. “Tis best I go first with the light and you follow when I call. Bring the pack and skins with you.”

“Oh yes,” said Logan, sarcastically. “That be a right good idea. If whatever lies beyond the tunnel can best you then I really do not want to be left alone here in the dark and have to make my way back to the other cave chased by whatever it was. If what be the other side be bad then I will face it first. You, at least, will have some hope of avenging my death.”

“You are a brave man, Logan,” said Autumn, touching his arm. “You are coming to understand that you always have a choice, no matter what the circumstance and I admire you for the choice you are making. But, and I mean this with no disrespect, I wager you are forgetting one small detail.”

“Oh yes?” asked Logan. “What be that?”

“I, too, have a choice,” said Autumn and she darted through the tunnel.

Chapter Eleven

Urbil was quietly grinding some chalk when he heard the voices. He did not pay any attention as he often heard voices but they continued so he put down the lump of chalk and went to the ledge outside his cave. It was still raining and his sitting stone was wet. He didn't like to sit on the wet stone as it felt strange, cold and slippery, so when it rained he stayed inside. He didn't like the way the water dripped from the creepers either. If he touched one the water would run over his fingers and hand and he didn't like that. It felt like small insects and Urbil didn't like small insects. Urbil liked the sensation of being immersed in water, its cool wetness like a second skin all over, not the scurrying of tiny things. Floating in the river was nice, being dripped on wasn't.

Urbil peered through the creepers overhanging the entrance to his cave, careful not to touch any of them. He clicked his tongue a few times then picked up his fish hook from beside his sitting stone. It still needed a little work but now was not the time. The sitting stone was wet and that was where he sat when he worked on his fish hooks. He put the fish hook back down and peered between the creepers again. Why had he come to the entrance? He couldn't remember. He puffed his cheeks and scratched his arm absently. It was still raining. A single drop of rain fell on the bald part of his head and he jumped backwards, grumbling irritably. He wiped his head several times with his hand, inspecting the hand each time for signs of water, then polished his head with the end of his beard. Then he stared malevolently at the rain and spat.

Back inside he picked up his lump of chalk then heard the voices again. Oh yes, that was why he'd gone to the entrance. To see if there were people around. Then he cocked his head and giggled.

"Silly Urbil," he whispered and giggled again then stuffed the end of his beard in his mouth, for no other reason than that he found it pleasant.

The voices weren't coming from the entrance. They were coming from the back of the cave. That was all right. Visitors from the back of the cave never bothered him. 'Twas the ones out front that were a

nuisance. That was why he let the creepers grow unhindered, so he wouldn't be seen from outside, not that many came from outside to visit.

"A thousand blessings be on you, Mor'upita-sehen," he muttered indistinctly, thankful for the lack of visitors.

He looked at the lump of chalk. It was dirty on all sides save one, the side he'd been rubbing against his grinding rock. That side was pure brilliant white. Unsullied. He spat out his beard and put the chalk down again. There seemed to be enough powder so he went over to his table and searched for his chalk pot. It was dark in that corner because of the rain and he took several pots over to the fire before finding the one with chalk in it. He started to brush the powdered chalk from his grinding rock into his chalk pot.

"It may be a whole lot worse," floated through the cave.

Urbil cocked his head, curious. He didn't normally understand what the voices said. They just gabbled away in some strange tongue, but this he understood. He put down the pot and turned to look down the length of his cave.

"Ohhh ahhh," he muttered in surprise.

There was a light at the end of the cave. That was not usual but it was not unknown either. And lights by their very nature flicker. That was not unusual either. He stared at the light, wondering, then it came to him. The light was not blue, that was why it looked different. It was more of an orangey red.

"Mayhap not so much red," he thought to himself, "but not blue. There be no blue there."

He stared at the light then clicked his fingers delightedly.

"There be some red ochre downriver a ways," he muttered. "Mayhap if I mix it with some chalk it will be like that light. Aye, and mayhap a little of the yolk of an egg. 'Tis a pretty colour."

Satisfied with his plan, Urbil sat down and picked up his chalk pot then put it down again.

“Owww?” he said, puzzled. “Did Mor'upita-sehen just say 'owww'? That be right strange.”

He got up and walked down the length of the cave and got ready to greet whatever was about to come through.

* * *

Autumn came out of the tunnel bent double with the staff thrust out in front of her. She straightened up and held the staff aloft. There was Urbil, not far away, watching with wide, curious eyes. He was standing to the side of the cave, balanced on one leg. The ankle of his other leg held in one hand. He had the first finger of his other hand in his ear and his beard was stuffed in his mouth. He had white streaks on his thighs.

“Greetings,” said Autumn.

“Owww,” said Urbil. His beard fell out of his mouth,

“Are you hurt?” asked Autumn.

“Lamb's tail,” said Urbil.

“I heard voices,” said Logan appearing behind Autumn. “Oh, hello Urbil.”

“Red and white,” said Urbil, taking his finger out of his ear and pointing to the staff.

“’Tis Urbil,” said Logan, sounding both relieved and not relieved at the same time.

“I think he is hurt,” said Autumn.

“Did you hit him?” asked Logan.

“It be raining,” said Urbil.

“No, I did not,” said Autumn.

“He looks normal to me,” said Logan, “well, as normal as he ever is.”

“He said 'owww' when I came out of the tunnel,” said Autumn.

“Mayhap you trod on him,” said Logan. “Urbil, are you well?”

“Owww,” said Urbil. “It may be a whole lot worse.”

“What be worse?” asked Autumn puzzled, “and worse than what?”

“Lamb's tail,” said Urbil, stepping forward.

He crashed heavily to the ground as he still had one ankle in his hand. Autumn jumped forward to catch him and narrowly avoided setting alight to his hair with the staff.

“Take this,” she said to Logan, tossing the staff backwards. “I think Urbil is hurt.” She helped him up.

“My knee hurts,” said Urbil, rubbing his knee and smearing white all over it.

“I think it be bleeding a little,” said Autumn. “Let me get you over to the light.”

She helped Urbil over to the entrance of the cave so she could look at his knee in daylight. The orangey red of the light from the staff gave skin an unusual hue.

“Tis only a small cut,” she said. “You will live.”

“Pink,” said Urbil sadly and thrust his bottom lip forward petulantly as he inspected the mixture of blood and chalk.

Logan asked Fiau to turn herself off and the cave plunged into darkness, save the glow from Urbil's fire and the light coming in the

entrance. Autumn stepped out onto the ledge and shook some water from the creepers onto the hem of her sleeve. It had stopped raining although everything was wet and dripping. The air was muggy and smelt of wet vegetation. She gently wiped Urbil's knee clean and he watched her mournfully.

"Tis only small," she said, inspecting the cut again. "I do not think you need a leaf."

Urbil nodded agreement then peered out at the sky.

"Hmmp," he said and clicked his fingers. The cave brightened as the muted light came through although, because of the clouds, there was no shaft of sunlight.

"Do you remember us?" asked Autumn.

Urbil didn't answer. He just sat on the floor of the cave with his injured leg stretched out through the entrance.

"We were here a few days ago," said Autumn. "I am Autumn and this is Logan. You caught a fish for us. Do you remember?"

"Fish," said Urbil. "You stood on stick."

Autumn breathed a sigh of relief and Urbil poked his knee and giggled.

"Can I ask you about the other cave, back yonder?" asked Autumn.

"Tis my cave," said Urbil. "Why are you here?"

"Not this cave," said Autumn. "The one beyond it. With the paintings in it. Did you do them?"

"You did not eat fish," said Urbil, getting up and limping inside. He squatted in a corner and licked his knee.

"We had some of the fish," said Autumn.

“It was very nice with the lamb's tail you gave us,” said Logan.

“I gave you lamb's tail,” said Urbil. He started to comb his beard with his fingers.

“Yes,” said Logan. “Twas very nice.” He couldn't think of anything else to say so he stopped talking.

Urbil ignored him anyway and continued to gaze at Autumn silently, his fingers running through his beard.

Autumn stared back for a few moments thoughtfully then went down to the far end of the cave and picked up her pack and brought it back. She sat down beside Urbil who stopped combing and started to look worried. He edged away a little and turned his face away.

Autumn opened her pack and brought out a small bundle of scrunched up grass stalks. She gently pulled the bundle apart and held it out for Urbil to see.

“You gave me this,” she said.

Urbil looked at her then looked down at the bundle of grasses she was holding out and his worried expression turned to wonder. He reached out and very gently stroked the small lamb's tail flower nestled within the grasses. It had wilted a little but was still intact.

“A gift given freely is a precious one,” said Autumn. “I cherish your gift.”

She carefully laid the grass down beside her pack. Logan gave her a quizzical look but didn't say anything.

“I remember you,” said Urbil gravely. He slapped his hand on the ground to emphasise the fact.

“Did you do the paintings?” asked Autumn.

Urbil took two handfuls of his beard and held them over his eyes then peeked nervously at Autumn.

“You like?” he asked.

“I think they are very good,” said Autumn. “Tell me ab...” but Urbil jumped up before she could finish.

He ran over to his simple table and grabbed a pot and brought it back.

“With this,” he said and took the top off.

Inside was a thick black paste. He handed the pot to Autumn and ran over to the fire and grabbed a small twig from one of the branches beside it. Running back he dipped the twig in the pot then draw a small outline of a lamb's tail flower on the rock beside Autumn then beamed at her. Autumn nodded approvingly.

“Did you use that chalk for the white cobwebs?” she asked, pointing to the lump of chalk beside Urbil's grinding stone.

He nodded and grinned toothlessly.

“How did you paint us?” asked Autumn, pointing to Logan and herself.

“I saw you so I painted you,” he said. “Covered in cobwebs.”

“You saw us covered in webs by the river?” asked Autumn, “or did you imagine us covered with webs?”

Logan nodded thoughtfully, impressed with the way Autumn was handling Urbil.

“I followed you,” Urbil said. “I saw the webs. I saw you fall.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. She glanced at Logan and half nodded. “What happened after we fell?”

Urbil scampered across the cave and sat on his bed of grasses then pulled his hair over his face.

“Umm,” said Autumn, not sure how to continue.

Urbil pulled his hair apart. “I ate the fish,” he said and immediately hid behind his hair again.

“The fish was yours,” said Autumn, “and you were welcome to have it all.”

Urbil slowly pulled his hair apart again and looked cautiously at her.

“You are not in trouble, Urbil,” said Autumn, realising that Urbil’s concerns and her own were, understandably, different. “We do not begrudge you the fish nor do we want it back. Do we, Logan.”

“Oh, umm, no, of course not,” said Logan, taken by surprise. “It was a very nice fish and I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did, we did.”

Urbil let his hair drop.

“Truth?” he asked.

“Truth,” said Autumn.

Urbil nodded thoughtfully then came back to sit beside Autumn.

“I saw you did not get up,” he said. “You were not breathing. I pulled the webs away from your face so you could breathe.”

“Thank you, Urbil,” said Autumn, patting his knee. “That was very kind of you.”

Urbil’s face twisted. “I like you,” he blurted then looked very surprised at himself.

“I like you too,” said Autumn. “We both do. Do we not, Logan.”

“Aye,” said Logan hurriedly. “Yes.”

“How did you get all the webs from us?” asked Autumn. “We were covered.”

“I washed you,” said Urbil.

He exaggeratedly dipped the end of his beard in an imaginary river flowing along the floor of the cave then wiped Autumn's face with it. Autumn laughed because it tickled.

“And then you came back here and painted us on the wall?” asked Autumn.

Urbil picked up the twig and waggled it.

“Do the webs come here often?” asked Logan.

“Sometimes,” said Urbil. “I do not track them for they do not bother me.”

“Where do they come from?” asked Autumn.

“There,” said Urbil, pointing to the back of his cave.

“How long have they been coming from there?” asked Autumn.

“Forever,” said Urbil.

“That be a long time,” said Logan.

Urbil shrugged.

“There are other paintings in the cave,” said Autumn. “Have you seen all of the things you have painted?”

Urbil nodded and started to twist his beard in his hands nervously.

“Have they all come from the cave?” she asked.

“Some live in the woods and the river,” he said, pointing to the entrance to his cave.

“The deer and the fish?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Urbil.

“And the spiders?” asked Autumn.

Urbil shook his head slowly, his eyes not leaving Autumn's face. His lips twisted and he mumbled to himself angrily.

“Where be my manners?” he suddenly said, slapping the top of his head. “You be guests in my house and I am being discourteous. I be offering you a hot drink.”

He jumped up and hurried over to put his cauldron on the fire then busied himself grinding some calhouny nuts.

“I venture we will not be getting much more from him for now,” muttered Logan.

“No, I fear not,” whispered back Autumn. “’Tis unfortunate as I am greatly disturbed and have many more questions.”

“Aye,” whispered Logan. “What of the red man and the thing with the big face? Be they real?”

“That is what disturbs me,” whispered Autumn. “And where is the red man now? Eh?”

Logan grimaced and sat back, tapping his fingers on his knee. Autumn got their bowls out of her pack, ready.

“We were in Veobad,” she said to Urbil. “Have you been there?”

“Accursed place,” said Urbil gruffly.

“Why is that?” asked Autumn, leaning forward attentively.

“Some boys threw stones at me,” said Urbil, “and when I caught one his father beat me with a stick and said his lad were a good lad and I should be hanged as a public nuisance. Pah. I have not been back since.” He hit the calhouny nuts angrily with his stone.

“Oh,” said Autumn. “That was not nice.”

She paused. If Urbil had not been back then he wouldn't know if days got repeated there or not.

“We were told this mountain be named Wut'qiui,” she said. “’Twould seem to be an unusual mountain.”

“’Tis not a mountain,” said Urbil. “’Tis a volcano.”

“A volcano?” said Logan. “I know of Mor'upita-sehen but I did not know there were others.”

“He were a right little shit,” said Urbil.

“Who, Mor'upita-sehen?” asked Logan.

“Oca,” said Urbil. “That evil monstrosity what threw stones at me. He be down South a bit.”

“Oca?” said Autumn. “Oca be the miller in Veobad, surely?”

“Noooo,” said Urbil, scraping the powdered nuts into the cauldron. “Mor'upita-sehen. It be in the middle.”

“I am confused,” said Autumn. “What is in the middle of what?”

“Mor'upita-sehen be in the middle of Ahon Hara,” said Urbil. “Do you not know where you are?”

“No,” said Autumn. “We were in the Mapdil Mountains for the Winter and followed the river South. So this is not a mountain?”

“All the Ahon Mara mountains be volcanoes,” said Urbil. “Wut'qiui be the first of them.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “So that be why there were tremors yesterday.”

“Tremors?” said Urbil looking over at her. “There be no tremors here. These be dead volcanoes. Only Mor'upita-sehen still be blowing these

days and they be few and far between.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. “I, umm, we thought there was a tremor yesterday. We were heading for Dotuke. Mayhap that be by Mor'upita-sehen. Is it far from here?”

“You be a philosopher,” said Urbil, bringing over their bowls. “Never were much good at practicalities, philosophers. Shame them as taught you did not teach you where places are.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn.

Urbil looked at her then went over to his table and rummaged underneath. He pulled out a large piece of dry bark then started opening the pots on top and muttering.

“Are you looking for this?” asked Autumn, holding up his pot of black paste.

Urbil scowled at her then came over and sat down beside her again. He wiped his hand over the bark then dusted it with his hair.

“This be Wut'qiui,” he said, neatly drawing a flat topped mountain on the bark and writing 'Wut'qiui' next to it. “There be Sar'taube, Owilausco and then Mor'upita-sehen. That be, oh, fifteen or more days away. Dotuke be just round Wut'qiui a bit. Mayhap a day's walking if you be not going to Veobad.”

“So what you are saying is that a tremor near Dotuke could not have been caused by Mor'upita-sehen?” asked Autumn. “It be too far away?”

“Nay,” said Urbil. “Tremors come this far. What I be saying is that if it were Mor'upita-sehen then all of Wut'qiui be feeling it, not just Dotuke.”

“We definitely felt a tremor,” said Logan. “More than one. And the ground opened up.”

Urbil shrugged, clearly loosing interest. He wandered over to his table

and put the pot back.

“What be orange?” he asked.

“’Tis a fruit,” said Logan.

“Red and white be pink,” said Urbil, ignoring him. He picked up another pot and peered inside then slammed it down.

“Be you wanting to stay the night?” he asked, his face clearly showing the answer he wanted.

Autumn looked over at Logan.

“’Twould be best if we move on,” she said. “We thank you for your hospitality, Urbil.”

Urbil grunted and went over to sit on his straw bed.

“Come, Logan,” said Autumn.

Puzzled, Logan followed her out of the cave.

“Why do we not stay and ask more questions?” he asked.

“I do not think Urbil can give us the answers,” said Autumn. “’Tis my belief that the things he has painted he has seen but I wager he knows not what they are nor where they come from.”

“Oh well,” said Logan. “I be right glad we be not going back through that tunnel.”

“We cannot,” said Autumn, looking up at the top of Wut’qiui. “I felt the draught stop. That opening has closed again. I venture the red man is back at the end of the cave.”

“Sploop,” said Logan, stopping to look at her. “You think he is real and not just a painting?”

“I know not,” said Autumn. “So this is a volcano? I have never seen a

volcano before. I wonder what is at the top?”

Chapter Twelve

Autumn emerged from the wood slowly. This last part of the climb had been very steep and even she had had to put her hands on the ground at times to keep her balance. The final part, beyond the trees, was rocky with patches of grass and small flowers but little else save Astauand beating down. The summit lay not far ahead. Perhaps a few paces if it were on the flat but it was still angled steeply so it would be some minutes yet to the very top. She paused to catch her breath and looked behind for Logan. He was some way behind, making a lot of noise but out of sight.

A goat with her kid pattered across the rocks over to Autumn's left. It stopped and gazed at her in surprise, perhaps wondering at the disturbance or, more likely, at Autumn's apparent inability to run with carefree abandon up ground that was still a way off vertical. The kid maa'd then ran to the top and back down again before batting its mother playfully with its head. The mother glanced down at the kid then bent to get a mouthful of grass and resumed watching Autumn, its jaws moving rhythmically. A curse came from further down and the goats fled. Autumn smiled to herself then resumed the climb.

“Ohhhhh!”

As she breasted the summit, a panorama opened out before her and she stared in wonder. She stood on the edge of a giant bowl. The ridge circled away on both sides and joined again a long way distant. Inside was a lake, some way below, shimmering in the midday sun. From where she stood the ground fell away relatively gently, covered with purple bushes but on the far side and to her right there was a mass of bare rock where a large section had slid down and now peppered that part of the lake with boulders. A flock of birds squabbled and fished on the lake.

“I had no idea,” she murmured to herself, awed by the scene.

She turned to share her elation with Logan but he was sitting at the edge of the wood below, fanning his sweating face with a leafy twig.

“Logan!” called Autumn. “Come, look at this!”

The flock of birds lifted off the water in alarm, squawking and breaking the smooth surface into a frenzy of small waves.

“What is it?” He looked around with urgency in his face but with no attempt to stand up.

”’Tis another world up here!” called Autumn, turning to look back inside the volcano.

“Another world? Sploop!” called back Logan and he jumped to his feet and climbed as rapidly as he could.

“See?” said Autumn, waving her hand across the vista.

Logan scowled, his face red and his chest heaving.

“Looks like our world,” he said between breaths. “I thought you meant we had come upon the Land of the Undead or Cysciec or somewhere like that.”

“I was expecting a huge fire,” said Autumn. “A mass of burning and desolation, not this. This place be serene and peaceful. ’Tis not how I expected a volcano to be.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “I had not thought on it but now you talk of it I think I was expecting a mountain top like any other. A peak then the other side much like this one.”

“Urbil said it was dead,” said Autumn, gazing around. “Mayhap before it died this bowl was full of fire but now it is out the world has reclaimed it.”

“It must have gone out a while ago,” said Logan. “I wonder how deep that lake is?”

“Jump in and find out,” said Autumn, watching the birds circle and slowly settle again.

“Are we going down there?” asked Logan.

“I would like to,” said Autumn. “I wonder what it is like to be at the bottom of a bowl. Everywhere you look is up.”

“That must be Sar'taube over there,” said Logan, looking past the bowl towards the South where the top of another mountain, hazy with distance, was visible on the horizon.

“What say you we spend the night by the lake then head off for Sar'taube tomorrow?” asked Autumn. “I am curious to know if it is like this as well. Mayhap it be only two or three days distant.”

“As you wish,” said Logan.

“I like this place,” said Autumn, turning to look at Logan, then she giggled. “What be that in your hair?”

“Tis a feather,” said Logan. “I found it back there and thought you would like it. 'Twas easier to carry in my hair than my hand.”

He felt around his head for the feather then plucked it and handed it to Autumn who graciously took it.

“Tis a cypei feather,” said Autumn, gently running her fingers along it. “The colours suit you. Here, wear it with pride,” and she stuck it back in Logan's hair.

“Do you not like it?” asked Logan.

“I like it very much,” said Autumn, “and in your hair I shall see it every time I look at you. Thank you. What was all that noise you were making?”

“Noise?” said Logan, looking puzzled then his brow cleared. “Ohh. I found a fallen branch but it was not fully broken away. I had to pull it off.”

“Why?” asked Autumn.

“I thought it would be the makings of a staff for you,” said Logan. “I have been looking ever since we burnt your other one but this is the

first I have seen that looked long enough and straight enough that was not rotten inside. I fancy it be strong enough."

"I thank you again," said Autumn. "Where is it?"

"I left it back there," said Logan. "Come and have a look."

* * *

Astauand set early as they camped beside the lake, disappearing below the rim of the bowl. As the twilight thickened, Logan lay back gazing out over the still water as Autumn rubbed her branch with a black stone, smoothing off all the rough edges where twigs and smaller branches had been. She had been working on it all afternoon.

"What do you suppose happens here when it rains?" asked Logan.

"I imagine like most places it gets wet," said Autumn.

She ran her hand over the staff and it seemed smooth enough so she started to work on the fire blackened end where she had burnt it to make it roughly the same height as she was. The charcoal needed to be removed and the fire hardened end shaped to make a blunt point.

"No, I meant where does the water go?" asked Logan. "As it is a bowl any water that is not taken into the ground will run off into the lake but there be no streams carrying the water from the lake away. So if the lake does not rise, where does the water go?"

Autumn paused in her scraping.

"Mayhap the lake does rise," she said. "Mayhap in time it will fill this bowl and spill over the sides."

"I did not think of that," said Logan.

He hummed tunelessly for a while.

"What made this bowl?" he asked. "I am not certain what a volcano is."

“It was described to me as a mountain with fire inside,” said Autumn, turning the staff to start scraping a fresh side. “Noxu said that the fire be so hot it melts the rocks which then flows like water over the sides.”

“That I would like to see,” said Logan. “I would not have believed it but after seeing water as hard as stone in the great cold of last winter in the North, 'twould make sense to find stone as soft as water in the heat of a burning mountain.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Urbil said that Mor'upita-sehen still burns and I would like to see inside if it be not too hot.”

“I wager it will be,” said Logan. “The heat of our fire is not enough to turn stone to water but it be hot enough to cook us. So why is there a bowl inside when the fire goes out?”

“I know not,” said Autumn. She carried on scraping the burnt end of the staff then sighed.

“If you heat milk,” she said, “it goes all frothy and rises but when you take it off the fire it sinks back down again. Mayhap the rock does the same. When the fire inside the volcano burns the rock melts and goes frothy and rises and spills over the sides. Then when the fire goes out it cools down again and the froth goes, leaving the bowl.”

“Tis clever thinking,” said Logan, “although it be difficult for me to imagine rock bubbling like hot milk. Where does the rock come from?”

“I venture it be all the rock that is above the fire,” said Autumn.

“Would not the fire be at the bottom of the bowl?” asked Logan. “Where the lake is now.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “Although it occurs to me that the fire may be deep within the ground and there be nowhere else for the melted rock to go except upwards. Mayhap that explains your problem with the level of the lake as well.”

“How so?” asked Logan.

“You know how a stream can split into two when there is something blocking its path?” asked Autumn, “and the two paths go off in different directions? Mayhap the melted rock does the same and when it cools and the rock retreats it leave tunnels for the water of the lake to flow into.”

“Tis hard to imagine what could block melted rock,” said Logan.

“There are many different rocks,” said Autumn. “Mayhap the fire be hot enough to melt some and not others.”

Logan nodded thoughtfully.

“On the drawing Urbil gave you,” he said, “the volcanoes were in a line going South. Why do you suppose they be in a line? Do you think each has its own fire? Who would start such fires anyway?”

“Mor'upita-sehen started them,” said Autumn. “It be the deity of volcanoes so I would think only It has the power to make them burn. Mayhap that be why the volcano Mor'upita-sehen be the only one that be still burning. That be where It lives.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “So I be guessing that Mor'upita-sehen be more mighty than Looplab since Looplab makes mountains but cannot burn them.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “But there be more mountains than volcanoes and I venture burning something be easier than creating it in the first place. We can burn wood but we cannot create trees.”

“That be true,” said Logan.

He sighed and sat up.

“Have you ever wondered why there is no Roinad among the gods?” asked Logan. “They say that the gods made us like them and we have Roinads so you would think there would be a Roinad among the gods as there is with us.”

“I do not agree with your logic, Logan,” said Autumn. “The gods have many powers that we do not. Mayhap self-rule be one of them which is why we need a Roinad to rule us and make the laws.”

“But Mizule made men and gave men the power to be warriors,” said Logan, “and Vallume made women and gave them the power to have babies so why not give us the power to self rule as well?”

“Now that is a good question,” said Autumn, pausing in her scraping, “although some women can be warriors but I have never heard of a man having a baby. Now I think on it, why is there no god of Roinads? If anyone can be a Roinad and rule over all why can each of us not be trusted to rule ourselves?”

“Mayhap it be because there be a lot of people,” said Logan, “and very few gods. Mayhap if there be lots of Mizules or lots of Vallumes they would need Roinads as well. If there be more than one Mizule then how would they resolve disagreements?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Mayhap they do not have the power to self rule and are as flawed as we are but because we are many we had to create our own Roinads so that there is peace.”

“That is a disturbing thought,” said Logan. His fingers found a pebble and he tossed it out across the still, dark water of the lake. “If we are ruled by the gods but have a need to create Roinads to also rule does that not means that the gods are not as powerful as we think?”

“Or mayhap that Roinads are as powerful as gods,” said Autumn. “It is said that Sviatopolny syn ks Buyacyiat tried that argument to no avail.”

“Who is Swetapolly sin kiss whosit?” asked Logan.

“Sviatopolny syn ks Buyacyiat was one of the early rulers of South Eastern Aferraron before it became Aferraron,” said Autumn. “’Twas in the days of the Old Tongue, several hundred summers past. His father unified the tribes of the area and Sviatopolny became leader on his father's death. Sviatopolny argued that because he ruled with the power of life and death as did the gods then he must also be a god

and thus was ruler by divine right.”

“Ohh,” said Logan. “What happened to him?”

“His son, Bryachavny, argued that if Sviatopolny was a god then he must be immortal and could only be killed by another god,” said Autumn. “So he challenged his father to a duel in an attempt to prove that he, Bryachavny, was a true god and thus had the divine right to rule as well.”

“So who won the duel?” asked Logan.

“Bryachavny,” said Autumn, “which caused a problem and he was assassinated three days later.”

“What sort of problem?” asked Logan, fascinated.

“Well, one of his father's commanders, a man called Fetawe, was apparently a man of considerable learning,” said Autumn, “and he pointed out that if Bryachavny was a god by virtue of having killed Sviatopolny then Sviatopolny could not have had the divine right to rule otherwise Bryachavny could not have taken away that divine power so Sviatopolny, because he had died, could not have been a god and therefore Bryachavny was the son of a mortal and therefore must be mortal himself and hence had no divine rights.”

“But could not one god usurp the divine right of another god?” asked Logan.

“So you would think,” said Autumn, “but this commander convinced himself and assassinated Bryachavny, thereby proving Bryachavny was not a god and consequently had no more right to rule than Fetawe. Or, to put it the way Fetawe did, he, Fetawe, had as much right to rule as Bryachavny had so he took the title to prove a philosophical point. They were interesting times.”

“How do you know all this?” asked Logan.

“Oh, we had history lessons at the Esyup,” said Autumn. “’Twas not all philosophy and fighting. My friend Didiza fell out of favour after that.”

“Was she not the one who believed the moons were not moved by Plakill and Plifal?” asked Logan.

“I do not know if she believed that or not,” said Autumn, “but she certainly argued so.”

“Is that why she fell out of favour?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn, “although she was not held in high esteem after that argument.”

“So why did she fall out of favour?” persisted Logan.

“Ohh,” said Autumn giving the end of her staff one final scrape before deciding it was smooth enough. “Didiza said that Sviatopolny was right in his assertion but wrong in his conclusion. She argued that he was right to say that as he had the powers of the gods he should have equal status to them but that the correct conclusion should have been that as Sviatopolny was clearly not a god then, as the gods had equal status with Sviatopolny then the gods were not gods either.”

“Do you mean she said there were no gods?” asked Logan.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I was not convinced at the time but we have met two gods now so clearly she was wrong. Mayhap I should try to get a message to her.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “Yammoe and Ept, although I would have preferred it had we not. The Land of the Undead be not a nice place.”

Autumn put aside her new staff. It was now quite dark and there was little more she could do until Astauand rose in the morning.

“Bryachavny was not the last to think he was a god,” said Autumn reflectively. “According to my teachers many who have ruled have had such illusions but none since have taken it so far as to proclaim it to the people and expect to be worshipped.”

“Mayhap if I had stayed as Roinad and not run away, I would think

myself a god as well,” said Logan with a laugh.

Autumn smiled and looked at him.

“I think not,” she said. “you do not take yourself so seriously.”

“I do not think I would like to be a god,” said Logan thoughtfully. “Mayhap something lesser, such as Khimera of the river. Yes, I think I would like the freedom of that. Gods and Roinads have too many responsibilities.”

“Would you want people washing their dirty clothes in you,” asked Autumn, “or have things swim inside you? I venture many liberties are taken with rivers and streams.”

“Aye, mayhap you be right,” said Logan.

He sat up and twisted to face Autumn and pulled his feather out of his hair.

“Have you had any thoughts on the webs and the paintings in Urbil’s cave?” he asked turning serious. He toyed with the feather.

“It did strike me that we have encountered the webs twice,” said Autumn, “and both times they tried to encompass us but Urbil said he had seen them many times and that they do not bother him, which makes me wonder if there be some purpose behind our encounters.”

“You mean they were deliberately trying to kill us?” asked Logan. He stopped playing with the feather and stabbed the quill into the ground. “Why?”

“I know not,” said Autumn. “Still, now we know the webs can be got rid of with water I am less concerned. ’Tis the other paintings that bother me more. Urbil painted the webs and then us and other things he has met such as deer. I wonder if he has met all of the things that he has painted.”

“You mean that big red man?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “That one in particular. Why was it the red man

that made way for the arch? Is the arch always there but blocked by the red man or is the red man a painting on the rock that has the power to come and go? Such questions bother me.”

“Aye,” said Logan. He pulled the feather out of the ground and began stroking its edge along the side of his hand. “If they be real, do you suppose they live in the volcano?”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, “although it could be that such things live all around and we have not yet ...” Her gaze shifted to look over his shoulder and her eyes narrowed.

“What?” asked Logan, twisting to look behind him. “What can you see?”

“I thought I saw something move,” said Autumn, peering into the darkness.

There was the faintest of pattering over the loose stones and the hint of something rustling in the grass beyond the light of the fire. Suddenly Autumn grabbed her staff and jumped up.

“Mizule,” she said, pushing Logan’s shoulder. “Get behind me. Now!”

Chapter Thirteen

“Voqev!” said Logan in alarm, stumbling backwards. “What is it?”

The creature stared malevolently at him through huge bulbous eyes. It had horns instead of jaws and each time they opened, sideways, there was a soft, sucking sound. When they closed, they clacked, like wood on stone. Logan couldn't decide which sounded worse.

“I venture it be one of the spiders Urbil painted,” said Autumn calmly, holding her staff loosely but ready. “It be having only six legs.”

“Six be six too many,” said Logan. “Look at the size of them!”

The body of the spider was a forearm wide but each leg was twice as long and the whole thing was a dirty white colour. As it hung in the light of Plakill, suspended on those six legs, it exuded a malign, ghostly evil. Its jaws sucked and clacked again, sending shivers up Logan's spine.

“I think it wants to be friendly,” said Autumn.

She squatted down to look at it from its own level. The spider jumped backwards then spun around, the ends of its feet tapping rapidly on the stones and faced her again.

“Mayhap it be hungry,” she said.

“You seriously think it eats cheese?” asked Logan sarcastically. “I wager this prefers meat, long dead.”

“Do not judge by appearances,” said Autumn. “Get some cheese from my pack. Mayhap the offer alone will create a bond even if it does not like the cheese.”

“Do not let it out of your sight,” said Logan and turned to fetch the cheese. “Voqev! There be another one!”

Autumn half turned and glanced towards her pack. Another of the spiders was crouched over her robe which was folded on top of her

pack. It too was staring malevolently at them then it lowered its head and seemed to sniff the robe in some way, even though it did not appear to have anything resembling a nose.

“Ah,” said Autumn, stepping backwards so she could see both at the same time. “Perhaps it would be best if you moved away from my pack.”

Logan didn't argue.

The second spider raised itself up and scurried towards Autumn, its jaws sucking and clacking excitedly. It tried to bite her leg but she stepped back. It lunged again and she stepped back again. The other scurried over and attacked her from the side so she jumped over them and stood by Logan. They seemed confused that she was no longer in front of them.

“Why do you not hit them?” he asked.

“I am not convinced they mean us harm,” said Autumn, “and it may be that even if they do their jaws or horns or whatever they be are not strong enough to do any damage.”

One of the spiders spun around and spotted them. It did a rapid triple clack of its jaws and the other spun around as well. Logan grabbed a burning branch from the fire and waved it at the spiders.

“Go away,” he commanded.

The burning end of the branch was reflected multiple times in each of their bulbous eyes but otherwise the spiders did not react.

“Go,” said Logan, stepping forward and waving the branch.

Nothing happened.

He bent and picked up his own staff and, emboldened by their lack of response, thrust the burning branch at the closer of the two. It bit the burning end of the branch off with its jaws and the piece disappeared into what was most likely its mouth.

“Ah,” said Logan, rapidly stepping backwards. “Well, now we know how strong those horns are.”

Both spiders rushed at Logan and Autumn slammed her staff down on the back of one and simultaneously kicked sideways at the other. The first burst open and dark slime squirted from it as it lay, its six legs contorting and spasming. The other backed away, one leg broken and dangling. Then it attacked again, its speed seemingly unimpaired by the loss of a leg. Autumn rammed her staff into its thick body then wrenched it free as the spider's five legs wrapped around the staff in its death throes.

“I wonder if there are any more?” said Logan looking around. He turned to look behind him and froze.

“Umm, Autumn?” he said, worriedly.

“Yes?” said Autumn, looking up from the spider. “Oh Mizule!”

It was difficult to count the spiders as their ghostly whiteness faded into the distance but it was fair to say that there were a lot of them. All silently watching.

“Perhaps we should leave,” said Autumn. “I venture we have accidentally camped in a nest or some such. Move slowly. Try not to alarm them.”

She slowly started moving backwards, gesturing for Logan to do the same.

“What about your pack and the skins?” said Logan, watching the spiders with morbid fascination as he slowly stepped backwards, praying he would not trip.

“Leave them,” said Autumn. “We can collect them when the spiders have gone.”

A sucking clacking sound behind her made Autumn turn.

“There be more,” she said.

A sea of spiders stretched away behind her, their legs seemingly intertwined as their bodies pressed together.

“We are surrounded,” said Logan, rapidly turning full circle. “There must be hundreds of them.”

“Do you suppose they can swim?” asked Autumn. “Mayhap if we jump in the lake?”

As if in reply there was a splashing and a rank of spiders emerged from the water's edge, wet and dripping.

“Perhaps not,” she said.

There was a sudden skirmish as several of the advancing spiders discovered the two dead ones and proceeded to dismember and eat them.

“Interesting,” muttered Autumn and sidled over to Logan. “When I say ‘run’, go that way, up the slope,” she whispered, gesturing with the end of her staff.

“What are you going to do?” whispered Logan.

“Create a diversion,” she whispered. “Ready?”

“Oh Sploop,” muttered Logan. He took a deep breath. “I suppose so.”

“Be brave, friend Logan,” muttered Autumn, gripping his shoulder. “Run fast but run safe, do not fall. Run!”

She pushed him hard and he stumbled and nearly fell but managed to retain his footing and fled in the direction Autumn had pointed. There was a surge as the spiders scurried after him then Autumn was upon them, slashing and kicking, her legs and staff blurring in the moonlight as she leapt and twirled. A score or more of the spiders burst, spattering their neighbours with dark slime then the neighbours fell on them, ravenously. An odour rose as spiders' guts were spilled and drove the others into a killing frenzy as they turned, first on the dead and injured then on those spattered with gore. Within seconds

the scene was a writhing mass of ghostly white cannibalism and the lake's edge started to discolour.

It did not last long. The survivors, more than half, excited and enraged, chased after Logan as he ran up the slope panting and half falling. Behind him he could hear fast tapping as the spiders gained on him, their jaws sucking and clacking in anticipation. He glanced back, the entire slope behind him seemed to be alive and moving.

“This way,” shouted Autumn, suddenly appearing and grabbing his arm. “Hurry!”

She raced on, Logan half running, half dragging behind her as she somehow managed to avoid the fallen rocks strewn around. Two spiders rushed in from the side and one went flying from a blow from her staff and the other lost both its jaws as her flying foot caught it. She let go of Logan's arm as she fell, then rolled and regained her feet as the injured spider was torn apart by three others.

“Over there,” shouted Autumn, pausing to let Logan catch her up then pushing him off to the left. She leapt ahead of him, impaling another dirty white body as she passed.

Yet another jumped on Autumn as she ran by a large rock, landing on her back and wrapping its legs around her. She instantly reached behind and grabbed its head just as Logan's staff came whirling, sending the spider flying, its head still in Autumn's hands. She tossed it away then disappeared.

“Autumn! Where are you?” shouted Logan desperately.

Her hand snaked out and grabbed the neck of Logan's tunic and threw him into the cave.

“Get some light,” she shouted.

Panting, Logan sat up and felt around for his staff. He couldn't find it.

“Fiau, some light, please,” he said, trying to stay calm.

The end of his staff spluttered into life, a short distance away.

“Find some rocks to block the entrance,” commanded Autumn, pushing a large rock across the entrance to the cave.

A spider came hurtling in and she felled it with her fist and threw it out where it was immediately set upon. She grabbed another rock and rammed it into the gap beside the first as Logan picked up a third and awkwardly carried it over. Autumn snatched it from him and heaved it into place on top of the other two.

“Some smaller ones,” she said, searching around.

Within moments they had blocked most of the entrance to the cave. Logan slumped to the floor, his chest heaving.

“Come over here,” he said, beckoning her towards him.

Obligingly Autumn walked over and Logan peeled off the remaining leg of the spider that had jumped on her and still clung to her side. He tossed it away in disgust.

“Thank you,” said Autumn.

She looked over at the stones blocking the entrance. Several spider legs were protruding through gaps, groping and writhing. She picked up the leg and pushed it through one of the gaps. It was snatched from her.

“Well, that was exciting,” she said. “I wonder how long the rocks will hold?”

“Oh Sploop,” groaned Logan. He got to his feet. “Mayhap there be some more rocks further back. There are no more here.”

“Before we look, Logan,” said Autumn, “thank you for finding me a most excellent branch for my staff. 'Tis very strong yet not too heavy. It has already served us well. 'Tis better than hands and feet for killing spiders like these.”

"I am glad you like it," said Logan. "Umm, yes."

He picked up his staff.

"I be getting an aversion to caves," he said glumly, looking around. "What joys await us in this one, do you suppose?"

"Let us hope there are no spiders in this one," said Autumn. "Or if there are that they be small, normal ones and few in number."

Logan looked back at the legs groping through the gaps in the rocks at the entrance and shuddered.

"How did you know this cave was here?" he asked.

"I did not," said Autumn. "We came upon it by chance. I saw a dark patch in the side of the slope and prayed it was a cave of sorts and could offer us some protection. Mizule answered my prayers."

"That was right kind of It," said Logan. "I confess I was too scared and running too hard to pray to anything."

One of the rocks at the entrance scraped inwards a little and Logan jumped.

"Best we get some more rocks and right quick," he said. "I wager those will not be holding much longer."

Autumn gave him a half smile then snapped several of the waving legs off. Instantly there was a commotion outside. She pushed the broken legs through the gaps.

"We have a few minutes more," she said. "Mayhap there has been a rockfall further in. Take my staff and give me yours. Best I go first. We know not what lies ahead."

"It be what lies behind that bothers me," thought Logan but stayed silent.

Cautiously Autumn advanced through the cave. It had widened out

immediately after the entrance but quickly narrowed again so Logan had to walk behind her, acutely aware that the spiders were undoubtedly pushing the rocks aside and bounding after them. Autumn walked forward, square on to the passage, confidently alert. Logan sidled behind her, his back to one wall and his head constantly looking back, nervously alert. It didn't help that the light from Fiau was ahead of Autumn and so cast constantly moving shadows behind them.

Within a few paces the passage curved to the right then started to incline downwards and all sound was deadened except their footsteps in the thin soil covering the rock floor. The decline got steeper.

"There be no sign of a rockfall," said Autumn, her voice slightly muffled.

"I wonder if the spiders have breeched the entrance yet," said Logan, glancing back yet again.

"Mayhap," said Autumn, "but in a passage this narrow it will be easy to defend ourselves. I wager no more than two at a time, unlike outside where we were surrounded."

Logan changed his grip on Autumn's staff so he could stab with it as there was not the height in the passage to swing it overhead. The passage curved sharply to the left then, a few paces on, back to the right.

"I am losing my sense of direction," said Logan. "Are we heading back towards the lake or towards the outside of the volcano?"

"I think we are staying inside the rim," said Autumn. "Aside from these three sharp turns have you noticed there is a slight curve to the passage? I wager it runs around the lake and is going deeper. Mayhap we will end up inside the heart of the volcano."

"That be a very long way down," said Logan. "It took us the best part of a day to climb straight up the outside so if we are going down in circles it could take a lifetime and I wager there is no way out at the end."

“Would you prefer to go back?” asked Autumn. She stopped walking and turned to look at him. “I confess I am being driven more through curiosity than good sense. Perhaps it would be better to return to the cave and wait for dawn.”

“What about the spiders?” asked Logan.

“I do not think they can eat the rock,” said Autumn, “so if they manage to move a rock or two we can simply move them back.”

“And what if they do not go away at dawn?” asked Logan. “We could be trapped in here forever.”

“Forever is a very long time,” said Autumn, “and as we have no food or water we will probably not live overly long anyway.”

“So the choices are to go back and be eaten by spiders, go back and starve to death or go forward to meet Voqev knows what and mayhap get eaten or starved anyway,” said Logan. “Which be quickest do you think?”

“For one who has been to the Land of the Undead and returned you do have a bleak outlook on life,” said Autumn cheerfully. “Come, let us move on. What is behind us is known and bad whereas what lies ahead is unknown and may be good. The odds favour us.”

She turned and marched on again. Logan watched her go then ran after her.

“Thinking about it,” he said, “if the spiders come out in the day we would probably have seen them earlier. I wager they will go at dawn or soon after.”

“Quite possibly,” said Autumn, “although I venture it will be tiresome to sit in that cave listening to the spiders struggling to get in and waiting for when they do. What say you we continue to explore until we judge it to be the middle of the night then make our way back?”

“You really do want to keep going, do you not,” said Logan, glancing back again.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I have a feeling that there be something ahead. It draws me on although if you strongly desire to return, we shall.”

“I have a strong desire to be elsewhere entirely,” said Logan, “and as neither going forward nor going back will take me there, I will follow you, as always.”

“Ahh, you are indeed a philosopher,” said Autumn. “Here is a thought to occupy you while we walk.”

“What is that?” asked Logan.

“Do you think this passage has been dug?” asked Autumn.

“What?” exclaimed Logan, stopping.

“It has remained the same height and width since we left the cave,” said Autumn, continuing to walk. Logan scampered after her. “Which would seem most remarkable if water or the movement of the rocks has made it.”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan. “Now you have given me something new to worry about. So you think we are in a tunnel dug by giant moles or worms?”

He stopped again as a memory came to him.

“There were paintings of worms in Urbil's cave,” he said hurrying forward. “Do you remember? Those long white winding things?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but I wager this tunnel was not made by a worm. Worms make circular tunnels and this be much higher than it is wide. Besides, can worms make tunnels in rock? I think not.”

“Mayhap giant rock eating worms can,” said Logan. “Oh no, do you think it was them spiders that made this?”

“No,” said Autumn. “If it were they would have made light work of the rocks we put in the entrance. No, I think this was made by people.”

“People?” said Logan, stopping in astonishment. He ran forward again to catch up with Autumn, vowing not to stop again. “Why do you think people?”

“Tis a comfortable height and width for people,” she said then stopped suddenly and Logan bumped into her.

“Why have you stopped?” he asked.

“Because I have found proof this were made by people,” she said. “There are steps here.”

Chapter Fourteen

Logan peered over Autumn's shoulder at the steps and pursed his lips, trying to think of something intelligent to say. Nothing came to mind.

"They may not be human made," said Autumn after looking at the steps for a while, "but they look to be of a size that would fit a human."

She went down two of the steps to illustrate her point.

"I venture they be made a long time ago too," she said. "They be worn and not fresh and there be no footprints in the dust."

"So whoever uses them has not been here for a long time," said Logan with a slight edge of relief. "How far down do they go?"

"Beyond the light," said Autumn, peering down the steps.

She looked round for a stone to toss but there were none. Logan sighed.

"I do not know why," he said, trying to keep his voice as though discussing what to have to eat, "but finding steps inside a passage makes me anxious. Very anxious."

"It should make you less anxious, not more," said Autumn. "If the passage was made deliberately then the fact that it was by people like us should be reassuring. 'Tis less likely that we will come across unpleasant surprises and if we do meet any of the makers 'tis likely we will be able to talk with them."

She sat down on the step and squeezed against the wall as Logan sat next to her. They both stared down the steps.

"But I understand your meaning," she said after a long pause. "'Tis a worry and no mistake. There is something about this being cut for some purpose that is disquieting and makes me wonder what lies ahead."

“Are you still of a mind to keep going?” asked Logan.

Autumn thought for a moment.

“Aye,” she said. “I still have a feeling of being called forward but if you say to go back I will go with you. These steps make me more wary of continuing.”

Logan nodded and sat there silently. Autumn glanced at him but his face was blank.

“I am unable to decide,” he said after a while. “My heart says to go forward and my belly says to go back and my mind says to not stay here. 'Tis a quandary.”

He tapped Autumn's staff on the step below their feet a few times then the step below that.

“Have you any more thoughts?” he asked. “My mind is blank.”

“Only one,” said Autumn, “and it does not help with the quandary.”

“Oh?” said Logan. “That be unlike you. I have never met anyone as full of thoughts as you. What be your thought?”

“'Tis only that we have come a long way through this passage,” said Autumn, “but the air is still fresh.”

“Mayhap there be another entrance further along,” said Logan, tapping the staff idly again.

“Then I would expect some movement to the air,” said Autumn, “but I feel none.”

“Perhaps there is no wind outside tonight,” said Logan.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “So, what shall it be? Go forward or go back?”

Logan tapped the staff against the roof of the passage.

“Oh Sploop, I know not,” he muttered. “What say you we let Chershoe guide us?”

“How?” asked Autumn.

“Like this,” he said, laying the staff on the steps. He let go and watched as it slid down the steps into the darkness. After a long pause there was a dull thunk as the staff hit something.

“Best we go get it,” he said standing up. “Come on.”

* * *

“That was eighty seven steps,” said Logan when they found Autumn’s staff. “It be a long way back up again.”

The steps had ended at a sharp bend in the passage and the staff had slid into the wall and stopped.

“I think there is a glow down there,” said Autumn, peering along the passage. “Fiau, could you stop the light, please.”

Obediently Logan’s staff stopped burning and they plunged into darkness. There was definitely a faint glow coming from the side further along.

“Interesting,” said Autumn. “If that be an entrance, why is it glowing? It is still night surely.”

She glanced behind her at Logan.

“I wonder what that is,” she said, more curious than alarmed.

Logan jerked around, Autumn’s staff clattering noisily against the rock wall and knocking itself out of his hand.

“What is ..., ohh, 'tis some sort of blue light,” he said. “I did not see it when we passed.”

“Nor I,” said Autumn.

She turned to look at the glow then back at the blue light while Logan felt around for the staff then brushed past him.

“How strange,” she said. “It seems to be hanging in mid air.”

She moved her hand behind the flame which sat about neck high in the middle of the passage. She could see her palm lit very faintly with a blue light.

“It looks like a candle flame,” said Logan, brushing his hand underneath it, “cepting it be blue and there be no candle, but it has the shape and shades of colour.”

He prodded the flame and it skipped backwards to avoid his finger. He held his other hand behind the flame and prodded it again. This time it went sideways to miss his hand.

“Be it some sort of firefly?” asked Autumn.

“I cannot see anything in it,” said Logan, peering closely at it. “It looks to be just a flame. There is no wick or anything. 'Tis just a flame with nothing to burn.”

Autumn blew at the flame and it flickered and bent but stayed where it was. She slowly put her hand over the top of it.

“I feel no heat,” she said, lowering her hand.

The flame let her hand approach then dropped, keeping her palm a knuckle width away. She slowly brought up her other hand and the flame eased itself to the side. Then she made a sudden grab and the flame leapt out of the way.

“I suppose we could have walked past it,” said Autumn, a little dubiously. “The light from the staff must have drowned it. I wonder how long it has been here.”

“I think I may have seen it before,” said Logan. “Two or three times when I have looked back I thought I saw something blue but I just thought it was something in the rock catching the light.”

“Really?” said Autumn frowning. “I wonder if there be several or if this one has been following us?”

“You do not suppose it be the spirit of one of those spiders?” asked Logan, staring up the steps. “Mayhap it be following us to report where we go and the spiders will come to find us again.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but I wager we have little to fear from the spiders, They are easily defeated and in this passage they cannot overwhelm us with their numbers.”

She held up her hand beside the flame.

“Tis half the size of my thumb,” she said. “Let us move on and see if it follows us and if it does, whether it gets any bigger or changes colour. For certain it seems to offer us no harm although there may be some magic going on here.”

She moved towards the glow from up ahead and Logan followed. The blue flame stayed where it was, for a while, then followed. This part of the passage was flat and the glow got brighter as they approached.

“It is following us,” said Logan, glancing behind.

“Ignore it until it does something,” said Autumn. “The glow is coming from an entrance or another passage.”

Logan flapped his hand at the flame and it stopped then moved forward again when he turned away. Cautiously Autumn paused just before where the glow was coming from and peered around.

“What is it?” whispered Logan.

“Twould seem to be a lit cavern,” whispered back Autumn.

She stepped around the corner into the cavern so Logan followed.

It was, indeed, a cavern, of sorts. It was several times wider than the passage and half a body length higher. The walls, floor and roof seemed to be as smooth as those of the passage but they all glowed

with a white light. It was otherwise empty.

Up close the light from the wall was dim and seemed to have a dark greenness behind it but, taken as a whole, the cavern was lit well enough to see. Autumn ran a finger along the wall and inspected the tip but it was unaffected.

“Mayhap it be some sort of algae,” she said, “such as in a pond or some such, although it does not come off. The wall feels like rock.”

They stood there for a few moments looking around but, apart from the glow, the cavern was remarkably uninteresting.

“The passage continues at the far end,” said Autumn. “Let us see where it leads to.”

She started to walk across the cavern and stumbled. She righted herself.

“That was strange,” she said, looking puzzled. “It felt like the ground moved. Did you feel anything?”

She looked at Logan who was standing with his legs braced and his arms held out as if to balance himself.

“Yes,” he said, looking as puzzled as Autumn did. “It felt like I was pulled to one ... oof.”

He landed on the back of his shoulders with a thump.

“Owww,” he exclaimed and sat up, rubbing his head.

Autumn was lying on the floor a little further ahead. She, too, sat up.

“What happened?” she asked, looking round. “Why did we both fall? Was it another tremor?”

“I did not feel the ground move,” said Logan. “’Twas more like I fell upwards than downwards, if that makes sense.”

Autumn jumped nimbly to her feet and picked up both the staffs.

“Did you hurt yourself?” she asked, holding out a hand to help Logan up.

“A small bump, nothing more,” said Logan, hoisting himself up. “Is it my imagination or has something changed in here?”

“It looks as it did before to me,” said Autumn, looking around, then she froze. “When we came in was there a step?”

“No,” said Logan. “The floor of the passage opened onto the floor of the cavern.”

Autumn pointed at the entrance. There was now a drop from the passage to the floor of the cavern.

“Sploop,” said Logan going over to feel it. “Did the floor give way?”

“There be no cracks or scrapes on the walls,” said Autumn, “and I heard nothing. It be right strange for rock to fall silently.” She looked up at the roof. “And it be right strange for the whole cavern to fall, not just the floor.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

“Look at the roof of the cavern,” said Autumn. “It is now level with the entrance and not some way above it.”

“Is it just this entrance or is it the other one as well?” asked Logan.

“I do not remember how the other one was,” said Autumn. “Only that there was another at the far end.”

“The blue flame followed us in,” said Logan.

“Has it got any bigger?” asked Autumn, walking through the cavern towards the other entrance.

“No,” said Logan, “but it looks strange.”

“In what way?” asked Autumn, stopping to look back.

“I am not sure,” said Logan. “Come and see.”

Autumn came back and looked at the flame which sat in mid air, showing no sign of wanting to go anywhere else. It flickered gently the way candle flames do.

“It is upside-down,” said Autumn in surprise. “Did you see that flicker? The bottom moved and the top stayed still.”

“Aye,” said Logan. He blew on the flame and it flickered again, upside-down.

“I am baffled,” he said. “I know not what to think.”

“Nor I,” said Autumn. She looked at the flame and gave it a little flick with her finger and it darted backwards, out of reach. “Hmm.”

She walked back towards the far entrance and Logan followed. There was a sudden blow to the side of his head and shoulder and his body crumpled.

“I fell over again,” he thought irritably to himself, lying cheek down on the floor.

His head, shoulder and hip hurt. He rolled over and sat up. Autumn was sitting up as well, rubbing the side of her head.

“I fell over,” she said, a little embarrassed.

“So did I,” said Logan. He rotated his shoulder and gave it a rub then stood up and rubbed his hip then rolled his head on his neck to ease the pain there.

“What?” he exclaimed, catching sight of the entrance.

Autumn leapt to her feet and grabbed her staff, instantly ready to do battle.

“What is it?” she hissed, looking round and walking backwards in a circle on the balls of her feet.

“Look at the passage,” said Logan

“Vallume!” said Autumn and straightened up.

The entrance to the passage was now going across the cavern, not up and down. The other entrance was the same.

“How can this be?” asked Logan incredulously. “I accept that it be possible for the ground to sink but how can this be?”

“I know not,” said Autumn, scowling. “Here, catch.”

She tossed her staff to Logan and it bounced off him and clattered on the ground.

“Look at the flame,” he stuttered, pointing.

The flame was now burning sideways. Autumn looked at it then at the entrance then back at the flame.

“That be interesting,” she said. “Do you see that the flame be burning from the flat part of the entrance over to the step? 'Tis the same direction as would be up if the entrance were the right way round.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “what of it?”

“I am not sure,” admitted Autumn, “but I find it interesting.”

She kept looking at the flame then over at the entrance then marched over to the entrance and studied the wall there closely.

“You are thinking about something,” said Logan, joining her. “What is it?”

“I be thinking about a pig carcass roasting on a spit,” she said, poking with her fingernail where the wall with the entrance in it met the wall of the cavern.

“Aye, I be hungry too,” said Logan.

“You are always hungry,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “but that be not why I am thinking of a pig on a spit.”

“Oh,” said Logan. He rubbed his shoulder again.

“Imagine you are inside the pig when someone turns the spit,” said Autumn, poking her fingernail further along. “What would it be like?”

“This is no time for riddle games,” said Logan. “I think we should leave here quickly. It is getting too strange for my taste.”

“Perhaps you are right,” said Autumn. “The edge seems to be solid.”

“It is rock,” said Logan. “Why would it not be solid?”

“’Twas just a notion I had,” said Autumn. “What if this cavern were like a pig on a spit with us inside? What if someone rotated it? Would we not fall around and the flames of the fire seem to change places?”

Logan stared at her.

“You mean you think this cavern is spinning?” he asked.

“’Twas just a notion,” said Autumn. “The walls seem to be solidly joined. I do not see how the cavern could rotate without crumbling or cracking these end walls.”

“I have a notion of my own,” said Logan. “’Tis going to be difficult to move along the passage now. We will have to walk on our sides.”

Autumn looked at the entrance which now lay sideways.

“Aye,” she said. “But think how much easier those steps are going to be as they are not going upwards anymore.”

“A good point,” said Logan. He bent to pick up Autumn’s staff. “So you are happy to go back to the lake now? I wager at least half the night be over so the spiders will probably be gone by the time we get

there.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “This trip be turning out more odd than I expected. Let us go back.”

They both fell over again.

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan. “My head is not liking this one little bit.”

“Nor mine,” said Autumn, climbing to her feet. She rubbed her shoulder and winced slightly. “The sooner we be gone from here the better.”

“Look,” said Logan, “the entrance seems to be the right way up again. And so is the flame. Do you think this all be over now?”

“We have no way of knowing,” said Autumn. “Let us leave while the passage is the right way up.”

She picked up the staffs and handed hers to Logan.

“Can we have a light, please, Fiau?” she asked.

Logan's staff burst into flame.

“At least Fiau is still cooperative,” she said. “Come on.”

She headed for the entrance then stopped and looked back.

“I have lost my bearings,” she said. “Which one did we come in?”

“Umm,” said Logan, looking from one to the other. “They both look the same. I do not know.”

Autumn disappeared into thought then shook her head. “No, I cannot remember exactly every movement since we came in here,” she said. “It could be either.”

“Why not look for our footprints in the passages?” said Logan. “I do not think either of us actually went into the other passage.”

“Ahh, good thinking,” said Autumn. She went over to the closer entrance and peered at the ground. “There be no footprints here,” she said then frowned. “But there are none inside the cavern either. Hmm, mayhap all this spinning and what not has settled the dust again.”

Logan followed her as she took the burning staff to the other entrance.

“No, there are none here either,” she said. “That be strange.”

“Why?” asked Logan.

“’Twas the cavern that did strange things,” said Autumn, “not the passages. No matter. We came down the steps and it was but a short distance to the cavern so if we do not find the steps going upwards very quickly we are in the wrong passage.”

“Unless there be steps upwards at both ends,” said Logan.

“’Tis a risk we will have to take,” said Autumn. “We are at this entrance so shall we try it first or would you prefer the other?”

“This one,” said Logan. “Lead on.”

Autumn stepped through the entrance and turned in the direction the steps should be and walked along the passage, the staff held out in front of her.

“The blue flame is following us,” reported Logan a few moments later.

“Is it still the right way up?” asked Autumn.

Logan stopped and let the flame catch up.

“Yes,” he said.

“This is something at any rate,” said Autumn. “By my reckoning the steps should be just about here.”

“Let us go on a little further,” said Logan. “I be sure they are not far.”

Twenty paces further along Autumn stopped.

"This be the wrong passage," she said. "We will go back and try the other."

They walked back. After forty paces Autumn stopped.

"Fiau, could you stop the light, please," she said.

The staff went out and the passage plunged into darkness, save the small blue flame.

"There is no glow from the cavern," said Autumn, looking in both directions. "It is completely black in here."

"Mayhap we walked past it without noticing," said Logan, reaching out to touch Autumn in the pitch darkness. "Mayhap Fiau be a little brighter this time."

"Perhaps," said Autumn. "Did you just touch me or was it something else?"

"That was me," said Logan.

"Thank Vallume for that," said Autumn. "The touch made me nervous."

"Sorry," said Logan. "I just wanted to be sure you were there, even if the cavern was not."

"So," said Autumn. "Shall we keep going this way or shall we go back and try again?"

"We came forty steps from when we last turned?" asked Logan.

"Yes," said Autumn.

"Let us go sixty steps back and see what we find," said Logan. "If we find nothing we stop and think again."

“Or shall we go on another twenty steps?” asked Autumn. “That way we will have gone sixty steps from when we turned back.”

“Does it matter?” asked Logan.

“A good question, Logan,” said Autumn. “Fiau, some light please.” The staff lit up again. “Yes it does matter if we want to get out the way we came in, but no, it does not matter because we are lost so any direction is as good as any other.”

“Hmmm,” said Logan. “I disagree. If this be the passage we came to the cavern from then we need to go back for that way lies the steps. I am certain of that.”

“But if this be the other passage,” said Autumn, “then we need to go the other way to at least be heading in the direction of the steps. If we go back we could be heading away from them.”

“There is another possibility,” said Logan.

“And what be that?” asked Autumn.

“If the cavern has disappeared,” said Logan, “then mayhap a third passage has appeared and we be in it and neither direction goes the way we want it to.”

“So which way shall we go?” asked Autumn.

“I have no idea,” said Logan. “I am completely lost. You choose.”

Autumn held the staff out in the direction they had come and studied the passage as far as she could see then turned and did the same the other way.

“This way,” she said decisively.

“Why?” asked Logan.

“I think there is something on the ground further along,” she said. “It may give us a clue.”

“Sounds like a good reason to go the other way,” said Logan. “What if it be dangerous?”

“If it were dangerous it would have done something by now,” said Autumn. “We have been standing here talking long enough for an army to go past. Come.”

She marched off up the passage and Logan slowly followed.

“Mizule,” said Autumn in surprise when she reached whatever it was.

“What is it?” asked Logan, speeding up a little.

“Tis my pack,” said Autumn, “and my robe, the water skins and your feather.”

“Your feather,” said Logan automatically. “I gave it to you, remember?”

Then he realised.

“Oh Voqev,” he said. “You know what this means, do you not?”

Chapter Fifteen

“Yes,” said Autumn. “It means we chose the right direction else we would not have found these things.”

“Yes,” said Logan, nodding. “No! That's not what I meant. I meant that big trouble lies ahead.”

“All lives have troubles,” said Autumn, “and I wager we are both too young to have an end to troubles.”

“Tis Mother Midcarn's doing,” said Logan, fidgeting his feet in the hope that would help Autumn understand. “She has returned our things twice now and both times we have ended up in dire straits.”

“Mayhap we would have ended up in those situations anyway,” said Autumn, “and there be strange things happening here. Mayhap this be someone else's magic or mayhap these things be where we left them and we only imagine we are inside a tunnel under a volcano, but two times is not enough, I think, to deduce a certain pattern.”

She lifted up her robe and something fell out.

“What was that?” she said in surprise. “Hold the staff.” She handed the staff to Logan and bent down.

“It feels like leather,” she said, straightening up. “A package of some kind, bound with a piece of twine.”

“Best not to open it,” said Logan, stepping back.

Autumn turned the package over then untied the twine.

“Tis not a package,” she said, holding up two pieces of leather. A scrap of parchment that had been between them fell to the ground. Autumn picked it up.

“I hope you find these handy, MM,” she read aloud.

“I knew it,” said Logan. “Did I not say Mother Midcarn was behind

this?"

"Indeed you did," said Autumn. "But why would she give us two leather bags?"

"They are not bags," said Logan. "Look, this bit be for a thumb. They be mittens and Mother Midcarn was making a joke."

"These mittens are a joke?" asked Autumn, frowning at him.

"No, the note is," said Logan. "She hopes you find them handy."

"I do not follow your meaning," said Autumn.

"They're mittens," said Logan patiently. "To go on your hands. That is why they are handy."

"I am sure they will be useful," said Autumn, "although I do not immediately see what for. Why is that a joke?"

"It is a play on words," said Logan. "The mittens will be useful and, at the same time, they go on your hands. That be why she said 'handy'. It be a play on two meanings for hand."

Autumn looked at him and blinked several times.

"Handy does not mean the same as hands," she said. "Are you sure this is a joke?"

"The note is a joke," said Logan, "although I wager the mittens are very serious. Mother Midcarn does not seem to give gifts for the pleasure of giving. Her other gifts have saved both our lives. That is why I suspect there is trouble in store. Mother Midcarn has seen where we are going in her Window and thinks these mittens will help save us. Or you, at any rate."

"Well, that may be the case," said Autumn, pulling on the mittens. "And I do not see a need for mittens here. 'Tis plenty warm enough."

She waved her hands around to see if anything would happen but

nothing did.

“You try them,” she said, slipping them off.

Logan pulled them on then grasped Autumn's staff. “They feel a little clumsy,” he said, “but I daresay that be because the leather is a little thick and stiff. If they were for warmth I would expect some fur inside. Still, I wager we shall discover their use when the need arises. Are they for you or for me?”

“She did not address the note to either of us,” said Autumn, rereading it. “I venture they be for both of us.”

“Shall we take turns wearing them?” asked Logan, “or shall we wear one each?”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. Her face turned even more serious than usual. “That be a right good question. Hmm.” She thought for a few moments. “I know not how to decide,” she admitted. “What are your thoughts?”

“I think sometimes you take things too seriously,” said Logan. “I was joking. Put the mittens in your pack and when the need arises one of us will say 'some mittens would be useful here'. Then we use them. That is the way with all Mother Midcarn's gifts.”

Autumn's nostrils flared briefly.

“Indeed, I think you are right,” she said.

She picked up her pack and untied the twine holding it closed then paused.

“’Twould be very useful to me if you said something to warn me when you are about to make a joke,” she said.

“You mean like 'I be only joking but ...'?” asked Logan.

“That would be perfect,” said Autumn, putting the mittens inside her pack.

“I can,” he said, “but it would lose the humour.”

“I cannot see the humour anyway,” said Autumn, “but it would be good to know when you are not being serious.”

“As you wish,” said Logan. “Umm, shall we keep going this way or turn around and go back?”

“Was that another joke?” asked Autumn, tying the twine of her pack again. “We keep going this way, of course.”

“No,” said Logan. “We have found our things so there be no need to go further this way.”

“We can debate these things until the end of time,” said Autumn. “Unless you have a good reason to choose that way let us keep going this way.”

“I am just afraid trouble lies this way,” said Logan. “Else why would Mother Midcarn have given us the mittens?”

“If she has seen us in her Window,” said Autumn, “then I wager the trouble she sees will find us no matter which way we go. I venture the time to avoid it is now past else she would not have done this. Besides, you are missing an important point.”

“What is that?” asked Logan, slinging a water skin over his shoulder.

“If Mother Midcarn has seen a need to give us aid,” said Autumn, “then whatever the trouble she foresees, she expects us to prevail, else there would be little point to her gifts. Wait while I put on my robe.”

“Why do I not find that thought comforting?” asked Logan.

“Because you still see birth and death as ends,” said Autumn, “and not as transitions.”

“If that be so,” said Logan, “why do you wear the robe that protects you from death? Surely you would welcome death as an opportunity to transition into whatever comes after?”

“I have two answers to that, Logan the Argumentative,” said Autumn. “The first be that I have no way of knowing if the ribbon on this robe will protect me the next time something happens so I must assume it will not and that my time of transition will have arrived.”

“And the second?” asked Logan.

“This robe protecting me helps me to protect you,” she said. “Come.”

* * *

They continued to follow the passage. Much of the time it continued downwards at a small angle and once they came across another set of steps going down. Only once did the passage angle up and only for a short distance.

“There be something up ahead,” said Autumn suddenly. She stopped.

“Another glow?” asked Logan tiredly.

“Not that I can see,” she said. “No, the sound of our footfalls has changed.”

“Mayhap the dust be thicker here,” said Logan.

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, “but I wager the passage gets wider ahead. There is a slight echoing now.”

“So what shall we do?” asked Logan.

“Carry on,” said Autumn. “There is nothing else to do but try to stay alert. There may be some danger.”

“I reckon 'tis not far from dawn,” said Logan. “We have been walking these passages all night.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “We will need to stop for sleep soon. I have been reluctant to stop to sleep in the passage, just as we would not sleep on a path in the woods. Mayhap what lies ahead will be a secluded space for us to sleep.”

“Chance would be a fine thing,” said Logan, “but let us carry on for now.”

They carried on. Barely seven paces ahead they came to a hole in the side of the passage. Autumn held up her hand to stop Logan and cautiously held the burning staff inside.

“’Twould seem to be a small cavern,” she said quietly.

She stepped inside and inspected the place.

“’Tis almost empty,” she said. “Come inside.”

“Almost?” said Logan, pausing in the entrance.

“There is a well in here,” said Autumn.

“A well?” said Logan. “Surely you mean an underground lake or pond or some such?”

“Come see for yourself,” said Autumn.

Puzzled, Logan walked inside. There was, indeed, a well. It was in one corner and had a built-up surround made from shaped pieces of rock.

“How strange,” he said. “Is there water in it?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “The water is about level with the floor of the cave. Someone has built this surround for some purpose.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “And I venture ‘cave’ is not the right word for this place. ’Tis shaped more like a room and fashioned. What do you think made it?”

“People,” said Autumn. “The size and shape of the passages and steps fit people and so does this room. Even the height of the well surround is a good height to sit on and scoop water from the well. ’Tis a goodly width for resting water carriers on as well. There must be people near by.”

Logan sat on the surround and scooped a handful of water to taste.

"Tis like a mountain spring," he said, "which would make sense, seeing as how this is a mountain. It must be fed by a stream under the floor."

"I wonder if the people who use this place live outside the mountain and come in to collect water or if they live inside," she said, putting her pack and water skin on the ground.

"I know not," said Logan. "Although if they be able to build these tunnels you would think they would be able to divert a stream to their village."

"Aye," said Autumn. "What say you we sleep here for a time?"

"What if someone comes?" asked Logan.

"That is what I am hoping," said Autumn, sitting on the ground with her back to the surround so she faced the entrance. "The presence of this well suggests people built it and come here for water. Mayhap someone will come along to collect some and will be able to tell us how to get out of here."

"What if they are dangerous?" asked Logan.

"Tis a risk we face with any strangers," said Autumn, "and no doubt any who come here will wonder the same about us. I confess I grow weary of walking through this passage endlessly and I welcome the opportunity to get out."

"Aye," said Logan. "I am the same."

He dumped his water skin beside Autumn's and propped her staff beside her then sat down.

"I will feel more optimistic after some sleep," he said with a jaw cracking yawn. "Shall we take turns?"

"It would be sensible," said Autumn, "but the darkness and silence

will make it difficult to stay awake. Mayhap it would be best to get what sleep we can and be better able to face any dangers that come along rather than try to anticipate them.”

“Aye,” said Logan, lying down. “I wager you will hear or smell anyone as come along. Shall we put out the light?”

“Fiau, turn off the light, please,” said Autumn.

“The blue flame is still with us,” said Logan after the room had gone dark.

“That is a comfort,” said Autumn.

“Why?” asked Logan.

“We have been down here a long time,” said Autumn, “and it has done us no harm.”

“That be but small comfort,” said Logan. “mayhap it is waiting for us to go to sleep.”

“Then watch it,” said Autumn. “Wake me if it attacks.”

* * *

Autumn woke some time later to a sharp intake of breath. She opened her eyes to find the room dimly lit.

“Well met,” said a girl's voice.

She sounded curious and not unfriendly. Autumn rolled over and sat up. There was a young woman, perhaps similar in age to herself, standing beside the well surround. She had something small in her hand which gave off a glow.

“Hello,” said Autumn. She nudged Logan who snored and curled himself more tightly. “My name is Autumn Savannah. This be Logan, we are strangers here.”

“I be Bronea,” said Bronea. “I know you be strangers. I know everyone here.”

“Ahh, good,” said Autumn. She nudged Logan again and he sighed then giggled. “Please excuse my companion. We have walked a long way and he was most tired. Where is here?”

“This is our well,” said Bronea. She put the object down on the surround and sat beside it. “Have water if you desire some.”

“Thank you,” said Autumn. “Umm, we entered a passage at the top of Wut'qiui. Are we far from there?”

“Wut'qiui?” said Bronea. “My, you have come a long way. We are in the heart of Owilausco. You must have been walking for days. Why did you come here?”

“No, it has been less than a night,” said Autumn. “At least I think it is night, or early morning. Is it dawn yet?”

“What is dawn?” asked Bronea.

“Oh, umm, has Astauand risen?” asked Autumn.

“Astauand? We know no false gods here,” said Bronea, frowning. “Are you heathen?”

“I am of Mizule and Vallume,” said Autumn.

Bronea spat on the floor and crossed herself. Then she brightened.

“Ahh, I understand now,” she said. “You have come in search of enlightenment.”

“I am indeed in search of knowledge and understanding,” said Autumn cautiously.

“That is good,” said Bronea happily. “I will take you and your companion to my mother. She will enlighten you. She be Sviatar Halava.”

“Thank you,” said Autumn.

She held Logan's nose and he jerked awake then sat up and stared at Bronea uncomprehendingly.

“Wha'?” he said.

“This is Bronea,” said Autumn. “She lives here and she is going to take us to see her mother.”

“That be right,” said Bronea. “I will fill this pot first. A moment.”

She dipped her bucket in the water then stood up.

“Follow me,” she said picking up her light.

Blearily Logan followed Autumn who followed Bronea.

“Where are we going?” he whispered.

“To meet this girl's mother,” whispered back Autumn.

Logan yawned and rubbed his eyes. “Well, she seems human enough,” he said. “I wonder if her mother has any food?”

“Are you hungry?” asked Bronea, glancing back. “It be almost eating time. You be welcome to join us.”

“Thank you,” said Autumn. “Can I ask what that object in your hand is?”

“It be a lamp,” said Bronea. “You do not know what lamps are?”

“We use rush or wood torches,” said Autumn. “How does a lamp work?”

“It is a cup of oil,” said Bronea, “with a piece of cloth in it that burns.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “Where does the oil come from?”

“Mor'upita-sehen,” said Bronea. “Here we are.”

She stepped into another room, lit by several lamps. It was clearly a dwelling room as there were seats and a low table although the walls were decorated with mottled patches of deep red and black. A middle aged man stared in astonishment.

“I found strangers at the well,” said Bronea. “This be my father, Osk. These be Autumn and Logan, father.”

“Well met,” said Osk, “umm.”

He stood up and pointed his elbow at Logan then looked puzzled when Logan looked puzzled.

“You be not elbowing me?” he asked gruffly.

He started to look offended.

“Ahh, sorry,” said Logan, pointing his elbow at Osk. “We are strangers here.”

Osk banged his elbow against Logan's then nodded and pointed his elbow at Autumn who immediately touched it with hers. Osk smiled.

“You sit,” he said, waving his hand at the three stools.

“Bronea, that you be?” came a voice from another room. “What kept you so long?”

“Yes, mother,” called back Bronea. “Come out here, we have guests.”

“So early?” grumbled the voice and a stern looking woman appeared, wiping her hands on a cloth. “Oh!”

“Well met, Sviatar Halava,” said Autumn. “I am Autumn and this is Logan. We are strangers here and we thank you and your family for your hospitality.”

“My name be Juawau,” said Juawau, accepting the situation quickly.

“You be most welcome here. Will you take food with us?”

She pointed her elbow at Logan who self consciously touched it with his.

“Umm, we would be delighted to take food with you,” he said.

Juawau nodded. “Bronea, get some dishes.”

“They are from Wut'qiui,” said Bronea taking her bucket of water into the other room.

“Wut'qiui?” said Osk. “That is a long way. Why are outsiders coming here to see us?”

“Twas an accident,” said Autumn. “We were spending the night by the lake in Wut'qiui and were attacked and hid in a cave. We explored the cave and found a passage and got lost. Bronea found us beside your well.”

“Who attacked you?” asked Juawau, looking concerned.

“Umm, some spiders,” said Autumn.

“You are scared of spiders?” said Osk. “What did you expect if you sleep in the open beside a lake?”

“They were very big,” said Logan, self-defensively.

Juawau frowned. “How big?” she asked.

Logan held up his hands to show them how big, not exaggerating by too much.

“Be that so?” asked Juawau, raising an eyebrow a little sceptically.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “There be many hundreds of them and they had six legs and jaws like horns which went sideways not up and down.”

“What colour were they?” asked Juawau, glancing at Osk.

“It was twilight,” said Autumn, “but they seemed to be white, or near white. They looked ghostly.”

Juawau nodded and pursed her lips. “This was at Wut'qiui?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Do you know of these creatures?”

“I will get food,” said Juawau and got up. “Do you like kawa?”

“I do not know what kawa is?” said Autumn.

“Tis eggs cooked with vony,” said Juawau and disappeared into the other room.

“What is vony?” asked Logan.

“Tis a moss that grows in these parts,” said Osk. “Tis most flavoursome.”

“I am sure it is delicious,” said Autumn. “So do you live here in these caves?”

“This is not a cave,” said Osk, frowning a little. “We be too deep below topside for that.”

Bronea appeared carrying some bowls and spoons with Juawau close behind with a cauldron. Bronea put the bowls on the table and Juawau ladled out the kawa.

“Thank you,” said Logan, sniffing his. It smelt a little fishy and had bluish purple lumps in it.

“What be these?” he asked, fishing out a lump with his spoon.

“That be the vony,” said Osk, swallowing a mouthful of the gruel.

Logan watched Autumn swallow a mouthful. She grimaced slightly then smiled.

“Tis delicious,” she said. “Although the texture is a little unusual. Is it

made with chicken eggs?”

Logan half filled his spoon and peered at it. The kawa was watery with small round white things in it, as well as the bluey-purple lumps.

“No,” said Juawau, “these be aciui eggs.”

“What are aciui?” asked Logan, putting the spoon in his mouth.

The kawa tasted a little of fish with a slightly sharp, hot edge to it.

“They be those things you thought were spiders,” said Osk.

Chapter Sixteen

Quietly Logan squeezed his mouthful of gruel back onto the spoon and put it in his bowl, trying not to retch. Autumn's face took on a very philosophical look and she paused, looking at her bowl, while Juawau, Osk and Bronea had several more mouthfuls. Her face took on a set expression and she slowly took another mouthful although it was several moments before she swallowed.

"Is it not to your taste?" asked Bronea, noticing Logan's bowl was still full.

"No, it be delightful," said Logan, hurriedly, "but I am not hungry," and he pushed his bowl a little further away.

"'Tis my philosophy to eat when you can for you know not when you might be eating again," said Osk, pushing the bowl back towards Logan. "Come, lad. A growing boy like you needs all the food he can eat."

"'Tis a good philosophy," said Logan, pushing the bowl away again. "But, you see, I, umm, unfortunately, as this is a surpassingly good dish, umm, I have a minor belly upset and, umm, well, yes."

"Then eat this all and have more," said Juawau, pushing his bowl forward. "Aciui eggs be a perfect remedy for ills of the belly and they be keeping you regular. There be plenty more in the cauldron."

She stirred the gruel in the cauldron and added another spoonful to Logan's bowl.

"And we cannot let the neighbours think we are not hospitable," she added, with a smile. "'Twould be a grievous insult to be inhospitable to a guest and likewise for the guest to refuse."

"Oh Sploop," muttered Logan, looking imploringly at Autumn.

"This is very like the porridge we had in Uli-Rratha," she said, "made with crushed oats. 'Twould not be hard to imagine them to be the same."

“Crushed oats,” said Logan with an air of desperation. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes then thrust his spoon into his mouth and swallowed convulsively. His shudder was almost undetectable.

“There is a nice big piece of vony,” said Autumn, leaning over and pointing with the end of her spoon at a particularly purple looking lump. “Turn off your mind and swallow the stuff,” she whispered urgently then sat back and smiled at the others.

“Ahh, no more,” she said when Juawau offered her more. “I am of small build and eat little, but thank you most kindly. Tell me, what are aciui? Osk said they are what we thought were spiders.”

“Aciui be what we farm,” said Osk. “When our ancestors came to this place they found many spiders here but spiders are not good eating as they be mostly mush inside. They found a way to cross spiders with ants and we be breeding them bigger and bigger.”

“Are not ants mostly mush inside as well?” asked Autumn.

“No, girl,” said Osk. “Ants be full of muscle, that be why they are so strong. Only problem is they be tiny. A steak from an ant be so small you cannot be seeing it.”

“So breeding the ants with the spiders produced bigger ants?” asked Autumn. She noticed Logan trying to surreptitiously push his bowl away again and kicked him under the table.

“Aye,” said Osk. “Took a lot of breeding but our aciui look like spiders but be built like ants. That be why they have only the six legs but still, we are only the three of us so one aciui gives us a leg each twice. If you still be here come the main meal you be in for a right treat.”

“Well that is something to look forward to, is it not, Logan,” said Autumn brightly.

Logan nodded unhappily. The dark red reflections from the walls gave his face a sickly pallor. Grimly he forced in another mouthful of gruel, which was starting to cool and beginning to congeal into something rather slimy.

“There be something that puzzles me, I must confess,” said Juawau, “although I am reluctant to be seeming rude.”

“What puzzles you, Juawau?” asked Autumn.

“You said you be walking all night,” said Juawau, “and that you got into the passage at Wut’qiui?”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“There be my puzzle,” said Juawau. “Wut’qiui be eight mayhap ten days travel away. How did you get here so fast?”

“Mayhap it was not Wut’qiui,” said Autumn. “We are strangers here and know not the names of these mountains. Mayhap we were misinformed.”

“Ahh, that could be the way of it,” said Osk. “I thought it strange you be running from aciui at Wut’qiui. There be none of them that far away.”

“Then it could not have been Wut’qiui,” said Autumn. “We met a man who drew a map for us but he could have made mistakes. If I show you this map would you correct the errors on it?”

“We would be most willing,” said Juawau. “Bronea, clear the table and bring another lamp. Maps be needing good light.”

“Yes, mother,” said Bronea, standing up. She collected the bowls and sniffed rather audibly when she saw Logan’s was still half full but said nothing.

“Tis in my pack,” said Autumn, rising. Her belly felt distinctly uneasy but she quelled it.

“Another thing that puzzles me,” said Juawau, “as you do not appear to be offended by my questions, is how you found us in the dark. No matter where you entered, there be many passages braiding this place and yet you came unerringly to us.”

“That be not so,” said Autumn, picking up her pack and bringing it over. “’Twould have been unerring if you had been our destination but you were not. We followed but a single passage and found ourselves here but arriving here was not out intent. We did not know anyone lived here.”

“There is no passage from the outside that comes right here,” said Juawau. “From the closest entry you would need to take eight forks at least.”

“No,” said Osk, leaning back against the wall and crossing his arms. “Six surely. If they be coming in from Voterm they could have gone left at the farm and down to Grenna’s and followed that passage.”

“Oh yes,” said Juawau, “I had forgotten that way. ’Tis little used though, how would they know about it?”

“We did not know about it,” said Autumn, sitting down with her pack on her lap.

“I still do not see how you could have made the right turns in the dark,” said Juawau.

“’Twas not dark,” said Logan. “We had a torch but for certain we saw no forks in the passage. ’Twas but a single passage all the way save at the cavern soon after we entered.”

“Which cavern was that?” asked Osk. “There be many hundreds of caverns.”

“We know not,” said Autumn. “Although it was a strange cavern as there was an entrance at each end and the walls glowed.”

“The walls glowed?” said Osk. “I know of no cavern where the walls glow. Do you, Juawau?”

“No,” said Juawau, frowning. “That be right strange. Do you think you could find your way back there? I would most dearly like to see a cavern that glowed.”

"I know not," said Logan. "It should be easy. Just follow the passage from your well back the way we came but when we left the cavern and tried to find it again it had gone."

Osk laughed. "Caverns be not moving," he said. "You must have taken a wrong turn going back. 'Tis easily done if you do not know the way, especially in the dark."

"We had a torch," said Logan insistently. "We saw no forks or joins. 'Twas just the one passage all the way."

"Oh well, no matter," said Osk. "Where be this map?"

Autumn opened her pack and brought out the piece of bark Urbil had drawn on.

"We were here," she said, pointing to Veobad, "and we were heading for Dotuke and decided to go up to the top. We had never seen the inside of a volcano before."

Osk and Juawau poured over the map.

"You came in near Dotuke?" asked Osk, scratching his head.

"Aye," said Autumn. "Which mountain would it have been?"

"Wut'qiui, right enough," said Osk. "This map be right. Are you sure it were Dotuke?"

"We never got to Dotuke," said Autumn, "but we were definitely in Veobad and reached the lake in Wut'qiui with a half day walking."

"I confess I do not understand how you managed to get here in a night," said Osk, sounding disbelieving. "You went down through Wut'qiui, under the river, through Sar'taube and got to the far side of Owilausco? 'Tis beyond my belief. If it were me I would plan on ten days although mayhap I could do it in seven if I pushed myself."

"I suppose it could have been longer," said Autumn. "We definitely went inside the cave in Wut'qiui at twilight but I know not what the

time is now for I have not seen Astauand since.”

“Do not mention that name in here,” said Juawau, crossing herself. “We know no false gods here.”

“I apologise,” said Autumn. “As I say, we are strangers here and know not your customs. What do you call the thing that lights the sky outside?”

“I have not been outside,” said Juawau. “I was born inside and will die inside.”

“Be not so harsh, Juawau,” said Osk. “They are outsiders and need names for things that are outside. Astauand be what the people of Voterm call that which lights their sky. It be only a god if they want it to be.”

“Mor'upita-sehen be the only true god,” said Juawau firmly.

“That be true,” said Osk, “but them as is outside be not knowing that. I be going to Voterm sometimes for trading,” he added for Autumn and Logan's benefit.

“If you will forgive me for asking,” said Autumn, “but why do you live underground?”

“To be one with God,” said Juawau.

Autumn raised an eyebrow in silent enquiry.

“Many generations ago our ancestors came here to be with Mor'upita-sehen,” explained Osk. “They lived and thrived here although now our numbers be declining.”

“Why is that?” asked Autumn.

“Because of the food, I wager,” muttered Logan quietly to himself.

“Oh, there be reasons,” said Osk, vaguely.

“They be faithless, fickle and false-hearted,” said Juawau, clearly annoyed.

“There now,” said Osk, patting her arm. “Calm yourself.”

“Umm,” said Autumn, wondering how to ask why Juawau was upset.

“She be Sviatar Halava,” said Osk, divining her question.

“That is what Bronea said,” said Autumn. “I apologise again for my ignorance. I thought that was your name but 'twould appear I be wrong.”

“She be one of the three,” said Osk.

“Hah,” snorted Juawau and gave Osk a look filled with daggers.

“Yes, well,” said Osk, “hmm. Tell me, Autumn. You say you came into the passages unexpectedly because you were being chased by aciui yet you had torches to light your way all this distance. How be it possible you were able to carry so many torches? I wager you would have needed a hundred or more.”

“We used my staff,” said Logan.

“I have been trying my hardest to believe you thus far,” said Juawau, “but this I cannot believe. Look at your staffs, only one be having a burn and that be small.”

“It be a special staff,” said Logan proudly. “It burns forever!”

Autumn sighed and Osk snorted. Juawau just looked pained.

“Shall I show them?” asked Logan, looking at Autumn.

“I suppose you must,” said Autumn, “as you have brought it up.”

Logan got up and fetched his staff.

“Fiau, can we have a light, please?” he asked.

The staff did not react. It remained staff-like and inert. Osk sniggered.

“Fiau?” asked Logan, his face turning redder than it had been from the reflection from the wall. “Fiau, are you there?”

He gave the staff a shake.

“Umm, it be not working,” he said. “I wonder why.”

He looked pleadingly at Autumn who shrugged.

“I think we best be getting Qaate,” said Juawau, looking at Osk.

“Aye,” said Osk, nodding.

“Who is Qaate?” asked Autumn.

“She is our chief,” said Osk. “She will decide what to do with you.”

“Do with us?” said Logan, jerking his head up from looking at his staff. “Why do you need to do anything with us?”

“We know not why you are here,” said Osk, “and nothing you say makes any sense. Be Bronea still here?”

“Bronea?” called Juawau.

“Yes, mother?” said Bronea, appearing at the entrance.

“Be a good girl and go find Qaate and ask her to come here,” said Juawau, not taking her eyes off Autumn.

“Be it urgent?” asked Bronea, “only I be ...”

“It is urgent,” said Osk. “Be off with you, girl.”

“Yes, father,” said Bronea.

There were some suppressed giggles from outside after Bronea disappeared that suggested she had been busy with a friend.

“We mean you no harm,” said Autumn. “’Twas as we say and we do not know the meaning of it either.”

“There have been some sightings and oddities ...,” began Osk but Juawau shushed him.

“Most likely they already know,” she cautioned. “Best not to tell them what we know or suspect. Mayhap they will try to change their story.”

“I do not see how,” said Osk.

“Wait for Qaate,” said Juawau.

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “Can I put away my map?”

Juawau nodded so Autumn opened her pack and took out the mittens to put the bark at the bottom.

“What be these?” asked Osk, picking them up.

Mother Midcarn's note fluttered onto the table.

“They be mittens,” said Autumn. “Covering for hands.”

“What be they made of?” asked Osk, inspecting them.

“They be leather,” said Autumn. “Made from the hide of a cow.”

“Ahh,” said Osk. “I have heard of such things. We make our own from the hides of aciui, but these feel much stronger. What do you think, Juawau? Shall I get some of this cow hide next time I am in Voterm?”

“They are not of Mor'upita-sehen,” said Juawau, not looking at the mittens. “We have no need of such blasphemies here.”

“How are cows blasphemies?” asked Autumn. “They are of the world.”

“They are not of Mor'upita-sehen,” said Juawau evenly. “That makes them a blasphemy.”

“Ahh, I see,” said Autumn. “I mean no offence but what makes something of Mor'upita-sehen?”

“If it comes from Mor'upita-sehen then it is of Mor'upita-sehen,” said Juawau.

“That makes sense,” said Logan.

“There is hope for you yet,” said Juawau.

“I am glad to hear it,” said Logan. “Are you of Mor'upita-sehen?”

Juawau looked coldly at him. “Perhaps I was wrong,” she said. “Mayhap you are beyond hope.”

“Perhaps now is not a good time,” suggested Autumn, giving Logan a small shake of her head.

“Ahh, I am sorry,” said Logan. “I was just trying to understand.”

Juawau just stared at him.

“I think this be Qaate now,” said Osk as the silence started to become uncomfortable.

There was a patter of footsteps outside and a very small, bent old woman came in, closely followed by Bronea.

“I am here,” she announced. “Kindly introduce me to your guests.”

“This be Qaate, our chief,” said Osk, standing up. “Qaate, these be Autumn and Logan. They be strangers.”

“I can see that, Osk,” said Qaate, sitting where Osk had been. She propped her walking stick against the wall. “We do not get many strangers here, so did you call me for a social visit?”

“Their account of how they come to be here makes no sense, Qaate,” said Juawau. “I thought it best for you to decide what to do with them especially since that thing was seen again.”

“You think they are related?” asked Qaate. “These two do not seem overly hairy nor large.”

“I know not,” said Juawau, “but I be cautious by nature.”

“And may Mor'upita-sehen be thanked for that,” said Qaate. “Your caution has been of great benefit to us all. So, is anyone going to tell me what their account is or do I have to deduce it for myself?”

Juawau rapidly explained what Autumn and Logan had said of their travels through the passages, including Logan's failed attempt to light his staff.

“This be the staff?” asked Qaate, pointing to his staff.

“Yes,” said Osk.

“I confess it looks like an ordinary staff to me,” said Qaate. She fixed Logan with a shrewd, piercing look. “Has Juawau told your tale rightly?”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“Ahh, you are the leader of this little band?” asked Qaate, transferring her gaze to Autumn.

“Yes,” said Logan.

“No,” said Autumn.

“So which is it?” asked Qaate.

“We be travelling companions,” said Autumn. “We agree things together.”

“Except, perhaps, who makes the decisions?” said Qaate with a small smile. “Tell me, Logan is it? Why did you say this one be the leader?”

“She be a Krisana,” said Logan. “She be right skilled and I follow.”

“A Krisana?” said Qaate, frowning. “Yes, I think I have heard of such things although it has been a long time since I was last topside. So, Krisana, how do you explain the strangenesses of your tale?”

“I cannot,” said Autumn. “Our tale is such as we experienced it but I cannot add to that.”

“Why are you here?” asked Qaate.

“We are here by chance,” said Autumn. “We are not here by design.”

“So your desire is to leave?” asked Qaate. “To return topside?”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

Qaate nodded.

“Tis dry business this,” she said. “Perhaps a drink, Juawau?”

“I am sorry,” said Juawau, “I am forgetting my manners, one moment.”

She bustled off to the other room and Qaate bent forward to lean on the table.

“What be these?” she asked, pointing to the mittens.

“They are mittens,” said Autumn. “Coverings for hands.”

“Ahh,” said Qaate, picking up the piece of parchment that had fallen on the table. “I venture you need such things topside. I have heard it can get quite cold.”

She read the note on the parchment.

“And this?” she said waving it.

“The mittens were a gift,” said Autumn. “The note from the one who gifted them.”

“Ahh, I see,” said Qaate, reading the note again. “Yes, handy, that be

quite funny.”

“See?” said Logan, nudging Autumn with his knee.

“And who be this MM?” asked Qaate. “Be this MM still in the passages?”

Juawau appeared in the entrance with a platter with five cups on it.

“MM be a friend of ours,” said Autumn. “Mother Midcarn be her name.”

There was a loud crash as the platter hit the ground and Logan was spattered with some kind of liquid.

“I am sorry,” said Juawau, stooping to pick up the platter and cups. “Did you say Mother Midcarn?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Do you know her?”

“Do we know her?” asked Qaate, “unless there be more than one, yes we know her.”

“The one we know lives outside a town called Glead,” said Autumn. “Tis a long way to the East. She be an older woman much skilled in certain arts.”

“Hmm,” said Qaate. “And what manner of arts be this Mother Midcarn skilled in?”

“Divination and prophecy, amongst other things,” said Autumn.

“Then likely this be the same one,” said Qaate. “’Twould seem that this brings an entire new complexion to the situation, does it not, Juawau?”

“Indeed,” said Juawau. “My apologies for having doubted you both. I could not know that you be friends of Mother Midcarn.”

“We quite understand,” said Autumn, deeply puzzled. “Would it be too

much to ask how you know Mother Midcarn?"

"We, ahh, requested her aid in a small matter," said Qaate, "but now is not the time to go into the details. So you are a Krisana, are you?"

"Yes," said Autumn.

"A Krisana of what, if I may ask?" asked Qaate. A slight tension seemed to come over her.

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

"More false gods," muttered Juawau, crossing herself. "Is there no end to them?"

"Mizule and Vallume," said Qaate. "That be warriors and women, be it not?"

"Yes," said Autumn. "Is that of significance here?"

"It might be," said Qaate. "It might very well be. Tell me, Krisana Savannah, you truly desire to leave this place and return topside?"

"Yes," said Autumn. "We told you true. We are here through chance not choice."

"Mayhap chance dictates our choices at times," said Qaate with a wry smile.

"Indeed," said Autumn. "Anyone who knows Mother Midcarn must agree to that."

"Quite, quite," agreed Qaate.

She picked up her walking stick and toyed with it, looking thoughtfully at Autumn.

"I wonder, Krisana Savannah," she said, "if we give you safe passage to topside and a fee of some kind, would you be willing to aid us in a

small matter?”

“I give my aid wherever I can,” said Autumn, “and expect no recompense although assistance in finding our way through these passages would be much appreciated. How can I aid you?”

“Yes,” said Qaate. “Spoken like a true Krisana. Tell me, what do you know of large, hairy things?”

Chapter Seventeen

Autumn gazed at Qaate for a few moments.

“I did once best an apiakun named Kizerain Qerrassa who was twice my size and very hairy,” she remarked, “although I venture you are not talking about a human.”

“I have not seen this thing myself,” she said, “but I have had reports of it although they differ. Some say it has two arms and four legs and others say four arms and two legs but all say it be it be too big and wide to get inside the passages even though it tried. Aye and it be fully covered in long hair the colour of rock. No one has seen or heard of any creature like this before.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “By all accounts though 'twould seem the beast had six limbs at any rate.” She paused for a moment. “And it be something you want rid of?”

“Yes,” said Qaate. “It has killed two of my people thus far.”

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“It is also stopping us from worship,” interjected Juawau.

“Indeed,” said Qaate. “It is in our Great Temple and cannot get out.”

“Which begs the question of how it got in,” said Autumn.

“No one knows,” said Qaate. “It just appeared there a few days past.”

“Did someone see it appear?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Juawau. “Some of us went to the Great Temple for a ritual and found it there. That be when the two were killed.”

“And what have you tried to rid yourselves of this creature?” asked Autumn.

“Nothing,” said Qaate. “We are a peaceful people and not given to

violence and besides, ...”

“The Great Temple is a most holy place and cannot be defiled,” said Juawau.

“Then I confess I do not see how I can aid you,” said Autumn, spreading her hands on the table. “If no one knows how it got in then it cannot be driven back the way it came nor can it be taken elsewhere as it be too big to fit the passages and to kill it will defile the Great Temple so that be not an option either. What else is there, save talking to it and asking it to leave. Does it talk?”

“Not as far as we know,” said Qaate. “Muttering sounds have been heard but 'tis in no language we know. Perhaps Juawau had best explain.”

“If an outsider were to rid us of this beast the Great Temple can be purified,” said Juawau. “But if we do it then the wrath of Mor'upitasehen will be upon us.”

“'Twould seem to me there is another choice,” said Logan.

The other four turned to look at him.

“Seal off the Great Temple and build another one,” he said with a shrug.

“That would seem a good idea,” said Autumn.

“Alas we cannot do that either,” said Qaate.

“Do you not have a ritual to purify a new place?” asked Autumn.

“Yes, we do,” said Juawau, “it is just that we cannot, umm, ...”

“'Tis best I know,” said Autumn.

Juawau looked at Qaate who hesitated then nodded.

“We cannot build another,” said Juawau. “We have not the skill to cut

the rock.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. “But how were these rooms and the passages made? And the Great Temple itself?”

“Twere done for us by Mor'upita-sehen,” said Juawau. “When we need a new cutting we ask and It cuts for us.”

“So why not ask Mor'upita-sehen to cut a new Great Temple?” asked Autumn.

“Why not ask It to rid you of the beast?” asked Logan. “If It can cut through rock surely It would make short work of a large hairy creature.”

“Umm,” said Juawau uneasily.

“Tell them,” said Qaate. “The time for deceptions be over.”

“Is that wise, Qaate?” asked Juawau.

“There is talk among the people,” said Qaate. “The truth will out soon and we have an outsider who be a Krisana and is willing to help us. The time is come.”

Osk sat there quietly, looking intent but puzzled.

Juawau closed her eyes and took a deep breath then slowly released it.

“Very well,” she said, opening her eyes. “Mor'upita-sehen has deserted us. It is gone. We know not where.”

Osk let out an explosive gasp.

“You be serious?” he demanded.

“That be why the numbers of faithless be rising,” said Juawau. “I and the other Sviatar Halava have tried to talk with It but we get no replies. No requests have been granted, nothing. Mor'upita-sehen be gone.”

“But, ... but, ...” spluttered Osk. “When? How long has ...?”

“It be two generations now,” said Juawau, sadly. “None of we three have spoken with It. Erija be the last to have heard Its voice.”

“Erija?” said Osk in astonishment, “but he died when I was but a lad.”

“Juawau is one of our three Sviatar Halava,” said Qaate, seeing Autumn's expression. “Only the Sviatar Halava are permitted to talk to Mor'upita-sehen and intercede on behalf of the people.”

“Ah,” said Autumn, nodding. “I can see that this would be a difficult situation.”

“I wager I have the wrong end of the stick here,” said Logan, sitting forward, “but does it not make the situation easier?”

“How so?” asked Qaate.

“If Mor'upita-sehen be gone then if you defile the Great Temple surely It cannot vent Its wrath upon you,” said Logan.

“Mayhap Mor'upita-sehen be still watching over them,” said Autumn, “but from afar.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, “I did not think of that.”

“And Mor'upita-sehen may yet return,” said Juawau. “We pray for Its return daily.”

“It has been two generations,” said Logan. “I venture the odds of that be somewhat small.”

Juawau and Qaate exchanged significant looks.

“What is it?” demanded Osk.

“Mor'upita-sehen may be back with us soon,” said Qaate. She sighed. “Tis best you know the whole story. We have been praying for Its return for two generations but It has paid no heed. We are desperate

for our sole reason for existing has gone and we have no purpose, no guidance. So, umm, ...”

“What have you done?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“Three summers past we heard tales of a great and wise sorcerer,” said Qaate. “We debated the matter at great length and sought more knowledge and debated yet more. Then last summer we sent out messengers and sought her aid in finding Mor’upita-sehen and returning It to us.”

“Her aid?” asked Autumn. “Vallume, you be not meaning Mother Midcarn?”

Qaate waved a finger at Juawau and Juawau bit back a remark about false gods.

“Yes,” said Qaate. “And Mother Midcarn agreed to aid us.”

“Sploop,” said Logan jerking forward. “You mean Mother Midcarn is here? Why do you not ask her about getting rid of the beast? I wager she could just snap her fingers and it would vanish.”

He snapped his finger to illustrate his point.

“We cannot,” said Qaate. “She was here but she is not any longer.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “So I wager she was not able to find Mor’upita-sehen, then. Has she gone back to Gleard? I would like to meet her again.”

“We do not know,” said Qaate. “She said she thought she knew where Mor’upita-sehen was but she has since gone missing.”

“Gone missing?” exclaimed Autumn. “How can you be sure she has gone missing and not just gone elsewhere?”

“Surely if this woman be missing she must be elsewhere,” said Osk. “Stands to reason.”

"Tis not as simple as that with Mother Midcarn," said Autumn. "She has most unusual powers."

"Aye," said Qaate, "and that be why we asked for her aid. But we know not where she is nor when she will be back nor whether she will bring Mor'upita-sehen with her. All is much confused and in the midst of this you two arrive. 'Tis not by chance I wager."

"Would be false to assume that if one thing follows another that it is caused by the other," said Autumn. "Many things happen which are unrelated to many other things. I wager your Bronea was born after I was but there is no reason to think my birth in any way caused hers."

"I thought you always say that everything is interrelated," said Logan.

"Aye," said Autumn, "but interrelation and cause are not the same thing. For something to be the cause of something else it needs to be direct and of great importance to that thing. So, if I move my finger and this cup moves then my finger be the cause of it moving but if a lamp in another room goes out, although it be in some way interrelated with my finger it would be wrong to say my finger caused it. The cause would be the oil running out or someone blowing on the lamp."

"Ahh, I see what you mean," said Logan.

"Yes," said Qaate, tapping her walking stick on the floor. "This be all very interesting but if we could get back to the issue at hand?"

"I wager it is related to the issue at hand," said Logan. "Seems to me that you have two things happening and one may be the cause of the other or the other way round."

"You mean us arriving and Mother Midcarn going?" asked Autumn. "Tis possible but we cannot be certain."

"Mayhap that too," said Logan, "but I was thinking this creature be appearing in the Great Temple around the same time Mother Midcarn be disappearing."

“Mother Midcarn was not in the Great Temple when the creature was discovered,” said Qaate. “She was not one of the two killed.”

“But do you know where she was when the creature arrived in the Great Temple?” asked Autumn.

“No,” admitted Qaate.

“So it be possible that Mother Midcarn was in the Great Temple at the time it arrived?” persisted Autumn.

“Yes,” said Qaate. “She did go in there from time to time. Mor'upita-sehen often joined us in the Great Temple and Mother Midcarn said there was a pathway there, although I know not which pathway she meant nor where it led. So, yes, it be possible that she was in the Great Temple when the creature arrived and it killed her.”

“I wonder if it is possible that Mother Midcarn somehow brought the creature here?” mused Autumn. “Have you any idea what she was working on?”

“What little she told me was beyond my understanding,” said Qaate.

“Be you saying that this Mother Midcarn has the power to go places the way Mor'upita-sehen can?” asked Osk.

“Yes,” said Autumn and Qaate at the same time.

“’Tis unbelievable,” said Osk.

“’Tis blasphemous,” snorted Juawau. “I was against this from the beginning. ’Twas asking for trouble and trouble is what we now have.”

“As I recall the vote was unanimous,” said Qaate quietly.

“There be no benefit in assigning blame,” said Autumn. “The past cannot be changed, well, at least as far as we are concerned. It may be different for gods and sorcerers. Our role is to find solutions for the present and choose the best among them for the future.”

“But you be saying that she had this power?” asked Osk. “This be a truth?”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“Then mayhap the beast did not kill her,” said Osk. “Mayhap she went there and the beast came here.”

Qaate and Juawau stared at him and Autumn looked at Logan.

“That thought had occurred to me,” she said, raising an eyebrow. “But I wager by your face you have had another thought.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “What if the creature *is* Mother Midcarn? What if she cannot change herself back?”

“I wager she would not have killed two people though,” said Autumn.

“Mayhap it was an accident,” said Logan. “Mayhap she did not know what form she had acquired and did not realise what she was doing. We have no way of knowing.”

“I was told that the thing came charging out of an alcove and attacked the worshippers,” said Qaate. “They said they did not provoke it as they did not know it was there and I believe them. I would not imagine they ventured inside knowing such a beast was waiting.”

“Tis a fair point,” aid Autumn, “but 'tis also possible Mother Midcarn took that form either by chance or design and when the worshippers arrived she rushed to warn them of some danger and an accident happened. We cannot presume evil intent. What happened to the bodies of those who died?”

“They were left behind as the others rushed to leave,” said Qaate. “A brave soul returned a short time after and peeped inside but could see no sign of their bodies. Most likely they were eaten.”

“Tis a possibility,” said Autumn, “but not the only one.”

She got off her stool and paced for a few moments then sat on the

floor with her feet on her knees. The others watched her as she closed her eyes and focused on her breathing.

“Will you still aid us?” asked Qaate after a while.

Autumn's eyes snapped open.

“I will aid you in any way I can,” she said, “but without more knowledge I cannot risk killing this beast, even if it be within my power which it may not. I need to think on this for a time and consider ways forward.”

“Aye,” said Qaate, visibly disappointed. “I wager 'tis not a matter to rush into lightly although I had hoped ..., but no matter. Would you like a quite place for your thinking?”

“That would be a kindness,” said Autumn.

“There is an empty sleeping room a little further along this passage,” said Juawau. “We would be honoured if you called it your own while you are among us. I will send Bronea to attend your needs. Will you be wanting a room as well, Logan?”

“I would like Logan with me,” said Autumn, “if that sits well with you.”

* * *

Autumn sat with her back to the wall with her legs crossed and her eyes shut. Outwardly she looked peaceful and still but inside her mind was a whirl. Logan sat with his back against the opposite wall, his legs stretched out in front of him. He could not yet cross his legs the way Autumn did although he had tried any number of times. He, too, appeared peaceful and quiet, although he absently drew abstract shapes on the floor with a finger. An oil lamp flickered gently on the table in the corner. Nothing else moved.

After a time Bronea appeared with fresh bedding and, fearing to disturb them, left the bedding in a corner and quietly stole out of the room, pulling the aciui skin curtain closed behind her. Some time later

she came back with a large pot of water and two drinking cups. Apart from Logan's finger, neither had moved. Disquieted by the lack of attention, as she was used to attention being paid to her as an only child and as a pretty girl, she stole away again and found a friend to discuss these two strange strangers with. Although no answers were found there the discussion, and the attention, cheered her up and, when she took the strangers their meal, she was light of heart again. Autumn had not moved but Logan had changed position and was now holding an empty water cup, tapping a finger against it gently. When Bronea put down the plates of fried aciui leg with vony and an appetising yellow-grey sauce he made her jump by saying 'thank you'. She giggled and bobbed her head and scurried away to update her friend.

Logan had had several mouthfuls of aciui leg before he realised what it was and his stomach moulded itself into a knotted lump of quivering stone in his belly. He stared at the haunch that was as long as his forearm but no thicker than his wrist.

"You be a fool," he told himself, forcefully. "You ate all that gruel earlier and you still be alive."

He pulled up the sleeve of his tunic and checked his arm. It looked much the same as ever, apart from the colour caused by the walls. Certainly his arm did not look like an aciui leg. Slowly the stone in his stomach dissolved and started to complain at the lack of food. With a small shudder Logan picked up the leg again and cautiously took a bite. It tasted a little like crab, he decided, and slowly munched his way through it, trying not to look at what he was eating.

"I wonder if all the insects be huge down here," he thought to himself and looked around.

Apart from the leg in his hand and the one on the other plate there were no signs of any other insects.

"No mosquitoes or flies," he muttered.

"None," said Autumn without moving so much as an eyelash.

“Sorry?” said Logan, looking over at her.

She opened her eyes.

“There are no insects down here at all,” she said. “No mosquitoes, flies, fleas, lice or even worms or earwigs. I have been wondering why.”

“There be spiders,” said Logan. “There be one on that plate for you.”

“Yes,” said Autumn, looking at it unenthusiastically.

She gracefully stood up in a single move and scooped a cup of water from the bucket. She watched the aciu leg while she slowly drank the water then, as it had not moved, picked a morsel from it and ate it.

“It be all right if you pretend it is crab,” said Logan, “although I could not bring myself to try the sauce.”

Autumn dipped her finger in the sauce and tasted it.

“It tastes of lemon,” she said but didn't have any more.

She sat down again with the leg nestled in the crook of her arm, picking bits off and eating them.

“Have you had any thoughts?” she asked.

“Many,” said Logan, “but none useful. I did wonder if it might be possible to ask another sorcerer to try to follow where Mother Midcarn went. Mayhap she left some writings about what she was doing.”

“Tis an idea,” said Autumn, “but we only know two. Varaunik knew her but freely admits she was far beyond his skills and Urbil did not finish his apprenticeship. I wager he would not find any interest in this business either. His thoughts were elsewhere.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “although there may be others. Beyond that my thoughts went nowhere. Have you had better success?”

Autumn curled her lip.

“Until we know where Mother Midcarn is I cannot take the risk,” she said. “If no one goes inside the Great Temple then no one will come to harm and I wager these people can perform their worship elsewhere. Should Mor’upita-sehen return I expect It will be understanding of their predicament. The only conclusion I have come to is that we must wait for more knowledge and better understanding. Mayhap Mother Midcarn will return or send some message.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “although I cannot see what use the mittens may be as yet. I would be surprised if they will be of use against this creature so there must be some other purpose as yet unrevealed. Mayhap the creature be unrelated to what Mother Midcarn has seen in her Window. As you said things happen without one necessarily causing the other.”

“But the danger here is that they may be related,” said Autumn. “’Twould be premature to go against the creature especially as it is not likely to do anyone any harm.”

“Aye,” said Logan.

He got up and put the rest of the aciui leg back on the plate and looked around the room.

“These walls be mighty depressing,” he said. “Black and red do not lift the mind or the spirit.”

“It has some significance to these people,” said Autumn. “All their walls seem to be these colours. ’Twould be nice to see some green again.”

“Or the sky,” said Logan. “I never thought I would say this but I miss clouds and rain.”

He sighed and picked up his staff.

“’Tis a mortal shame that Fiau has gone,” he said, stroking it regretfully.

“I am here, Logan,” said Fiau, materialising from the staff.

“Sploop,” said Logan in surprise. “Where did you come from?”

“The staff,” said Fiau, looking humourlessly at him from her long thin face.

“’Tis nice to see you again, Fiau,” said Autumn.

“And I you,” said Fiau. “Although I wager it will not be for much longer.”

“Are you leaving us?” asked Logan. “I know you have run out of flame.”

“I have not,” said Fiau. “’Twas not a good time when you asked last. A light such as I would seem most advantageous in this place and to show myself to them as live here could have put you in danger.”

“A fair point,” said Autumn. “We should be more careful. So why will you not be with us for much longer?”

“’Tis not I,” said Fiau. “’Tis you Autumn. You be dying.”

Chapter Eighteen

“That needs some explaining, Fiau,” said Autumn, while Logan stared speechlessly in shock. “All living things die. Have you some portent of my death?”

“You have been underground for nine days,” said Fiau. “You need the light of Astauand to survive.”

“Tis only one day,” said Autumn, “mayhap one and a half, not nine.”

“We have been in these root holes for nine days,” said Fiau. “In that lit place we jumped near eight days but our bodies have been through nine days without Astauand.”

“You mean we skipped eight days without noticing?” said Logan, his mind still reeling. “Like when we repeated Veobad three times?”

“Yes,” said Fiau.

“Well, that would explain how we got here so quickly,” said Autumn. “It happened in that cavern where we kept falling over?”

“Yes,” said Fiau.

“But ...,” started Autumn then changed her mind. “Tis no matter at the moment. We are here, now. Why do you say I am soon to die without the light of Astauand? There are those that live down here who have never seen Astauand.”

“They are full human,” said Fiau.

“And I am not?” said Autumn. “Come, Fiau, you need to explain yourself better than this.”

“You are only part human,” said Fiau. “The other part with us.”

“Who is 'us'?” asked Autumn. “Do you mean trees?”

“Yes,” said Fiau.

"I am not understanding," said Autumn, staring at Fiau's long thin face. "How is it possible that ...? Ahh."

"What is Fiau talking about, Autumn?" asked Logan anxiously.

"I think she be talking about our time in Havildar when Khimera implanted those Salodkaja seeds in me," said Autumn.

Fiau lifted a long thin finger and touched Autumn's tunic above where the seeds had been embedded.

"From that time you have been absorbing the life sap of the seeds," said Fiau, "and becoming one with us. Have you not noticed the changes?"

"She has not changed!" said Logan loudly.

"Yes, I have," said Autumn. "And we have both remarked on it. I have grown stronger and more supple. You remember that time when I cracked the rock while exercising? And when we were fleeing the spiders and blocked the cave? I lifted rocks you struggled to drag."

"That rock was already cracked," said Logan stubbornly.

"Mayhap," said Autumn. "My balance is better as well. I can stand on my staff for five or six breaths."

"That be practice," said Logan. "Nothing more."

"Tis possible," said Autumn. "Fiau, are you saying I am slowly turning into a tree?"

"No," said Fiau. "The five seeds be not enough to do that and your human essence is strong."

"But will I start to grow leaves or more arms or something?" asked Autumn.

"Your essence is human," said Fiau. "That cannot be changed by sap. Sap be a life force and gives you some of the life of a tree but your

flesh will never become wood.”

“That is good to know,” said Autumn. “Much as I like trees I like being human more. So, why do I need the light of Astauand?”

“All trees need the light of Astauand,” said Fiau. “’Tis the nature of a tree. Keep it underground and it will die.”

“But you said I was not a tree,” argued Autumn.

“’Tis true,” said Fiau. “I wager your human essence will not die but your tree essence will. Mayhap you will not change but mayhap you will fully die. ’Tis rare for humans to get the sap and you be the first to move underground. I give a warning not a prophecy, but a grim one all the same. ’Tis your choice.”

“How long can I stay underground?” asked Autumn.

“I know not,” said Fiau. “But all trees denied Astauand’s blessing wither and die.”

“What about Logan?” asked Autumn.

“He be all human,” said Fiau. “I know little of the lives of humans. Mayhap he will wither and die as well. I know not.

“Will you die in here too, Fiau?” asked Logan. “You are all tree.”

“No, Logan,” said Fiau. “I am already dead. I was fashioned from a fallen branch and can die no further and I be protected by magic from the one who fashioned me.”

“But it was the branch that is dead,” said Logan, “not you. You are the spirit of the branch and you are alive.”

“Such things are beyond my understanding, Logan,” said Fiau. “But I cannot exist independently of my branch, that I do know.”

“That is good,” said Logan, “at least I will still have you.” Then he slapped his head. “Sploop!” he cried. “Autumn, we have to get you out

of here and into the light! You be going to die!”

“Ahh, Logan, still you do not understand,” said Autumn. “Death be not an end. Accept that.”

“Oh Voqev, have it your own way,” said Logan. “You be going to transition then, but you be not doing that while I am around to prevent it! We are leaving this place and Juawau and Qaate and the rest of them can go to Yammoe! And they can take their big hairy thing with them!”

“I thank you for your sentiment, friend Logan,” said Autumn, “but I have unfinished business here. I promised to give these people my aid.”

“No, you do not,” said Logan. “You promised to aid them if you could and if you had thought of a solution you would have said so already. Your beliefs and vows make certain of that.”

“How so?” asked Autumn, frowning.

Fiau looked at each of them then merged back into the staff, her presence no longer needed.

“You will only kill to prevent death and suffering,” said Logan. “There be no need to kill this hairy beast as it cannot get out of the Great Temple and will cause no death or great suffering so long as no one goes in there.”

“But what of their worship?” asked Autumn.

“They can do it elsewhere,” said Logan. “They can use the passages or their rooms or go outside if they want. It is not for you to kill simply because they be unwilling to make changes.”

“Aye, that is true enough,” said Autumn. “If a bear takes residence in a cowshed it be not my problem to kill the bear if the farmer will not build another cowshed. I will only fight the bear if it be killing others and then only if there be no alternative.”

“Exactly,” said Logan. “So let us make our apologies to Qaate and leave this place.”

“But what if the beast is Mother Midcarn or she be in another world while it is in this one?” asked Autumn.

“You are the greatest fighter in this world and the next,” said Logan. “You have bested Yammoe, you have the essence of trees within you and you are a wise philosopher but can you turn a big hairy beast back into Mother Midcarn or cross over into other worlds in search of her?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I have not those skills.”

“Then live within your limitations, Autumn,” said Logan. “You cannot take responsibility for everything. Come with me and return to the surface and let us go in search of problems you can solve, not wither and die here wrestling fruitlessly with what cannot be solved.”

Autumn narrowed her eyes and stared at Logan. He stared back unflinching, his desire to keep Autumn alive making him strong.

“Aye,” she said after an eternity. “You have the right of it. 'Tis only my old failing keeping me here. My vanity, my falseness of thinking I can solve what I cannot.”

Logan breathed a sigh of relief.

“Then let us do this,” he said. “Mayhap Qaate will not give us a guide after all but we will find a way out.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “But there is still one thing I wish to try.”

“Oh no,” said Logan visibly deflating. “What strange idea has your false mind come up with now?”

“I will visit this Great Temple,” said Autumn, “and I will talk with this creature. Mayhap it can speak as well as mutter and has knowledge of how to get itself back from whence it came. Mayhap it is Mother Midcarn and she be able to talk to me. I can but try.”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan. “Very well, but promise me you will not get into a fight.”

* * *

“Tis not far to the Great Temple,” said Juawau leading the way, “although I know not what you hope to accomplish by talking to the thing.”

“There is no need to reopen that debate,” said Qaate sharply. “Autumn has made her position clear enough. Besides, who knows how the situation will change. Mayhap that will be sufficient.”

“And I wager they hope the beast will attack you and force you to kill it,” whispered Logan to Autumn, “although no one seems too concerned it might end up the other way around.”

“We be strangers here,” whispered back Autumn, “and strangers are never as valued as those you know.”

“Do you think they will guide us out of here afterwards?” whispered Logan.

“Yes,” whispered Autumn. “They will not want one who is not afraid of what they are too afraid to do to linger. 'Twill not be over long, I venture, before they start to see us as a threat to their customs.”

“What be you two whispering about?” asked Qaate, looking back at them.

“Logan is concerned you may not guide us topside after this has run its course,” said Autumn.

Qaate stopped walking and turned to face them.

“We are not uncaring,” said Qaate, “and would not hold you here against your wishes. Beside,” and she smiled sardonically, “I wager none here could stop you leaving if you have a mind. Logan, set your mind at rest. Osk will guide you, as agreed.”

"I did not mean to be rude," said Logan, giving Autumn a dirty look.

"We are not overly trusting of strangers at first meeting," said Qaate, "and it is well for us to remember that others may feel the same."

"That is true," said Autumn. "Tis rare for others to perceive us as we see ourselves. Lead on. I find I am curious to see this creature that is the cause of such consternation."

"There be four entrances to the Great Temple," said Juawau, leading them forward again. "We posted sentinels at each to keep us informed."

"What is the layout of the Great Temple?" asked Autumn.

"Tis a large empty hall," said Juawau, "with the shrine at the far end. There be four alcoves as well, two at each end."

"What is in those alcoves?" asked Autumn.

"The caskets of Sviatar Halava past," said Juawau. "They be sacred relics." She sighed and crossed herself. "If your ... discussions ... come to anything we will need provision for their safe removal."

"I will see what I can do," said Autumn.

"Mayhap the problem be already solved," said Logan, unthinkingly.

"How so?" asked Juawau sharply.

"Oh, umm, nothing," said Logan.

"Come," said Juawau, stopping abruptly. "I insist on knowing your meaning."

"Umm," said Logan feeling embarrassed. "Well, um, if the creature has been in there for two or three days and, um, has not been able to get out, umm, well, it might be getting a little hungry."

Juawau stared at him with loathing then muttered a short prayer to

Mor'upita-sehen. She set off again, her lips tightly compressed and her stride short and angry.

"Well met, Radl," said Qaate moments later to a lithe young man lounging in the passage. "What news?"

"No news, Qaate," said Radl, pulling himself away from the wall. "It has been silent in there for three lamps, maybe four." He eyed Autumn and Logan with interest.

"Mayhap it be asleep," said Qaate. She turned to look at Autumn. "Should we wait for it to awaken?"

"I see no great benefit to putting it off," said Autumn. "It that an entrance?" She pointed to an aciui skin curtain a little further down the passage.

"Yes," said Juawau. "There be another further along and the other two be down that passage and to the left."

"Good," said Autumn. "I expect you will wait here?"

"Yes," said Qaate.

Autumn walked briskly off towards the entrance.

"Who is she?" whispered Radl, standing beside Osk.

"She be going to talk to the hairy thing," said Osk quietly.

"Do you not want to offer a prayer of safe-keeping to Mor'upita-sehen before you enter?" asked Juawau.

"Oh," whispered Radl, watching Autumn. "I venture we be not seeing here again, then. 'Tis a shame. Nice legs."

"My life is in the hands of Mizule and Vallume," said Autumn, "but you offer whatever prayers please you. And you, Logan, go back and wait with the others."

“But my place is beside you,” said Logan. “You may need me if the discussions get difficult.”

“Then I will call for you,” said Autumn. “But for now, you wait here. I will not risk your life unnecessarily. Go back over there.”

She gave Logan a gentle push and he reluctantly went back to join the others.

“A moment,” said Osk, stepping forward.

“Yes?” said Autumn, her hand on the curtain.

“Tis unlit in there,” he said. “Normally the Temple be lit by twenty lamps at all times but they will have gone out long ago. Take this one.”

He took the lamp that burned on a small shelf beside the entrance and handed it to her.

“Wait,” said Radl. “That one be nearly exhausted. Use this one, it be fresh filled.”

He took another lamp out from a niche underneath the shelf and lit it from the other and gave it to Autumn.

“Thank you,” she said. “I do not imagine this will take long.” She pulled back the curtain and stepped inside, letting the curtain swing back behind her.

“Brave girl,” said Radl with a look of admiration. He turned to Logan. “Be she spoken for?”

“Yes,” said Logan, looking at him with distaste. “Very much so.”

“Radl,” said Qaate, catching Logan's look. “Go and tell the others what is happening. We do not want them hearing voices and panicking.”

* * *

Qaate, Juawau and Osk stood there silently for a few moments, watching the curtain then Osk muttered something to Juawau and the three of them started a slow quiet conversation. Logan felt excluded so he casually backed away from the entrance a little then leaned against the side of the passage, watching and waiting.

“Hello,” came Autumn's voice, muffled by the curtain. “Are you there?”

The others paused in their conversation to listen for a reply and Logan felt tense, his stomach churning.

“Pryvitannie, vy tam?” came from the entrance.

“Sounds like the Old Tongue,” thought Logan.

Osk put his lamp on a shelf, its sudden scrape making Logan jump. His first thought was that Autumn had been attacked.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” came Autumn's voice “I would speak with you. Ja Vosienskaj Savany. Ja chacieu by pahavaryc z vami.”

Logan relaxed against the wall again, his hand resting on the hilt of his knife tucked inside his tunic, just in case he had to run inside the Great Temple. He glanced over at the others. They'd stopped talking and were standing silently, tense. Juawau was looking at the roof, Osk at his feet and Qaate at the curtain. None of them saw a small blue flame come from the darkness of the passage beyond Logan.

There was a muffled thump from behind the curtain and, before he could leap forward, Logan was hit heavily on the chest, his back and head rammed hard against the rock. Stunned, he collapsed to the ground with something heavy on top of him. Dimly he heard shouts and feet then the weight on his chest and head disappeared.

“Sploop,” he muttered, winded, his head foggy.

“What happened?” he heard Qaate say.

“Are you hurt?” this time from Osk.

“Mizule!” said Juawau in Autumn's voice. “That hurt.”

“That sounded like Autumn,” thought Logan, trying to get up.

“Lift him up,” said Qaate.

Logan felt strong hands under his shoulders and felt himself lifted to a sitting position.

“What happened?” asked Logan, shaking his head to try to get rid of the ringing. He opened his eyes and saw blurred figures in the dimness of the passage.

“She landed on top of you,” said Osk. “Are you hurt?”

“Who did?” asked Logan, becoming aware that his chest hurt and it was painful to breathe.

“Autumn,” said Osk.

“Oh, that be all right then,” said Logan. “I thought it was the big hairy thing.”

“My apologies,” said a face appearing in front of him. It resembled Autumn's face but he struggled to focus on it. “Where does it hurt?”

“My chest,” muttered Logan, “my head, my shoulder.”

“How many fingers can you see?” said the voice.

“Is that you, Autumn?” asked Logan squinting. He thought he could see seven or eight fingers but that didn't seem right.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “How many fingers?”

Logan concentrated on the plethora of fingers in front of him and, with an effort, managed to get the number down to three stationary ones and three that moved around a little.

“Three,” he said.

“Good,” said Autumn and hands started to feel around his chest and head. “Nothing seems broken.”

“I do not understand,” came Qaate's voice. “How do you come to be here in the passage?”

“The creature hit me,” said Autumn, standing up. “All I saw was an arm just before it hit then I was thrown against the wall. 'Tis fearsomely strong.”

“But how do you come to be in the passage?” asked Qaate. “You did not come through the curtain.”

“It hit you?” cried Logan, the spinning in his mind slowing, then he clutched his chest.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Full across my chest. I was expecting something but I did not hear a sound.”

Logan staggered to his feet and the passage swayed several times so he held on to the wall for support.

“Best you stay sitting,” said Autumn, taking hold of Logan's other arm.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, shaking her hand loose.

“A trifle sore in my chest,” she said, “but my pride hurts more.”

“What hit me?” asked Logan.

“I did,” said Autumn. “For that I truly apologise.”

“But how ...?” asked Logan.

“That is what I would like to know,” said Qaate. “From where I was standing it looked like you came through the wall.”

“A trick of the light, I wager, Qaate,” said Autumn.

“But Logan was not standing near the entrance,” said Qaate.
“I must have bounced off something,” said Autumn. “Who knows. It all happened very quickly.”

“It does not matter, Qaate,” said Juawau. “Both seem uninjured. What is more important is what do we do now?”

“I go back in,” said Autumn. “This matter needs resolving.”

“But what about the creature?” said Logan. His knee was beginning to throb.

“I am better prepared this time,” said Autumn, “although it would seem the creature does not want to talk. Can I use your staff?”

“Of course,” said Logan. “Where is yours?”

“I dropped it inside,” said Autumn, bending to retrieve Logan's staff. She grimaced and rubbed her chest.

“You are hurt!” said Logan, clutching her arm. “Do not go back in there. We will think of something else.”

“Tis nothing,” said Autumn dismissively. She gently removed Logan's hand then adjusted her robe and tightened her belt. “Right, stand aside.”

She pulled back the curtain and Logan saw the faintest of blue lights slip inside as Autumn stepped through.

“Wait!” he cried, lurching forward, but too late. The curtain swung back behind her.

* * *

Autumn paused to let the curtain drop and listened intently. There was no sound at all.

“Fiau,” she whispered. “Light.”

The staff instantly burst into flame, far brighter than her lamp had been, and illuminated something large and pale perhaps half way along the length of the Temple. They both stood for a few moments, each appraising the other. What looked like four eyes underneath the mass of shaggy dirty white fur glinted in the torchlight. Then it charged.

“It has six legs,” thought Autumn as she spun and kicked where she thought its head might be.

The creature thumped into the wall then reared up on four legs trying to grab her with its other two but she ducked and spun out of the way, giving it a hard blow with the staff as she passed. An acrid smell of burning hair mingled with a deep howl of anger. It reared up higher, its top scraping the roof, and advanced on two legs with two reaching out towards her. She ducked again and both the middle legs came up hard and flung her across the Temple. She landed heavily, stunned for a moment then curled into a ball as the creature dropped down on top of her. Four hands grasped at her then two more as its weight bore down. She kicked hard with both feet into its body and a gasp of rancid breath nearly made her faint.

Two hands gripped her legs and two more held her torso down as the other two started thrashing at her face and head. She bucked her body trying to throw it off but it was too heavy. Desperately she rammed the fingers of one hand into where she thought the breath had come from while repeatedly jabbing where its eyes seemed to be but its fur was too thick to make much impression. One of the creature's hands found her throat and started to squeeze. She felt its grip on her leg slacken slightly and jerked her knee up hard into what she thought was its belly. Again there was a gust of rancid breath and the grip on her throat slackened momentarily. Instantly she stabbed her elbow into that arm and the creature lost its grip and that arm buckled so the creature tipped over slightly, giving Autumn the opportunity to get a foot underneath.

“Arghhhh!” she screamed and thrust upwards with every fibre of her strength.

The creature fell off her onto the ground and Autumn instantly rolled

the other way and jumped to her feet and attacked, kicking and punching. The creature ward off her attack with three of its arms and used the other three to climb upright then launched itself at her again. Again she spun out of the way and kicked viciously. The creature howled in anger again and it looked as though one of its middle pair of legs was injured. It held that leg tight against its body and came at her again. Again Autumn spun and lashed out with a kick, just as something hurtled past her ear. The Temple went dark. Instantly she reacted and somersaulted backwards as the creature roared then she spun to one side and lashed out again. Her foot hit only empty air. The momentum carried her further round and she nearly lost balance. She had to put a hand on the ground to stop herself falling but she used the opportunity to spin round on her arm and sent a low kick to where she thought the creature's body was although she could no longer see it in the darkness. It wasn't there.

She leapt to her feet and started slowly backing away, every sense straining for the slightest indication of where the creature was. There was a slight sound behind her, off to the right, and she instantly lashed out with her foot.

"Have a care," complained a thin, rustley voice.

Autumn lashed out with her arm at where the voice had come from but there was nothing there. There was a faint patter of light footsteps and Autumn twisted, tracking them, ready for an attack. Logan's staff burst into light again. Autumn instantly reacted, launching herself at the creature with a flurry of blows. It didn't react.

"You are wasting your energy," commented Fiau.

Autumn leapt backwards, poised to repel an attack from where the staff burned then she straightened. Fiau was holding the staff.

"Fiau," said Autumn in surprise.

"You nearly hit me," said Fiau.

"Is the creature dead?" asked Autumn, slowly advancing on the large body that lay on the ground.

“‘Twould seem so,” said Fiau calmly.

Edging around the creature, Autumn saw her staff protruding from its carcass. Around the staff the creature's matted fur was thick with a dark yellow liquid that dripped to the ground. There was another dark yellow patch further along the body.

“Did you kill it?” asked Autumn, poking the body. It did not react.

“Yes,” said Fiau. “One staff in an eye and one in its heart.”

“I thank you,” said Autumn.

“You're welcome,” said Fiau, merging back into the staff. Autumn caught it as it toppled.

Chapter Nineteen

“Sploop! That be nice,” said Logan, emerging into the morning light of Astauand.

He stood with his arms outstretched and his face turned to the sun, basking in its warmth.

“Ahhh, that be right good,” he said. “’Tis nice to be out of the dark.”

“I hate it,” said Osk, coming out of the cave behind him. He shielded his eyes from the glare and stood in the shade of a tree. “Too bright and it rains out here as well. Ugh, horrible. And the food, be not getting me started on that dreadful food you topside people be eating. Give me a nice safe dry room bottom-side and an aciui leg anytime.”

Autumn smiled and slipped off her robe to feel the warmth and the fresh air better.

“I confess I did wonder if I would ever see woods again,” she said. “Caves are fine places but they are not our world.”

“You be welcome to it,” said Osk, slapping at some flies that had decided to investigate him. “Be you wanting me to take you all the way to Voterm?”

“Just point us in the right direction,” said Autumn, “then go back to your family. We thank you kindly for bringing us this far.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “Much appreciated.”

“’Tis that way,” said Osk, pointing South. “Just down there a bit you’ll find a stream. Follow it down and Voterm be not far. ’Twas nice meeting you both and I give our thanks once again for ridding us of that beast.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, tapping elbows with Osk. “Fare well, Osk.”

“Aye,” said Logan, coming over to tap elbows as well. “Mayhap we will meet again.”

Osk gave an abrupt nod of his head and disappeared back into the cave.

"I am uncertain how long we were underground," said Autumn, "but however long it was I feel in great need of fresh water on my skin. Those passages and rooms were clean enough but I feel grimy."

"Aye," said Logan. "We have probably been sweating spider juice as well. I be most looking forward to some proper food. No doubt we will find bread and cheese in Voterm and mayhap I can catch us a rabbit or a fish."

"I can hear running water over there," said Autumn. "Come on."

* * *

"So what do you think happened to Mother Midcarn?" asked Logan a short while later.

He was standing knee deep in the stream, naked, with a sharpened stick in his hand trying to spear fish. Autumn was sitting in the stream, washing her hair. Their wet tunics were spread over some bushes, drying in the sun.

"I know not," said Autumn, "and I confess to being worried although there is nothing we can do."

"Aye," said Logan, watching the water intently. "I somehow expected her to come back when the beast was gone but there was no sign of her in her rooms. Do you suppose she was that hairy beast or did she just gave up and go home to Gleard or somewhere else?"

"I pray she was not that hairy thing," said Autumn, "although if she were I wager she would not have attacked me." She scooped a double handful of water over her head.

Logan's arm flashed and his spear stabbed the water. He pulled it out and sighed to find it empty.

"You remember when you crashed into me in the passage?" he said,

taking up his stance again.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I apologise once again. You seem to have recovered well.”

“More or less,” said Logan. He rubbed his chest again just to make sure. “But I was thinking. You came through the wall, did you not?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I felt the wall as I passed through.”

“But you hit me,” said Logan. “You did not pass through me.

“Aye,” said Autumn. She wrung out her hair then got up and went to the bank. “You have a reason for bringing this up?”

“Only that it seems to me that being thrown against the wall would have killed you,” said Logan. “Your ribbon seems to have decided the wall was too hard but I was not. I wonder if you would have gone through me if I was likely to be killed by you.”

“That is an interesting thought,” said Autumn. She took her nekmit frond out of her pack and started to untangle her hair. “I do not see how we can ever know and I wager it is not so. When we were in Uli-Rratha that arrow went through me and killed you so I venture the ribbon only protects me, not you.”

“Aye,” said Logan tracking another fish. “That was my thinking as well. Oh, I forgot to tell you. That blue flame followed you into the Great Temple when you went in the second time.”

There was a triumphant cry and Logan proudly held a flapping fish in the air on the end of his stick. He slid it off and tossed it on the bank. Autumn picked it up and banged its head against a stone.

“I thank you for your sacrifice, little one,” she murmured then laid it neatly on her pack. “The blue flame? I did not see it in there but my mind was on the beast. Why did you not tell me before?”

“I did not want to talk of it in front of the others,” said Logan. His arm flashed again and again he grunted in disappointment. “The

flame never seems to do anything and if they did not know of it it seemed a bad idea to add to their fears. Still, I know not what it means but I did not see the blue flame come out again nor have I seen it since.”

Autumn nodded then looked around. “I wonder if it followed us out of the cave,” she said. “I do not see it anywhere but it is a bright day. Mayhap we will see it after dark.”

“Do you suppose it is somehow related to the hairy thing?” asked Logan. He half stabbed at a fish but stopped midway.

“Who knows what is related to what,” said Autumn. She put away her nekmit frond and propped herself on her elbows in the sun. “Mayhap Mother Midcarn knows but going by experience she is not one for explanations, even if we do find her, which be unlikely.”

“Hi-yeee,” crowed Logan jubilantly. He held up another flapping fish then waded through the water to lay it beside the other. “That be one each! Oh I am looking forward to this. A few herbs and some roots and we will have a meal fit for a Roinad.”

He dropped to the ground beside Autumn.

“Shall we head for Voterm today?” he asked, “or stop the night somewhere and go in tomorrow?”

“There is no urgency,” said Autumn. “When our clothes be dry let us make our way and if we find a spot for the night we can stop there.”

“Only I was hoping we might be able to get some bread today,” said Logan. “And mayhap some cheese to breakfast on.”

Autumn laughed. “I do not know if it is because I have been underground for a time or if it be because I am imbued with the sap of trees as Fiau said but I am finding Astauand most revitalising,” she said. “I feel myself growing more, I know not the word, fortified perhaps. Let me find some stalks for my hair and to carry the fish then we can move on and find you some bread.”

“And you,” said Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn, tying back her hair. “I would like some bread too.”

* * *

“What about here?” asked Autumn. “This seems a good place for the night.”

Some way further downstream they had come upon a bend in the stream with a small clearing on the narrower side. Against the far bank the stream ran quite fast but this side it was shallow and had a small pebbled beach. There were the long dead remains of another fire from some other traveller who had passed this way and left a nice flat stone in its centre. All ready to bake some flatbread, if they had any flour.

Logan looked at Astauand then down at the stream.

“We still have plenty of daylight left,” he said. “I venture Voterm be not much further away.”

“Ahh, I underestimated the strength of your belly,” said Autumn. “No matter, let us continue.”

Logan grinned. “’Tis not just ...,” then he froze as a cry came from some distance away.

Autumn jerked round and stared in the direction the cry had come from.

“That did not sound like an animal,” she said, listening carefully.

“I think it came from a little further over,” said Logan, pointing slightly to the left of where Autumn was staring.

The cry came again, this time ending abruptly.

“’Twas a woman's cry,” said Autumn, plunging into the stream. “Over

there.”

She rapidly waded across the stream, Logan not far behind, and plunged into the woods, her pack and water skin bouncing on her back. Logan ran after her then paused as the stalk through the gills of his fish broke. He grabbed the fish in his hands and chased after her.

Autumn stopped, her face taut with concentration and her ears straining. The cry came again, this time with a discernable edge of fear.

“That way,” cried Autumn and plunged into the woods again, slightly off to the right.

She dodged round a tree, her staff banging it as she passed, and sped off, outpacing Logan who lagged behind. Through the trees she saw a clearing and headed towards it. Off to the right Astauand glinted on the stream. She emerged to see a grassy area with two cows munching at the grass and a small wooden dwelling. All seemed quiet. The two cows looked up curiously, their jaws continuing to chomp.

“Who cried out?” Autumn quietly asked the cows, scanning the clearing. “Was it one of you, eh?”

Neither cow answered. They just looked at her for a little longer then went back to eating.

“Do you see anything?” asked Logan, coming up behind her.

“No,” she said quietly. “Perhaps it came from inside the dwelling.”

She slipped off her pack and the water skin and started to cautiously cross towards the dwelling, looking this way and that for any signs, her staff at the ready. Logan put down the fish and his water skin and pulled out his knife. His skill with a staff was almost non-existent and he felt more comfortable with a blade in his hand. He followed Autumn, keeping some distance back. If there was trouble it was best to keep out of her way.

Warily Autumn circled round the cows then froze. She went over to

the nearer cow and touched the side of its neck. It mooed and shook its head irritably.

“What is it?” whispered Logan, coming closer.”

“This cow has blood on its neck,” said Autumn quietly. “It does not look deadly but it is bleeding.”

She moved around the cow checking the other side then went over to the other.

“This one be untouched,” she reported. “I wonder what caused the wound.”

She started to edge around the dwelling then there was a low whimpering sound.

“Stay here,” mouthed Autumn to Logan and lightly ran on tip toe to the edge of the dwelling and peered around.

There was a man pressing a woman against the wall, one hand deep within her hair forcing her head back. The other hand pressed tightly into her belly. He was naked and his back and legs were covered in dark hair. He looked to be kissing her throat.

Autumn paused, uncertain. Was the woman being attacked or was she with her lover?

The man grunted softly and the woman whimpered again and lashed out feebly with her leg.

“Hold!” shouted Autumn, jumping out.

The man leapt backwards and the woman slumped to the ground, dragged over by his hand still entwined in her hair.

“Grwarrw,” growled the man as he twisted to face Autumn, except he was not a man like any she had seen before.

The creature's broad flat face leered at her and his wide mouth

cracked open to bare his small green teeth. His eyes angled sharply upwards and blazed deep yellow. His chest was as hairy as his back. He slashed at Autumn and she glimpsed hooked black talons on the ends of his fingers as she evaded the blow and used the movement to twist into a kick to his chest. He fell backwards under the impact, dragging the woman with him. He released his grip in her hair and rolled then jumped to his feet and dropped into a crouch, two sets of talons held up in front of him.

“Grrraahhh,” he snarled as Logan edged around the building several paces distant.

Autumn slammed her staff into the ground and used it to launch another kick at the creature. Her heel caught it on the shoulder and it spun away then righted itself.

“I have seen you two before,” it growled in a thick, deep voice. “Your time is coming.”

“Your time is now,” said Autumn, advancing upon it, one arm outstretched, the other holding her staff in her armpit ready to lash out.

“Pah,” growled the creature and spat on the ground contemptuously. Then it turned and ran towards the woods.

“Look after the woman,” yelled Autumn, giving chase.

The woman lay sprawled on the ground, her hair covering her face. She was whimpering and moving her legs convulsively.

“You be safe now,” said Logan, kneeling beside her. “There now, there now.”

He slipped his knife back inside his tunic and tossed his staff aside.

“Let’s try to get you sitting up,” he said. “Do not be alarmed. I am Logan, I only wish to help you. Come on, try to sit up.”

He gently lifted the woman by the shoulders and set her against the

wall of the dwelling then smoothed her hair out of her face.

“Oh Voqev!” exclaimed Logan when he saw all the blood covering her throat and the upper part of her tunic.

“How is she?” asked Autumn, coming back. “Oh Vallume! Get some water quickly, and cloths.”

She pushed Logan aside and knelt beside the woman.

“Where ...?” started Logan.

“Look inside,” said Autumn urgently.

Logan dashed inside the dwelling and spotted a bucket half full of water. He grabbed it then a cloth from a bundle on the straw bed behind the door. The bundle rolled and a baby fell out. It started screaming loudly and waving its arms and legs.

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan, hesitating.

The baby seemed angry rather than hurt so he abandoned it and ran outside.

“There is a baby inside!” he said thrusting the cloth at Autumn.

“I know, I can hear it,” said Autumn, soaking the cloth in the water.

At the sound of the baby's cries the woman stirred and started to struggle.

“Do not move,” said Autumn, holding her against the wall by the shoulders. “Logan here will look after the child.”

“Me?” said Logan, stepping backwards.

“You,” said Autumn starting to wash the blood from the woman's throat. “Go.”

Nervously Logan went back inside the dwelling. The baby's cries

intensified.

“Stay still,” said Autumn, washing the blood from the cloth then wiping the woman's neck again. “Logan!” she cried.

“Yes?” said Logan appearing in the doorway. He had the baby in his arms and was trying to soothe it. Its face was mottled red and wet.

“Get me another cloth then go and find a uyacaku tree,” said Autumn, inspecting the woman's injuries.

“What does a uyacaku tree look like?” asked Logan.

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “Take over here and I will go. Keep the cloth on the wounds, they are still bleeding. Put some pressure on but not so much she stops breathing.”

“What about this?” asked Logan, holding up the yelling babe.

“Oh Vallume,” said Autumn. “Oh, give it to me.”

They changed places and Logan started to apply pressure to the woman's neck. The child opened its eyes briefly to look at Autumn then started screaming even louder.

“This serves no useful purpose,” said Autumn to the baby. “Stop it.”

The baby ignored her and started to beat Autumn's chest with tiny fists.

“Oi!” came roaring across the clearing. “What in the name of Voqev are you up to? Get away from them!”

Autumn and Logan both looked around. A thickset, heavily bearded man was running towards them brandishing a scythe.

“Is this your baby?” called Autumn.

“Damned well right it is,” shouted the man, swinging the scythe at her.

“Then please take it,” said Autumn, sidestepping the scythe and holding out the baby at the same time. “Your woman is badly injured and I need to attend her.”

The man dropped the scythe and grabbed the baby which buried its hands in his beard and the screaming slowly subsided.

“Mizule,” said Autumn, “that be a relief. Now I can think again.”

“Be you doing this?” shouted the man. “I be skewering your guts, damn you!”

“Hold,” said Autumn. “This woman was attacked and we came to her aid. Her throat is injured and I need to find a uyacaku tree.”

“Who attacked her?” shouted the man, holding the baby tightly and kneeling worriedly beside the woman.

“Someone that ran off into the woods,” said Autumn. “Is there a uyacaku tree near here?”

“What?” said the man, staring helplessly at the blood seeping through the cloth Logan was holding to her throat.

“A uyacaku tree,” said Autumn, shaking his shoulder. “I need to stop the bleeding and seal the wounds.”

“A uyacaku tree?” said the man, struggling to engage his brain. “Yes, umm, over there, by the stream.”

“Show me,” commanded Autumn, grabbing his tunic and pulling.

The man resisted then slowly stood up. It was becoming apparent that Logan was trying to help the woman not kill her. He hurried off with Autumn, the baby now quiet in his arms.

“That be right,” muttered Logan. “Run off and leave me to deal with the blood as though I know what I am doing.”

He lifted the cloth from the woman's throat and blood started to well

up again in several places so he covered her throat again and gripped it tightly. She started to choke.

“Ooops, sorry,” he muttered and eased his grip a little. She began breathing again.

He rinsed the other cloth with his other hand then swapped them over. The front of the woman's tunic was now a sodden mass, tinged pink all the way down to her lap.

“I am back,” said Autumn's voice. “Where did you find the cloths?”

“Just behind the door,” said Logan.

She ran inside and emerged with another cloth.

“Move aside,” she said. “Luvan be here in a moment with uyacaku sap. I must dry the wounds.”

Logan gratefully let go of the woman's throat and made way for Autumn who tossed aside the wet cloth and started to dab her throat dry.

“Luvan be that man?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Most of these cuts be not too bad but these three are. Ahh, here he comes.”

Luvan was running back with the baby in one hand and a large piece of bark in the other.

“Thank you,” said Autumn, taking the out-thrust bark. “Logan, put your finger here and press hard. Do not let go until I say.”

Logan pressed where Autumn had pointed and immediately the wound just above stopped welling blood. Autumn scooped some thick yellow-green goo from the bark and carefully held the wound closed with one hand and smeared the goo over it with the other. Then she fanned the goo with her hand. She tested it for stickiness then smeared another layer of goo on top and fanned it again. Cautiously

she released her hold on the edges of the wound and they stayed closed.

“Good,” she said then waited for a few seconds studying the wound. “You can let go now.”

The resin held and no blood came out of the wound.

“Now here,” she said, moving on to the next.

When the three worst wounds were dealt with she liberally smeared the goo over the woman's entire throat and fanned it dry.

“What is that stuff for?” asked Logan, fascinated.

“It helps stop the bleeding and holds the edges of the wounds together so they can heal,” said Autumn. “When it is fully dry it protects the wound as well until it is fully healed. Help me get her tunic off. I need to check for other injuries. Luvan, does she have another tunic?”

“Aye,” said Luvan, “you want me to get it?”

“No,” said Autumn. “We will put her to bed for a time but she will need it later. Logan, give me your knife.”

Logan handed her his knife and she deftly slit the woman's tunic from neck to hem.

“There are some small scratches on her belly,” said Autumn, inspecting her. She gently pulled the woman forward and inspected her back. “And some scrapes on her back but they are but small. Logan, help me get her inside and in to bed.”

The woman's eyes flicked open and looked around in panic as she struggled to get up.

“My baby!” she said hoarsely. “Where is my baby?”

“She be here,” said Luvan, bringing the baby round so the woman could see it. “She be safe.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “She can still talk. I was afraid she could not.”

Chapter Twenty

“How is she?” asked Autumn coming back in through the woven rush door.

The woman was sitting up on the straw bed with her baby in her lap. She held her head stiffly but colour was coming back into her face.

“She is shaken but recovering well,” said Logan. “Luvan is warming some milk to help her throat.”

“Good, good,” said Autumn. “Luvan, I have put some uyacaku resin on the cow's neck as well. It had a nasty bite. You must make sure the resin stays dry until the wounds be healed else it will dissolve and the wounds reopen.”

“Right you are,” said Luvan, bringing over a cup of warm milk. “Caouma, love, try to drink this.”

He knelt beside the bed and helped Caouma swallow a little.

“Be you well enough to tell what happened?” he asked.

“I heard ...” Caouma in a hoarse voice then she started coughing and held her hand to her mouth. When she finished, Autumn took her hand and glanced at it.

“I was checking for blood,” she said, seeing Luvan and Caouma staring at her. She released Caouma's hand. “There be none so the injuries did not go over deep. You were saying?”

Caouma held her hand to her throat and Autumn gently took it away.

“Do not touch your throat,” she said. “The resin is good protection but not strong enough to be handled. Let your throat heal on its own.”

Caouma nodded.

“Luvan went ...,” and she started coughing again and took some more of the milk. “'Tis right sore,” she said. “Luvan went to our field and I

heard the cows get upset.”

She paused and her hand went to her throat but she wavered and put it back down again.

“So I went out to look and saw a man bending over it. Least I thought it was a man, from behind, 'cepting he wasn't wearing nothing. I thought mayhap he be a hideaway from the woods. You hear stories about such as them although we ain't seen one before in these parts. So I shouted at him to leave our cow alone and he turned round. Oh Mielikki! It weren't no man, that be for sure.”

She put her spare hand over her eyes and shook her head as though trying to expunge the memory. Her face went pale again.

“There, lass,” said Luvan, giving her a half hug. “It be gone now, thanks to these two.”

“It was Autumn,” said Logan. “She got rid of it, not I.”

“Tis no matter,” said Autumn. “So I am thinking that the thing then attacked you?”

“Aye,” said Caouma. “I think I screamed when he turned, it turned around, and then it came after me.”

“That must have been the cry we heard,” said Logan. “We were at the bend in the stream.”

“Tis a blessing you were no further away,” said Luvan. ‘Seems to me you arrived just in time. I heard the cry and came running but I would have been too late. Did not the dog give warning?’

“No,” said Caouma, “He did not make a sound.”

“I be flaying that bastard alive,” swore Luvan, thumping his fist on his knee. “I be getting that useless turd for protection when I be at the field but I swear, damn it to Yammoe and beyond.”

He stomped out the door.

"It grabbed me by my hair and threw me against the wall," said Caouma, tears starting to well up. "I screamed again but it started to bite my neck. Oh, oh," and her tears started to flow.

"Autumn, Logan," said Luvan reappearing in the doorway, "best you come look at this."

"We will be back in a minute," said Autumn, squeezing Caouma's hand. "Drink your milk and try to get some sleep."

Caouma nodded and stared at her cup, reliving the attack and trying hard not to start shaking.

"What is it?" asked Autumn when they got outside.

"Round the back," said Luvan. "Come."

They followed him round the back of the dwelling and over to the treeline not far away.

"Tis the dog," said Luvan.

It was lying on its side in the grass with its back at an impossible angle, its throat deeply lacerated.

"There be very little blood," said Autumn, kneeling to study the dog. "Tis unusual. There usually be lots of blood with throat injuries." She felt along its spine then pronounced that its back was broken.

"I wager your dog tried to do its duty and was bested," she said, standing up again. "Please show it the respect it deserves." She turned to look back at the dwelling. "I be thinking the creature came out of the wood around here and the dog attacked it. Then the creature saw the cows and went after them."

"Why?" asked Luvan. "What was it after?"

Autumn sighed. "There be very little blood," she said. "The wounds to the dog, the cow and Caouma are all at their throats. I wager the creature was after their blood."

“So it be a thing of Voqev, then?” said Luvan, what little they could see of his face behind his thick beard going ashen.

“I know not where it came from,” said Autumn, turning to look back at the woods, “nor where it went.”

“Did you not catch it and kill it?” asked Logan, a little surprised. He had just assumed that Autumn had as she had returned alone.

“No,” said Autumn. “It ran off into the wood and I gave chase. I nearly caught it then it simply disappeared.”

“You mean it hid somewhere?” asked Luvan, “or climbed up a tree?”

“No,” said Autumn. “It ran between two trees and then was not there any more. There was nowhere to hide. I checked all around and overhead.”

“That is not good,” said Luvan, frowning.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Best you sleep with your scythe tonight although I wager it will not return.”

“Why be you thinking that?” asked Luvan. “You think it did not like Caouma’s blood or some such?”

“No,” said Autumn. “It spoke in our tongue so I venture it be intelligent enough to know you be now forewarned and no longer easy prey.”

“It spoke?” said Luvan in surprise. “What did it say?”

“It swore, nothing more,” said Autumn giving Logan a quick shake of her head.

“Hmmm,” said Luvan. “Mayhap it was a man after all, just deformed and disfigured.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but no human I have ever met has two rows of teeth.”

“What?” said Luvan, jerking back. “Two rows?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Tis clear from the wounds in Caouma's and the cow's necks. The dog's be too badly torn to tell.”

“Hurmph,” growled Luvan. “That be right unsettling.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but there may be many creatures in the world with more than one row of teeth. I have heard tell of a fish with three.”

“Mayhap,” said Luvan, “but fish do not attack women and cows in fields.”

“This is true,” said Autumn. “With your permission I think Logan and I will sleep here tonight.”

“You be right welcome,” said Luvan. “Although I be thinking I will not be sleeping at all.”

“This is probably not a good time to ask,” said Logan, “but do you have any flour you can spare?”

“Flour?” asked Luvan. “We have two sacks of the stuff, fresh back from the grinder. Why? Will it help Caouma's wounds?”

“Oh no,” said Logan. “It just be that we ran out of flour some days past and I have a hankering for some bread.”

Luvan stared at him in astonishment then broke into laughter. “Oh aye, lad,” he said, slapping Logan's shoulder hard. “Come back to the house. You can have all the flour you want.”

* * *

“She has fallen asleep,” whispered Luvan when they got back to the dwelling. “Come, the flour be in the store at the end.”

He took them to the end of the small dwelling where there were some sacks slung from a greased pole under the roof.

“Have you got a bag or something?” he whispered.

“We have this,” whispered Autumn, producing the empty flour sack they had got in Veobad.

“Is that all?” asked Luvan.

“It is plenty for us,” said Logan.

“As you wish,” said Luvan, “but it seems poor recompense. Mayhap some honey or some dried fish?”

“Thank you, no,” said Autumn, as Luvan ladled flour into their small sack. “We have some fresh fish for our dinner and we travel light.”

“Is that what you do?” he asked, tying a piece of twine around the neck of the sack. “You travel?”

“Aye,” said Autumn.

“To what purpose?” he asked, leading them back outside again so as not to disturb Caouma.

“To see the world,” said Autumn.

“Oh aye,” said Luvan disinterestedly. He looked around at the woods and the stream that flowed past the edge of the clearing. “So you be staying here the night, then?”

“If that sits well with you, Luvan,” said Autumn. “We have to pass the night somewhere and you both may sleep a little easier if we are here.”

“For sure,” said Luvan. “I would not do this otherwise but as you are here, would you object if I go into the village? 'Tis but a short walk away and I would like to ask if any others have knowledge of this creature, aye, and to warn them as well. I will be back before nightfall.”

“Take your scythe with you,” said Autumn. “’Tis a good idea but it would be well if you stayed safe on the journey.”

“Oh, I can do better than that,” said Luvan. “A moment.”

He went back into the dwelling and emerged soon afterwards carrying something wrapped in a length of dirty cloth.

“Tis my sword,” he said, unwrapping it. “I was a Summen with the Roinad before I took up farming.”

“Oh?” asked Logan politely. “Which Roinad was that? Obvia Vasagle?”

“Nay, lad,” said Luvan, strapping the sword belt around his waist. He had to suck his stomach in a little as he had gained some weight since his army days. “Old Oohoi. The one before that there Vasagle.”

He got the buckle done up and relaxed his belly so it hung contentedly over the belt.

“Aye, this takes me back,” he said, pulling the sword out of its sheath and waving it around. “Oh I do hope that there man creature thing crosses my path. I be just in the mood for it.”

He tested the edge of the sword and smiled grimly. “Right, I be back before dusk. Help yourselves to any food or drink what takes your fancy.”

He strode off towards the stream. Logan and Autumn watched him as he followed it downstream and disappeared behind the woods.

Logan scratched his head.

“Well,” he said.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Well, indeed.”

Logan opened his mouth to say something then changed it to “Best I be getting our things.” He wandered off to collect Autumn's pack, the water skins and the fish from where they had left them at the edge of the clearing. The cows watched him then decided to follow to see what he was up to. When he turned to go back they stayed put and mournfully watched him then ambled off to a fresh patch of grass.

“Shall we make a fire?” he asked, sitting down beside Autumn

“We can cook the fish on Caouma’s hearth, I wager,” said Autumn, “although we had best sleep outside.”

“So, umm,” started Logan then stopped.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I be wondering about that too.”

“Have you seen that creature before?” asked Logan. “I have not.”

“It seemed somehow familiar,” said Autumn, “but I cannot rightly say how.”

“Well, it seemed to know us,” said Logan. “It definitely said ‘I have seen you two before’. Mark the ‘two’ as well. ‘Twas not just you or I but us both.”

“I did mark that, Logan,” said Autumn, “and that bothers me. We have not known each other that long so unless it is much mistaken, it has seen us in the past year or so.”

“’Tis a worry,” said Logan. “Where could it have seen us without us seeing it? And what of the ‘Your time is coming’?”

“I know not what it meant by that,” said Autumn. “It would seem to be obvious. Our time is coming just means that we will continue to live for a while longer.”

“Umm, no,” said Logan, looking at her in surprise. “‘Your time is coming’ be a threat.”

“How so?” asked Autumn, equally surprised.

“It means ‘our time of reckoning’ or ‘our time to die’,” said Logan. “’Tis a common threat in inns and among ill-matched couples.”

“I did not know that,” said Autumn. “Well, we learn something new every day. I wager such a threat was just bravado, though, else why would it not stay and make good the threat?”

“Mayhap it plans to return with friends,” said Logan. “That be usually the case at an inn.”

“’Tis as well we are staying then,” said Autumn. “I would not like Caouma and Luvan to be alone if it comes back with others.”

“Aye,” said Logan.

He gazed restlessly around then jumped to his feet.

“I am going to look for some herbs for the fish,” he said.

“Do you want me to come with you?” asked Autumn.

“Best you stay with Caouma and the babe,” he said. “I will not go far.”

* * *

He came back a little while later, beaming happily. Autumn was sitting quietly in the sun with her back to the wall, her legs crossed, her eyes closed and her hands resting comfortably on her ankles.

“Look what I found,” he said, fishing mushrooms out of his tunic. “They be nice and plump. There was a whole crop of them a short way down stream.”

“They will be nice with the fish,” said Autumn, opening her eyes and picking one up. “Why is it blue?”

“I noticed that as well,” said Logan. “They looked perfectly normal when I cut them but they started to go blue soon after.”

“I wonder if they be poisonous,” said Autumn.

“I ate one,” said Logan, “and I am well. It tasted of mushroom.”

“Do not have another until Luvan be back,” cautioned Autumn. “Mayhap he knows they are poisonous which is why the crop was still there, so close to the dwelling.”

She paused while Logan collected the mushrooms then fished around inside his tunic to find the herbs he had collected. They seemed to have worked their way around his back so he had to untie his belt cord to let them fall out.

“I have remembered where I have seen that creature,” she said when he'd settled down.

“Oh really?” said Logan, looking quizzical. “Where was that and where was I?”

“You were with me,” she said. “It was in Urbil's cave. Its likeness was painted on the wall.”

Logan stared at her for a few moments.

“Oh, Sploop,” he said. “Now I remember.”

He fell silent.

“But seeing its likeness is different,” he said at length. “Its likeness cannot see us. Do you suppose Urbil has painted our likenesses on the walls and the creature has seen them?”

“I dare say it is possible, although unlikely,” said Autumn. “But then, how likely is it for two people to see its likeness in Urbil's cave then see it in the flesh a few days later?”

Logan screwed up his face. “I do not like this,” he said. “Something here smells bad and I wager it is not our fish.”

* * *

Luvan returned just as Astauand's orb touched the horizon.

“Greeting,” said Autumn. “Any news?”

“Aye,” said Luvan. “It be right strange. How is Caouma?”

“She is still sleeping,” said Autumn, “although the babe cried for a

time but we left it be. 'Tis best with its mother."

"Aye," said Luvan. "Best I check on them then I be milking the cow. After that we can eat and I will tell you what I have heard. Can't rightly say as I know what to make of it as it sounds like damned nonsense to me. I be not putting too much store on it, them village folk be a superstitious lot."

"Can I help you milk the cows?" asked Autumn.

"Thank you kindly," said Luvan, "but there be no need. 'Tis only the one. The other was with a bull only a few days past so 'twill be a long while before she be producing."

He went off with a bucket to milk the cow while Logan got on with preparing the fish and making some bread. He found some leftover broth in Caouma's cauldron and put that on to heat as well.

"You are not from this area, then?" asked Logan when Luvan returned with half a bucket of milk.

"No, lad," said Luvan. "I was born a little North of Uli-Rratha and joined the army there." He scooped up a cup of the milk and started to feed the baby.

"I found some mushrooms down by the stream," said Logan when Luvan seemed to have a free moment. "They turned blue when I cut them. Are they safe to eat?"

"Reckon so," said Luvan. "I feed them to the cows when I find them but me and Caouma be not liking mushrooms so we have not eaten any ourselves. Cows seem to like them though."

"That be good enough for me," said Logan and put them on a stone in the fire to fry. "I have heated this leftover broth for you and Caouma although you both be welcome to share our fish."

"Oh, you have your fish," said Luvan. "You deserve it. We be happy with the broth."

He used the cup to feed some broth to Caouma then spent a little time with her and the baby before bringing the cauldron outside to finish while Autumn and Logan ate their fish with mushrooms and herbs.

“Help yourselves to milk,” he said settling himself on the ground. “Ahh, I be right hungry.”

He swallowed a few spoonfuls of the broth then settled back more comfortably.

“No one I spoke to had seen nor heard anything like the creature,” he said, “but they did see something else, or so they say.”

“What was that?” asked Autumn, chewing on some fish flakes and a piece of mushroom.

“A dragon,” said Luvan.

Autumn and Logan stared at Luvan in the growing dusk.

“Be you serious?” asked Logan after a few heartbeats.

“That be what they are telling me,” said Luvan happy with the reaction he'd got. “But they be a superstitious lot. Every right thinker knows there be no dragons.”

“Well,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “Master Xanos wrote of seeing a dragon in the Skizze Mountains in Neander some two hundred summers ago although no one else in his caravan saw it.”

“Master Xanos?” said Luvan, narrowing his eyes. “Two hundred years? You be from an Esyup, I warrant.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but it is of no import. Go on.”

“Well, that be about it,” said Luvan. “Seems something was seen flying through the air not long after dusk. It flew over the village twice then headed North. I reckon it was most likely a large bat but them as saw it swore it be much much bigger.”

“Did it breath fire?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Luvan. “It didn't even so much as fart in the wind and no one has gone missing. It just appeared from the South, circled then went North but as you can imagine they be full of it, especially them as didn't see a thing. Give it two or three days and it be bigger than the village, setting fire to everything in sight and gobbling up the old folk, you know what country folk be like. They'll be talking of it for many summers. Not much else to talk about round here.”

“The creature that was here had no wings,” said Autumn thoughtfully. Her face suddenly creased and she delicately pulled a fish bone out of her mouth and flicked it away. “I think you need wings to fly.”

“The dragon had wings they said,” said Luvan. “And there be a snake in these parts than can fly from tree to tree without wings.”

“You are joking!” said Logan, his jaw dropping open.

“No,” said Luvan. “I have seen them myself but there be no need to worry, lad. They only be an arm in length and they eat mice and frogs. You be too big for their little jaws to get around.”

“But they do bite?” asked Logan.

“Difficult to eat a mouse without biting,” said Luvan, “but they be not poisonous if that is what is worrying you.”

“What is worrying me is a snake flying out of a tree,” retorted Logan.

“The important thing is that everything else that flies has wings,” said Autumn, “so what the people saw could not have been the creature we saw nor that snake.”

Chapter Twenty One

Autumn woke with a start. She lay unmoving, her eyes closed but every sense reaching out through the darkness, probing for danger. All seemed quiet, nothing seemed to have woken her, and yet ...

Cautiously she reached out and touched the rough wood of the wall of the dwelling beside her. It was solid, unyielding, reassuring. Then it moved.

Autumn's hand jerked away instinctively and she sat up, fully alert and ready for combat but ... there was nothing to combat with. The wall loomed above her, silhouetted against the dark sky. Some stars were visible, others obscured by cloud, Plifal low and misty. Off to one side was the faint outline of the trees at the edge of the clearing. Further along the wall Logan lay still, a faint whistle coming from his regular breathing. Nearby one of the cows stirred and softly rumbled. All was reassuringly familiar. Autumn ran her hand along the uneven timbers. Nothing was amiss.

Autumn giggled. "Twas just your imagination," she muttered and giggled again then lay back down.

She closed her eyes and relaxed, cradling her head against her bent arm. Slowly the ground beneath her grew soft and began to undulate. Gently, soothingly.

"Ohh, that is nice," she whispered and stretched luxuriously, feeling her body undulate with the soft rhythmic waves beneath her.

She inhaled deeply, the rich smell of the countryside, the grass, the trees, the cows, even the stream invigorating her senses. She fancied she could smell the clouds and the sky, even Plifal.

"Mmmmm," breathed Autumn enjoying the exotic aromas. Slowly she opened her eyes. "Ohhhhhh," she mouthed in wonder and sat up.

The darkness was alive with a swarm of fireflies. Iridescent, shimmering, swirling in patterns too complex to follow but deep with implied meaning. Beyond the clearing the outlines of the trees glowed,

every leaf and bud clearly defined with dancing pink and blue and green light. An owl flew across the stream, vivid in living silver and trailing roils of purple in the air behind it. The stream chattered away to her and she understood every word.

“That is so beautiful,” said Autumn aloud, her voice as deep and slow as the root of a giant tree. She reached out her hand to touch the fireflies and her finger stretched to Plifal and beyond, her hand encompassing the night sky. She could see her blood coursing through the veins in her hand, vibrant and pulsing, the ridges, whorls and lines of her skin like mountains and valleys in a lustrous, living landscape.

The undulating ground beneath her stopped undulating. Somewhere in the endlessness before her the ground started to rise, the green grass of the clearing scintillating. The fireflies came together and, slowly at first but getting faster and faster, began to swarm around the mound that was rising. Beneath her the land slid forward and she rolled backwards against the soft, yielding timbers of the wall, enveloping her like a sack full of down. With a sudden inrush of air the mound started to breathe and take on a new form.

“Hello, Autumn and Logan,” said the mound. The multicoloured fireflies stopped swarming and formed themselves into eyes, a nose and a mouth.

“Hello,” said Autumn brightly, enraptured by the display.

“Or perhaps just one of you,” said the mound.

“It be me, Autumn,” said Autumn happily, stretching her arms out, wanting to touch and be touched. To be one with everything.

The fireflies changed their shape so the features began to look familiar.

“Or mayhap neither of you,” said the mound. Its voice was becoming familiar as well. “I have no way of knowing.”

“Oh, 'tis you,” said Autumn, relaxing into the softness of the wooden wall. 'Tis nice of you to join us. Are you well?”

"I may even be talking to myself and neither of you will ever hear my words but that is the risk I must take," said the voice.

"I can hear you, Mother Midcarn," said Autumn. "Would you like some bread?"

"But I hope one of you, at least, hears me," said Mother Midcarn.

The fireflies rearranged themselves into a smile and her eyes glowed like a million diamonds in the light of a thousand candles.

"Tis a glorious evening," said Autumn. "Shall I wake Logan? He be sleeping and will be sorry to have missed you."

"My dears, I know you are nearby and I know you both love mushrooms," said Mother Midcarn, "so I have left this message in the hope you find it as it is the only recourse left to me."

A stream of fireflies reached out like a hand pleading for comfort and mercy. Autumn brought one of her hands back across the sky to grasp it. A myriad of flashes shot through their arms.

"You see, my dears, I have been taken prisoner," continued Mother Midcarn, the fireflies swirling in a carnival of colour. "I know not where I am although it be very hot and judging by the sounds I hear, it seems to be deep underground yet I feel certain that I am still in your world. Beyond that I cannot say for I do not know. My Window has been taken from me and without it I am blind. I can see nothing in the future, the past or the present. My dears, my future and the futures of all lie in your hands for I have unleashed Bar Ilan."

"Is Bar Ilan staying for dinner?" asked Autumn. She tried to get to her feet but they lay beyond the horizon and did not want to come back. The fireflies started to fade and the shape of Mother Midcarn started to subside.

"I need your help, my dears," said Mother Midcarn, her voice fading. "Help me, my dears, please help me."

The mound disappeared and the clearing lay flat again. The glow

around the sleeping cows faded and Autumn's legs and arms returned from their travels. The timbers of the wall became hard again and pushed her upright.

"Ohhh," said Autumn in disappointment. "It be all over. How sad."

Logan snored and rolled over and Autumn lay down again.

"Sleep well, Mother Midcarn," she whispered and giggled. "That was fun."

* * *

Autumn woke before dawn, as usual. She went down to the stream to wash then came back and settled herself against the wall to wait. There were muted noises coming from inside the dwelling and the occasional cry from the baby. From time to time there were indistinct voices.

"Morning," said Luvan, appearing in the doorway with his milking bucket. "How be you?"

"I am well," said Autumn. "How is Caouma?"

"She had a troubled night," said Luvan, scratching his crotch vigorously. He yawned. "Her throat still be sore but she be on the mend I wager. I thank you again. Did you see any sign of that creature during the night?"

"No," said Autumn. "I neither saw nor heard any sign of the creature."

"That be good," said Luvan. "Well, best be doing the milking. You be staying a bit longer?"

"I think we will be on our way today," said Autumn.

"Oh, right," said Luvan. "Well, be in no hurry. You can have some fresh milk as soon as I be done and there be some oats if you have a taste for porridge."

“That is very kind of you,” said Autumn, smiling up at him. “I venture when Logan wakes he will be most happy to take up your offer.”

“Right you are, then,” said Luvan. He stood there for a few moments wondering what to say next then grunted and walked off to meet the cows that were slowly making their way over.

Autumn sat there, absorbing the sounds of the woodland coming to life as Astauand slowly peeped over the horizon. A cacophony of birds greeted It, tweeting, singing and hooting their welcome of the new dawn. At the edge of the clearing the stream jumped and tumbled, its clear cold water full of the joy of life. Nearby some baby rabbits emerged from under a bush, intent on play and watched closely by their mother. Further downstream a deer, skittish and nervous, bent to drink, starting at every unexpected sound. Out of sight around the side of the dwelling came the regular sounds of milk squirting into the bucket.

Astauand was nearly clear of the horizon when Logan stirred. He stretched then relaxed, his eyes closed. One hand slowly crept up and scratched his nose then rubbed it then he rolled over and sighed. One eye opened and inspected the world.

“Sploop,” he said suddenly and sat up.

The deer disappeared back into the woods and the mother rabbit sat up and stared, her nose twitching furiously at the sudden interruption.

“You are watching me,” he said, yawning again and scratching his head.

“Aye,” said Autumn.

“Be you not meditating?” he asked. “You are always meditating when I wake. 'Tis most strange to find you not. It is like Astauand not being in the sky. Is something amiss?”

“I want to talk to you,” said Autumn. “The world will not go astray if I do not meditate this dawn.”

“Oh,” said Logan, blinking suspiciously.

He yawned again and scratched the side of his chest absent-mindedly.

“It be right disconcerting to open your eyes and find you are being watched,” he said, gathering himself into a sitting position with his back to the wall. He belched then rolled his head across his shoulders to ease a slight stiffness. “Ahhh, so what do you want to talk to me about?”

“I will wait until you are fully awake,” said Autumn. She took a slow deep breath, held it then slowly released it.

“Oh,” said Logan. He looked around then shook his head. “Be that Luvan milking the cow?” he asked.

“Aye,” said Autumn, stretching her arms out in front of her and making weaving motions with her hands.

“How be Caouma?” asked Logan a long pause later.

“She be on the mend Luvan said,” said Autumn.

“Good,” said Logan. “I will be back in a minute.”

He got up and stretched again then headed off towards the woods. On his way back he stopped beside the stream and had a long drink then washed his face and hands and splashed water over his head.

“That is better,” he said coming back to the dwelling. “Is there any bread left?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, tossing him a flatbread. “I saved it for you. I dare say we can make some more before we leave.”

“Oh aye,” said Logan, tearing off a piece and chewing on it. He sat down again with his back to the wall. “So we be moving on today? I expected you to want to stay another day or two to see how Caouma fares.”

“That be what I want to talk with you about,” said Autumn. “Are you awake yet?”

“I suppose so,” said Logan, breaking off some more bread and popping it in his mouth.

“Let us go for a walk along the stream,” said Autumn. She jumped to her feet in one swift, graceful movement.

“Why?” asked Logan, staying seated.

“For the pleasure of living,” said Autumn, nodding towards the entrance to the dwelling.

Logan glanced at the doorway then got up. “As you wish,” he said.

They strolled down to the water's edge then Autumn headed upstream with Logan in tow, a mildly curious look on his face.

“Did you sleep well?” asked Autumn at length.

“Aye, well enough,” said Logan, “although I did have a strange dream.”

“As did I,” she said, continuing to walk. “Do you remember yours?”

“Not clearly,” he said. “There were lots of lights and my arms and legs seemed to stretch way past yonder mountains. Oh, and Mother Midcarn was in my dream as well.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn, nodding. “Mother Midcarn was in my dream as well. Everything was lit up and glowing and she had fireflies for eyes. Did she speak?”

“Ohh,” said Logan, stopping walking. “So she spoke to you as well, did she?”

“So she did speak to you?” asked Autumn, also stopping. “What did she say?”

"I am not rightly sure," said Logan thoughtfully. "'Twas as though she did not know I was there even though she was talking to me, if that makes sense."

"Did she greet you by name then say she did not know if you were there or not?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Logan frowning. "And something about mushrooms. Then she said something about being held prisoner by someone with a strange name and that her Window had been taken and she did not know where she was nor the Window. I did not follow that part clearly. Why would anyone take Mother Midcarn prisoner? How would that even be possible?"

"I dreamt the same," said Autumn. "The name was Bar Ilan." She turned and started walking slowly again. Logan watched her for a few paces then caught up with her.

"We had the same dream?" he asked. "Do you know of Bar Ilan?"

"'Twould seem so," said Autumn, "and no, I know no one by that name."

"Mushrooms!" said Logan and snapped his fingers. "We ate mushrooms last night."

"Aye," said Autumn, "and they turned blue when you cut them."

"Do you think they made us have the same dream?" he asked.

Autumn stopped walking and turned to look at him. Her face was very serious, even more so than her normal expression. "If it was a dream," she said.

"You think it really happened?" asked Logan. He turned to look across the stream at the volcano then squatted down and picked a grass stalk to chew on.

"This be Mother Midcarn," said Autumn. "She can do many strange things." She exhaled then crossed her arms. "I know you are nearby

and I know you both love mushrooms so I have left this message', that be what she said."

"I fancy I remember that," said Logan, chewing on the grass stalk. He spat a few shreds at the stream. "What do you think it means?"

"If we take it literally," said Autumn, "I venture she knew we are nearby and she left a message somehow for us to hear and that the mushrooms made that possible in some way."

"You think they be magic mushrooms?" asked Logan looking up at her. "Be that why they were blue inside?"

"Tis possible," said Autumn. "I cannot think of any other explanation unless it were all just a dream and we both had the same dream."

"I wonder how she knows we both like mushrooms," said Logan.

"Mayhap she has seen us eating mushrooms in her Window," said Autumn. "'Twould seem a big gamble though, leaving a message in the hope we would find and eat some mushrooms."

"Mayhap not," said Logan. "If she knows us that well then it be fairly safe that we will eat any mushrooms we find."

"But finding those particular mushrooms?" asked Autumn. "That seems unlikely. Especially if she does not have her Window any more."

"Aye, that be a fair point," said Logan. He sighed and threw away his grass stalk. "Seems to me that we have two choices here."

"Aye," said Autumn. "Either we decide that it was just a dream which for some reason we both had or we decide that Mother Midcarn actually did talk to us."

"And if it were a dream then we enjoy it for what it was," said Logan, "and go on with our travels. I venture that be not your choice though, Autumn."

"Is that the choice you want to take?" asked Autumn.

Logan dropped backwards from his squat to sit on the ground, his legs splayed out in front of him.

“She be a nice lady,” he said after a few moments. “I liked her even though she be giving me headaches and more. Ayah, if she be a prisoner that does not sit well with me.”

“So we are agreed?” asked Autumn, sitting down beside him.

“Oh, I doubt that very much,” said Logan. “If it is that she be a prisoner I am not seeing what we can do about it. We have no idea where she is and, to be honest, if this Bar Ilan has the power to take her prisoner I am not thinking even your skills as a fighter be able to overcome him. Or it.”

“I see your point, Logan the Pessimist,” said Autumn, “but there be two things you have missed.”

“Inevitably,” said Logan. He scratched his ankle. “I do not have your way of looking at things. What have I missed?”

“We do have some idea of where she is,” said Autumn. “She said we were nearby and that she is still in this world. That be a start. Oh, and that it was hot where she is and underground.”

“Well that narrows it down a bit,” said Logan. “We should be able to find her before lunch, then.”

“Oh I wager it will not be that soon,” said Autumn, then she frowned. “Was that another one of your jokes?”

“Twas not a joke,” said Logan. “I was being sarcastic.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. She thought for a moment. “What is sarcastic?”

“Pfft, I am not going there,” said Logan. “Mayhap when you understand jokes I be trying to explain sarcasm but not before. What was the other thing I missed?”

“I confess am not happy that you deny me knowledge,” said Autumn,

“but no matter, it will keep. The other thing you missed is that Mother Midcarn, if this be not a dream, went to the trouble to leave us a message.”

“Aye, what of it?” asked Logan.

“Do you not see?” said Autumn. “She knows us probably better than we know ourselves as she has seen our futures in her Window. She would not leave us a message if there was nothing we could do to help.”

“Mayhap she is desperate,” said Logan. “Desperate people oft-times do daft things.”

“But why would she leave the message for us?” asked Autumn. “I wager Mother Midcarn does not do daft things. Why not leave a message for someone who could help her?”

“Mayhap she did,” said Logan. “Mayhap she has left hundreds of messages for sorcerers all over this land or mayhap she does not know anyone else stupid enough to go on a wild pig chase to Sploop knows where because of some damned fool dream.”

“Oh, I wager it be not just Sploop who knows where to look,” said Autumn thoughtfully.

“I knew this was coming,” said Logan. “I could feel it in my bones and read it on your face.” He sighed in resignation and got up. “Where are we going then?”

“There,” said Autumn, pointing to Mor'upita-sehen, far off in the distance. “That be a living volcano. It be fairly nearby and I wager it be quite hot inside.”

Chapter Twenty Two

“So you have a plan, then?” said Logan.

“Perhaps the beginnings of one,” said Autumn, gazing at Mor'upita-sehen in the distance. “I be thinking that we head for yonder volcano and try to find a cave that gets us inside, or perhaps climb to the top and get in that way, as we did with Wut'qiui, then explore whatever tunnels and passages we find. Mayhap Mother Midcarn will be able to give us a better message when we get closer.”

Logan fell onto his back with a groan and lay outstretched beside the stream. He put both arms over his eyes.

“You do not like my plan?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Logan. “It could take forever to find a way in and even if we do we could wander the passages for an eternity and not find her. And that be not mentioning that while we do that you will be withering and dying from lack of sunlight and I will be doing the same from lack of food.” He groaned again. “And, even supposing we do find her, it could be another eternity to find our way out again, if we ever do.”

“There be a few details that need polishing,” admitted Autumn.

“And how hot does it get in there?” asked Logan, peering at her from between his arms. “I hear tell that volcanoes belch fire and Voqev knows what else. What if Mor'upita-sehen decides to do that when we are inside?”

“’Tis not likely,” said Autumn. “Mor'upita-sehen has gone so nothing should happen.”

“What if this Bar Ilan has taken over?” asked Logan. He moved his arms so they were draped over his head. “What if it tries to stop us? And what if there be other creatures we know nothing about? This loathsome creature that attacked Caouma and the dragon or whatever it was that was seen over the village may have something to do with Mother Midcarn being taken. Mayhap more and worse is to come. I

venture we need a different plan rather than a polish of this one.”

“Tis a risk we have to take,” said Autumn, “unless you can think of something better.”

Logan screwed up his face and rolled over.

“I wonder if we be at fault for approaching the problem too directly,” he said after a while, his voice muffled from the grass.

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “Sometimes it is good to circle round a problem and come up on it from behind. Go on.”

“That is all I have thought of so far,” said Logan, rolling over again and sitting up. “Instead of going to Mor'upita-sehen directly, why not go somewhere else?”

Autumn pondered this.

“That is good thinking,” she said. “Go on.”

“Ahh, I was hoping you would have some thoughts on that,” said Logan. “Umm, well, the first thing seems to be to find a cave that gets us inside, so why do we not go where we know there is such a cave?”

“You mean back upstream?” asked Autumn. “Where we came out yesterday?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “I know it be not much of an idea but ..., well, it be a start.”

“It is an excellent idea,” said Autumn, thoughtfully. “If you lack knowledge of a thing then ask those who do know.”

“You mean Qaate and the others?” asked Logan, sitting up.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “They know these passages and mayhap will even guide us to the bowels of Mor'upita-sehen. That should make our search a lot easier. Mayhap they will even help us search and they will know where to find food and water.”

“Oh Sploop, I will never learn,” said Logan sadly, shaking his head slowly.

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn.

“Damned spiders eggs,” he grumbled. “If we stay topside at least we can eat proper food.”

* * *

“So, let me see if I understand this rightly,” said Qaate. “Mother Midcarn comes to help us find our lord, Mor'upita-sehen, but instead gets herself taken prisoner. You come to help us rid ourselves of a large hairy beast that has suddenly appeared and then you leave, never intending to return. But yet you do return, this time asking us to aid you. You say that Mother Midcarn has appeared to you in dreams asking for your aid but not telling you where she may be found. Is this a fair summary?”

“Well, yes,” said Autumn with a slight shrug. “You seem to have captured the essence of the matter.”

“Some questions occur to me,” said Qaate, twiddling her walking stick between her fingers.

“I venture we do not have the answers,” said Autumn, “but feel free to ask them.”

“Be Mother Midcarn a prisoner of Mor'upita-sehen?” asked Qaate.

“I think not,” said Autumn. “She said she had unleashed Bar Ilan so 'twould seem reasonable to assume that this Bar Ilan be her captor.”

“And is this Bar Ilan another name for Mor'upita-sehen?” asked Qaate.

“I know not,” said Autumn, “and I venture you and Juawau would have a better knowledge of the other names of Mor'upita-sehen than I.”

“'Tis not one I know of,” said Juawau, “but we are not privy to all the

secrets of our lord.”

“Hmm,” said Qaate. “It may well be that we have already offended It by seeking to interfere in Its business and to further interfere could prove calamitous. If Mor’upita-sehen does not wish to return then our seeking to find the one who can make It return would not, I fear, be a productive venture.”

“I can see the validity of that line of reasoning, Qaate,” said Autumn, “but every line of logic is no better than the base from which it derives and yours may be flawed. There is no reason to presume Mor’upita-sehen and Bar Ilan be one and the same and although Mother Midcarn did say she had unleashed Bar Ilan she did not say that Bar Ilan be her captor.”

“Indeed,” said Qaate, “so it is quite possible that Bar Ilan be unrelated to this and that Mor’upita-sehen be her captor, mayhap even in punishment for unleashing this Bar Ilan.”

“Yes, it is possible,” said Autumn, “but just as equally not. We lack any knowledge on which to make a judgement here.”

“Quite,” said Qaate. “I am also moved to ask why Mother Midcarn did not come to us directly for our aid on her release. We are, after all, her employers and, presumably, her captivity has some relation to the work she was performing on our behalf.”

“We do not know the cause of her captivity,” said Autumn patiently, as she was used to the endless philosophical deliberations of the elders at her Esyup, “so we cannot assume that it is related to the task she was performing on your behalf. Mayhap it is not and that be why she did not request your aid. But, on the other hand, it may also be that she does not have the means of contacting you from her place of captivity and contacted us instead.”

“She still has a duty to contact us,” said Juawau.

“And mayhap she is fulfilling that duty,” said Autumn, “using Logan and I as the messengers.”

Qaate raised an eyebrow and sniffed.

“And I am moved to ask,” she said, upending her walking stick and tapping its handle on the table, “why, if she is able to contact Mor'upita-sehen Itself, why she does not ask the deity to intercede on her behalf. I venture this Bar Ilan be of lesser significance than The Great One.”

“As I recall,” said Autumn, “Mother Midcarn told you that she thought she knew where Mor'upita-sehen had gone, not that she was in contact with It. Mayhap she is unable to ask The Great One for aid or, well, ...” and she stopped, reluctant to continue that thought.

“And what?” demanded Qaate, tapping her walking stick on the table again. “Do not try to withhold anything from me.”

“I am reluctant to say it,” said Autumn, “but mayhap Mor'upita-sehen be held captive by this Bar Ilan also.”

“Impossible!” interjected Juawau. “Mor'upita-sehen is all powerful!”

Qaate held up her hand for silence and gazed thoughtfully at Autumn.

“And you?” she asked as the silence stretched. “What is your interest in this?”

“Mother Midcarn is our friend,” said Autumn, “and it is beholden on all friends to aid each other when aid is asked for.”

“But this would seem an impossible burden,” said Qaate. “No true friend would ask the impossible.”

“A debatable point,” said Autumn, “but the request has been made and I will do what I can. Besides, I have made a vow that goes beyond the dictates of friendship.”

“And what is that vow?” asked Qaate.

“I have sworn to Vallume to uphold the sanctity of women,” said Autumn.

“Pah,” said Juawau. “To a false god!”

“Be that as it may,” said Autumn, giving her a level look. “But I have made a vow and I shall remain true to that vow, with or without your aid.”

“Even when that request for aid comes to you in a dream?” asked Qaate. “How can you know it be anything but a dream? An invention of your imagination?”

“Two reasons, Qaate,” said Autumn. “The lesser being that I am not accustomed to receiving such requests in this manner. Indeed I have never before received a request for aid in a dream.”

“So you say,” said Qaate, “but how are we to know the truth of that? And the other?”

“The other is that I am accustomed to the skills of Mother Midcarn,” said Autumn. “She has demonstrated skills beyond the reach of others to me in the past and I believe that she does have the skill to send me a message in my dreams. Indeed, I also believe that the manner of delivery augurs the direness of her current situation.”

“In what manner has she demonstrated such skills to you in the past?” asked Qaate, frowning.

“They are of no great relevance,” said Autumn, “but I wager you have some knowledge of her skills. It does not fall to many to be asked to find a missing god.”

“Hmmm,” said Qaate.

She stared unblinkingly at Autumn, resting both her hands on her walking stick. One finger tapped a slow rhythm but otherwise she seemed to have withdrawn.

The silence stretched unbearably for Logan. Autumn was entirely used to it. Esysup elders could remain silent for days while deciding how to answer a question, or even whether to answer it. A story that continually circulated among the non-elders, and which was almost certainly not true but had the benefit of being believable, was that an

elder in (unspecified) times past had died from starvation having spent too long contemplating her response to the question 'do you want salt or honey with your oats?'. Logan spent the time fidgeting restlessly. Autumn spent the time debating whether Qaate was thinking through all the ramifications, being indecisive or merely delaying for effect. Or even, conceivably, all three. She decided it was for effect as Qaate appeared to be decisive and the ramifications were not overly complex.

In time Qaate coughed dryly and seemed to come back to life.

"Your request is absurd," she said mildly, "and your explanation even absurder."

Logan exhaled sharply and looked disappointed. Autumn merely waited for Qaate to finish as she clearly had more to say.

"No one with even the intelligence of an aciui would expect to be believed," she continued, "and you are clearly more intelligent than an aciui. I find I am asking why you would come to me with such absurdities expecting to be believed and the only explanation I can think of is that you speak the truth."

"Sploop!" muttered Logan and Juawau frowned at him.

"We do indeed speak the truth, Qaate," said Autumn.

"Yet perhaps not the whole truth," said Qaate, "but no matter. Why do you wish for guidance within Mor'upita-sehen?"

"Because we believe Mother Midcarn to be there," said Autumn patiently.

"But why within Mor'upita-sehen?" asked Qaate.

"All she said in her message was what she was nearby, that it was hot and underground," said Autumn. "I venture it be hot within Mor'upita-sehen."

"Indeed," said Qaate. "Too hot to sustain life. There the rock itself be

liquid and if, by some sorcery, Mother Midcarn be within, you will not be able to release her and live, unless you be a sorcerer yourself. Are you a sorcerer, Autumn?”

“Nay,” said Autumn. “My skills are those of a Krisana not of a sorcerer.”

“And you, Logan?” asked Qaate. “Where do your skills lie?”

“I can cook passably well,” he replied, startled at being directly addressed for the first time, “and argue well enough to not bore Autumn over much but that be about all.”

“I wager that be a significant skill in itself,” said Qaate with an amused chuckle. “I would not be surprised if Krisanas bore easily even if they do have the self-control to hide it but I fear it would not keep you alive inside liquid rock.”

“Mother Midcarn knows these things,” said Autumn, “and she would not ask for aid that is beyond our powers to give. Do you have any thoughts yourself, Qaate?”

“You left us a half and one shadows⁵ ago,” said Qaate. “Since then we have had reports of strange occurrences in one of the less frequented regions of our community.”

“Indeed?” asked Autumn. “And you think this is relevant to our situation?”

“Perhaps,” said Qaate. “Our community extends from Wut'qiui all the way to Wa'craen although it be divided in two by Mor'upita-sehen because of the heat. There be but a few passages that go around at a safe distance although even they are hot, oft-times unpleasantly so. That particular region is not lived in. The passages are merely to pass

5 Being sub-surface dwellers, the Esuaqi have no terminology for the passage of time in terms of the movement of the sun or moons. Their standard measurement for time is how long a typical oil lamp burns. Despite their lack of natural light, however, their body clocks are still circadian and coincident with the cycle of the sun. Thus the term *a shadow* corresponds to what surface dwellers call *a day*, meaning a full day and night cycle. There is some dispute among linguists on the origin of this term but as Esuaqi either dim their lamps or douse them entirely to sleep, the most commonly accepted origin of the use of *shadow* is to mark a full lit/unlit cycle, i.e. a day.

from one side to the other.”

“And the strange occurrences?” asked Autumn.

“There was some minor carelessness at one of the aciui farms between here and Mor’upita-sehen,” said Qaate. “Several aciui escaped and roamed the passages. In the process of rounding them up and herding them back sounds were heard echoing through the passages that had no obvious explanation.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn, frowning. “But this was after we left so I do not see the significance.”

“The accounts reached me after you left,” said Qaate. “But the incident was several shadows ago. The aciuiherds were slow in telling us as they did not think it overly important.”

“But you do?” asked Autumn.

“Mayhap it be just a coincidence,” said Qaate, “but around the time Mother Midcarn went missing, unusual sounds were heard in that area and it be quite hot around there and most decidedly underground. I venture it be a good place to start your search, although I know not where she would be held. ’Tis only passages and someone in a passage would be found by chance sooner or later.”

“So you would think,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “Am I right in thinking that the source of the echoes was never found?”

“Aye,” said Qaate, “although I wager no one made any real effort to search. Why should they?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “How far away is this region?”

“Half a shadow or thereabouts,” said Qaate. “Do you wish to go there?”

“As you say,” said Autumn, “it is somewhere to start at the very least.”

“Then I will send someone with you as a guide,” said Qaate, “and this

person can arrange for others from the farms to help in your search. Do you anticipate any violence?"

"Tis the nature of my training to always anticipate violence," said Autumn, "and I wager whatever has taken Mother Midcarn captive will not be overly pleased at any attempt to recover her and may well resist. So, yes, I anticipate violence although of what nature I cannot say."

"That is unfortunate," said Qaate. "We are a peace loving race and have no armies or any skilled in the arts of war. Do you intend to recruit warriors from topside?"

"I had not thought of doing so," said Autumn.

"We would prefer you did not," said Qaate. "One reason we have been able to remain peaceful is that few from topside know how to get down here and those that do know only the highest levels. I would not welcome warriors and have no desire to let them learn our pathways."

"Then I shall have to deal with any violence on my own," said Autumn. "Which be in many ways a blessing as I have no knowledge or skills in managing warriors and armies."

"That is good," said Qaate. "Twould seem the decision is made then. If you wait here I shall find someone to be your guide. Juawau, please arrange for food so that Autumn, Logan and the guide are well fed before they depart on their quest. Aye, and best have some extra prepared to take with them. They may be some time away."

She stood up and left the room. Juawau hesitated, seemingly about to say something then left as well.

"Food?" said Logan, rather sourly. "I pray it be not more spiders eggs and legs."

"I suspect that be all they have," said Autumn, "Still, we do have some bread and cheese and a full sack of flour."

"I pray it lasts long enough," said Logan. "Umm, Autumn, can I ask

you something?”

“Of course, friend Logan,” said Autumn. “I would hope you could ask me anything.”

“Umm,” said Logan, a trifle nervously. “Do you hide the fact that I bore you?” He paused, puzzled by her reaction. “Why are you laughing?”

Chapter Twenty Three

“There are more people in these passages than I expected,” said Autumn after they had gone quite a distance.

“We are in the busier part,” said Osk, “and word is spreading of you so some have come to gawp. 'Tis unknown for a topsider to come down this far.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, nodding and smiling at yet another greeting from a passer-by.

“Soon we will be in the central region which is rural and has few people,” said Osk. “There we will find Hial who reported the sounds. She may have more to tell us and will, no doubt, take us to where she heard the sounds.”

“I am not sure what use that will be,” said Logan, “but it is a start.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “No matter how long the journey it must always begin with the first step. It is good of you, Osk, to guide us.”

“I would have preferred not to,” said Osk, “as I have much to do on my own farm but I know the central region well and Qaate and the Sviatar Halava wanted someone reliable.”

“Ahh, they do not fully trust us,” said Autumn. “'Tis quite understandable.”

They passed several rooms with people standing at the entrances. Some smiled and greeted them and others watched silently. Two small children started to follow but were snatched back by their mothers. The passage branched and Osk led them down the broader of the two then stopped beside a large niche in the wall. He refilled their lamps from a large urn stored there.

“Bronea said the oil comes from Mor'upita-sehen,” said Autumn. “Did she mean the deity or the volcano?”

“She be training to be Sviatar Halava like her mother,” said Osk, “so

everything, good and bad, comes from It. 'Tis only natural, I suppose, for a young girl not to ask by what process the oil gets here."

The passage branched again and, again, they followed Osk into the broader fork. There were fewer rooms along this passage and fewer people to watch them pass.

"So where does it come from?" asked Logan.

"Aciui," said Osk. "We eat their flesh and the juices are processed to make the oil. There are people whose task it is to make sure all storage pots are kept full."

"I confess I am intrigued by how your people have adapted to life underground," said Autumn. "How long have you been here?"

"You mean us Esuaqi?" asked Osk, "or me personally?"

"The Esuaqi," said Autumn.

"I do not know in your terms," said Osk. "A moment."

He stopped to go and exchange greetings with a friend a short way down another passage then, after some laughing and slapping of shoulders, he returned to lead Autumn and Logan again.

"You were telling us about the Esuaqi," said Autumn.

"Oh, aye," he said. "You have some way of measuring the passing of time by the weather, but down here we have no weather and my head cannot follow it, but Juawau tells me our ancestors first came here twelve or thirteen generations ago. I am not sure exactly."

"That be a long time," said Logan. "Why did you come here?"

The passage started to slope gently downwards and it seemed a little warmer than it had been.

"I be told there was a war," said Osk. "Some sort of fight over which gods be true and which be false. I know not how it started but this

were a long way over somewhere, I am not sure where, but there are no volcanoes there. There were them as said Mor'upita-sehen were a false god as there were no such thing as volcanoes so how could there be a deity of what don't exist. I be not knowing the ins and outs of it but there was a big fight and them as knew of Mor'upita-sehen left and came here. A lass by the name of Varfuiotui found Mor'upita-sehen and spoke with It and explained their predicament. Mor'upita-sehen, being most benevolent, said the people could stay here with It and make their home under the volcanoes."

"That must have been a glorious time," said Autumn. "What happened to Varfuiotui?"

"She became our first Sviatar Halava," said Osk. "Juawau be descended direct from her brother. All the Sviatar Halava be descended from Varfuiotui and her two brothers."

"Is that why there are only three Sviatar Halava?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Osk. "When one dies their oldest living child takes over."

"What happens if a Sviatar Halava has no children?" asked Logan.

"Has never happened yet," said Osk, "and we pray it never will. I venture if it does then Mor'upita-sehen will have to do something about it. Have you ever seen an aciui farm?"

"No," said Autumn.

"We be on the edge of one," said Osk. "You hear that sound?"

"That rustling?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Osk. "Come along here, 'tis only a short distance."

He led them down an ill-lit narrow passage and the rustling got steadily louder. The passage joined another which was substantially wider than any they had been in before. Osk led them along this passage until they came to a wide entrance covered with thick leather-like ropes. The rustling was louder here and constant.

“Do not undo the ropes,” said Osk, “or you be letting the beasties out, but have a look.”

They peered in between the ropes and Logan shuddered. Behind the ropes was a vast cavern filled with a seething mass of half-grown aciui, crawling over the walls and roof as well as the floor and each other. They sensed the presence of the people and surged towards them, no doubt thinking it was feeding time.

“Damned, they be a healthy lot,” said Osk proudly. “’Tis it not a beautiful sight?”

“Umm, there does seem to be a lot of them,” said Logan, horrified.

“Aye,” said Osk. “Each female lays several thousand eggs. Our problem be keeping the numbers down, else we’d be overrun with ’em. No need to be scared, lad, they’s just being friendly.”

Logan had stepped back as several of the aciui reached out with a leg or two, trying to touch him.

“Give ’em a pat,” said Osk. “They like that.”

“Another time, perhaps,” said Logan putting his hands behind his back.

Autumn cautiously reached out and touched the leg of one of them. It was dry and leathery. The aciui chomped its jaws at her in a friendly fashion.

“What do they eat?” she asked.

“Our waste,” said Osk, “and mosses and algae and other odds and ends.”

She scratched the aciui’s upthrust leg and the thing chittered at her and thrust another leg up.

“See?” said Osk happily. “It likes you.”

“Do they eat people?” she asked, not taking her eyes off it.

“Aye, I suppose,” said Osk. “They will eat most anything I daresay but they don't be eating any of us 'cepting where there be an accident or something. That be why it seemed right strange you were attacked. Aciui be friendly creatures. No matter, shall we be moving on?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, pulling her hand back. The aciui leapt at the ropes in annoyance and she stepped back hurriedly. Osk didn't seem to notice.

“All our farms be around the centre,” he said, moving back along the passage. “There be none as far out as Wut'qiui. Can't say as I rightly see how they even got there, never mind how they got topside and found you. It be right strange. Would have thought it too cold for them if nothing else.”

“The world is full of mysteries,” said Autumn, “until you find out the explanation then you wonder why it was not obvious all along.”

“Aye, mayhap you be right,” said Osk. “Hial's farm be aways yet. Best we be getting a move on.”

* * *

The passages were distinctly warmer now and Osk was visibly sweating.

“Please, do not do that,” muttered Logan when Autumn started to take off her robe.

She gave him a thoughtful look then put her robe back on.

“I venture she be too hot in that thing,” said Osk, glancing back.

“I feel better when she is wearing it,” said Logan.

“Mayhap,” said Osk, “but does she? 'Tis hot along here. Why not let her take it off?”

"I am not too hot," said Autumn. "'Tis easier to carry this way."

"As you wish," said Osk, "although I would not be wearing such a thing. Hial's farm be a little further on but her rooms are down here. Come."

He led them down a narrow passage which opened up unexpectedly into four dimly lit rooms. Half a dozen people stopped what they were doing to stare.

"Osk?" cried a tough looking older woman, coming over to meet them. She carried a long thin knife encrusted with black. "What brings you this far out? And who are these?"

She studied Autumn and Logan with great interest.

"Well met," said Osk. "I be here to talk about the noises you heard and I have some friends with me. Autumn and Logan."

Hial nodded, mid-way between friendly and unfriendly. "Why be you bringing topsiders? Does Qaate know?"

"Qaate sent us," said Osk.

"She sent topsiders about some damned fool noises?" said Hial, frowning. "You I understand although I did not expect any visitations, but topsiders? How did you even know about the noises?"

"They be very trusted, Hial," said Osk. "And there be things going on 'tis best you know nothing about."

Hial gave a cynical laugh. "Aye, reckon so," she said. "Always is. Just because I feed, clothe and light you buggers don't mean you need to tell me what be going on. Always up to some sort of politicking you lot."

She looked at Autumn and Logan for a few moments then turned back to the others.

"Get back to your work, you rock cracked wasters," she roared and the

others hurriedly got back to their work, giving the arrivals sidelong looks and muttering to each other. "Pif, take over here," and she tossed her knife, point first. at a large young man who caught it adroitly.

"Pif be my son," said Hial, turning back to study Autumn and Logan. "Best you be coming in here," and she lead them over to another, unlit, room.

She pulled out a lamp from a niche and lit it from Osk's lamp.

"Sit down," she said, gesturing to some hard, narrow stools around a table. "So what's this all about?"

"Qaate got your report of strange noises," said Osk. "We be here to investigate."

"Don't you aciuishit me, Osk," said Hial. "No one ever comes here to investigate anything 'cept when production be down and ain't never had a topsider down here, that's for sure. Don't you be giving me any of this 'you be not needing to know' shit, neither."

Osk sighed.

"These be friends of a topsider what be helping Qaate," he said. "Their friend be missing and they be looking for her."

"Oh aye," said Hial, leaning back against the wall. "This be that witch what be looking for old Mor'upita-sehen, then?"

"How do you know about that?" demanded Osk.

"It be common knowledge," said Hial. "So, it be true then."

"I did not say that," said Osk.

"You did with your face," laughed Hial. "You two be witches also?"

"No," said Autumn. "We just be ordinary folk and our friend be not a witch either. She be a sorcerer."

“Same difference,” said Hial. “Well, you be finding nothing down here 'cept passages and aciui, and rock. Lots of rock. Be better if you were witches, you'll be needing a bit of magic to find something what ain't here.”

Autumn smiled. “’Tis unlikely, I concede,” she said, “but you heard strange noises and we have no better ideas for where to start. Can you tell us what you heard?”

Hial grunted. “Were just echoes through the passages,” she said. “Could have been anything, I reckon.”

“Can I ask why you reported the sounds to Qaate?” asked Autumn.

“I didn’t,” said Hial. “Never crossed my mind to. How did you hear about them?”

“I know not,” said Osk. “Only that someone told Qaate.”

Hial frowned then yelled for Pif, who came running.

“Did you tell anyone about them noises we heard in the passages a while back?” she demanded.

“No, Ma,” said Pif, looking worried. “Only Yusi.”

“That explains everything,” said Hial. “Be gone, lad,” and Pif disappeared. “Yusi be his friend and she be daughter of Kren,” she added by way of explanation.

“Ahhh,” said Osk, nodding.

“Who is Kren?” asked Autumn.

“He is an old gossip,” said Osk. “He makes and sells aciui oil and talks non-stop to anyone who’ll listen. Pah, he talks to them as ain’t listening as well, makes no never mind to him. If Kren knows something then everyone will know in a lamp or two.”

“And Yusi takes after her Da,” said Hial sourly.

“What sort of noises did you hear?” asked Autumn.

“Can't rightly say,” said Hial.

“Were they voices?” asked Autumn, “or banging or rocks rubbing together?”

“Mayhap,” said Hial. “Twere just echoes, like.”

“Hial, please,” said Osk. “You can tell them.”

Hial scowled.

“As a kindness to me,” added Osk.

Hial curled her lip and wrinkled her nose.

“Topsiders!” she growled and shook her head. “Faff.”

“Please, Hial,” pleaded Osk.

Hial rolled her eyes. “Could've been a voice,” she conceded. “Not saying it was mind, but could have been.”

“Just one or several?” asked Autumn.

“Two, mayhap three,” said Hial. “Or mayhap just the one but different levels.”

“Different levels?” asked Osk.

“Aye, one higher than the other,” said Hial. “Mayhap a third but can't say for sure. 'Twas lower but sounded different, like. Could just have been the passages playing tricks.”

“So it was just voices?” asked Autumn.

“That time,” said Hial.

“There have been other times?” asked Osk. “Can you not just tell us

rather than make us drag it out of you?”

Hial scowled at him. “The time Pif were with me,” she said, “when we had a breakout, it were the voices, but I be hearing other sounds two, mayhap three times since.”

“Breakout?” asked Autumn. “What is that?”

“Aciui got loose,” said Hial. “Happens from time to time. They chew on the ropes 'till they break through.”

“Ohh,” said Autumn. “What sounds have you heard since the voices?”

“Just the one voice,” said Hial, “and mayhap some banging or tapping.”

“What did you do?” asked Osk.

“Ignored it,” said Hial. “Ain't got no time to go investigating strange noises.”

“Pah,” said Osk. “It isn't harvesting. You got plenty of time on your hands 'til next harvesting.”

“Shows how little you know, mister big time era'owen of a Sviatar Halava,” snorted Hial.

“Tis nothing to be ashamed of if you were scared,” said Autumn. “Only a fool is not scared when strangenesses happen and I wager you be not a fool.”

Hial didn't answer, she just gazed at Autumn.

“Osk tells me that these passages are the only ones through to the other side of Mor'upita-sehen,” said Autumn after a couple of heartbeats. “Surely you would hear voices in the passages as people pass through.”

“Aye,” said Hial, “but these were not in those passages. They were in the passage behind the farm. No one goes there except me and some

of the workers.”

“Could the sounds not have been your workers?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Hial, glancing at Osk. “Like he said, ain’t harvesting time yet.”

“Mayhap it were a couple who wanted some privacy,” said Autumn.

“Aye, that was my first thought,” said Hial, “Cepting they was all working when the breakout was found and none be so stupid as to canoodle during a breakout.”

“That be true,” said Osk, looking over at Autumn. “If aciui be able to lay eggs in the passages we’d be overrun in no time. No one what works the farms would risk that for a canoodle. Simply ain’t worth it.”

“But it is possible?” asked Autumn. “Mayhap some passers-by left the main passage for some reason?”

“Aye, anything is possible, I suppose,” said Hial. “Mayhap even Mor’upita-sehen has come back and is playing games with us. Yes, Osk, I have heard the rumours, don’t you be giving me looks like that.”

Osk sighed and looked unhappy.

“Anything else you want to know?” she asked.

“When did you last hear these noises?” asked Autumn.

“Last shadow,” said Hial.

“Have you heard all these sounds in the same place?” asked Logan, leaning forward, “or in all sorts of places?”

“Several places,” said Hial, “but all in the same area.”

“And where be that?” asked Osk.

“Back of second glebe,” said Hial.

“What is a glebe?” asked Autumn.

“’Tis a large cavern used for growing aciui once hatched,” said Osk. “Like that one I showed you back yonder.”

“I see,” said Autumn. “And these were not the sounds that aciui make?”

“You be thinking I not be knowing what aciui sounds like?” snorted Hial with a look of indignation. “I be farming ’em since I were born, aye, and my ancestors before me.”

“I meant no offence,” said Autumn. “I know little of aciui and their ways.”

“Pah, topsiders,” said Hial derisively. “Be better if you be sending investigators who know what they be about, Osk.”

“They know their business,” said Osk, “and our business ain’t their business.”

“Mayhap,” said Hial standing up. “Any more or can I be getting back to work?”

“Just one more thing, if I may,” said Autumn. “Can you take us to the back of second glebe? I would like to hear these sounds for myself and see the passages.”

“Aye,” said Hial, sitting back down again. “When was you wanting to go?”

“Now, if that be good with you,” said Autumn.

Hial sighed and thought for a few moments.

“Aye, I suppose,” she said gruffly, “although what good’ll come of it I know not. You coming too, Osk?”

“Of course,” said Osk. “If I leave you alone with topsiders I venture I may never see them again.”

He laughed heartily at his joke while Hial stared at him. Autumn and Logan just looked at each other. They followed him out into the main area while Hial put out the lamp.

“Osk was laughing,” whispered Autumn to Logan while Osk went to chat with one of the workers. “Was he joking?”

“I hope so,” whispered back Logan, “but if he was I do not think it was funny.”

“How am I ever to understand jokes if even you do know know when they are jokes?” whispered Autumn with a slight frown.

“I venture he would not have said anything if it were true,” whispered Logan, “although Hial certainly did not find it funny.”

He looked around at the workers then at Hial rummaging around in one of the rooms then turned to glance up the dark passage down which they had come. He froze.

“Look,” he muttered.

“Interesting,” said Autumn turning to look. “The blue flame is back with us again.”

Chapter Twenty Four

“It were along here,” said Hial, “at least first time was.”

They were in a narrow unlit passage some way from where Hial lived; behind the second glebe and a long way from the first. Their two lamps did not penetrate far in either direction and there was a continuous faint eerie scratching that hovered on the edge, sometimes disappearing if you held your head the right way.

“Exactly here?” asked Autumn.

“Can't say exactly,” said Hial. “I was looking for aciui not ghosts.”

She glanced behind and stiffened. “That be strange,” she muttered and started to walk back then stopped and held her lamp up and peered around.

“What is it?” asked Autumn.

“Nothing,” said Hial. “Just a reflection off a bit of rock, most like.”

“Tell me what you saw,” said Autumn, going to stand beside her.

“Just a blueish flash,” said Hial, turning back to face the others. “It went almost as soon as I saw it. 'Tis nothing. Lamps flicker and make strange sights in these passages. Ain't seen blue before though.”

“'Tis probably of no importance then,” said Autumn, giving Logan a quick look. “You said the first time. What about the other times?”

“Ohh, there be another passage a bit further along,” said Hial. “Don't go nowhere. Me Grand Da wanted another glebe other side of this wall, see, and Mor'upita-sehen made the passage but never got around to making the glebe. Turned out Assembly decided we not be needing it after all so it were abandoned.”

“'Twas not my doing,” said Osk when he saw her glaring at him.

“Your Da were Head of Farmers' Assembly,” said Hial accusingly. “And

you be era'owen of Juawau.”

“I wasn't even born back then,” said Osk. “How could I intercede when neither I nor Juawau weren't even born?”

“Can we get back to the noises?” asked Autumn, sensing this was a topic with a long history behind it.

Hial gave Osk another filthy look. “Aye, I reckon,” she said. “Spose you be wanting to see that an' all?”

“Please,” said Autumn.

Hial set off along the passage with the others behind. Autumn glanced back and saw the blue flame had reappeared in the darkness behind them, although it was keeping further back than it had been. Hial turned a sharp corner into a short passage. It ended in a solid rock face.

“This be it,” she said. “One time I was just by the junction and another time I was down this end.”

“And you heard the voices in here?” asked Autumn.

“Just the one,” said Hial.

“Could you all be quiet for a moment,” asked Autumn.

They all froze while Autumn listened intently.

“I cannot even hear the aciui in here,” she said.

“Aye,” said Hial, “tis quiet and no mistake.”

“Can I have your lamp?” Autumn asked Osk and he passed it to her. She studied the end of the passage, holding the lamp close to the rock.

“I see nothing,” she said after a while. “Where was the other glebe going to be?”

“Both sides and behind,” said Hial. “This were to be a side entrance with the main entrance further along the other passage.”

“Why would you need a second entrance?” asked Autumn, studying one of the side walls.

“For the beaters,” said Hial, giving Osk a look that expressed her contempt of those who were not experienced aciui farmers.

“Beaters go behind the aciui to drive them towards the main entrance,” said Osk. “At harvesting.”

“Ahh, I see,” said Autumn. “So the beaters would go in here and drive the aciui which way?”

Wordlessly Hial pointed towards one corner of the end of the passage. Autumn nodded and went to that corner and tapped on the wall with her staff.

“Be solid rock behind,” said Hial. “You be wasting your time.”

“How do you know?” asked Autumn.

“Hmmp,” snorted Hial. “Because the glebe were never made, that’s how.”

“You know that for a fact?” asked Autumn, tapping again.

“Course I bloody ...,” said Hial then they all froze as there came a faint answering tap. “What was that?”

“Shh,” said Autumn, tapping again.

There was an agonising wait as they all strained their ears, then a faint “tap”.

“Tap, tap,” went Autumn.

“Tap, tap,” came a reply.

"Tis just an echo through the rock," said Hial.

"Shh," said Autumn. "Tap," pause, "tap, tap."

"Tap, tap," came the reply, then "tap."

"If it be an echo it has changed the pattern," said Autumn. She thumped the wall with her bare fist and Osk winced.

"Tap, tap," came the answer.

"That be no echo," said Osk.

"That be right," said Autumn, "here, hold the lamp," and she passed it back to Osk. She moved slowly along the wall, banging it hard several times and pressing her ear against it to listen for the reply. Some dust fell from the roof, near the entrance, where Hial was standing. She glanced up, frowning. Autumn paused beside her then started to make her way back along the other wall, banging and listening. More dust fell.

"Seems to be ..." started Autumn, staring intently at the end of the passage just as Hial gasped and shouted, "run!" as she turned and ran.

With an almighty crash the roof caved in, right where Autumn was standing, and the passage plunged into darkness.

"Vogev!" shouted Logan then he started coughing from the dust that had been thrown up, his ears reverberating from the noise of the fall. He managed to get his breath and stop coughing and screamed "Autumn!", or at least thought he did. He couldn't hear himself. He stumbled forward in the darkness and fell over some rocks on the ground to sprawl on the floor. Two hands reached out, feeling his body then gripped his shoulders and helped him to his knees.

"Fiau, we need some light," he heard, very faintly, as though the voice was far beyond Plakill.

His staff, lying on the floor at the end of the passage, spluttered into life, filling the small space with light.

“Autumn! Thank Alodia!” Logan thought he said, although he could only hear himself through the vibrations in his skull. He jumped to his feet, ignoring the stabbing pains from his knees and shins, and threw his arms around her, then started choking again in the cloud of dust that came off her cloak.

“Are you unhurt?” mouthed Autumn, pushing him away to look at him, her eyes showing deep concern.

“Aye, are you?” Logan was fairly sure he heard his voice that time, but it was raspy and distant. He flung his arms around her again and this time Autumn hugged him back, deeply relieved.

“Osk, Hial,” she suddenly said and let Logan go as she turned around.

Osk was sitting in the corner, staring at her wide eyed.

“Are you hurt?” cried Autumn, jumping over to him.

He didn't answer, just sat there staring, his eyes switching from Autumn to the rockfall, to the torch and back to Autumn.

“Tis only me, Autumn,” she said bending over him. “Logan, bring the light over.”

Logan stumbled forward, tripping again on loose rocks but managed to keep his footing. He snatched up his staff and held it over Osk so Autumn could see him more clearly. Osk scowled.

“What manner of sorcery is this?” he demanded.

“Tis just a light,” said Autumn. “Burning wood, nothing more.”

She tried to touch his head, looking for injuries but Osk wouldn't let her.

“Logan, find his lamp,” she said, taking Osk's hand and patting it with her other.

Logan heard her voice, still a long way off but much closer than

Plakill. He spotted the lamp on the ground not far away where it had rolled after Osk had dropped it. He picked it up and peered inside.

"All the oil is gone," he said. He definitely heard himself that time although it was like being underwater. He tossed the lamp back on the floor and started prodding his ears to ease the pressure he could feel inside.

"Osk," said Autumn, tapping his shoulder, "Osk. Look at me."

Osk relaxed his shoulders and his eyes focussed on her.

"'Tis only a topsider's torch," she said. "'Tis nothing to be afraid of."

"Hmm" muttered Osk, his eyes going back to the rockfall.

"I wonder if he hit his head," said Autumn slowly, studying Osk. "Osk, I am Autumn and this is Logan. Remember?"

"Hello," said Logan, waggling his fingers at Osk. His voice still sounded as though underwater but nearer the surface, although there were now waves crashing on the shore.

"It fell on you," said Osk. "I saw it fall on you."

"Ah," said Autumn. "So you saw that, did you?"

She straightened up then sat down on the ground in front of Osk.

"Osk, listen to me," she said, taking his hand again. "That was just some of Mother Midcarn's magic. I am still human. Be not afraid."

"How ... ?" asked Osk, some colour coming back into his face.

"'Tis my robe," said Autumn. "It protects me from mortal danger."

"But the roof fell on you," said Osk.

"One time an arrow passed through her," said Logan, shaking his head to try to clear his ears. "She was unhurt but it killed me."

“What?” said Osk, tearing his eyes away from Autumn to stare at Logan. “You be dead?”

“He is joking,” said Autumn, giving Logan a look that unmistakably told him to shut up. “Calm yourself.”

Osk scowled at Logan and turned his eyes back on Autumn. “But how ... ?” he asked.

“The roof did not fall on me,” said Autumn. “It fell through me and I walked away from it, just as in the Great Temple when that creature threw me through the wall.”

“And hit me, by the way,” muttered Logan.

“But ... “ said Osk.

Autumn sighed. “No matter,” she said briskly. “If it be easier for you then believe that the roof missed me. It was dark in here, you cannot be certain what you saw.”

Osk took a deep breath and held it for a moment then let it out in a long agonising whistle.

“Aye,” he said slowly. “That must be the truth of it. And that staff there be just a stick of wood from topside.”

“It is,” said Logan, more to test his ears than anything else. They were almost back to normal.

“How did you light it?” asked Osk, then he shook his head several times. “No, I do not want to know. It be lit and that is all there be to it.”

“Can you stand?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Osk, rapidly returning to his normal self as his mind denied what he had seen and rationalised it into normal things he could accept.

“Good,” said Autumn. “Let me check you for injury.”

She rapidly ran her hands over his body, checking for broken bones, blood and sore spots. Apart from some minor cuts on his face and lower legs and a coating of dust he appeared to be well.

“Are you injured?” asked Osk then shook his head. “How could you be?”

“I am uninjured,” said Autumn.

She turned to look at Logan. “You have some scrapes on your knees, and a small cut on your face but you seem otherwise unhurt. Are you?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “I lost my hearing but it is coming back. I can almost hear you properly again.”

“That is good,” said Autumn. “Now we need to find ...”

“I have just noticed,” said Logan, “you are still wearing your pack and water skin!”

“I did not take them off,” said Autumn. “Ohhh. That be right interesting. And my staff be where I put it when I went to help Osk.”

“That means ...,” said Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “My ribbon protected them as well.”

“Your ribbon?” said Osk. “What ribbon?”

“This silver ribbon on the hem of my robe,” said Autumn.

Osk reached out to touch the ribbon then pulled his finger back.

“This ribbon saved you?” he asked.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Tis a long story and one day I will tell you but we have other matters to talk about now.”

“Have you such a ribbon?” asked Osk, looking at Logan.

“Sadly not,” said Logan.

“Hmm,” said Osk. “But your staff be magic?”

“Aye,” said Logan.

“But you be not gods?” asked Osk.

“No, we are not gods,” said Autumn, “just friends of a powerful sorcerer.”

“And that be Mother Midcarn?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“Mor'upita-sehen,” breathed Osk. “Now I am beginning to understand.”

“I would ask that you delay your understanding for a time,” said Autumn. “It would seem that we are trapped in this passage and you be most experienced with passages. What do we do now?”

“Hmm?” said Osk. “What?”

“The rockfall,” said Autumn, pointing to it. “What do we do now?”

“Pray,” said Osk. “Mor'upita-sehen be best but any you believe in will do.”

“Is that all?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Osk. “We can move the smaller rocks but that big one be completely blocking the passage, We cannot move it and we cannot get around or over it. All we can do is pray that Hial escaped on the other side and has gone to get help. Where was she standing?”

“She was right beside me,” said Autumn, “although she turned and ran as it started to fall. I do not know if she got past or is

underneath.”

“With Mor’upita-sehen’s aid she escaped,” said Osk. “If not then we are dead.”

“How so?” asked Logan. “Even if she is dead, surely others will have heard the noise and will come to our aid?”

“Aye,” said Osk, “but it will take time for them to search the passages looking for the fall. If Hial escaped she will be able to lead others straight here.”

“So we wait,” said Autumn. “We have some food, water and light. I venture it will not be over long before we are found.”

“Oh we will be found all right,” said Osk. “But we be missing air.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

“As we breathe we use up the air,” said Osk. “With the fall blocking the passage no more air can come in so we will die when we have used it all up. This be only a small space. If we were in a main passage then there would be plenty of air but this be a dead end.”

“Are you certain?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“Aye,” said Osk. “Falls are not common but they do happen and some have died that way.”

“Mayhap it be like trying to breathe underwater,” said Logan, “only this time we are under rock.”

“I know not,” said Osk. “I have never been underwater.”

“How long can we stay here?” asked Autumn, looking around the small section they were in.

“I cannot say,” said Osk, “but mayhap two or three lamps but it could be more or less.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn.

She went over to study the rockfall.

“’Twas a strange coincidence,” she said. “You said such falls do not happen often?”

“Aye,” said Osk.

“Yet it happened just here at just this time,” said Autumn.

“You think there were someone’s hand in this?” asked Logan.

“We venture into a rarely used passage in search of a sorcerer who has been taken captive,” said Autumn. “We hear sounds on the other side of a wall where there should be solid rock and just as we do the roof falls in. Does that not strike you as odd?”

“I venture all those trapped by falling rock think it a malign coincidence,” said Osk. “But such falls do happen and people get trapped. Only Mor’upita-sehen has such power to make it happen and It be gone.”

“Do you think it was aimed at you?” asked Logan. “After all, it fell on top of you.”

“And Hial, I venture,” said Osk. “I will be greatly saddened if she be under there.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “She seemed a goodly person, beneath her bluster and I would not wish such a death on anyone although I wager it was quick and she did not suffer.”

“Unless she be trapped by rock on the other side, badly injured and unable to get away,” said Osk.

“Ah, that is not good,” said Autumn. Then she frowned. “We must stop such thoughts. We have no way of knowing and believing what we imagine can only be folly. ’Twould seem to me that until we know otherwise we must assume that no aid is coming and thus we must do

whatever we can do ourselves to alleviate our circumstances.”

“Feel free,” said Osk. “Let me know when you have worked out a way to shift that there rock and I will gladly throw myself into the effort.”

“Any thoughts, Logan?” asked Autumn.

“Seems to me that if we clear the smaller rocks and move them to the end of the passage we may find a gap we can get through,” said Logan. “Or at least for air to get through so we be not using all ours up. Mayhap we will even find a crack in the big rock that we or Fiau can do something with.”

“That be good thinking,” said Autumn, “and I have no better thoughts. If nothing else it will keep us occupied and stop our minds dwelling on death.”

“Who is Fiau?” asked Osk.

“My staff,” said Logan. “Umm, it can do more than burn.”

“I wager it can,” said Osk. “Tell me, can it wake me from this bad dream I be having?”

“Sadly not,” said Logan.

“Focus your mind on a happy outcome,” said Autumn. “Ill thinking saps the mind and the body. Come, let us use some of the smallest rocks to hold the staff upright then if we stack the others at the end we will not end up with no room to move.”

“Indeed,” said Logan.

He took off his water skin and placed it neatly mid-way along one wall and Autumn added her skin, pack and staff.

“Ahh,” said Osk, watching them. “Now I understand why you told her to put her robe back on. Of course. Were you expecting trouble?”

“No,” said Logan, “but I am happier when I know she is protected.”

Osk nodded and watched as Autumn built a small pile of stones around the base of Logan's staff. Then they formed a line along the narrow passage with Autumn picking up rocks at the fall and passing them to Logan who passed them to Osk to stack against the end of the passage.

"By Mor'upita-sehen, she be strong," said Osk in astonishment, watching Autumn pick up one of the larger rocks.

It was too big for Logan to hold so he and Osk had to carry it to the end between them.

"She be a Krisana," said Logan as they heaved it onto the pile. "They train a lot. I have seen Autumn crack a rock just by kicking it."

"That I do not believe," said Osk, pausing to wipe his brow.

Autumn passed them another large rock and they struggled to carry it to the end.

"Can we rest for a while?" he asked. "There be no point killing ourselves trying to dig our way out."

"Aye," said Autumn. "Some water would be good too. I am sweating."

"Please do not take your robe off," said Logan. "There may be another fall."

"If there is, run the other way," said Osk, passing her a water skin. "Just a moment, why do you not walk through the fall?"

"It does not work that way," said Autumn. "I cannot walk through things."

She had a drink and passed the skin back.

"Have you tried?" asked Osk.

"Yes," said Autumn. "Look," and she held up her hands. Her finger tips were shredded and oozing blood from the rocks. "If I could move

through things I would not be getting these.”

“Aargh,” said Logan, reaching out to take her hand and look more closely. “That looks painful.”

“Tis only minor,” said Autumn. “I will survive a few little cuts.” She pulled her hand back.

“Yes,” said Osk. “Why do you not wear your mittens? They seemed to be quite strong.”

“That is a right good idea,” said Autumn. “I had put them to the back of my mind. How are your hands? Mayhap one of you should wear them.”

“Mine are not too bad,” said Osk as Logan rummaged in Autumn's pack. “Yours, lad?”

“Mine be nothing compared with Autumn's,” said Logan passing the mittens to Autumn. “Here, you wear them.”

“Thank you,” said Autumn, and she pulled them on and clenched her fists experimentally. “They are quite thick but I wager the protection will be more useful than delicacy of touch. Shall we get back to work?”

“Aye,” said Osk, getting to his feet. “We be wasting our time but at least it keeps the mind occupied.”

“Mizule!” said Autumn trying to pick up a large rock.

“Are you hurt?” asked Logan. “Is it too heavy for you?”

Autumn bent to pick up the rock again then stared at it in astonishment.

“Nay,” said Autumn, stooping once again to grasp the rock. “Look at this.”

Chapter Twenty Five

Logan and Osk crammed together in the narrow passage to watch as Autumn tried to pick up the rock.

“Sploop!” said Logan. “It be disappearing where you touch it.”

“How is that possible?” asked Osk. “Where is the rock going?”

“I have no idea,” said Autumn, wiping her hand across the top of the rock she'd been trying to lift. A layer the size of her mitten simply disappeared.

“Can you push your hand inside the rock?” asked Logan.

“Yes,” said Autumn a few moments later. There was a deep groove the width of the mitten now in the rock, with a small indentation next to it where the thumb had touched.

“I do not like this,” said Osk, backing away. “There is too much here for me to follow.”

“I wager they be magical gloves,” said Autumn, holding her hands up and studying them. “They were a gift from Mother Midcarn, after all.”

“I wonder if she saw this rockfall in her Window,” said Logan.

“Very likely,” said Autumn. “Well, I know not how long the magic in these will last. Stand back.”

She started to gouge a narrow hole in the big rock blocking the passage, trying to dig her way through to the other side.

“’Tis right strange,” she said after a few gouges. “’Tis like brushing water away. Bring the light closer, I cannot see for the shadows.”

Logan plucked his staff from its stand and held it partly inside the deep hole Autumn had dug.

“The sides of the hole,” he said, studying it. “They look exactly like

the sides of the passages. Like they have been sliced rather than hewn.”

“So they do,” said Autumn, pausing for a few moments. She looked at her mittens again. “I wonder if this be how Mor'upita-sehen made the passages? Has Mother Midcarn used the same magic?”

“It seems to work,” said Logan, “whoever's magic it is. I wonder how far back this rock goes?”

“I need to make it wider,” she said, peering into the hole. “I am almost at my arm's length and 'twould seem I am not through yet.”

She started to run her hands over the sides of the hole to make it wider until it was enough for her to get her shoulders inside. Then she started to crawl in, burrowing through the rock. Her feet were a full arm's length inside the hole before she stopped.

“I think I am through,” she called back. “I can feel an edge with my bare hand.”

“You are,” said Osk, coming to the edge of the hole. “I can smell fresh air.”

Suddenly Autumn's feet disappeared with a slithery scratching noise.

“What happened?” called Logan, pushing the staff as far as he could in the hole.

Autumn's face appeared at the other end.

“I am through,” she said. “I am standing on some loose rocks the other side. I think Hial is trapped here. I can hear someone breathing but nothing else. Throw the staff through.”

“Please be careful,” said Logan urgently. He threw the staff as hard as he could and it clattered on the far side. Light reflected jerkily off the inside of the narrow tunnel as Autumn retrieved the staff and started moving around.

"I have found her," she called a short while later. "She seems to be unhurt apart from a cut and a lump on her head. She be right strange though. We need to get her back to her rooms."

"Osk, can you get inside that hole?" asked Logan.

"Let me try," he said, feeling for the edges. He knelt and tried to crawl inside. "Nay, I be too wide in the shoulders." He backed out again and sat back on his heels.

"Autumn? Can you hear me?" called Logan.

"Aye," said Autumn, the light appearing at the end of the hole. "I am only a short distance away. There is no need to shout."

"Oh, sorry," said Logan, lowering his voice. "The hole be too narrow for Osk. Can you make it wider?"

"I am worried about Hial," she said, sounding indecisive. "Pah, my mind be disarrayed. A few more minutes will make no difference to her, especially if we still be trapped the other side. A moment."

The light disappeared from the end of the tunnel as she propped the staff against the wall then she pulled the mittens back on and climbed into the hole, wiping one side to make it wider.

"Try this," she said, climbing out when she reached the end. "Logan, find me a water skin."

"I can just about get in," said Osk, trying again. "It be a tight fit but I think I can get through."

"Stop!" commanded Autumn as he thrust with his feet trying to force his way inside. "I will go back and make it wider. 'Twill not help any of us if you get stuck. Logan, when I am through, throw me the water skin so I can attend to Hial."

She stooped and climbed back inside the tunnel and rapidly writhed to the far end, blocking what little light came through.

“The skin,” she said when she got out. Logan tossed it as far as he could and she grabbed it and pulled it the rest of the way.

“Now you,” said Logan, giving Osk a gentle push.

Osk knelt again and wormed his way through.

“How is she?” he asked when he got out.

“She is alive,” said Autumn, kneeling beside Hial who was half propped against the side of the passage. “And she be awake but she does not speak nor seem to recognise me.”

“Hello?” called Logan. “Are you still there?”

“I would not leave you behind, Logan,” said Autumn. “We are still here.”

“Good,” said Logan. “Here is your pack, catch.”

He tossed through to Autumn her pack then the other water skin then her staff then scurried through the tunnel himself.

“’Tis almost like she be asleep,” said Osk, bending over Hial, “although her eyes are open.”

“She has a cut on the back of her head,” said Autumn joining him. “It does not seem overly bad but blows to the head can be bad inside.”

“Her limbs do not seem broken,” said Osk, “But yes, her eyes are vacant.”

Hial muttered something and reached out to touch Osk.

“What was that?” he asked, leaning forward to hear her better.

“’Tis I, Osk,” he said a moment later then twisted to look at Autumn. “She does not recognise me.”

“Move over,” said Autumn and Osk shuffled to one side. She knelt

beside Hial again. "I am Autumn, what is your name?"

Hial opened her mouth then her face fell and she looked confused. "I, umm, I ..." she mumbled and started to cry.

"There now," said Autumn comfortingly, patting her shoulder. "This will pass and you will remember your name again, do not worry."

She glanced over at Osk. "I have seen this once before," she said. "A kick to the head at my Esyup. The lad could not remember anything afterwards, not even his name. It was nigh on half a day before things came back to him but it did. We need to get Hial back to her dwelling where she can rest and be attended by her loved ones. Do you know the way?"

"Aye," said Osk. "More or less."

"Let us hope it be more and not less," said Autumn. "I will carry Hial. Logan you bring our packs." She stood up and gathered Hial in her arms. "Lead on, Osk."

"Is it safe to touch that staff?" he asked.

"Aye," said Logan, "just keep your hand at the end that is not burning."

They were almost back at the main passage when they heard voices and saw the glimmer of lights.

"Well met, there," called Osk loudly.

"Who is that?" called back a voice.

"Tis Osk and Hial," called Osk. "There has been a rockfall and Hial needs aid."

Two people came running along the passage.

"We heard the fall and have been searching the tunnels," said Pif emerging into the light of the staff. "Is Ma badly hurt?"

“She had a blow to the head,” said Autumn. “I wager she will recover but we need to get her home.”

“This way, quickly,” said Pif. “Shall I carry her?”

“Tis no trouble,” said Autumn, following him.

“Are there any others still there?” asked Pif's companion.

“Only us four,” said Osk. “Tis the dead end passage at the back of second glebe.”

“Ahh, we were going to check there next,” said Pif's companion. “Right, I will spread the word and get the searchers back.” He ran off down the passage.

* * *

“Come,” whispered Autumn to Logan.

Hial was in her bed and being looked after by anxious relatives. Osk was talking to an older version of Pif who was, probably, his father.

“Should we not stay?” whispered back Logan.

“There is nothing we can do here,” whispered Autumn, “and we have yet to find Mother Midcarn. I am hoping that tapping may have been her and there may have been another rockfall where she is.”

“Yes,” whispered Logan. “Are we going back to that passage?”

“Aye,” whispered Autumn. “Bring your water skin.”

They backed away then disappeared into the dark passage without anyone noticing. A short way further on Autumn turned into the main passage.

“Can we have some light, Fiau?” she asked. Fiau obligingly flared up.

“Do you know the way?” asked Logan, “or shall I go first?”

"I took note of our turns coming back," said Autumn. "I am fairly sure I can find it again."

"So did I," said Logan grinning. "I was certain you would want to come back. Between us we should find it. Do you think there is another cavern beyond?"

"Aye," said Autumn. "Someone or something was making the tappings and I venture whatever it was lay not inside the rock itself. Mayhap Mor'upita-sehen made a glebe but did not finish the passages but whatever is there is worth exploring."

"I thought the same," said Logan, "but Hial and Osk seemed more concerned with why the glebe was never finished a long time ago."

"Tis not uncommon for long past injuries to not be forgotten," said Autumn. "Ahh, I do not remember this fork."

"This way," said Logan. "This was where we met up with Pif and his friend."

"Ahh," said Autumn, "yes, I remember now. You are right."

It did not take long to reach the rockfall and they stood in the passage studying it.

"I did not note it at the time," said Autumn, "but see how this passage is almost completely clear. The rocks fell very neatly blocking the side passage and not hindering this one, save for a few easily moved rocks. It makes me wonder if it were by design."

"Fiau, turn off the light, please," said Logan.

The passage plunged into darkness.

"The blue light is still following us," said Logan. "I do not remember seeing it in the passage after the rockfall. Was it this side when you got through the rock?"

"I did not notice it," said Autumn. "My mind was on Hial and you

two. It could have been. Do you think it was in some way related to the fall?"

"I have no way of knowing," said Logan. "At first I thought you had caused the fall by banging on the walls but, as you said, it was a strange coincidence. Hold my staff a moment."

He passed Autumn his staff then approached the flame in a friendly manner.

"Hello," he said, lifting both hands so they touched each other just under the flame.

It flickered in a friendly manner and he slammed his hands closed around it.

"I have caught it," he said proudly.

"No you haven't," said Autumn as the flame reappeared, sliding between Logan's clenched fingers.

"Oh," said Logan disappointedly.

It ascended and hovered just below the roof.

"I wonder how we can get rid of it," he asked.

"Flame," said Autumn. "Would you please stop following us?"

The flame flickered but otherwise did not move.

"I am unable to think of anything else," said Autumn. "If it will not go of its own free will and we cannot trap it, I do not see what else we can do, save play games of hide and seek and I venture that will not work. Besides, we do not know if it be malicious in intent. Other than the rockfall it has not brought us any harm and there is no reason to think the fall has anything to do with it."

"I suppose we had best accept it then," said Logan. "Fiau, some light please. Shall I go first or will you?"

"I will," said Autumn. "'Tis possible something has appeared the other side."

"Have a care, then, Autumn," said Logan. "Put Fiau through first."

Autumn crawled through the hole with the staff held out in front of her.

"'Tis empty," she said when she had climbed out the other side.

Logan tossed the water skins and her pack and staff through then climbed through himself. The blue flame followed.

"It seems unchanged," said Logan, looking round the passage. "So are you going to try to dig through?"

"That was my plan," said Autumn.

"Whereabouts?" asked Logan.

"The tapping seemed loudest at the end of the passage to the side," said Autumn. "And the sound of the rock was a little different too. Up this end and the other side it seemed more solid."

"'Tis a shame we piled all the rocks there then," said Logan. "We be having to move them to get at the passage wall."

He started to roll one of the rocks away from the end of the passage.

"Let me see if the mittens still work first," said Autumn, opening her pack. "If they do then I can make the rocks disappear and if they do not then there seems little point in moving them."

"I be a fool," said Logan, straightening up. "I knew you were going to use the mittens to dig through the wall but forgot they could clear a way to the wall in the first place."

"Aye," said Autumn inspecting her fingertips. "I nearly did as well." She pulled on one of the mittens, wincing slightly as the heavy leather ran over her cuts.

“Let me try,” said Logan. “If they work for me you can have a rest while I clear the way.”

“Thank you,” said Autumn, sliding the mitten off again. “It would be well to know if they work for us both.”

Logan slid on the mittens and bent to the closest rock. Swathes of it disappeared as he rubbed his hands over it.

“This is fun,” he said, beaming all over his face. “Look, I can sculpt rock with my hands!”

He fashioned a crude face on the surface of the rock then used the seam of the thumb to carve squiggly lines to represent hair, then stood back to admire it.

“No,” he said after a few moments of contemplation. “I be not a sculptor.”

He smoothed a hand over the face and erased it.

“Right,” he said. “Best get on with why we are here.”

* * *

“Ahh,” said Logan a while later. “I think I have found something.”

He pulled his arm back and slipped off the mitten then felt around inside the hole he'd made.

“Yes,” he said, “there is definitely an edge. I think there is a space here.”

“Can you see anything?” asked Autumn, coming over with the light,

Logan pushed it through and peered into the hole.

“No,” he reported after a few moments. He pulled out the staff and slipped the mitten back on. “Let me make the hole bigger.”

He worked busily until he'd made a hole big enough to climb through then peered through again with the staff.

"It seems to be a smallish space or a passage," he reported to Autumn. "You don't suppose we've just found a bend in that other passage do you?"

"There was no bend that I saw," said Autumn, "although I suppose there could be another passage coming off that Hial did not tell us about for some reason."

"Shall we go back out and check?" asked Logan.

"We could," said Autumn, "but this is where I think the tapping was coming from so I wager it would be more sensible to explore this. We can look for another way round later."

"I agree," said Logan. "This is a stupid question, I know, but shall I go first?"

"Why do you always volunteer when you know I always go first in case of danger?" asked Autumn. "I confess it puzzles me."

"I do not know," said Logan, sitting back. "I daresay it is because I feel I want to protect you, even though I know very well you can protect yourself far better than I can."

Autumn smiled at him, her face looking a little softer than usual in the light from the staff.

"Very well, then," she said. "You go first."

"Are you serious?" asked Logan, suddenly feeling nervous.

"Yes," said Autumn. "If that is what you want."

"Oh Sploop," said Logan. "I did not expect that. Right."

He hesitated then slipped off the mittens and passed them to Autumn who put them in her pack. Then he grasped his staff firmly and thrust

it through the hole and peered around again. Then, with a determined grunt, he squeezed through the hole and disappeared.

"It is empty," his voice called a short while later. "Come on through."

Autumn pushed her pack through then the water skins and squeezed through herself, dragging her staff behind her.

"You see," said Logan, holding up his staff.

It was definitely not a passage as there were no entrances or exits, other than the hole Logan had just made. The roof was a little higher than the passage and the walls much further apart but it was by no means a cavern. It was also completely empty.

"It has just occurred to me," said Logan in a flat voice, "that you knew it was empty which is why you let me go first."

"If Mother Midcarn was in here she would have given some sign when you made the hole," said Autumn with a shrug, "and anything else would have come to investigate or made some sort of sound."

Logan nodded and slowly rotated, looking at the walls.

"The walls have the same look as the passage," he said. "This place has been made, 'tis not like a cave. But who would make a place like this with no entrances? It smells strange as well."

"Aye," said Autumn. "And does not something else strike you as well?"

"Umm," said Logan thinking. "No."

"Why would there be a space in the rock with no way in or out that is full of air?" asked Autumn.

She walked the few paces to the far wall and tapped on it with her staff.

"I do not know," said Logan his face creasing in puzzlement. "Mayhap there was no air until I made the hole then it came in from the

passage. Or mayhap the air in here be very old, which could be why it has a smell.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, tapping the wall again.

She listened carefully but there was no answering tap. She moved further over and tapped again.

“Are you going to bang on all the walls?” asked Logan, yawning.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “There may be other spaces behind these walls.”

“Then I shall have a rest,” said Logan, sitting on the ground with his back to a wall. “I be unaccountably tired. I wager it be all that digging.”

“Yes,” said Autumn, also yawning. “I am feeling tired as well. There is no great rush. I think I shall have rest for a short time myself.”

She sat down beside Logan whose head was already nodding.

“Mayhap it be the air in here,” she muttered, her eyes feeling very heavy. “Just a short nap and ...”

Her eyes flicked open at Logan's snore.

“The air,” she thought. “It smells strange.”

“Oh Mizule,” she cried, lurching forward and twisting to grab Logan's shoulder. “Wake up, come on, wake up! The air be poisonous!”

“Wha’?” asked Logan sleepily. His hand on the staff relaxed and it clattered to the ground and went out.

“Wake up,” slurred Autumn, feebly shaking him. “Wake ...,” and she slumped over him, sound asleep.

Chapter Twenty Six

Logan groaned gently and tried to scratch his nose but his arm wouldn't reach so he rolled over to take his nose to his hand. He couldn't roll over either, which seemed strange. He sighed and thought about it for a few moments then tried to lift his arms. He couldn't. They seemed to be held down at each wrist. He tried opening his eyes but they didn't seem to work either. It took several seconds for him to realise that he had, in fact, opened his eyes but that it was completely dark. He tried his arms again. They were still held down.

"Hmmm," he muttered.

His feet seemed to be held down at the ankles as well. He could bend his knees and, after a brief experiment, he found he could move his hips and lift his shoulders.

"Autumn?" he whispered. "Autumn?"

The darkness was silent.

"Oh Sploop," he thought then changed his mind. "Oh Voqev!"

He felt around with his fingers. There was rock underneath but he couldn't touch anything else. He hunched one shoulder, pulling his wrist against whatever was holding his arm down and twisted his head and managed to rub his nose against the shoulder of his tunic.

"Ahh, that is a lot better," he muttered and did it again just to be sure the itch had gone.

Something rustled a little way to his left and he froze in panic, his head at an awkward angle.

"Who is there?" he said, in a half strangled high pitched voice. There was no reply.

He straightened his head and peered in the direction of the rustle. The darkness was total. There wasn't even a faint glimmer, just a single shade of pitch black.

The something rustled again.

“Who is it?” he half shouted, his voice a little panicky.

“Urghh,” came the soft reply.

“Is that you, Autumn?” asked Logan, his voice a little squeaky.

“Uh.”

It could have been Autumn's voice but ... it might not have been.

“Autumn?” asked Logan, trying to sit up even though he knew he couldn't.

“Logan?” asked Autumn.

“Oh thank Zeeth,” said Logan relaxing. “Where are you?”

There were several rustling sounds and a small grunt.

“I know not,” she said, “but 'twould seem I am fixed to the ground in some manner.”

“As am I,” said Logan. “Can you see anything?”

“No,” said Autumn. “Tis somewhat dark in here.”

“What do you ...?” started Logan but he stopped at the sound of a flint on rock and the sudden glow of a lamp.

“So,” hissed a voice. “You are awake.”

“I am awake,” said Autumn calmly.

The lamp came closer and Logan, craning his head, could see Autumn's profile in its glow. Sadly he could also see another profile, the other side of the lamp. A hooked black talon pushed Autumn's chin to one side. Then the lamp moved towards Logan.

“Oh Sploop,” he thought and pulled at his wrist restraints just in case they had gone. They hadn't.

A broad flat face leered at him from behind the small lamp then something heavy sat on his belly.

“I know you,” gasped Logan. “You attacked Caouma.”

The creature's wide mouth split open in a grin and showed its small green teeth.

“I have attacked many things,” it said. “I never bother to ask their names.” It rested the lamp on Logan's chest and ran a talon down his cheek. Logan tried to shudder but the creature sitting on his belly made it difficult. Its yellow eyes stared curiously into his.

“Why are we here?” he asked.

“This is your tomb,” said the creature. “What do you think happens in a tomb?”

“You are going to kill us?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said the creature. “Be quiet and await your turn. I be talking to this one first.”

“Why are you going to kill us?” asked Logan anxiously.

“Tis my job,” said the creature disinterestedly. Then he grinned again. “But this time my pleasure as well. You have a name?”

“Umm, Logan,” said Logan.

“You have never asked a name before,” said Autumn. “Why now?” In the dim glow from the lamp she could see that the bond on her wrist was a band of rock that merged into the rock floor.

The creature sighed, its eyes never deviating from Logan's. “Your deaths will be oh so slow and oh so pleasurable, for me at least although you may find it less so,” it said, running a talon across

Logan's forehead. "Twould be fitting to make things more personal. I be called Mijr and I venture my name will be in the last breath you take, if you still have any lips by then, which you may not. I have yet to decide. Ahh, you may recall I said your time is coming?"

"Umm, yes," said Logan hesitantly.

"I was right," said Mijr happily. "And now it has come."

It ran the sharp tip of its talon across Logan's lips then delicately and with extreme precision, stabbed him in the centre of his lower lip.

"Owww," said Logan, jerking his head back and banging it on the rock underneath. He licked his lip and there was a slight taste of blood.

Mijr smiled. "Did you feel pain?"

"Yes, of course," said Logan.

"Interesting," said Mijr. It slid a talon inside Logan's nostril and pushed so the tip of the talon went through and protruded from the side.

"Ahhh," moaned Logan, trying to pull his face away.

"Stop that!" commanded Autumn, trying to break the rock holding down her arms.

Mijr ignored her.

"Did that hurt more or less than the other?" it asked, deeply curious.

"More," said Logan, aware of a drop of blood sliding onto his cheek.

"Hmm," said Mijr. "I know not what pain is nor do I know how it varies around your body. I lack knowledge of your species."

It withdrew the talon then used it to scooped up the blood.

“Your blood tastes sweet,” it said, licking the talon and savouring it. “Still, there is much of you to explore before I drink my fill.”

Mijr got off him, taking the lamp.

“And you?” he asked, sitting on Autumn's belly to peer at her face. “You have a name?”

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, testing the strength of her wrist bonds. They seemed quite strong. “This is not your world. Why are you here?”

Mijr balanced its lamp on Autumn's chest.

“It is my world now,” he said. “Bar Ilan be Lord of this place and soon it be taking charge beyond these dark places. You are not the same as Logan. In what manner do you differ?”

It took hold of the edges of Autumn's robe around her neck and pulled them apart to expose her tunic underneath.

“Who is Bar Ilan?” asked Autumn, lying perfectly still.

“Bar Ilan be your Lord and Master,” said Mijr, studying her tunic.

It slipped a talon under the neck of her tunic and ripped it almost down to the lamp.

“And why are we captive?” asked Autumn.

“You be annoying my Lord,” said Mijr, studying her neck. “It wants rid of you. Why is your neck so thin?”

“Leave her alone!” demanded Logan, struggling against his bonds.

Mijr ignored him and ran his talons over Autumn's neck.

“A bit scrawny,” it muttered, “but I wager you be juicy inside.”

It bent its head and sniffed her throat then jerked back flapping a

hand in front of its face.

“Get away,” it growled.

Autumn raised her head. Something very small with a tinge of blue seemed to be moving rapidly in front of Mijr's face. It kept flapping its hand then snapped at the blueness with its teeth.

“Tis the blue flame,” she thought in surprise.

Suddenly she thrust upwards with her hips, dislodging the lamp and throwing Mijr to one side. The lamp broke and flared up briefly before going out. Mijr cursed. In the darkness the blue flame glowed and seemed to get a little larger as it weaved in front of Mijr's face and darted into its eyes.

“Growghh,” snarled Mijr, trying to catch it.

Its green teeth glistened eerily in the blue light then it sneezed as the flame disappeared up one of its broad nostrils. The flame shot out and bounced dizzily off the ground then renewed its attack.

“Arghhh,” cried Autumn as she focussed every fibre of her body on ripping her right arm as hard as she could from its rock bracelet.

There was a loud crack as the rock snapped and she hit Mijr on the knee as hard as she could.

“Grrrr,” snarled Mijr staggering as the knee gave way. It bent down and rubbed its knee with one hand while trying to swipe at the blue flame. “Begone you foul pest! And you, shut up and lie still or your death will be even slower!”

It swung a kick at Autumn's head but with a loud crack she broke her other wrist restraint and half rolled out of the way, her legs still trapped. She sat up and aimed a flurry of blows at Mijr who jumped backwards then in again to kick her in the side of her belly. The blue flame stabbed at one of its yellow eyes and Mijr snapped at it, narrowly missing the flame with its teeth then backhanded the flame so it went tumbling.

Mijr leapt on top of Autumn, its hands scrabbling to entwine in her hair and its jaws going for her throat but Autumn managed to get her forearm under its chin while her other hand punched into its crotch. She screamed as she violently jerked one leg and, as the rock broke, her knee caught Mijr between its shoulder blades. She threw it to the side and it rolled and came upright and pounced on her again, its jaws wide, its double rows of green teeth going for her throat. The blue flame darted forward and disappeared inside its mouth, plunging the cavern into complete darkness. Then there was a wet squelching ploppy sound and Logan was spattered with warm wet lumps of something indescribably nasty.

“Autumn!” he screamed wrenching and twisting, trying to break his bindings. “Autumn!”

“I fancy it is all over,” said Autumn as the blue flame appeared again.

She sat upright and the blue flame hovered in front of her. The headless remains of Mijr lay sprawled between and over her legs and she was covered in gore. She pushed Mijr’s body away and bent to break her remaining bond.

“Are you hurt?” asked Logan anxiously.

“My wrist hurts,” said Autumn, “but it will mend. Are you here, Fiau?”

“I am here,” came Fiau’s voice from the far end of the cavern.

“Can we have some light?” asked Autumn, standing up cautiously. Her ankle hurt as well.

Fiau flickered into light and Autumn limped over to fetch the staff and bring it back.

“You are limping,” said Logan, straining his neck up to watch.

“That too will mend,” she said.

“What happened?” asked Logan. “You look a mess.”

“It seems that Mijr swallowed the blue flame and it burst its head,” said Autumn. “It feels disgusting but I venture Mijr had a brain as I am covered in it. You too by the look of things, unless you be injured.”

“No, I am unhurt,” said Logan.

Autumn bent to break Logan's bonds then wrenched a handful of Mijr's hair from the remains of its body and started to wash herself clean of Mijr's brains and blood with water from one of the water skins.

“Fiau,” said Logan, splashing water over his face. “I do not wish to be rude but can I ask why you did not come to our aid as you did when Autumn fought that hairy thing?”

“There was no need,” said Fiau materialising. “Mijr was scared of Autumn and no great match for her.”

“Oh,” said Logan, looking at the gore spattered over the walls. “Could you not have helped with our bindings at least?”

“Alas no,” said Fiau. “My powers, such as they are, are of wood and the living world.”

“’Twould seem we have the blue flame to thank,” said Autumn, pulling off another handful of Mijr's hair to dry herself as best she could. “Where is it?”

“I do not know,” said Logan. “Fiau, is that blue flame still here?”

“It is,” said Fiau.

“Where?” asked Autumn looking around.

“Over there,” said Fiau, pointing.

“I cannot see it,” said Logan. “Could you dim the light a little, Fiau?”

Obligingly Fiau dimmed the flame of Logan's staff then merged back into it. As far as she was concerned the conversation was over.

"I do not know what you are," said Autumn, "or your purpose but I thank you for your aid."

The flame flickered slightly but otherwise didn't react.

"Oh well," said Logan. "That was, umm, exciting, I suppose, but what do we do now?"

"We must continue our quest for Mother Midcarn," said Autumn, "and quickly. It would seem likely that we did not fall asleep through tiredness."

"What do you mean?" asked Logan.

"The air smelt strange," said Autumn, "I fancy it had something in it which made us fall asleep and it may come back. This Mijr may be dead but mayhap Bar Ilan will send another like it or worse."

She picked up her staff and studied the walls.

"We came in through there," she said, pointing to the hole in the wall, "and the tapping did not seem overly far away."

She started tapping on the wall beside the hole.

"I will get the mittens," said Logan. They were still where he had left them, beside Autumn's pack.

He slipped on the mittens then he paused.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

"Aye," said Autumn, stepping sideways to tap on the wall further along. "Tap, tap."

She paused then there was a faint answering "tap, tap."

"Where is it coming from?" asked Logan, looking around as though he expected to see someone tapping on the wall.

She tapped on the wall again and cocked her head, listening intently.

“More that way,” she said when the answer came.

She tapped again then, after waiting for the reply tried further down then came back.

“Seems loudest and clearest around here,” she said, inscribing an arc with her hand.

“Right,” said Logan coming over with the mittens on. “Shall I see what is on the other side?”

“No,” said Autumn. “Hold for a moment.” She looked thoughtful.

“You think there be danger there?” asked Logan. “If there is why would it be announced?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I have to agree with you. But I wonder if it may be Mother Midcarn.”

“All the more reason,” said Logan, wiping a hand over the rock.

“Hold,” said Autumn. “Not here. Move further along.”

“Why?” asked Logan. “You said this be where the tapping is coming from.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “And it may be Mother Midcarn but she may be held in place as we were and the mittens may injure her when you break through.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “I did not think of that. How about in the far corner? That should miss her, if it is her.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but it may also end up in a different cave which will not help.”

“So where then?” asked Logan. “I have to dig somewhere.”

Autumn tapped the wall again near the corner and pressed her ear against the rock listening intently.

“As I recall she was a little less tall than you or I,” said Autumn. “I be fairly certain that the tapping be about here,” and she put one hand on the wall, “so if we assume she be lying as we were and one hand can reach the wall then her feet would be about ...” and she stepped two paces along the wall, “... here. Dig to this side of my hand, just in case.”

“As you wish,” said Logan swiping a hand down the wall just beside Autumn's hand as a marker.

“And hurry,” said Autumn. “We do not know if there will be more bad air.”

* * *

“I am nearly at arm's length,” said Logan, a few minutes later. “If this be the same thickness as the last I should be almost through.”

He slowed down and cautiously scooped out some more rock.

“I think ...,” he said, withdrawing his hand and pulling off the mitten. He put his hand back in and felt around. “Ahh, yes, I am through the rock. Time to start widening it.”

“Was that a voice?” asked Autumn.

She pushed Logan aside and put her ear to the hole.

“Hello?” she called through the hole.

Her eyebrows went up.

“There is someone the other side,” she said. “’Tis faint and I cannot make it out but it is more like a woman's voice than a man's.”

“Let me make the hole bigger,” said Logan.

“Have a care,” said Autumn, stepping aside.

Logan made the hole bigger, taking care to stay to the side of his marker. When it was big enough for her head, Autumn stopped him.

“Hello?” she called again, putting her head as far as she could inside the hole.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn after a moment. “Who are you?”

“Who is it? hissed Logan, impatiently.

Autumn pulled her head out. “It is Mother Midcarn,” she said. “’Twould seem she is not in the best of tempers.” She put her head back inside.

“Where are you?” asked Autumn, her body tensely pressed against the wall.

“No, I mean where can you hear my voice coming from?” she said a few moments later.

She stayed a few moments longer then came out of the hole.

“She is in the dark,” said Autumn, “but she thinks my voice was not close but not far.”

“That is not much help,” said Logan. “Why not ask her if the mittens will cause her injury if they touch her? She made them, after all.”

“Good idea,” said Autumn.

She put her head back in the hole and asked Logan's question. She stayed there a long time.

“No,” said Autumn, pulling her head out again.

“That was a very long 'no',” said Logan.

“She gave me a technical answer which I could not follow,” admitted Autumn, “but in essence I think her answer was 'no'.”

“You think?” asked Logan. “Would it not be better to be certain?”

“Ayah,” said Autumn frowning. “You ask then. No, wait. Touch the tip of my finger,” and she pointed her little finger at Logan.

“Sploop no,” said Logan putting his mittened hands behind his back. “What if they take your finger off?”

Autumn wrinkled her nose. “Ahh,” she said, pulling her long ponytail around. “Touch my hair, it will grow again.”

Logan looked at her with narrowed eyes then touched the tip of her ponytail very gently with a mitten.

“It looks undamaged,” said Autumn. “Try a little further up.”

“But your hair ...,” protested Logan.

“Oh Vallume!” said Autumn and firmly pushed her ponytail across Logan's hand. It lay there limply like a flat black eel that had died.

“I venture 'twill be safe,” she said.

“Let us hope Mother Midcarn be wearing a haircloth tunic,” said Logan.

He turned and started enlarging the hole until it was big enough to climb through then stood back as Autumn did just that, taking Fiau with her. Logan followed immediately.

Mother Midcarn was sitting on the floor of the cave, glaring at them. A band of rock encircled her waist and held her to the wall.

“What kept you?” she demanded. “I expected you days ago!”

Chapter Twenty Seven

“So much for gratitude,” muttered Logan.

Autumn ignored him and went over to Mother Midcarn. “Somewhere hot and underground,” she said. “Better guidance would have brought us here faster. The fact that we are here at all is mostly due to chance and the ears of a farmer.”

“Oh tosh,” said Mother Midcarn. “Anywhere else would not have been hot or underground. Still, you are here now, that is the important thing. Get this piece of rock off me.”

“Surely a sorcerer such as you could remove it yourself,” said Logan, coming over with the mittens. “How did you even allow yourself to be captured?”

“My powers are limited without my Window,” said Mother Midcarn, raising her arms so Logan could wipe the restraint away.

Autumn helped her get to her feet where she stood a little unsteadily.

“Ahh, that is better,” she said, shaking one foot then the other while balancing herself between the wall and Autumn. “Tis uncomfortable sitting on rock for days at a time.”

“You said something in your message about your Window being stolen,” said Autumn. “Was it this Bar Ilan who took it?”

“I know not, my dear,” said Mother Midcarn, “but I venture it be the most likely culprit.” She stamped each foot firmly on the ground and shook off Autumn’s supporting hand. “Good. Now, it is time we were away from here. We have much to do.”

“But did you not see this happening?” asked Logan. “You sent us the mittens so we could come and get you so surely you saw your Window being taken and who did it.”

“Alas no,” said Mother Midcarn. “This period was blank in the Window. All I saw was that you two would become trapped by a

rockfall so I sent you the mittens to aid your escape. I did not fathom why you were underground nor what would happen after the fall.”

“I confess I do not understand,” said Autumn. “You are a powerful sorcerer so now your Window is gone why can you not find your Window and reclaim it?”

“Tis not that simple,” said Mother Midcarn. “Much of my powers are made possible by the Window. It supplies the energy, you see.”

“I still do not understand,” said Autumn. “If you have not the energy from the Window how did you leave us your message?”

“I used the last of my residual energy on the spiritual plane,” said Mother Midcarn. “I knew you both loved mushrooms and these volcanoes are known for their mushrooms with certain properties. Sooner or later you would find some and eat them although why it took you so long I cannot imagine.”

“Residual energy? Spiritual plane? I know not what they mean,” said Autumn looking greatly puzzled.

“Never mind, my dear, you be not needing to know the technical things,” said Mother Midcarn, patting Autumn's hand. “The important thing is that you did get my message and you came to find me.” She beamed disarmingly.

“What if we had not eaten the mushrooms?” asked Logan.

“Then you would not have got my message,” said Mother Midcarn, “and the future of all would be in disarray. 'Tis as simple as that. Now, presumably we go back the way you came?”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn. “The future of all? Disarray?”

Mother Midcarn strode over to the hole Logan had dug and stared critically at it.

“Logan,” she said, raising one hand and beckoning him over. “You flatter me. Make it wider, if you please.”

Logan glanced at Autumn then went to the hole and started widening it. Although she was shorter than either of them, Mother Midcarn was somewhat stout.

“If we are to help you further,” said Autumn, “we need more information, or am I to understand our help is no longer needed?”

“I venture you will still be of some use, my dears,” said Mother Midcarn. “You did find me and I daresay you will be able to find my Window.”

“We have even less of an idea where your Window is than where you were,” said Autumn. “Begin at the beginning, who or what is Bar Ilan?”

“A little wider, I think,” said Mother Midcarn to Logan. “Bar Ilan is the Lord of Un'izeq, the land under the volcanoes.”

“Do you mean that horrible man-like thing with green teeth and yellow eyes?” asked Autumn. “It said its name was Mijr.”

“Mijr?” said Mother Midcarn, looking at her in surprise. “No, Mijr is just a nasty little nuisance although it serves Bar Ilan when it has the mind to. No, Bar Ilan was banished by the gods and imprisoned.”

“Imprisoned?” exclaimed Logan. The hole was now wide enough for him and Autumn to get through side by side. “A deity was imprisoned? Sploop! What did It do to warrant imprisonment?”

“No one knows,” said Mother Midcarn, “although Bar Ilan is not a full deity itself. It happened before we were created, back when time was young but it took the power of the other deities combined to bring it under control and banish it.”

“But why under the volcanoes?” asked Autumn.

“For Mor'upita-sehen to guard over,” said Mother Midcarn. “And I let it out. Yes, that should be wide enough now. Stand aside.”

“Let me go first,” said Autumn. “We know not what has turned up the

other side.”

“True,” said Mother Midcarn stepping back. “All yours, my dear.”

Autumn quickly disappeared through the hole and announced that the cavern was empty so Mother Midcarn slowly squeezed herself through.

“Oh yukky,” came floating through the hole as Logan followed her. “What be that mess?”

“That be Mijr,” said Autumn as he emerged. “I am not certain how but it captured us and bound us to the floor of the cave. I think it wanted to explore our basic natures in some detail.”

“Mijr?” asked Mother Midcarn, prodding the corpse. “’Twould seem you found a novel way to kill it.”

“’Twas not I,” said Autumn, “although I would have. ’Twas the blue flame.”

“Blue flame?” said Mother Midcarn, looking up sharply. “What blue flame?”

“’Tis a small blue flame that hovers in the air,” said Logan. “There is nothing there which burns but it never seems to go out and we cannot catch it.”

“How very odd,” said Mother Midcarn. “A blue flame? I presume we leave this cavern that way?”

She pointed to the hole they’d dug from the passage with the rockfall.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Shall I widen it or will you, Logan?”

“I will,” said Logan. “You have a sore wrist and ankle and none of what I am hearing is making any sense anyway. I enjoy this digging. It be a whole lot easier than shovelling cow shit.”

“Cow shit?” asked Mother Midcarn. “What cow shit?”

“He used to live in a cow shed,” said Autumn, “and what little I know of cows is that they produce a powerful lot of shit.”

“Well, I suppose so,” said Mother Midcarn. “I have never given it much thought. When did it first appear?”

“When the first cow was born, I imagine,” said Logan from inside the hole.

“The blue flame,” said Mother Midcarn coldly.

“When we took refuge in the cave after being attacked by spiders,” said Autumn. “At the top of Wut'qiui.”

“You were attacked by spiders?” said Mother Midcarn.

“There were aciui, actually,” said Autumn, “although we did not know it at the time. It just be one of the many strange things that have happened to us of late.”

“What sort of strange things?” asked Mother Midcarn.

“Shall we move on?” asked Autumn, estimating that the hole was now big enough.

“Oh, yes, sorry dear,” said Mother Midcarn, climbing through. “The strange things?”

“Oh, where shall I start?” said Autumn following her.

“How about Veobad?” said Logan.

“You seem to have dug an inordinate number of holes,” said Mother Midcarn, eyeing the hole in the rockfall.

“Leave it to me,” said Logan.

“Yes, that was strange,” said Autumn. “We stopped at the village of Veobad to get bread then we left and found ourselves back there.”

“You took a wrong turning,” said Mother Midcarn. “What be strange about that?”

“No,” said Autumn. “We followed the stream then found ourselves back in Veobad the day before and the same things happened there with the same people except it made no sense since we were not doing what we had done the day before even though the people acted as though we had.”

“And when we left, it all happened again,” chimed in Logan.

Mother Midcarn stopped again.

“Oh dear,” she said. “That wasn't supposed to happen.”

“Then when we left a different way we were half way up Wut'qiui when there was a tremor and a crack opened in the ground and we could see the night and stars through it,” continued Logan then he paused. “What do you mean, that was not supposed to happen?”

“I rather think that was my fault,” said Mother Midcarn. “I was asked to help find something and ...”

“Mor'upita-sehen,” said Autumn.

“Ahh, so you know about that?” asked Mother Midcarn.

“Yes, Qaate told us,” said Autumn. “This is the last of the holes. On the other side are the passages.”

“That makes it a little easier,” said Mother Midcarn, climbing through. “It was while I was trying to return Bar Ilan that I opened up a rift to ..., umm, another place, shall we say.”

“What other place?” asked Logan. “That Un'izeq place?”

“No, somewhere else,” said Mother Midcarn.

“I do not understand,” said Autumn. “You mean you opened up paths to more than one other place?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” said Mother Midcarn. “When I was searching for Mor'upita-sehen I opened up the rift to Un'izeq which made it possible for Bar Ilan to get out. The other place opened up by accident when I was struggling to return Bar Ilan. I wager that was what you saw through the crack in the ground.”

“Oh Vogev,” exclaimed Logan. “I nearly fell in! You mean I could have ended up in Un'izeq?”

“No, not Un'izeq,” said Mother Midcarn. “The other place.”

“We got him out,” said Autumn. “No harm was done.”

“But I could have, oh Sploop,” said Logan in agitation. “What would have become of me?”

“I do not know,” said Mother Midcarn. “I have no knowledge of this other place although it would seem to lie in parallel with our world. From what little I saw there was no life there but I did not have time to explore. What did you see?”

“’Twas like the night sky,” said Autumn, “only through this crevasse in the ground and there was no sign of Plakill or Plifal. So are you saying that what happened to us in Veobad was in this other place?”

“No, Veobad is here,” said Mother Midcarn. “But when I realised I had opened the rift to Un'izeq I made time repeat so I could close it again. That must be why you went there again and experienced the same things.”

“But if the day repeated,” said Autumn pensively, “why did we not repeat ourselves?”

“I venture that was because of your ribbon and Logan's stone,” said Mother Midcarn. “You are protected by their magic.”

“I confess I am having difficulty understanding this,” said Autumn.

“You and me both,” said Logan. “So where is Un'izeq?”

“It is a land underneath the volcanoes,” said Mother Midcarn. “It is a dark, noisome place and home to things that be offensive to the gods.”

“I thought that was the Land of the Cysciec,” said Autumn.

“Oh no, Cysciec be quite different,” said Mother Midcarn. “Them as are in Cysciec be too evil for the Land of the Undead but they still be undead mortals. Them as are in Un'izeq be lesser deities that have brought upon themselves the wrath of the gods.”

“Lesser deities?” said Logan. “You mean some are better than others?”

“Not better,” said Mother Midcarn, “just less powerful. You know Mielikki be the deity of forests and woods?”

“Aye,” said Autumn.

“Well, as a tree spirit Fiau be a lesser deity of forests and woods,” said Mother Midcarn. “Her powers are small compared with Mielikki. I am not certain but I wager Bar Ilan sought too much power and the deities did not like it.”

“I wager you will soon be there yourself,” said Autumn. “You seem to be on par with the deities.”

Mother Midcarn smiled. “No, what I did was quite simple really.”

“And you did it twice?” asked Autumn.

“Well, no one is perfect,” said Mother Midcarn. “Even though I said it was quite simple really, it is actually fiendishly difficult for a mortal and no one has attempted it before.”

“Can you explain it to us?” asked Autumn. “I would dearly love to know.”

“Sadly no,” said Mother Midcarn. “The mathematik has not yet been invented.”

“The what?” asked Logan.

“Ahh, 'twas a slip of the tongue,” said Mother Midcarn. “Pay it no mind.”

“But this whatever it was does not exist yet?” asked Autumn. “You got it from the future?”

“Aye,” said Mother Midcarn. “A long way in the future. How I got to that time was by chance but now I have that knowledge I am learning how to control it.”

“There must be some very clever people in this future of yours,” said Autumn. “Who made this invention?”

“’Twas not one person but many,” said Mother Midcarn. “Each building on the thoughts of those before.”

“So who was the first to start those thoughts?” asked Logan.

“That I cannot tell you,” said Mother Midcarn.

“Mayhap it be you, Logan,” said Autumn teasingly. “Your new manner of counting may yet prove fruitful.”

“Enough of this,” said Mother Midcarn. “I cannot reveal any more than I have already and I suspect that may be too much as it is. Tell me more of your strangenesses.”

“Well, there was the attack by the aciui,” said Autumn, “which brought us into these passages and then we met Juawau and Qaate and they asked us to help rid them of some big, hairy thing that was in the Great Temple.”

“Big hairy thing?” said Mother Midcarn, stopping again.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “It had six limbs which seemed to serve as both arms and legs and was very hairy and too big to fit inside the passages.”

“How many eyes did it have?” asked Mother Midcarn.

“Four,” said Autumn, “as far as I know.”

“Most likely it was a jieci,” said Mother Midcarn.

“What is a jieci?” asked Autumn.

“A thing from Un'izeq,” said Mother Midcarn. “They be as you describe and their four eyes can see in all directions. I venture Bar Ilan brought one with it as well as Mijr.”

“Well, it be dead too,” said Autumn. “Qaate had it fed to some aciui. Were the aciui that attacked us your doing as well?”

“Tell her about the cavern,” said Logan.

“What cavern?” asked Mother Midcarn.

“Ahh, that was after the attack but before we met Qaate,” said Autumn. “We found a cavern that was all lit and as we tried to cross it it kept spinning. One moment we were on the ground the next we were on the roof then on one side. It was very strange.”

“Ahh, yes,” said Mother Midcarn. “No doubt that was my doing as well. After Bar Ilan came through the rift it and I struggled for a time and I do recall that gravity got tossed around somewhat, but the aciui were nothing to do with me. Of that I am quite certain.”

“Gravity?” asked Logan. “What is that?”

“It is the thing that holds you to the ground and what makes things fall,” said Mother Midcarn.

“Oh,” said Logan. “I knew something did. What is it? Is it like a wind or a string or some such?”

“Something like that,” said Mother Midcarn. “What other strangenesses have befallen you?”

“Umm, there was the attack on that woman by Mijr,” said Autumn. “Although it must have been sent by Bar Ilan. It did say something

right strange though.”

“Oops,” said Mother Midcarn, stumbling but Logan grabbed her before she fell. “Thank you, dearie. Be it far to go?”

“We will be at Hial’s dwelling very soon,” said Autumn. “We can rest there and decide what to do next.”

“Who is Hial?” asked Mother Midcarn.

“She is an aciui farmer,” said Logan. “She led us to where you were.”

“Ahh, I must remember to thank her,” said Mother Midcarn. “What was it that Mijr said to you?”

“It recognised us,” said Autumn, “and said that our time was coming then it disappeared.”

“Oh really?” said Mother Midcarn. “It recognised you? Had you met before?”

“No,” said Autumn.

“How interesting,” said Mother Midcarn. “I wonder.” She went silent.

“What do you wonder?” asked Autumn when it became apparent that Mother Midcarn was not going to share her thoughts immediately.

“Hmm?” said Mother Midcarn. “Oh, I was watching you both in my Window when Mijr first appeared. It was when I saw you get trapped by the rockfall. Afterwards I made you the mittens and sent them back but, you know, I rather think Mijr may have seen you in my Window and it may well have seen me send you the mittens and decided you were of some importance in the grand scheme of things. I venture it was Mijr that stole my Window and either it or Bar Ilan is now trying to use it.”

“To what purpose?” asked Autumn.

“I know not,” said Mother Midcarn. “But I venture whichever took it

has realised it has no little power and wants that power for itself. This is most excellent news.”

“Excellent?” asked Autumn. “How so?”

“I am still alive,” said Mother Midcarn. “That can only mean they have not worked out how to use my Window. There is hope for us yet.”

“Stop,” said Autumn.

“What is it?” asked Logan as he and Mother Midcarn stopped to look at her.

“I need to get this clear in my mind,” said Autumn, “and Hial’s dwelling be close and I venture it be best not to discuss this in front of her and the others. Tell me if I have the essence of this.”

“Certainly, my dear,” said Mother Midcarn.

“A long time ago Bar Ilan was banished beneath the volcanoes,” said Autumn slowly, “and Mor’upita-sehen was set to guard over it. But then Mor’upita-sehen Itself went missing and you were called in to find It.”

“That’s right,” said Mother Midcarn, “although ...”

Autumn held up her hand for silence and Mother Midcarn stopped talking.

“While you were looking for Mor’upita-sehen, you opened up a path for Bar Ilan to escape,” said Autumn, “and it brought Mijr and the hairy thing with it. You have been trying to return Bar Ilan and the others and in the process you made time repeat and other strange things.”

“Well, that be a great simplification,” said Mother Midcarn. “What I actually did was ...”

“No, no, I want it simple,” said Autumn. “I am trying to understand

how everything fits together. So, somehow Mijr saw Logan and me in your Window then stole your Window and took you prisoner and has been trying to capture or kill or do something to us as we seem to be some sort of threat. I suppose that would explain the aciui and mayhap even the rockfall. Could Mijr have caused the rockfall?"

"Perhaps," said Mother Midcarn. "Certainly Bar Ilan could."

"That would seem to make sense," said Autumn. "And the fact that you are still alive suggests that whoever has your Window does not yet know how to use it properly. Do you suppose Bar Ilan has it or would Mijr have kept it for itself?"

"I cannot say," said Mother Midcarn. "But as Mijr is dead it could be nigh on impossible to find if it hid it."

"Does that strange other world you came across have anything to do with this?" asked Logan.

"I venture not," said Mother Midcarn. "My Window was taken after I closed that opening."

"That be a relief," said Autumn. "Twill be difficult enough to find in these volcanoes. So, it seems to me that everything originates with the pathway to Un'izeq and Bar Ilan so we need to try to find your Window so you can return Bar Ilan and mayhap Mor'upita-sehen." She paused then threw up her hands. "Mizule! Where to begin?"

"I am not so sure," said Logan thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?" asked Autumn.

"I think I see how the attacks and the confusions with time and the other things fit in," said Logan slowly. "But what about the blue flame? It first appeared after all this had begun but surely if it be from Un'izeq or sent by Bar Ilan it would have attacked us not killed Mijr."

"That is true," said Autumn. She looked at Mother Midcarn. "What do you know of the blue flame?"

“Nothing,” said Mother Midcarn. “I have not come across a blue flame before, at least not one with a mind of its own. That be right strange.”

Chapter Twenty Eight

“Who the bliad are you?” demanded Pif as they loomed out of the dark passage. “Oh, it be you two again. Why are you back here? And who is this?”

He dropped his arm so the stone axe head rested on the floor although he kept a firm grip on the shaft.

“This be the one we were looking for,” said Autumn, coming fully into the light of Hial’s home. “Her name is Mother Midcarn. How fares your mother?”

“Ask her yourself,” said Pif gesturing towards the furthest room. “Take more than a tap on the head to lay her out,” and he spat on the ground.

Hial was talking to several people clustered in the room and was clearly not lying down and resting. Elsewhere others were standing in knots talking animatedly and looking worried.

“I shall,” said Autumn, “but why are you armed and what be everyone doing?”

“There be tales of something much amiss at the Great Temple,” said Pif. He sniffed and ran his fingers through his hair.

“What is amiss?” asked Mother Midcarn mildly although her eyes betrayed some urgency.

“Tales differ,” said Pif, his eyes narrowing. “One says as how it be an invasion of topsiders and another an uprising of ghosts and spirits and a third that there be maddened aciui on the rampage, killing as they go. I have even heard it said Owilausco be coming active again but none take that tale seriously. Why be you back here? You have found your friend so why do you not go back from where you came?”

“We do not know the way,” said Autumn. “Osk brought us here and we hoped he or another would guide us back.”

“Osk be gone,” said Pif. “Best you be talking to Ma.”

He turned and bellowed “Oi, Ma!” His voice boomed and echoed around the underground chambers and a small swirl of rock dust fell from the roof. Everyone stopped their discussions and turned to look at him, except Hial who continued to talk animatedly at a man who towered over her while jabbing his lower chest repeatedly with her finger.

“... and don't you be giving me no never you mind, see,” drifted across the now silent arena. Then she turned and shouted “What now?” at Pif.

“C'mere, Ma,” shouted Pif, beckoning with an arm the size of Logan's leg.

She gave him an exasperated look then jabbed the man once more under his ribs before stalking over.

“Ohh, it be them again,” she said as she got closer. “This be the one you were looking for?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “After we brought you back we went in search of her again and found her in a cavern beyond that passage. How are you?”

“I have a headache,” growled Hial, “and this bastard shouting don't be helping it none.” and she glared at Pif. Then she realised what Autumn had said and turned back to face her.

“What do you mean, beyond the passage?” she demanded. “There ain't no caverns down there.”

“We dug through the wall,” said Logan, “and found a cavern then dug through the wall of that and found another with Mother Midcarn in it.”

“Dug?” said Hial frowning. “How be you digging? None can dig this rock 'cepting Mor'upita-sehen Itself. Ohhh, you be that witch, I reckon.”

“Sorcerer,” said Autumn.

“Auger and diviner,” said Mother Midcarn hastily.

“Oh aye?” said Hial. She sniffed then wrinkled her nose. “So what else did you find down along?” she asked, studying the dried gore on Autumn’s robe. “Smells like you killed sommat nasty.”

“There was something else there,” admitted Autumn, “but it has gone now.”

“Hmm,” said Hial scowling. “There be some right strange things going on and no mistake and I reckon as how you be right in the middle of it. ’Twould be best, I am thinking, if you and your friends,” with an emphasis on ‘friends’ to show her distaste, “be moving on, right smart.”

“That is our desire,” said Autumn. “Except we know not the way and Pif says Osk is no longer here.”

“Aye, he left as soon as the rumours started coming,” said Hial. “So what be the truth of it then? What be happening at Great Temple?”

“We do not know,” said Mother Midcarn. “That is why we need to go there as quickly as possible.”

Hial scowled at her.

“Not much of a diviner or auger if you be not knowing,” she said sarcastically.

“So true,” said Mother Midcarn, “although I wager I can foresee a loss in your immediate future.”

“Oh aye?” said Hial. “Be that a threat of some sort?”

“Oh dear me, no,” said Mother Midcarn, “you completely misunderstand me. I was merely predicting that if one of your neighbours happens upon the caverns that you say are not there then they will profit from them, not you.”

Hial stared at her for a few moments then turned to Pif.

“Go find Benk and Klem,” she instructed. “Tell 'em to meet me back of second glebe. You be there too.”

“Aye, Ma,” said Pif hurrying away.

“Pif,” called Hial after him. “Bring a marker with you.”

“Aye, Ma,” called back Pif.

“Need a marker to mark what be rightfully ours,” she said, turning back and seeing Autumn's questioning look, “if it do turn out there be more space down there.”

She stared at Mother Midcarn again then nodded.

“Maj!” she roared then pressed a hand against her head and grimaced.

“Yes, Ma?” called a girl who looked to be on the cusp of womanhood.

“Get over here,” called Hial more gently. Maj came skipping over, unafraid of her mother. “Take these three to Qaate.”

“Yes, Ma,” said Maj, inspecting the three visitors and wrinkling her nose at Autumn's robe. “When?”

“Right now,” said Hial then stepped away, pulling Maj with her. “And see what you can find out about what be going on while you're there,” she hissed.

“Aye, Ma,” said Maj. She looked at her mother for a few moments then turned back to the others. “Well, it be a fair old walk, best we be setting off, actually. Come on.”

She picked up a lamp and set off down the passage with Autumn and the others close behind.

“So, what actually be all that stuff over your robe?” asked Maj brightly.

“Someone's brains,” said Autumn.

“Oh,” said Maj, glancing at Autumn then at Logan. She decided they didn't seem the type who wanted to chat on the way.

* * *

“I do not actually know where Qaate actually lives,” said Maj when they were getting near the Great Temple. “I will need to ask directions, actually.”

“I do,” said Mother Midcarn. “You can leave us now, child. I know the way from here.”

“Ma said to take you to Qaate,” said Maj stubbornly, “and that be what I am actually going to do. If you know the way I will follow you, then.”

“As you wish,” said Mother Midcarn.

She led them through a maze of passages thronged with people in small groups, all busily talking and looking anxious. Several people in rooms they passed were packing their belongings and fretting over what to take with them and where to go. Most people eyed the group as they passed then tried to work out who they were, what they were doing and what it could possibly mean.

At length they came to a set of rooms down a short, well lit passage, a little distant from the main crowded area.

“This be where Qaate lives,” said Mother Midcarn looking around, “although it would seem she is not here.”

“Nice place, actually,” said Maj going over to inspect some of the furnishings. “I wonder where she actually got those cushions?”

“If there be trouble at the Great Temple, I wager she would be there,” said Autumn.

“I doubt it, dear,” said Mother Midcarn. “People like Qaate never go

where the problems are, they go to meetings about the problems somewhere else. Do you know where the Band Room is, Maj?"

"No, actually," said Maj. "Ohh, isn't that nice?" and she went to admire a hand painted aciui leather wall hanging.

"That is a nuisance," said Mother Midcarn frowning. "I met the Band of Elders when I first came here but I have not been back since. Come, let us ask someone else."

She strode back along the passage to the main thoroughfare. Maj reluctantly tore herself away from Qaate's luxuries to follow.

"Down that way," said a man nervously when Mother Midcarn accosted him. "Third on the right, up the steps then second left. You can't miss it."

"Be not listening to him," said a passer-by. "Band Room be up the other way then second on the left. When it forks you keep going straight then you take the steps then turn left past the old well room."

"Your brains be addled, man," said the first. "Been drinking too much aciui wine I wager."

"Trust me," said the passer-by. "I be saying the right of it. Take no notice of this fool."

"Thank you," said Mother Midcarn. "Come on."

She led the way up the thoroughfare as the second man had said while the two Esuaqi watched them go.

"Damned fool," said the second. "They be topsiders. What you be telling them where the Band Room be when there be Mor'upita-sehen knows what breaking loose?"

"Ohh," said the first. "I didn't think. That one with the smelly robe and funny eyes made me nervous."

"Aye, she were a scary looking creature all right," said the second.

“Right, you run off to the Band Room and tell the Elders there be topsiders looking for them and we sent them to the old well room. I’ll follow them and see where they actually do go. If they go somewhere else I will try to get a message through.”

“Good thinking,” said the first and hurried off down the thoroughfare.

* * *

“What did he say to do at the fork?” asked Mother Midcarn when they reached the fork.

“Go straight ahead, then up the steps,” said Autumn, “which would appear to be a difficulty.”

“So if one goes left and one goes right, which be straight ahead?” asked Logan.

“I venture it be this one,” said Mother Midcarn. “It is less to the right than the other is to the left.”

“Actually, I think it is the other way,” said Maj.

“Why?” asked Mother Midcarn, frowning at her. “You said you do not know this place.”

“He said to go up the steps, actually,” said Maj, stepping back nervously. “There be no steps that way.” She paused for a moment then added “actually” for no obvious reason.

“Maj is right,” said Logan making a conscious effort not to say ‘actually’ himself. It was infectious.

Maj smiled gratefully at him and he went slightly pink which made her giggle. Autumn watched her for a moment then half smiled.

“They both said to go up steps,” she said, turning back to the fork. “Let us therefore take the passage with the steps. At the very least we will be on the right level.”

“As you wish,” said Mother Midcarn, “although I do not remember any steps when I was taken from the Band Room to the rooms assigned to me.”

“Mayhap they were on the same level,” said Logan, acutely conscious of Maj now watching him.

“They were two passages away from Qaate's rooms, on the same level,” said Mother Midcarn. “Oh well, we have to go somewhere. For certain the Elders be not meeting at this fork.”

She set off up the passage.

“So what do you actually do topside?” asked Maj, following Logan.

“Oh, erm, nothing much,” said Logan. “I, um, just travel around a lot, you see, um, with Autumn.”

“Oh,” said Maj disappointedly. “So she be your actual era'owen?”

“Oh Sploop, no,” said Logan. “We just travel together, you see, um, yes.”

“I would like to visit topside,” said Maj, brightening up again. She let her shoulder bump into Logan's. “Mayhap even actually stay up there if it be a nice place.”

“Ohh?” said Logan as they started to ascend the steps. He edged closer to the wall.

“Is it a nice place?” asked Maj, innocently, edging a little that way as well.

“Umm,” said Logan, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on Autumn's back, three steps ahead of him.

“This must be the old well room,” said Mother Midcarn as the steps ended in a large room with a low circular wall in it.

The well itself was hollow and the level below could be seen.

Immediately underneath this hollow well was another well with water in it.

“I wager this used to be a well until they made the lower level,” said Logan. “I wonder why the water in the well does not overflow?”

“The water levels be getting lower, actually” said Maj. “That be why we ask Mor'upita-sehen for lower levels. There be some as say the water will run out one day actually.”

“Why do you not ask Mor'upita-sehen for more water then?” asked Autumn.

“I know not, actually,” said Maj with a shrug.

“We are wasting time,” said Mother Midcarn. “Something serious is happening. I can feel it.”

She headed past the old well into the broad passage beyond and turned left.

“I wonder where the Band Room is,” she said.

“Tis some way away,” said Qaate, appearing from a room a little way further along. “Welcome back, Mother Midcarn.”

Three large men appeared from the same room and fanned out behind her, trying to look menacing.

“All is well,” said Qaate, turning to dismiss them. “Thank you.”

“As you wish, Qaate,” said one of the men and they turned and went back into the room.

“Well met, Qaate,” said Mother Midcarn. “We were looking for the Band Room and were directed here.”

“Aye,” said Qaate. She shifted her gaze to the entrance to the old well room. “I know these people, all is well. Thank you, Raned, your conscientiousness is much appreciated.”

“My pleasure,” said Raned and headed off back to the lower level.

“Raned was suspicious of topsiders looking for the Band Room,” said Qaate, “so he directed you here and sent me a message. These are uncertain times. I be right glad you are back. We have great need of your counsel for we have no idea what to do.”

“We heard worrying rumours at Hial’s farm,” said Mother Midcarn, “and there seems to be an air of panic here. You look exhausted. What is going on?”

“Let us go to the old well,” said Qaate. “We can sit and talk there. Well met, Autumn, well met. Logan. Your quest seems to have resolved itself in a timely manner, please join us. And who are you, child?”

“I be Maj, actually,” said Maj. “Daughter of Hial.”

“Indeed,” said Qaate. “And your reason for being here?”

“She is a good friend of Logan, actually,” said Autumn and Logan stared at her in consternation. She smiled at him then turned her attention back to Qaate.

“You make friends quickly, Logan,” said Qaate, raising an eyebrow. “Mayhap it be a useful skill, mayhap not,” then she sighed and seemed to collapse in on herself a little. “Ahh, no matter if the girl joins us also. Rumours are spreading unchecked and very soon we will have to acknowledge the truth of the matter. Come.”

She slowly walked into the well room, leaning heavily on her walking stick. Inside she sat on the low wall. Mother Midcarn sat on the wall beside her and Logan went to sit on the ground with his back against the wall opposite. Maj sat next to him and he edged away slightly. Autumn remained standing.

“Ahh, where to begin,” muttered Qaate.

“Begin from when we left to find Mother Midcarn,” said Autumn. “It was only three days past and would seem to have been an eventful time.”

“Aye,” said Qaate. “Well, now, let me see. After you killed the big hairy thing in the Great Temple we had its remains dismembered and taken to a nearby farm to feed the aciui there. The Sviatar Halava had the mess cleaned up in the Temple and arranged a cleansing ritual to purify the Great Temple the next day.”

“What big hairy thing?” whispered Maj.

“I will tell you later,” whispered Logan.

“I will look forward to that, actually,” whispered Maj, shifting a little closer to him. He shifted a little further away.

“And has the Great Temple now been purified?” asked Mother Midcarn, ignoring them.

“Regretfully no,” said Qaate. “When the Sviatar Halava and a large group of worshippers arrived for the ritual they were confronted by several strange creatures who refused them entry. They were sent away with instructions to send their leader to the Great Temple. They immediately ...”

“What kind of strange creatures?” interrupted Autumn.

“They were like us,” said Qaate, “except they were naked with a goodly covering of body hair, flat faces, green teeth, black talons on their fingers and yellow eyes. There were four of them.”

“Ugh,” whispered Maj with a shudder that somehow moved one of her legs so that it touched Logan's.

“They sound like tarc,” said Mother Midcarn.

“You know of these creatures?” asked Qaate, openly astonished.

“Aye,” said Mother Midcarn. “Autumn bested one in her search for me.”

“I did n...” started Autumn but subsided when Mother Midcarn held up her hand.

“Were you actually there?” whispered Maj. Logan nodded.

“Ohhhh,” she whispered, looking admiringly at him. Logan swallowed nervously and concentrated on Qaate.

“They did not seem overly fearsome,” said Qaate, “so when the Sviatar Halava reported this desecration to the Band of Elders we deliberated and decided, even though we are a peaceful people, to send in a group of armed men to evict these ... tarc from the Great Temple.”

“I wager you were unsuccessful,” said Autumn.

“You say this to bolster your own achievement in our eyes?” asked Qaate, looking coldly at her, “or to diminish us?”

“Neither,” said Autumn. “But clearly if the eviction had been successful you would not be in your present situation which, although I do not yet know what it is, I venture is dire.”

“That be the truth of it,” said Qaate. “None of the fifteen we sent in came out again. Their weapons were thrown out and one of these tarc informed us that our leaders were to attend within two lamps.”

“And did you?” asked Mother Midcarn.

“Aye,” said Qaate. “I and the others of the Band of Elders together with the Sviatar Halava went to speak with these tarc. There was another there as well.”

“Another tarc?” asked Mother Midcarn.

“No,” said Qaate, collapsing a little more within herself. She fiddled anxiously with her walking stick. “There was another creature there, unlike anything we have seen before. It was huge, the height of three of us and was entirely red with outstretched wings instead of arms and three large staring eyes above a gaping toothless mouth.”

“Ooooh,” muttered Maj, staring wide eyed at Qaate and clutching at Logan's arm for safety.

“Bar Ilan,” said Mother Midcarn, thumping her hand on the wall beside her. “Damnation!”

Qaate stared at her. “There is much you seem to know that we do not,” she said, frowning. “How is it that you know these creatures?”

“That is a long story,” said Mother Midcarn. “So you all spoke with Bar Ilan?”

“No,” said Qaate. “We listened to Bar Ilan, if that be indeed what this creature is. We listened and we were then dismissed as though of no import.”

“What did Bar Ilan say?” asked Mother Midcarn, leaning forward intently.

“Could you grip a little less tightly?” whispered Logan. “My arm is going numb.”

“Ohh, sorry,” whispered Maj, easing her grip the tiniest of fractions but shifting slightly closer. “It sounds awfully scary, actually.”

Qaate glared at her then turned her attention back to Mother Midcarn.

“It told us,” she said, then paused to take a deep breath. “It told us that it was now our lord and master and that henceforth it would occupy the Great Temple and that we must pay tribute to it.”

She gripped her walking stick's handle angrily and the stick scraped unpleasantly on the rock floor.

“What manner of tribute?” asked Autumn.

Qaate looked at her helplessly. “At regular intervals,” she said quietly, “we must send one of our young folk to it, as a tribute.”

“You mean as a sacrifice?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Qaate then she raised her hands to the roof. “Oh,

Mor'upita-sehen. Why has thou forsaken us?"

Chapter Twenty Nine

“What ideas have the Band of Elders come up with?” asked Mother Midcarn.

“Precious few,” said Qaate, gripping her walking stick firmly. “One is to arm our people and go to war against these creatures but we are not a warlike breed and even if we do cast them out, which be not over likely, we will still suffer dreadful losses. Another that has been suggested is to simply abandon everything and go topside and start anew.”

“That would seem a sensible solution,” said Autumn. “’Tis generally better to walk away from trouble than to stay and increase suffering.”

“It would be the ruin of us all,” said Qaate. “We have not the skills to survive topside and where would we go anyway?”

“I would not dismiss the idea entirely,” said Mother Midcarn. “Have there been any other suggestions?”

“To fill the Temple with aciui,” said Qaate, “in the hope that they will eat all the creatures.”

“That will not work,” said Autumn. “A herd of aciui attacked Logan and I and they were not overly difficult to fight off. I wager the tarc would make short work of them.”

“We say a clutter of aciui,” said Qaate, “not a herd, but no matter.”

“Did aciui really actually attack you?” whispered Maj.

“Aye,” whispered Logan. “We were at the top of Wut’qiui.”

“You must be very brave,” whispered Maj admiringly.

“It was Autumn, not me,” whispered Logan. “I just ran where she told me to.”

“Oh, you be teasing me,” whispered Maj, batting her eyelids. “I be not

believing you, actually.”

“And, of course, we could simply refuse to submit and take the consequences,” said Qaate, “whatever they are, or submit and pay the tributes. But, now you are returned, Mother Midcarn, there is another option which I venture would be best.”

“I was afraid you would say that,” said Mother Midcarn. “There is one small problem, however.”

“Are you saying that despite all the time and resources we have made available to you, that you have not found Mor'upita-sehen?” said Qaate, her eyes going flinty.

“Oh, I know where Mor'upita-sehen is,” said Mother Midcarn. “It is just that I cannot bring It back as yet. I need a special thing to do that and it has been stolen from me.”

“Stolen by one of us?” said Qaate, sitting up straight. “Tell me by whom and it shall be returned to you instantly.”

“Bar Ilan,” said Mother Midcarn, “or one of the tarc, I am not certain.”

“This situation goes from bad to worse,” said Qaate, closing her eyes in dismay. “You cannot bring Mor'upita-sehen back without this thing?”

“Sadly not,” said Mother Midcarn. “I need it to, ah, focus and, um, other things.”

“But if it is returned, you can bring Mor'upita-sehen back?” said Qaate.

“Oh yes,” said Mother Midcarn. “I know exactly where I went wrong. When I was held prisoner I went over ...”

“A moment,” said Qaate, pushing the handle of her walking stick forward. “You say you know where you went wrong? Went wrong with what?”

“Oooh,” whispered Maj, wrapping her arm around Logan's. He untangled it and firmly crossed his arms on his chest. Maj smiled and patted his knee and forgot to take her hand away.

“I tried to bring Mor'upita-sehen back a while ago,” said Mother Midcarn, “but I made an error. 'Twas only a little error, tiny even but, um, well anyway, I now know what my mistake was and next time I will get it right.”

Qaate fixed her with a beady stare. “And what, pray, were the consequences of this error? The appearance of this Bar Ilan would seem a remarkable coincidence.”

Mother Midcarn sighed.

“I did warn you when you came to me with this task that there may be undesired consequences,” she said. “You cannot deny that.”

“Sooo,” hissed Qaate, poking her walking stick in Mother Midcarn's direction. “'Tis your meddling that has brought this catastrophe upon us.”

“At your behest,” said Mother Midcarn, leaning forward angrily and tapping her finger on the stone wall between them. “'Twas you that wanted the return of Mor'upita-sehen, not I, and there must always be a risk when mere mortals meddle in the affairs of the gods. The ultimate responsibility must lie with you and your Band.”

“Enough,” said Autumn stepping forward. “Arguing responsibility will not resolve the problem. If the situation cannot be remedied it matters not who is responsible and if it can be remedied then I fancy no one will care about responsibility. What we need to do is cooperate to find a remedy, not make cooperation an impossibility.”

Qaate and Mother Midcarn glowered at each other then Qaate finally capitulated.

“Aye,” she said reluctantly. “We must work together to find a remedy.”

“Indeed,” said Mother Midcarn.

“Good,” said Autumn. “Now, if I might be allowed to make ...”

“But there will be a reckoning,” said Qaate putting both hands on the handle of her walking stick, “whether a remedy be found or nay.” She nodded emphatically.

“This is not helping, Qaate,” said Autumn. “Now, if I can make a suggestion?”

“Go ahead, girl,” said Qaate. She blinked slowly.

“I would suggest that you and your fellow elders start to make arrangements for your people to leave this world and go topside,” said Autumn, “while Mother Midcarn and any other who may be in a position to provide aid work to find a way to rid you of Bar Ilan. That way no one will have to be sacrificed.”

“Tis an almost impossible task,” said Qaate. “Bar Ilan requires the first tribute tomorrow and the people will require much longer than that to gather their possessions and ready their clutters to say nothing of the scouts that would need to be despatched to search for a suitable place topside.”

“I venture your people will react most speedily when they find their lives are at stake,” said Autumn.

“Actually, no,” said Logan. “It will not work.”

“What do you mean, boy?” demanded Qaate.

“Umm, Autumn and me were talking with Mijr before she bested it,” said Logan standing up. “It said that Bar Ilan be now lord of this place and soon it be taking charge beyond these dark places. I think if you leave, Bar Ilan will simply follow as it plans to go topside anyway.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn as Maj scrambled to her feet as well. “You have a point there.”

“Is that so, boy?” said Qaate. “Hmm, that opens up another possibility, does it not. If them as is topside be at risk as well, mayhap we can get

their aid. I hear tell they have armies and whatnot who be equipped to fight battles. Mayhap they will be able to defeat this Bar Ilan.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but it will take a long time before they will send aid and likely not until they are threatened themselves.”

“No,” said Mother Midcarn. “No mortal army can defeat Bar Ilan. Its powers are beyond those of man.”

“You have knowledge of its powers?” asked Qaate.

“Aye,” said Mother Midcarn. “I have fought with it thrice and bested it thrice.”

“Why did you not say you had bested it before?” demanded Qaate. “The solution is simple. Go now to the Great Hall and best the cursed thing again and be done with it! Why do you waste time with this idle chatter?”

“I cannot,” said Mother Midcarn. “Each time I bested it it has returned and for the doing I will need that which was taken from me. Moreover, I fear that to be rid of it forever will require the intercession of the gods.”

Logan ducked involuntarily as Qaate's walking stick crashed into the wall some way away from him.

“Will no one rid us of this damnable beast?” cried Qaate angrily.

She sat on the low wall fuming, her hands opening and closing and her thin lips squashed tightly together. Logan walked over and picked up her walking stick and cautiously handed it back to her. She snatched it back without acknowledging him and he went to stand beside Autumn. Maj sidled over to stand next to him.

“Tis an awkward situation, I agree,” said Autumn. “Mother Midcarn, am I right in thinking that you could best Bar Ilan if you had your Window back?”

“Aye,” said Mother Midcarn. “For a time anyway.”

“And to return Bar Ilan to its place you will need the aid of Mor'upita-sehen?” continued Autumn.

“Aye,” said Mother Midcarn, “and mayhap some other gods as well.”

“And you could bring Mor'upita-sehen back if you had your Window?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Mother Midcarn, “provided Mor'upita-sehen be willing. I cannot force It to come back.”

“Well then,” said Autumn. “’Twould seem to me that it would be a good idea to get your Window back as little seems possible without it.”

“What actually is a window?” whispered Maj.

“I will tell you later,” whispered Logan.

“Oh goody,” whispered Maj.

“Will you two stop that infernal whispering?” demanded Qaate angrily. “It be getting on my nerves!”

“Sorry,” said Logan as Maj edged behind him for protection.

“But how do we get my Window back?” asked Mother Midcarn. “We do not know where it is?”

“I have a thought on that,” said Autumn. “I suggest Mother Midcarn and I go to the Great Temple and talk with Bar Ilan.”

“And what do you think you can achieve that the Band of Elders and the Sviatar Halava were unable to?” asked Qaate scathingly.

“Bar Ilan knows Mother Midcarn can best it,” said Autumn. “If it does not know she is missing her Window it will, I venture, be more willing to listen.”

“But what if it has my Window?” asked Mother Midcarn, “or knows

where it is?"

"Then we may get a clue to its whereabouts," said Autumn.

"You may be on to something there, dear," said Mother Midcarn thoughtfully. "It is certainly worth trying."

Qaate looked from Mother Midcarn to Autumn then back again. "What is this window you keep talking about?" she asked finally. Mother Midcarn ignored her.

"I will go and inform the Band of Elders of your proposal," said Qaate, after a lengthy pause, "and request they start planning our departure from our home. I will meet you at the Great Temple. Do you want me or any of the other Elders to join you in your meeting?"

Autumn glanced at Mother Midcarn who shook her head slightly.

"I fancy not," said Autumn. "There may be violence and 'twould be best for your people if you were spared that. If the meeting should prove fruitful then we can call on the Elders when it comes to terms."

"As you wish," said Qaate, almost managing to hide her relief. "Wait here. I will send someone to guide you to the Temple."

* * *

"You think it will come to violence?" asked Logan when she'd gone.

"'Tis always a chance," said Autumn. "Mother Midcarn, is it possible for me to best Bar Ilan?"

"No, dear," said Mother Midcarn. "It has powers far beyond even you."

"Hmm," said Autumn thoughtfully. "I venture I can best the four tarc, if they be like Mijr, so if trouble starts can you hold off Bar Ilan long enough for us to escape the Temple?"

"Perhaps," said Mother Midcarn. "I have a few tricks I can use without

my Window but do not be over confident about the tarcs. There be a lot of the buggers and no doubt Bar Ilan can call on more if the need arises.”

“Tis an awkward situation right enough,” said Autumn. “Mayhap if I ever return to my Esyup I will ask them to find ways to fight with magic and such but at the moment we have no such skills. Do the tarc have magic or other powers?”

“Not that I know of, dear,” said Mother Midcarn. “They be more scavengers, feeding off the leavings of their betters.”

“Well, that is a benefit,” said Autumn.

“I be thinking Bar Ilan may not even be there,” said Logan.

“Why do you think that?” asked Autumn.

“A thought just came to me,” said Logan, “you remember ...”

“Radl!” cried Maj, nearly bursting Logan's eardrum. He slapped a hand over his ear in case she shouted again. Maj ran over to the young man that had just walked into the old well room. “What be you actually doing here?”

“I am sent to guide you to the Great Temple,” said Radl smiling at her.

“So you be actually living here in centre?” asked Maj.

“Aye,” said Radl. “I be working as a messenger for the Band of Elders.”

“Radl be from the neighbouring farm actually,” Maj told the others. “I ain't seen him for a time. We wondered what had actually become of you but your Da said you be sick of aciui and be not actually coming back.”

“Aye, that be the truth of it,” said Radl. “Hey, be good to see you again, Maj. Listen, best I be taking you all to the Temple then we can

be seeing what's what."

Maj beamed at him and slipped her arm in his as Radl led the group away.

"'Twould seem that maid no longer has eyes for you, actually," whispered Autumn, a wicked smile on her face.

"Alroidia takes many forms," whispered Logan. "And I be ever so grateful! Why do you suppose she keeps saying actually?"

"Young people often like to use language forms not approved of by their parents," said Mother Midcarn. "It be part of growing up and building their own identities."

"I did not," said Autumn.

"Oh, I wager you did," said Mother Midcarn. "Even though you lost your parents when you were very young your Esyup filled the same role. You have a pedantic way of speaking that no doubt you developed to compensate."

"What does pedantic mean?" asked Logan.

"Precise and detailed," said Autumn. "I consider that to be a virtue."

"It is in some ways," said Mother Midcarn, "but in general conversation it can be annoying."

"Woo-hoo," said Logan with a chuckle. "I remember saying that when we first met, Autumn. I said you annoyed people and you were right strange."

"Do not be over critical, Logan dear," said Mother Midcarn. "You be picking up her habits as well."

"Radl says we are almost there, actually," called back Maj, breaking off her chatter with Radl for a moment.

"At least I be not saying actually all the time," said Logan with a

laugh. "And who cares if I annoy people? I have Autumn to protect me!"

"Aye," said Autumn, "and I want you to stay outside the Great Temple when we go in."

"Not likely," said Logan. "The last time I stayed outside you nearly killed me. I will come inside where I can see where you be thrown so I can keep clear. Besides, with you two fighting Bar Ilan and them tarc, who is going to take the Window? I am the thief around here, after all."

"Actually, that is a good point," said Autumn. "If by some chance we do find the Window in the Temple, Logan can steal it back while you and I distract Bar Ilan but we need somewhere to meet again afterwards."

"The best place would be my rooms," said Mother Midcarn. "I have some books there that may be useful."

"We know not how to get to your rooms," said Autumn.

"Ask for any of the Elders or Sviatar Halava," said Mother Midcarn. "They all know where I was ..."

She stopped in the passage, frozen, concentrating.

"What ails you?" asked Logan.

"We are almost there, actually," called Maj from up ahead. She saw they had stopped and said something to Radl who turned and came back.

"Be there a problem?" asked Radl. "What be she doing?"

Mother Midcarn was very slowly twisting her head from side to side, sightlessly scanning the wall. Her raised hands made small grasping motions in front of her.

"Be she having a fit or conniption?" he asked worriedly when neither

Autumn nor Logan answered. They just stood there watching her closely.

Suddenly Mother Midcarn hissed and pointed a finger at the wall then started slowly moving it around, her eyes tightly closed.

“What is behind this wall?” asked Autumn.

“Nothing,” said Radl. “’Tis solid rock. There be nothing behind the Great Temple this side.”

“Where exactly is the Great Temple?” asked Logan.

“Up there,” said Radl, looking puzzled. “Where Qaate be.”

Qaate was standing some way further along the passage talking with two or three people as old as she was and Juawau.

“Is that the entry?” asked Autumn.

“Aye, one of them,” said Radl.

“So how far from that entry be the end wall of the Temple?” she asked.

Mother Midcarn hissed again.

“My Window be not far away,” she growled. “I can feel a glimmering of it. It be over ... there!” and she stabbed at the wall with her pointed finger.

Radl backed away nervously.

“Where be the end wall?” asked Autumn again.

“I am not sure,” said Radl. “For certain it be a big Temple, and there be the alcoves at each end.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “Mother Midcarn, can you tell how far away it is?”

"It is not close," said Mother Midcarn relaxing her posture again, "but it be not far either."

"Tis a shame you are not pedantic as well," said Logan. "Hot and dark, near not far. Some precision would be useful."

"It is over there," said Mother Midcarn. "What more do you need to know? Get out your mittens and dig for it!"

"Wait," said Autumn. "I wager it be inside the Temple. Best we not go digging inside lest we find ourselves in some awkward situation. Mayhap it be in one of the alcoves or buried deep in the rock or guarded by who knows what. We need to know more."

"If we count the number of paces from here to the entrance," said Logan staring up the passage, "when we go inside we will have an idea of how far from the entrance it is. Radl, Is there not another passage the other side of the Temple?"

"Aye," said Radl.

"Good," said Logan. "What say you we go to the other passage and see if Mother Midcarn can sense her Window from there? That will give us an idea of which side of the Temple it is as well. Mayhap if she can point to it from there it will help still further."

"That is good thinking, Logan," said Mother Midcarn. "Come on."

"Well met," said Qaate as they got close. "Do you want us to wait outside for you?"

Mother Midcarn hurried past without even glancing at her. Autumn smiled as she went past and Logan said "forty two" but didn't stop.

"Wait, where are you going?" Qaate called after them. "Forty two what?"

"They be going round the other side," said Radl, pausing. "Do you want me to go after them?"

“Yes,” snapped Qaate, “hurry.”

Radl hurried after them, Maj in tow, happy to be part of whatever was happening since it was more exciting than aciu farming or clearing up after her brothers.

“Can you still sense it?” asked Autumn as they turned the corner to go across the end of the Temple.

“No,” said Mother Midcarn breathlessly.

She hurried on and turned another corner to go down the far side of the temple, one hand pressed into her side for she was not built for fast walking. Suddenly she stopped.

“Thirty nine,” said Logan pulling up beside her. “Can you sense it?”

“Aye,” she panted, waving her finger at the wall. “Just let me catch my breath.”

“Is it stronger here or the other side?” asked Autumn.

“It be weaker,” said Mother Midcarn, “and it be over ... there.”

“Is that entrance opposite the one on the other side, Radl?” asked Logan.

“Umm, what do you mean?” asked Radl.

“If you go in that entrance back there,” said Logan patiently, “can you go straight across to go out the other side or do you have to go up or down the Temple a bit?”

“Oh,” said Radl. “Umm, I think you just go straight across.”

“Good,” said Logan. “So it would seem that the Window is about forty paces from the entrance and it be further the other side than this side. So what shall we do now?”

“We will go inside and talk to Bar Ilan,” said Autumn. “You come too

and see what is forty paces away and closer to the other side.”

“What do we do then?” asked Logan.

“We improvise,” said Autumn.

“Actually, can I come too?” asked Maj. “I have never actually seen inside the Great Temple.”

Chapter Thirty

“Wait for me!” called Qaate, hurrying down the passage as fast as her walking stick would let her with Juawau dogging her heels.

“Oh my word,” she gasped when she reached Autumn and the others. She steadied herself with a hand against the wall.

“We were talking,” she said then paused to catch her breath. “Oh, you tell them,” and she waggled her walking stick at Juawau.

“It is imperative that the relics be not disturbed,” said Juawau aggressively.

“They are held in the alcoves,” said Mother Midcarn. “No doubt they will be safe there although we cannot guarantee what Bar Ilan will do with them.”

“There have been changes to the Great Temple,” said Juawau. “We saw this when we met with Bar Ilan but the alcoves remained intact which shows it is respectful of their significance. You must be equally respectful and preserve them at all costs.”

“Changes?” said Mother Midcarn, frowning. “What changes?”

“The roof be raised to a great height,” said Juawau, “and there now be a large plinth or pedestal of some sort near the end. No doubt Bar Ilan intends it to be an altar or throne of some sort.”

“Whereabouts is this plinth?” asked Autumn.

“It is towards this end of the Temple,” said Qaate, “between the two alcoves. It is a big block of rock, mayhap two people high and three across.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn. She paused for a moment, thinking. “You say it is between the two alcoves. Is it part of the wall or is there space behind?”

“We did not have the opportunity to explore,” said Juawau. “Our

meeting with this creature was most fraught.”

“I am sure it was,” said Autumn, “and I thank you for this information. Tell me, where is the end wall of the Temple, and what lies beyond?”

Juawau thought for a moment. “The end wall is about twenty or so paces further on,” she said, “and the alcoves go some ten paces further. Beyond that lies rock then some dwellings.”

“Has anyone checked those dwellings?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Qaate. “Why would they?”

“It is possible that this plinth obscures a new space created between the alcoves,” said Autumn, “and that space may extend as far as the dwellings beyond.”

“Why would this creature do such a thing?” asked Juawau.

“I cannot know its design,” said Autumn, “but if it were me I would use such a space for the housing of more guards or supplies or perhaps as another way out of the Temple.”

“Ahh,” said Qaate, “so you think there be more than four of those tarcs at hand?”

“’Tis possible,” said Autumn, “or other creatures. ’Tis useful to know of the possibility at any rate. How well lit was the Temple when you were there?”

“It was dimly lit,” said Juawau. “They were using but four lamps.”

“I see,” said Autumn. She thought for a few moments. “Well, Logan, I think you are right. Best you come in with Mother Midcarn and me. I would be surprised if the Window will be on display but if you should see it, mayhap you will find an opportunity to take it. More likely it will be hidden away somewhere so, Mother Midcarn, your task is to locate it. I will try to keep Bar Ilan's attention but if things go awry then make for this passage. I venture it will be easier to deal with Bar

Ilan, the tarc and whatever else there may be in a narrow space. I will protect you both as far as I can.”

“That does not seem much of a plan,” said Qaate.

“It be the best we can do under the circumstances,” said Autumn. “Until we know for certain where the Window is there be little more we can do. The rest of you I suggest get some distance away. If this develops into a fight you may get hurt and your presence in this passage will be a hindrance.”

“I must come in with you,” said Juawau. “My first concern be the relics.”

“If you wish,” said Autumn, “but I venture you can do nothing about them whether they still be intact or not and your presence will not aid Mother Midcarn, Logan nor I. ’Twould not surprise me if you put yourself at risk of a painful and lingering death as well.

“Why would this creature harm me?” asked Juawau. “I am a Sviatar Halava of Mor’upita-sehen.”

“I wager Bar Ilan is not greatly impressed by that,” said Qaate. “It wasn’t last time you met and you poking around behind its back will not help. The relics have survived this long and we must trust that they will continue to survive. Come, let us be away. We have much to prepare should this venture fail.”

Juawau scowled and hesitated then turned and followed Qaate up the passage.

“You too, Maj,” said Autumn firmly as Maj lingered as the others slowly walked away.

“But ...,” she said then Radl took her hand and pulled her after him.

“Well,” said Mother Midcarn watching them go. “That was easier than I expected.”

“Let us hope the remainder of this venture will be as easy,” said

Autumn, putting her pack and water skin on the ground. "Shall we go in?"

"One small matter," said Logan, putting his water skin beside Autumn's. "What does this Window look like?"

"It is a perfect circle," said Mother Midcarn holding her hands up in front of her, "about this wide and the purest of blacks in colour. It may still be in its cover though which is thick leather with a carry handle."

"Is it heavy?" asked Logan, tightening the cord around his waist.

"Its weight be like that of a badger," said Mother Midcarn, "although if it is not in its cover it will feel slippery so grasp it firmly."

"Good," said Logan. He took several deep breaths and bent his knees twice.

"What are you doing?" asked Autumn.

"Preparing myself for the fray," he said, looking very serious.

"Ahh," said Autumn, watching curiously as he interlocked his fingers and pushed his hands out to arms length. "Best I carry your staff. If you have to run it would not be good to have Fiau light your movements."

"Good thinking," said Logan. "I'll take yours."

"Ready now?" asked Autumn when they'd exchanged staffs.

"As ready as I will ever be," said Logan, taking one last deep breath and gripping the staff firmly. "Bring it on."

Autumn smiled then quietly pulled back the thick acui skin curtain that covered the entrance and stepped inside. Mother Midcarn followed and Logan stepped through after her, bumping into Autumn's back. She let the curtain fall back behind them.

The Temple was quite dark with just one solitary lamp lit. It was some distance away, further down the Temple. From where they stood it looked as though some tarc were sitting in its light doing something that involved aggressive arm movements and gruff voices. There were faint sounds of other creatures in the darkness, rustles and creaks and the occasional low voice.

The faint outline that was Autumn moved quietly towards the light and Logan followed, trying not to breathe loudly. He could sense Mother Midcarn slightly behind him and hoped it actually was Mother Midcarn. They were perhaps three paces away from the lamp-lit group when one of the tarc stopped what it was doing and looked up. It growled something in some unknown language and the others stopped as well and twisted to look at Autumn.

“Greetings,” said Autumn politely. “Light, please, Fiau.”

The staff burst into life, illuminating much of the Temple with its light. Other than the four tarc sitting at the base of the plinth there were a lot more scattered further up the Temple. They were lying on the ground, apparently asleep, or sitting and quietly talking with their neighbours. None of them took any notice of the visitors. The four at the plinth were playing some sort of game using old bones. One of them laughed and they resumed their game.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn. “I wish to speak with Bar Ilan.”

“It ain't here,” growled one of the tarc without bothering to look up again. “Piss off.”

It threw its bone onto the ground then snickered. “Beat that, Ganj,” it growled.

“When do you expect Bar Ilan to return?” asked Autumn politely.

“When it wants to,” growled one of the others. “Get out of here or we'll set the cubqoi onto ya.”

“It is a matter of some importance,” said Autumn, somewhat

surprised. The last thing she had expected was to be more or less ignored.

“Not to Bar Ilan, it ain't,” growled the first tarc. It scooped up the pile of bones with a delighted howl and threw another onto the ground.

“Where is Bar Ilan?” she asked.

“None of your business,” growled one of the tarc and spat on the bones in front of it.

“I think we should be going, Autumn,” said Mother Midcarn softly.

“But ...,” said Autumn then nodded. “As you wish.” She raised her voice again. “We shall return another time. Please tell Bar Ilan we were here.”

She hesitated but there was no response whatsoever so she turned and walked back to the entrance.

“I confess I did not expect that,” she said when they were back in the passage. “It had not occurred to me that Bar Ilan might not ...” then she looked over at Logan. “Did you not say something about Bar Ilan not being here earlier? Back at the old well?”

“’Twas just a thought,” said Logan. “Well, more of a hope, really.”

“What were you saying?” asked Autumn. “I do not seem to remember.”

“I did not finish my saying,” said Logan. “Radl arrived to guide us here so we ended the talking and left.”

“Yes, dear,” said Mother Midcarn, a trifle impatiently, “but what was your thought?”

“It was something Qaate said,” said Logan. “About Bar Ilan being big with wings instead of arms.”

“And what has that to do with where it is?” asked Mother Midcarn.

“Well, you remember when we were with Caouma and Luvan, Autumn?” said Logan, “and afterwards Luvan went to the village?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “although that seems a long time ago now. What of it?”

“Luvan said that the village people had said they had seen a dragon,” said Logan.

“There are no dragons,” said Mother Midcarn. “They are just tales to scare small children.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “that be what I thought as well, only it occurred to me that if Bar Ilan be wanting to take over topside as well, it might be off scouting nearby and if it be seen flying with its wings it might be mistook for a dragon.”

“That is a thought,” said Autumn, nodding. “So you think Bar Ilan might be topside at the moment? Looking for somewhere else to add to its empire?”

“’Twas just an idea,” said Logan. “I do not imagine it has much else to do while waiting for the Esuaqi to send it someone in tribute. I reckon it has already worked out it is unlikely to be attacked. What we just encountered be proof of that. Them tarc could not have cared less about us.”

“I wager you are right, Logan,” said Autumn, glancing at the curtain. “I confess I have no thoughts on what to do next. Did you get any better sense of where your Window is, Mother Midcarn?”

“Aye,” said Mother Midcarn. “It is at the top of that plinth. I felt it very strongly.”

“I did not see any way up it,” said Logan. “I thought I could see a gap between the plinth and the wall behind so mayhap there be some steps there but I wager not.”

“Why?” asked Autumn.

“Bar Ilan be three times the height of a man,” said Logan. “It would be like a table for us so where be the needs for steps?”

“True,” said Autumn. “But you could make some footholds with the mittens, could you not?”

“Well, yes,” said Logan. “I dare say I could. It would be awkward to carry the Window back down but I could drop it to you.”

“Not me,” said Autumn, “Mother Midcarn. I will be busy creating a diversion. If we do not light Fiau you two can get to the plinth in the darkness unseen. You, Logan, then climb to the top and find the Window and drop it down to Mother Midcarn then we all get out quickly and head back to her rooms so she can call Mor'upita-sehen.”

“Sounds over simple to me,” said Logan. “How will I find a pure black thing in the dark?”

“Good question,” said Autumn. “Any suggestions, Mother Midcarn?”

“Why not take a lamp and flint up with you?” she said with a shrug. “When you get to the top you can light it, find the Window then put it out again.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Autumn. “There be no time like the present.”

“Oh, I wouldn't be too sure about that,” said Mother Midcarn. “I have been to many time periods and each has advantages and disadvantages.”

“Mayhap you could take us forward to when this is all over,” said Logan, wondering how to climb a sheer rock face in the dark using mittens that made the rock they touched disappear, which would mean he had nothing to hold on to.

“Get me my Window and I will,” said Mother Midcarn, “although I make no promises that it will be better.”

“Enough,” said Autumn. “You know what I meant.”

“What if Bar Ilan comes back in the middle?” asked Logan.

“I will try to talk with it,” said Autumn. “You can still get the Window to Mother Midcarn.”

“Right,” said Logan and turned and wandered off down the passage.

“Where are you going?” asked Mother Midcarn.

“To get a lamp and flint,” said Logan.

“Why not use this one?” she asked, holding up a lamp.

“Ahh,” said Logan. “Yes.”

* * *

“Hello,” said Autumn, coming out of the darkness into the dim lamp light of the game playing tarc. “I am back.”

“Urgh,” grunted one of the tarc, giving her a quick glance.

“I forgot to tell you earlier than I am the one who killed Mijr,” said Autumn, balancing on the balls of her feet ready for an attack.

“Oh yeah?” said one of the other game-players. It threw down a bone and the one next to it snatched up the bone with a cackle.

“Are you not angry about that?” asked Autumn.

“Served 'im right,” said the one who'd thrown down the bone. It studied the bones on the ground and groaned then said something that sounded disgusting. The others laughed.

Autumn heard a faint scrape some way off to her right and estimated Logan must be near the plinth. She frowned, wondering what to do. It was proving surprisingly hard to create a diversion and she found herself, because of her beliefs, unable to launch an unprovoked attack. She pushed her hood back and scratched her head.

“What game are you playing?” she asked, then rushed on without waiting for a reply. “I wager it be a silly game and you all be cheating.”

A small blue flame wriggled out of her hood and gently rose up to hover over her head, as if appraising the situation.

“Aye,” said the tarc, not bothering to look up, “that be what we call it in your tongue. It be a game of trickery and deception.”

Autumn sighed and stepped forward. With great reluctance she kicked the closest tarc in the back. With superb timing the tarc leaned forward just at that moment to inspect the bones then leant over to its neighbour to say something and her kick missed by a hair's breadth. The blue flame slowly ascended and paused to note the two cubqoi lying on top of the plinth, their heads hanging over the edge as they watched what was happening below, so bored that anything was a distraction.

One of the heads of one of the cubqoi lifted to look at the the blue flame. Its nostrils briefly flared to detect any scent but there was none. It glanced at its other head then subsided again was a faint sigh. The blue flame flickered then slowly wafted around the plinth.

“Mizule,” muttered Autumn, regaining her balance. She stepped back and prodded the tarc with the end of her staff.

“Piss off,” growled the tarc, twisting round to glare at her.

“Make me,” said Autumn, poking it again.

The tarc spat then turned back to the game so it could toss down a bone. The tarc opposite, with its back to the plinth, reached out and felt around then threw a large stone at Autumn. She dodged it easily and it clattered against the wall somewhere behind her.

“Oh Sploop,” thought Logan when he heard the clatter. He froze for a moment but there were no more sounds of any battle being raged so he scooped out another notch in the back of the plinth as high up as he could reach then took off the mitten and slipped it inside his tunic.

He reached back with his hand to find Mother Midcarn then whispered as quietly as he could "I be going up". He felt her nod. Then he felt around to find the first notch he had made and put his foot in it. It was barely deep enough for his toes and they felt the strain as he hoisted himself up, feeling for the highest notch. Hugging the plinth with his toes protesting angrily he managed to get his other foot to the next notch which was a little too high for comfort but it was a little deeper and he managed to get part of the ball of his foot inside.

"What do I have to do to get you to fight me?" he heard Autumn say, almost plaintively.

"Just kick the bastard's teeth in," thought Logan straining upwards. "That should do it." It felt like he had found the top of the plinth so he gripped as tightly as he could with the first joints of that hand, took a deep breath and let go with the other hand.

"This be our rest time," growled a tarc. "Come back tomorrow with a decent wager."

His toes screamed in protest as he pushed his foot into the third and last notch then, with a heave, he managed to get his chest onto the top of the plinth. He paused for a few moments to collect himself then scabbled a little with a foot before managing to get a knee over the edge.

"Tis only a short fall," he thought then shifted his hips and pushed with an arm so his entire body was on the top. The lamp dug painfully into his belly. Taking great care to remember where the edge was in the darkness, Logan got to his knees and looked around. There was a blue glow off to his right.

"I hope to Zeeth you be on my side," thought Logan. The blue flame flickered and started to descend.

"What would you consider a decent wager?" came Autumn's voice from somewhere ahead of him.

Logan reached inside his tunic and fumbled for the lamp. He pulled it

out and reached inside again for the flint. It wasn't there.

“Oh ,” he muttered and rummaged around. He found the flint eventually. It had made its way round to nestle in the small of his back, half hidden by the mitten.

“That was pretty stupid of me,” he thought. “What if the mitten had dissolved the flint?”

He shook his head at the thought then held the lamp on top of the plinth and struck the flint. A spark jumped up and touched the wick. It caught and a tiny flame appeared then went out again. He struck the flint again and this time the wick flamed more strongly. It died down then spluttered two or three times then burned strongly.

“Ahh,” thought Logan in satisfaction.

He sat back on his heels and lifted the lamp to look around. Two large dark grey shapes lay on the plinth, barely two body lengths away. A large hairy head swivelled round to look at him with two cold grey eyes. It seemed curious. As Logan stared, panic beginning to rise, the head of the other shape twisted round to look as well. Then the cubqois' other heads turned to see what the first heads were looking at. Then all four started to snarl, four jaws opened and four sets of very sharp fangs appeared as four upper lips curled back.

“Growwwwww,” came from one throat then another. Two more joined in in harmony.

“Oh Yammoe,” said Logan in alarm, almost dropping the lamp. “Autumnnnnn!” as first one then the other cubqoi leapt to its feet.

Chapter Thirty One

At the first snarl Autumn reacted and slammed the staff into the head of the targ in front of her and simultaneously lashed out with a foot at the one beside it. Both fell. By the time the fourth snarl finished the other two targ lay beside their companions, one writhing from a hand chop to its throat and the other stunned from a side kick to its ear. She thrust the staff deep into the belly of the closest and shouted “Fiau, light,” then ran away from the plinth. Around her were the sounds of targ reacting to the snarls, clambering to their feet or waking up.

By the time Logan's “Autumnnnnnn!” rang out she was five paces away and the staff was flaring into life. She stopped, looked back and up and saw the outlines of two large shapes twisting round at the top of the plinth. As the first echo started rolling back she was already sprinting. After three bounds she leapt forwards and upwards, her hands reaching for the two dark grey tails now clearly illuminated by the burning torch held upright by the dead targ. As her hands snatched at the tails and buried themselves in the thick fur she curled forward so her feet slammed into the side of the plinth and with a grunt as her sore ankle stabbed pain up her calf Autumn kicked hard, thrusting herself away.

As a sudden light flared behind the cubqoi, silhouetting their ravening heads, Logan cowered back, the small light from his little lamp glinting off eight angry eyes. One set of jaws was already wide and coming for his head when all four heads were suddenly wrenched backwards. The cubqoi howled as they were dragged over the edge.

Somersaulting in mid air, Autumn landed on her feet and released the tails but over balanced and fell on her back. Using the momentum she rolled backwards and leapt to her feet. The two cubqoi crashed to the ground in front of her, a mass of heads and legs, just as a targ, faster to react than the others, grabbed her from behind, trapping her arms. Instantly Autumn lashed back with a heel and jerked her head back, spreading its broad flat nose across its face in a bloody mess.

Surprised at the sudden disappearance of the heads, Logan crawled forwards on hands and knees and peered over the edge. Immediately

below were four apparently dead tarp, one being used as a candle holder for the burning staff. Beyond them were two large grey wolf-like animals with too many heads getting to their feet. Further beyond was Autumn, facing him with a faceless tarp falling to the ground behind her. Not much further away was a horde of tarp charging forward. Autumn glanced up and their eyes met.

“Are you hurt?” she shouted, jumping to one side and spinning to face the oncoming tarp.

“No,” he shouted back, his eyes dragged back to the cubqoi. One of them was already on its four legs and shaking both its heads.

Autumn did a jumping scissor kick and caught two tarp before falling to the ground. She kicked up with her legs and pushed with her arms and regained her feet.

“Find the Window!” she shouted as she backstepped rapidly.

A quick glance behind then she spun, grabbing the burning staff, and swung it in a wide arc, stopping the oncoming tarp in their tracks. The head of one exploded.

“That must be the blue flame,” exclaimed Logan then he saw something at the far end of the Temple.

“Autumn,” he shouted, “there be another of those big hairy jiec things.”

“The Window!” shouted Autumn as she thrust the burning end of the staff into the face of a nearby tarp.

“Find my infernal Window, Logan,” shouted Mother Midcarn.

Logan looked down and saw her emerge from around the corner of the plinth. A tarp rushed at her and she slammed a small rock into its face.

“The Window!” cried Logan and jumped to his feet and nearly lost his balance. He teetered on the edge for a moment but managed to right

himself by throwing his arms back, blowing his lamp out in the process.

“Sploop,” he shouted and spun round, his eyes searching for the flint which he'd left the other side of the plinth. He spotted the flint and leapt over a large stone slab to grab it before realising that he could see it in the light from Fiau and didn't need the lamp.

“Damned fool,” he muttered and threw the flint down. It bounced and went over the edge of the plinth. “Oops.” He hesitated then tossed the lamp after it and looked around. The top of the plinth was flat and featureless, apart from the large stone slab in the centre.

“Focus,” he said, trying to calm his pounding heart. It didn't slow his heart but he felt a little more purposeful. “It must be under there.”

There was a small explosion and a brilliant flash from the side of the plinth and he quickly looked over the edge. Mother Midcarn was pointing at something and four or five tarc were screaming as the hair on their bodies flamed. Three fell to the ground writhing and the other two ran blindly away, cannoning into others and setting them alight. He glanced over at Autumn but she was hidden by Fiau, who had appeared and grown huge and was wrestling with the enraged jiecí. Her mass of sharp pointed branches easily outmatching its six legs. The smell of burning tarc was becoming thick and Fiau hastily dragged the jiecí sideways as a ball of fire that had once been a tarc came close to setting light to her trunk.

“The Window,” muttered Logan as he tore himself away from watching the carnage below.

He jumped over to the slab and tried to push it aside but it was far too heavy.

“Oh Sploop,” he muttered and pushed with all his strength. It shifted not one iota.

He scrambled round and tried from another side. It made no difference. The slab was immovable.

“Oh Seiliu,” shouted Logan, kicking the slab angrily. “What to do? What to do?”

He was momentarily distracted as the jiecì hurtled through the air and smashed into the wall of the Temple then slid down the wall in a wet, bedraggled mass of dirty white hair.

“Fiau,” he said suddenly. “Mayhap Fiau be strong enough.”

He jumped to the edge of the plinth, caught his foot on the slab and fell full length.

“Owwww,” he muttered and climbed to his feet. He rubbed his chest and found the mitten in the way. It was still inside his tunic.

“The mitten!” he said, pulling it out and staring at it. “Oh, Sploop! The mitten!”

He shoved his hand inside and bent to wipe the slab. A layer disappeared and he rapidly scrubbed away at it. Then his hand went through and the slab shattered, the pieces falling into the pit underneath.

Feverishly Logan tore off the mitten and scrabbled at the shards of stone, cutting his hands in several places. He ignored the pain because there was a large piece of leather inside the pit.

“Aloidia,” he muttered and slipped his hands underneath. It was too thick to be just a piece of leather. Carefully he lifted it out. It was a satchel of sorts and there was something hard inside it. He opened the flap and peered in. The blackness was intense.

“’Tis the Window,” he muttered, staring at the thing, mesmerised.

There was a sudden buffet of wind and a loud, flapping noise as though some giant bird had landed and a shadow fell over him.

“Give that to me,” said a deep, rasping, harsh voice behind him.

Logan whirled around and nearly dropped the Window. A huge red

form towered over the plinth and three angry eyes stared at him. Two vast wings stretched sideways, nearly touching the side walls of the Temple. All sounds of fighting stopped and a deadly silence descended.

“Voqev,” said Logan, frozen in trepidation.

“We meet once more, Bar Ilan,” called Mother Midcarn, from the side of the plinth.

One of Bar Ilan's eyes swivelled down to stare at her while the other two remained fixed on Logan.

“Indeed, you meddler,” it rasped. Droplets of yellowy-green liquid fell from its gaping mouth as it spoke and several landed on the plinth around Logan. The rock where the droplets landed fizzed and bubbled and wisps of acrid smoke wafted up. “But you will not best me again. I have your trinket.” Its middle eye shifted to look down at her then turned back to Logan.

“Give that to me,” it rasped, one huge wing folding and the claws on its joint reaching out.

Autumn's view of Logan was blocked by the bulk of Bar Ilan so she ran to the side of the plinth. Logan was standing, transfixed, with a leather bag in his hands, Bar Ilan's claws reaching out to him. Instantly she leapt upwards, her hands making contact with the top of the plinth and levering her body up and forward. She cannoned into Logan, knocking him down and snatching the bag from the edge of Bar Ilan's grasp. She rolled then leapt to her feet and twisted to grip the handle of the bag and threw it over the edge to where Mother Midcarn stood.

“Catch,” she shouted and Bar Ilan spat acid in anger. The jet spewed across the plinth but Autumn twisted out of the way, lost her balance and fell off backwards. She landed, shoulders first, on the charred remains of two or three tarc. They smelled most unpleasant. She lay for a moment then rolled off and jumped to her feet as Bar Ilan's tail came whipping round the side of the plinth, its head bent low and its three eyes darting. She jumped over the end of the tail, her eyes

searching for something with which to stab it but there was nothing.

“Ragghhhhh,” roared Bar Ilan, jerking fully upright and spreading its wings.

It twisted sideways and roared again in anger. Against the wall Mother Midcarn tore her Window from its protective bag. Bar Ilan's tail slashed viciously at her as she grew rapidly in size, her eyes flashing. The tail sliced through her as though she was not there. Autumn stepped forward from the side of the plinth to watch, certain that, as far as mere mortals were concerned, it was all over. She glanced up and saw Logan, on his hands and knees, watching Mother Midcarn. She was now of a height with Bar Ilan and they faced each other, her two eyes locked on its three, neither moving. Sparks danced over her outline as she held her Window at arm's length, pointed at Bar Ilan.

The air grew heavy and thick as though a huge storm was about to break. Small tremors shook the Temple and here and there pieces of rock fell from the walls and roof. A crack ran up the side of the plinth as it broke and Logan had to scramble to avoid falling. He saw Autumn and jumped off the plinth, landing on his feet on the targ remains. He ran over to join her and found himself lying on his side against the edge of the entrance to the alcove as the Temple twisted onto its end. Autumn had fallen against the other side of the entrance. The bodies of targ landed beside them, a few still alive.

With a sickening lurch the Temple twisted again and Logan, Autumn and the targ were thrown against the wall. Not far away the bodies of the two cubqoi crashed down and the smashed jeci slid across the upended floor. Further down, up, along, Logan was too disorientated to know, Fiau had grown long, stout branches and had wedged herself against the walls, floor and roof. She was staring intently at Mother Midcarn and Bar Ilan, the only things in the Temple not being affected by the movements. Mother Midcarn seemed to be lying on the wall with Bar Ilan near the opposite wall, some way above.

Autumn sat up, rubbing her shoulder. Logan lay on the wall, groaning and holding his head.

“Are you hurt?” asked Autumn leaning over to touch him.

"I think I am dead," groaned Logan. He sat up and there was blood running down his face from a cut that ran from his hairline to his ear. The blood was dripping in several directions, not knowing which way to go.

"I venture this will be over ..." started Autumn then she stopped.

A wedge of rock had leapt out of the floor in front of Mother Midcarn and rushed upwards towards Bar Ilan like a tidal wave, gathering in size and ferocity. The wave of rock smashed into Bar Ilan and it staggered back, its wings flailing, into the wall above it. The Temple lurched again and everything not fixed in place plummeted down to the far wall. Autumn, Logan and assorted pieces of broken and burnt taro crashed into the side of the plinth. Logan's flint slid along the floor leaving a trail of sparks. The wave of rock hurtled back up the floor towards Mother Midcarn then collapsed into a wall of flame then disappeared.

Mother Midcarn grew even bigger, the Window now a small dot held between her forefinger and thumb. She thrust it towards Bar Ilan, a look of fierce determination on her face.

"Pierazyu ciabie niadobrasumliennaje istota, viarnisia tudy, adkul ty pryjsou!" she shouted.

A shaft of brilliant purple, shot through with streaks of silver, leapt from the Window and hurtled towards Bar Ilan. The shaft caught Bar Ilan in the chest and threw it against the wall. The Temple lurched again and Autumn and Logan slid down the side of the plinth to the floor of the Temple.

"Oh, my back," moaned Logan. "Will this Voqev cursed place never stop spinning?"

"Are you badly hurt?" asked Mother Midcarn, bending over him. She looked to be normal sized again.

"My back is broken," said Logan through clenched jaws.

"Don't be silly, dear," said Mother Midcarn, wiping the blood on his

face with her sleeve. "If your back was broken you would not be able to sit up."

"It feels like it be broken," insisted Logan, "owww." He jerked his head back.

"It be only a small cut," said Mother Midcarn inspecting the wound on his head. "'Twill leave a decent scar though. Make you look tough."

"Where is Bar Ilan?" asked Autumn, sitting up. There was a long scratch down one arm and she looked dishevelled. One of her feet was bleeding from where Logan's flint had stabbed her as it fell.

"Over there," said Mother Midcarn, nodding towards the far wall. Bar Ilan was pinned against the wall and glowed purple. "It be all over now, at least until it wears off."

"Umm," said Autumn, glancing upwards. "Is that supposed to be happening?"

"What's that, dear?" asked Mother Midcarn. She finished inspecting Logan and turned to inspect Autumn.

"Is it safe to come in now?" called a voice, tinged with worry and curiosity.

"Over there," said Autumn, pointing at the plinth.

"Ah," said Mother Midcarn, looking around. "No, I have not seen that before. That be right strange."

"What have you done to our Temple?" cried the voice, this time distraught and more than a little angry.

Thick black smoke was pouring out of the plinth, shot through with patches of glowing red. Mother Midcarn picked up her Window and gazed at it thoughtfully. The Temple started to tremble and shake and the smoke grew thicker.

"Well now," she said after a few moments. "I think Mor ..."

There was a deep roaring, crashing noise and smoke filled the Temple. It was a choking, unpleasant smoke that caught in the throat and brought tears to the eyes. As the smoke cleared, Autumn could make out that the plinth had gone. She blinked several times and wiped her eyes with the hem of her robe. There was a creature where the plinth had been. The grey hairy form looked like a small jiec.

She climbed to her feet, shook her head and wiped her eyes again then stared in astonishment. Surely not?

“Urbil?” said Logan beside her. “Urbil? How in Voqev's name did you get here?”

“Why did you have to ruin my holiday?” said Urbil in a querulous voice. “I was having such a pleasant time.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn, going over to look closely at Urbil. “What are you doing here?”

“Who is Urbil?” asked Mother Midcarn going over to join her.

“This is Urbil,” said Logan, his back momentarily forgotten. “He is a hermit from Veobad.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” said Mother Midcarn. “This is Mor'upita-sehen, or at least a personification of Mor'upita-sehen.”

“This is not Mor'upita-sehen,” said Juawau marching across from the entrance. “This is just some dirty old man.”

“She takes after her grandmother,” said Urbil giving Juawau a dirty look. “No doubt you can see why I left.”

“How do you know my grandmother?” demanded Juawau.

“Be silent,” said Mother Midcarn in a commanding voice. “I know this is Mor'upita-sehen.” She turned back to Urbil. “Why have you come back? I have been looking for you.”

“I know,” said Urbil. “And you have been a right nuisance. I have had to come back to sort out the mess you have made.”

“I am confused,” said Autumn. “If you are Mor'upita-sehen why have you come back now? Why did you not come back when Bar Ilan was first released?”

“Fieja told me you were in danger,” said Urbil.

“Who is Fieja?” asked Autumn.

“This is,” said Urbil as the blue flame appeared from under his beard. “She has been watching you since you left my retreat. When she told me that Bar Ilan was threatening you I decided to come and put an end to this.”

“But why me?” asked Autumn. “Bar Ilan has threatened all the Esuaqi.”

Urbil's face screwed up in distaste.

“Have you any idea what it is like to be trapped here?” he asked. “Forced for generation after generation to be endlessly worshipped? They do not even allow me to talk to the people. I can only talk to three of them, their cursed Sviatar Halava who never say anything except ask me to dig more holes and cure people's gout. Tell me, Autumn Savannah, how do I cure gout? My domain is volcanoes and fire and rock not the ailments of mortals. That is why I left. I needed a rest from their incessant pleadings and mutterings.”

“Oh,” said Autumn, trying to ignore Juawau whose face was as black as thunder. “But why me?”

“You treated me with respect,” said Urbil shyly. “As an equal and not an idol to be worshipped. You gave me a lamb's tail flower because you liked me, not because you wanted me to do something.”

“Oh this is absurd nonsense,” said Juawau, unable to contain herself any longer. “You are not Mor'upita-sehen. You do not even look like Mor'upita-sehen.”

Urbil looked at her sadly.

“Oh well,” he said. “Best we be getting on with it.”

“Getting on with what?” asked Mother Midcarn.

“That,” said Urbil, jerking a thumb at Bar Ilan still pinned to the wall. “I will need some help however. You left a mighty big hole.”

Urbil walked over to stand in front of Bar Ilan. He stood there silently for a few moments then a cloud of thin grey smoke began to coalesce beside him. A shimmering column of liquid gold appeared and flowed over to stand the other side. Urbil himself became transparent then turned into a column of black and red liquid rock.

“Mor'upita-sehen!” cried Juawau and fell to her knees.

“That be Yammoe as well,” said Autumn. “I recognise It, but the other?”

“Zeeth,” said Mother Midcarn.

Bar Ilan let out a tremendous roar that shook the Temple then slowly faded from sight. The other creatures that littered the Temple faded and the roof returned to its normal height. What was left of the plinth disappeared. Fiau shrank back to her normal size then merged back into the staff.

“It is done,” said the column of black and red stone.

“We meet again, Autumn Savannah,” said Yammoe as Zeeth faded and disappeared. The smoke of Yammoe swirled gently and gaps opened up to form dark spaces that resembled eyes, a nose and a mouth in an undulating face. “Are you well?”

“I am, Yammoe,” said Autumn, “although Logan's back seems to be paining him.”

A tendril of smoke reached out and washed over Logan. The cut on his head disappeared and the pain in his back faded. Another tendril

reached out to Autumn and the wound on her foot and the scrape on her arm vanished.

“Thank you,” said Logan, bending and stretching in relief. “That be right kind of you.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I offer my thanks as well.”

The smoke quivered and started to fade.

“I do not want either of you back in my realm,” said Yammoe. “’Tis not the place for the likes of you. Best you be doing something with this one,” and a tendril pointed in Juawau’s direction. “She be about to cross over and her time is not yet due.” It faded and disappeared.

Juawau was white faced and shaking. Her hands were clasped tightly in front of her and she was mumbling prayers to Mor’upita-sehen. She seemed about to collapse.

“She will recover,” said Mother Midcarn. “’Tis always a traumatic experience when your worldview is shattered but she will build a new one. I will take her back and talk with her when she can hear sense again.”

“I venture it is not you who should talk with her,” said Autumn. “It be Mor’upita-sehen. The fault lies with It.”

If a column of black and fiery red stone could be said to scowl then it did.

“How so is it my fault?” demanded Mor’upita-sehen.

“You should have been more open from the start,” said Autumn. “Had you let your feeling be known none of this need have happened. These people be mere mortals and you, a deity, should not have allowed them to worship you if that was not what you desired.”

The red of the column flashed angrily and the black grew blacker.

“You and the Esuaqi have a lot to talk about, I wager,” said Autumn.

“Mayhap if you retake the form of Urbil it will be easier for them and you can build a relationship that suits you all better.”

The column started to shake then turned into Urbil again.

“You may be right,” said Urbil. “Certainly it was wrong of me to abandon my volcanoes.”

“I have a thought, if you will permit me,” said Logan.

Urbil just looked at him sorrowfully.

“These mittens Mother Midcarn gave us,” said Logan, holding out the one he still had with him. The other was in Autumn's pack in the passage outside. “They be right good for digging in rock. Mayhap if we give them to the Esuaqi they can dig their own caves and not expect you to do it for them.”

* * *

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Logan. He grumbled and put his arm over his eyes and tried to go back to sleep.

It didn't work. His body felt well rested and full of energy. He drew in a deep lungful of crisp fresh air then sat up. Around him the dawn chorus was in full song. Birds chattered and tweeted and some early mosquitoes buzzed. Not far away the stream ran and tumbled and some way distant he could see a badger having a final drink before bed.

He stretched and looked around, happy to be back in a world of trees and grass, where spiders were no bigger than a hand and where horizons attracted the eye.

“Tis a glorious day,” he muttered.

He looked over at Autumn, sitting cross-legged on a large stone in the middle of the stream. She looked relaxed and contented, her eyes closed. A small waterfall beside the stone chattered happily. A cloud of midges a little upstream floated down and engulfed her for a

moment then moved on to hover above the surface of the water. A small fish leapt out of the water to snatch a midge then fell back with a splash. Autumn's eyes flashed open then she raised her arms above her head and stretched then slowly lowered them.

"Hello," she said, looking over at Logan. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," said Logan. "Very well."

He stood up then started to climb the low hill that followed the bank of the stream. He was almost at the top when he gave a cry and came running back.

"Autumn!" he called hoarsely. "There be a giant eagle the other side of the slope!"

Autumn jumped to her feet then onto the bank.

"A giant eagle?" she said, frowning.

"Aye," said Logan, "or a bird at any rate. It be as tall as a tree! Go and look."

Autumn stealthily went up the slope and dropped to her knees as she neared the top and peered over the brow. Logan was on his hands and knees not far behind. She started to shake, gently at first then more violently.

"Oh, Logan," she said then started to laugh out loud.

"Why are you laughing?" said Logan feeling affronted.

"It is not an eagle," she said, rolling over to look at him. "It is a big bush that someone has shaped into a bird."

"What?" said Logan. He crawled to the top and peered over then started to laugh as well.

He rolled over and sat beside Autumn.

“Look at this place,” she said sweeping her hand across the vista that lay before them. “Is not the world a wonderful place?”

She grasped his hand and squeezed.

“It is indeed,” agreed Logan. “Where shall we go next?”

Glossary

{Pronunciations given in brackets. OT denotes names or expressions in the Old Tongue}

Aciui {ac-ee-we} [3]: A species of giant six legged insects created by the Esuaqi by cross breeding spiders and ants. Primarily used for food and clothing as their exoskeleton can be made supple by boiling with certain algae. Aciui have a large off-white globular body with six legs and a head with large, laterally opposed jaws. Adults are typically 30 to 40cm across the widest part of the body with jointed legs 60 to 80cm long. Aciui are omnivorous.

Aciuiherd {ac-ee-we-herd} [3]: The term for a labourer who works in the Esuaqi aciui farms.

Ajoi {ah-jo-ee} [3]: A carpenter and ferry operator in Veobad.

Aqineer do'h Raspusny {OT: aka Aqineer the Lewd}: Era'owen of Ptemsesnis III, ruler of Zachad. Aqineer was exiled from Zachad by Ptemsesnis for unspecified 'crimes against her person' and he and his followers established what would become the State of Wase.

Bar Ilan {bar i-lan} [3]: The Lord of Un'izeq.

Benk {be-ne-ke} [3]: Son of Hial.

Bliad {bli-ad-de}: A swear word usually used in connection with annoyance, surprise, disgust.

Bronea {bron-e-a} [3]: Daughter of Osk and Juawau.

Bryachavny syn ks Sviatopolny {OT}: Son of Sviatopolny syn ks Buyayciyat who survived three days as ruler of the Zachad following his killing of his father. Bryachavny was assassinated by Fetawe Tol Niepierakanaucy, a commander under Sviatopolny, over a philosophical disagreement.

Buyayciyat {OT}: The leader of the Ciyat Tribe in South Eastern Aferraron who transformed a loose coalition with neighbouring tribes into the Zachad.

Calhouny {ca-leh-ow-ny}: A native bush which produces a cherry-like fruit whose stone (called the nut) is dried and ground to produce a beverage similar to coffee, but milder in flavour.

Caouma {ca-ooh-ma} [3]: The woman attacked by Mijr, near Voterm. Almost-era'owen of Luvan.

Ciyat {OT}: A small tribe which was based between the Uli-kaja and Urchaal Rivers where they meet the Looncan Sea. Under the leadership of Buyayciyat and, later, his son, Sviatopolny syn ks Buyayciyat, the Ciyat dominated the Zachad collective and whose expansionist policies lead to the creation of the Aferraron and Wase States.

Cubqoi {cu-be-ch-oy} [3]: Two headed wolf-like creatures from Un'izeq.

Cypei {ky-pey-ee}: A bird native to Western Aferraron, noted for its distinctive call and three long, brightly coloured tail feathers.

Dotuke {do-tu-ke}: A village to the West of Userko, in the foothills of Wut'giui.

Erija {er-ij-ah} [3]: A former member of the Sviatar Halava.

Esuaqi {es-yew-ah-chi} [3]: A tribe who live in the caverns and tunnels within the Ahon Hara Mountains. Originally they were a small fanatical sect who worshipped Mor'upita-sehen and established a commune in the volcanoes but over subsequent generations (believed to be of the order of twelve to fifteen) they grew into an established community and lost their fanaticism. However, they still maintain that Mor'upita-sehen is the one true god and all others are false gods.

Euet {yew-et} [3]: Friend of Ajoin.

Fetawe Tol Niepierakanaucy {OT}: A senior commander under Sviatopolny and, briefly, Bryachavny, before assassinating the latter and founding the Kanaucy dynasty after disputed the latter's philosophical claim to a divine right to rule.

Fieja {fi-ej-ah} [3]: A spirit entity that is the eye of Mor'upita-sehen. Fieja is immortal and generally takes the form of a small, blue flame.

Fogma {fo-ge-ma} [3]: The almost-era'owen of Ajoin.

Ganj {ga-ne-je} [3]: A taro.

Glebe {gle-be} [3]: A large cavern expressly for the farming of aciui.

Grenna {gr-en-na} [3]: A member of the Esuaqi.

Hial {he-al-le} [3]: An aciui farmer.

Jieci {ji-ek-i} [3]: Creatures from the Land of Un'izeq with six limbs but no head. Each limb is capable of grasping. Their mouths is in the centre of their bodies and they have four eyes allowing them to see in

all directions simultaneously. Jieci are covered in long hair the colour of rock.

Juawau {ju-ah-wa-ooh} [3]: Era'owen of Osk, mother of Bronea and one of the Sviatar Halava of the Esuaqi.

Kawa {ka-wa}[3]: A gruel of ant eggs with onions and vony.

Klem {ke-lem} [3]: Son of Hial.

Kren {ke-re-en} [3]: An Esuaqi oil seller and renowned gossip.

Luvan {lu-va-ne} [3]: The almost-era'owen of Caouma, the woman attacked by Mijr near Voterm.

Maj {ma-je} [3]: Daughter of Hial.

Mielikki {mi-el-ik-ki}: The deity of forests and woods.

Mijr {mi-je-re} [3]: A tarc.

Nekmit bush {ne-ke-mi-te}: A hardy plant common in Southern Aferraron. The nekmit has narrow fronds with short, closely packed spines which are commonly used for combing things, such as hair, sheep's wool and so on.

Nirwa {en-ir-wa} [3]: A friend of Ajoin.

Oca {oh-ca} [3]: The miller/baker in Veobad.

Olm {ol-me}: A species of worm with rudimentary legs and no organs for vision.

Osefouku {os-ef-oo-ku}: An extinct volcano in the Ahon Hara Mountains.

Osk {osk} [3]: Era'owen of Juawau and father of Bronea.

Owilausco {ow-il-ow-es-co}: An extinct volcano in the Ahon Hara Mountains.

Ptemsesnis III {OT}: Ruler of the Zachad who's exile of Aqineer do'h Raspusny led to the latter's creation of the Wase state.

Pif{pif} [3]: Son of Hial.

Qaate {cha-ah-te} [3]: The head of the Band of Elders of the Esuaqi.

Radl {ra-del} [3]: A member of the Esuaqi.

Raned {ra-ne-de} [3]: A member of the Esuaqi.

Run'gegeric {run-ge-ge-re-ik} [3]: A sorcerer in Uli-Rratha. One time apprentice master to Urbil Qandi. It is unclear whether Run'gegeric ever existed or was merely part of the 'cover story' used by Mor'upita-sehen in his guise as the mortal Urbil Qandi.

Sar'taube {sar-ta-oo-be}: An extinct volcano in the Ahon Hara Mountains.

Sehenhara River {se-he-ne-ha-ra}: A major river than flows from the Mapdil Mountains in the North West to join the Azour Sea at the Northern end of the Ahon Hara Mountains.

Sviatar Halava {sev-ia-tar ha-la-va} [3]: The priests of the Esuaqi sect of Mor'upita-sehen and the only three people who are permitted to talk directly with the deity. Their status is hereditary.

Sviatopolny syn ks Buyayciyat {OT}: Second in the Yayciya dynasty of rulers of Zachad. Killed by his son, Bryachavny syn ks Sviatopolny, in an attempt to prove the latter's divine right to rule.

Tal-dengann {tald-en-ga-ne-ne}: A village in the foothills of Wa'craquen.

Tarc {ta-re-ke} [3]: Human-like creatures from the Land of Un'izeq. Tarc have wide, flat faces with two rows of small green teeth, yellow, upwardly slanting eyes, a liberal coating of body hair and they drink the blood of humans and mammals.

Un'izeq {uni-ze-che}: Literally 'The Land Down Under'; the realm under the Ahon Hara volcano range to which Bar Ilan was banished.

Urbil Qandi {ur-bi-le ch-an-di} [3]: A personification of Mor'upita-sehen. Urbil Qandi is an old hermit and dreamchaser who lives in a cave in the foothills of the (long extinct) Wut'qiui volcano beside the Sehenhara River, not far from Veobad. Urbil claims to have been a one time apprentice to the sorcerer Run'gegeric, but ran away before completing his studies, in order to explain away any supernatural powers that he may reveal.

Userko {yew-se-re-ko}: A village a little to the South East of Veobad, on the Sehenhara River.

Uyacaku {yu-ya-ca-ku}: A tree similar to a pine or fir tree with a thick resinous sap. The resin is sometimes used for significant cuts in place of stitching as the sap forms a strong but flexible seal holding the edges of the wound together. The resin dissolves in water so the

wound must be kept dry until it has healed, at which time the resin can be dissolved.

Varfuiotui {va-ref-ou-eeo-twe} [3]: The first Sviatar Halava of the Esuaqi.

Veobad {ve-oh-ba-de}: A village in the foothills of Wut'qiui, on the banks of the Sehenhara River.

Vony {vo-ny}: A bluey-purple moss that grows underground in damp conditions.

Voterm {vo-te-rem-me}: A village in the foothills of Mor'upita-sehen.

Wa'cragen {wak-ra-ch-en-ne}: The Southernmost of the volcanoes of the Ahon Hara Mountains.

Waslebane {wa-se-le-ba-ne}: A small flowering shrub whose buds, when ground to a paste, are often used as a treatment for soft tissue injury.

Wut'qiui {wut-chee-we}: The Northernmost of the volcanoes of the Ahon Hara Mountains.

Xanos {za-nos}[3]: An elder at the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup 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.

Yolt {yo-le-te}: An extinct volcano in the Ahon Hara Mountains.

Yusi {you-see} [3]: A friend of Pif and daughter of Kren.

Zachad {OT}: Under the leadership of Buyayciyat, a loose coalition of tribes in South Eastern Aferraron and Western Wase, unified to become the Zachad. The expansion of the Zachad, and their subsequent split under Ptemsesnis III when the events surrounding Aqineer do'h Raspusny led to the latter going into exile, resulted in the eventual creation of the Aferraron and Wase States.