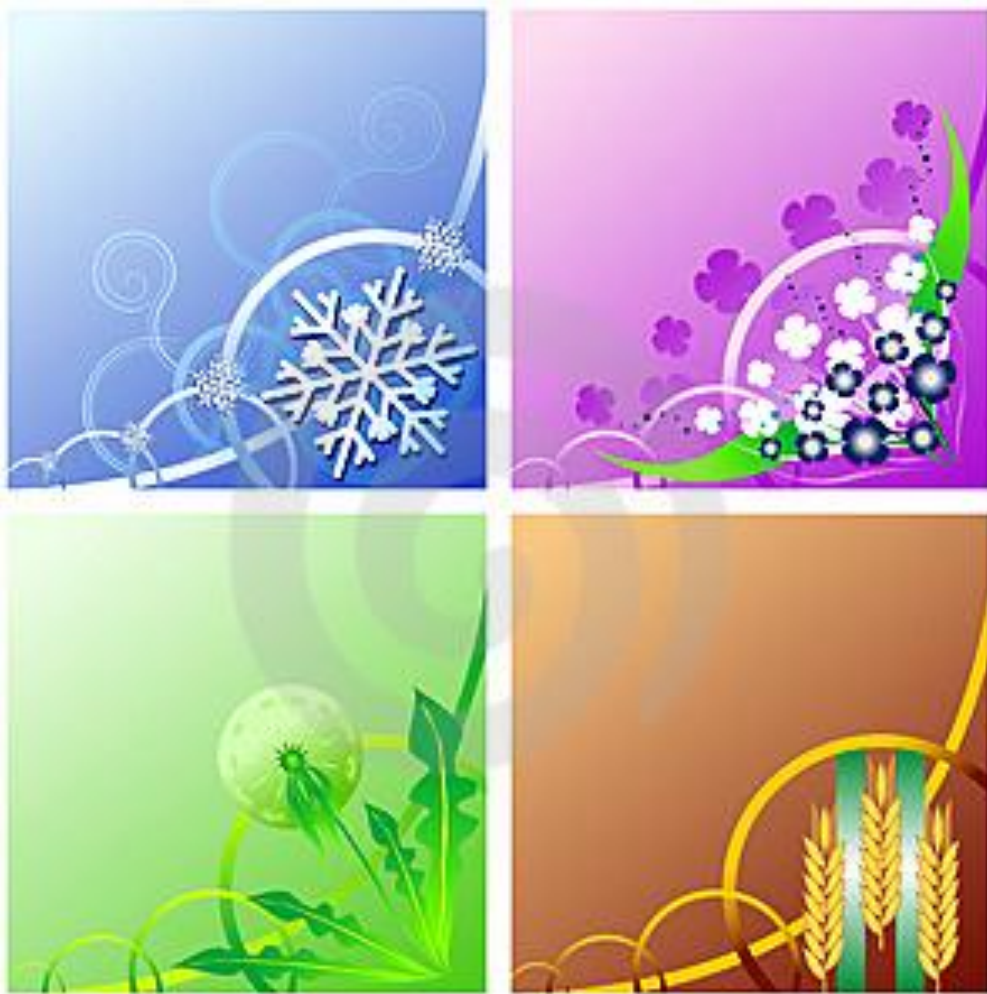


# SERVANT OF THE SEASONS

Excerpt from the beginning of Part 1: Autumn

by Lee Benoit



I was plowing when the appearance of three figures in the distance made my heart pound and my palms sweat. This isn't to say that my heart wasn't already pounding and my whole body, including my hands, wasn't already sweaty. Plowing was hard work and I wasn't really suited to it.

I had never been outside a Dome before the day I was turfed. It was not as dramatic an event as it sounds. I was too stunned to struggle when they came for

me. Now I have been outside for four seasons, which is, trust me, much more dramatic than it sounds.

This place was all but dead when I came to it. I stopped here because it seemed slightly less dead than the places I had crossed as I walked through all of that searing summer, the sun a bright malevolence, the rain poison.

I stopped here because when I came to the sluggish river I found I could not readily ford it, and I was tired. As I sat on the ragged bank and considered whether I was tired enough to die, I noticed there were fields to the south of me, weedy and sick, with a crop of beans almost ready to harvest.

There was a house of sorts, dug into a berm near the river, with four of everything except people --four clay cups, four wooden plates, four dented spoons, and four empty bolsters slumped listlessly on two sleeping platforms. There were three knives, two tangles of tack and one plow. I had never known people could live outside the Domes, and through my long walking summer I learned that not many did. When I happened upon the dwelling and field, I decided whence some had gone, I would stay.

Soon a man came, and at first I thought it was the landholder come back to defend his claim but no, this was a neighbor, my only one by the man's account.

"I come for the crop," the man said. He looked me over appraisingly. "I weren't expecting nobody." He looked at me as if to say his suspicion had been confirmed.

"This is my place now. I'll bring in the crop," I assured him, though I had no idea how to accomplish such a task. I stood as tall as I could and wished I had one or two of the several knives decorating my neighbor.

"I'll be back come spring, then. See if you live." It was said without menace, but not without malice. And the man went away again.

I picked beans until my fingernails were stained green and then pulled up the stalks until my palms were bloody. I didn't know to reserve seed for next year,

and I didn't think to use the dry plants for kindling. I had never felt a winter's cold, but when it bit and blew I learned how to make a fire and hunched before it and cursed myself for a fool.

When I wasn't trying to keep warm, I was trying to find new ways to eat beans and pining for clean and familiar things; in other words, for things I had no reason to expect to see ever again. I knew the spring thaw had arrived when the river rose alarmingly high and coughed up all sorts of debris, and my neighbor -- his name was Varas, or so he said -- came again from his place a day's walk over the river. He never did tell me how he forded the swollen river.

Given how lonesome I had been all winter, how bored and scared, I was happy to see him. An hour's conversation dulled the bloom on the rose of our new acquaintance, and while Varas would never be a friend, I managed to learn some things from him. I learned the fate of the previous landholders (nothing good) and Varas's version of the ways of the crops and land and weather in this place (nothing easy, nothing sure). Varas told me that there were beans, red ones, that could grow in winter, and I determined to plant such beans. Two harvests, however mean, must surely be better than one. If I say so myself, I have a mathematical turn of mind.

I don't know why Varas didn't simply kill me. Maybe it was because of the roof. One day he told me he needed a new one and I offered to help in exchange for some beans to plant and help getting them in the ground. I knew better than to offer Varas anything without bartering, and after all, we weren't friends.

I never did tell Varas how I came by my knowledge of building trades, not that he asked. In return for a snug, sturdy roof, Varas lent me a fractious beast with a hollow leg for a week and a sack of seed loosely sealed with Varas's word for its viability. Varas called the beast a mule, but it didn't look like the ones I'd seen in books; it had an awfully long neck.

Yes, books. I like old things. Well, I used to like them, when I was surrounded by new, spare, efficient things. Books were my favorite. So bulky and impractical when you think about it, but so full of delights. My colleagues used to

tease that my antiquarian streak was eccentric, but it deflected their attention from other eccentricities, so I didn't mind. I don't have colleagues anymore, unless one counts Varas, which I would prefer not to.

After the height of summer, Varas left with a full cart and a promise. That had been two months ago, as closely as I could reckon (the moon had been fat twice). He was to sell my summer crop (minus what I would need to eat that winter and seed for the following spring --I do learn from my mistakes) in the settlement two weeks' walk across the border. I couldn't go on my own behalf; that would have been tantamount to suicide. Varas was to bring me some of the red winter beans I coveted and a draft beast of my own. I should have noticed that he left without getting his own land ready to plant, as if he had no intention of returning.

For the first weeks of Varas' absence, I didn't spare him much thought. An overland trek to the cross-border trading settlement routinely took a month or more, according to him, and I imagined much that could conspire to delay a traveler for good or ill. After the time came and passed when Varas should have returned, I stopped looking for him as actively.

I was forced to conclude I'd been gulled. How hopelessly young and stupid I seemed, even to myself! Even so, I resolved to prepare my land; I would plant some of the green beans and find out for myself if they couldn't produce in winter.

I looked back down the uneven furrow I'd just completed, and felt as pleased as a man could who'd pulled his own plow all morning. My nose and brow were sunburned and stinging with sweat. I'd borrowed my head covering to pad the traces of the plow, but was forced to conclude that had been a bad bargain for negligible relief to my raw, sore shoulders. Still, pulling the plow was a sight better than pushing it. I'd tried that the day before, and all I had to show for that was a bruised chest and a sheepish memory of myself shouting at an imaginary traction animal to pull harder. Sometimes being the only sentient being within walking distance is not so bad a thing.

Now, here came strangers. Three of them, with who knew what evil intent? After a year scratching at this miserable plot, my native curiosity was as dead as the land around me, that is, nearly so. My suspicion, with so much to fertilize it, had flourished apace, like a weed. Perhaps these trespassers brought news of the town, or of Varas himself, though I thought that unlikely.

I slipped the traces, pulling the canteen of water from the basket of river stones weighting the handle of the plow and sipping tentatively; water seldom benefited from close confinement, especially not the rain water I collected and boiled. It was warm and dusty as my sweat. I didn't want to meet three strangers while bound and grunting, so I left the traces lying in the uncut earth and waited. I rubbed my eyelids and winced as my roughened thumb grated against my sore nose. I remembered a time when I'd been proud of my hands for their clean cleverness, and vain --I can admit it now --of my looks. Could it have been just a year ago? I wasn't what I had been, that was for sure, so I figured it was just as well I didn't look as I had, either. I would have shrugged if my shoulders hadn't ached so.

I leaned on the handles of the plow and checked my knives, two little ones at my belt, the longer, flat xyrra laid across the beam of the plow. I was better at bean farming than self-defense, but only just, and I was aware I was no bean farmer. Still, no need for my visitors to know my blades had tasted plant sap to the complete exclusion of lifeblood. Since the Hostilities, the rules of hospitality had been swept away except in the Domes and, as with food, I made my own now.

Faced with three strangers and armed with three knives (symmetrical to tell about, yes, but I didn't fool myself that my three knives evened up a fight), I couldn't help but wish for my neighbor's presence, his quick way with words, whatever fighting skill he might possess (as shifty and selfish as he was, I suspected he could hold his own in a brawl). I suppressed the urge to walk forward to meet the newcomers.

I needn't have worried. As the figures closed in on my position, the tallest one hailed me in a sharp voice I recognized.

"Edor!"

"Varas," I muttered, then repeated it so the man would know he'd been heard. I did not greet the men who flanked Varas, but reached slowly for my xyrra, and inched my free hand toward the smaller tumi at my belt. I felt it only prudent to keep the plow between myself and them.

Varas noticed. "Showing us the long and the short of it, ain't'cha, Edor lad?"

"Only until I know you come in peace, neighbor."

Varas's whiskers cracked like dirt, showing muddy skin and teeth in something very distant indeed from a friendly smile. "And here I'd'a thought you'd be happy to see me, back safe and with everything I promised." He nudged the smaller man next to him, who stumbled forward and unslung a fat pack basket, setting it in front of the plow. From near the ground, the man flashed shadowed blue eyes up at me. I made to speak, but he cast his eyes down quickly and shuffled back to stand beside Varas.

"Your winter seed, just like I promised."

I had no idea if it was enough, or any good. I nodded toward the man who'd been carrying it.

"And the rest of our bargain? That's no draft beast," I nodded at one of Varas' silent companions, then the other. My voice sounded as raw as my shoulders felt.

"Har!" Varas barked. "Pretty observant for a Dome-dweller, ain'tcha, Edor?" Anger flared in my belly, but what could I say, really? "Offer us poor travelers a drink and a bite and I'll tell you all about your beast."

Varas and his cohorts outnumbered me so I thought it better not to protest or make any demands. Also, I admit, I was curious. I was curious about what had delayed Varas, about the men with him, and about the wary blue gaze the small man had leveled upon me, so I hefted the seed sack and canteen and waved the xyrra so Varas and the others would walk ahead of me. I left the plow where it was.

Nobody said a word as we trudged over the fallows, Varas leading the way, his two companions between us, stumbling slightly. The two clasped hands, not casually, but tightly as if they were afraid. My curiosity about the two men sparked. I was not used to having people afraid of me, didn't much relish it, but knew it was practical. I kept up my silence, and my xyrra, and wondered what the hand-clasp meant. It couldn't possibly mean what such a thing meant in the Domes. Could it?

When we reached my sod house, I didn't invite my guests inside. I was disinclined to offer any but the slimmest hospitality, first of all, and part of me was just too embarrassed to have anyone inside the dark, damp dwelling. Keeping a dirt house clean struck me as a contradiction in terms in theory and a paradox in reality. Recent rain had made matters worse, driving mud and critters in (on six legs and eight legs and no legs at all) and all comfort out. Varas' studied nonobservance of my rudeness made me feel petty and childish until he nonchalantly dipped himself a cup of water from the cistern, slurping at my own cup (it was very hard for me to hold me tongue on that one) and tossing the dipper to his two companions, who were squatting in my dooryard, still holding hands, looking from Varas to me to each other with wide eyes.

"It's good seed, you know. I wouldn't cheat you."

"Not on this smaller part of our bargain, perhaps. What about the beast? Or the balance of my profit from the beans, if there is no beast?"

"Well, now, friend, you're looking at it."

I gritted my teeth loudly enough that the men on the ground looked up. “I’ll bite, Varas. Am I looking at the beast or the profit?”

“Both.” Varas’ wet little eyes slid towards the pair on the ground. “Why’nt you sit, Edor.”

“Don’t invite me to sit in my own yard, Varas. Just talk.”

“Maybe you won’t be so growly when I tell you the Salters have crossed the border.”

My pulse flipped and marched backward uncomfortably. “That’s impossible. They’re a Northern phenomenon.”

“No, sir. They was there, sure as I’m here now. They commandeered all the beasts, mount and burden and draft. They showed a mighty keen interest in old Ruki, I’ll tell you that. I barely got him out with me.” Varas’ affection for the knock-kneed “mule” was the only evidence I’d yet seen of a heart in the man.

“But you did?” I owed the animal a lot, too, and wouldn’t have wished him ill, even for spite of his slippery master.

“Barely,” Varas repeated and curled his lip.

After a few more sips of water, Varas appeared to have finished talking, so I swallowed my pride and prompted, “Speak, man. You have information for me, not to mention a season’s profit.” And my chance of surviving the winter, I almost added.

“Them Salters rolled through, emptying out the academies and temples and brothels, same as everywhere. Selling off the Nonproductives for labor, billeting everywhere, confiscating goods and stock left and right. If I’d’a known, I’d’a never gone in. Not much of a place, not for them. No Dome or nothin’.” There was an oily note in Varas’ voice that made me wish, not for the first time, that I’d never told Varas where I’d come from.

Suddenly, I thought I understood. “So what am I looking at here, Varas? Professors or priests or catamites?” I had a feeling I already knew the answer.

Varas leered. “They’re a little young for professors, eh? A little pretty for priests?”

“So. You took twenty baskets of pod-beans and brought me one basket of red bean and two bumboys?” I kicked the pack basket, but gently. It wouldn’t do for my anger to end my chances here. My head hurt with the effort to cover my embarrassment.

“They’ll work.” Varas sneered. “If you make ‘em.”

I feared Varas would see too much in my face, so I turned my attention to the two men before us. They were young, and slight, with wheaten hair and blue eyes and brown skin. “What are your names?” They blinked at me, one after the other. Something in their eyes made my heart gasp. “I don’t suppose you speak Almen. Varas? What are their names?”

“Don’t know. The slaver didn’t know. I call ‘em Gee and Haw.” He rasped a laugh.

“They’re not animals, Varas! You’re the beast, you know. Don’t they have identity papers or something?”

“Do you?”

I couldn’t control my wince, nor the reflexive way my fingers covered the keloided scar on the back of my hand. I knew what Varas was implying: no Nonproductives had papers. “Best get on.” Varas stood and brushed off the seat of his pants. “Guess I’ll see you after the thaw. We’ll have to take our crops to Kenvro, at the closest, maybe Diabarzh, if the Salters keep moving over winter.”

I didn’t want to think about Salters. I’d thought I’d left behind that menace, at least, when I was turfed. I reluctantly shook Varas’ hand. “Say hello to Ruki for

me. Have a good winter.” I meant the first, and suspected the second was an impossibility.

I watched until Varas cleared the berm, headed over and down to the river. I wanted to be sure he’d gone, but I wasn’t sure what to do next. Bewildered with my guests, I fell back on old habits. “You’d best come to the kitchen, I imagine you’re hungry,” I said.

“Thank you,” said one. “You are kind,” said the other. “You do speak Alman!” “Not to beasts.” A slim hand waved dismissively in the direction Varas had taken. “And not smoothly.” A second, slightly broader, hand waved dismissively between the two. “Well, thank you for speaking to me.” Though I wondered to myself how I, newly minted slaveholder, could be less of an animal than Varas. “I am called Edor.” It was the name I had used since leaving the Dome, my professional title. Sometimes I wondered if I even recalled my true name.

“He is Lys. I am Tywyll.” “We are Novigi.” “That must be far.” I had never heard of it. The one called Lys tilted his head. “Not... far. Brother?” Tywyll nodded. “Distant, perhaps. Not far.” “You’re brothers?” Poor things, to be whores so young. “A way of saying, only,” said Tywyll. “Not blood, but still brothers, you see?” Not really. My life before hadn’t bred close friendships and my life since, well, hadn’t merited them. “Come, you can wash while I fix supper. You’ve had a long walk.”

The two Novigi followed me to the lean-to that held the pump and kitchen. I supposed “kitchen” made the semi-permanent hearth sound rather grand. I stirred up the smothered coals and laid on more fuel; the local peat was free and burned hot, if not brightly or fragrantly. I kept my body and face turned away from where the two not-brothers had stripped to the waist and begun washing in the sun-warmed water from the pump; there was no privacy beyond simple courtesy.

I had rigged a hanging basket fed by a reed pipe connected to the cistern. If I couldn’t have a true bath, I had determined that I would at least have clean

rinse-water. I hadn't shown my guests how to use it, but they seemed to have figured it out, if their little exclamations of surprise were anything to judge by. After a few minutes, the happy sounds changed to hisses and muffled yelps of pain and I forgot their modesty.

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

Lys and Tywyll turned to look at me, their eyes slitted and their shoulders hunched to protect their bodies. They didn't answer.

"Are you injured? Let me see." If Varas had done something to them.... I took a step forward and the two closed ranks, Tywyll stepping in front of Lys and putting his hand out to stall my approach. Lys put a quelling hand on Tywyll's arm and they had a rapid, quietly urgent conversation in a very foreign language. Tywyll drooped in defeat at the end of it and Lys stepped past him to stand before me, a defiant look in his bright eyes.

"These will not heal. There is pain."

"What won't...?" I began.

Lys' brown cheeks colored and he looked down his own body. I followed his glance to his nipples and would have continued, dangerously, but for what I saw there. One was brown as a late-summer berry, the other cruelly distended and swollen around a thick metal ring.

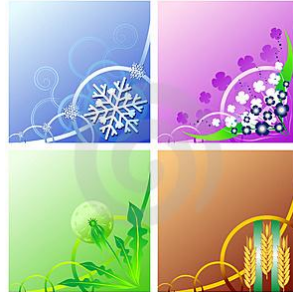
"Who did this?"

"No papers," Lys' voice was very soft. In a sick flash, I understood. This was the slaver's mark, now the mark of my ownership.

"It should have healed by now. Varas... bought you," I felt my gorge rise on the word, "over a month ago. It doesn't look infected."

Tywyll turned and revealed a similar injury. "This metal is poison. We are Novigi."

I had heard of diseases that struck only members of certain races. Perhaps this was some sort of allergy peculiar to Lys and Tywyll's people. "Then they must come out."



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