



Good Year For Pumpkins

To the casual observer the village fete was a chance for locals to show off their culinary skills, their craft skills, their fashion sense and general good health. But to an insider, it was a breeding ground of competitiveness, one-upmanship, beggar thy neighbour and the ongoing expression of feuds, grudges, snubs and arguments. And this year the drought had everyone's nerves on edge.

Straddling the line between insider and outsider, Lotte Thorsvedt strolled through the crowds unrecognised except by those who had come down from the castle and knew her as the Queen's new Head Gardener. Lotte wasn't a gardener, she was an ecologist, but she knew enough about plants and compost to get her the job. She also had an ability to take care of plants in the depths of a drought that left the village gardens looking like baked wastelands. Ignoring the quarrels about lacemaking and a shouting match between the vintner and the distiller over stolen wine barrels she stepped into another verbal conflict, this time about pumpkins.

"Is that a pumpkin?" She joined the back of a crowd staring at a pumpkin so big the grower needed four horses and a reinforced cart to bring it to the fete arena. It sat like an orange whale amongst other enormous vegetables, and a small child balanced on the top waving a flag.

Opinion was split with some in the crowd suspecting it was made of wood, and others wanting to know how something so massive could grow during a drought. How many of his other vegetables could grow beyond seedlings without water. A muttered suggestion about witchcraft forced Lotte to lower her head. The grower, Herr Funkle, a slender old man with uncontrollable silver hair, laughed it all off. "It's real. It's not witchcraft. Come try it, try a piece."

The invitation was refused until Lotte stepped to the front of the crowd. The vast orange monster filled her field of vision. Bulbous and deformed, it waited for someone brave enough to cut into it. "I'll try a piece," she said.

"Of course." Herr Funkle produced a long saw with a slender blade. "Hold that." He then brought out a hammer and chisel.

"What are you doing?"

"The outer flesh is quite thick. I need this to start it off. Perhaps I can carve a room into it. You could shelter in the rain."

"I'll stand under a tree, thank you." Lotte held the saw as Herr Funkle went at the pumpkin with his chisel. The crowd grew in size, mumbling and sniggering as Herr Funkle's chisel impacted with soft flesh and he was splattered with pumpkin juice. "I'm in. Wait until you taste this." He swapped his chisel for the saw and carved a large block of pumpkin. "There. Try that."

The flesh was firm and bits of stringy interior and seeds decorated the edges. Lotte hesitated before taking the first bite and when she held it to her mouth she noticed a delicate metallic aroma. She took a mouthfull, chewed and spat it out. "Oh, god." Her eyes watered and she grabbed for a handkerchief in her trouser pocket when her nose started to stream. "That is the most disgusting piece of fruit I've ever tasted."

"It's an acquired taste."

"Acquired taste? If you licked a steam engine it wouldn't taste like that. Herr Funkle, what do you put in your soil to make things grow this big?" His marrows were bigger than sheepdogs, next to them two onions as big as chickens, and three carrots the size of chopped logs.

"Hard work. Time and devotion and lots of organic matter."

"Taste it yourself."

The crowd waited for this. A man at the front took pity on Lotte and handed her a precious jug of water.

Herr Funkle carved his own block of pumpkin and bit into it. For the first few seconds he chewed and smiled, raised his eyebrows and made out he was enjoying his own fruit, but the crowd and Lotte soon realised something was wrong. Herr Funkle took his time swallowing, smiled again, but with less enthusiasm, bobbed his head, smoothed the front of his coat and finally, reluctantly swallowed the pumpkin.

"There. Excuse me." He walked round to the back of the pumpkin and vomited. The sound had the crowd in fits of laughter and when he returned he said to Lotte, "I had marmalade at breakfast. Oranges always disagree with me."

The accusations flew. Parched members of the crowd accused Herr Funkle of cheating, and the more scientific insisted that the amount of water contained in his vegetables were the reason for the drought.

"To be fair," Lotte said, "the rain falls before the water is taken up by the vegetables. So the size of the pumpkins can't be responsible for the lack of rainfall."

"You're new here," said another man. "It poured with rain for five days last week."

"Ah. Okay."

The mystery travelled back to the castle and when she arrived at her own vegetable plot, full of stalks and withered leaves, she saw Queen Anteje staring into one of several empty water butts. She stepped away and shook her head.

"Where is it all going?"

"Where's what going?" said Lotte.

"The water. Torrential rain last week. The springs should be full and the stream should be washing people away in the village. And here we are, everything's as dry as a bone."

"Have you seen Herr Funkle's pumpkin?"

"What? Is that a euphemism? Who is Herr Funkle?"

"No, no, it's not a euphemism. Down at the village fete, Herr Funkle has grown vegetables that are bigger than most people's livestock. He has a pumpkin bigger than that water butt. I'm sure if you squeezed it, it would provide enough water to the village to last a year."

"Don't exaggerate." Anteje was in war mode; armoured again, her sword lying patiently against her hip, and a helmet left on a nearby wall. "Pumpkins are the least of our problems." She kept looking towards the distant pass where a dip in the mountains provided access to her realm from neighbouring valleys and neighbouring enemies.

"Do you think there's a connection?" said Lotte.

"Between what?"

"Between an invasion and the size of Herr Funkle's vegetables?"

Exasperated, Anteje struggled to answer. "I don't think Queen Erinia or Empress Helene has troops hidden inside Herr Funkle's vegetables. Lotte, go up to the hilltop on the east side of the village and take a look at the stream where it passes a single juniper tree. It's the main source for the village. Look for anything suspicious."

"Beavers perhaps."

"Beavers, whatever. If you find any beavers that look suspicious bring them back here, I'll have them executed. Lotte, stop complicating things. Just go and look at the stream."

"I will. I'll go now."

"Good."

"They taste horrible, by the way."

"What, beavers?"

"No, Herr Funkle's vegetables."

"Lotte!"

"I'm going."

The walk to the hilltop was a difficult trudge. In spite of the cool weather and the threat of rain and a fine drizzle that left her face damp she needed to drink and her water bottle was only half full.

But when she arrived at the top of the hill she needn't have worried. The single juniper tree stood alongside a gushing stream with churning water tumbling over rocks and across shallow pools of glistening shale and gravel. Luscious green grass carpeted the cavities in nearby rocks, and dense patches of mosses and lichens spread across the ground where it was all glazed with a fine mist of sparkling droplets of water.

But none of it reached the village. Lotte stood hands on hips and studied the surrounding mountains, grey rock walls iced with winter snow, the distant plume of a water fall plunging from a hanging valley into the edge of the Obersee. The green of coniferous forest mixed with the dormant russets and browns of the deciduous trees, the lake still like a turquoise mirror. It all made geographic sense, except for the water.

She filled her water bottle for the walk back to the castle. Where the path split Lotte took a drink, decided against the slippery grass desire line and stayed on the stony path. The water made her gag. She spat it out and sniffed the water bottle. It had the same metallic aroma as Herr Finkle's pumpkin. The same unholy taste that made him spew.

Back at the castle, Lotte found Heike, a Warrior Scholar who called herself a chemist, but was more interested in brewing concoctions that had a habit of exploding. In her laboratory, a stony outbuilding separated from the armoury by a dense thicket of willow, Heike danced around a table full of tubes and beakers, themselves full of liquids bubbling and spitting, foam dribbling over the edge of the table and a weird green cloud belching out of a metal box.

"What are you making?" Lotte kept a safe distance from the experiments.

"Elderflower mead," said Heike. "Do you want to try some? It's a bit strong."

"No. I've had enough peculiar tasting substances for one day. I wanted to ask if you could take a look at something. Water that tastes metallic."

Heike concentrated on her green cloud. "Probably iron oxide. It's quite safe to drink water with rust in it."

"It isn't rust. It tastes more alkaline than iron oxide."

"Sodium. You get it in mountain spring water. Someone should bottle it and sell it. They'd make a fortune."

"No, not sodium. I have some here."

She held the water bottle at arm's length. Heike stared at Lotte's arm. "It's okay. I don't bite."

"Yes, I know. I don't want to get blown up."

Heike took the bottle, poured the water into a beaker and held it up to a blue flame burning out of the top of a copper pipe. She swirled the beaker and shoved her nose up to the glass. When she sniffed the water her expression changed. "That's unusual." She sniffed again. "It's not metallic or alkaline. I've smelt that before somewhere. Leave this with me and I'll analyse it. I think we should tell Anteje."

"Is she expecting an invasion?"

"Of what?"

"Enemies."

"No. Sorry, you being the gardener I thought you might mean aphids or something."

"Anteje wouldn't dress like a warrior to fight aphids."

"She nearly killed Queen Erinia and Empress Helene in an inferno last year. She expects them to retaliate at any moment." Heike went back to her cloudy metal box. She lifted the lid and recoiled at a face full of green smoke. "They weren't very happy. Trapped in a burning maze. This is nearly ready. Are you sure you wouldn't like try some?"

Lotte's mind had returned to the hilltop. The table full of smoke and mist and vapours reminded her of the damp conditions and in particular the grassy path, wet and deformed by footsteps that had to be recent. "If you can analyse the water sample and get it to Anteje. I'll be back soon."

She left Heike's treacherous laboratory and headed back up the hill to the stream. She followed the grassy footpath and her suspicions were confirmed. Where the stream should have continued over a ledge and off down the hillside to the village several planks of wood had been tied together and reinforced a ditch that diverted the water channel away to a new route down the grass, over

hummocks and mounds, a twisting, cavorting stream that passed through more wooden planks to keep it in line with a metal funnel staked to the ground.

From here the destination was obvious. A smallholding with a rickety house surrounded by vegetable plots filled with huge vegetables. Next to the house a reinforced cart and in the adjacent field, two heavy horses nibbled the grass. Lotte sat on a pile of turnips and waited for Herr Funkle to appear from his kitchen.

He was surprised to see Lotte amongst the turnips and runner beans. "Aha," he said, "I've grown my first human being."

"Hello, Herr Funkle. I bet you know why I'm here."

He confessed to diverting the stream and insisted he was going to remove the wooden channels once his crop had finished.

"You must be aware," said Lotte, "that vegetable so big have either no flavour or taste horrible."

"Yes. I must admit the taste of the pumpkin today took me by surprise, but that can't be because of the size. What's your name?"

"Lotte."

"And you work for the Queen?"

"I'm the Head Gardener at the castle."

"Am I in trouble?"

"No. Not if you apologise. I'm told Queen Anteje believes in justice." She didn't mention the fire in the maze and trying to incinerate her rivals. "What troubles me is the taste of the water."

"The water?"

"Remember the pumpkin? That taste is in the water in the stream at the top of the hill. Get your coat. Let's go and explain what's happening to Anteje."

News usually travelled fast around the village, but gossip tended not to circulate amongst Anteje's court. When Lotte arrived with Herr Funkle, Anteje was already waiting in the main hall with her Security Chief Guinevere and Military Strategist Hilda. Next to a table against the fireplace Heike stood alongside a collection of small bottles, each one stoppered and labelled.

"Something wrong?" Lotte approached the reception party.

"Who is that?" said Anteje.

Herr Funkle stepped out from behind Lotte, took off his hat and bowed. "Majesty. I'm Herr Funkle. I am sorry for diverting the water. I may have inadvertently caused the village drought. Please be merciful in your punishment. If you choose to hang me could you make an accurate assessment of my weight so that the drop-"

"Stop." Anteje walked over to the tables. "I'm not going to hang you. Don't be silly. What do you know about this?" She picked up one of the bottles and read the label. "Do you grow almonds, Herr Funkle?"

"Almonds? No. I don't grow any nuts."

"I knew the smell was familiar," said Heike to Lotte.

"Almonds?" said Lotte. Heike nodded. "Amygdalin? You mean there's cyanide in the water?"

"Yes."

"That would have killed everyone in the village."

"Herr Funkle," Anteje's hand gripped the hilt of her sword. "What did you mean, diverting the water?"

"I confess I placed a few obstacles to bring the water into my smallholding. Cyanide?"

"Yes. Cyanide."

He looked at Lotte. "That explains why my produce tastes rotten."

"I'm surprised you're still alive, Herr Funkle," said Lotte.

"I don't eat my own produce. It's only for show."

"Herr Funkle," said Anteje, "your smallholding is quarantined until the poisoned water runs clear. Heike will keep testing it and when it's safe you'll remove the diversions and I won't hang you."

"Thank you, Majesty."

"Not that I was going to hang you anyway."

"No. Perhaps burned at the stake-

"What?"

"Herr Finkle is grateful for your mercy," said Lotte.

"What about the vegetables?" said Heike. "Someone might eat them."

Staring out of the window, Anteje said. "If they weren't so big we could have sent them over the pass. A peace offering to Erinia and Helene. Herr Finkle, in future, stick to making jams and marmalades."

"Yes, Majesty. Although marmalades do tend to disagree with me."