

# Narnia Fanfiction: Book One

## Contents:

Daughter Would You Accompany Me? <i>by electrum</i> .....	4
<i>Just how did Helen get to Narnia?</i>	
Dreaming of Lions <i>by King Caspian the Seafarer</i> .....	7
<i>When Uncle Andrew sleeps, sometimes he dreams of lions.</i>	
By the Sword <i>by Elizabeth Culmer</i> .....	9
<i>When Jadis and Cynara were twelve, they killed their older brother.</i>	
Heart's Desire <i>by Elizabeth Culmer</i> .....	11
<i>Jadis in the garden: separation from God is only a punishment if you believe in him.</i>	
Singing Paeans to the Stars: The Passing of the King <i>by ilysia</i> .....	12
Wind, Sand, Stars <i>by songsmith</i> .....	14
<i>The son of Tash builds his empire.</i>	
Little Sister <i>by Elizabeth Culmer</i> .....	24
<i>Charn is gone; nostalgia is useless. Jadis has new worlds to conquer, if she can only find the way.</i>	
Winterfall <i>by songsmith</i> .....	29
<i>Archenland also waits for the end of the Long Winter.</i>	
The Arrest <i>by opera13</i> .....	39
<i>Mr. Tumnus awaits his arrest for treason.</i>	
The Diamond Vial <i>by warrior4</i> .....	46
<i>Father Christmas journeys to find the fire flowers.</i>	
The Sword of a King <i>by warrior4</i> .....	50
<i>Father Christmas remembers the forging of Rhindon.</i>	
Regrets <i>by MyBlueOblivion</i> .....	53
<i>Edmund Pevensie went through massive changes during The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe. From brat, to traitor, to saviour, to King, this story covers his thoughts during his most defining moments during the film.</i>	
Singing in the Dark <i>by FairLilyFlower</i> .....	105
<i>On the Pevensies' first night in Cair Paravel, Edmund is missing England.</i>	
Blessed <i>by electrum</i> .....	109
<i>Oreius reflects upon his new kings.</i>	

Balance <i>by</i> <i>electrum</i> .....	112
<i>Wherein Edmund has put his hoof in his mouth, Phillip gives riding and philosophy lessons, and the first rain in a century comes to Narnia.</i>	
Somnolence <i>by</i> <i>FaithfulPureLight</i> .....	116
<i>A month since Narnia was freed. Peter is still struggling with what is reality and what is a nightmare. Does his brother hold the key?</i>	
The Conscience of the King <i>by</i> <i>electrum</i> .....	142
<i>In the aftermath of the Battle of Beruna, many people have forgotten that Edmund was not the only traitor in Narnia. General Oreius, however, is not one of them.</i>	
Heat Wave <i>by</i> <i>FaithfulPureLight</i> .....	154
<i>Where our Kings learn the dangers of training when tempers and temperatures run high.</i>	
Silence <i>by</i> <i>MooMoog</i> .....	158
<i>That was all winter brought...</i>	
The Most Noble Order of the Table <i>by</i> <i>electrum</i> .....	161
<i>A tale of how King Edmund the Just became Sir Edmund, Knight of the Order of the Table.</i>	
Night Raid <i>by</i> <i>warrior4</i> .....	184
<i>Three months after the Battle of Beruna, evil forces still lurk in Narnia.</i>	
Suitor <i>by</i> <i>Capegio</i> .....	198
<i>Susan's siblings react to her first suitor.</i>	
Chaperone <i>by</i> <i>Capegio</i> .....	201
<i>Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, except perhaps her mother.</i>	
Black Dwarfs, Blue River <i>by</i> <i>electrum</i> .....	210
<i>Relating the story of King Edmund's first diplomatic success, how he learned a craft, and why his older brother is known throughout the Black Dwarf clan as Nancy.</i>	

***Editors Note:***

The Chronicles of Narnia is copyrighted by the estate of CS Lewis, Walt Disney Company, and Walden Media. Stories contained here are for entertainment purposes only and may not be sold or reprinted in any other format.

All stories in this series are rated T for Teen, otherwise known as MPAA PG-13 or TV-14, or less. Mild language, descriptions of violence, or references to sexuality may occur.

All stories in this series, unless otherwise noted, first appeared on [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net). Leaving reviews of critique, feedback and/or appreciation is encouraged.

Stories may have been edited for spelling, punctuation, minor grammatical issues, or clarity.

# Daughter, Would You Accompany Me?

*by electrum*

“Daughter, would you accompany me?”

Caught in mid-sigh, Helen lifted her head from the tea dishes in astonishment at the sound of a deep voice here in the kitchen. It was not the voice of Mr. Phelps, for he never came down here, nor yet the butler James or any of the staff. She had never heard this voice before, but something about it was strangely familiar. All in an instant she saw that the light was different, as if the afternoon sun was shining from the hall behind her and not the small window before her, and the sweet scent of all that was best of summer filled the air.

Lifting her water-wrinkled hands out of the dishwater, she slowly turned to face this Voice. She was surprised yet not so to see a lion, golden and brilliant, filling the room. There was such majesty and wisdom and kindness to his appearance that no trace of fear entered into her heart even though his huge paws were as large as the plates she was supposed to be washing. A glow emanated from him and his every move scattered light from his mane like the fine-cut crystal used for service when Mrs. Phelps threw dinner parties. Never in her life had Helen Dyer seen or imagined anything so majestic and mighty, and she could not see anything else in the room but him. At a loss, she dropped into a quick curtsy because she could not think of what else to do or say.

The Lion inclined his head in silent greeting, his long, tufted tail lashing the air. Gold-brown eyes watched her with quiet patience and he asked once again,

“Daughter, would you accompany me?”

Confused, Helen stood with her mouth open. That this Lion should be able to speak did not come as a shock. She would not put anything beyond his capability, especially since he had appeared as if from the very air and he was far too large to fit down the narrow hall to the servants’ door. If she was dreaming it was a wondrous dream and she did not want it to end.

“Accompany you?” she finally managed. “Where, Sir?”

“To your home,” answered the Lion. “To your husband’s side.”

Fear instantly gripped her and she lifted her dripping hands to her mouth. “Frank? Has he been hurt? Oh!”

The great Lion seemed to smile, banishing her anxiety. “No, Daughter, your husband is well and safe. You need not fear for him.”

She let out a shuddering sigh, for her Frank had been known to jump to the defense of people being laid upon by hoodlums and had more than once come home battered and bruised. Young or old, rich or poor, it didn’t matter to Frank and though it pained her to see him sore she had always been so proud that he would stand up for anyone that needed help. It was one of the things she loved best about him. Her family had only seen a rough

and unpolished country boy in Frank, but Helen had seen a jewel beyond price. Not for one instant had she ever regretted marrying him, not even when her family had turned their backs on her.

“Did he send you, Sir?” Helen asked, wondering how and why Frank had met this Lion, for she could not imagine a more fantastic messenger.

“He sent for you.”

“From home, Sir?” She suspected that somehow the Lion was not talking about their shabby apartment at the end of a dirty alley many blocks from the fine house where she worked.

“From your true home. From the kingdom that awaits you. Your husband is there waiting for you.”

She shook her head, wishing she could understand what he was trying to tell her. It was like a beautiful memory dancing on the edge of recollection. Almost without realizing it, she took a step towards him.

“Where is this home?”

“Right before you. Will you accompany me, Daughter?”

She stared into his eyes, bright with hope and promise. There was such love there as she had only ever seen in Frank’s eyes, absolute and eternal. It seemed to Helen a perfect moment, as if any misdeed she had ever committed was washed away, and to look into the Lion’s deep, golden eyes and to feel the love in his expression was the whole point and purpose in her young life.

Her voice was a whisper, so awed was she by what she saw. “To Frank?”

“To Frank. To Narnia. To Me.”

Narnia. The word thrilled her. She felt her heart leap for the joy and the sound of it. Frank was there waiting for her and she was seized by a sudden, overwhelming desire to tell her husband how deeply, how completely she loved him for sending this Lion to her.

“If I may, Sir,” she hesitantly pressed, “who are you?”

The Lion’s voice was a deep rumble like thunder, but there was no anger in his tone. It was the might and weight of the answer that expanded his voice and she somehow felt that her question pleased him. “I am Myself. I am Aslan. I am the Son of the Emperor-Over-Sea. Will you come, Helen, Daughter of Eve, across worlds and ages, that you may know me better?”

Aslan. His name called out to her and she felt a longing to obey. “Will you be there?”

“I will be with you always.”

“Yes, Aslan. I will,” she breathed. “How?”

“Lay your hand upon my mane and do not be afraid.”

She reached for him, soapy water still clinging to her hands. His mane looked deep and soft and she wanted to nestle close and warm within the halo of golden light surrounding him. A thought suddenly struck her and she hesitated, pointing to the hall.

“My hat! It’s my best . . .” She broke off, feeling a little foolish.

With joy and delight in his expression, Aslan gently replied, “You won’t need it, dear Helen.”

“Oh,” she said. Unable to devise a more clever answer, she simply echoed, “Oh.”

“Come!” invited Aslan. “Come to the kingdoms that await you!”

And, without the least bit of fear in her heart, she went.

✚✚

# Dreaming of Lions

*by King Caspian the Seafarer*

When Uncle Andrew sleeps, sometimes he dreams of lions.

Those dreams are never good ones, and more often than not he awakens from such a dream with a scream on his lips and a roar ringing in his ears. And then he is puzzled, not frightened. Why should he dream of lions? And why should the sight of one in his dreams fill his heart with immeasurable dread? Andrew doesn't know why, and usually manages to convince himself otherwise after a glass or two of brandy and telling himself it's nonsense. But when he first awakens after such a dream and the gold and glory and terror and majesty are still fresh in his mind, he feels an ache somewhere in his calloused heart—an ache of longing, like a memory long forgotten, that begs to be remembered—to go along with the icy chill of fright.

He feels himself, as he reluctantly returns to the waking world, reach for something—a ring, his mind tells him, though he can't imagine why. He licks his lips greedily, expecting—for what afterward seems the queerest of reasons—to taste the seductive sweetness of honey on them. And sometimes, especially on cool, damp nights in early spring before the icicles on the lampposts in the street are quite melted, he awakens with a start, yanking his feet away from a red hot fire at the foot of his bed only to find that they are ice cold.

If you were to ask him, of course, Andrew would deny being haunted by ghosts of the past.

"Lions?" he would roar—no pun intended—with amusement. "I'm not afraid of any such beast, my dear gel, my boy." He remembers exactly what he wants to remember about everything; and something, some ancient fear of ignorance inside him, has buried deeply the memory of the one time he met a lion and really was afraid.

"I don't care for honey," he'll tell you, staring at the pot with a disdain that surprises even him, because he liked honey just as well as anyone else before...something. He does not remember the sting of thistles or stickiness of the bee's brew or the horror that came with not understanding.

"She was a superb creature, she was," he mutters to himself, recalling only the long, lustrous raven locks and the proud beauty of her smile. His mind has conveniently forgotten the dazzling, terrifying flash of her eyes and how the smile could turn to a snarl in less time than it took to blink.

But even as he disowns the memories that return occasionally to his mind, even as he casts off those things which he does not desire, Andrew feels a slight pang of regret. He feels—though reluctantly, and with ample fear as well as excitement—a warm breath on his face; a wild, strong, serious, sweet, intoxicating thing that makes his head spin more than any amount of brandy, but in a way that won't leave him with a headache on waking.

It is that wild breath that caresses his face in the last moments before dawn, in the final slumbering hours of the night, that gives him a lingering, wistful sort peace, even though he refuses to question why or how such a thing could be.

Because, of course, Andrew Ketterley is far too clever a man to let dreams of lions mold his future.

Or so he would tell you.

¥¤¥

## By the Sword

*by Elizabeth Culmer*

When Jadis and Cynara were twelve, they killed their older brother.

They thought they had covered their tracks. Jadis's spell dissipated with Mordan's last breath; the servant who had procured the sword died under Cynara's whip for a fabricated infraction. The sisters attended the state funeral with properly stern expressions, refusing to let their triumph show when flames wrapped hungry tongues around their brother's corpse.

Their father didn't even pretend to investigate.

The funeral consumed the morning and the afternoon. As the sun eased toward its bloody rest and the lesser stars began to show their faces around the Watcher in the darkening sky, drums still pounded in the temples, horns blaring at each new sacrifice whose blood and bones would pave Mordan's way to the sunless lands. The discordant music echoed through the palace corridors as Jadis and Cynara answered their father's summons, walking the eight prescribed steps into the small audience chamber from which Crown Prince Acernos enforced Queen Nekoris's orders and managed her household's security.

Acernos sat on his stone chair, an unsheathed sword across his lap and a death spell shining from the diamond hung about his neck; its light obscured his expression. "I fear I have been negligent in your lessons, daughters," he said softly. "To cause the death of a member of the royal family is treason. The penalty for treason is death."

Jadis straightened her back an impossible extra fraction, pulling her magic sharp and ready just under the skin of her hands. In the corner of her eye, she saw Cynara shift her weight into a more stable stance, fingers twitching toward her dagger. To attack their father was suicide, but they would die like queens, not sheep.

But their father made no move to strike. "You should not have worked together," he said, still without heat, as if the implicit threat of their magic and blades meant nothing, as if Mordan hadn't been the heir, the favored child who could do no wrong. Jadis clenched her hands tighter, waiting.

"The days when a shield-brother could be trusted are long dead and buried," Prince Acernos continued. "One of you - either of you - might have succeeded undiscovered. But magic and a blade? No. That was far too obvious."

Jadis burned cold with rage and shame. This was Cynara's fault. Cynara had begun their game of shield-sisters, of ancient conqueror queens. Cynara had beguiled Jadis into thinking they were stronger together, had lured Jadis into suggesting that they kill Mordan together, to seal their alliance in blood.

Jadis shot a hateful, sidelong glare toward Cynara, and seethed at seeing her betrayal reflected on her sister's face. She was the wronged one! How dare Cynara blame her?

On his granite chair, their father smiled. "You were not completely inept," he said, sheathing his sword and clenching his hand to veil the diamond's glow; behind him, the torches sprang to life, flickering ruddy over the stones. "You left no overt evidence. And

eventually I will need an heir. Therefore, I will let you live... this time. But when you settle the succession between yourselves, do not make the mistake of trust a second time. You are dismissed."

"As you command, sire," Jadis said, Cynara echoing her half a beat behind. They bowed and withdrew in silence, and remained silent until they had returned to the children's wing of the palace and left their escort outside.

"So," Cynara said, as the heavy doors swung shut behind them. She eyed Jadis with a measuring stare, left hand resting lightly on the dagger at her side. "No alliance."

"No alliance," Jadis agreed. She studied her sister, cataloging weaknesses for a new reason now - not as places where she could balance Cynara with her own strengths, but gaps at which to aim her strikes. Cynara had fooled her into believing she didn't have to stand alone; Jadis would destroy her in payment for the loss of that hope. But not yet. Not today. Cynara burned hot where Jadis burned cold; time would lull her into complacency.

"In place of alliance, I propose a truce until we come of age," Jadis said. "There is no sense wasting our strength on each other before either of us can rule alone."

Cynara tipped her head, acknowledging the point - the more fool she. "To war, then," Cynara said. She drew her dagger, sliced a wound across her right palm. "I pledge this to you: no hand but mine will bring your death."

Jadis took the dagger from her sister's hand and matched her gesture, blood for blood. "Your death is also mine. This I promise, blood to blood, until the end of the world." She clasped Cynara's hand one last time, steel and magic pressed between them to seal their pledge like the shield-sisters of old. Together, they could have set the world aflame.

But that trust - that hope - had been nothing more than a dream. She had been wrong to listen to Cynara, to think her sister would never be her enemy, to believe Cynara's games and lies. From this day on, she could never spend an unguarded moment with anyone.

Jadis let the dagger fall, and turned away from her twin.

They had killed their brother. One day, Jadis or Cynara would kill their father. Then Jadis would kill Cynara, whatever the price.

She would win the world. And she would rule alone.

¥¤¥

# Heart's Desire

*by Elizabeth Culmer*

"Come in by the gold gates or not at all," the garden's maker had written. And truly, there was no need to turn aside, walk a quarter-circle around the hilltop, and clamber over the wall, but Jadis was the Queen of Charn and she bowed to no one.

She would have the apple on her own terms, as she had earned everything else in her life.

The fruit was sharp and almost painfully sweet, with a metallic tang underneath that expanded to bitter and salt in the aftertaste. The juice was shockingly dark for such a fair-fleshed fruit. Jadis licked the red-brown stain from her hand and laughed.

Pure theatrics: the apple bled. Was that supposed to induce guilt or shame?

The Lion had made this world, she acknowledged, but she had been here at the making; her magic was thus woven deep into its earth and air, inseparable from its very fabric of being. Until this world died, the Lion must adjust his plans to account for her. And even after, she could continue - if that simpering fool had learned to travel between the planes, surely so could she! And she would learn to cross directly, without the crutch of that horrible, drowning place between the worlds.

A breeze stirred the garden, swirling petals and scent from the tree. Jadis sneezed, and then nearly gagged on the rotting sweetness of the silvery perfume. Stumbling, she turned aside, holding her arms across her face as if to block the very air from attacking her.

The air stilled. The scent dissipated.

Jadis lowered her arms and clenched her free hand, seething. So. The Lion had fashioned a trap for those who defied him and ate the fruit unbidden. But even he could not stop the apple from performing its function; already she could feel new strength coursing through her blood and bones like a river of ice, scouring away her mortality.

She had forever, now. She had new magic to master, a new world to conquer, a new foe to destroy. If the Lion thought that a mere tree would defeat her or that length of days would lead her to despair, he was a fool, as her sister had been.

Jadis ran her tongue across her teeth, savoring the iron tang of immortality, and took another bite.

¥¤¥

# Singing Paeans to the Stars: The Passing of the King

*by ilysia*

"You truly mean to do it, then?"

Sunlight fell through the Tree's leaves, catching the muted silver of the apples and casting soft, dappled patterns on the faces of the two beneath the spreading branches.

The King laughed softly. "Yes, Rhonan, truly."

The bay sighed. "He has spoken of it so often in these past years... I wondered when you would call him for this last feat." She paused, and her voice became as soft as a Horse's can. "Indeed, I believe he has been waiting for your call since my mother's death."

A look of brief mourning passed over the King's aged face. "Perhaps I have waited too long to call my old friend to my side; yet I was not ready- not yet."

"And now, my King?"

"I have lived to see my son's children grow, to see my land blossom. I have lived with grief and without regret. I have lived to know the longing that comes to all mortals... yes, I am ready."

"As am I, old friend."

Rhonan started at the new voice, her black wings spreading and her forefeet rising off the ground in surprise; but the King merely smiled. With the patience given only to those of many years, he rose slowly from where he had been seated at the Tree's base to go to the great winged Horse who stood in the slanting sunlight.

Though the once-strawberry coat was now generously flecked with grey, the great wings of chestnut and copper were as strong and as graceful as the day they had been gifted, and the spark in the Horse's eyes had not faded.

The King stopped but a handbreadth from the Horse and raised one frail hand to stroke the greying flank. "A call grows in my mind, good Fledge, and with it the image of an everlasting garden." Fledge breathed in exaltation; the King smiled. "Will you bear me, old friend, as you once bore the little lord and lady?"

"My King, it is only for this that I have lived."

Fledge knelt and slowly, yet with a grace that belied his age, the King slipped onto the father of all winged Horses, settling himself before the flashing wings. Fledge rose and the King on his back straightened, seeming suddenly younger to Rhonan as she stood in the shade of the Tree.

"Away then, Greatheart!" the King cried, and his voice was like a trumpet. "The Lion calls us home!"

At that, a wind sprang up in the east and the great Horse, with a short run, surged into the air, the draft of his copper wings stirring the leaves of the Tree. They rose higher and

higher, King and Legend, until they were no more than a speck of bronze against the blue sky.

Rhonan watched as her great father and the first King of Narnia were borne westward on the wind; watched until they could not be seen against the western sky; watched as they faded from Narnia, called by the Lion not to die but to go into the West, and to the great Garden that waited there until the very ending of the world.

"Is it true, Mama? Did Grandfather truly bear King Frank away into the west, to the garden at the end of the world?"

"Little one, of course it is. Did I not see these things with my own eyes?"

"And so King Frank did not die?"

"No, love; nor did your Grandfather. But their time here was done, and Aslan needed them elsewhere."

"But are they still there, Mama? Still there in the garden at the end of the world?"

"None save Aslan know that, love. Aslan tells us only our own story, after all, and when Grandfather and the King went into the West, they passed out of this story. But you will see them someday, and then they can tell you their tale for themselves. For now, though, it is late, and time for all good foals to be abed."

¥¤¥

# Wind, Sand, Stars

*by songsmith*

Listen, O noble soul, and hear of the days before the people of the desert were one, the time of gods and heroes, and the mighty lord - Tash give him rest and glory! - who made all Calormen one and first ruled as Tisroc.

Know, O most honorable gentle, that in those days the many clans held each to their own territory, and warred amongst themselves for beasts and slaves and other riches. And in those days there was a mighty Tarkaan, lord of a small but prosperous clan, who had but one daughter. And this lady was more beautiful than a gazelle under moonlight, but strong and clever as well, and her father's greatest joy. He swore that none but the worthiest man should have her, and no man was worthy in his eyes.

Now it was not only mortal men who desired her. The great god Tash – all glory and honor to him! – also saw and desired her, and he sent his winds to her at night, and she conceived.

Now when her father discovered she was with child, the sun grew dark in his eyes, and rage came upon him. He demanded to know what man had been with her, but she answered him, "Nothing but the wind has entered my chambers." And he cursed her for a liar and cast her from his home. She wept and wailed but he would not be moved, and he turned his face from her and closed his ears to her words.

Some of her kin took pity on her and took her in, for that they could not bear to see her cast out while with child. When the babe was born, it was a boy, strong and lusty, well-formed in limb and fair of face, and she called him Ashkar. All exclaimed over his great beauty and they said to the Tarkaan, "Sir, here is a grandson you should be proud to claim, for surely his father is a mighty lord indeed!" This pleased him, and his heart softened, but still he would not see his daughter. He sent gifts to her instead, that she might care for the child as befitted his rank, but he swore she should not return to his home until she named and wed the boy's father.

So she brought the child up alone, living at the edge of the clan's settlement. She taught him to sit a horse, and to shoot a bow straight and true, and the words of the poets and every manner of noble art. When he was old enough to take up the sword as a boy should, she journeyed with him to the home of the Tarkaan Mazhar whose clan had long been allied with hers, and she said to him, "See, this is my son, the grandson of the Tarkaan my father. I have taught him poetry and courtesy and every noble art, but I cannot teach him to be a man. I pray you take him into your home, that he may be as a son to you and as a brother to your sons, and he may grow to be a warrior worthy of his clan and yours."

And Mazhar Tarkaan said, "Truly, a noble lordling is he. Gladly will I foster this one, and when he is a man he shall wed my daughter, and be my son in truth." And so they lived among the Tarkaan Mazhar's clan until Ashkar was a man. And he learned to wield the sword and to throw the spear straight and true, and all the arts of war. And he was as a brother to the Tarkaan's sons, but most especially to the eldest, Dzetin. And also as he

grew he came to look upon the Tarkaan's daughter, Najet, with great favor, and she upon him likewise.

When he was grown tall and straight and began to scrape his cheeks, his mother took him out to the edge of the settlement and showed him the desert that stretched away endlessly. "That you are a son of a great house you know," she said.

"Yes, mother, and you have taught me the honor of that blood," he made answer.

"Did you not think it strange, then, that you know nothing of your father's house?"

"Aye, mother, but I know he must be a lordly man, for everyone says so."

And then she said, "Thy father is more lordly than any know, but he is not a man. He is Tash, lord of the desert, who sent his winds to me in the very walls of my father's home. Now you are a man, it is fitting that you know this."

Then he was consumed with wonder but felt no surprise. He said, "O my mother and O the delight of my eyes, give me leave that I may go into my father's lands and seek my fortune."

And she replied, "O my son and O the delight of my eyes, I can refuse thee no good request." And she gave him food and bade him take their steed - "for, as you must know, the desert is wide and you will not go far afoot" - and bid him farewell, carefully hiding her tears.

Then into the desert Ashkar traveled, following the caravan routes, and determined that he should find some manner of proving his great blood. But he had not journeyed long when he saw on the western horizon a dark, hazy blot, and he knew that a storm should soon be upon him. He made haste to cast up what shelter he could, and took his horse into it with him though there was scarce room, for he would not leave a fine mount to the stripping sands. Then the storm was upon him. The wind howled and raged, the sand bit even through his coverings, and all was blackness. "Ah!" thought Ashkar, as he huddled there, "the lord of the desert is cruel and merciless. So too must I be, then."

In good time the storm passed. Ashkar carefully dug himself out, shaking off the sand that had settled over his shelter, and tending to the hurts of himself and his mount. By then the blackness was that of night, so he spread his sleeping roll on the desert floor and lay beneath the brilliant stars.

The next day he continued on his journey. In the heat of the day, when he grew weary and the sun beat down mercilessly, a sweet breeze brushed him, cooling and welcome, so that he sat straighter and felt he could go on further. "Ah," he thought, "my father is kind and uplifting. So too must I be, then."

Ill fortune beset him then, for the storm had scoured away many of the track-signs, and he became uncertain of his path. Then in the heat of the day he found that his waterskins both were leaking. Though he tried to hasten his journey, he only became more lost. Thus we see the truth of the poet's words: the imprudence of haste labors twice but the prudent man is rewarded in the fullness of time. At night his condition was something bettered, for he could read the stars well, but not knowing where he was he could only guess where he should go. He kept on, however, for he felt he must come to civilization eventually if only he continued.

The next day his water ran out and both he and his horse suffered terribly of thirst. Ashkar thought, If this poor beast should die I might drink its blood and so live myself, and then he grieved, for it was a fine steed and he felt, as the poet has said, the spirit of a noble horse exalts a man more surely than the saddle raises him from the ground. But if they continued, one of them should die, and Ashkar wished that it should not be he. Then in despair he cried out, "Ah, Tash! Tash, Lord of the Desert, Tash my father! Let not your son perish here in your own lands, under the cruel pity of the terrible sun!"

Then a wind blew, so fierce and strong that Ashkar had to turn his face aside to shield it, and thus it was he beheld two birds not far distant, stooped, it seemed, it to the very desert itself. Ashkar urged his weary mount towards them, certain that where there were birds there must be sustenance of some sort. He hoped to find some hapless creature newly dead, or perhaps a small spring. Instead, he soon beheld before him a cleft in which bloomed a great oasis, with the center of this rich greenery being a huge, shimmering lake.

Then Ashkar fell down upon his face and gave thanks to Tash for his deliverance. And when that was done in all propriety and goodness, he rushed forward to drink and felt the life returning to him.

Then he said to himself, "How is it that such a bountiful place should be unknown to anyone? For surely this should support a fine settlement, a jewel among cities." He walked along the lake's shore, and saw where the date-palm grew, and the fig, and all manner of good and useful plants, and where cultivation might better what nature had wrought. Then he turned away from the water and saw in his mind where there might be homes, and space for herds, and yes, even places for horses to run and men to meet in the practice of warrior arts.

"Surely the great Tash sent the sandstorm in order that I might see this," Ashkar thought. "He is clever and far-seeing. So too must I be, then." Then again he knelt and gave thanks to Tash for revealing his plans.

"I shall bring my bride here, and such of her brothers as will swear to me for the lands that I give them," he decided. "And such herds as we may carry away with us, and peasants and slaves to work the soil and harvest the crops." So he thought and planned while he repaired his gear and refilled both food and water. But he was still unsatisfied, for it seemed to him such a humble settlement was unworthy of the grandness of Tash's gift. "It must be a city," Ashkar thought. "A city devoted to the glory of mighty Tash, the wonder of the world. No less will be a fitting tribute to my father." And he began to think how he might achieve this.

When all was in readiness and his horse well-rested, he followed the course of the water, which ran to the vast and open sea. Thence he turned northwards, along the coast, and soon came to a small fishing settlement. Now he was no longer lost, and he knew he could find his way back to the place Tash had given him.

Then he set about proving himself a warrior and a leader of men. For many months he roamed the desert, striking the enemies of his clan and trading with their allies. Many other young men did likewise, and had since the sun first scorched the sands. They fought among themselves and made alliance where they wished, and such was the strength and skill of Ashkar, and so great was his good fortune, that many pledged themselves to him. In this fashion he soon acquired wealth and might, and thought it well to marry. So he took the richest of his things and the strongest of his men, and he journeyed back to the lands of his foster-father.

And when he arrived before Mazhar Tarkaan he cast himself to his knees and spread gifts before him, saying, "O father of my brother and O my heart's father, receive these gifts which I bring for love and devotion's sake, and receive also these others which I bring for the hand of your daughter, Najet, whose beauty is surpassed only by her righteousness."

Then Mazhar raised him up and embraced him, saying, "O son of my heart and O beloved of my daughter, a thousand welcomes! Greatly we rejoice at your return, for we feared you lost to us in the desert."

"I thought myself lost to it once," Ashkar said, "but I have naught to fear from that realm any longer. I have journeyed far and found many great things, and now I think it a fitting thing to claim my bride."

Mazhar saw the richness of the gifts Ashkar had laid before him, and his heart rejoiced for his son's fortune. But he said, "Certainly the gods have smiled on you, O my son, but in truth you have scarcely become a man, and your name is not spoken among the clans. Shall I marry my daughter and the delight of my eyes to an unblooded boy?"

"I am neither unblooded nor a boy," said Ashkar, "but I pray you tell me how I may find favor in your eyes."

Then his foster-father said, "The clan of Shivin steals from our herds. Go you, then, and teach them the strength of Zardaba and restore what was lost to us."

"If that is your will," Ashkar replied, and he took up his sword and went forth. He gathered to him his foster-brother and others among the young men of the clan, and he took them forth into the desert.

At the dark of the moon, when the sands were lit only by starlight, they came upon the herds of the Shivin. Their hearts were fierce and their arms strong, their horses swift and their blades sharp, and they took many head of sheep and goat from the Shivin herds and some slaves, returning in victory and rejoicing. Ashkar it was who had the greatest prize of the night, the finest ram of the Shivin's herds, and all praised his valor for such beasts are guarded more dear than gold. None could now say he was less than a man.

Now it passed that Ashkar wished to prepare a dwelling for his bride in the place Tash had shown him. So he went to his brothers and said to them, "venture forth with me into the sands where fortune for all of us may come by the grace of Tash," and they took their herds and servants and rode forth. When they saw the place which Tash had given Ashkar, his brothers all exclaimed in great delight. "Truly, O brother of my heart," said Dzetin, "you have indeed been greatly blessed!"

"This bounty of great Tash I share freely with you, my brothers, that we may all prosper and make here a city for his glory."

So they turned the herds to graze and cast their tents, and they set the servants to the preparing of farmland along the water's shore, and they chose the land where they would build homes. And the first dwelling that they built was for Ashkar and for Najet.

The season turned, and the crops grew, and the herds bore calves. Homes rose up and down the banks of the waters. Then one day, as the sun burned down into the mountains of the west, a rider came out of the sands, and he stumbled to the feet of Ashkar, crying, "Woe! The banners of our clan are trampled into dust, and the Shivin ride triumphant! Woe!"

When Dzetin heard the messenger's words, he tore his clothes, and cried aloud, "Alas! Alas for my father, dead beneath the barbarian spears! Alas for my sister, their captive and slave!" So Dzetin lamented, and Ashkar with him. Then they cut their skin and let the blood flow into the sand, and vowed that the blood of the Shivin would feed the hidden life of the desert, and the flesh of the Shivin should be meat for jackals, and the bone of the Shivin cracked by hyenas, and their names fall out of memory. Then they gathered their weapons and rode to fulfill their oath.

Having not the numbers to challenge the Shivin outright, they came upon the camp in darkness, and by the stars' light they sought those of their own people who had been carried away, and when they found one they pressed a knife into his hands and bade him join them. And they crept all through the encampment and slew those who were wakeful, but the blood did not run thick before it was morning and they had to withdraw.

When the sun rose so too did the Shivin, and so too did the sound of their lamentation, for those who greeted the day with death-blind eyes. The Shivin moved on, swift and anxious, so quickly that they did not even bury their dead with proper honor. But they could not run far enough, or fast enough, and the next night Ashkar and his brothers did the same, with the captives they had freed beside them, and in the morning the Shivin bewailed their fate, to have brought down the wrath of some angry ghost or demon. Once again they fled, hoping to reach their places of safety, praying to their god that he would protect them. On the third night they were yet wakeful, knives glittering in their hands against flesh, salt in pouches at their waists against spirit. And Ashkar and Dzetin rallied their kinfolk, and descended against the Shivin in a great host, and the sunrise was not redder than the sand.

And when Dzetin found his sister, she was bathed to the elbows in blood, for she had turned the knives of her captors against them, and the battle-spirit rode as high in her as any man, and she led her kinswomen into the night with hair loose and hands red, to visit their revenge upon the Shivin.

Then by noon the clan of Shivin was no more. The blood ran thick and the few survivors were slaves.

Then rejoiced the Zardin and feasted well. And Ashkar came before Dzetin and Najet and he said unto them, "Come, let us be joined at last. Now, as our sorrow and our victory show, we are strengthened together and weakened apart. Give now to me, O my brother, your sister to be my wife, that the bonds of kin shall be forever bound between us."

"Full willingly," Dzetin said, "for I have long wished we should be brothers in truth." And he put her hand in Ashkar's.

"Come, Najet, and pledge with me before Tash, and we shall be one and build a new city for his glory, and our children shall be mighty Tarkaans."

But Najet frowned, and she said, "I do not consent to this, for I am a servant of Zardeenah, whose grace has always been with my clan. I shall not abandon Zardeenah," she declared, "and I shall teach my children to honor her as I do."

At this Ashkar was much dissatisfied, for it seemed to him that Tash was the greater and more worthy of worship. He said this, and also he said, "Furthermore, is it not fitting that a woman should adopt the gods of her husband's tribe clan?"

"Should not a man adopt those of his foster-tribe?" Najet countered. "And I do not see that Tash is greater, for as the desert is merciless, so without the cooling night we should

never survive, and without the stars (which are Zardeenah's jewels) we should all stumble lost among the trackless sands."

Then Ashkar thought himself of how grateful he had been for the cool night and guiding stars when he himself was lost, and relented. "Then keep to her," he said, "but you shall have Tash besides. And though you teach your daughters to worship her, they shall leave her service when they go to the house of their husbands and thereafter hold Tash before all." And to this Najet agreed, provided the Lady of Night's sacred places should continue to be tended and honored, and so they agreed and were wed.

And when the celebrations were ended, Dzetin took his leave of them, and he returned home to take his place as Tarkaan, while Ashkar took his bride to his new settlement.

Then there was peace upon them for a time, and they built their settlement. Others came from the Zardin to join Ashkar and his brothers, and also some from the Tashin, Ashkar's kin by birth, sought him among the desert sands and swore their allegiance to Ashkar, for, they told him, his grandfather was nigh unto death and some of the clan would follow the heir of his blood regardless of his mother's shame. And at their heels came a trickle of younger sons from among the Zardin's allies, eager to win a better place than they might have at home.

But the Shivin too had allies, by oath and by blood, and these would not long suffer the Shivin's destroyers to go unpunished. They first refused to trade with the fledgling clan, then began to raid their caravans and herds, until Ashkar was obliged to send more guards with each one. This was an outrage to Ashkar, and he began to plan ways to stop the interference.

Accordingly he gathered together his brothers and all the men who could bear arms, and they planned a great raid on the most troublesome of the clans. On the appointed day they rode forth and gave fierce battle, and by the unveiling of night the warriors of the meddlesome clan lay dead before them. They took some of the herds and slaves, but Ashkar said, "It should be foolish to waste this land, or to let another enemy claim it," and he made one of his brothers lord over it under him.

Now meanwhile Najet had been speaking among the clan, and learning all the bonds of kinship that their settlement might claim. And she said to Ashkar, "Husband, let us not risk men in bloody battle for that which we may gain by wisdom. For is it not said by the poets, 'a keen mind is fiercer than any sword, and flies further than arrows'?"

And he said, "O my wife and O my heart's joy, it is so indeed. But how should these wretches cease to torment us unless we teach them to deare our swords?"

And she said, "Teach them instead that to aid us is joy to them. You have already shown the terror of your sword arm. Now speak to those who do you but little harm, biting as the sand flea, and make them instead your friends and shelter." And she told him which Tarkaans had kin within their settlement, and might so be brought to friendship.

Ashkar saw there was much wisdom in his wife's words, and he kissed her in the joy of it, and then asked that she set all in readiness for such an embassy. So she prepared their servants and rich gifts to give the Tarkaans, and they put on their finery and went to the Tarkaan Orkun. And they gave to him many good gifts, and honored him as kin, and he was overjoyed and forgot his wrath. Then pledged they friendship in wine and salt, and Orkun said, "Let us go now and give thanks to Nidash for the new bond between us."

Now this was the custom, that a new alliance should be brought to the god even as a new babe, but Ashkar would have none. His countenance darkened, and he rose up, saying, "For none but Tash will I bare my neck," he declared. "It is you who should bow, even as the water-reed bends to the desert wind."

Hearing this, Orkun was wroth, and he too rose with black anger upon his face. "Upstart boy," he thundered, "what are these words but hot wind themselves? Nidash sustains us all, and no man shall give insult unto him!"

Then it might have been ill between them, but for Najet, who sprang to her feet and set herself between the angry men. "My lords," she said, "such quarrels are not meet among kin such as we. It is right for a Tarkaan to honor only the god of his clan, and kneel to no others. But let us send gifts to the temple, that the priests may do all with right ceremony to bring this joining before Nidash, for such matters are the concern of priests." And so it was done as she said.

They broke their journey in their brother's new-won land, and he feasted them well and they went to their sleep much satisfied. But in the night a dream came to Ashkar, and he woke crying out. Najet sat up and lit a lamp, snapping her fingers through the flame to chase the dream-spirits away. She begged him to tell her what vision had so disturbed his rest.

"I dreamed that I walked beside the water here," he said. "There were dates heavy on the trees and melons thick on the vines, and beyond the fields the herds were in, hundreds of fine beasts. Then a woman rose up from the mud at the shore, and she towered over me even as the trees, and when she spoke her voices was as the thunder. 'Begone!' she said, and 'Begone!' and 'Begone!' yet a third time, and then she raised a spear. I fled, and her cast went wide, but she pursued me still, and I ran for my life. I called out, 'O my father, mighty Tash, defend your son!' and then came a wind from the desert, and a swirl of sand surrounded her. Faster and faster it spun, and she shrank within it, screaming, and her screams were the fall of rocks in the cliffs and the roar of water in the dry gullies, and terrible to hear. And she raised a hand to point at me, even as she shrank, and she cried, 'My curse upon you, Ashkar son of Tash! Famine and pestilence shall walk where you walk, and you shall thirst but drink only sand. Scorpions shall sting you, jackals shall bite you, lions devour you! Let your father of the wastes guard you from his own domain!' And she laughed terribly, so that I clapped my hands over my ears, and so woke myself. Interpret this dream for me, my wife, I beg."

"It needs no great wisdom to read," Najet replied. "The god of this land is angry, for her hold places are not tended, and her shrines are home to rats and creeping things, and her priests do not speak the rites for her. And that is by your decree, my husband and lord."

"I conquered this land in the name of my father," Ashkar replied coldly, "the great Tash, to whom all other gods must bow. Did not his power defend me, in the dream?"

"A lord must be honored in his own place, even if a mighty king visits. The honor of the one is not lessened by the other."

"And should the king bow to the lord?" he snapped.

"Should he command his servants not to?" she countered.

To this Ashkar made no reply, but lay down again, turning his back to her, and she, offended, did likewise, and they slept again.

At the dawn the sound of lamentation woke them, and they looked out to find that the waters had receded far from the shore. Even as they watched the pool shrank still further, leaving only a sticky grey mud behind. The edges were already drying beneath the morning sun.

Ashkar could not bring himself to look at his wife, but went out and called for someone to fetch the old priests, and for others to clean the shrine. He himself went to the herds and chose the finest beast among them for sacrifice, which he then sent to the priests. Then in full view of all he took up his knife and cut his palm, letting the blood drip to the place where water met shore. And the receding of the waters ceased, and reversed, until he was standing waist-deep in the returned waters.

And when this was done he went into the new shrine of Tash to pray, but ever after he gave of his blood when he conquered a new land.

In this fashion, by conquest and by alliance, he gathered together the many clans of the desert lands. And Ashkar's power grew great in the land, and many clans bowed to him. And the rest of the clans feared him, and they thought he wished to swallow the world, and they called him Demon for the demon that had tried to devour the sun, and been imprisoned in it by the gods for his crime, so that his rage scorched the world.

And those who feared him the most banded together, and they sought them a leader to put in his place, one who would respect other clans and the old traditions, and the man they chose was Dzetin.

Now in the years since Dzetin took his place as Tarkaan, much had passed between him and Ashkar. Both men had children and their eldest were fine, healthy sons born within days of each other. And these boys grew straight and tall and were the very joy of their fathers. When the time came for his son to learn the sword, Dzetin sent him to Ashkar, saying, "O brother of my heart, this is your nephew, my son. I entrust him to you, that he may learn to be a man and a great warrior." And Ashkar took the boy in gladly and treated him as his own son, and it was arranged between him and Dzetin that Ashkar's second son should go to his uncle for fostering in turn, and the men parted as brothers in joy.

So the boys grew together under Ashkar's eye, and he taught them the ways of the sword, and the cousins were as brothers, and this was a joy to him. Then it passed that one day they quarreled, as boys will, and as boy will they made to settle their quarrel with fists. So they had done before many times, slinking home scuffed and bruised, their clothing rent and their faces dirty, laughing as brothers. So it should have been again, but that they were well up into the cliffs. And when Ashkar's son struck Dzetin's, the boy fell and kept falling, tumbling down the rocky slope to land broken at the bottom.

Dzetin was sent for and came, riding his horse near to death with the speed he made. "The boy lives," Ashkar said to him, even before any words of greeting, and took him straight to the child.

Live he might, but he would never again wield sword or bow, never sit a proud horse. He would be fortunate indeed even to walk. Dzetin sat with him and comforted him, for a time, and then he went out to Ashkar.

"I gave my son into your keeping," he cried, "and this is what becomes of him?"

"I would defend your son with my life," said Ashkar, "but I cannot defend him from life."

"Can you not protect him from knaves and scoundrels?" Dzetin thundered. "What of the one who has done this? What of my son's vengeance for the life stolen from him?"

Ashkar said, "His cousin has neither slept nor ate since this terrible thing, but weeps constantly. Surely his own guilt punished him enough, for they were brothers in spirit, even as we."

"No true brother would dismiss this crime to mine! It is as murder, what has been done to him!"

"An accident," Ashkar replied. "Brother, this is Tash's will—"

"Curse Tash!" Dzetin roared. "And curse you, who are no brother of mine! I will take my son and go from this accursed place — ha, and my sister, too!" And he called his servants and prepared a litter for his son to ride in, and was gone before the sun set. And Ashkar did not try to stop him, but gave him many things to make the journey more comfortable, though his heart too rode high in anger at the words between them, the moreso when Najet refused the journey and her brother cursed her with vile insults. And so they parted as enemies, with wrath.

Now this was the state of things when the clans came to Dzetin, and he had not spoken to Ashkar in the years since that day, nor wished to. And when they said to him, "O mighty Tarkaan, grant unto us the protection of your strong right arm, for that Ashkar seeks to claim all the desert in his name, and trample the clans into dust. He defiles the holy places and tears down the banners of the proudest clans. He takes our herds and our women and our water for his own. Nothing will sate his lusts save his own blood," Dzetin heard them and thought him of his son, lying broken on a pallet, while Ashkar mouthed excuses, and so he said to them, "I will lead you."

So they gathered together in a great host, and armed themselves, and they stood against Ashkar. And when Ashkar learned that Dzetin was leading the forces arrayed against him, the sun grew dark in his eyes and he cursed the day they had parted in anger. Yet he likewise called together his allies into an army, and went forth to meet them. And when they came to the place where battle would be joined, Ashkar saw that his forces were greater in number and in armament than Dzetin's, and that the victory should surely be his. His heart wept at this, for he wished mightily that he had never broken with his brother.

So Ashkar took his steed and rode to the bare ground between the armies, carrying a wreathed spear in token of peace. And Dzetin came to meet him there, likewise arrayed, and they met together beneath the dimming sky.

Then Ashkar said, "O my brother, why should it come to this, that we should war? We who should stand as each other's shoulder-companion!"

And Dzetin replied, "O my brother, deep runs my sorrow that we should come to this pass! But certainly it is true that there can be only one lord among the people. Truly, if you spare me, I shall be a stone in your sandal ever after. You should have no peace from worrying about me, no matter what oaths I swore. Better to die an honest enemy than live to see the brotherhood between us soured by the venom of suspicion."

"So it must be," Ashkar said. "But drink with me, now while we are yet brothers."

"Gladly I will," said Dzetin, and so they shared the cup like kinsmen, and then returned to their camps, each to each.

In the morning the armies met again, and the fighting was fierce and the blood ran bright and free. But when dusk fell, the brothers met upon the war-stirred sands, and shared the cup between them. And so it passed for three days and nights.

On the fourth day, the fighting was fiercer still, and many men fell, and all was confusion on the battlefield. And Ashkar was unhorsed, and his standard-bearer struck down, and he fought alone on foot for some time, while the sun beat down upon them all and cast heat-visions into their eyes. Then from the sands rose a dark figure, which came towards him, and the only brightness about it was the sword in its hand. Ashkar raised his own sword to meet it, and they fought back and forth across the sand, one combat among many, and there was no one to mark their battle.

Then Ashkar saw his chance, and took it. His blade slid deep into the side of the other, and the dark warrior fell upon the bloody sand. And when he did so, his helmet came loose, and then Ashkar saw that his opponent was Dzetin.

"Tash defend me!" he cried. "This fate I never wanted!" And he cast himself to the sands and took Dzetin into his arms, pressing his hand to the wound. But it was for naught, for he had struck true, and his brother's lifeblood flowed free to water the desert.

"It is well," Dzetin said. "A brother's blade bites less coldly. To have killed you should have been the deeper wound. Promise me but one thing, O my brother."

"Anything," swore Ashkar, gripping his hand tightly.

"Care for my sons," instructed Dzetin, and Ashkar vowed, "They shall be as my own, they shall be mighty lords and prosperous. In Tash's name I swear it."

"It is well," said Dzetin again. "Now kiss me, before my eyes dim-" And Ashkar bent and kissed him as a brother, and the light went from his eyes and he died. Then Ashkar wept bitter tears, saying, "A thousand curses on this black day! Let all the stars weep for the blood of a brother spilled on this wretched plain!"

When they saw their champion fallen, all the heart went from the army, and they laid their arms down in the dust. Then was Ashkar Tisroc acknowledged lord from the northern mountains to the southern river, and from the the Great Water to the Cliffs of the Sun's Resting. And he conquered the Tovar and brought to heel the Caitiri, and laid waste the Orsomo and made the Irival to pay great tribute, until all the world trembled at his name and his empire was renowned.



# Little Sister

*by Elizabeth Culmer*

A thousand years after the Lion planted the poison tree in Narnia and banished her from the heart of her new world, Jadis stood on a mountain ledge in the northern wastes and examined the half-built city of the giants with a jaundiced eye. These creatures were nothing like her own ancestors, nothing like the proud, fierce people Lilit had chosen as her own and led to Charn. The giants of this world were dim and brutish, trading their minds for sheer, useless size. Even the few clans who retained their reason and were building this city were, on the whole, dull and lacking in vision.

"All the world was under me," Jadis quoted to the empty air, and then repeated the phrase in her own language. The words came slow and tasted strange after so long.

She was the only being in this entire world who spoke that language. The only one who spoke anything but the Lion's tongue. Refugees stumbled through cracks between the worlds at irregular intervals, bringing new languages and customs, but their children learned the Lion's speech and within a few generations all other tongues were lost.

It was enough to make Jadis scream. At first she had hardly cared for her banishment from Narnia. She had spent centuries exploring the reaches of this new, vibrant world; its raw, sharp youth was invigorating, so different from the weathered, weary terrain of Charn. It set her mind fizzing with possibilities. But there was no point in ruling empty wilderness, nor in corralling sheep-like humans to her will - not when the Lion's secrets waited in Narnia for her to discover.

So Jadis had returned to the western border of Narnia, leaving behind nothing but carefully nurtured hatred of Narnia, clans of spirits and beasts twisted into mocking forms and primed to heed her call, and a handful of deadly, whimsical spells waiting to devour any who sprang their triggers. She was tired of exploring. The magic of creation had faded in the early years, and now its echoes survived only in Narnia itself, the country where the Lion had walked. Jadis needed to walk that land in his wake, needed time and patience to unearth the riddle of his power.

She wanted to find a door.

This world was annoyingly porous, but only inward, never outward. Any scum could enter, but Jadis could never leave, could not break through the Lion's imprisoning boundaries to follow her own desires and vision. She had been queen of Charn, absolute ruler of an entire world, until she reached for greater power. If she desired, she could be queen of this world as well... but that was a paltry prize, a galling consolation to her imprisonment.

The Lion could walk between all the worlds. Jadis could too - she knew she could - but only if she could see how it was done, only if she could find the residue of his spells and unpick their lace.

Only if she were in Narnia.

And she could not go to Narnia. She was left with all this world to shape at her whim, except the one small portion she truly desired.

"All the world was under me," she said again in the speech of Charn, and laughed bitterly. She almost - but only almost - wished she had not spoken the Deplorable Word. It was ironic: to speak once and render herself unintelligible forever after, unless she spoke in a foreign tongue.

Cynara would have understood the joke. She would have smiled, sharp and bright like her sword, the one she had raised to run Jadis through on the palace steps a heartbeat before Jadis ended their world. Cynara had died trying to turn her sword on herself, trying to deny Jadis her death.

Nobody in this world had half that strength. Jadis had respected Cynara. Nobody in this world was worthy of respect. Even if she cared to teach her language to a stranger, nobody in this world deserved the honor of tasting the words on her tongue.

"Where now is the blood of Charn, the blood of kings, the blood of Liliith?" Jadis asked the air and the mountain. She waved a hand at the half-built city beneath her. "Look at the shame of my cousins. Look at my shame, thwarted by a brute beast of the field. I cannot set foot in Narnia. I cannot send a cousin; the Narnians would never trust a giant. I cannot persuade a traveling Narnian to my cause; they remember the Lion's warnings and revile me. I cannot send my little tribes of western fools; they have been raiding Narnia for too long to claim peace and friendship now. What is the use of endless days without an infinite canvas on which to paint?"

Cynara would have laughed to see her sister brought this low. All the world had been under Jadis, unquestionably - the power to destroy a thing was the greatest power of all, and she had destroyed a universe. Now she skulked about the borders of one tiny land, not even half the size of the smallest imperial province, defeated by a tree. Yes, Cynara would have laughed.

Then she would have sheathed her sword and made new plans.

Suddenly furious, Jadis pointed her finger at the figures hauling stones through the unpaved streets, and whispered a spell under her breath. Water vapor condensed from the air, seeping into cracks in the stones and freezing to ice, warping and shattering with the force of a hundred winters. Distant shouts and screams rose through the summer air to Jadis's ears. She smiled.

Something stirred at her feet: a tiny mouse, scuttling over the stones. It darted past a hollow in the mountain ledge, and a slim green snake shot forward and sank its fangs into soft fur.

The mouse died.

The snake shifted its grip and began to swallow its prey.

"A clever huntress," Jadis said to the snake. "You remind me of my sister. She nearly swallowed me that way. I thought I had rallied the army to my cause, thought I had cowed the governors and the court magicians, thought I had bribed the servants... and the moment our father was dead, she struck. I barely escaped the palace alive, and did not regain the city until nearly three years later." She brushed her hair back and crouched on the stones, stroking one finger along the suddenly docile snake's back. "I only held Charn

for two months before the final battle. But that was long enough. I fought Cynara almost to a draw in her own sphere, and then I proved for all time which of us was the stronger.”

Her finger stilled, pressed against the flat top of the snake’s head. Jadis narrowed her eyes, a passing fancy distilling into a more serious possibility.

She could not send a giant into Narnia. She could not make alliance with the Lion’s slaves. She would not do as Cynara might, and send an army to invade from the west; there was too much danger that they would turn against her and save the tree, or destroy the Lion’s secrets in their ignorance. But she could step sideways, reshape the field of battle, as she had done against Cynara. If her tools were inadequate, she would shape a new one, a creature who would appear fair and friendly to the Narnians, who would gain their trust, who would either destroy the tree or make them destroy it of their own choice.

Jadis smiled. “Ah, little serpent. Finish your meal as quick as you can. I have much to do.”

*§§*

There was no rational reason not to use the snake as a test for the creation of a new spell, but Jadis had no need to be rational if she did not wish to be. The snake had sparked her new plan. It had reminded her what it meant to be queen of Charn - reminded her to act, not to wander aimlessly and let the Lion control her fate.

She began her experiments on mice instead.

It was simple enough to change their size and shape, but she could not create the spark of intelligence in the beautiful dolls she sculpted with painstaking care. Jadis reversed each spell in its turn and fed the failures to the snake.

After a month, she strode into the slowly growing city of Harfang and demanded an audience with the giants’ king. “You know who I am,” she told him, standing slim and proud before a figure twice her size. “I am your cousin, of the true royal blood you only claim through pretense. I am a daughter of Lilith; all her power and more runs through my veins. I was here at the dawn of time, when the world rose from darkness into form. You owe me fealty and whatever goods and slaves I choose to take.”

The king might have protested, but his wife knew truth when she saw it and whispered in his ear until he bent his head to Jadis.

She left the city with ten giants at her heels, bound by iron and ice. Perhaps they were criminals, perhaps only the king’s enemies. It did not matter. They had minds, rudimentary though they might be, and that was all Jadis needed to know.

Reshaped giants, however, remained giants. There was a sly stupidity in their eyes Jadis could not eliminate, and all their gestures and habits screamed their true origin and nature.

She killed each failure in turn and left the corpses to rot on the mountainside.

Retreating to the tower in which she had, ages ago, taught herself the magic of this new world, she cradled the snake in her hands, allowing it to taste her fingers with its delicate tongue. Jadis scowled. How was she to create a tool intelligent enough to play the Narnians against each other? How was she to build an ally from dross?

“If Cynara had only listened to me,” she told the snake, “none of this would be necessary. We played at shield-sisters when we were young. Why could she not be satisfied as my general, my right hand? I was eldest, not she - I would have been first from the womb if our

mother had lived, if the surgeons hadn't cut too high and pulled Cynara out before me. It was my right to be queen. Now, when I need her or someone like her, I have no one. I am the last of my blood, forever."

The snake's tongue flickered, and it mouthed curiously at Jadis's fingers.

Jadis paused.

Once again, she smiled as a new idea bloomed in her mind.

She fed the snake a single drop of her blood to start. The next week, she fed it another. Then two. Then three. Then five. Then eight. The numbers formed an ancient pattern, one that had been repeated endlessly in cloth and tiles through every land under the rule of Charn. Jadis considered it a useful reminder.

After she fed the snake twenty-one drops of blood, Jadis began to reshape it, a little more each day, teaching its body the pattern of the change from serpent to woman. And she whispered spells and songs into its ears, teaching its mind the pattern of the language of Charn. She told of Lilith, the all-mother, who saw that a man born of dust was not worthy to hold her honor or loyalty, and who led the first people to a new world under a bloody sun. She told of Joyan and Gerathis, the soldier and the sorceress who followed a falling star and founded the city of Charn where the heavens had scorched the earth. She told of her own family, of Queen Nekoris betrayed by her son Acernos, who was killed in turn by his daughters; then one sister betrayed the other, and so destroyed the world. So history had always gone, in Charn. Things fell apart. The fire died.

"But this is a new world, little sister, and you will not betray me," Jadis said each night as the small green body stretched and reformed. "Listen well: you are blood of my blood, my shield-sister, my right hand. You will open my way into Narnia. Once I learn to walk between worlds, all of this one will be your inheritance."

The serpent woman blinked her eyes and listened. And each day, the change grew smoother. Each day, her snake form grew larger. Each day her expression grew sharper.

The day she drank a hundred and forty-four drops of blood - a dozen dozen, a number of power - the snake opened her woman's mouth and spoke, in a sweet, hissing voice. "My sister," she said. "My mother. What is my name?" She spoke in the old tongue, the true tongue, the one Jadis had not heard since that last day on the palace steps, that last conversation with her sister.

Jadis ran her hand through the serpent's golden hair as the new-born woman knelt before her chair. For half a second she thought to say 'Cynara,' but that was nonsense. The serpent was poison and guile, not wildfire. She could not replace Cynara. No one could.

"Innenya," Jadis said instead. "Lilith's youngest daughter, who climbed the spiral stairs down into the sunless lands to wrest the secrets of death from the hands of jealous gods. She is the lady of the night sky, the shadow who leads the Watcher behind the moon to shelter our secrets from judgment." Her hand stilled. "No. That is who Innenya was in Charn. In this world, the name means whatever you choose to make it mean."

The serpent's mouth gaped open in a tooth-filled smile. "Thank you, mother," she said, resting her head on Jadis's knee. "Will you tell me another story?"

Jadis let her hand linger for a moment. Then she stood and moved to the window of her tower. "No. I am done with looking back. The past is dead; I have new worlds to conquer."

Charn and Cynara were gone, turned to dust by her own hand. There was no point in nostalgia. She had ruled once; she would rule again. This time, her reign would be unopposed.

"Come, Innenya," Jadis said, switching to the Lion's speech. "We have much to plan."

¥¤¥

## Winterfall

*by songsmith*

At first, they hardly notice. The mountains between Archenland and Narnia are high and even the easiest passes can be blocked in a hard winter. When no word comes from Narnia after the first snows, everyone simply assumes the weather is to blame, and settles in to wait for spring.

A Hawk arrives at Christmas, carrying a formal wish of the season's joys to 'our royal cousins of Archenland' and an informal apology that there will be no invitation to the usual Christmas feast – the passes are too deep under snow for even the clearing teams (minotaurs, centaurs, and firebirds working together to break up or melt the snows) to handle. "Perhaps for Springmelt," King Van says politely, unconcerned. This is expected, when you rule a land locked inside mountains on all sides. Narnia at least can send Birds and Griffins; Calormen and Telmar are completely out of contact more often than not in winter. Some word comes by sea, but winter storms are no joke, and few captains will brave more than the short hop to Covarr, a day's sail off the coast. What Birds make their home in Archenland rather than Narnia (and are willing to be of service to the crown, because of course one would never force a Talking Animal to act as messenger) are kept busy checking in with their sources – official and otherwise – in other courts. It does no harm for other lands to think Archenland wholly ignorant through the winter; a little land surrounded by larger neighbors must think always of keeping its advantages.

Winter lingers in the north; Van has been exchanging the annual spring posturing with Calormen for nearly a month before the passes to Narnia clear. He sends a letter at once with greetings and an inquiry to their food stores; Narnia is a richer land than Archenland, but makes less provision for harsh winters, having them so rarely. Aside from the deep snows in the mountains, it hasn't been a bad year in Archenland, and they have enough to share, if Narnia needs.

The messenger returns with Narnia's polite thanks and assurances that all is well with their northern cousin – at least where supplies are concerned. Gravely, Van's man relates the ill tidings: the king and queen of Narnia are dead. A winter fever, he was told, swift and sudden. Prince Riel – King Riel, though it's not clear whether he's been formally crowned yet – is in the north, fighting. No doubt the giants taking advantage of Narnia's tragedy. The country is in mourning, of course (and Van reminds himself that he must order a black banner flown; the Narnian royals are kin by custom, no matter how long it's been since the lines last intermarried), but the Spring Festival will be held as usual, and Archenland will be invited.

The formal invitation arrives a fortnight later with all due ceremony; the Spruce dryad bearing it urges Van to accept and to bring as large a party as he wishes. "Narnia is in need of joy and revelry." Narnian festivals are not to be refused at the best of times; Van sends back Archenland's acceptance the same day.

It is a large and merry party that goes north the next month, though smaller by two than it might have been; his brother's wife is having a difficult time of her first pregnancy, and

Vanin will neither risk her to travel nor be parted from her. They have an escort from the border, a local Wolf pack that has claimed the privilege of escorting Narnia's guests, and they gossip cheerfully all the way to the Dancing Lawn. There's not much talk of courts in it, but Van expects no less. He'll get his news from the human-type Narnians that care more for politics. For now he takes honest pleasure in the more practical bent of the Wolves' conversation; the hunting and the weather and how many cubs the Pack expects. He does try asking for word of King Riel's northern campaign, but the Wolves only seem to know that it is over and all is well in Narnia.

It's evening when they reach the Dancing Lawn, and the glow of lanterns calls them on through the trees. Toes are already tapping to the drums that carry and though they've been riding all day everyone feels energized, ready to dance until they drop. And if it follows most Narnian festivals, they will drop and rest and rise again to dance some more.

It's only when they get closer that Van notices something off. Where are the faun pipes? With the Lawn before them they should hear more than drumming; even a sword-dance calls for a tune. And while hypnotic, the drumming doesn't have that sort of intensity that betokens a spontaneous competition between drummers, for which the other musicians might fall silent. He reins in, just a little, listening hard. A man doesn't keep crown and kingdom long without learning to heed that inner alarm.

Where is the rest of the greeting party? The Wolves are still with them, but they should have been met. Perhaps not by a formal party; it wouldn't be the first time monarchs of Narnia forgot all but the pulse of their country's celebration. But there should have been revelers, or even just Trees, to welcome them and bring them into the dance. Van looks up at the trees; they sway only with the wind.

Something's wrong.

He reins up hard, reaching for the sword at his knee, meant for protection against border-bandits and forgotten in Narnia until this moment. His people don't notice immediately, caught in the spell of a Narnian festival; they ride on eagerly. Only his personal guard reins up beside him. "Sire?"

"I—" Van feels foolish. What does he fear? A lack of music? He laughs a little, and shakes his head, forcing his fingers to uncurl from around the sword hilt. "Just a fancy," he says. "I must remember we're in Narnia; the beasts of the forests here are... far more friendly." He grins at the Wolves who've drawn close, inviting them to share the joke. The leader lets his tongue loll out, amused. "You're expected," he reminds them. "Shall we go?"

"By all means," Van invites. They dismount with the others, and some vestige of caution makes him attach the sword to his belt, as his guards are doing but he would not ordinarily. Then it's forward, to join the revelry and feasting. He can see the gathered crowd through the trees, and his steps quicken. It looks to be a large one, a good year. Perhaps Bacchus himself will visit; Van hasn't yet had the pleasure, but he hopes for it.

The confusion of bodies begins to resolve into individual forms, and Van slows. No one is dancing. They are all intent on something at the center of the gather, which he cannot see from this vantage. Nerves reawakened, he edges forward carefully.

This isn't the sort of gathering he's used to. Narnians are all so different, any crowd of them can be dizzying at first, but Van has been here often enough to be somewhat accustomed. He sees hags, boggles, ogres, sprites — any number of beings generally not

invited to such gatherings, for their notions of merriment often have a sharp edge and their personalities (to say nothing of their forms!) are unpleasant. They're somewhat vulgar, and best left alone. Yet here they are, along with creatures that must be even worse, for Van has never seen them before and cannot identify them.

In the center of these creatures is King Riel, older than Van had last seen him but recognizable enough, with his arms bound cruelly behind his back. He's clearly the focus of their foul celebration: the creatures jeer and taunt him, poking him with spears or knives and scratching him with tooth and claw. Through it all he stands still, refusing to give them the satisfaction of flinching, and Van thinks fleetingly that his father would be proud.

Then his own folk are prodded forward, deeper among the fell gathering, and Van's attention is taken by the woman who steps forth to meet them. She is tall and regal, dressed in a sweeping gown that only accentuates her height. Her hair and skin are both so fair that she seems to glow against the night, catching all the torchlight. She looks human, not exactly and uncommon thing in Narnia, but rare enough that Van should have heard of her – a woman like this would generate no small amount of comment in the courts. He racks his brain for any mention of such a woman and comes up blank.

She smiles, and his heart freeze. He's well accustomed to false smiles, but never before has he seen one so edged with cruelty. "So good of you to join us," she says, the mockery of a hostess. "No doubt Prince Riel is glad to see his kin once more." She runs a possessive hand over the young king's shoulders while her forces laugh. The sound echoes in Van's ears until his wants to clap his hands over them to shut it out, but he won't let go of his sword. He's amazed they haven't been disarmed yet, but supposes the creatures don't consider the small band much of a threat.

"It is well," the woman continues, "to have noble guests witness a coronation."

"Coronation?" someone echoes. Van can't tell who; they sound relieved and he grimaces; the shock of it all is getting to his folk.

"Yes. Oh, not our young prince's," she adds, trailing her fingers over his throat. Van thinks he sees the lad shudder slightly, but the light may be playing tricks with his eyes. "Narnia needs a stronger guardian, and one who won't unduly favor certain Narnians." That raises a fierce cheer from the crowd and Van begins to see the shape of this. "But our dear Riel does have an important part to play tonight. After all, Narnia demands the blood of a king." She smiles again, cold and cruel. Gasps and cries of protest or outrage ripple through the Archenlanders. Van might have been one of them, but he is struck dumb with horror, understanding what this – his mind fumbles for an insult, finally latching onto one from the tales he'd been told as a child – this witch proposes to do. His hand tightens on his sword-hilt, but there are so many creatures between him and the prince...

The small sound is drowned in the hooting laughter and cheers of the fell crowd, so the first sign of archers in the trees is when their arrows spout from throats and eyes. "Narnia!" the roar goes up, seemingly from everywhere at once. Van doesn't think, simply rips his sword from its sheath, slicing a harpy down in the same motion. His men do the same, and even one or two ladies produce knives from somewhere about their persons, setting themselves to defend their unarmed sisters. He has no time to notice more than that, as the clearing descends into utter chaos.

It isn't like other battle, isn't like melees at tournaments. There are no patterns or organization to it at all. There's only the dance of blades and keeping yourself alive. Van's focus narrows to a tight circle of threat around himself. Anything that enters it, he strikes at; everything else he ignores. He has no concentration to spare for looking around at the rest of the battle until, more or less by accident, he fights his way into a knot of his own people. By unspoken agreement they form a ring, pushing the fell creatures away and claiming a small stretch of ground. With someone at his back, it's easier to spare attention for the battle at large.

Their approach seems to be the common one; everywhere he looks small bands of Narnians fight back-to-back. In some places, the creatures of the witch are on the defensive; in others, the ones who must be loyal to the prince are hard-pressed. Van sees mostly centaurs and fauns among the prince's supporters, and guesses they're the army — what's left of it. Battles in the northlands indeed.

"To the king!" someone shouts, over the clash. Van dispatches the boggle in front of him and risks another glance around. Riel is still caught in the witch's grip, the pair surrounded by minotaurs and things that look a little like harpies but are featherless like bats, for which Van has no name.

"Enough of this farce," he hears the witch say, her words falling into one of those odd silences you sometimes get in battle, when both sides pause for a collective breath. Alarm zips through him, but a dwarf and a tiger come at him and he has to pay attention to his swordwork. He gets the dwarf down — the battleaxe he's carrying isn't meant for such close quarters and he can't swing it properly so he's an easy target — and lifts his eyes from the tiger just in time to see the woman plunge a strange knife into Riel's chest. The young king's eyes widen and he stiffens, then Van's view is blocked by a mass of fur and claws as the tiger leaps for his throat. He barely gets his sword up in time, managing to score a thin wound down the beast's flank, but it's nothing more than a scratch and only makes the tiger angry. He presses the attack with a backswing meant to take its head off. Then a sudden heaviness comes upon him, stealing his breath, and he falters, his swordpoint dropping. It feels like the times he's sat worrying for his kingdom and his people until he thinks he will crack under the strain and run mad, only doubled and redoubled, a physical weight bowing his shoulders.

The tiger takes advantage of his weakness, darting forward with claws and teeth bared. Van feels a line of fire run up and down his leg, the pain clearing a little space in his fogged brain, and he sees the tiger's claws stained a vivid crimson, the witch standing tall above the crowd with the knife in her hand dripping scarlet, the torchlight ruddy on faces and blades.

He drowns in red, and knows no more.

Red is the first thing he sees when he wakes, but it's the sun through closed eyelids. Then whatever he's laying on shifts, and he sees any number of interesting shades as his leg makes its protest known in no uncertain terms. He nearly bites his tongue off to contain a scream; he has no hope of stopping the moan that slips from his throat.

Motion stops at once, reducing the sensation in his leg to merely excruciating. "Sire!"

Van forces one eye open, wincing against the light, and makes out Sar, one of his guards, bending over him with concern. "What—" he croaks. His voice is gone and even his tongue feels heavy.

"You were badly wounded, sire," Sar tells him, as if the throbbing that's replaced his lower limbs hasn't already informed him. "I'm sorry, your majesty, but we can't stop to let you rest. I know it hurts," he adds. "We have some brandy, if you wish."

"No," Van murmurs. He'd probably choke, or vomit, and feel just as bed after. Memory of the night — last night? He hopes so; the notion that he's been unconscious longer is not a comfortable one — filters back in, and he manages, "Riel?"

"Dead, sire. That woman — her name is Jadis, apparently — has declared herself queen of Narnia." Sar's voice is gentle, his speech careful as though it were Van's heart that was weak and not his leg.

"Our folk?"

The soldier's grim look gives him an answer without words, and he closes his eyes in pain. "Some are with us," Sar murmurs. "Others may have escaped as well." He hesitates. Van can hear someone else, but his ears find no sense in the rumble. "Sire? Are you fit enough to press on? We must get you across the border to safety."

Van tries to nod, finds he lacks the strength. "I — will live," he croaks. "Sar — the oth—"

"We must get you away, your majesty," the guard repeats. "This Jadis is bent on exterminating any of Frank's blood. Brace, now, my king —" He jolts into motion again, and realizes they have him strapped to some sort of litter or travois. Whoever's guiding it is taking pains to choose a smooth path, but they're clearly not on a road. Van grits his teeth against the pain, wondering if he might be better off strapped to his horse. If he thought he could hold himself upright he'd suggest it. As it is he wishes they'd be a little less carefully; a few good bumps might well knock him out again.

Van remembers little of the trip, save the sense of motion and pain. Despite Sar's care, and that of the Narnians helping them (he learns much later that his travois was drawn, against all custom, by a centaur named Cloudstrike), his wounds fester and he takes fever. They cannot stop for healing; the false queen has wolves on her side and they harry the little band, forcing it to hurry ever faster, ever southward. He has no memory at all of the crossing in Archenland; the pass was his undoing.

His next clear memories begin in his own chambers in Anvard, with his wife and brother and half a dozen healers crowding him anxiously. Vanin tells him, in simple, short words, the news from Narnia: most of the court dead, the army routed and scattered, the chaos caused by treachery everywhere one turns. No one knows who has turned their coat to Jadis; she has allies among nearly every race, it seems, though some are more common than others. Vanin has called up the army and is holding the passes, but they all know such a state of affairs can't last long; Archenland's armies are needed far more in the south, or Calormene will get ideas. Van has never prayed so hard for winter.

His leg heals but slowly. He walks with a limp, though he disdains the use of a cane as soon as it is strong enough to bear his weight. He can barely sit a horse, and he will never fight in earnest again, though as the summer wears on he forces himself through whatever exercises can be done effectively standing still. He turns over field command of the army to Vanin, hating it but admitting he would only be a liability.

Every day, it seems, brings worse news from Narnia. Jadis is indeed bent on eliminating Frank's descendants (and Van is certain it is only a matter of time before she turns her attention to Archenland in earnest) but she is also gathering other humans. Some she kills,

others have been taken into her new palace in the middle of Sweetmere Lake, and no further word of their fate is known. Narnians too, go in and never come out again, but it's clear her focus is humans.

Two ships from Galma put in at Langcliff Bay, Anvard's nearest harbor. The merchants and sailors aboard either talk of nothing but Jadis or superstitiously refuse to speak of her at all. Someone else has remembered old stories; Van hears her called the White Witch for the first time. It's certainly better than Queen Jadis; he refuses to grant her the title, and orders his court recorders to refer to her as 'white witch' in the official documents. The Galmans bring whispers of a terrible new weapon, one capable of killing with just a touch. Many scoff - magic can kill, certainly, any child knows that, but it takes preparation and could never be used in a heated battle - but Van remembers her cold smile and thinks if anyone could find a way to kill efficiently with magic, it would be her.

Word finally comes from the beleaguered Narnian loyalists. She has a new weapon, and it is as fearsome as rumor made it. Not death, they say, not exactly - in fact all those with some knowledge of magic believe her spell might be undone - but no one can, though they've tried. She turns her victims to stone, and whether they're dead or just imprisoned, the effect is the same. Van prays that at the least they are unaware; to be frozen and know the passage of time strikes him as a recipe for swift and certain madness.

One of Narnia's surviving human lords brings his wife and small daughter to Anvard, begging sanctuary for them. Van grants it; he doesn't imagine anything will make Archenland a greater target than being the home of Frank's remaining line does. He's had his historians digging through the records, looking for any sign of this Jadis or her family, and the results are interesting, if difficult to believe. It would certainly explain her hatred for Frank. He can't persuade the lord himself to remain; the man is determined to fight for his country, and Van can't deny his right to do so. It's a tearful parting, and the whole court falls over itself to make his family feel welcomed. They never hear from or of him again.

Vanin comes to him just before harvest, full of plans. His brother has been chafing under the strain of waiting; Van knows the feeling, but what can they do? Vanin lays out his strategies and Van catches some of his enthusiasm, though he tries to temper it. They cannot attack Jadis - at best they might contribute troops to a loyalist offensive, but the Narnians are still scrambling to recover from the double blow of treachery and conquest; they won't be ready to lead an assault for some time - if ever again, he admits, because a king needs to be realistic about these things. But Vanin has taken his cue from his king, and his plans are not for battle but for rescue. He proposes to smuggle Narnians out of the Witch's reach, beginning with what humans remain. He's already mapped three routes, one direct, one by sea, and one through Telmar, of all things. It's risky, but so is living.

"Narnia won't give up," Vanin says. "If we can help them... if we can save even a little of what Narnia should be..." And then Van knows that neither of them expects to see Jadis overthrown within their lifetimes.

"Do it," he says.

He thinks he should apologize to his sister-in-law: Vanin is rarely at home after that, running hither and yon to arrange escapes and secure hiding places. His new daughter cuts her first tooth and learns to crawl while her father is away. But his efforts are working. A slow but steady trickle of Narnians makes it across the border, mostly women and children but also men and women sufficiently important to have drawn Jadis's personal attention.

Most of them join the court at Anvard; a few travel to Galma or the Lone Islands, wanting to stay in Narnian territory. It's a risk, but so far the Witch hasn't shown any interest in the islands. Van suspects his brother is doing more than just arranging escapes, but he doesn't ask. There are some things a prince can do that a king cannot.

Winter comes on early, making Van wonder if Aslan had heard his prayers. Then a frost nearly ruins the harvest before they can get it all in, and he wonders if a deity more perverse than the Lion heard him. The snow closes in, and he can finally stand down his armies, allowing them long-overdue visits home. He dreads having to call them up again in the spring; Calormen won't sit idle much longer. They should have acted already, but they've been fortuitously distracted by a rebellion brewing in the southern Empire which is much more damaging to their interests than 'little barbarian kingdoms.'

The snow makes Vanin's work more difficult, but he's determined to do as much as he can before it becomes impossible. Van agrees with this in principle, but after watching his sister-in-law keep a brave face for months, he orders Vanin home for Christmas and the midwinter celebrations.

The longer the winter continues, the more Van relaxes. A pressure he didn't know he was under eases, and it's only when he finds himself waking one morning without the pain in his leg that he notices. He rubs a thoughtful hand over the scars. It's still stiff, and probably always will be, but the bone-deep ache is gone — contrary to everything he knows about old wounds and weather. He remembers the weight that staggered him during the battle, and the beating sense of urgency he's felt to help Narnia, and he looks north. "What did you do to me?" he murmurs, but he knows. It's in the stories. Archenland is not Narnia, but they are kings of Frank's line and keep the histories. A land needs a king — or queen — and Narnia more so, because she's so magical. Without a sovereign bound to her, she doesn't have the same power, or the same awareness, and what thinking creature would become a dumb animal if they had the choice?

To be chosen by Narnia, the family stories say, is a deep honor, and there have been two occasions when someone was skipped in the line of succession because Narnia preferred the younger child. Van doesn't think for a moment he's Narnia's true choice; there are hints that she's jealous of her kings and Archenland will always have first claim on him. She grabbed him in panic, he suspects, when Riel died and there was no clear heir. He's kin and already bound to the land; it would have been enough. What disturbs him is the lessening of the tie. There are ceremonies to bind a king to his land, but he doesn't know Narnia's, and anyway it would have to be done on Narnian soil. He hopes it just means she's found a proper king, but were that the case it should be gone, not weakened. In the spring, he decides, he'll make a trip to the border. A few steps over it should be enough for ritual, and little enough danger. "Hold on till then, lady," he whispers to the northern sky.

Father Christmas makes an unexpected public visit to Anvard. He's usually hard to see in Archenland, preferring to make his deliveries without anyone noticing. Van welcomes him to the feast heartily, pressing a glass of mulled wine on him, but he senses the spirit is perturbed. "Walk me to my sleigh," Christmas invites, when the gifts are distributed and the wine is drunk. Van goes, though walking anywhere is a more difficult proposition than it used to be. Father Christmas matches his limping pace without making a production of it, as if it simply happened to be the speed he wished to walk. They amble out into the snowy night, the silence companionable.

"I cannot get to Narnia," Christmas confides softly. "The borderlands are open to me still, but the heart of the country is gone."

"Gone?" Van echoes sharply.

The spirit spreads his hands. "To my senses. The land is still there; your sort can travel it as ever. But for those of us who walk there by magic..." He shakes his head. "It is locked away behind walls of glass so thick I can barely see through them, and they creep ever outwards. Bacchus will make no visits this summer, and by this time next year I think even the borders will be closed to me."

"The Witch's doing?" He knows the answer, but can't help asking.

"I believe so." His eyes are hazy and unfocused, seeing something far distant.

"How could she keep you out?"

"Alone, she could not. She has tapped the Deep Magic; it is the only way she could command the land so."

The Deep Magic. Van shivers. Even in Narnia they rarely speak of it; it isn't the everyday matter of illusion and cantrip, nor even the more complex workings that are the province of scholars. A man might live his whole life knowing nothing of the Deep Magic; a king knows it only because it binds him to his land. "How?" he whispers, not certain he wants to know.

"That I cannot say. She has some true tie to Narnia, or it could not be done at all, but how she has forged such chains on the land, I do not know."

Van thinks of torchlight and blood, of a knife and a claw. He fingers the ridge of scar on his leg. "Can anything be done?"

Father Christmas steps into his sleigh, settling himself on the driver's bench heavily. "Only Aslan can stop this now."

Archenland loves the Lion as Narnia does, but they are somewhat less certain of his parousia. "Will he come?"

"When the time is right," Father Christmas answers, and Van knows when to stop asking questions.

"Merry Christmas, sir," he says instead.

"And to you, your majesty."

Van doesn't return to the celebrations. He stands and watches the sleigh out of sight, then goes quietly up to the dark and empty library. Sometime near dawn he nods off over a tome chronicling the founding of Archenland.

He doesn't remember his dreams, but he wakes chilled through.

Spring comes in due course. The passes to Calormen open and the first raiding parties appear with all the certainty of the cuckoo. They are bolder this year, as if to make up for the previous year's quiet, and Van soon has his hands full dealing with border patrols and refugees and aid to raided villages. He thinks about pointing out to Calormen that it would be more profitable to raid Archenland if they'd let them finish the planting first, but that would probably only encourage them. It isn't until after the crops are, finally, safely planted that Van notices how quiet the north has been. No one has mentioned the passes opening, though it is long past time. He seeks out his brother for a briefing on Narnia's condition.

Vanin, appealed to, looks grim. He gives the news brought by Birds and Griffins: Narnia is still caught in winter. To be sure, in some places the snows have melted enough for things to grow, but the air has not lost its bite and everyone fears a late frost will spoil the crops. "I took the liberty," Vanin adds quietly, "of allotting some of our supplies as aid should Narnia's crops fail."

Van doesn't reproach him for it; of course they would not let their cousins starve. But he remembers the early frosts last year, and fears they will not have enough to share — this year, perhaps, but how long can they go on?

"The dryads will help," Vanin points out. "And Narnia won't let her people starve, surely."

Remembering, Van touches a hand to his heart. He's only faintly aware of Narnia now, far less aware than he is of Archenland. Which is wrong, from what he's read of the bonds; Narnia should be the more active. "Where is it safest to cross the border?" he asks.

Vanin tries to talk him out of it. So do their wives. At Van's insistence, no one else knows he plans more than an inspection of the northern passes. Van seeks out some of the Narnians residing in Anvard and discreetly questions them on kingship rituals, under the guise of learning what the Witch might have done to gain such power. Unfortunately it seems the details are known only to Frank's line and the land-bound Narnians: the Trees, dryads, naiads, and so forth. The humans in his court know only that it involves shedding blood for Narnia. It'll have to do.

On a cold, clear day in what should be early summer, Van stands a few feet over the border, slices his palm and lets his blood drop onto a patch of ground scraped bare of snow. "This I give freely," he whispers, "until your own kings come again."

Life settles into a pattern. Fewer and fewer Narnians take refuge with them, and no more humans at all. Jadis has destroyed every trace of human blood in Narnia. Vanin becomes more secretive, though at least he is home more often. Van doesn't ask. Nor does he ask about the supplies that ever so quietly vanish, so long as there's some sort of paper trail he can point to. He has his hands full with Calormen, which has noticed Archenland has no close allies to call on and is eyeing it up like a tasty snack. Telmar wouldn't be opposed to a land grab either; Archenland may be surrounded by mountains but Telmar is in them, and is perpetually hungry for cropland. Van spends most of his time trying to prevent the two from allying against him.

The third year of the Witch's reign, Archenland loses the island of Bwedoln to Calormen. It's a painful blow, but they don't have the forces to properly defend the island, especially since Calormen's newest hobby is blockading their ports. Van has been wondering what he'll have to give up to ensure Archenland's safety; it's terrible, but he hopes they'll be satisfied with Bwedoln for a while.

There is happier news that year: Vanin's second child is born in the spring — a son, with lungs to rouse the entire castle. Van holds his nephew and murmurs apologies the child will never understand. He knows by now that it is unlikely he will have any children of his own; this squalling scrap is Archenland's next king, if Van can hold Archenland together long enough for him to grow up.

Kingship ages a man; his father used to tell him that a crown started leeching color from the hair the moment it was placed on the brow. Still, Van doesn't expect to find himself white at the temples before he's half through his thirties. His queen, Aslan bless her, tells

him it makes him look distinguished. What he sees in the mirror is old. The Witch has been in power for five years, five years of struggling to hold a tiny kingdom against enemies on all sides. Van looks eastward often, because at least their coast is only threatened half of the time, and prays that Aslan will aid them all soon.

The Lion must be confused by his prayers of late. He wishes for winter and spring in equal measure: winter in the south and spring in the north. He fights for every scrap of advantage, swallows down his pride and makes bargains he detests, anything to keep Archenland free and whole one more year.

Vanin dies in the tenth year. Anvard has flown a black banner for murdered kin every day since they returned from that ill-omened Spring Festival. Now all the castle's banners turn black, flying morosely at half-staff, limp in the still and heavy air of summer. Desperate to understand, Van goes himself to Naverholm, to question his brother's contacts in person. A beast, they tell him. An unclean perversion, a monster. Teeth and claws and fur of a wolf, shape and stance of a man. It sounds fantastical, and Van curses them all for cowards, to see an overlarge Wolf and turn it into a creature of nightmare. But they swear it is truth, holding to their story no matter how he rages at them, and at last Van must accept them at their word.

Now he wishes he had asked more questions of his brother. He tries to pick up the pieces, the threads of plans Vanin has left behind, but his brother was cautious and trusted little to writing. There is no way to know how much is lost in this one brutal blow. The only thing Van can do is try to be a father to his brother's children, to comfort his sister's tears, and to keep on going.

He names his nephew heir officially; Vanin's son will inherit Archenland. His niece is promised to a Calormene prince – not the heir, but in Calormen that can change daily. Van isn't certain which of them he's been crueler to. The things they do to their children in the name of politics.

Narnia's line will die with him. The bond has burned steadily, a tight knot in his chest, but it is only an ember, and even the borders are too dangerous now. There will be no more rituals, no more surrogate kings. Anyone who wishes to aid Narnia now will have to find another way in.

Van is glad not to pass on that burden as well. One country is more than enough for any king to live with; the suffering of two could break him. And there is enough suffering in Archenland. It, like Narnia, is waiting for the Winter's end.



# The Arrest

*by opera13*

## **Chapter 1: Waiting**

They're coming.

Tumnus heard the howls before he saw the pack. Maugrim might be the head of the Secret Police, but he didn't mind letting a victim know he was on his way, particularly when said victim couldn't escape.

He had thought of it, of course. The Robin had even suggested it. Go underground with the Dwarves.

But it wouldn't, couldn't work. The Queen knew what she was doing when she assembled a police force with such a gifted sense of smell.

Tumnus set his teacup down, rattling the saucer slightly. He had put away his father's picture, a few other precious things. Maybe they would be left undisturbed. Not that it mattered, really. After he was taken to the Witch's House, he wouldn't be coming back.

But she'll be back. Lucy, he thought. His lips pressed together slightly as he considered the worry on her face when she realized what had happened. She would blame herself, he was sure.

Well, it was her fault, he supposed. But he wasn't bitter; he was glad, gladder than he'd been in a long time. The prophecy...

He had spoken to her at length the last time she'd been here, only two days ago. He had asked her everything. What was her family like? Was she a Queen in her own world? Did she have any magic? And, of course, "Have you any brothers or sisters?"

"Three," Lucy said. "Two brothers, Peter and Edmund, and my sister Susan." She frowned slightly. "They don't believe me."

"About what?"

"About visiting you here. About coming into Narnia at all. Peter and Susan finally let it drop a few days ago, but Ed's been really beastly." An ugly look flashed across her face for a moment, but was quickly replaced by mere sadness. "I wish they could meet you."

"Perhaps...I do not understand, Lucy. Certainly it is unusual for humans to travel into Narnia. I do not believe it has happened in an age, despite the stories my grandfather Tumaëus used to tell me. But if there are other humans, your kindred, living to the west, why should they doubt your word that you have braved the Wild Woods?"

"It's not...like that, really," Lucy said slowly. "It...England, I mean...It's not just a place you can walk to from here."

"Eng Land?"

"It's where the spare room with the wardrobe is," she explained.

"Oh, yes, you have told me of those things."

"Well, it's not a place you can get to by walking. It was by magic, I guess. And the others don't believe in magic. They think I'm lying."

"I'm sorry, Lucy," he had answered, quietly. But his mind had only half been on the conversation.

Four, there are four of them.

The prophecy...

The howls grew louder. Soon now.

Her siblings would believe her soon: he knew that. Aslan was working now, and they would be drawn into the World. Two Sons of Adam and Two Daughters of Eve. Tumnus had doubted Aslan many times in the past; doubted and denied him, and then sold his soul to the Witch for a few comforts. But whatever he had done would not change the fact that the children would come, would fill the four thrones, would find his house empty and ruined...

She will be worried about me when she finds out. Poor child. But Mr. Beaver will take care of it. He said he would set the Robin to watch until they arrived. They will be safe, and they will rule. Surely Aslan would not send four children so far and let them fail.

"Lucy will be fine. She will be a Queen," he spoke aloud, trying to reassure himself.

Tumnus thought back to his visit with Mr. Beaver, only a few hours earlier. Hours: Maugrim hadn't even bothered to come at once. He liked letting his prey worry.

Probably because he can't have any fun with them after they're turned into stone.

The Robin had come as soon as word of the arrest reached him. It was difficult to keep secrets in the forest when one knew what to look for, and Tumnus had asked the Robin to listen, knowing he might be in trouble.

"Tonight," the Robin had said. "The trees are whispering that She knows. They are saying something about a child, a human child. Is it true, Tumnus?"

He had jerked his head once, then turned to do what he must before the officers arrived.

Fauns might not be blessed with the speed of their four-footed cousins, the goats, but Tumnus could step speedily enough when times required it. And this was one of those rare times. Quickly, he had snatched up his scarf and umbrella, and Lucy's handkerchief from where it lay on the mantle, and trotted toward Beaversdam.

He wished he were in slightly better shape as he reached the unfinished dam with a stitch in his side and rapped softly at the door, feeling the sound drift away on the wind, but afraid to tap more loudly so near to the listening trees.

Nevertheless, the door opened, a little. Mrs. Beaver in her apron stared up at him, her mouth slightly open, then snapped it shut. "Dear," she called over her shoulder.

"Who is it, Mrs. Beaver?" asked her husband. Tumnus heard his shuffling, unconcerned footsteps as he approached the door and his face came into view. Mr. Beaver blinked once, then again, before a frown settled on his face.

"You are not welcome here."

¥¤¥

## Chapter 2: Unwelcome Memories

Tumnus knew that he could expect a cheerless reception from the Beavers. He had long been held in disdain for his neutrality. Throughout the country there were small resistance cells, beasts working in a dozen small ways to undermine the Witch, to distribute food to the creatures who were ill-suited to the winter, to hide the ones who had angered her.

Tumnus would have no part of it, and he told his neighbors so. "Better to forget about the past, forget about the prophecy, and get on with the business of living," he had told Mr. Beaver once, when both were younger and still on speaking terms.

"If you could call it living, I might agree," his friend had replied.

"I can," said Tumnus. "Why can't you? You've got your home, if it is a bit run down. But you'll set it to rights eventually. You've got fish in the river, and fire in the hearth."

"Aye, I do," Mr. Beaver had nodded. "And you do. But what of the folk who can't live on fish? What of the Deer who have to paw through the frozen ground hoping for a bit of dead grass her magic may have missed? The Birds who have no berries? The Squirrels who wait instinctively for nuts that never grow to harvest?"

Tumnus had laughed. "We've lived a hundred years without those things, if they ever existed to begin with. We'll manage just fine."

That had ended that day's conversation. Just one of what would become many minor disagreements over the years. Tumnus watched as his friend slowly grew more distant, more secretive. The less Mr. Beaver said, the more the faun knew. His friend was involved in the resistance effort.

At least the Queen didn't pay me to be a spy for her, Tumnus had thought, then. But then he wouldn't have done that. At least, he thought not. There was a great deal of difference in watching the woods for imaginary humans and turning on one's fellow Narnians.

Despite his secrets, Mr. Beaver and Tumnus had continued their friendship for some time. But whenever they visited, the conversation would inevitably turn from the friendly news of neighbors to politics, as conversation so often does. Tumnus would often find some excuse to end the evening when the conversation went this way, and Mr. Beaver, ever gracious, rarely pressed him to continue.

But there came one such visit when neither chose to end the talk.

Tumnus had been commenting on the antics of Twidget the Squirrels latest brood:

"Mischief actually made one of his sisters fall out of the nest with the pranks he plays," he laughed.

Mr. Beaver had suddenly grown silent.

"What?" Tumnus asked, noticing his friend's solemn expression.

"Mischief was...punished today," Mr. Beaver said gravely. "Cauvric said he had made fun of the White Witch." Tumnus winced at the name of Maugrim's second-in-command.

"One of the Trees bore witness."

"She didn't...turn him into stone?" Tumnus asked, horrified.

"No." Mr. Beaver jerked his head imperceptibly. "She was merciful."

"Well, that's something." Tumnus said, sitting back and feeling relieved. "You see, we can exist peaceably under the Queen."

"The Witch."

Tumnus waved his hand. "A matter of opinion."

"No," said, his expression changing as though he were truly seeing something about Tumnus for the first time. "No, it is not opinion, Tumnus. It is fact. There are some things which cannot be commuted or made relative, no matter how much we may wish it. The so-called Queen of Narnia is an entirely evil being, however convenient it may be for you to think otherwise."

"That's a strong accusation, Mr. Beaver," Tumnus frowned into his teacup.

"And a treasonous one, no doubt," his friend scoffed. "But I'm a Beast, and I'll speak the truth, as sure as if Aslan were in the room with me."

"It is treason," Tumnus replied stiffly, "but I was referring to your comment about me. You think I am living with some sort of delusion? Or perhaps you merely accuse me of complacency?"

"There is no middle ground on this, Tumnus. To sit and do nothing while evil roams at will is more than complacency. It is more than delusion. It is...wickedness."

Tumnus froze. Mr. Beaver looked for a moment uncomfortable, as though he wished he could call back the words. But after a moment, his face hardened into a sort of determined resignation. He would not back down.

"You always were as stubborn as a Boar," Tumnus said, rising. "If that is how you truly feel, then I shall not taint you home with my presence any longer."

Mr. Beaver's throat worked, as though he longed to say something else but could not find the proper words.

"I take my leave," Tumnus said, bowing with a touch of irony. He took up his umbrella and made his way to the door.

Mr. Beaver followed, and for a moment Tumnus thought he might apologize, but he merely put his paw on the doorknob, blocking Tumnus' exit. "She cut off his tail," he said flatly. "The Witch...she cut off Mischief's tail."

Tumnus felt his eyes go wide in horror. A young squirrel with no way to counterbalance, nothing to help him jump from branch to branch. A Dumb predator will likely kill him before a few weeks have passed...

But Tumnus, too, was stubborn. "He...should not have spoken against the Queen," he said hoarsely.

And the door had shut quietly behind him as he walked into the gently falling snow.

¥¤¥

### Chapter 3: Mistrust

"You are not welcome here."

The door started to close.

Tumnus didn't know what gave him the gall to do what he did next. He pushed against the door—hard— before the lock clicked into place, and let himself in. Mr. Beaver stared up at him, livid underneath his fur. "Get—out—of—my—dam!"

Tumnus closed the door with a soft click. "I'll go, but not yet. I need to talk to you. You must listen."

"Must? I must do no such thing. Get out of my house."

This would get him nowhere. Better to get to the point. "I'm to be arrested."

Mr. Beaver blinked, then waved his paw dismissively. "Not my concern. I don't know what you've done to earn the Witch's wrath, and I don't really care, but I'm sure you deserve what's..." He looked away in spite of himself. "...what's coming to you."

"I know that you and I haven't always seen eye to eye on things." Tumnus began. "And I admit my neutral views may have been misplaced..."

"Neutral!" Mr. Beaver hollered, shocking Tumnus, who had never heard the Beast raise his voice before.

Evidently, Mrs. Beaver had never heard it either. Her mouth fell open as she stared at her husband. He sighed. "Why don't you put on some tea, dear? For two. Our visitor won't be staying."

She walked toward the kitchen and Mr. Beaver lowered his voice. "Let us be frank, Tumnus. You are not neutral. You never have been. You've been working for the Witch for years. Only you thought I didn't know it."

Out in the open. Tumnus felt the color drain from his face. "How long have you known? All this time?"

"Only a few years. Now, I will ask again that you leave our home and not upset my wife further."

Tumnus mustered the last of his resolve. "I met a child. A Daughter or Eve. By the Lamppost. Sixteen days ago."

Mr. Beaver set his hand on a chair to steady himself. "If this is some kind of ploy so that I will confess to hoping that the Witch will someday be supplanted, don't you think I've said quite enough to condemn myself already? But if you need further words to repeat to your mistress, you may tell her that I look wholeheartedly toward that day."

"This is not about tricks, Actus," Tumnus said, for the first time using the Beaver's given name. There was a child in the woods, a girl. I invited her home to tea."

"Why?" asked Mr. Beaver, alarmed.

"Because the Queen...the Witch...told me to."

"What have you done?"

"Nothing: I let her go. That's why I'm being arrested. Tonight. In a few hours."

"Sit down," Mr. Beaver commanded. "Why would you do that? Let the human go?"

"I'm not certain," Tumnus replied. "She was not what I expected. She's only eight years old. Such a tiny little thing, and so trusting. She just took my arm and I led her to my cave. We talked for hours. I started to play my flute." He looked up. "You do remember what I can do with my flute?" Mr. Beaver nodded, no doubt remembering the many times Tumnus had lulled a schoolfellow to sleep, causing him to be late to class. "But I couldn't," he said. "I took her back to the Lamppost, and then she left."

Mr. Beaver considered this news. "So the Witch's spells are weakening. Her enchantments cutting Narnia off from the adjoining lands is apparently flawed. Humans can enter Narnia. Who know but that the Kings and Queens will come next?"

"Not next, Actus. Now. Lucy visited me again only yesterday. She—"

"Lucy?"

"Her name. She is one of the Royal Four, I have no doubt."

"A child of eight years?"

"The Lord Digory and Lady Polly were only children, if the stories can be believed," Tumnus reminded him. "I questioned Lucy closely when we last spoke. She is the youngest of four children. Two brothers and two sisters. They must be the ones we have waited for."

Mrs. Beaver entered, setting out three, not two china cups and clucking her tongue. "If you boys have finished yelling at each other, I'll join you now, shall I?"

Mr. Beaver nodded. "Mr. Tumnus was just saying that—"

"I heard. I told you that you should have built these walls thicker." Mr. Beaver turned back to Tumnus. "Well, this is hopeful news," said Mr. Beaver, "if we can believe it."

Tumnus nodded. The words stung, but he had earned them. Many times over.

"It still begs the question," Mr. Beaver continued, "of why you have come here. We cannot hide you for any length of time. The wolves will sniff you out in a matter of hours, unless the snowfall were particularly heavy. But it hasn't snowed in days."

"I didn't come for help for myself. I came to give you this." Tumnus reached into his pocket and drew out the precious handkerchief, handing it to Mr. Beaver reluctantly. The last thing of Lucy's he would ever see, he supposed.

"I don't understand," said Mr. Beaver.

"It's Lucy's handkerchief," Tumnus said. "She'll come back. She's visited twice already. She'll likely return soon, maybe even with her siblings. Someone must be there to lead them on. If they become lost in Narnia without a guide (for I do not doubt Lucy will seek to help me: she had a noble heart.), they may be found by the Witch before they can do they good they have been sent here to do."

Mr. Beaver stared at the handkerchief, with its small embroidered "L", as if searching for truth within its linen folds. He nodded once. "It will be seen to," he said quietly. "What about you?"

Tumnus breathed a sigh and rose to leave. "It doesn't matter about me."

"Sit down," Mrs. Beaver ordered. "You said yourself the Police will not come till tonight. Maugrim always plans his arrests after sunset. He and his kind like to sleep during the day. At least you can finish your tea like civilized Narnians. In fact, I may have a cookie or two to go with it." She shuffled out of the room.

"She seems pleasant," Tumnus said. An awkward pause. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you're wedding."

Mr. Beaver nodded sadly. "Will you not at least make an attempt to escape them?"

Tumnus shook his head. "We both know how pointless that would be. Anyway, if they don't find me at home, they may well follow my scent here, and the two of you would be implicated, and then where would we be? The children must have a guide."

Mr. Beaver frowned, but couldn't disagree. They finished their tea in silence, along with the cookies Mrs. Beaver had so generously spared for her condemned guest. When all was finished, Tumnus graciously thanked her and her husband. Mr. Beaver saw him to the door.

Tumnus stepped outside and began to walk away. The door had not closed, and he knew Mr. Beaver watched him. He paused for a moment and spoke quietly over his shoulder.

"Actus?"

"Yes?"

"I was wrong."

¥□¥

# The Diamond Vial

*by warrior4*

Her face looked at her new gift with awe that joyous Christmas morning. But I thought I saw a glimpse of fear in her eyes too. After all when she would have to use this would be in midst of great pain and strife. But I could also see the fire burning in her spirit. Regardless of any fear I knew she her valor would prevail.

§§§

"Your task is simple my friend. Three royal gifts befitting the monarchs of Narnia need making. One for the soon to be High King, and two for his sisters." Aslan's command was sounded simple, yet nothing was ever simple with the Lion. He had just approached me and sent my head spinning with the first words of hope to be spoken about regarding Narnia in a hundred years.

"Of course My Lord," I replied. "But the prophecy speaks of four monarchs. What of the younger king?"

"His tale is his own, as his gift." Aslan replied cryptically. "Rest assured my friend, he shall also receive his own gift that shall prosper Narnia."

"As you wish Aslan. I am at your service as always."

Aslan smiled at me and my heart glowed. "Thank you good Father. Here is what you must make first and the journey it requires."

§§§

The mountains towered over me. After several days of travel I had finally come to the mountains of Aslan's country. Somewhere within those peaks lay the Valley of the Sun. However I suddenly felt lost. I had never travelled this way before and knew not where the fire flowers grew. Just as I came to despair a birds cry from above caused me to look up.

It was the most spectacular bird I had ever seen. As large as swan yet its plumage rivaled the most glorious sunsets I had ever seen. Its song was thrilling, haunting, joyous, and simple all at once. I tried to wrap my head around such a thing could happen when I realized that it would be better to just enjoy it. I watched as the bird flew overhead like a streak of fire calling out its song. It flew straight to the mountains and was then lost to view in the crags.

"Lovely tune isn't it?"

The booming voice behind me caused me to jump. Turning I saw an old friend walking my way. Atlas, father of the good giants and more faithful friend one couldn't have. I smiled as I talked to him.

"That it is Atlas. I've never seen that bird before. Have you?"

"Aye," the giant replied. "Comes this way twice a day. Once in the morning and again near noon. When it comes back it always carries a piece of glowing sun-fire in its beak. Never knew a bird that could grip something that hot in its beak, but that's a phoenix for you."

That was it! I then knew how I would be able to find the Valley of the Sun. I looked up at my giant friend as my idea blossomed. "Atlas, do you know where in those mountains the phoenix goes?"

Good giants usually have a deep rumbling laugh that is a delight to hear. Atlas was no different as he chuckled at me. "Of course Father Christmas. That phoenix is the personal messenger of the Stars. Rumor has it that the Stars have decreed one of their old companions should be raised back to the sky. The only thing that can do that is the fire-berries from their valley. However the fire-berries can only heal a small bit of health at once. For a truly miraculous cure one would want the fire-flowers from which the berries bud from. But good luck, the flowers seldom bloom and even if one did find them, their nectar is hot enough to burn through just about anything."

"That's alright," I replied. "Can you take me there?"

Atlas smiled at me again. "I suppose so; you'd need my help anyway. There is a cliff guarding the entrance to the Valley of the Sun only I or one of my kin could lift you over. It's not like I have the weight of the world on my shoulders or anything." Talking as friends do we set off.

A day later we came to the cliffs Atlas had spoken of. He was right. The wall of stone was perfectly sheer. There would have been no way I could have climbed up on my own. Atlas however was as good as his word. Bending down he put his hand on the ground.

"Here we go. Up you get."

I sat down in his palm and he gently raised me to the cliff top. He set me down gently on the edge of the cliff and looked up at me. "I'll be right here when you get back."

Thanking him I turned into the valley. It nearly blinded me. The Valley of the Sun lived up to its name. The bushes on which the fire-berries grew glowed as bright as any star I had ever seen. The sheer walls of the mountains reflected the light to make everything a pure golden color. The heat from them was great, but not so much that it would be impossible to move around. Taking off my red coat I started looking amidst the bushes for any sign of the flowers I needed. However while there were plenty of berries to be found none of the bushes were in blossom. Undaunted I pressed farther into the valley.

I don't know how long it took me to reach the head of the valley, since there was no sense of time. It was always lit up like the brightest noontide within that place. Finally I reached the end of the valley and still hadn't seen single blossom. I was about to go back the way I had come when I noticed a path leading up into the mountains.

As far as paths go this one wasn't the best. Unlike the rest of the peaks, with their perfect smoothness, this crag was bruised and crumbling. The path up it was covered in loose gravel and sharp corners. It wandered up the face of the valley before turning into the mountain and disappearing overhead. Walking carefully I began to follow the path.

At once I noticed the way was rougher than it looked. My feet were constantly sliding on the ground and I had to steady myself more times than I care to remember. The stone of the mountain was rough on my hands. Soon I had acquired an impressive collection of

small nicks and cuts. Looking at the stone in more detail revealed it to be of sharp obsidian of broken glass like sharpness. As I looked back where I had come and where I had to go, the path before me defiantly seemed harder.

I don't know why, stubbornness probably, I kept going. Time and again I slipped and fell. Soon not only my hands were cut, but my knees and shins too. Then I fell hard and heard the rip of cloth on stone and the slice of obsidian going through my right hand. A small tumble of rocks fell as I steadied myself. I inspected the wound and fear gripped my heart. My right hand was cut clean to the bone. I tried clenching my fist to stanch the blood flow but found the tendons had been cut too. I was devastated. If I couldn't use my hand then how would I be able to finish my work?

Then I heard the phoenix cry again. I looked to the sky and saw it carrying another berry in its beak as it winged its way west. The song it sang calmed my heart even if my hand still burned with pain. I watched until it was lost to view over the mountain. Then I saw it. One small flower growing out of a crack in the ground. It had five petals over a brown stem. Reds, oranges, and yellows colored the flower to make it look like a miniature campfire. Peering inside I could see the red nectar that was its juice.

Careful not to pick the flower I tipped it gently to the side to pour the nectar into an iron cup I had brought. I was a little too careful and thank the Lion for it. I was only able to pour one drop into my cup, but the instant it hit the iron the nectar sizzled and burned right through the metal. It fell to the slope as if the iron hadn't even been there. I looked down and started to think of how to move the nectar when I noticed something. It wasn't burning through the obsidian rock. The drop of nectar was just laying there glowing faintly.

I looked around frantically and then saw the small pile of rocks that had fallen when I had sliced open my hand. One of the rocks had broken to form a slight depression in the middle. It might not be a lot, but I thought it would hold a few drops of the precious nectar. Using my left hand I picked up the rock and brought it next the flower. My injured right hand was shaking from the pain, but I was able to use it to tip the nectar towards the rock cup I held. Just as I was about to pour my hand jerked and sent the nectar splashing all over the place, but sadly not into the rock I held.

It was then that I felt a burning sensation on my right hand. Two drops had fallen on my hand. One had landed squarely on my wound and to my great amazement the cut was mending itself. The nectar had found its way into my bloodstream and I could feel it burning through my veins. All of my other cuts were similarly healed within a few seconds, but the burning sensation was decidedly uncomfortable. Still my wounds were healed and I quickly sent Aslan a prayer of thanks and gratitude. Tipping my right hand I caught the second drop in the rock cup in I still held and ever so carefully I walked back down the path that somehow seemed a great deal easier.

I reached the edge of the Valley of the Sun to find Atlas waiting for me. "Found it then did you?" he asked as he lifted me down.

"I did," I replied. "However, I was only able to collect one drop. I doubt that will serve our needs. Maybe I can brew a similar potion when I get back to my shop."

"I think not," Atlas said. "One drop you might have, but that should be enough. Pour some water in it and I think you should be able to make a nice cordial. After all there are few things more healing as cold clear water, save that nectar of course."

"Of course," I said. Thanking my friend for his help I returned to my shop. I was still puzzled as to find a vessel secure enough to hold the fiery nectar I held in its rock cup. When I returned to my shop, I went to the stream outside that powered my waterwheel. The stream came from the same mountains I had just visited and was fed by the high glaciers at their peaks. The water was ice cold and clear as crystal. Kneeling next the stream I peered into it. A piece of glacier ice floated by and I was somehow reminded of a diamond as it passed.

Just then a strong wind blew in from behind me causing me to stagger a bit. My hand brushed the rock cup holding the nectar sending it flying towards the stream. It hit the water and something miraculous happened. As soon as the rock hit the water it started turning clear. Water poured over the top and mixed with the nectar. The rock was still turning clear and the change was continuing up as it grew of its own accord under the pure waters. I then heard the voice on the wind.

By valor found, by healing made new, for the Valiant given to restore the lost.

The wind died down and I reached into the stream. The rock had somehow changed and reformed. It was no longer rough and sharp. Rather the obsidian had been made new into a beautiful glass vial. The red juice within filled the vial to the top. Because of the wetness of the vial it slipped out of my hand and fell on the rocky stream bank. I fully expected the glass to break, but once again Aslan surprised me. He loves a good joke that Lion. The vial didn't shatter, the rock it landed on did. I knew at once the vial was made of diamond and nothing could shatter it.

I picked up the vial and brought it inside my shop. Swiftly I made a red leather pouch and belt for the vial. Another thought came to me as I set down my work. Suppose the wound was under layers of clothes and hard to see? I plucked the knife from my belt and added it and its sheath to the belt I had just made. Battles might be ugly affairs, but they still needed to be fought from time to time. And at the end the virtue of those who had fought would be well matched by the valor of the one who would heal them.

¥□¥

# The Sword of a King

*by warrior4*

I remember looking at the boy in front of me as he held the gift I had given him. Could this truly be the one spoken of I thought. He's so young. Thank the Lion that my fears were proved groundless only a few days later. I can still recall when the mighty Aslan came to me and requested the gifts be made.

*§§§*

"My friend, long has your sleigh been silent."

I looked up from my bench to a sight that warmed my heart. Aslan was walking towards me. In all the countless years I've known the Lion the sight of Him always warms my heart.

"Too true my Lord." I replied. "The power of the Witch still keeps me from Narnia."

"Yes," the Lion said. "But it shall not be so forever. Hope has been kindled and I am called to the west."

I almost couldn't believe what Aslan had said. Could the winter that had gripped Narnia for so long truly be nearing its end? Words can never describe the joy of living in Aslan's Country, yet Narnia had its own almost lyrical magic that I had always reveled in during my visits. Before the enormity of this could sink in Aslan was speaking again.

"Your skills are once again needed; however I have three special tasks for you." I listened with rapt attention as I was told what I needed to do.

*§§§*

This certainly wasn't the usual thing to come out of my workshop. To one side two of the three royal gifts lay completed. I was halfway done with last gift. The shield with its red lion lay gleaming on a soft cloth close to the bow, arrows, horn, knife, and cordial I had already made. All that was left was the sword.

Reverently I selected the not the finest steel but the roughest iron in my workshop. Clamping it tight in the tongs I plunged it into the forge. Pumping the bellows the pig iron soon started changing colors. First a dull orange replaced soon by a glowing red. More pulls on the bellows and the iron brightened into an almost joyful yellow. However I knew the iron needed to be much hotter. I worked the bellows furiously until the metal shone white and made it hard to look at. Only then did I take it out of the forge and lay it on my anvil.

The first blow of the hammer fell with a shower of sparks. Again and again the hammer fell driving the impurities from the iron. When the metal cooled to between a red and yellow I put it back in the forge to heat it again. The hot metal was soft and yielding under my hammer as the abuse I was putting it under stretched and shaped it. Slowly it started taking shape. Taking it out of the forge again I ran a careful eye down the form I had made. Nodding with approval I placed it in a cooler section of the forge to keep its heat up while I selected another ingot of rough pig iron.

This second piece was to for the core of the sword I was making, hard, strong, and true as a king should be. Heating the second piece like its brother I pulled it out and began a slower more methodical hammering of the iron. Slowly the impurities were hammered out. As they were the charcoal I had added to the forge was pounded into the iron, turning it into steel. I added more charcoal to this core steel than I had the outer softer steel that would make up the sharpened blades. While the hard core steel would offer strength to the blade I was making it was the more flexible softer steel that would allow the sword to resist the force of battle without shattering.

Finally I placed both hard and soft steel together in my forge and pulled hard on the bellows. Soon they were both glowing white hot. Taking them out of the forge and on my anvil I began hammering them together. I couldn't help but think about the qualities the wielder of this sword would need as I started the final forging.

*CLANG!* Strength, to endure all challenges and trials

*CLANG!* Courage, to do what must be done regardless of fear

*CLANG!* Compassion, to stave off the horrors of war

*CLANG!* Justice, to only ride to war in defense of the defenseless

*CLANG!* Honor, to always do what is not always easy, but always right

Looking at the sword the hard and soft steels were now fused together. Strength and flexibility evenly matched along the entire length of the blade. I placed the sword, for now it could be called thus, back in the force and heated it again. Just as the temper of the king must always be pure, so must the temper of his blade. The heat from the forge rose to something I had never felt before. I could hear loose hairs of my beard being singed even as I stood off from the heat.

Moving swiftly I ran outside and gathered some ice I had kept for this most important part of the forging. I dumped several buckets into the quenching trough. Soon the water was as cold as the land the sword I was making would soon liberate. Sweat drenched my forehead as I carefully reached my tongs into the forge and pulled the sword forth. In one smooth motion I plunged the white hot steel into the freezing water. The trough came alive in a dance of steam and crackling water.

Yet, I was not done. Twice more I heated the sword white hot and quenched it in the freezing water. After the third quenching I pulled it out of the trough and glanced down the blade. I don't think I have ever made something as close to perfect as that sword. Even in its rough form I could tell its balance would be perfect. The sharpest razor would never come close to the keenness of this blade.

I then set to work on the hilt. The steel cross guard was first fitted over the hilt. Nothing fancy save for two vertical pieces of steel to secure the blade in the scabbard I had already made. I shaped the handle from the wood of an oak tree that grew just outside my shop. I covered this oak with the finest leather I could find. A red leather that would not warp or lose its grip when wet. I fitted the hilt with a small golden band to help the grip of the warrior who would wield it. Finally a golden image of Aslan himself was set as the pommel. A reminder and a guardian as to who truly gave the king his authority to rule. I was about to begin honing the blade when I dropped my hammer.

Whoever has said Aslan doesn't have a sense of humor doesn't know the Lion. Just as I kneeled to retrieve my tool a blinding flash of lightning flashed and struck the sword on my anvil. I shielded my eyes yet I could somehow still see what was happening. The lightning traced along the edges of the blade giving them a sharpness I could never hope to achieve. Then it moved to the fuller I had pounded into the middle of the blade.

*When Aslan Bears His Teeth Winter Meets Its Death* was inscribed into the steel.

*When Aslan Shakes His Mane We Shall Have Spring Again* was struck into the reverse side.

With one more blinding flash of light the sword seemed to glow and was lifted off the anvil to pierce the anvil in front of where I was kneeling. The thunder from the lightning echoed away as a soft wind began to blow. A soft voice then whispered to me.

"Rhindon."

I looked at the sword sticking out of the anvil on which it had been forged. Reaching to the hilt I expected to have to pull hard to free it. To my surprise it slid out easily. It was now truly a thing of terrible beauty. Rhindon gleamed in my hand. Cold blue steel easily reflecting my image in its blade. I knew at once this blade was destined to be as much of a legend as the warrior that would carry it into battle. Taking the sheath I had made I slid it home for the first time.

Looking out the door I saw the stars of Narnia. For the first time in one hundred years they were aligned for Christmas. I quickly cleaned myself up and readied my sleigh. I had gifts to deliver and a kingdom to help save.

¥¤¥

# Regrets

*by MyBlueOblivion*

## **Chapter One: Regrets**

It's a funny thing to think that I never used to feel the cold. No, that's not entirely true. I felt it, but it bothered me less. Winter used to be my favourite time of year; building snow-men with Father, snow-ball fights with Peter, the squeals Lucy used to make when I tipped fresh snow down the back of her neck... it all seems so far away now. So long ago.

I feel the cold now. In fact, I don't think I've ever felt this cold. Strange... I never knew what the grown-ups meant by 'bitterly cold'. How could it be bitter? It's a feeling, not a taste! At least, that's what I used to think. I know better now. You see, I've felt it. Aching, biting, gnawing cold. A cold that goes beyond freezing. It gets inside you, cuts through you, takes you apart from the inside out. Every breath hurts as it stings away at your lungs... making every breath sour. Bitter, even.

Not too dissimilar to poisoned Turkish Delight, I find myself thinking somewhat ruefully.

In a way, some small part of me is actually glad of the cold. As I sit here, hugging my knees, waiting for her to come back, I feel terribly sorry for myself. But the more I think about it, the more I realise that I have next to no right to feel sorry for myself, but every need to feel sorry for my actions. And I am, oh, how I am. For the first time in... I can't remember how long! How sad to think that... For the first time in, well, years, I guess, I wish my family was here. And the cold, in its way, reminds me of what I have done, what brought me here. And that small part of me is glad, because the cold has brought me to terms with the saddest fact of my existence.

I deserve this. And so much more. I look at my skin, see the ghostly blue-green colour it has taken on from the glow of the ice around me, and I find it a fitting metaphor. A visible sign of the taint within. For my surroundings mirror precisely what I have been toward my family. Cold, distant, almost alien. I had cut myself off from them for the stupidest reason of all; I had believed that, if I let go of them now, distanced myself deliberately and forcefully, then it wouldn't hurt when they left of their own accord. Like Father did when he went away to war. Like Peter...

No. Peter never left. It wasn't his fault, he's only human after all... I couldn't expect him to be there for me all the time. But when he wasn't, it hurt all the same...

I had been so afraid. But you had comforted me, just like you always did. You pulled me close, told me you loved me, that you would look out for me. And I believed you, and trusted you, and though I would never admit it to you, I loved you more than at any other point in my life. Standing there, in the prickling grey mass of my new uniform, feeling so very small in the face of my new school, your words gave me hope.

Those hopes had been dashed mere hours later. Some of the older boys had asked me for my lunch money, and I had said no. I had told them defiantly that you would come, and then they would be sorry. But they just laughed. And you never came.

The first blow did more than split my lip and knock me down. It broke my faith in you. Because, like the angry, spoilt child that I am, I let it. I was angry because my brother, my Peter, hadn't come to my rescue. And I realised then that you weren't perfect. You were no longer my hero, the perfect brother I had believed you to be. My anger blinded me to everything else, and like so many things it became easier in the end to just continue with it, rather than admit to a mistake and change. And because of that, every time I failed to match up to the standard you set, every time I failed where you succeeded, I began to hate you more and more... Almost as much as I hated myself.

I see, now, the error of my ways. And I wish I could take it all back, every angry word, every spiteful act...

I wish I could hold Lucy in my arms just one more time. I wish I could tell her how much she means to me, that she is summer to my winter, that her endless happiness is one of the things in this life I envied most. That I had been cruel to her, made her miserable, to bring her down to my level. Because I knew, deep down, that I could never reach hers.

I miss Susan so much. I miss her warm smile and gentle touch, ever present, ever comforting. Even when she nagged at me, somewhere inside I knew that she only ever tried to be so smart because she loved us, that she wanted to protect us from all the unseen dangers of the world. I had resented her so much for that, thrown so much scorn and sarcasm at her for her efforts. And now I wish with all my heart that I could hear her voice one more time. Even if it was just for her to nag at me.

But most of all, I wish I could see Peter. Just for a little while. To have just one chance to tell him how sorry I am, to tell him that I know now why he snaps at me the way he does. It's because he never lost faith in me, the way I lost faith in him. Every time I do something spiteful, every time I talk back to Mum or tease Lucy, every time I shout at him or Susan to leave me alone, that they aren't my parents, it hurts him. It's like every word has taken a knife blade to his heart. Because he still sees, beneath all the hurt and anger and childish hate that I have become, the Edmund that was. His little brother.

And, were I allowed just one single regret before the end, it would be this: that I never told him that I was sorry for all I had done. That I knew, in my heart, that he didn't deserve my anger, because he hadn't done anything wrong. That it had all been me, my selfishness, my pride. And I would tell him that I loved him so very, very much, that he was still the one I looked up to. Still my hero. And most of all, I would apologise for not being the brother I should have been.

My short time here, in this cell, has changed me, though I probably don't realise just how much. It has shown me the error of my ways, the sin that I will have to pay for, probably sooner rather than later, and it has taught me that I have missed so much of the joy that life has presented to me. I have learnt a new appreciation for all that I took for granted. And I have even learnt two new definitions of 'cold'.

Cold can indeed be bitter, and not just in the literal sense. Winter can be spiteful, hateful even, because it can not support life the way that the other seasons can. It can have beauty, yes, a certain cold majesty, but it can never know vibrancy or joy like the others. And, in its own way, it seeks bitterly to destroy all that it touches, all the warmth that it can never possess.

Just like her.

I can hear her voice, shouting orders to her servants. She seems to be calling for an army to be raised, her orders are so many, though I can't hear her words clearly. But I can hear the anger in her voice, the hate, and it chills me anew that it is directed toward my family. The beavers had mentioned that my family were held as a shining hope for summer after an endless winter, for freedom from cold tyranny. As I listen to the sounds of the Witch and her dwarf coming closer, listen to her voice that is warm as winter's kiss, I know that she intends to destroy them. And so, I make a pledge.

If, by God's grace, I ever get away from this place, if the powers that be see fit to let me see my family once more, this I promise. That I will do all in my power to right the wrongs I have done. I vow that I will do anything, everything, to heal the wounds I have caused, that I will fight to my last breath to repair all that I can. And at this moment I swear that, if it is what fate requires of me, I will lay down my life for them. No more mistakes. No more regrets.

As I look down at the meal that has been left for me, a frozen cup of water and a stale lump of bread, it appears for all the world that my redemption will be a long time coming...

✚✚

## Chapter Two: Losing Faith

"Why so sad, your Majesty?"

I don't have to see his face to know who it is. Even if I didn't recognise his voice immediately, the tell would be in his tone. Behind the harsh rasp of his words, there lies a wealth of hatred, spite and sarcasm. It's a tone I know well, and not just because it's one I've heard come from the dwarf many times in the last couple of days. It's very like a tone I used to hear almost every day. My own, in fact. I shudder at the thought, and feel the sharp sting of bile touch my throat.

Am I... was I... as bad as him? A vile, loathsome, perfectly horrid little beast? I look at this Ginnarbrik, see his sneer as he walks past me on some kind of errand, and I have to wonder. Similar names have been used for me, in the past, and not always when no-one thought I could hear. Was this what I was like? I know I went out of my way to push everyone away from me, to hurt the ones I loved so that when the time came for them to leave, it wouldn't hurt so much. I had been selfish and cruel, yes, but... is this really what it was like, standing on the other side?

If it is, then I'm further gone than I thought. I never thought I was being that bad. I was only trying to protect myself, wasn't I? Trying to make the pain go away? Was that really such a bad thing to want? I don't know, any more. Nothing makes sense to me, not since I walked into her castle so willingly. The dwarf hinted that I had been bewitched, and had laughed at me for being such a fool. Knowing that I wasn't fully in my right mind should have helped my conscience, but it didn't, which I suspect is what he wanted.

You see, in every story I ever read growing up, every fairytale, there was a common theme for those heroes who ended up being enchanted. They all had some weakness to begin with. Be it greed, or selfishness, or pride, there was always a way for the sorceress to get a hold on the hero. It didn't matter how shiny their armour was, or how valiant the steed, it

couldn't stop them from being themselves. And so, for me to have been enchanted, it makes me think that I'm probably further gone than even I realise.

I shift against my bonds, and one of the creatures nearby eyes me carefully. I don't know how they think I'm going to escape, but still they watch. I've never been the strongest chap, or the most athletic; that was always Peter's field. But I doubt even he could get out of this situation. The cords that bind my wrists are so unbearably tight, that they feel as though they are burning directly into my skin. My fingers went numb ages ago, leaving that maddening, prickling sensation to form in my hands and arms.

The rest of me is tied to a tree, so tight that breathing was a little difficult at first. The twisted roots of the tree are digging into my back, causing sharp pain with every small movement. After the first hour or so of being tied here, the pain became so much that I started to cry, I'm ashamed to say. Instead of moving me, the guards called Ginnarbrik. The vicious pig had jeered at me, calling me names that I didn't recognise but sounded awful nonetheless. He had slapped my face, hard, then gagged my mouth so tight that my face was almost forced into a kind of grin. And all the while, he had that awful, leering smile written on his face. How can someone get so much enjoyment from the suffering of another?

It doesn't look like I'm going to survive this. The White Witch (for I can no longer refer to her as a queen) has given me the choice of joining her, helping her to betray my family and the people of this land further. She says that if I help her, she will let me live, but I don't believe her any more than I believe in Father Christmas. She plans to kill me, just like she plans to kill my family. The thought threatens to bring more tears to my eyes, but I hold them back. Tears won't help anyone now, especially not me.

When the Witch had me dragged from that cell, and took me on a wild chase through the snow, I confess I harboured thoughts of escape. When it became apparent that I was being too carefully watched, I entertained thoughts of rescue. I hoped that Peter would come to save me, or even one of the girls. I had even hoped that when they reached Aslan's camp, they would be able to mount some kind of rescue. As the night begins to draw in, it seems as though it was too much to hope.

After all, why should they rescue me? What am I to them, but a traitor? For all my wanting to see my family, wanting to make amends, it has crossed my mind more than once that they might not want to save me. After all, Mr. Tumnus wasn't the only one I betrayed for sweeties, as the Witch put it... I betrayed them, too. My own family. I can just see the anger on their faces, the tears in Lucy's eyes, the disappointment on Susan's features. The disgust in Peter's eyes. And as much as I know that I deserve their hatred, I find a small part of me rebelling against the thought, and becoming angry at them for abandoning me so easily.

No. I don't know that. I must not lose faith in my family, no matter what comes. I have to trust that everything will work out in the end, in this life or the next. Because, if I lose my grip on the thought of being with them again, being a family like we used to be, then I'm giving into her. And I won't do it. I won't give her the satisfaction.

I wonder what my family are doing now. Did the wolves find them? Did they make it to this Aslan? Most importantly, are they safe? I would give anything to know that they are well, that Aslan's army is going to protect them. I wish I could be there with them... but that doesn't seem possible now. I can hope, and I will cling to that hope with all my strength. But, at the same time, I have to accept the truth, the whole, awful truth.

I'm going to die here. And with those terrible words in my mind, I finally drift, exhausted, into my first sleep in nearly two days...

§§§

I awaken minutes, maybe days, later, and notice the gloom pulling in around me. I can hear noises from the camp nearby, sounds of far more creatures than there were earlier. I can hear a rasping noise, like metal on stone, the clattering sounds of weapons being moved, bestial grunts and howls and roars as an army prepares for war. They leave me feeling chilled, even more than the nip of the air around me. But those aren't the sounds I concentrate on. Something else is making itself heard, and I fear that noise more than the others.

Laughter. Cruel, vicious, mirthless laughter. It grates against my nerves, because I know what will follow it, if the dwarf is left to his own devices. I can still feel the welts and bruises from the last time he attacked me, and I shudder at the thought of enduring more. I wonder, briefly, what happened in his life to make him like this... I wonder if he was born cruel. I decide that I will probably never know, and as I finally see him approaching it fades into insignificance.

"Is our little prince uncomfortable?" he hisses as he walks close by, cuffing the side of my head as he does so. "Would you like your pillows fluffed? That's what you wanted, wasn't it? Special treatment, for the special boy!" I cringe at his words; partly from fear of what he's going to do next, and partly because he's telling the truth. The words sting, far sharper even than some of the times he has struck me. And, for a brief instant, I can't help but think again that I deserve all of this, that I'm not worth saving, that I'm too tainted now to be anything other than worthy of this punishment.

I must be hallucinating. I have to be. Why else would I be seeing a dozen or so creatures in shining armour storming toward me? I can see fauns, and creatures that are more goat than man. At the lead is a massive being, man from the waist up and horse everywhere else... what did they call those at school? Cen... centaur, I think. Either way, he is huge! And he is wielding a sword that has to be as big as me. They're closer now, I can't believe that Ginnarbrik hasn't seen them...

He's seen them! He's for it now, I can tell. Everything is happening so fast... The centaur has his sword pointed at the dwarf's chest, and I can feel hands untying me. Around me, there are creatures screaming as the fauns and goat-things go to work, and I find myself thankful that I can't see much. I can hear voices around me, telling me to stand, that we have to run before the alarm is raised properly... but... my legs are weak, and my head feels funny... and as the world goes dark, I feel strong hands grasping me, lifting me, and taking me away from this hell...

§§§

Where... where am I? I'm being held, carried, and I forget where I am for a minute. Then it comes back... the rescue. I've been rescued! I can feel the wind whipping around me, and hear quick hoof-beats. I am being carried, curled up, in the arms of the centaur, held tight against his chest. Around me, I can see precious little, just glints of the armour worn by the other soldiers as it catches the moonlight.

I manage to look up at my rescuer, wondering how best to thank him. He looks down at me for a few seconds, his features stern and intense, and I feel my words die in my throat.

As he looks back up again, I feel a lump form in my throat. His expression was plain; he thought of me as a traitor, barely worth his effort to rescue. He is doing this, not for me, but because he has been ordered to. The thought hurts me, and I realise now that my hopes of true salvation were foolish. How could anyone want me, a traitor?

Yet, if that is the case, why rescue me at all? To punish me themselves? I am too tired, and nothing makes sense any more. In all truth, I'm not sure I care any more, so long as I don't have to see her again. I lean my head against the centaur's chest, resigning myself to the fact that, whether or not he will ever accept me as a person, he has rescued me from her, and I can ask no more. I am free, and for all my fears, I am grateful. As I drift back off to sleep, lulled by the steady rhythm hoof-beats and breathing, I whisper the only two words that come to mind.

"Thank you."

¥¤¥

### **Chapter Three: Forgiveness**

"Wake up, Son of Adam. We are here."

The words seem distant and close all at the same time, as I slowly wake up. As I open my eyes, I realise that I am no longer being carried by the centaur, but am instead lying on the ground. It's cold, as the first rays of sunlight are just beginning to show behind the surrounding hills, and I shiver a little. I look up, and see the centaur standing over me, an unreadable expression on his face. It's less stern than before, and a little more kind, but there is still so much mistrust there. I stand as quickly as I can, stretching as I do so, and face my rescuer.

"Um... thanks," I manage to mumble, unsure and not a little afraid. I still don't know what will become of me, but even so, he did save me. "For... for saving me, I mean. From her." The centaur simply nods at me, his features softening as he does so. When he next speaks to me, his voice is not so stern.

"Wait here, Son of Adam. Aslan will speak with you shortly." And with that, he leaves. I look around briefly, and see that I am surrounded by tents. They have brought me to Aslan's camp, safe and sound.

Aslan. I'm not sure why, but that name fills me with a kind of quiet dread. It's the same feeling I got at the Beaver's dam, when they had told us the prophecy. I realise that it probably has something to do with the enchantment that was placed upon me, her influence corrupting me still. After all, this Aslan stands against her, so he surely must be good. But what will he make of me? Will he show mercy? Or will he punish me for all I have done? And if he does, what will it mean... will it mean my imprisonment, my banishment... or my death?

"Greetings, Son of Adam."

I hear a voice from behind me, deep and solemn, and I instantly know who it belongs to. I stand, rooted to the spot, unable to turn and face the owner of the voice... unable to face Aslan, for it can't be anyone else. I can hear breathing from behind me, loud and strong, the breath of something far larger than a human, and I wonder for a moment what kind of

creature Aslan is. Fear washes over me, and I can feel myself starting to shake, and for the briefest moment I wish I was anywhere else but here.

"You need not tremble, child," says the voice. It carries no threat, only gentle warmth, and a warm, sweet air seems to surround me. Suddenly, I don't feel quite so afraid. "I will not harm you. I wish to speak with you, Son of Adam, if you will but turn and face me." Slowly, I turn to face him. I half shut my eyes, not sure I want to see the face of this being, whatever he may be.

When I finally see him, my breath is taken away. I don't think I've seen anything quite so beautiful, so noble, in all my life. I open my eyes wide, drinking in the image of the lion in all his golden glory. I find a part of myself wishing to reach out, to touch his mane, to stroke his fur. A part of me thinks that he is so wonderful, that if he decides here and now that I am worthy only of death, that I couldn't think badly of him at all. And another part of my mind suddenly feels very guilty that I had been so mean to another lion, not so very long ago.

"You're... Aslan, aren't you, sir?" I ask, feeling more sure of the answer.

"I am, child."

"Have you seen my family? Are they safe? How did they get here?" I blurt out, desperate to know and not caring too much if I seem rude for it.

"Peace, Son of Adam," Aslan says in reply, smiling with his eyes. "I tell no-one any story other than their own. Suffice to say, they are here, and they are safe. The rest you will have to ask them." An uneasy silence settles for a moment, before he speaks again.

"Who are you, Son of Adam?" Aslan asks, those golden eyes locking onto mine, steady and deep.

"I'm... I'm Edmund, s-sir," I manage to stutter out, completely intimidated, and not entirely sure of his meaning. He smiles, and I know that I have somehow given the wrong answer.

"I know your name, dear heart. You are Edmund Randall Pevensie, formerly of Finchley, third child and second son of George and Helen Pevensie. These things I know. But what I asked of you was who you are. There is a difference."

I look at Aslan, dumbfounded that he knows so much about me. And yet, I'm also completely at a loss as to what he means. I sense no condescension in his voice, no hidden meanings. He isn't trying to trip me up or make me look stupid, but even so that's how I feel. What does he mean by his question? Apparently my confusion is all too evident, as he changes the subject.

"Walk with me, Edmund," he says gently. "I have something to show you." He begins to walk, and I follow in silence. Slowly, we climb part of a nearby hill, until we're standing on a kind of outcropping that overlooks the camp that we had been standing in. Looking out over the tents in the valley below, Aslan asks me "Tell me what you see, Edmund."

"I see your camp," I reply simply, deciding it's better to listen to what he has to say. I can almost hear a slight purr from Aslan as he considers my answer.

"That is what is there," he says after a moment. "But I see so much more. I see my family. I see brothers and sisters, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. I see faith, and loyalty,

pride and courage. I see their fears, their hopes, both for themselves and for Narnia. I see all that they have done, everything that has brought them to this point, all the things that make them who they are." With an almost audible snap it all falls into place. I know now what he was asking of me, and the answer that comes to mind makes me sick to my stomach. I dread that he will ask me again, and seconds later, I'm not disappointed.

"Do you know who you are, Edmund Pevensie?" I feel my lip start to tremble, and hot tears begin to form in my eyes. The answer tears from my throat without conscious thought, because I know who I am, and what I have done.

"I'm a traitor, Aslan."

"That is certainly something you have been and done," Aslan replies, turning to face me, his tone serious. "But is that who you truly are?"

"I'm a traitor of the worst kind," I answer, my voice shaking, unable to contain it any longer. The tears burning my eyes begin to flow down my cheeks, as I finally pour out all the darkness inside. "I... I tried to turn my family over to the Witch for... for sweets! I... I hated Peter so much for trying to be Dad... I was angry at Susan for being so smart, and Lucy for being the favourite... I just wanted to be special, to be the favourite, the perfect child that everyone wanted..."

Aslan just stands, silent, as years of pain, jealousy and anger flow forth in a vicious torrent. As I talk, I gain speed, until my thoughts literally are pouring out in an unstoppable tide... every time I had hurt Lucy, or taunted Susan. Every time I had argued with Peter, or whispered vile, horrid things to him when I thought no-one else could hear, about how he wasn't the perfect son they all took him for. I even tell Aslan about the conscious decision I had made to ignore the last thing Mum had asked me to do, to listen to Peter... I tell him it all, and still he patiently listens. Faster and faster I speak, louder and louder, building into full-blown hysterics, until the sobs racking my frame become too much, and I collapse in a heaving, sobbing ball at his feet.

Laying here, crying with sheer grief and remorse for everything I have done, I am vaguely aware of his presence above me. I feel him slowly lay down next to me, so that I am resting between his paws. I find it oddly comforting, and as I begin to calm down and my tears lessen, I say the one thing I most need to say. I am sorry. I am so very sorry for all I have done and all I have said, and I will do anything to make it right.

"This is not who you are, my dear child," Aslan says finally, his voice so low that at first I'm not sure he has really spoken. "This is what you have done, to yourself and those around you. If you could not recognise your actions as wrong, if you could show no remorse for your actions, then you would truly be that person. But you are not.

"In your heart, you have not seen that you were loved, that you were seen as special by those around you. You felt inadequate, and so assumed that your family saw the same, instead of seeing that they loved you for who you were. You clung to the anger and jealousy, and drove all others away for fear they would do the same to you. I do not condone your actions, Edmund. You have done much wrong, and made many mistakes. But your willingness to rectify those actions tells me who you truly are.

"You have a good heart, despite all you have done and all that has been done to you. You have seen both sides of life, both dark and light, and know the difference better for it. You

are loved by your family, despite all you have done, and that in itself tells me that you are not who you think you are, but a far better person indeed. Stand up, my son."

I stand slowly, aching and tired, completely spent by my outburst. I wipe the wetness from my face, grinding the heel of my right palm into my eyes to clear them. I feel ashamed to have cried, but looking into Aslan's face, I begin to feel cleansed, somehow. That it was precisely what I needed. And I feel utterly thankful for that fact, that Aslan has helped me to find that release. Composing myself, I meet his gaze far more steadily than I have previously.

"There will be dire consequences for your actions, young one," the lion says, his voice grave. "But rest assured, no harm will befall you while I am here. I fear that your pain will not pass quickly, Edmund, nor will it be easy for others to accept all you have done. Though it may be easier for them to forgive you, than for you to forgive yourself. That, in and of itself, is far worse than any punishment that I would administer. All I ask is that you stay true to your promise to change, and to treat others with the kindness and fairness that you wish to be treated with. Remember all you have done, Edmund, and learn the lesson well."

"I will, Aslan."

"EDMUND!"

An excited cry grabs my attention, and I look down at the tents below. There, my heart leaps into my throat as I see my family gathering at the base of the hill. Peter has just grabbed Lucy, stopping her from running up to me. I wonder if it's because he realises that my conversation with Aslan is meant to be private, or because of something else. Icy fingers of fear clutch my heart, and I turn to Aslan, an unasked question in my eyes.

"Courage, dear heart," he says, and breathes softly on me. I feel myself relax at once. "As I said, it will not be easy. So few of the worthwhile things in life are. Just know that your family love you dearly, far more than you may ever know. Now, walk with me, Edmund Pevensie, and do not fear. I am with you."

With heavy footsteps, I begin to follow him toward my brother and sisters. I have waited for this moment for what seems to be a lifetime, and yet it is the hardest journey I have ever had to make. The journey to earn their forgiveness, and my own, lays before me, and I'm not sure I'm strong enough to get there...

✽✽✽

## **Chapter Four: Silent Promises**

There was a time, not so very long ago, that being in this position would have made me cringe with embarrassment at best, and recoil with outright disgust at worst. Now, as Lucy throws her arms around me with unabashed glee, shortly followed by a slightly more controlled Susan, I can't think of any place I'd rather be. I can feel their love, their happiness at my return almost unscathed. I rest my head on Lucy's, closing my eyes and drinking in this sensation, strange and alien as it feels. A feeling of being loved that I had forgotten, like the ghost of a dream. It's so wonderful that I'm only barely aware that Aslan has gone.

As Susan wraps her arms around me, whispers the words we missed you into my ear, the feeling intensifies to the point where I could almost cry. She pulls back, keeping her hand on my shoulder, and gives me an appraising look with those searching, blue-grey eyes. She's assessing the hurt that has been done to me, checking my cut lip and my bruised eye, and for a moment I can see her looking deeper still. She searches my eyes for something, I'm not sure what, and after a moment she finally speaks openly.

"How do you feel?" she asks, and I realise now just how much I had missed her slightly mothering tone.

"I'm okay," I manage after a few seconds, surprised at just how weak my own voice sounds. "A little tired." Susan's response, forming behind the worried expression in her eyes, is cut off by the one voice I had both needed and feared the most. My brother, my hero.

"Get some sleep." His words, though not unkind, are not what bother me. There's no greeting, no welcome back, and certainly no warmth. There's cold steel in his voice, the tang of suppressed anger, and it stings bitterly. All at once, the spell is broken, and as I look upward with hesitant eyes I see that my worst fears are coming true: he doesn't want me back. He can neither forgive nor forget what I have done, and I was an idiot to believe otherwise. Once more feeling the weight of my mistakes on my shoulders, I slowly move in the direction Peter has motioned for me.

"And Edmund?" I turn, hearing a softening in his voice, and look into his eyes, fearful of what I will see. Peter's face softens, creasing into a smile, and I am overjoyed to hear his next words.

"Try not to wander off!"

§§§

I had been five, no, six years old the first time someone had said that to me. Lucy had been ill with a summer cold, and Father had decided that, to give Mother a little peace, he would take the rest of us to the park. We had walked there, talking happily, and I remember enjoying the chance to spend some time with Father. He was always so busy with work, it seemed, that he didn't spend as much time with any of us as he would have liked. I held his hand, talking and laughing, and thrilling every time he smiled at me, or laughed at one of my jokes. It's silly, but it is, to this day, one of my favourite memories.

We ran around for a while, enjoying the summer day. Susan settled down to make daisy chains, while Father, Peter and I started to fly Peter's new kite. We took turns to fly it, watching as it swept back and forth across the slight breeze. Everything was going well, until it became my turn to fly. I got a bit over-excited, and lost control of the kite, sending it crashing into the ground. We could hear it break from where we stood. Father immediately walked over to retrieve it, leaving Peter and myself alone.

"Oh, well done, Edmund!" Peter began to whine. "Why couldn't you just be careful?" I heard the disappointment in his voice, saw the blame in his eyes, and did the very last thing I should have done. I ran. Before Peter could stop me, or father could react, I was gone. I hadn't intended to run far, and I certainly hadn't meant to frighten anyone. But before I knew it, I had lost sight of my family, and anything that even looked familiar.

It must have been a good half an hour before they found me; as it turned out, I hadn't got very far, after all. Father came into view, his face frantic, Peter and Susan close behind. I was standing close to a small copse of trees, bawling my eyes out as any self respecting six

year-old would. As soon as I saw them, I ran forward, desperate to be with my family. Father spotted me at about the same time, and for a second he looked ready to start shouting at me. But a second later, when he took in the state I had worked myself into, he simply dropped to his knees and caught me up in a hug.

Wrapped in his arms, I cried out the fear, quickly following them with tears of remorse at breaking the kite. I repeated the word 'sorry' over and over, the syllables overlapping, my father gently rubbing my back in soothing circles, calming me down slowly. Eventually, he pulled back, setting me down, and his serious expression conveyed without words the gravity of what I had done. After a moment, he smiled, erasing my worry completely.

"Come on," he said, standing and taking my hand gently. "Let's get you home. And, Edmund? Do try not to wander off, okay?" He grinned, letting me know that he was joking, and that he loved me and was glad I was safe. As we made our way to the park's exit, I looked over to Peter, who was walking just a few feet to my left.

"I'm sorry I broke your kite," I managed.

"That's okay, Eddy," he replied after a moment, slipping his arm around my shoulders and giving me a comforting squeeze. "We can always fix it." And with that, it was all forgotten.

§§§

"Try not to wander off!"

Peter has made good use of that line, over the past few years. He has always meant it as a gentle jibe, a joke reserved for when I have done something especially daft. As he says it now, and he smiles that warm, loving smile, I find myself more than a little confused. Has he truly forgiven me? Or is it for show, for my sister's benefit, or even for his own? I decide that I am too tired to tell, and too paranoid as a result of that fatigue. I smile, a little shyly, I suppose, and say nothing. Turning once more, I head toward the tent and the comforting darkness within.

§§§

I wake suddenly, and find myself surrounded by the close warmth of a well appointed tent, instead of the cold of an icy prison cell. There's no sting of ice against my skin, and no bite of rime-coated steel encasing my ankles and wrists. In truth, it takes me by surprise, and I panic for a moment, not knowing where I am. After a few moments, the memories of the past day return, and I breathe a quiet sigh of relief. It's quite dark in the tent, the thick layers of cloth and furs that make up its walls easily blocking the sunlight from outside, save for a thin sliver that betrays the entrance. I can feel myself beginning to doze off again, comfortable in the bed I had found earlier, until something catches my eye, a movement in the darkness.

I catch another movement near the entrance flap, and I quickly realise that I'm not alone. My eyes strain against the gloom, and the shape of the intruder slowly comes into focus. I'm more that a little surprised to find that it is Peter. I think about talking to him, saying something, anything, but nothing comes to mind. I watch him move to leave the tent, and just as I give up on the hope of speaking to him, he turns to face me.

"I'm sorry I woke you," Peter says, his voice heavy. "I brought you some clean clothes. They're on the stool."

"Thanks," I reply quietly, not wanting to invite any of the anger he's obviously feeling. I sit up, gaining my bearings, and make out the pile of fresh garments nearby. Deciding to change as soon as Peter is gone, I reach forward to take the clothing. Peter, who has turned and started to leave again, turns around to face me again when I wince in discomfort, a sharp hiss of pain escaping my lips before I can stop it. My old clothes have caught on one of the various wounds I have gathered on my back over the past few days. He watches me for a second, then asks,

"Are you okay?" There is genuine concern in his voice, a fact that heartens me a little. I whisper a reply, tell him I'm fine and that he shouldn't worry. Peter, not believing me for a second, moves back into the tent and takes a seat on the bed opposite. My eyes have become used to the dark, and I can clearly make out the dour expression on his face. "There's no point lying about it, Ed," he says angrily. "I heard you loud and clear. If you're in pain, someone needs to know. Now come on, out with it."

"My back is just a bit sore," I lie again, and I can see that he doesn't believe me. I can't say I blame him, really; I sound pitiful. In an attempt to show him that I'm fine, I stand up and stretch my arms, barely managing to keep a grimace from my features. Peter just responds with a look that tells me he isn't impressed, and stands up himself.

"What on earth has she done to you, Edmund?" he asks, his voice a little harsh. "Come on, just show me. Please?" I decide, right now, that my pride doesn't matter any more. If I'm to have any chance of repairing my relationship with my brother, I have to let go of my pride and let him in. I bow my head, and slowly move to remove my jumper, gasping a little at the effort of moving my arms so much. Seeing I'm in pain, Peter helps me, his expression softening visibly as he sees just how much trouble I'm having. As I start to shed my shirt, Peter gasps softly.

I can understand why. I hadn't realised just how much weight I had lost. It's probably only a few pounds, but my ribs are showing enough to notice. Ugly, purple bruises mark my pale skin, and as Peter's expression changes from annoyance to shock, then on to pain, I feel tears well up in my eyes. I want to hide, ashamed at what has been done to me, but I swallow hard and let Peter inspect my wounds. He gently places his right hand on my shoulder, and slowly turns me around, appraising every bruise, every mark. When he finally reaches my back, he stops.

"Oh, my God," he whispers, shock colouring his voice. "What in God's name did she do to you?" I can feel him slowly trace the outlines of the welts that I know are criss-crossing my back with his fingertips, and I quietly begin to sob with a mixture of shame and pain. "Are... are these... whip marks?" he asks. I can hear anger beginning to creep into his voice, and I nod slowly, unable to speak for the tears coursing down my face. Gently, Peter turns me round to face him. I look up at him, and see tears of his own forming.

"I'm so sorry, Ed," he manages, close to breaking down. He takes my face in his hands, smoothing my hair back with his fingers, a wild mixture of emotion evident on his face, in his eyes. He softly wipes at my tears with his thumbs, as he continues to speak. "It's all my fault. If I hadn't been so hard on you, or if I'd paid you more attention..."

"I most likely would have done the same thing!" I say loudly, unable to take it any longer, shocking both of us with my sudden outburst. My sorrow has been replaced with a sudden well of anger, and I can feel myself shaking as it takes over. I'm angry at myself, furious that

I have done this to my brother. And I can't let him blame himself any more, not for my wrongdoing, not for my mistakes and actions.

"But... why?" Peter manages to ask.

"Because I could never be the brother you wanted," I say, finally letting go of everything I've been telling myself over the last few days, letting it all out into the open. "I was so jealous of you, Peter. You were always the one I looked up to, always the perfect brother, the perfect son. And I hated myself, because I could never come close. I was a total failure, Peter. And because of that, I began to lash out at everything nearby... I just wanted to push you all away. Because it was easier to tell myself I hated you, to hurt you enough to make you go away, than it was to make myself better. To make myself worthy of... of you."

"Edmund, stop. Please?"

I hear Peter, but I can't stop myself. Just as it did not more than a couple of hours ago, everything comes rushing out. Every moment that has defined me for the last three years floods out, a continuous stream of pain, of jealousy, anger and perceived loss. I even tell him about the first time I had been beaten up at school, of how it had damaged my faith in Peter; not because he had done anything wrong, but because I was a spoiled brat, and no other good reason, so far as I could see. As my words finally finish, and become replaced by near uncontrollable sobs, I say the words that I most need to.

"I love you Peter. No matter what I told you, I didn't mean it. I know you must hate me, but I... I needed you to know..." Peter gently presses a finger up to my lips, quieting me without a word. I look up at him again, see the sheer sorrow in his eyes, and my own crying increases. My words become replaced by a whimper of I'm so sorry, which gets repeated, again and again, the words merging into a long string of regret. Slowly, tentatively, he reaches forward and pulls me into an embrace. He doesn't say a word, just holds me tight against his chest as I cry myself out. He keeps his arms well clear of my back, and clings onto my shoulders, one hand softly stroking my hair, soothing me as best he can. He doesn't say it out loud, but I can sense his love for me. And all of a sudden it hits me, the reason for his behaviour earlier, the source of my confusion...

He must have been so angry at what I had done. Peter must have been torn between that anger and this love, a need to comfort me warring against his fury at my betrayal. It's just one more thing I have done, one more hurt placed upon my brother's soul. Not wanting to break the moment, never wanting to let go, I wrap my own arms around my brother and hold him tight. After a moment that seems like an eternity, I finally hear him whisper the words I have wanted to hear for so very, very long...

"You bloody idiot."

Peter backs away slightly, and looks me straight in the eye, a sad yet genuine smile crossing his lips. When I see that he didn't mean it in a horrible way, I manage a weak smile of my own. "Why can't you ever see what's in front of you, Ed? I have never hated you, not once. I might have hated what you've done, but I never stopped loving you. I love you, Eddy, don't ever forget that. You're my little brother, and you mean more to me, to all of us, than you will ever know. But I see now I should have talked to you, instead of trying to beat your habits out of you. If I'd just tried a bit harder..."

"Now who's being the bloody idiot?" I grin, wiping the last vestiges of my tears away and giving a hearty sniff. I have to stop his train of thought, stop him from hurting himself any further. "You're not perfect, you know. You can't protect me all the time."

"I know," he says, smiling down at me with that sweet, golden smile. "But I have to try. What are big brothers for? And don't swear!"

"You started it!" I gasp in mock horror, giving him a playful poke in the ribs. He just smiles again and gently cuffs my shoulder. I can't help but laugh then, for the first time in forever, and Peter joins me. It just feels so good to have my family back, to have my brother once more, that I don't ever want this feeling to end. Somehow, we end up in another embrace; not one of comfort, or of tears, but of pure, unrestrained love. I know I have a lot of ground to cover before I can truly make up for what I have done to my family, but as Peter drops a tender, brotherly kiss onto my forehead, I know that everything's going to be alright.

"I missed you," I hear him breathe, and I know he's not just talking about my absence of the last few days. "I missed you, little brother." In return, I simply smile to myself.

I have my family. I don't need anything else. As Peter finally offers to help me dress, then tells me that it's nearly time for lunch, I smile to myself. And on the spot, I make a silent promise that never again will I let anyone hurt my family, or harm them in any way.

Especially not me.

✚✚✚

## **Chapter Five: Moments of Light**

The view from up here is fantastic. Around me, the centaur and faun archers are preparing for the battle to begin, and I wonder for a moment if they appreciate the view as I do. This place, this whole country in fact, is beautiful. I've never seen the like; having grown up in London, I've never seen such magnificent scenery, not even when we got evacuated to the countryside. I wish I could go and explore it all. I wish I could share the sights with my family.

And I wish, more than anything at the moment, that I could have seen it on any day other than today...

I fidget in my armour, trying to get the chainmail hauberk to sit right. I can't quite get used to the feel of it; funnily, three days ago I couldn't have told you what a 'hauberk' was. Let alone a 'gambeson' or a 'tabard'! And yet here I am wearing them, desperately trying to look the part of someone fighting in a war, and not like a scared boy from Finchley who wished he didn't have to be here. Deep down, I know that I must. I owe it to these people, to my family and to Aslan, to fight in this battle. But I'm scared nonetheless; how could Peter look so calm when he rode out to the front?

I wish I was down there with him. When he ordered me to take charge of the archers, I will admit that a small part of me was relieved. I was terrified of leading the charge, even with Peter there to protect me. But knowing he's down there, looking every part the King I know he is, ready to lead the attack, knowing that he might just die and I won't be able to do anything about it... It makes me feel sick to my stomach. Too many people have been

killed because of me already, and I don't want the next to be my own brother. I love him far too much, and after the last few days, I have come to appreciate just how much he loves me in return; how much they all do. I don't want to lose that, not now...

*§§§*

My first day in Aslan's camp seemed to go very quickly. After my talk with Peter, the first real conversation I had had with him in years, I had felt awfully tired; drained, almost. It was as though the outpouring of all my pain, of all my jealousy and spite and anger, had left me feeling... hollow. It's the only word I have to describe it. I was still tired from my time with the Witch, but this was different. A kind of dull ache that ran all through my body, a feeling of just wanting to hide away from the world.

As it turned out, a hug was the next best thing. Lucy made sure of that. As Peter and I left the tent, me wiping my eyes clear of my recent tears, Lucy came running over to tell us that lunch had been arranged. As soon as she saw me, a look of deepest sympathy crossed her features, and she threw her arms around my middle. I found myself thinking again that, not so long ago, I would have been horrified. In all truth, I still was, a little. I guess that part of who I used to be involved not being a very tactile person; just another form of cutting myself off from the world. I held my little sister close, and shot Peter a look that I hoped said I wanted to talk to her alone for a moment. He nodded silently, and left us alone.

"I need to tell you something," I murmured after a moment, gently pulling away from my little sister. She looked up at me expectantly, concern in her eyes, and my heart broke all over again at the thought of upsetting her. I couldn't tell her about Tumnus, it would hurt her far too much; maybe later, when I could figure out how best to tell her, I would. But not then. "I'm sorry for being such a beast", I offered instead, hoping for the best.

"Oh, Edmund, don't," Lucy sighed, reaching out and rubbing my arm affectionately. "I heard what you said to Peter. I know that eaves-dropping is bad, but I wanted to see where you had got to, you were both so long. I don't know why you did what you did, Edmund, but I do know how sorry you are, and that you just needed to know someone cared about you. And I do." She turned, hooking her arm around my own and leading me slowly over to where Susan and Peter waited for us. I was completely shocked, speechless in fact. She'd heard it all, and her response was simple, unconditional forgiveness. I was amazed, in all truth, and my expression must have shown it.

"You were horrid, Ed," she continued, grinning up at me, her eyes twinkling briefly, "but I always knew that you didn't really hate us. It was just a case of us getting through that we didn't hate you, it seems." She looked up at me again, stopping in her tracks and looking thoughtful. "You can always talk to me, you know, if you feel that way again. You're my brother, after all. I might not get it all, but... I love you, and that's what matters. Right?"

"Absolutely," I said, smiling as warmly as I could muster, and slipped my arm away from hers and put it around her shoulders. We walked like that, Lucy smiling in that totally heartfelt way she does, and me smiling on the inside, until we reached Peter and Susan. Susan got up and greeted me with another hug, while Peter just smiled and nodded, apparently happy with what I had done. I knew I still had to apologise to Su, but I was willing to wait for a short while and talk to her after lunch.

Lunch was a fairly quiet affair. Lucy chatted happily about her morning activities, playing with some of the dryads and talking to the fauns. I just sat and smiled, enjoying the feeling

of having my family around me. Susan shared some of her morning as well, and I could hear the excitement in her voice as she described a conversation with a Talking Gorilla. Throughout it all, Peter stayed silent, and I assumed that he was just enjoying hearing the girls talk as much as I was. At least, until I noticed the sad glances he occasionally shot my way. Part of the expression he wore was difficult to read, almost as though he was afraid I would just fade into thin air, or disperse like smoke.

The rest of it was all too easy to read. I could see the hurt in his eyes, though he hid it well, and it slowly dawned on me that whilst he had forgiven me, and was overjoyed to have me back, it was going to take a while to regain his trust, and for the pain of my actions to fade. I accepted that without question; my family could take as long as they needed, and I would do all I could to redeem myself in their eyes. It hurt, a little, but by that point I didn't much care. To be whole again was worth any price.

Eventually, Peter made his excuses and left, stating that he was going to find the army's general; apparently he had begun tutoring Peter in the use of a sword. My brother must have caught something in my expression, because he relaxed slightly, and explained that he felt it would be better for me to rest than to join him. I nodded quietly, and watched him leave, feeling a lump forming in my chest as it began to hit home just how much work I was going to have to do. Minutes later, Lucy got up to leave herself, leaving me alone with my older sister. For long moments, we sat quietly, Susan watching me thoughtfully, while I figured out what I was going to say to her.

"He's just worried about you, you know," Susan said after a moment, before taking another bite of her bread and jam. She swallowed before continuing "We all are. What happened, Edmund?"

I had planned on saying that I was sorry, that I hadn't meant to hurt her or the others, the same litany I had repeated for days now, both openly and privately, and would probably be repeating for years to come. Instead, Susan's gentle question pulled me up short, and I floundered for a moment, unsure of how to answer.

"I'm not sure I know, any more," I finally answered. I looked at her, and wasn't surprised to see a look of disappointment on her face. All three of my siblings had reacted to my actions in different ways, over the years; Lucy got hurt and cried, Peter got angry, occasionally to the point of hitting me. But Susan... she always had a way of looking at me, a look that said she wished I would grow up, that I would better myself. Instead of getting hurt or angry, she tried to reprove me, which used to anger me almost as much as Peter trying to be the father of our little group. This time, though, I could understand why she looked at me that way; after all, I was more than a little ashamed of myself. Which is why I was so surprised at what came next.

"We really messed up, didn't we?" she said, sidling over to me and slipping her left arm around my shoulders. "I really messed up. It all started at that awful school, didn't it? You were always such a sensitive boy when you were younger... when the bullies got to you, I should have done something to help, or told Peter to pay more attention. Instead of trying to help, I just threw what you were doing back at you, and nagged you to be better. I'm sorry."

"You didn't do anything wrong," I managed, after a few moments. Her words had stunned me to say the least. I could understand Peter wanting to blame himself for my wrongdoing; he was, well, Peter. Always taking on the weight of the world. But Susan? Again, I wasn't

about to let someone else take the blame for me. "It was all me," I said, perhaps a bit harshly. "My fault, Susan, not yours. I was an absolute monster, Su. I did so much damage to our family..."

"And if we had helped, maybe you wouldn't have gone down that path," she said, cutting me off. With her right hand, she reached up and slowly turned my chin so that I faced her. "I'm not condoning what you did, Ed. You did a lot of things wrong, and you hurt all of us, at one point or another. It's going to take time to undo that. But we weren't blameless in all this, Edmund. I'm apologising for my part in this, just like you did, and I needed you to know."

"But... but I hadn't apologised to you yet," I managed to stutter, my voice thick with emotion. "I'd talked to Peter and Lu, but I hadn't had a chance to..."

"Yes, yes you did," Su said, cutting me off mid-sentence again. "When you came down that hill with Aslan, your apology was written all over your face, in your eyes. I could see that the Witch had hurt you, that you had realised what you had done and felt sorry for it, and I remember feeling that I loved you so much, and was sorry for you. You really wouldn't have needed to say any more than you did with that look. And after all, Aslan said that we didn't need to talk about this."

"But, I did," I whispered, biting back the tears that threatened to fall for the third time that day. "I needed to tell you... how sorry I am. I needed to say it out loud. I had to start somewhere."

"I know," she said, smiling warmly. "Like I said, you were always sensitive, for a boy. You know, I really missed you Edmund. Today seems like the first time I've seen you in years; the real you, that is. I hope the other you is gone for good. I love you too much to lose you to him again." At these last words, I was completely undone. I shut my eyes against the inevitable tears, but they came anyway, silently flowing and leaving hot trails down my cheeks. Susan leaned forward, and lay a single, tender kiss on my temple, before drawing me into her arms. I leaned against her, resting my head against her shoulder, and wept silently.

The first time, weeping before Aslan that morning, it had been a way of letting go of my guilt, of owning up to all I had done. It had been a moment of pure release, and it had opened the way for my healing, for my redemption. When I had cried with Peter, I had been letting go of my pain, the feelings of worthlessness, of inadequacy, that had started it all. A way of tearing down the walls between my brother and I, and a way of telling him just how sorry I was for what we had lost. I had been totally honest with him for the first time in years, letting him in, letting him see the real me.

But sitting there, quietly sobbing into Susan's shoulder, bitter-sweet, salty tears slowly soaking into the fabric of her dress, it was for pure, unrestrained sorrow. Sadness for all I had done to my family, for all my wrongs... Sadness for what had been done to me, for the pain I had endured, for the abuses the Witch and her dwarf had heaped upon me, some of which I had no name for... Sadness for a boy I barely remembered, a boy who had been dead for so long I was no longer sure if he existed, deep within me; the Edmund that was, the Edmund that had been. A carefree, smart, fun-loving and caring little boy, whose coffin I had put the last nail into the day my father left...

I wept for myself, selfish as that sounds. Because, in all truth, I missed that part of myself.

I missed my family, I missed being able to make them happy as much as they made me happy, and I wept for that, too. And, somewhere amongst all the pain and loss and tears, I realised something. He wasn't dead at all, just lost. The old me was still there, beneath the surface. And with some work, and with the help of my brother and sisters, I knew then that there was hope for the old Edmund yet. And so it was that I finally spoke, whispering to both my sister, and to the part of myself I thought had been lost long ago.

"I missed you too..."

✂✂

## **Chapter Six: Shades of Grey**

By the end of my first day at Aslan's camp, it was becoming painfully obvious that my path to redemption was destined to be a rocky one. Any time I passed one of my siblings, I was greeted by sad glances hidden behind warm smiles. Peter was perhaps the hardest one to deal with; I knew, deep down, that it would take him the longest to come to terms with me, and what I had done. After the third time of practically running into him around the increasingly small encampment, I was just about ready to scream. I watched as his first response, an obvious expression of relief and affection, was quickly replaced by an awkward stiffness in his character, a sudden formality, that left me feeling like a complete stranger in some ways.

Susan was warmer with me, but I could still see the pain in her eyes, and I couldn't shake the idea that she blamed herself, in part, for my betrayal. That was something I wasn't willing to accept, but for the sake of peace I kept quiet. Of the three of them, Lucy was the easiest to deal with. Even if her response to seeing was almost always a hug... it seemed to my slightly paranoid mind that it was as much to comfort herself, let her know that I really was there, as it was to comfort me. But every time she did, it just brought the guilt of my actions, and the guilt of Mr. Tumnus, flooding back. Looking into those ever-cheerful eyes, though, I quickly forgot my worries, if only for a few moments.

The hardest thing to deal with, though, was the rest of the camp. Everywhere I went, suspicious stares followed my every footstep. After a couple of hours, the atmosphere was beginning to press in on me from all sides, and I just wanted to run and hide. Traitor, they said. Witch's Servant. Groups of dwarfs, Talking Animals and other creatures would stop talking as I passed, hostile glares following me until they thought I was out of earshot, then followed by fervent, sharp whispers. There was no sign of Aslan, and I was deeply sorry for that fact. Of all the Narnians, I felt that he might just understand what I was going through.

Just before supper was due to be served, the dark cloud that had been following me around broke out into outright conflict, with the person I had least expected it to come from. Mr. Beaver had avoided me all day, deliberately walking away from me whenever we caught sight of each other. As evening began to draw in, however, he came to find me. From what little I could read of his expression, he was not at all happy about the matter, and would clearly have rather been in any other place than near me.

"Son of Adam," he said, stopping a short distance away from me. He had taken me by surprise, as I hadn't seen him approach, and I jumped slightly as his rough accent snapped me from my thoughts. "King Peter asked me to find you. Your supper is being served shortly." He hesitated for a moment, something clearly on his mind.

"I hope you realise what you nearly cost us," he snapped after a pregnant pause, his voice sharp to the point of nearly being a hiss. "Because of you, yer selfish little blighter, the Prophecy was nearly stopped. We could have lost the war. We might have lost Aslan's favour. Narnia could well have been destroyed, might still be destroyed, all because of some... some..."

"Some what?" I countered, heat rising to my cheeks and anger building in my chest. "Go on, say it. Traitor."

"Yes, traitor," Beaver finished. "How could you do it to us, eh? You didn't even give us a chance! You just ran straight to her, with open arms, straight into her tender comforts! How could you? And you dare to show your face here, and walk around the place like an honoured guest... Why Aslan didn't just destroy yer on the spot, I don't know."

"I wonder the same thing myself," I snapped back, fists clenched at my sides. "But I guess that's for him to know, and for us to wonder. He certainly hasn't told me."

Beaver looked ready to launch into another tirade on what he thought of me, but instead he just stopped. He glared at me, poison in his eyes. And then it dawned on me that he wasn't just looking at me; he was looking past me. I turned, following his gaze, and came face to face with my brother. Peter stood not five feet behind me, an incredulous look on his face, a look I knew all too well. I had seen it often enough; it was a look he used when he couldn't believe what I had just done, and was about to start shouting about it.

"Mind if I ask what's going on?" he asked, his voice neutral, but with an icy undercurrent. For once, his sharp stare wasn't directed at me, but was instead aimed squarely at Mr. Beaver. I stepped sideways slightly, into his line of sight, and made Peter focus on me.

"It was me," I said sharply, not wanting Peter to get involved. "It was just me, being my usual self, okay? Just leave it." I don't know why I didn't want Peter to help, but I just didn't want him to face off against Beaver for my sake. I stormed past Peter, not daring to look into his eyes, and went to find my sisters.

A part of me was beginning to wish that I hadn't been rescued. As good as it was to be amongst my family again, it was all too clear that no-one else wanted me around. Dinner was a grim affair, with no-one talking; the girls could no doubt sense how hurt I was feeling, but didn't know how to approach it, as such. Peter just sat staring at me, pain and worry etched on his face as he chewed his way through his food. I couldn't meet any of their eyes. It hurt too much, and I could feel myself slipping further and further into apathy.

I finished eating, and made to stand. Lucy tried reaching out, placing her hand on mine. It would have been a comforting gesture, a reminder that no matter what anyone else thought of me, she at least loved me, as did the others. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't open myself up again, not even for her. I was too tired, too spent, and in too much pain. And so I walked. I left the sad eyes of my family behind, even ignoring Peter as he said my name, and headed for our tent.

§§§

I cried myself to sleep that night. I just lay on my bed, silent tears soaking into my pillow, until my eyes were sore and my throat hurt from the quiet, whispered sobs. I was vaguely aware of Peter entering our tent, but when he didn't say anything I feigned sleep, not wanting to speak to him. Eventually, sleep came, but it brought neither rest nor comfort. For most of the night, I was plagued by nightmares; dreams of Her, the things she did to

me, merged with the faces of everyone who I had caught whispering about me. It all swirled and merged together, and it seemed mere minutes later that I awoke, sweat pouring from me, and Beaver's words ringing in my ears.

Traitor. That's precisely what I was. The word ran through my mind, taunting me, as I sat gasping for breath, still haunted by the dreams. I wanted to cry out, to scream, to hit something, but at the same time found I couldn't move. My limbs felt like they were made of lead, and my heart was hammering in my chest, fit to explode. I thought for a moment that I might pass out, and I gulped down air in an effort to calm myself. It didn't work. I hadn't had a panic attack since I was a small child, and a small part of my mind was horrified as it realised that I was having another one, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

As the tent began to swim in my vision, I was suddenly aware of strong arms wrapping around my shoulders, and the sensation of being embraced. As Peter pulled me against his chest, began stroking my hair and whispering soothing words into my ear, I slowly began to calm down. Panicked tears coursed down my cheeks as my breathing began to slow, returning to normal. Above me, Peter continued whispering his litany of comfort, until the tears stopped altogether.

It's okay... hush, little brother... she can't hurt you here... you're safe...

Gathering myself, I pulled myself away from my brother a small distance and looked up at him. His expression was clear; I had worried him, and from the rings under his eyes he hadn't slept very much at all, no doubt listening to me fret in my sleep. Those piercing blue eyes held mine, and the question they held was plain enough.

"I'm fine," I said, my trembling voice betraying the lie in my words. "It was just a bad dream." I pulled back completely, turning slightly away from Peter. I prayed he would take the hint and just leave me alone. On hindsight, I'm glad that Peter can be a little dense when it comes to things like that.

"I heard what Beaver said to you," he whispered, his voice thick. "He had no right, Ed. No right at all, and I told him so. Has anyone else said anything? If they have, they'll have me to deal with!" I shook my head in response, not wanting to cause any more trouble.

"Ed, come on," my brother said, a little louder but no less soft. His right hand moved up to the back of my head, and he began working his fingers through my hair, reminding me of our father. "You can trust me, okay?" I continued to look away, not wanting to meet his gaze.

"I'm sorry I was a bit of a prig with you yesterday," Peter continued regardless. "It's not easy, you know? I guess I'm just trying to get used to having the 'old you' back. It's just felt... strange; I guess old habits die hard. But you can talk to me, I hope you know that. Please don't shut me out again." Peter heaved a sigh, and I looked back at him.

"I'm sorry," I said sadly, and I meant it. "I guess old habits really do die hard. I want to be better, I really do, but I'm such a failure, Peter..."

"Don't ever say that," Peter countered, his face hardening. "You made a mistake, I'll give you that. But you aren't a failure, Edmund. Aslan forgave you. The girls forgave you. And so have I, believe it or not. If Oreius and the others had had to kidnap you, rather than rescue you, it might be a bit different. But I heard you last night. You fought the Witch as best you could, from what I could make out, despite how much she obviously hurt you.

The only failure was mine, Ed. You're too young to have gone through what you did. I should have found a way to protect you."

"Peter, don't start that again. It's not your fault, it was mine. Look, can we... start over? I know it sounds stupid, but I just want to put it all behind me. I want to get to know you again. I want to get to know me."

"A fresh start?" He looked thoughtful, then gave me a sly grin. "Very well. But on one condition. If anyone else gives you any trouble, tell me, okay?"

§§§

Peter was good to his word; he was more open with me, and while he couldn't hide his pain entirely, he put a brave face on. At breakfast, I talked with the girls, and apologised for my actions of the night before. Lucy was Lucy, cheerfully telling me to forget it and that she understood; I felt then that I truly didn't deserve her. And from the look on Susan's face as she accepted my apology, Peter had told her about my confrontation with Mr. Beaver, and she understood completely. I was relieved, truth told, and when I explained that I wanted a fresh start, they all heartily agreed. As we finished breakfast, Peter mentioned that he was going for more training with the army's general. Catching my sad look, he grinned widely and said,

"Don't look so put out, Ed. The general asked me if you would come along too."

I had, of course, agreed on the spot. The idea that not everyone in the camp hated me entirely was quite comforting, and I was both excited and nervous at the idea of using a real sword. Peter led me out to a neighbouring field, where several centaurs and fauns were sparring. As we passed, most of them stopped and saluted Peter; their response to me was markedly less polite. In response, Peter just smiled and slipped his arm around my shoulder, squeezing it gently.

After a short while, Peter pointed out the armoured form of the general, a large centaur sparring with another of his kind. The general spotted us, and immediately called a halt to his own training and trotted over to us. As he did so, he removed his helmet, and a moment later I recognised him as the centaur that had saved me from the Witch's camp. Oreius gave a stiff bow, bending at the waist, and smiled at both myself and my brother.

He explained that, for a change, Peter would be training with one of the fauns, and learning some more advanced sword techniques for fighting on foot. When General Oreius then announced that he would be overseeing my first sword training personally, I suddenly felt very nervous. Peter reassured me that it would be alright, and then left to one of the armourer's tents to get ready. I watched him go, then turned back to face the general. He looked at me, his expression kind but a little sad, I thought.

"I wondered if we might talk first, my King," he said. "Walk with me, if you will. I would like to get to know you better." We walked into a clearer part of the field, Oreius keeping his pace slow so that I could keep up. I was so nervous that I could barely think straight. As it turned out, I needn't have been.

"Why did you go to her, your Majesty?" The question was a simple one, but I didn't want to talk about my more personal reasons with someone who wasn't a part of my family, save perhaps Aslan. When I didn't answer straight away, Oreius stopped and turned to face me. "You do not need to tell me of your problems with your family," he explained. "But I wonder... could you not tell she was evil?"

"She was kind to me at first," I said, swallowing thickly and talking slowly, wanting to find the right words. "She offered me warm words when I felt my family didn't want me. She told me I could be a prince, and fed me sweets. I didn't know anything of Aslan, and I was just too blinded by my greed. When we got back to Narnia, all I could think of was going to her. I wish so much that I hadn't." I looked up into the great centaur's eyes, and saw a look of compassion and pity.

"Evil sometimes wears a pleasant face," he said, his voice almost sad. "Many of far greater years than yourself have learned that, at a far greater price. I must apologise, Majesty, for judging you perhaps too harshly. When first I heard of your betrayal, I took it as it appeared. I should have learned you before I judged you."

"I think a lot of Narnians see me the same as you did," I said, as we continued walking toward a tent in the distance. I could see a group of dwarfs working outside, and knew somehow that this tent would be some kind of armoury. "There's been a lot of talking."

"I would have thought the silences were harder to bear," Oreius replied, a note of what I took to be humour colouring his voice. "I have seen the way the camp has been treating you, Majesty. They will come around, given time."

"I don't think they will," I sighed. "And they have every right not to. I did betray them, after all, whether I meant to or not. It's a price I'll have to pay." The general stopped as we reached the tent, and regarded me with a strange expression in his eyes. I thought he would say something more, but instead he simply ushered me toward the tent, and called out to one of the armourers. A gruff looking dwarf, whose name I later learned was Briarthorn, took me inside, and the business of getting me outfitted began.

§§§

Two hours later, as the sun began its final climb to midday, I found myself standing on a lush green hillside, learning the art of the sword. Wisely, Oreius had started me off with a wooden training sword, and had begun teaching me the basic movements involved. I would like to think that I was a fast learner, but in all truth I suspected that I was in fact more than a little clumsy, if the general's expression was anything to go by. But learn I did, and by the time lunch was served I had picked up a few of the basic patterns, blocks and attacks and the like.

As the afternoon progressed, my training continued, until I had learned enough to start with a proper sword. The change in weight caught me by surprise at first, but I adapted, and before long the slow, steady cadence of my movements had begun to speed up. As evening began to approach, Oreius suggested we try an actual sparring session, moving slowly so that I could learn with minimal risk to either of us. Happily, I agreed.

A short way into the match, I noticed that a small crowd was beginning to form, watching us from a distance. I tried to ignore them, ignore the stares and the whispered mutterings I fancied I could hear from the assembled creatures. As the bout continued, I became more and more distracted, more and more fearful of the collective gaze of the other soldiers. Eventually, when the weight of it all became almost unbearable, I made a mistake.

Had we been sparring properly, I could well have been seriously injured, maybe even killed. I lost my concentration, and didn't parry at the right moment, or at the right angle. Before I had even realised what had happened, the point of the general's broadsword was resting gently against my right collar-bone. The weapon was quickly removed and sheathed,

and the general removed his helm to look at me face to face. Embarrassed and ashamed, I looked away.

"Pay them no heed, Majesty," he said, gently turning my face toward him with one large, calloused hand. He graced me with a smile, then looked up at the gathered soldiers. Under his withering gaze, they quickly went back to what they had been doing. Looking down at me, seeing how upset I was with the whole situation, the general seemed to come to a decision.

"How many summers are you, my King," he asked me, his voice soft.

"Ten, nearly eleven," I answered, unsure of where he was going with his question.

"Ten summers?" he repeated, a slight hint of shock entering his tone. "So young... astounding."

"What is?" I asked, a little confused.

"That you have endured so much in such a small time, Majesty. You have endured the Witch's enchantments, and her tortures, and you have come out almost whole. Many of far greater years and maturity have endured as much, and have been undone by it. And some turned to her side under far less duress. And yet, here you stand, concerned above all else that you are not worthy of being here, or worthy of our fealty. This more than anything else, has impressed me."

What came next shocked me, and it is something that I will be eternally grateful to Oreius for. If you have ever seen a horse kneel, you will know just how awkward the whole affair is, not to mention how much more difficult the whole process of standing back up is. But that is precisely what the general did; he knelt.

"King Edmund, chosen of Aslan," he said, his voice deep and grave, "I pledge myself to you. My sword, my shield, my very life are yours, in His name and the name of his great Father, the Emperor-Over-The-Sea. I will serve you, as I will serve your royal brother and sisters, until the very end, if that is what is required of me."

"Thank you." I'm not sure if I was meant to say anything at that point, but it seemed appropriate. I was completely taken aback, and for a moment I was so moved that I felt in danger of crying. Instead, I blushed awfully, and squirmed a little. Oreius spread his arms and bowed even further, apparently pleased with my response. And it was then that I saw that we were being watched again.

The crowd had reformed, to a lesser degree, but those that were there were no longer glaring in undisguised contempt. There were gazes of understanding, embarrassment, and a dozen more emotions there. They had heard, and had apparently come to a better understanding of my story. As Oreius stood, and my attention was drawn back to him, I wondered about how this would affect my standing with the rest of the camp.

"You have been forgiven by Aslan, and by your family," he said quietly. "The rest will follow, in time. As your people come to know you, they will eventually come to judge you on what is, not just what has been. Act well, and have faith, my King. Aslan provides."

The general and I walked into the camp together. Everywhere we went, there were whispers and stares, but they didn't seem as hostile as they had the previous day. Oreius and I talked amongst ourselves as we walked, about tactics and the art of war, and about the land of Narnia and her varied peoples. As I got to know the centaur, I came to better

appreciate his advice and wisdom. He was gently spoken, and kind-hearted, and I could see why Peter spoke so highly of him.

When we finally reached my family's tents, Peter was waiting for me. Oreius stopped a few metres short, and after nodding and saluting to my brother, he turned and congratulated me on my work that day. He then saluted once more, before turning and leaving. As I watched him go, Peter moved up beside me and slid his left arm around my shoulders.

"So, how did it go?" he asked nonchalantly, with an air that said he knew precisely what had happened. I looked at him curiously, and he simply smiled sidelong at me.

"You knew what he was planning to do, didn't you?" I said, more of a statement than a question. Peter's grin widened.

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything," he said quietly. "After Beaver and the others yesterday, you just looked so down. So I went to see the general and asked his advice. He just said something about leading by example; I didn't find out what he had done until about three minutes before you arrived."

"Word travels fast, huh?" I said, less than impressed at my brother, but more thankful for him than I had been in years. I looked at him square on, turning to face him. "Thank you, for everything," I said. Peter smiled warmly, patting me on the shoulder.

"You're welcome, little brother," he said. "Come on, supper is being served in a while, and you look like you could do with a rest and a freshen-up."

"Too right," I replied. "I never knew that sword fighting could be so exhausting!"

By the end of the first day, it had become painfully obvious that my path to redemption was destined to be a rocky one. By the end of the second day, it was becoming clear that I had started on that path, and that it would most likely be harder than even I guessed. But I also realised something else. I had my family, and I had apparently made at least one friend. Things weren't as bad as they had seemed, sitting alone in that cell, just four days and a whole lifetime ago.

With my life caught between the flashing moments of light and the infinite shades of grey that would come, I was not alone. And I had the greatest defence of all.

Love.

✂✂

## **Chapter Seven: The Meaning of Sacrifice**

There are so many of them...

Over the last few days, as I have come to terms with the idea of fighting a battle, I have been getting more and more nervous about this moment, more and more scared. This morning, seeing Aslan's army fully arrayed around the mountain, some of that fear had begun to fade, even if only a little. We have even more soldiers than I had realised; hundreds of centaurs, satyrs, and fauns, rank after rank of Talking Animals of every shape and size, from leopards and gorillas to at least one massive rhinoceros. Waiting in reserve, we have a whole air force at our command, from small, swift kestrels, to proud eagles and

majestic gryphons. But it's not going to be enough... God help us, it's not going to be enough...

I can't even guess how many of them there are. In truth, I don't even want to think about it. Part of me wants to run and hide, or to be sick on the spot. And a part of me can't move, or react, because I know that somewhere down there, she is there. She has to be. I can't see her giving up the chance to cause yet more pain and suffering. She'll want to lead from the front, to personally see to it that as many of us die as possible, preferably all of us. I look at her army, and I can't help but think that we are all doomed... No, I can't. If I start down that path, I'll be of no use to anyone.

Peter's down there. My brother, my heroic brother, is down there, facing off against the Witch's forces. Yesterday morning, when I told him I believed in him, I meant every word of it. When I saw him in his armour this morning, looking nervous and proud all at once, I began to believe even more. When he turned to me, and wished me luck, I was more proud of him than I think I've ever felt. We hugged, and he told me that he loved me. He made me promise that if it all went wrong, that if it looked like we were going to lose, that I had to do my best to find the girls and get them to safety. I tried arguing that it wouldn't go that way, trying to keep him up-built; he just insisted even harder. So I promised him, and sent him on his way. But not before I told him again that I believed in him, and that I loved him too.

And I do, oh, how I do. If anyone can lead us to victory, I believe he can. Aslan believed in him, the girls believe in him. Who am I to believe any different? He's only thirteen, only three years older than I am, but he's already a leader, already a king. Everyone can see it. I can see it in every pair of eyes, on every face, the complete belief that he is their king, and that my family will lead them to victory. It shines through all of the fear. They believe in us; they even believe in me...

And I wish, oh, how I wish I could feel the same...

§§§

My second full day in Aslan's camp started in much the same way as the first. I awoke from a dreadful nightmare, soaked in sweat and gasping for breath. Within seconds, Peter had me sitting up, wrapped in his arms, with me clinging onto fistfuls of my bed covers for dear life. He held me as I calmed down, rubbing my back in gentle circles as I sobbed fitfully into his tunic, whispering to me to keep breathing. He rocked me back and forth, gently stroking my hair, just as he had the morning before, and so many mornings in the past, when Mum and Dad weren't around to hear my dreams.

I just wanted so badly for it to end; I was tired of the nightmares, tired of the pain, tired of seeing Her eyes every time I shut my own. And this was just two full days since my rescue, about a week after entering Narnia... how much longer would it last? Peter sat back as I finally started drying my eyes, and regarded me with concern written all over his face. I knew that eventually, I would have to tell someone about what the Witch had done to me, the things that Ginnarbrik had done to me on her behalf. But I couldn't, not yet, and I prayed he wouldn't ask me.

"Feeling better?" Peter asked, moving around slightly, so that he could look me in the eyes. I offered a weak smile, and nodded slowly. Piercing blue eyes looked straight back at mine,

and I could see the worry they held. He wasn't convinced, and I couldn't honestly blame him for that fact.

"I'm fine. Honest," I said quietly, my voice a little hoarse. After a while, and a very long, meaningful stare, Peter decided not to say what he obviously wanted to. There was a question there, in his eyes, and another expression that I recognised; Peter was forming a plan, or deciding on something. I had a slight feeling that I didn't want to know what it was. He sat back and tried to give me a reassuring smile, one that didn't quite touch the worry in his eyes.

"Okay," he said, his voice quiet and thoughtful. "So long as you're sure. Listen, Ed..." Peter stopped for a moment, and reached up with his left hand, brushing some of my hair out of my eyes. "I meant what I said yesterday. She can't get to you here; I won't let her. None of us will." With that, he stood, and after offering me one last smile, he left me to go and get ready for the day.

After Peter left, I thought long and hard about what he had said. She couldn't get to me here, could she? Somehow, I knew that Peter would be good to his word. He would fight for me, protect me as well as he could; after such a long time, with me acting the way I had, I felt that Peter wouldn't want to risk losing me again. He had always been protective, ever since he was little, and the memories of those days actually made me smile.

And Peter wasn't alone. I'm not sure when it happened, or even why, but at some point Aslan came into my thoughts. As I thought about the Lion, about the things he had said to me, and the feeling of warmth and belonging that I now associated with his memory, I began to feel safe. The fear of her was still there, but knowing that my brother and the Lion were there for me, that they stood between Jadis and me, it seemed... less, somehow. I doubt I'll ever be able to describe the feeling properly. Feeling better in myself, I finally got out of bed, and started to get dressed.

§!§

Peter's plan came to light a short while later, as we all sat down for breakfast. I had found that, as I had begun to feel better about my situation that morning, my appetite had returned in full force, a fact that the girls seemed to take great delight in commenting on. As I demolished my second boiled egg, Susan made a comment about slowing down before I choked myself to death, a genuine smile showing in her voice. I simply gave her my most dashing smile as a response, and crammed another spoonful of egg into my mouth.

Lucy giggled, and Peter just smiled, raised his eyebrows slightly, and went to stretch his legs, clutching his cup thoughtfully. Susan made a good show of looking scandalised, but I could see it in her eyes; she was just thankful that I was there with them, eating my fill, and mostly healthy. Barely stopping for breath, I declared single combat on a rack of toast and a pot of lemon curd. Susan decided to give in, and resolved herself to taking a couple of the slices for herself before I finished it all on my own. Lucy summed up the scene a moment later.

"Narnia's not going to run out of toast, Ed!" she said, laughing. I smiled around my breakfast, before swallowing and taking another bite.

"You'd best pack up enough for the journey home."

As Peter spoke up, from his position leaning against one of the larger boulders that lined the valley we were camped in, I felt my heart sink a little. Not because of the thought of

going home, oh no. It sank because I had an awful feeling as to what he was going to say next. If I knew Peter at all, he was about to say something dreadfully brave, and somewhat foolish. That would be just like Peter, ever the hero.

Another part of me, though, a small, selfish part, was glad that there was an opportunity to go home. I could go back to an ordinary life, and have a second chance at living it. I could be nicer to Lucy, and listen to Mother and Father and be the son I always should have been. And if I could talk Peter out of whatever was coming next, we could be friends again, brothers again, like we always should have been.

"We're leaving?" Susan asked, sounding unsure. And then it came.

"You three are," said Peter, sad finality in his voice. "Mum said I had to protect you three. But that doesn't mean I can't stay and fight." And it was at about that point that the selfish side of my personal conflict lost. I knew what I had to do, now. For this country, for this people, but most importantly for my family, I had to make a stand.

"But we can't leave," Lucy said, her voice quickly filling with sadness. "They need us. All of us."

"Lucy's right," I said, my voice rasping a little through my suddenly dry throat. I was so nervous, yet I had to say it. I couldn't keep it in, because of everyone here, I had the best reason of all to fight. "I've seen what the White Witch can do... and I've helped her do it. And I can't leave these people behind to suffer for it." My head dropped slightly. They would surely hate me after that confession. Everything that had been built over the last two days would be wiped out, and I would lose my family again, I knew it. I couldn't have been more wrong.

I had expected the collective gasp from my family, the sudden shock at my little revelation. What I hadn't expected was the intense feeling of love and pride that seemed to flow from them, from the encouraging smiles that washed over their faces as I finished speaking. Lucy, bless her, slipped one small hand into mine and squeezed, comforting me without words. Peter and Susan cast each other a glance that I couldn't quite read, then joined our little sister by nodding in approval.

"Well, that settles it then," Susan said after a moment, getting up and walking away from the table. She retrieved her bow and quiver, then turned and gave us a smile. "We'd best get in some practice!"

§§§

And practice we did. Peter and I worked together under General Oreius that morning, and into the early afternoon. We learned more sword work, as well as how to use a shield; despite what you might read in books, or even see in the theatres, fighting with a sword and shield is far more complicated than you can imagine. But learn we did, and quickly too; somehow, despite the incredibly short time we had been doing all of this, Peter and I were learning at a pace that seemed to genuinely impress our centaur and faun tutors.

Later that day, as Peter and I practised a little on our own, repeating a lesson on fighting from horseback that Oreius had just given us, the worst happened. I had privately been dreading the upcoming battle, and not just because I might have to fight, even die, battling against whichever vile beasts the Witch commanded. I was afraid that I would have to face her again; afraid that I would have to stare into those cold eyes as she killed me, hear her high, cruel laugh as she destroyed my family.

When Mr. Beaver told us that Jadis was coming to the camp, to speak with Aslan personally, it was all I could do to not run and hide. As we walked toward the main encampment, I wanted to jump back on Philip, the horse I had been learning to ride, and beg him to take me anywhere, anywhere away from her. I prayed, quickly and silently, that the ground would open up and swallow me whole. I couldn't do it, I couldn't face her...

I wouldn't have if it hadn't been for Peter. I eventually came to a stop a short distance from Aslan's tent, frozen with fear, unable to move as my nightmares all came back to haunt me at once. Peter, who had been looking outright thunderous since hearing of Jadis' imminent arrival, turned to say something encouraging to me, and found that I wasn't there, that he had left me standing, near to tears, a few feet behind him. His expression instantly melted, and an instant later I had my head buried against his chest, eyes screwed shut to stop myself crying and shaking uncontrollably.

He kept his arms around me, not saying a word even as Lucy and Susan joined him. When Peter finally spoke, it was with a tone that I didn't recognise, a tone that scared me a little, but comforted me all the same. His voice was calm, and slow, but there was a power and conviction there that I hadn't ever heard before.

"I meant what I said this morning, little brother," he said, moving out to hold me at arm's length and look me in the eyes. "She's not going to hurt you. Not while I've got anything to say about it." Seeing the stormy anger that filled his normally shining blue eyes, I believed every word of it.

§§§

"Jadis, Queen of Narnia! Empress of the Lone Islands!"

My skin crawled at the very sound of his voice. Ginnarbrik, the dwarf who had hit me. The dwarf who had tormented me, and threatened me with his knife; who had whipped me, and beaten me at the Witch's command, while she watched me writhe and scream with that awful smile on her face; who had watched as she did things to me... horrible things... and jeered at me while I cried myself to sleep... How I hated that creature, that vile, horrid beast.

And behind him, she came. She looked every part the false Queen, sitting on her litter, flanked by her dreadful minions, and I could hardly bear to look at her. I could feel myself physically shrinking into myself, desperately trying to get away from her, to hide and never come out again. I watched, mesmerised, my blood running as cold as the dungeon she had kept me in, as her cyclops guard lowered her throne to the ground. She stood, an imperious expression on her face, and my world collapsed into one point.

She looked straight at me. Her lips looked as though they were ready to twist into that hateful parody of a smile, and her eyes burned with cold hatred. Peter put his hand on my shoulder, steadying me, and the girls moved closer in support, but it wasn't quite enough; I could feel her chill from where I stood. I could sense everybody in Aslan's camp as it tensed, readying for what was to come.

"You have a traitor in your midst, Aslan."

I could feel her harsh words like a physical blow, as she laid my sin bare for all to see. I cringed, wishing that I could just become invisible, and hide away from her gaze and the faces of everyone around me. The atmosphere became electric as her eyes settled directly

on me, accusing me, taunting me with my own mistakes. A moment later, and Aslan's voice broke through the tension.

"His offence was not against you," he said, his voice a barely contained growl. The effect was immediate: I no longer felt as terrified. I was still frightened, but somehow it was... less. At least, right up until she spoke again.

"Have you forgotten the laws upon which Narnia was built?" she countered. I felt myself begin to shake a little, fighting the surge of revulsion I felt at the mere sound of her voice. I remember looking to Aslan to see his reaction, looking for any sign of hope, and was heartened to see that he did not look impressed.

"Do not cite the Deep Magic to me, witch," he growled, his voice full of authority. "I was there when it was written." The way he said it, I couldn't help but believe he had been a bit more than a spectator to those laws being crafted, and I found myself wondering at just who Aslan was. The Witch, however, was not finished.

"Then you will remember well," she argued, her voice rising to carry to all in the camp, "that every traitor belongs to me. His blood is my property!"

And there it was. My heart skipped a beat as she pointed toward me, emphasising her point. I was doomed, and there was nothing that could be done. It was law, the law that this land was built upon. Aslan's silence had confirmed as much. I felt so alone... for all of a second. There are days that my brother's over-protectiveness gets on my nerves, I will admit that. There are days when it drives me to distraction. But as he drew his sword, and stepped forward to place himself between myself and the Witch, I don't think I could have been more thankful for him, and it drove home just how much he loves me, how much he loves all of his family.

"Try and take him, then!" Peter bellowed, pointing his sword straight at her heart, daring her to come near me, his little brother. It became her turn to look less than impressed, and a moment later we found out why.

"Do you really think that mere force will deny me my right... Little King?" she spat, her voice full of contempt, her expression equally so. A moment later, her voice rose again, addressing the gathered soldiers as a whole. "Aslan knows that unless I have blood, as the law demands, all of Narnia will be overturned, and perish in fire and water!" She wheeled on me again, her eyes piercing right through me. "That boy will die, on the Stone Table... as is tradition." The absolute finality of her words struck home, making me reel. A shudder of anger and shock ran around our forces, the girls pressed closer to me, and even Peter lowered his sword, stepping back a short way, the set of his shoulders screaming defeat. There really was no way out...

I began to think back to my time in the Witch's dungeon, to the promise I had made myself. I had said that I would give anything to make up for what I had done. I had pledged that I would fight for my redemption, no matter what it took. And I had said that, if that meant that I had to die for my sins, to die for my family, then I would. And now it seemed that I would be fulfilling that promise far sooner than I had thought. My throat became dry, and my eyes started to sting... I couldn't do it, I just couldn't do it. I didn't want to die, I wanted to live; I'm only ten years old! I'm far too young. I want to live, and to love, and be loved in return. I want to experience life! I had my family back after so long that it all felt new again; I didn't want to lose that, not then and not now, not after trying so

hard and making so many promises. But no-one could save me from my fate, or so it seemed. She had won, and I was as good as dead.

"Enough." Aslan's voice, deep and sad, cut through my thoughts. Every eye was drawn to his golden form, and those deep, molten eyes. He was gazing straight at the Witch, and I somehow knew that he had a plan. "I shall talk with you alone," he said to Jadis, and then turned, walking toward his tent. After a heartbeat, she followed him, and went to discuss my fate.

§§§

We sat there, waiting for Aslan and the Witch to emerge, for what seemed like an age. Nobody seemed ready to speak, not Susan, not Lucy, not Peter. And least of all me. I tried giving Lucy a hug, trying to comfort her and assure her that it would all be alright. I had to have faith that if anyone could save me from my fate, he could. But the words wouldn't come, and after a few brief moments, I let go of her again. Susan rubbed my shoulder, and Peter offered me a half-smile, but it didn't help. I ended up sitting, slumped forward, with my arms resting on my knees, feeling utterly dejected. I picked absent-mindedly at the grass directly in front of me, desperately trying not to think.

But inside, my mind was a whirl of thought. What if Aslan couldn't devise a plan to save me? I still didn't want to die, but unless some other option could be found, I had to give myself up. If I didn't, then this whole land would die in my stead. I remember thinking back to my Sunday School lessons, and all I had learned of Christ, and his sacrifice for Mankind... would I have to die for these people, as he died for me? And if I had to go to this Stone Table, and give up my blood for a world that was not my own, would I have the courage to go half as quietly as He did, or with half as much dignity? Was this what sacrifice felt like?

I decided, rather selfishly I'm afraid, that I would much rather not know. Not yet. Not while there was still a small hope of my surviving. I had to hold on to hope, if not for myself then for my family. I needed them, and I liked to think that they needed me, in some small way. And the same went for the people of Narnia; if there really was anything to this prophecy, then they needed us too. As I was thinking all of this, I noticed that a kind of ripple was passing through the crowd, and some of the creatures were beginning to stand. As my family and I joined them, Aslan and Jadis left the Lion's tent.

I could barely suppress a shudder as she walked past, returning to her throne. As she moved past me, she stared at me, long and hard. I could sense her absolute hatred for me, for my family, and I started to feel that same, dreadful fear of her begin to creep over me. I hoped that Aslan had found a solution, that he had found a way for me to live. I repeated that thought to myself, over and over, desperately trying not to start panicking. Then, without warning, the moment ended; Jadis turned away from me, and turned to face Aslan. My own gaze followed hers, and I bit my lip nervously as we waited for him to announce my fate.

"She has renounced her claim on the Son of Adam's blood!"

It took a few moments for his words to sink in. I almost couldn't believe it. I wasn't going to die! He had done it! Words can't describe how I felt... I don't think I've ever been as happy. What I do know is that what came next completed that feeling.

"How do I know that your promise will be kept?" she asked, her voice cold and demanding. I had about half a second to wonder what promise she meant, what kind of deal Aslan had made. Aslan's response a moment later erased that question... it also erased the last worries from my mind, just as thoroughly as it erased the self-important smile from her face. His roar echoed around the camp, and I was gifted with a sight I thought I would never get to see.

The Witch's face showed fear. She blanched, turning even paler than usual, and sat down on her throne awkwardly. After all the tension and fear, all of the endless worry about what my immediate future held, the tears, nightmares and heartache, that one sound changed everything. I felt free, light even. It was as though the world had been lifted from my shoulders. I was free of her.

I was free...

§§§

I had been so wrapped up in celebrating with my family, as well as the rest of the camp, that I paid next to no attention to anything else. On hindsight, I guess I should have seen it coming. I never asked Aslan just what it was that he had promised the White Witch. If I had thought about it, if only for a second, I might have figured it out. As it was, it just didn't occur to me. And in that last act of selfishness, in thinking only of myself and just how happy I was to not be dying on the Stone Table any time soon, I didn't find out what He was planning until it was too late.

It became all too obvious the next morning, yesterday morning. When the dryad came into our tent and gave us the message from our sisters, that Aslan was dead, Peter and I were devastated. When Peter came out of Aslan's tent an hour later, it hit home. Aslan was gone, and we had lost our greatest chance of winning the battle against the Witch. As the news spread, and a sense of defeat and, in some cases, panic followed, I wondered why Aslan had done it.

I think that Peter doesn't know that I know what Aslan did for me; he just tried to explain it away as one of those mysteries. Aslan was gone, and we would just have to deal with it. I could see it in Peter's eyes, though. He understood too well what the Lion had done, and why. His disappearance was far too much of a coincidence... she had said that if she didn't have blood, Narnia would die. I understand full well that Aslan had given himself up for his people, for his world.

But he also died for me... and I can't understand why. Now, standing here with the archers, I'm preparing myself for the possibility of doing the same thing. Without Him, we have little hope of winning. The Narnians all believe that our family, my brother, sisters and I, will be the ones that save their home from the clutches of the Witch. They believe that, even with Aslan gone, we still have hope. Seeing the sheer size of the enemy army, I'm not so sure. And I can't help but think...

It should have been me...

¥¤¥

## Chapter Eight: Nor the Battle to the Strong

I don't think I've ever been in this much pain before. I'm no stranger to pain, don't get me wrong. After the last few days, and my time with... with her... I can honestly say I've felt more than my fair share. But this, this is... oh, God... I can't even think straight...

Everything is a little blurry, like the world has been wrapped in cotton wool. Everything save for the pain, that is. I can feel my breath coming in short, ragged gasps, and feel my heart hammering in my chest. I can feel the hard ground beneath me, and feel the sticky warmth of my own blood as it soaks my tunic; through half-closed eyes, I can even see the sky. But it feels distant, faded almost. It's like watching someone else die, in a way. The only thing that feels real, that is keeping me grounded, is the sharp, stabbing pain that fills my body every few moments. Every move, every breath... even thinking hurts, and I just wish it would end.

I've managed to drag myself away from where the Witch stabbed me, hoping that she wouldn't notice and come back for me. It was a struggle every inch of the way, and I came close to blacking out more than once. I can hear the battle shifting around me, moving across the field as our forces slowly retreat; it seems far away now. Everything seems far away...

There's no escaping it. I know I'm dying. I just hope that I bought Peter enough time, and enough of a chance, to defeat Jadis... Peter. I wish I could see him. And the girls; I wonder what will become of them. He told me to get them out, to protect them... in saving my brother, have I failed my whole family one last time?

*§§§*

"Edmund! Get the girls, and get them home!"

Hearing my brother's call, hearing the edge of frantic fear that came through in his voice, my world came crashing down around me. I looked at him, despite the melee raging around me, and locked eyes with him. And there, I saw the last thing I wanted to see at that moment in time. We were lost, finished. It was written all over his face, in his eyes. Time slowed, almost stopping, as the realisation struck me. I had just enough awareness of my surroundings at that point to duck an attack aimed at my head, and to strike back at the ogre that had tried to kill me.

I was snapped back into reality by Mr. Beaver. We might not be on the best of terms, but he still did his best for me. He grabbed my hand roughly in his paw, and began to drag me up the hill, away from the fight... away from my brother. At the last, I turned back, and looked for Peter. I couldn't just leave without one last look; I so badly wanted him to be following me, to be escaping himself. Instead, he was still fighting. He looked like a living legend, like a knight of old, and for a brief instant I thought that it would be alright to leave him. He was handling himself far better than I ever could have. And that's when I saw her.

The Witch was walking toward Peter, wand in one hand and sword in the other. An expression of purest hate was plastered on her pale face; she was going to kill him, pure and simple. She hadn't been able to get to me, so she was going to make do by murdering my brother. I wasn't about to let her though... I weighed up the options, between doing as I was told and trying to save Peter. Part of me wanted to save my own skin, and saving the girls would be my chance. But, in the end, I was done with hurting my family. I wasn't about to let one of them die, especially not for me.

"Edmund, Peter said to get out of here!" Beaver called, trying to stop me as I ran forward, desperate to stop the Witch from reaching my brother.

"Peter's not King yet!" I threw back at the Animal, and before he could reply further, or I could have a chance to change my mind, I began sprinting toward her. I dodged around the warring Narnians, weaving around minotaurs and ogres and vile creatures that I didn't know the names for. I had to reach the Witch, but at the same time the question of how I was going to stop her was running through my mind. Everyone that attacked her either died on the edge of her sword, or was turned into stone by her wand. Leopards, gryphons, even General Oreius himself, had been reduced to cold, lifeless statues. What chance could I possibly have?

As I got closer to her, I could see that lethal wand glittering in the sunlight, like the ice she loved so much. And then it hit me. Her wand! That was it! As I closed the last, short distance between us, and I prepared to jump down from the rocks and challenge her, an idea struck me... it was just a wild notion, but it occurred to me that everyone that had attacked Jadis had failed, and been turned to stone. But what if someone were to attack her wand, instead? It was worth a try... after so many deaths at her hand, it had to be worth something.

Loosing what I hoped would be a decent battle-cry, I jumped down toward the Witch, and brought my sword downward as hard as I could. But she was fast, far too fast. Just an instant before my sword could connect with her wand, she turned to face me. Her eyes went wide with hate, her lips curled into a sickening grin, and I knew what was coming next. Jadis lunged forward with her wand, trying to run me through, to turn me to stone like so many before me. She would kill me, then my brother, and Narnia would fall under her grip for all time, the Prophecy undone...

Except I was no longer standing there. Knowing precisely what she would want to do, I acted as fast as I could. I sidestepped, and with all my strength brought my sword down on the wand's glittering, exposed length.

I couldn't have prepared for what came next. The wand shattered, and a blast of icy blue light surrounded us. It was cold all of a sudden, so very cold. My arms and legs suddenly felt like lead weights, I felt sick to my stomach and light in the head, and the world seemed to spin for a moment. I looked up, and saw to my horror that Jadis hadn't been affected, or else was dealing with it far better than I was. I could barely move as Jadis attacked me with her sword, and I felt helpless as she deftly spun my sword with hers, loosing it from my numb fingers and sending it flying into the air.

I couldn't even react properly when she stabbed me with the jagged remains of the wand. Surprisingly, it didn't hurt as much as I had thought it would. The shock of being stabbed, of feeling every last inch of it as the weapon pierced my stomach just below my ribs, stopped me from feeling too much pain. It felt awfully cold for a second, as the air was punched from my lungs, and I felt the point of the wand hit the back of my ribs. The pain hit a moment later as, with a disgusting, almost sucking sensation, I felt the wand being wrenched viciously from my body; all I could do was gasp, as a sudden rush of agony washed over me and I fell to the ground.

And, for a few brief seconds, all I could remember was the almost animal snarl on her face, and thinking how very wrong I had been to trust her...

I'm not alone. I can sense someone nearby, watching me. I try hard not to breathe too deeply, or move, or even to cry out (as much as I want to), in case the creature or person is one of hers. For a second, I almost entertain the thought that it's Peter, or one of our army, and I'll be safe. But, as the bright sunlight is briefly blocked out by that someone's shadow, and I start to make out the sounds of all-too-familiar, rasping breaths, my heart sinks. I know all too well who it is. All I can do now is pray that he thinks I'm dead, and that he will leave me alone.

Just as Ginnarbrik starts to move away, a horrible tickling sensation starts at the back of my throat. I realise with a start that I can taste copper. I remember the taste, after swallowing a penny when I was a lot smaller. Hazily, I remember that Lucy had found it quite funny, that Susan had panicked a little, and that Peter hadn't been too pleased with me at all... probably because it had been his pocket money that I had swallowed. I am tasting blood now, that is for certain; I must have bitten my cheek at some point. As the tickling gets too much, I cough a little before I can stop myself.

"So, our little Prince is still alive, is he?" I can practically hear the little beast sneering as he speaks, his voice dripping with sarcasm, and I curse myself for giving myself away. I hear him moving closer, stopping a short distance, just out of sight. "Did the special boy get what he deserved at last?"

"Oh, shut up!" I snap between gasping breaths, my voice little louder than a whisper, angry despite my pain. This dwarf, this creature, has caused me too much pain already, and I don't want to listen to more of his taunts, not now. Why did it have to be him that found me? Why now, of all times?

"Temper, temper," he says, mocking my outburst. "It will do you no good in your condition, little Prince. Perhaps you should call for help? Maybe someone will hear you."

"I'm not going to give... give you the satisfaction," is my halting response. It's getting harder to breathe, heavier almost, and harder to talk. I'm guessing that I don't have long left. "Just leave me alone."

"Perhaps I should call for someone?" the horrid dwarf continues, ignoring me. "The Queen would love to know that you are still with us. After all, your brother made for such poor sport! A pity that he died so very quickly!"

"Liar! He's not dead!" I spit out. Peter can't be dead, he just can't. This has to be another cruel trick, yet another kind of torture for his pleasure.

"I do not lie, boy," Ginnarbrik snaps back. He sounds a little closer. "The Queen made short work of him. He screamed like a whelp child, begging for mercy. He died crying and cursing your name to the Heavens! Just like your sisters will when we find them. Just like the Great Cat!"

I gulp, trying to hold back the stinging tears that threaten to spill down my cheeks. Whilst I can't quite picture Peter cursing me with his last breath, the image hurts me to my core. My mind grabs onto the dwarfs words, and images of Lucy and Susan dead, broken and bleeding, quickly follow. And Aslan... the thought of the Lion, regretting his actions for me at the last, as he was killed by the Witch...

"Liar," I say again, barely a whisper. The dreadful pain in my chest has been joined by a new one, right above my heart... what if he's telling the truth? A few tears begin to fall, coursing down my face, stinging my eyes. I've failed them all. I don't deserve to be here, when so many have died, will die, for me. It would be better to be anywhere else than listen to this bile. Better to die...

"Why... why don't you just... kill me yourself?" I manage to hiss the words through my teeth, mustering as much venom as I can. He simply sneers at me, enjoying the obvious pain in my voice. I want to hurt him. After everything he has done, everything he watched her do to me, I want him to feel a little pain. He deserves it. I try glaring at the beast, but it does no good, so I try something else.

"Or are you too much of a coward?"

That gets his attention. The sick, twisted grin he'd been wearing up to this point disappears. I can see his knuckles whiten as he grips the haft of his axe harder, and his dark eyes narrow. His breathing quickens slightly... it's clear that I have him rattled. With each shallow, rasping breath, he edges closer to me, hate shining in his eyes.

"Coward?" he hisses. "You dare call me a coward? I wasn't the one who screamed so loudly, who whined at every touch of my whip! It was not I who could not fight off the Queen's touch!" His voice rose steadily in volume, until it became an almost hysterical screech. I fight as hard as I can to stop the tears, but still they come as he brings all of my nightmares to the surface, and the pain gets worse and worse...

"I was not the one who cried myself to sleep in the brief quiet," he carried on. "I did not sell my family for sweets and shallow promises! And I am not the one begging for death now! To end you now would be a mercy, boy. One I will gladly give!"

I move my gaze from his face, angry and twisted, to the sharp edge of his axe. My tears finally slow, then stop, as a dreadful thought occurs to me. I'm going to die for certain, sooner rather than later. My family are gone. My parents will never see us again. Attacking the dwarf further suddenly seems pointless... how can I possibly hurt someone who's already broken? Tears are pointless... what else is there to cry about? I've lost everything...

"Any last words, little Prince?" The dwarf jeers one last time. He's so close I can smell him, leather and sweat mixing with the smells of the field.

No, I haven't quite lost everything. I still have one thing left. One last choice to make. How will I go? Do I go crying and begging, in the vain hope that I might live? Or do I make one last stand, and show that I have changed, that I am not the boy I was, that my family can finally be proud of me? I think of my father, giving himself for his country and his family. I think of Aslan, giving himself for his home.

And then I think of Peter. A vague memory comes to mind, of my brother leading our forces into the charge, sword held high... I know it wasn't that long ago, but it's so hard to think. I remember hearing, faint in the distance, his battle-cry. And suddenly, it all fits. I know how to answer. I open my mouth, swallowing hard to clear the taste of blood, ignoring the cracking of my lips and the sharp stab in my chest as I draw breath to speak. I tilt my head back as far as I can, to get a clearer look at Ginnarbrik's face, to see his reaction. And, as I say my last words, watching as his eyes grow wide with anger, and the world starts to go dark, I smile just a little.

"For Narnia... and for Aslan..."

§!§

Is this what death feels like? I remember my last words to the dwarf. I remember hearing a dull thud and a strangled cry... my own, I assume. And then... nothing. Everything is dark, and feels distant. I'm not sure quite what I expected, but this is a little, well, disappointing. I guess, after Sunday School, that I expected some kind of bright light. I guess a choir would have been a bit much to ask. But darkness, alone? I cough, and feel a sharp pain below my ribs, but it quickly fades again. Is that normal? More, how long have I been here? Minutes, days? I don't know, and strangely can't bring myself to care...

§!§

For a moment, I don't know where I am. Just for a second, I think I'm at home in bed, just coming out of a dream. And then I remember. I'm dead, dead on a battlefield far enough away from home to be a dream. But, if that's true, why can I hear voices? They're dull and distant, like a memory that you can't quite recall... one of them is crying, I think. Is that Lucy? I wish it was... not that I wish her to be crying. I just wish it was her, here with me. I don't want to be alone.

But, if she's here, and Susan and Peter too, from the sound of it, then that means... NO! It can't be! They have to have survived, they have to! Please, let them not be dead... I wish I could move, or call out to them, but it's like crawling through molasses, nothing wants to work...

Wait, what's... what's that? That taste... it's like... I can't even begin to describe it. Hot, and sweet, and cool, fragrant and so full of life. Life! I can feel the liquid in my mouth, and as I swallow I can literally feel it begin to fill my body. Tingling warmth is spreading through my arms and legs, the pain is fading... it's gone. Everything just seems to have stopped; the bleeding, the pain, the fear... it's all gone.

I realise with a start that I have stopped breathing. I start again, and cough slightly. Slowly, not quite trusting this new feeling, I open my eyes... and see three more pairs looking into my own. My family are here, all of them, and even though every set of eyes is wet with tears, it's possibly the most wonderful sight I have ever seen. I look up, and see that my head is resting in Susan's lap, her hands stroking my hair gently. Lucy is off to my right, smiling widely, clutching a small bottle of red liquid. And Peter... Oh, Peter. I haven't seen him cry like this in an age. I feel a sudden burst of regret that I have done this to him. I want to reach out to him, to all of them, and reassure them all that I'm alright.

Peter beats me to it. Before I can react, or even sit up properly, Peter throws his arms around me and pulls me into a crushing hug. My ribs are still sore, and the stab wound still aches awfully, but I can't bring myself to complain. As my sisters join in, I allow myself to forget the pain for a moment. I forget everything. I don't want this to end, not now, not ever. No more memories, no more pain, just this... my family, safe and sound, and happy to be so. Eventually, Peter pulls back from me, and stares straight at me, straight at my eyes. Somehow, I know what he's going to ask.

"When are you going to learn to do as you're told?" he says, spluttering with a mixture of tears and laughter. I feel his hands holding the back of my head, and see the mixture of fading panic and elation written on his face, and the answer is all too clear. I meet his gaze, and smile more warmly than I have in forever. If it means that my family will be safe, if it means I can protect them, or help them in any way, then the answer is easy.

Never...

¥¤¥

## Chapter Nine: Aftermath

I don't think I've ever felt so warm in my entire life. It's hard to describe, really; I've never felt anything like it. It isn't just a feeling of being warm; I mean, I know what that feels like. I've felt summer days, and sat in front of the fire with a cup of Mother's hot chocolate on a winter's day. I remember days on the beach, those rare times when my family went on holiday, when the day got so hot that the sand started to burn my feet, and I had no choice but to paddle in the sea to cool off... but that wasn't anything like this. Well, that isn't totally true.

I feel warm in the usual way; as I lay here in my hammock, wrapped in as many blankets as I could get my hands on, I'm certainly not feeling the chill of the night air, if you follow. But at the same time, I feel a different kind of warmth... a warmth that sits just around my heart. That probably sounds stupid, I know. But I can't honestly describe it any better than that. After today, and everything that has happened, I just... in a way, it feels like nothing is real. Everything seems so distant, like it's all part of some happy dream. Maybe it's partly because I'm so tired I can barely move, partly because I fought in my first battle this morning and I can't believe that we won, let alone that I'm alive... It's all just so much to take in.

On the other side of the tent, I can hear Peter breathing; in a short while, when he's finally in a deep enough sleep, I know that he'll start to snore. The thought makes me smile to myself, and even though it used to drive me mad back home in England, now it doesn't matter. He's alive and safe too, and knowing that he's there is well worth putting up with the noise. If I close my eyes, I can almost picture Susan and Lucy sleeping just a few feet away in their tent, and again I feel a slow smile spread across my face. I don't want this feeling to stop.

I wonder if this has anything to do with Aslan? Words can't describe how I felt when I saw him today, alive and whole. It was like a great weight had been lifted, only to be replaced by a different one. I was happy, overjoyed even. But at the same time, there was the guilt of knowing what he had done, and why, mingled with the remaining guilt of my own actions... It's still there, hiding at the back. I wonder if it will ever get better, or go away. I can't think about it, though... not now.

§!§

I'm not sure how long it had been since the end of the battle... maybe an hour, perhaps. An hour since we had saved Narnia from Jadis' control. An hour since I had nearly died, an hour since Aslan had returned from the dead and saved us all. To tell the truth, it seemed far longer. All I knew was that nothing seemed real; it was all moving in a blur. It had been since I had seen Him on the battlefield.

It hadn't seemed real. I had looked up over Peter's shoulder, toward one of Jadis' victims, a satyr that she had turned to stone. Standing there, large as life, was Aslan... I was stunned! It shouldn't have been possible! I watched in silence as the great Lion breathed on the satyr-statue, and I heard a collective gasp from myself and my family as the satyr came back

to life. It was like watching ice thaw, just faster. I found myself wondering just who Aslan was, what kind of being he was...

All my questions disappeared a second later. He looked straight at me, those deep, golden eyes finding mine, and everything just stopped. All my doubts, my growing fear at seeing someone who was supposed to be dead, the disbelief that we had all made it, just vanished; it faded into nothing, and as Aslan nodded at me, acknowledging me and my family, I somehow felt that there would be no more need for fear or doubt, so long as I believed in him. I've never felt that way about anything in my whole life.

I sat in one of the medical tents at our camp, watching as a group of satyr and faun healers worked on my brother's arm. It was typical of Peter, really. He had all but carried me from the field, Susan at our side, and made sure that I was seen to first. He had stood there, fretting as only Peter can, while the healers stripped me of my armour and started to check me over. I had a few bruises that were slowly healing, and a couple of cuts and scrapes that closed up as the healers examined them. The stab wound I had received from the Witch was now nothing more than a thin scar, pale against even my skin. It ached terribly, and one of the fauns had given me a cup of something for the pain. It smelled bad, and tasted worse, but it worked quickly enough. After a few moments more of checking that I wasn't about to die on the spot, the healers left the tent.

While I was trying to stomach the herbal remedy, Susan looked to Peter, who was starting to look a bit pale. She reached out and touched his arm, whilst telling him that I would be fine and that he should probably change out of his armour. The second she touched his right arm, Peter hissed sharply and pulled away. Susan looked down at his arm, then her own hand, and I was as surprised as she looked when we saw blood on her fingertips.

"Peter!" Susan said loudly, her voice panicked. "You're bleeding! Why didn't you tell us you'd been hurt?"

"There's been more important things to deal with," Peter replied quietly with a slight shrug, sounding tired, and far older than he was. "Family comes first."

"The last I checked," I snapped, standing as quickly as I could without too much pain, "you are just as much a part of this family as I am. What's gotten into you?" Peter remained silent, refusing to meet my stare. I looked from my brother to Susan, who had a look of disbelief that rivalled my own. After a few seconds, she spoke.

"Some man in a red suit gives him a sword and shield," she said, her voice showing less anger than her eyes, "and he thinks he's St. George. I'll get the healers." And in a flurry of skirts and tent flaps, she was gone. I watched her leave, a little confused at her odd statement, then turned my attention back to Peter.

"What's this all about, Pete?" I asked, probably glaring at him harder than I meant to. He was injured, and he hadn't told us... I just wanted to know why. I thought about asking him what Susan had meant as well, but decided that the matter could wait.

"It just didn't matter," Peter said after a few moments, his voice still quiet. I opened my mouth, ready to shoot him down before he started on that road again, when he raised a hand, motioning for me to stop. Slowly, painfully, he sat down on the cot next to me.

"I nearly lost you out there today," he said, voice barely above a whisper. "After getting you back, she nearly took you away again. I had to be sure that you were safe first, that you were all safe. I promised Mum." With those words, his shoulders slumped. This was a rare

moment; I was seeing the real Peter, the one beneath all the armour, and not just the metal plate he had been given. The Peter that would go to any lengths for us, no matter the cost. The Peter that hid the burden that came with that position. Slowly, trying not to cause him any more discomfort, I put my arm around his shoulder and gave it a squeeze, for once becoming the comforter.

"I'm still here, Peter," I said, keeping my own voice low. "And I'm not going anywhere soon, I promise. No more wandering off." Those last words managed to raise a smile, albeit a small one. A moment of calm passed between us, the pair of us just happy to be safe and mostly whole, before Susan returned with the healers. They seemed in quite a state, seeing that they had yet another future king to patch up, and it quickly became apparent that they weren't going to take Peter's excuse of 'It's just a scratch' at face value.

Susan and I watched as the satyrs began removing Peter's armour, while the fauns busied themselves with preparing their equipment. As the outer layers of my brother's protective garb came free, it quickly became apparent that he had been wounded more badly than we had guessed. His padded gambeson was soaked with blood down his right side, and a deep gash on his right arm was easily visible. The healers quickly got to cleaning the wound, and removing several pieces of broken mail that had become embedded in the skin.

I sat quietly next to Susan, watching in silence as the group of creatures moved around our brother. I looked over at her, and saw that she was almost as pale as Peter, her features pinched with worry. She was obviously feeling as useless as I was, seeing Peter in such a state; in her own way, Susan has always been as protective of us as my brother. For maybe the first time, I had a glimpse of how she felt, this feeling of worry about our family. I caught her eye, eventually, and offered her a smile, trying to reassure her. Susan smiled back, and even reached over and gave my hand a squeeze. It steadied me a little, in a way, and I was glad of the distraction.

I've always hated just sitting around, waiting to be useful, especially when it involves one of my family... though I may not have shown that in recent years. It's a horrible sensation, that feeling of being useless; it's one of the reasons that I've always hated being in or around hospitals. Whilst I wanted to be there for Peter, I hated seeing him hurt and not being able to do anything. Susan must have seen this, I think. As the healers finally finished patching Peter's arm, and told him that he needed to rest, Susan turned to me.

"Why don't you go and find Lucy?" she said, giving me a warm smile. "She should be somewhere nearby. Go on, I'll keep an eye on Peter." I looked at my brother, seeking his approval, I guess, and he nodded slowly, letting me know that he was alright. I hesitated for a few more seconds, torn between wanting to stay with him, and desperately needing to get outside and do something. Peter looked at Susan, raising his eyebrows slightly with a knowing look in his eyes. She simply smiled in return, and proceeded to usher me outside, making the decision for me.

Sometimes, it drives me mad that my family knows me so well... sometimes.

§§§

I started to look for Lucy amongst the many creatures milling around the camp... there seemed to be a great deal more than before, and I remembered that someone had mentioned reinforcements arriving with Aslan. I also noticed several creatures and animals that I knew for certain had been turned into stone by the Witch; again, evidence of Aslan's

power. Not for the first time, I found myself wondering just who he was, how one being could do so much. How it was possible for a lion, Talking or otherwise, to return from the dead...

While I was busy thinking, Lucy found me. I had wandered almost to the edge of our camp, when I heard a shrill cry of excitement from behind me. I turned around, and there she was, running as fast as she could toward me, laughing all the way. One of the things I've always admired about Lucy is her laugh. Even on my worst days, when I hated everything around me with a passion, her laugh was so light, so infectious, that I couldn't help but want to join in. Which was probably part of the reason I used to be so mean to her... jealousy can be a horrible thing.

Watching as my little sister ran helter-skelter toward me, I felt my growing smile begin to fade. Behind her, walking at a much more sedate pace, was perhaps the last person I had expected to see. The last time I had seen Lucy's friend, Mr. Tumnus, he had been turned into solid stone. Jadis had seen to it that his last moments were filled with a lot of pain, if his expression had been anything to go by. He had died protecting my sister, protecting my family, where I had betrayed them... and it was all my fault. A moment later, I was nearly bowled sideways as Lucy flung her arms around me. She squeezed me tight for a few seconds, before stepping back a little and grinning broadly.

"Oh Edmund!" she cried, the happiest I had heard her sound in ages. "Isn't it just wonderful? We've been able to save so many Narnians, and Aslan is bringing the stone ones back to life, and... and look! I can finally introduce you to Mr Tumnus!" She grinned up at the faun, who had finally joined us.

"Mr. Tumnus," she said, her voice taking on a mock-serious tone, "this is my brother Edmund. Edmund, this is Mr. Tumnus." I looked up at Tumnus nervously, not sure what to expect from him. I remembered the last time I had seen him, remembered the look of disbelief, shock, then utter disappointment on his face as he was taken away by the Witch's guard. By turning him in, I had done him more harm than most, even though I hadn't meant to do it.

"Hello, Edmund," he said quietly, offering a weak smile, and a curious dip of the body that seemed to be half bow, half curtsy. I offered him a small smile of my own, feeling completely dreadful, and returned his 'hello'.

"I've just got one last place to visit," Lucy cut in cheerfully. "I'll be back in a minute. You two get to know one another, and I'll see you when I get back." With one last smile, she left. Tumnus and I watched her go, our little ray of sunshine... I could see plainly from his expression that he already loved her dearly, a true and close friend. The thought made me feel ten times worse for what I had done to him.

"She really is the most delightful person," the faun began quietly, still not looking at me, the smile he had worn for my sister fading slowly. "You're very lucky to have her as a sister."

"I'm very lucky to have all of my family," I admitted. I looked up at him, and waited while he shifted his attention to me.

"Look," I began, shuffling my feet nervously, and resisting the urge to look down or away. "I'm... I'm sorry for what I did, for what you went through because of me. I didn't mean for any of it to happen, honestly I didn't. I'm..." Mr. Tumnus waved his hands at me gently, signalling for me to be quiet.

"I know," he said plainly. "I know that you never meant for it to happen. I know that, had circumstances been different, we might even have been friends from the start. But it happened the way it happened, and no amount of wishing can take that back. We have both made mistakes, Edmund Pevensie; Aslan alone knows that I made more than my fair share under... under her reign." He sounded upset, understandably so, and more than a little sad, along with a hint of something else... anger? Regret?

"I... I think it best that Lucy doesn't know about our history, Edmund Pevensie. At least, she will not hear of it from me," he continued. "She has a good heart, Edmund, and a very clean, simple view of the world. I won't do anything to change that. If you choose to tell her at some point, I will understand, but for now, at least..."

"I understand. Thank you," I said, unsure of what else to say. Whilst I had known, deep down, that not everyone would be able to immediately forgive my first actions in Narnia, I was still bitterly disappointed that events had turned out this way. "I want you to know...if there is any way I can make amends..." I tried to continue, but the faun cut in once more.

"Maybe, in time," Tumnus said, more than a hint of bitterness in his voice. "For Lucy's sake, I will try. But it will take time, Edmund. What you did is no easy thing to forgive." And with that, he went off to find my sister again. I watched him go, an unpleasant feeling settling in my stomach. In many ways, I wish he had been openly furious with me; if he had shouted at me, or called me a traitor as Mr. Beaver had, I somehow feel that it would have been easier to deal with. As it was, the whole thing just left me feeling... hollow.

§§§

I still felt out of sorts at dinner tonight. We had held a feast, of sorts, the whole camp sitting around a bonfire, celebrating our victory over Jadis, and remembering the fallen. We had eaten, and many of us had told stories, both of recent valour and of ancient Narnia, and those of us that were musically minded sang a few songs. There had been a little dancing, mostly led by the fauns and satyrs, and I had even taken part. Of course, Susan and Lucy dragging me bodily into the dance had nothing to do with it... but even so, I was enjoying myself.

I eventually found myself sitting in one of the quieter corners of the group, watching the dances from a safe distance. I watched as Lucy danced in intricate circles with a group of fauns, Mr. Tumnus amongst them. I was amazed at how quickly she had picked up the steps, and couldn't help but smile at how much she was enjoying herself. As I spotted Susan trying to dance with one of the centaur archers, my smile deepened. I felt more at home than I ever had in England.

The reason why, I had decided, was sitting on the opposite side of the bonfire from me. Aslan, in all his golden glory, stood with General Oreius and my brother, both of whom, I am glad to say, were now in fine health. Aslan was speaking to the other two, both of whom looked to be deep in thought. As I watched them, I had the sudden urge to be over there with them; partly, I wanted to keep an eye on my brother, who I was still a little worried about, but mostly I just felt that I needed to be close to Aslan. Despite how happy I felt, at the same time I still had a lot of doubts, and more than a few fears.

I can't quite explain the feeling. I guess I just needed comfort and advice, of a different sort than my brother or sisters could provide. Maybe because I was missing my parents, maybe because I just had so much to ask, but I wanted more than anything at that point to talk

with the Lion. I wanted to feel his breath upon me, to know that all would be right with the world, just like I had the first time I had met him.

"...And then Old Broadleaf says to me, 'That wasn't a walnut, you silly boy, that was my head!'"

A round of shrill, unbounded laughter broke me from my thoughts. For a second, I was puzzled by the tail-end of the conversation I had just heard. Then I realised who it was that had been speaking; in the middle of the group of animals nearest to me, mostly smaller creatures like hedgehogs, rabbits and the like, was a young squirrel. I think his name was Skitterleaf, or something to that effect. Either way, the small, reddy-brown animal was clutching his sides, struggling to control his own laughter, whilst occasionally gasping out the word 'walnut'.

His neighbours were all chuckling along with him, obviously having found his story funny, and before long, I found myself joining in. I hadn't heard the joke, and doubted that I would have appreciated it properly if I did; squirrels have a strange sense of humour, I have found. But the sound was so infectious, and the atmosphere so happy because of it, that I couldn't help myself. The sound of my voice caught the group's attention, and a moment later I was receiving nods of acknowledgement and small cries of 'good health, majesty', along with a few cups raised in my direction.

I'm pretty sure that my face chose that highly inopportune moment to blush. That kind of attention has always embarrassed me a little, to say the least. But I did manage to raise my own goblet in return, and mumble something to the effect of 'thanks'. As I looked up for a second, my attention was drawn away from the party, and once more to Aslan. He wasn't where I had last seen him, but was instead walking slowly into the tree line on the other side of the camp site. If I was going to talk with him, ask him the many questions that were plaguing my mind, then now was as good a time as any... I stood, plucking up my courage (though, on hindsight, I don't know why I had to), said a brief farewell to my new friends, and followed after the Great Lion.

*§§§*

After the warmth of the bonfire, and the noise and merriment of the feast, the woods felt almost unnaturally cool and quiet. It felt a little like the trees were holding their breath, waiting for something to happen. I walked slowly, as quietly as I could, not wanting to disturb the atmosphere, though I wasn't entirely sure why. As I followed after Aslan, watching as he made his own slow, thoughtful way towards a small clearing, I started to wonder if perhaps he might prefer to be alone.

I ended up standing just inside the tree line, on the edge of that clearing. Aslan made no sign that he knew I was there, and I found myself a little torn between approaching him, and just leaving him to his thoughts. He just looked... serene, I suppose. The moonlight reflected from his fur and mane, making him seem to shimmer. He just looked so large, and peaceful, so much a part of the world around him, that I couldn't stop looking at him, nor could I even think about disturbing him. And it was at about that time that I realised that I could hear something, something that had been there all along, but had been so quiet that I hadn't noticed.

Singing. As I stood watching Aslan, I listened to the rustling of the trees around me, hearing the sounds of the wind as it moved the branches around me. It struck me a few

moments later that there was no wind. I listened harder, and found to my surprise that there was a deeper sound; what I had thought was rustling was, in fact, simply the higher notes of a broader range of sounds. It was like hearing whispering in another room, just on the edge of hearing, but the more I listened, the more I could make out. And the more I made out, the more I understood. It was a song without words, a melody of quiet joy, of thanks; and it was directed towards the Lion.

It was beautiful. As I listened to the song, feeling it wash over me, I soon found that there was another sound mixed with it all, something that I could feel rather than hear. A slow, steady rhythm ran beneath it all, and it only took me a moment more to find the source. Aslan was breathing on the ground of the clearing, a long, steady breath, seemingly endless, rising and falling gently in time with the song of the trees. And then, as quietly as it had all started, everything stopped.

"You can come closer, Edmund," Aslan said, his clear, deep voice showing a hint of amusement. "I will not bite you." He turned, fixing his gaze on me, and before I could stop myself I was walking out into the clearing, drawn to him. Those deep, golden eyes held mine for a few silent moments, and then he spoke once more.

"You seem troubled, dearheart," he said, more a statement than a question. I nodded in response, finding myself unsure of just where to start, despite the whirl of questions going through my mind. Sensing my unease, I think, Aslan simply smiled patiently, before nuzzling me slightly. "You can speak your mind, Edmund. Ask me your questions," he said, his voice gentle.

"I... I just wanted to know," I began, then faltered. "I guess... why me?" Aslan purred softly, a sound akin to a laugh, before laying down. After a second, I realised that he was waiting for me to join him. I sat down next to Aslan, the tiniest of gaps between us.

"Do you trust me, Son of Adam?" The question caught me off guard, and it was a few seconds before I could muster a response.

"Yes, Aslan," I said quietly, only slightly surprised at the conviction in my answer.

"Yet you doubt my choice?" Aslan's tone became deeper, more grave than it had been, and I found that I couldn't meet his eyes. Aslan sighed slightly, before speaking again.

"Rest assured, Edmund Pevensie, that I do not. You and your family were chosen for Narnia, because you are what Narnia needs."

"But I made so many mistakes," I said, finding myself close to tears. "How can anyone want me for a King?"

"It is true that some may not be able to forgive, to begin with. But I ask of you, have patience. Show them by example. You made mistakes and did wrong, dearheart, but you learned from your actions. You learned, and became better for it. Keep learning, my child, and have faith. You will never be alone in this, and I ask no more of my children than they can bear. I trust you."

Hearing the warmth in his voice, his conviction, I felt a small tear break free and slide down my cheek. His words, his belief in me and my family, had brought to the fore the most important question I had known in my short life. I wasn't sure that I could ask it, didn't know if it was even right for me to ask. But I needed to, and so I did. I wiped my

face with the sleeve of my tunic, and took a steadying breath, before looking at the Lion beside me.

"Why did you do it, Aslan?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. From his expression, I could tell that Aslan knew exactly what I was asking, a fact I was secretly glad of.

"Come closer, Edmund," he said, his own voice quiet yet inviting. I was starting to feel cold from the night air, and was glad of the chance to be nearer to the Lion. I shuffled over, resting against his side, and almost at once I could feel his warmth spreading into my body. "There are many reasons that I took your place, Edmund; reasons that I will not burden you with. Let it be enough to know that I died for my people. I died to appease the Deep Magic, and save my land and those I love most, which includes you, young one. But most of all, I died for the Oldest Magic of them all. For love. Let that be enough, for now."

"Who are you, Aslan?" The question escaped my lips before I could stop it. I was so awed by his power, his wisdom, and his love for everything, that I just had to know more about him... as soon as the question was asked, however, I realised that it could have sounded a little rude, and so I found myself cringing a little. Aslan noticed my reaction, and laughed out loud, deep and rich.

"You need not fear asking that question," he said. "But know this, dearheart. To answer would take a long time indeed, and I would have to tell you a great many stories. As I have told you, I tell no-one any story other than their own." With another deep purr that sounded suspiciously like a chuckle, he stood up, turning to face me where I sat.

"I will tell you this," he said, his warm breath and his sweet scent washing over me, filling me with a kind of inner peace. "I am the son of my great Father, the Emperor over the Sea, and his servant in all things. I am, have always been, and ever shall remain, myself." He leaned forward, touching my forehead with his tongue; a lion's kiss. He smiled at me, and I returned it with one of my own.

"And I am also one who loves you very much," he finished. "Now rise up, Edmund Randall Pevensie. Rise up, and know me better..."

§~§

Aslan walked me back to the camp, and we talked the whole way. He explained a little of the Deep Magic, of how the Stone Table came to be broken and his return to life. He explained what he had been doing in the wooded clearing; by breathing on the ground, he had been curing the land, and returning life to those victims of the Witch that had yet to be found. My mind had been drawn to the fox and the butterfly that Jadis had condemned to stone on the ridge, and Beaver's friend Badger and his family, who Lucy had told me about. They were free now; Narnia was free.

We talked about the plans for a coronation that had been set in motion. In the morning, our camp will move to Cair Paravel, the Castle of the Four Thrones, and as soon as the preparations have been completed, Aslan plans to crown my brother, sisters and I. I confessed my nerves about that occasion, and Aslan reassured me that it would all be alright. Eventually, we reached my tent, and Aslan bid me a good night. I was fighting off the urge to yawn by that point, and shivering from the cold a little, and so I was glad to turn in for the night...

As I lay here, feeling sleep creeping up on me in that slow way that it does, I can't help but believe Aslan's words. It will be alright. That's not to say that everything will be easy; we might have to fight for our new kingdom. There's going to be a lot of work to repair all the damage Jadis did, and sorting out her remaining followers. And, on a personal level, I know that I have my own private battle to wage against the damage I have done, both to myself and those around me.

But that can wait until morning...

✚☐✚

## **Chapter Ten: Once A King of Narnia**

Everything feels so strange...

When I woke up this morning, I still felt like an ordinary ten year-old boy. But at the same time, I felt completely different. Admittedly, I was in a larger, more comfortable bed than I have ever known, covered in wonderfully warm blankets, and I could smell an ocean breeze coming in through the windows. But it was still the same me; hair messed up from too long on my pillow, eyes barely open, and not in the least bit impressed with my darling little sister... Lucy had woken me up by bouncing on my bed.

I've always been a heavy sleeper, and have always had trouble waking up in the morning. Just ask my family; I'm not a pleasant sight, and not good company, either. I will admit that I did moan a bit at Lucy when she woke me up today, but instead of complaining too much, I pulled her down onto the bed and started tickling her. I can't remember the last time I did something like that, or had that much fun, if I'm honest.

Susan and Peter found the pair of us in a heaving, giggling mass of bed-covers, and it wasn't very long before they joined in too. The noise raised more than a few eyebrows, to be sure, as several of the Narnians assigned to be our guards came rushing in to find out what was going on! It was a feeling that I hadn't really felt for far far too long, a feeling of family, of belonging. I hoped there and then that it would never end.

Getting ready for the coronation this afternoon, I still felt strange, different even. I haven't felt this happy, this peaceful, since the day Father left for the war... maybe even before then. Sure, there was still a lot on my mind. Even now, I still have lingering memories of my first few days in Narnia. I have just really started rebuilding my relationship with my family. I miss my home, and my parents. On top of all that, I was getting ready to be crowned King of a magical land that I barely knew! I should have been feeling fit to burst, but instead I just felt happy, and more than a little excited, in a calm kind of way... a bit contradictory, I know, but that is the only way I can describe it.

I had just finished having a bath, and caught my reflection in the mirror. It was different to the one I was used to; a little taller, a little skinnier perhaps, but still recognisable, with my too-pale skin and more freckles than I would like. My eyes were the most changed, though... I almost didn't recognise them, at first. They looked older, as strange as that sounds even to me. I looked older, and I couldn't quite decide why. I did decide, eventually, that I was older, in a way; I was certainly not the boy I had been, if that makes sense.

Then there was the scar. As I was drying my hair, the scar on my stomach pulled taut, stinging a little, and reminding me that it was there. I remember running my fingers over the mark, and having a brief flash of memory; intense cold, and a sharp stab of pain. It lasted less than a second, but it was enough. I could see her face, snarling at me, willing me to die, wanting me to break down and give in... only this time, I refused. I wouldn't let Jadis get to me, I wouldn't, but it was so hard to stay focussed. I closed my eyes, and took a few deep breaths, remembering the happy feeling of just a few moments before.

If it hadn't been for the Fox, I might have given in to my memories. As it was, I heard a voice coming from my room; it was a voice that I recognised, but I couldn't place where I'd heard it before. I quickly finished dressing, and went to find out. To my complete surprise, standing in the middle of the main chamber was someone I hadn't expected to ever see again – the Fox that I had tried to save on the hill. I was stuck somewhere between joy at seeing him alive, and embarrassment at the memory of how he had come to be turned into stone in the first place. I'm not sure how much of that showed on my face, but if the Fox's expression was anything to go by, probably quite a bit.

"My apologies for intruding, Your Majesty," the Fox said, bowing his head slightly, sounding slightly uncomfortable. "Your royal brother asked me to check on you, and to tell you that a valet will be with you shortly to help you prepare for the coronation."

"Thank you," I said - well, sort of mumbled, actually - and after another bow he turned to leave. I thought about just letting him go, but I had to say something, embarrassment or not. I called out to him, and he stopped, turning to face me with an unreadable expression on his face. "Would... would you mind staying for a little while?" I asked. "I could use the company, and, umm, I kind of wanted to talk to you."

"Certainly, King Edmund," he replied, and walked back toward me. I smiled nervously at him, and wondered where to begin. Standing there, looking down at him as he looked back almost expectantly, I felt rather uncomfortable myself. So I sat down, right there on the floor, so that I could be face to face with the Fox. A moment later, the Fox sat down too, and I found myself deciding on just what to say.

"Umm, what's your name?" was apparently the best I could come up with. With the amount of apologising I've done over the past few days, you would think it becomes easier... trust me, it doesn't.

"Giles, my lord," was the Fox's simple reply. His quietness was a little unnerving, but he didn't seem unkind, or even particularly upset with me in any way.

"Giles? That's a nice name," was my own slightly weak response. "Listen, Giles, I ... I just wanted you to know that I'm sorry for what happened. I'm sorry she turned you to stone. And... and I'm sorry I let you down." I thought of the expression he had worn, after I tried to save him by giving Jadis the information she wanted. The thought made me feel a little ill.

"Thank you," Giles said after a few long moments, a smile crossing his face. "Though, there was no need to apologise. You didn't let me down, my King."

"How do you mean?" I asked, a little confused at his reasoning. "You were turned into a statue because of me."

"Perhaps," Giles said, looking thoughtful. "Then again, it may have happened anyway. I had been spying on her forces, after all."

"I just wanted to stop her hurting you," I said. "She'd already hurt too many people because of me... I'm sorry. You looked so disappointed with me."

"If I looked disappointed, I apologise, my King. I'm glad that you tried to save my life, I truly am. I appreciated your efforts, but at the same time I wished that you had kept silent, or else told her something other than the truth. You see, I was willing to die, if it meant more time could be bought for our forces."

"Another mistake," I whispered, half to myself. "I've made so very many, recently. And please, it's just Edmund. I'm not a king yet, you know."

"Very well, Edmund it is," Giles smiled.

"You were really ready to die?" I asked, a little in awe. The Fox nodded slowly. "You're very brave, Giles. Far braver than I was. I did so much damage when I first came here."

"Do not be so hard on yourself, Edmund," Giles replied. "Don't you see? Already you were trying to mend your ways, up on that ridge. Edmund, I have heard that some have called you a traitor. I want you to know that I do not believe them. You made a single mistake, and trusted someone you should not have. Whilst that wrong could have undone much, since then you have done a lot of good, and fought to redeem yourself. From what I have heard, you were more than willing to risk yourself for your family and this country. Without your efforts, the battle may have been lost altogether. I have known traitors, Edmund. Believe me when I tell you that you are far less of a traitor, and far more of a king, than you probably know."

"How can you be sure?" I asked, stunned by his words. In truth, I hadn't truly thought about it that way... even after Aslan told me I had been forgiven, I had still only really thought about all I had done wrong, not the things I may have done right.

"As I said, I have known traitors," Giles said, sounding sad, breaking into my thoughts. "In a way, I am one myself."

"You?" I asked, surprised. "A traitor?"

"After a fashion," the Fox replied, a wry smile crossing his face. "I turned my back on my own family, so that I might follow Aslan." I sat in silence, unsure of what to say, until the silence became a bit uncomfortable. Eventually, I spoke up.

"What happened? If you don't mind me asking?"

"I don't talk about it very often," he said softly, then took a deep breath. "But perhaps, in this case... My father, Ranulph Greystail, was the head of the once-noble House Cinnabar. His father held that position once, and his father before him, for generations; some say all the way back to the times of King Frank and Queen Helen. For generations, my family held a high position amongst the nobles of Narnia. We were trusted by many, and were often sought out for our sage council and for our diplomatic skills.

"Then, a hundred years ago, Jadis came. She brought her winter, and her armies of fell creatures. The line of Adam fought against her, and fought bravely, but the Witch commanded powerful forces. Toward the end of the war, when Narnia was most in need of a great victory, the King of the time came to the House of Cinnabar, seeking advice in his war against her tyranny. The head of the house at the time, Gerard, counselled that the King should face Jadis in open warfare, forcing a final battle between our forces and hers,

and helped him arrange battle plans. The King gathered his army, and under Aslan's banner marched against the Witch.

"The Narnian army was ambushed and all but destroyed. Jadis had recruited Narnians to her side, promising them power and riches in return for their handing over the throne to her. Among the chief traitors were my family. We had betrayed the rightful King. Since that day, House Cinnabar has worked as spies for the Witch's secret police. My father and both of my brothers died in that service. I am the last of my household."

"How did they die?" I asked, adjusting my position on the carpet as my legs started to go a little numb. A hopeful thought had started to form, as I briefly remembered Aslan's actions of a couple of nights ago, when he had breathed on the land and healed it. If they had been turned to stone...

"Jadis had them executed," Giles said, his voice heavy, and my heart fell at the finality in his voice. "They gave her information on a group of Narnians that were causing her problems. She sent her wolves, but they found nothing; I had warned the rebels, and in her anger the Witch had my family killed. All because of me."

I didn't know what to say. Giles had done the right thing, for all the right reasons, and had lost his family as a result. I have to admit that, hearing his story, I felt both a great amount of pity for Giles, and no small amount of sadness. The Fox looked up at me then, and his sad expression seemed to melt a little.

"I'm sorry, Edmund," he said softly. "I didn't tell you this to upset you. That would never be my intention, least of all today, of all days. I tell you my story because there is a lesson to be learned. I made a hard decision, but despite my loss I know that I did the right thing. As a King, you will make many decisions, most of them harder than even I can likely guess. But Aslan trusts you to make those decisions. Learn from your mistakes, try to be fair in all things, and don't be afraid to ask for help. You won't go too far wrong, I think. The trick is, you have to trust yourself. "

"I sometimes wonder if I can," I said slowly. Giles reached forward, and placed his paw on my hand.

"Your family does," he said. "So does Aslan. And so do I, if I may say so. You feel things deeply, Edmund, and you think things through; perhaps a little too much, if it is not too bold." I managed a smile at that; I could picture Peter saying something about the opposite being true. "My point is that you have to have faith. Faith in yourself, faith in your family, faith in Aslan. Have faith in your own abilities, and in His blessings. And remember that so long as you do, you will never be alone."

"I hope everyone is as understanding as you," I said, a small smile crossing my face.

"Most will be," Giles said. "If I might offer some advice? Worry a little less about the past, and concentrate on the future. If you dwell too long on what has been, you will never move forward. We are a good people, my King, and few of us hold a grudge for very long. You have been forgiven, as I said. Let that be enough." He stood then, and I joined him.

"I must go," Giles said, smiling at me. "I have a few things to see to before the coronation begins. I will see you there, my liege. Before I go, though, I was wondering if I could ask you something."

"Yes?"

"There is a lion downstairs... I suppose in human terms he would not be a lot older than yourself. He hasn't even started growing a mane yet. Quite the excitable young creature. He... well, he has some odd markings on his face..." I felt myself starting to redden. It was the lion I had drawn on in Jadis' courtyard, it had to be; I had almost forgotten about him!

"Oh no!" I groaned. "Is he very angry?"

"He seems to think it is quite the honour, actually," Giles said, grinning. "Apparently Aslan told him that it was a mark of respect, that you had been intimidated by his fierceness and had marked him accordingly." I had never pictured a fox raising his eyebrows before, but he did.

"Nearly true," I said, embarrassed. Giles grinned some more. "It sounds like we should stick with that story, though!"

"Very wise," Giles replied with a laugh. He left then, and just a few moments later, a faun arrived to help me prepare for the coronation. I felt happier again, having talked to Giles. I don't know if it was because of what he had said, or if it was more to do with having apologised to the last Narnian I had directly affected by my actions. Whatever it was, I felt... not ready, I think, but more ready than I had been to accept that I had a future here, and to face what was to come. I felt lighter, in a way. Less burdened. I just had to have faith in my family, and in my new friends, and to trust that I would never prove their faith in me to be poorly placed.

*§§§*

The coronation was everything I had imagined, and so much more. I had seen the throne room of Cair Paravel just once before today, when we had moved into the castle, and Aslan had begun organising the castle's preparation. I had been impressed by its size, certainly, and the glass roof was unlike anything I had ever seen. But today, seeing the hall decorated so beautifully, and filled with so many Narnians in their best dress, it was beyond amazing.

As we walked toward the thrones, Peter to my right, then Aslan and the girls, my heart was practically in my throat, I was so nervous. I kept my hands closed so that the smiling faces we passed couldn't see them shaking from my excitement, and I'm pretty sure that I was grinning like an idiot; I'm glad that Aslan was there, in all truth, or else my nerves might have given way. But, as it was, I made it to the dais at the end of the hall without tripping over my feet, and turned to face the Great Lion.

The ceremony was simple and elegant, though in all truth I expected no less from Aslan. We were introduced to the Narnians formally, and Aslan announced our new titles; Lucy the Valiant, Edmund the Just, Susan the Gentle, and Peter the Magnificent. Peter was also titled as High King, due to his position as eldest of our family. As Mr. Tumnus placed our crowns upon our heads, it struck me that my family really did look like royalty, and their titles fit each of them perfectly. We sat down on our thrones, then, and Aslan closed the ceremony.

"Once a king or queen of Narnia," he said, his deep voice echoing around the room, "always a king or queen. May your wisdom grace us, until the stars fall down from the heavens." I was so excited, it was all I could do to sit still. I spotted Giles in the crowd, standing next to the lion that he had mentioned to me earlier. Both of them were smiling, and I nodded slightly, smiling along with them.

Before long, there was dancing, and feasting, and more dancing; I've never known a people so full of life, so willing to embrace happiness as the Narnians. It's so unlike England. There, everything is so grey and dull. Even before the war, there was never anything about the place or the people that could compare to this; even the best party I could have imagined would have looked like a funeral, when compared to the celebration that my family and I became the centre of.

I let the excitement and the joy carry me along with it; dancing until my feet hurt (even though I hate dancing), eating food more delicious than I could have imagined. I talked and laughed, and even sang, with every Narnian that approached me, as well as my family. For perhaps the first time in, well, forever, it seems, I felt like I truly belonged...

Eventually, after a very long time, I found myself standing in a quiet corner of the great hall, watching my family. I was just a little tired, I guess. Peter was dancing with a dryad, Susan with a faun, and Lucy was sitting with Mr. Tumnus and the beavers off to one side, laughing at one of Mr. Beaver's jokes. They all looked so very happy, and seeing them so made me feel warm inside, through and through. For whatever reason, the thought that I had nearly lost all of this threatened to bubble to the surface, then, and I felt a sudden need to be alone. I do that sometimes, I've never known why. And so it was that I found myself slipping outside for some fresh air.

§!§

It's a funny thing to think that I never used to feel the cold. Well, that isn't entirely true. I felt it, but somehow it bothered me less. Winter was always my favourite time of year; I would be the first to run out into the snow, Mother hollering after me to put on my scarf. I would beg the others to make snow-angels with me, or build a snowman, or even have a snowball fight. On more than one occasion, Father had to pick me up and carry me inside when it got too dark, as I never wanted to stop playing... not that I minded that too much, either, because if we had been very good then Mother would make us some hot chocolate, to keep the cold at bay.

Winter meant being with my family, gathered around a fire, listening to music on the wireless or to one of Father's stories. It meant Christmas and presents, our grandparents coming to see us, carols around the tree and roasted chestnuts. And, nine times out of ten, it meant me coming down with a winter cold because I didn't wrap up enough. Not that I ever learned. As soon as I was deemed fit, I was back outside...

I feel the cold now. Even though it has been the most gloriously warm day, even though there is only the slightest breeze coming in off of the ocean, I'm cold. I can't help shivering a little, and pulling my cloak a little tighter around myself every so often. From the little balcony that I've hidden away on, I can hear the party going on inside, hear the sounds of my family and the Narnians celebrating still; I know it will be warm in there, and that I will be amongst friends. But I can't bring myself to rejoin them. Not yet.

I hate the cold now. It carries too many memories for me, too many reminders of what I have done, too many reminders of Her. It's just one more thing that's been taken from me for my mistakes. I wonder if I'll ever enjoy anything again, sometimes. But then I think of Aslan, and my family, and I think that, for all that I've lost, I have gained so much more. And so I stay out here, partly to face my fears, partly to remind myself of what I've learned, and who I have become.

King Edmund the Just... I'm not sure if I will ever get used to that, even less sure that I am worthy of such a title. I still can't quite believe that all of this has happened, that I am here, in this place, let alone that I have been crowned along with my family. Four thrones, four rulers... the idea that someone prophesied my family's arrival over a thousand years ago is just overwhelming. The fact that I am now wearing a crown, that I have sworn an oath to serve and protect this land, is just as unbelievable. However did I get here? I shiver again, and start to wonder how much longer I can stay out here; a part of me still doesn't quite feel like going back. And so I stay, breath curling upward in little wisps, alone with my thoughts.

"I wondered where you'd got to."

It seems that someone, at least, has noticed my absence. I turn around, and find Peter smiling at me from the archway that leads onto the balcony. The smile doesn't quite reach his eyes, and I can see that I've worried him a little.

"I just needed to get some fresh air," I say, smiling back at my brother and hoping he won't be too upset at my disappearing from the party. My whole family have been keeping quite a close eye on me since the battle, almost as if they're afraid I'll just up and vanish on a whim. It's a little annoying, I'll admit, but at the same time it's immensely comforting.

"Ah," he says simply, as he walks over to join me. I turn to look out over the ocean again, as Peter leans on the balcony. He's quiet for a second, then continues. "You never did like things like this much, did you."

"Not really," I sigh. "It's not the party, really, so much as all the fuss. Over me, I mean."

"I think you might have to get used to it," Peter says with a laugh. "You are a king now, you know? Or were you sleeping through the crowning part?" His smile is infectious, and I can't help but join in with a smile of my own.

"No, I wasn't," I whisper after a few seconds. I look up at him, and I think for a moment about telling him my fears; fears that I won't be a good king, that I've done far too much damage already to ever be truly accepted, despite everyone telling me the opposite. It's all so confusing. Peter looks back at me, and instantly his expression changes; he can see what I'm thinking, almost, like he's reading my mind. His look is one of understanding and love, and he moves to face me square on. And with one simple action, he answers my questions, and stops my fears dead in their tracks.

Peter steps forward, and pulls me into his arms, resting his chin on my head. I hold onto him too, curling my fingers into his tunic and closing my eyes as I rest my head against my brother's chest. We stay like this for a few moments, Peter rubbing my back in the same way Father used to, letting me know that he loves me, and that that is all that really matters; that I have my family, and they have me. After a few moments, he pulls back, and after dropping a small kiss onto my forehead, Peter smiles at me once more.

"Come on," he says gently. "We'd best get back inside before Susan sends out a search party. You know how she can get." We both grin at the thought, and as we start walking toward the door, Peter puts his arm around my shoulders. As he does so, and we step into the light of the banqueting hall, a thought comes to me.

I made a promise, not so long ago. It was less than a fortnight, and a whole lifetime away, a promise made by a very different boy sitting in an icy dungeon. I promised then that I would do everything I could to make up for what I had done. I had promised to do

whatever it took to be better, to never let my family down again, to never hurt them if it was in my power. Now, I promised it again. I would give everything I had to be the best brother I could, and I added that I would try to be the best king I could, too. I would try my best to never let anyone else suffer for my mistakes again...

No more mistakes. No more hurt.

No more regrets.

¥¤¥

# Singing in the Dark

*by FairLilyFlower*

The coronation celebrations had lasted the entire night. Only now, when the merest line of sky touching the sea was beginning to fade from black to grey, were most of the Narnians either heading for home or searching for a place to sleep within Cair Paravel. Of the new Kings and Queens themselves, only Peter was still awake, making farewells on behalf of himself and his siblings or conveying tired courtiers to bedrooms or rooms full of couches and cushions where they could rest for what remained of the hours of darkness.

Lucy had managed to stay awake till just after midnight, at which point Peter and Susan had carried her up to her new bedchamber in one of the high towers; a lovely affair with woven tapestries lining the walls, a balcony that overlooked the sea, and a bed carved from some honey-brown wood with nymphs and dryads weaving their way around the four posts that supported the silk canopy. Once there Susan had put her little sister to bed, and had been so enchanted with the chamber she had run to find her own, and discovered an equally beautiful room waiting for her just across the spacious hallway. Peter had lingered to kiss Lucy goodnight, and when he went to find Susan he found her curled up in her own four-poster bed, fast asleep with a radiant smile still on her face.

He had returned to the revelry then, and had watched and laughed with Edmund as the Fauns, made merry by some potent wine, had danced ever more wildly as the night wore on. Edmund, excited about staying up as long as he wanted, had lasted another two hours before dozing off despite the sweet, lively music of the Fauns' flutes and the Satyrs' drums, so Peter, with the help of , had carried him up to bed as well.

Now, with dawn fast approaching, Peter was performing his final farewells and had just shown to a comfortable little bedroom, when he decided against going to bed himself. He was still far too animated to sleep now, and he had too much to think about. Peter smiled to himself, even though his face was aching from it by now. Less than a week ago, he had been a boy-evacuee running from bombing raids, and now! Now, he was a King, and – dare he even think it? Peter paused a moment, then ran to a corridor just leading off from the main throne room, where a long mirror ran throughout its length.

Once he was in front of the mirror, he stood and gazed at his reflection, trying to be objective. He hadn't grown at all – his face and hair were still the same, he was no taller or broader. His clothes were different obviously, but what else?

Peter took a deep breath and looked directly into his own eyes. Yes, there it was! His eyes held a different look – they were deeper, more thoughtful, more knowing. His whole face had a different expression – steadier, keener, and he stood straighter. Peter regarded himself without vanity, but with a profound sense of fulfilment.

He was a man now. There was no mistaking it.

Unconsciously, his hand rose to feel the crown still resting on his head. It was not a clumsy, heavy thing, but a light circlet that rested easily on his fair hair. Peter did not wear it lightly,

however. He had been given the greatest responsibility that could ever be bestowed upon a man, and he vowed to shoulder it unceasingly until his sisters and brother were grown enough to bear its weight as well as its privilege. He had been appointed High King, and he knew then and there he would never rest whilst a duty remained undone.

That decided, Peter whirled round and went to visit his family, to make sure they were sleeping peacefully. After that, he thought he might go for a stroll down on the beach, and watch the sun rise in his new kingdom.

Lucy and Susan were both still sound asleep when he peeped into their bedchambers. Peter moved noiselessly between the rooms, and went equally softly to check on Edmund.

His brother lay with his back to the door, and Peter might have assumed that Edmund was sleeping also, had not the slight tremor of his shoulders and the merest of sighs told him otherwise. Peter paused in the doorway – should he call out to his younger brother and make sure everything was all right, or just let Ed go back to sleep? But then he heard a muffled sob, and all thoughts of leaving fled.

“Ed?” he whispered, stepping forward. Edmund sat up instantly, wiping furiously at his eyes.

“Peter! What are you doing here?” Edmund asked, rather gruffly, turning his face away from the light. “Haven’t you been to bed yet?”

“No, I haven’t been to bed – I decided to stay up all night.” Peter strode forward, no longer bothering about whispering. “What’s the matter, Ed? Did you have a nightmare?”

Edmund shook his head. “No, it wasn’t a nightmare. It’s – it’s silly. Never mind it, Peter, just go and carry on with whatever you were doing.”

Peter sighed deeply, and came to sit on the edge of his brother’s bed. There was an open window overlooking the land towards the western woods that was open a little, and he felt a deliciously cool breeze playing over his face. He took in a deep breath before speaking.

“Ed, you don’t have to hide anything from me anymore. I thought that we’d sorted all that out after the battle. You can tell me anything.”

Ed glanced over at Peter, encouraged, but then doubt seemed to flood his face, and he looked down, tears threatening. “No – all this is all wrong for me, Peter! It’s just stupid! I can’t be a king – I’m only eleven and not even tall for my age! Look at you – you’re perfect! You look just right as a king and a general. I look – I must look ridiculous. Like a kid playing in the dressing up box ...” Edmund’s voice trailed off, and the tears began falling.

Peter only hesitated a moment, and then reached up and took off his crown – he needed to be just Peter, Edmund’s brother, in order to sort this out, instead of being High King Peter the Magnificent. He tossed the circlet on the bed, and reached over to pull Edmund into a hug. The younger boy resisted for a moment, but then suddenly clung to Peter for dear life.

“Stop all this foolishness,” Peter murmured, rocking Edmund to and fro. “Aslan chose you to be a king, just as much as he chose me. And all those people, yesterday and this night – they want you for a king. No one else. So you’re young, Ed – so what? You’ll grow – and remember what they called you? The Just – King Edmund the Just! They wouldn’t choose someone they didn’t have faith in to rule. Aslan wouldn’t. I wouldn’t – I reckon that you’re ready.”

Edmund sniffled for a few moments, still hanging on to Peter. The older brother carried on rocking the younger, humming soothingly. Edmund's next words were so low that Peter almost missed them entirely.

"The dream I had – we were back in London," Edmund said softly.

Peter froze suddenly in comforting his younger brother. "What?" he asked, as urgently as he dared.

"We were back at home with Mum, and Dad had come home from the War," Edmund carried on, as though he hadn't heard. "And they promised to take us all to the seaside on holiday, and I wouldn't have to go back to that school. And later on you and I were going to stay in the country – just us boys – and ride horses. And I was so happy – and then I woke up. And it's stupid, Peter, because I'm in Narnia, and I love it here, but I remembered Mum and Dad, and we probably won't ever see them again, and I missed them, and then I realised I was just a kid and -"

"Stop," Peter interrupted, firmly but kindly. "Slow down, Ed. You're missing Mum and Dad?"

Edmund nodded, not trusting himself to speak again. Everyone was so joyful to be in Narnia, and he had to go and be the odd one out again ... Typical Edmund! Always being awkward, he thought miserably.

"I miss them as well," Peter admitted, giving Edmund's shoulders a little squeeze. Edmund looked up in surprise. "Don't you believe I have feelings, Ed?" Peter asked wryly, and his younger brother blushed pink.

"No, it's not that," Edmund paused, and tried to explain. "It's just – well, all of you seemed so happy. And I'm happy too – it's just I thought of Mum and Dad tonight and that we won't ever see them again."

Peter remained silent for a few moments longer; still hold his younger brother, as he thought about what Edmund had said. The cool breeze returned, ruffling his hair like a gentle hand. And Peter felt great warmth well up in his heart as the memory of a great pair of golden eyes looking upon him returned – a certainty, that above all else, all of Aslan's family would be safe.

"But we will see them again, Ed," Peter said, so confidently that Edmund pulled out of Peter's hug to stare at his elder brother's face. Peter smiled at him, eyes dancing. "I just know we will. Maybe we'll go back to England someday, or perhaps Mum and Dad will find their way here. But I know that we haven't left them behind forever."

Edmund was quiet for an instant, before blurting out the obvious: "But how do you know, Peter? How come you're so certain?"

Peter tugged Edmund back into the hug before replying. "When the girls and I first arrived at Aslan's camp, Aslan spoke to me about what I had to do – fighting the battle, and ruling Narnia. And I was saying about how I wasn't who he thought I was." Peter paused, allowing what he had just said to sink into Edmund's mind: that he wasn't the only one with doubts.

"And then Aslan asked me to consider what was being asked of me – because he wanted his family safe." Peter continued. "That means everyone in Narnia, Ed. Including you and me and the girls. And if we're part of this family, then it must follow that Mum and Dad are

too. Part of this family we have to look after. So however long we're going to be away, it stands to reason that it's not forever."

Edmund went still suddenly, allowing his elder brother to rock him back and forth, soothingly, the way he used to when Edmund had been very small and had awoken from a bad dream. Through the window Peter could see the sky lightening from black to deep blue as dawn drew near. Edmund would be able to see some spectacular sunsets from his room in the days ahead.

"Peter?"

Peter glanced down at Edmund. "Yes, Ed?"

"Thanks."

Peter smiled. "Whenever you need me, Ed, I'll do my best to help. Just have a little faith."

That one little phrase was all it took. Suddenly something fell into place in Edmund's mind, something he hadn't quite been able to articulate, a leap he hadn't been able to make until now. Edmund had always been the doubter amongst his family ... until now. "Have faith," he murmured, remembering a saying he had once heard: faith is the bird that sings to the dawn while it is still dark. Peter had nodded in agreement when told that - Edmund had merely rolled his eyes. He had never placed much faith in anything - save perhaps his father and Peter when they had been younger.

Maybe he needed to start doing so. Faith in Peter was a good beginning. Believing in Peter was easy, now he seemed so much older and wiser.

So why not have faith in himself and his family?

The pair remained still for a few minutes longer, Peter waiting, Edmund thoughtful, as the sky lightened further, and the cries of the seagulls became audible and the breeze thawed a little, bringing with it the promise of a beautiful day. Then Peter suddenly let go of Edmund and stood up, stretching himself. "Do you want to go riding Ed?" he asked.

"Riding?" Edmund replied, frowning a little in confusion.

"Yes - just the two of us," Peter said as he reached for his crown. "An early morning ride along the beach. We can watch the sun come up - for the very first time in Narnia!"

Edmund paused only for a second before grinning and leaping out of bed to get dressed.

And a few short minutes later, the two new Kings were cantering along the shoreline, as the newly-risen sun turned the water to gold.

¥□¥

# Blessed

*by electrum*

"Shouldn't they be using wooden swords? Mightn't they be harmed?" worried Celer, voicing the concern of almost every officer assembled.

Oreius said nothing in return, knowing Fauns tended to brood over imagined possibilities, and withheld his judgement until he had seen more. He had assembled the finest fighters in the Narnian army to assess the fighting abilities of their new monarchs. Both kings moved with a certain grace and he could tell they would make fine swordsmen, especially King Peter. King Edmund needed more confidence. And height. And strength. But that would come with time and age. He was pleased to see that Peter had adapted his speed and technique to his brother's level of ability without being obvious. Celer's concerns were misplaced. Oreius knew the High King would never allow harm to befall his brother again.

"Hold!" he called, and instantly both boys stepped away, panting and grinning at each other. "Weapons away, Sires."

The lesson over for the day, Peter and Edmund gladly sheathed their swords, pulling off their helmets and facing the Centaur and the Faun. Both were sweating with exertion, their faces flushed and their hair plastered to their heads. Oreius motioned for one of the officers to bring them some water, knowing they preferred it to wine this early in the day.

"That was well fought, Your Majesties," he complimented, letting his gaze sweep over the pair of them. "It will take little time, I believe, for us to develop new techniques suitable to you both."

Peter opened his mouth to reply, but said nothing, clearly pondering what the Centaur could mean. Edmund cocked his head and asked, "New techniques? What about the old ones?"

Oreius smiled, pleased with their reactions and knowing they valued his greater wisdom and praise. "King Edmund, you and your brother are the only Humans in Narnia's army. Your legs are straighter than a Faun's or a Satyr's and you move with a very different action than they do. They are very upright in their stance and their armor is unlike yours."

Peter smiled his thanks as one of the female Centaurs relived him of his helmet and gloves and another Centaur handed him a goblet of water. Immediately he passed the goblet to Edmund and accepted another from her. He looked up at Oreius with a smile and said,

"I don't believe there's any comparison between a Human and a Centaur, Oreius, is there?"

"More than you'd think, King Peter. Already I can see a number of sword techniques we Centaurs use that can be adapted for you. With practice and discipline you will each find your own style of combat, and as you grow in stance and strength, your swordsmanship will grow and adapt with you."

"Grow in stance and strength," echoed Edmund reverently, with a wistful expression. He was easily the shortest one there, barring the Cheetah captain. "I like the sound of that."

Peter laughed aloud, throwing his arm over Edmund's shoulders and pulling him close. They all laughed with as much joy as relief and Oreius wondered if these two knew, truly knew, how much they and their sisters meant to Narnia. But a fortnight ago a century-long winter had ravaged the land. A week ago Oreius and three of the officers here in the courtyard had been statues of stone. And by their very presence and the strength of their love, these brothers and their sisters had broken an enchantment dark and deep and helped overthrow a sorceress that had challenged the might of Aslan himself. Would they truly ever understand? Did he want them to? Would Peter ever know why Oreius and Bellone the Rhinoceros had sacrificed themselves for him? Did they know that to Narnia, they were the very embodiment of hope?

Across from him, holding King Edmund's helmet and gloves, Celer gave him a swift look. They were thinking along the same lines if the Faun's expression was any indication.

He looked down at Edmund's dark head as the young king elbowed his brother playfully. Edmund, the traitor, who had caused so much grief. Edmund, whom Aslan had forgiven, whose place on the Stone Table he had taken. Edmund, who had disobeyed his king in order to destroy the White Witch's greatest weapon. Edmund, who sacrificed himself to save his brother. King Edmund the Just, who had learned a mighty lesson he would carry all his days.

Yes, they understood. They understood far beyond their years. And Oreius knew that he must never, never underestimate them, children though they may be.

"Oreius?" wondered Peter, his blue eyes wide with concern. He lowered his goblet while beside him, Edmund was no less anxious.

He shook himself, flicking his tail and avoiding Celer's eye. "I was lost in my thoughts a moment, Your Majesty."

"Is everything alright?"

He leaned down closer to them, letting his affection show as he placed one hand on Peter's shoulder, the other on Edmund's. "Now that you and your sisters sit on the Four Thrones, Your Majesties, all is very well indeed for myself and for Narnia." A moment later he hardened his features, their instructor once again. "Tomorrow at dawn."

They both groaned and he smacked them on their arms, knocking them together lightly.

"With shields."

They groaned louder, laughing now, and around them the warriors of Narnia's army laughed with them. Peter looked down at his brother ruefully.

"It's better than algebra, Ed."

"I'll take your word for it. Breakfast?" he asked hopefully.

"Definitely," Peter agreed. He looked at Oreius, his eyes bright. "Dawn, then, Oreius, with shields."

"And get some sleep tonight," Celer added.

"Tonight?" asked Edmund under his breath as they collected their helmets and gloves. "I think I could sleep right now."

Peter grinned mischievously. "Lucy and Su won't let you. Besides, you can't eat if you're asleep. Come on! Race you!"

The High King darted through the archway. Behind him, Edmund let out a disgruntled cry and set off after him at a run, shouting for him to stop.

Watching them leave the courtyard, Oreius nodded to two of the Dwarf archers and a Cougar standing guard to follow and escort them back to the palace. Beside him, Celer smiled.

"We have been blessed," stated the Faun quietly, to the approval of all who heard.

"We have indeed," agreed Oreius.

¥¤¥

## Balance

*by electrum*

"That's it." He threw down his quill and dropped back in his seat. "From now on, I'm just King Ed. King Edmund is no more."

"And I'll be Queen Lu," giggled Lucy.

"Or you could be Qu Lu," teased Peter, dipping his quill in the inkstand. His blue eyes glittered mischievously. He turned to Susan. "And you could be Qu Su."

They all looked at Susan as she concentrated on writing her name. Midway through 'Susan' she pressed too hard on the pen and a pool of ink spoiled her efforts. She made a face, smiling despite herself. "I am staying Queen Susan if it takes me half an hour and four tries every time I sign my name."

They were in the library of Cair Paraval, all of them trying, with various degrees of success, to master the use of a quill. Gryphon feathers, which made the best pens, littered the table along with blotchy scraps of parchment as the Pevensie children learned to write their titles and names in flowing script, or any script at all in Edmund's and Lucy's cases. Grateful as she was that all her kings and queens could read and write, the court recorder, an elderly Centaur named Minovin, had gently but firmly suggested their majesties should learn how sign their names before they botched up any more of her official records with their efforts. Now they were all splashed with ink and despite their struggles, they were having fun, laughing at the notion of kings and queens having to do lines. Peter was having the most success and, having written 'High King Peter of Narnia' and 'Sir Peter Wolfsbane' a dozen or more times without any errant spots of ink on the paper, wandered off to look at a scroll encased in glass in the center of the library.

"Well, here's something we should know," announced Peter, glancing up. They gladly gave him all their attention. Peter cleared his throat. "It's on deportment and law, so listen up, Ed. 'The inhabitants of Narnia, Magical Creatures and Talking Animals, Walking Trees and Divine Waters, are each unto themselves their own persons, not one above the other. None shall be lord, nor give commands, save by the authority of the Lord of Cair Paravel and even then only in service to Narnia and during times of war or strife. As is the will of Aslan, none but the Sons and Daughters of Adam and Eve shall rule in the land as king or queen. No being of Narnia shall ask of the other what is not willingly offered. No Trees shall be felled without the consent of the Forest, nor the course of Water be altered without the consent of the Spirits therein. Magical Creatures and Talking Animals will bear no burden nor surrender the fruits of their labor unwillingly. No Magical Creature or Talking Animal will be slain for its flesh, for that is murder, and the inhabitants of Narnia shall make no war upon each other. This law is put forth by Frank, First King of Narnia, and transcribed in the reign of his grandson, King George William, by his youngest grandson Prince Arthur, in the year 92.'"

Susan drew a deep breath. "It makes good sense."

"Be nice to each other," translated Peter with a laugh. "Very good sense, Su. It also confirms Aslan's law that only Humans can be monarchs here."

Edmund rose and joined Peter, looking at the ancient scroll for himself. It was gorgeously decorated with images of trees and water, Unicorns and Centaurs, and among the Animals was a horse that immediately reminded Edmund of...

"Oh, rot," he muttered, realizing. He looked up at his brother. "I have to go."

"Where?" wondered Peter.

He cast his sisters and brother a rueful look. "I have a Horse I have to apologize to."

Susan smiled, understanding. "Phillip isn't at all angry, Ed."

"Maybe," he agreed with a nod, "but I should still apologize. See you in a little while."

§§§

"Phillip? Phillip, are you in there?"

The Horse's chestnut head appeared over the edge of a stable door and he tossed his mane in greeting to his king. "Well met, King Edmund."

With a smile he stepped over to the stable and Phillip nosed the door open to meet him, lowering his head in what Edmund realized was a bow before nuzzling his chest gently. Edmund automatically stroked Phillip's nose as he said,

"I owe you an apology, Phillip. I didn't know it was rude to ride a Talking Horse except in times of war and I've ridden you a dozen times or more since the battle. I'm sorry."

"There is no offense, Sire."

He sighed. "I have so much to learn here."

Phillip slowly moved towards the doors so they could have more privacy out in the field and Edmund kept pace, one hand on the Horse's neck. "But you're learning, Your Majesty. If I didn't want to carry you, I wouldn't."

"So you don't mind?" worried Edmund.

He let out a whinnying chuckle. "The honor is mine, good king. I would carry you always and everywhere."

Edmund paused at the archway leading into the stable yard. His voice was earnest as he faced the Horse. "Thank you. But Phillip?"

"Majesty?"

"Please, if you see me doing something wrong or if you catch me saying anything rude, tell me. I've put my foot in my mouth a few times already and it's hard enough trying to be king and deal with...with..."

Phillip stared at him with genuine fascination, trying hard to imagine what Edmund could mean. Finally he asked seriously, "Why would you wish to put your hoof in your mouth, King Edmund?"

He blinked, caught completely off guard, then sputtered, "Oh! I don't mean really put my hoo- my foot in my mouth. It's an expression we use back where I come from."

The Horse's ears perked up. "In Spare Oom?"

"Uh, yes. I mean...um...yes." All four Pevensie children had given up trying to clarify the particulars of their home in England. As far as Narnia was concerned, they were from the city of Wardrobe in the land of Spare Oom. Lucy thought it was quite funny. Peter had been the first to capitulate to the inevitable in order to spare the feelings of Cair Paraval's historian. The old Dwarf had produced a beautifully illuminated page of a book that he was writing with the help of Tumnus and the Beavers, detailing how Narnia's kings and queens had left their Castle Finchley in the shining city of Wardrobe in the great land of Spare Oom. Edmund would never forget his brother's astonished expression, nor the pleading look in Susan's eyes, nor the sheer delight in Lucy's face. Peter finally looked at the expectant Dwarf and said the words that sealed their past forever: "This is a most masterful work, good Truskin." And from that point on, England was but a memory.

Edmund hastened to clarify for the Horse. "When we say we've put our foot in our mouth, it means we've said something stupid or embarrassing without meaning to. Usually you don't realize it until after the damage is done, though. Like me riding you without asking first."

Phillip pondered on this. "That would be uncomfortable. And taste horrid."

"Precisely," said the king.

They were standing in the green field beyond the stable yard. The breeze was heavy with moisture and smelled of rain and grass and flowers all mingled with salt air. Edmund closed his eyes, breathing in deeply.

"A storm is coming."

Edmund smiled at the Horse. "The first rain in Narnia in a hundred years, or so Mr. Tumnus says."

"It has been a time of many firsts, Majesty. Would you like to ride?"

"I've never ridden bareback." He thought of Peter on Flisk the Unicorn, and how confident and graceful his brother had been.

"Another thing you must learn, then. In battle you may not always have the luxury of time to saddle me up." He bent down and Edmund awkwardly clambered onto his back. Both felt odd without a saddle and bridle, but Phillip just spoke on. "Sit up straight. Knees in. I'll walk slowly. Feel me and move with me."

For a while they did just that, silently moving around the field as the sky grew darker with gathering clouds. After a while Phillip said, "Let go my mane and hold your arms out. Balance, King Edmund."

He obeyed, adjusting slightly. "You can call me Edmund, Phillip."

"At times such as this, I shall. But among your subjects you must always be a king." He picked up the pace the slightest bit. "What you said before about dealing with kingship..."

It was a moment before Edmund could bring himself to speak. "Actually, it wasn't being a king I was talking about, but what I did. What I caused."

Phillip stopped abruptly and Edmund struggled to keep both his poise and his seat. There was a hint of righteous anger in the Horse's voice as he said, "From what I have been told,

Edmund, you are still but a foal. Anyone that would judge you by what they would have done in a like situation is a fool. At that time you were neither warrior nor king, just a foal without his sire and dame running from a war more terrible than our own."

"H-how do you...?"

"I spoke at length with Queen Susan when she went riding three days past. She worries that you will... sulk."

He sighed. "She got that right."

Distant thunder echoed off the mountains. Phillip ducked his head down to look back at the young boy. "Aslan has named you King Edmund the Just. That is a title filled with great hope for Narnia. You must always strive in all things to live up to that title. Learn, my king. Learn everything you can. Talk to the wise, talk to fools, listen to their stories and don't ever forget the lessons you carry. Apply yourself to your subjects, including your queens and especially your king. You are his balance and his anchor, and wisdom will flow from you like the waters of the Great River flow to the sea."

"Phillip..." His voice cracked and Edmund had to slide off the broad back before he fell and the moment his feet touched the ground he wrapped his arms around the Horse's neck and buried his face in the shaggy mane. His throat was tight and he fought uselessly against his tears, but he did not break down.

"You are greater than you know, Edmund. Aslan's faith is not misplaced, nor is mine."

He sniffed, leaning heavily against the Horse as the first drops of rain began to fall. "Thank you, Phillip."

§§§

From the highest, westernmost tower of Cair Paraval, Queen Susan watched the tiny figures of the Horse and her brother as Edmund clambered once again onto Phillip's back. He sat up straight and tall with his arms outstretched. She knew he was balancing, but she couldn't help but think that with this gesture Edmund was embracing the whole world.

She looked up as a drop of water touched her cheek. The storm promised to be long and loud and all the people in the castle were excited at the prospect. Susan smiled. First she'd go find Lucy, then Peter, and they'd collect Edmund and gather round the fire in the glass-domed conservatory to watch the storm. She wanted to revel in the past and plan the future in the presence of the people she loved best.

¥¤¥

# Somnolence

*by FaithfulPureLight*

## **Chapter One: Insomnia**

Yawning, Peter wandered the halls of Cair Paravel, tired but knowing he would not be able to rest. He was more than tired. It was a bone deep weariness that made it barely possible to perform his daily duties. His mind however would not allow the exhausted King to sleep.

It had been a month since the coronation, a month since his sisters, his brother, and he had each been crowned by Aslan. A month since the battle that had destroyed the White Witch, securing the freedom of Narnia. A month since their lessons had begun. Their heads being filled with the knowledge Kings and Queens needed to know to run a country. And it had been more than a month since Peter had slept well.

At first he had trouble sleeping because he knew that his brother was in the hands of a tyrant, and he, Susan, and Lucy were running for their lives. Even when they had been safe in Aslan's camp he could not sleep, imagining what could be happening to his younger brother.

Edmund had been returned to them, abused but alive, and still he could not sleep. He watched his brother at all times, afraid it was a dream. That his prayers had not been answered and Ed was still with the Witch.

And after Beruna he was having even more trouble sleeping. It was harder to believe his brother was alive. That he had not died out on that battle field trying to save Peter's life. Hard to believe Lucy had gotten there in time to keep Edmund from death. Now every time he closed his eyes he saw his little brother's broken and bloody body on the green field; white as chalk and gasping for breath. Every time he broke his own rule and slipped from conciseness, his nightmares plagued him with what had happened, the 'what-ifs' and lies.

It was torture. Every time he would wake screaming, crying, panting for breath, and no matter where he was or what he was doing he stopped to check on Edmund. To make sure that the nightmares had only been images supplied by his sub-concise.

Which left him here. Stubbornly trying to keep himself awake by wandering the Cair's corridors. He knew it bothered and worried the more nocturnal Animals, or the Night Watch when they caught him walking late at night. Fortunately they did not catch him often enough that Oreius had been notified yet it seemed. Peter knew if the General or his siblings were aware of his lack of sleep that he would be in more trouble than he cared to deal with.

Especially if Ed knew what the nightmares that made his older brother terrified to go to sleep were about. He could picture the look in his younger brother's eyes. It was a look of soul shattering, gut wrenching pain. A look that had not faded with the short amount of time that had passed since Edmund's betrayal. He wondered idly if the look would ever

diminish and leave his brother. Edmund felt far too guilty about what had happened. Peter no longer blamed him for any of it.

He wondered if he ever had. His baby brother had been enchanted by the Witch, and although was somewhat responsible for his own actions, he himself no longer thought so. Besides, if he had been nicer to his brother he might not have gone to the Witch. They would never know now though. So he struggled to put his guilt behind him.

However trying to put his guilt behind him did not mean he wanted to see that look in his brother's eyes, or see the worry in Susan's and Lucy's faces. So he kept to the shadows, trying to keep out of sight of his subjects, those whom he would normally greet.

It was not only the feared nightmares that kept him awake through day and night, but his new duties. Perhaps it was to keep himself from focusing on the demons that appeared every time he closed his weary eyes. Being a King was also taxing his strength, and he found his thoughts as consumed with his new position, as they were with the reoccurring nightmares.

He still did not know all of the Cair, despite his late night wanderings around his new home. Cair Paravel was too large to be seen within a month. He was no longer late to his lessons though. He knew the most important rooms in the castle; the ones he and his siblings spent in the most time and such. At night however was an entirely different story. He was more hesitant to descend down the dark corridors. He had no idea how to get back if he became lost. Perhaps if Edmund was with him he would have gone down. But if his brother was at his side at this moment it would spell disaster for Peter, not adventure.

He was walking down random corridors, recognizable in his sub-conscious when he ran into one of the guards. A Satyr stood above him, bewildered at the appearance of the High King so late at night. He had heard the rumors that the King had been prowling around the Castle during the darkest hours lost in thought, but this was the first he had seen it. Orders had been given that if the High King was seen out of his private chambers during the night any of the Guard was to call General Oreius. The General had become suspicious of their Lord, and wanted answers.

Peter winced. Unless he thought of a believable excuse he knew what was coming. The Guard would call for someone. Perhaps the General. He would rather deal with Oreius than Susan, Lucy, and Edmund. He respected the good General, and he knew that the talking to would only be marginally better, but he'd rather that than the looks of worry he would see if his fellow monarchs found out.

"A Good Morn to you Sir."

It was morning correct? He was pretty sure that it had struck midnight an hour or so ago. He cursed silently. Perhaps if he had known the good Satyr's name this would help his case. But a month was hardly enough time to learn the names of all those who served in his army. He was trying, it was just a very long list.

The Satyr looked down upon him with an interesting expression on his face. Exasperation? Humor? Disappointment? A combination of all seemed most likely. One look from that stern face and he decided that perhaps he would try simple evasion.

"Good Morn, Your Highness." Spoke the guard, knocking him from his thoughts and plans of escaping unscathed.

"Yes, it is, isn't it? Well, I think I'll just head back to my rooms . . ." He started walking the other way as he spoke hoping that he would be able to slip back into the shadows.

"Your Majesty shall I send for a escort? Perhaps the General would be so kind as to come to the summoning."

Peter froze as the guard spoke, suggesting Oreius's involvement. He had to speak very quickly to avoid meeting with the general .

"That's quite alright. I wouldn't wish to bother Oreius or any of the other members of the army. I am sure I shall be fine." He tried to look self assured, like a King. Right now he felt more a child being told on then a King who could command respect. He was going to have to work on that if he was going to continue doing this. That or learn to stick to the shadows more.

"If your sure Sire..." Peter held his breath. Perhaps he could get away with this after all. The Satyr contemplated long enough to make even a battle hardened warrior such as the General impatient. It was no wonder then that he was fidgeting by the time the guard nodded his go ahead, allowing Peter to pass.

As he walked down the hall, his breath let out in one big rush. It seemed he had gotten away this time. No Oreius to explain why he was wandering the castle to, no worried siblings, no forcefully annoyed and determined brothers who would tie him to a chair.

He had reached the end of the corridor when the Satyr called out,

"King Peter?" He froze, terrified that guard had changed his mind. He was sure his voice was an octave higher as he answered.

"Yes?"

"Aren't your chambers the other way?"

He turned, blushing a delicate shade of pink. Direction had not been part of his plan. He grinned, as though caught in the act of something he knew he shouldn't be doing. "Yes so they are. Thank you for pointing that important detail out. I still get so lost within the Cair. I hope some day I get used to it."

With his excuse made, he hurried towards his rooms, breaking into a dead run as the Satyr lost sight of him. He continued, not thinking to stop, unsure if it was safe until he reached his destination. This was the last place he wanted to be for the rest of his night.

He left once again, walking towards his safe haven. To the one place that he knew would offer salvation against his nightmares. Where reality was better than dreams for once. Edmund's room.

¥¤¥

## **Chapter Two: Ideas Hatched**

Edmund glared at the back of Peter's head; which at the moment rested in the nook of his arms on a stack of books. Their staggering amount of classes and duties had no end. Etiquette lessons, dancing lessons, statecraft, astronomy, science, lessons in army strategics, and every morning the two boys learned martial arts and swordsmanship. Usually it would not surprise Edmund that his brother had fallen asleep even if he was Peter, who always

paid attention in classes. After all if he thought Susan, Lucy, and he were tired and over worked his older brother was sure to have it High King, Peter continued to take as much of the administrative weight on his shoulders as had a hard time sharing responsibilities with his siblings.

However, it was clear Peter was suffering from more than the usual work overload. He had been falling asleep in class far too often. Even Oreius's classes, which both boys enjoyed earnestly, had a hard time keeping his older brother's attention. And Edmund had noticed. He had known something was wrong with Peter when he had asked him what one of the candlesticks that were only used for the room of the High King was doing in his own room. The older boy had blushed and stammered out a rather poor excuse before turning away and becoming a little too interested in the sewing project Lucy was showing them.

So, Edmund had asked the guards to keep an eye on the High King. And sure enough, only a few days ago he had found something. The guards may have been keeping things from Oreius, but not from their younger King. A King who was not at all pleased with one of his siblings. Obviously something was bothering Peter to the extent that he wasn't sleeping enough. It had taken little rationality to figure what that 'something' was.

Nightmares.

The dark demons that haunted Edmund's own mind far too frequently for comfort were now plaguing Peter's sleep. His brother's nightmares had been growing steadily worse over the past month. Edmund understood what Peter was suffering, for among the four siblings he had always been the most susceptible to nightmares. Even little Lucy was not plagued by them more than normal. He once - before falling through a wardrobe, getting caught in the clutches of a evil witch, almost dying on a battle field for his brother, and being crowned by The Lion himself - would have considered himself weak. He was wiser now though. He knew things affected him deeper and he dealt in different ways than his brother and sisters. There were things in his past now to cause said nightmares as well.

Apparently, Peter was having a worse time with nighttime monsters right now than he himself was. And who better than he, King Edmund the Just, brother to The High King, Peter Pevensie, to handle such a problem? Now he only needed to figure out how. Peter was not going to sit and talk about his dreams and then just simply trot off to bed. It would be a miracle if he stayed awake long enough to move an inch.

"Note how the leaves of this plant have a yellow underside which are smooth, while the tops of the leaves are green and slightly fuzzy. Its main property my Kings, is to put people into a deep sleep that can last for days if the dose is given correctly."

Edmund perked up. He and Peter were in the middle of their botany lesson, which came before the Etiquette lesson, but after the lessons in strategics. The teacher, a young willow dryad who also doubled as the court's apothecary, was ignoring the sleeping King. She had tried several times to awaken him to no avail. Finally, she had given up, teaching as though both boys were paying attention. What was she talking about?

"When ground up, it is odorless and tasteless. It dissolves into any drink fairly efficiently, although wine is best, as it quickly disappears. As General Oreius would say my Majesties, it is some knowledge that could be used in an enemy's camp." The dryad set down the plant in question, looking around for her next example.

Had he not just been wondering how to get Peter to listen to him? It was fairly obvious that he would not be able to do anything until his troubled brother had gotten some sleep. Using this herb seemed to be the easiest and would make the least mess. Of course he would need Susan's and Lucy's help, but once they heard Peter hadn't been sleeping they would be game.

"Where would one find such a plant, Milady?" Edmund asked quickly. The dryad paused, pleased with his interest, and gladly answered her curious charge:

"It can be found throughout Narnia My Liege. It grows abundantly around Cair Paravel to be sure however if one wished to examine oblero in its natural habitat."

Edmund nodded, pressing on.

"And how long would it take to effect the person being drugged?" He was already calculating the body mass and weight, as well as dividing how many cups of wine he might need.

"That depends on the size of the person being drugged."

"Oh, say, someone my size?" Ed asked, exuding a casual and offhand demeanor. It was crucial he not seem too interested.

"For someone like yourself, I would think only half an hour at most."

Edmund smirked as she turned back to the other plants. Peter should have paid better attention in class. Otherwise he would have known not to drink his wine tomorrow night during dinner.

He felt better, knowing his promise to protect his brother was yet again to be fulfilled. Everyone thought Peter could handle himself. Including Peter. Edmund knew better, though. If he didn't take it upon himself to look after his brother, nobody would.

¥¤¥

### **Chapter Three: Waiting**

Everything was set. Nothing would go wrong tonight. It was simply impossible. Every detail had been meticulously seen to, every flaw polished until the imperfections had disappeared from view, from existence.

Edmund paced in his chambers, eager for dinner to begin. His brother had gone without sleeping again last night, and his inconsistent naps during the day seemed to not have helped at all. This had to end. As it would. Tonight.

When he had spoken to his sisters earlier in the day things had gone remarkably well. He had expected both of the girls to be surprised by his news. Instead he had been the one surprised, by just how much they had guessed. He hadn't thought either of them had seen that much. Over the past month the four new rulers had had very little time together to simply relax and be children. And since many of the classes they took were different or separated as each had their own set of things to learn, Edmund saw his brother far more lately than either Susan or Lucy. However, despite that fact that neither had seen Peter all that much, both of them had noticed Peter acting rather strange. Susan admitted her suspicions, but had been unable to prove anything as she hadn't caught Peter in the act,

except for one time on the journey to Aslan's camp. Lucy on the other hand had a bit more than suspicions to go on since she had caught Peter sneaking out of her room once in the dead of night, presumably on the way to his own chambers.

They were both glad to hear that Edmund was doing something about this growing problem. The three of them were worried about Peter's obviously failing health more than they could express in words. He had lost weight visibly now, and the dark circles under his eyes stood out darkly against his paler than usual skin. Over all he was beginning to show just how much his insomnia was affecting him.

He'd outlined his idea as quickly as possible, unsure how long they would have before a teacher, subject, or worst of all, an overly tired and haunted brother. The three of them had decided, after some pouting from Lucy, that Edmund himself would deal with the more difficult part of slipping the powder into Peter's drink without their older brother's notice. Susan pointed out that it would not be hard to distract Peter. He was so tired, a moth could flit by and distract him from anything he was doing, including a battle. This situation had the potential to become very dangerous not only to Peter's health, but to his life.

Edmund checked the clock once again, to find that only six minutes had passed. He groaned, throwing himself into a chair, staring ahead into space. He had rarely been so anxious for such a commonplace thing as dinner. He went over everything in his mind again, checking for any mistakes that he had missed the first thousand or so times he had reviewed it.

All he had to do was wait for Lucy and Susan to distract Peter. Then he only had to grab the goblet, pour in the powder, and give it a quick stir before Peter noticed. It was perhaps a bit risky for if Peter caught him there was no telling what would happen. Edmund had come to the conclusion that if his older brother did catch him it would not matter. One way or another Peter was going to sleep. He would rather take this route, having Peter's own body betray his will to stay awake. But if he was given no other choice, he would force Peter to himself. Surely with Peter as tired as he was, Ed could handle him.

He growled at nothing, throwing himself out of the chair to resume pacing around the room. He felt like a caged animal. If anyone had come in to speak with him he was sure they'd find themselves back outside within a matter of seconds.

Why had Peter allowed this to get so far out of hand? Why hadn't he gone to Orius, or someone else he had trusted? Why hadn't he come and talked to Susan, or Lucy? Why hadn't he come talked to Edmund? He knew Peter did not like to worry others with his problems, that was part of what made him Peter. But with something this big, something that bothered his brother to the point of sleep deprivation, even Peter should have known better.

Fear froze Edmund in place, as cold as that icy prison from not so long ago. Had Peter refused to tell him because he still did not trust his younger brother? Had he still not proved where his loyalties lay? The thought pierced whatever confidence he had found like a sword. Nothing hurt more than the idea of his brother's mistrust.

He shook the idea away, banishing the icy grip back into the dark. He knew that was his own insecurities speaking, trying to poison his mind once again. This was not what had happened, he told himself. Peter had just been being Peter.

The real problem, Edmund supposed, was the burning anger that sat bubbling in his chest waiting to burst. He tried to keep it holed up, but it was becoming harder the more he was forced to sit and wait. He wasn't mad at the guards, nor Oreius, their teachers, his sisters, Peter, or even himself. There was no living being to be mad at for the situation at hand. He was, however, furious at the thing that hunted them all by night at one time or another.

The nightmares that had frequently haunted him had changed targets, it seemed. The things now bothered his older brother mercilessly, never allowing him to rest. He already had enough to handle, king, brother, student, diplomat, warrior, the list seemed to go on for quiet some time. Why must it bother Peter more, when he had done nothing to deserve such torment?

Edmund glanced at the clock once again, hoping that this time it would produce better results. No such luck. Unless the clock was broken, which he doubted, he still had half-an-hour to go. He briefly pondered the idea of breaking the clock himself just for the pure pleasure of it, before shaking his head. Nothing was going to distract him sufficiently until dinner. He glared at nothing in particular, before throwing himself back into his chair and opening one of the many books he had found in the library. Perhaps they could distract him.

Even as he began to read the first page however, he knew it was hopeless. Nothing but Martil calling him for dinner would ease his mind now. Edmund could only pray to Aslan that the time went quickly.

✚✚✚

## **Chapter Four: Necessary Justice**

"Lucy?"

The soft voice drifted down the hall, followed by the almost silent foot steps. Susan stepped into view, silhouetted by the setting sun.

Lucy sat on her bed, legs swinging back and forth, as she was still hopelessly small for the bed. She had probably not even heard Susan's call as she was chattering unceasingly with her friend Mr. Tumnus. It was hard to say if Tumnus had gotten a word in edgewise since the youngest monarch had begun, although judging on how fast Lucy was speaking it was doubtful.

Lucy followed her beloved friend's gaze as he stood, bowing to her older sister. "Oh Susan! I didn't see you there. Mr. Tumnus and I were only talking. He's going back to his home soon." Lucy's face fell as she acknowledged the departure of the faun. Admitting it out loud made the departure of their friend seem that much more real.

Susan smiled graciously. "It is a shame you must leave so soon Mr. Tumnus. If there is anything I can do to make your journey easier please let me know."

She struggled to form the reply. Court customs and formal protocol still made her unsure. A month had passed, and yet it seemed only a few days had gone by. The time had flown by in a rush of celebrations, classes, state visits, and trying to get used to being a queen. All of their new subjects wanted to thank the four children for defeating the White Witch and bringing an end to such a dreadful winter. Embassies from other countries that had only

recently heard of the defeat were clamoring to secure a spot in the good graces of the new monarchs. It did not help that none of them had any idea of how to act, or what to say when these representatives approached, trying to push their cases above the rest.

Tumnus blushed and muttered his thanks. Susan turned back to Lucy, sure that her sister would be growing hungry by now.

"Lucy, dinner is ready. That's why I came to get you." Lucy's eyes lit up.

"Oh! All right I'm coming Susan!" She scrambled off the bed, giving Mr. Tumnus an impromptu hug, and was about to race from the chambers when she stopped short.

"But what about Mr. Tumnus?" her younger sister implored. Susan found it hard to keep the smile from her face. Before she could answer, Tumnus spoke. He had already begun moving towards the door.

"Do not worry about me, my dear. I believe I shall just make myself some tea before retiring to my room and reading one of my books. I will see you tomorrow morning, my queens." He bowed before disappearing from the room. Susan shook her head slightly. She knew he did not wish to leave their company, especially Lucy's, whom he adored above all else, but he wanted to make it easier for her brothers, her sister, and her. It was a kind gesture.

Lucy smiled one of her sweetest, most angelic smiles before bolting down the stairs, hurrying towards one of the balconies. Susan shook her head, following at a more sedate pace. The sunset today was particularly lovely, and the air was warm. She had planned dinner for her siblings and herself out on the balcony overlooking the Eastern Sea, hoping that perhaps the atmosphere would help her older brother relax.

She was worried about Peter, they all were. From what Edmund had told Lucy and her earlier that day, it sounded as if things had gotten out of control very quickly. She remembered catching Peter in the act of avoiding sleep only once, on the way to Aslan's camp. Neither of them had been sleeping very well at that point. She had thought that once all the danger was over everything would have been fine. She should have known better. Peter blamed himself for not protecting Edmund, her, and Lucy. Therefore, he would have allowed his guilt to manifest into something it should not have.

Edmund had not said much to her, or to Lucy. She knew however, that it was eating her away as surely as it was doing the same to Lucy. What about Edmund though? Edmund's plan was interesting in itself, and although she did not approve of the idea one bit she supposed that 'desperate times called for desperate measures.' And if that phrase ever applied to anyone at any time then it was Peter at this point.

Life had most definitely caught up with the four siblings as of late. Who knew that being kings and queens would have been so difficult? There was so much to do and learn, sometimes it made Susan's head spin. She remembered times before, in England, when her friends and classmates had complained about school and how much work it was. If they could only see her now. This was more work, and far more important than school had ever been. It was more rewarding as well.

Susan hurried to catch up with Lucy, who stood waiting for her just down the hall. They both started to walk towards the balcony, silent but content to be in each other's company. Both of them knew words were not always needed.

"I'm worried about Edmund, Susan."

Susan started, turning toward her younger sister, confused. Why would Lucy be worried about Edmund? The last she had known, her older brother was the one that needed to be worried about, not her younger brother.

"What are you talking about Lucy?" she asked, curious and keen to listen. Lucy was a good judge of character and emotion.

"He might not realize it, but Peter's problems have become his as well. He's running himself ragged."

Susan started. "Edmund?"

She frowned at her younger sister, trying to work through her confusion. What could Lucy mean? What had happened to her younger brother? Her mind raced, thinking back on the time they had spent together. She scrutinized every detail, every gesture, trying to figure out what Lucy had seen. What she had missed.

"Yes Edmund. He's so concerned for Peter that he is ignoring everything about himself. All of his needs. We might have to do something about him too if this goes any farther."

Susan sighed. Where both of her brothers idiots? It was clear to see now as she looked back on her memories and knew what she was looking for, that Edmund had been neglecting his own needs. Just as Lucy had said.

¥¤¥

## Chapter Five: Sleepytime

Lucy glanced up for a moment from helping the faun who was setting the table. Her older sister walked over to the entrance of the balcony, asking one of the ladies-in-waiting if they had any more napkins. Edmund stood off to the side, leaning against the railing, watching as she helped the faun. She smiled slightly to herself, going back to setting down silverware.

"Lucy," her brother started, the tone of voice something she had heard only far too often. It was the tone he had developed at that horrid school. The one he reserved only for picking on her. She turned to face him just in time to see the last traces of a battle on his face as he struggled to reign in the emotions and desires he was not proud of. Lucy knew it was going to be a constant struggle for a bit, changing the way he acted. She held the hope however, that he would come out better for it.

"Are you sure we have enough forks, Lu?" Edmund finished. Lucy giggled. It was true, the amount of flatware was astounding. They had a different utensil for every course. She started moving around the table again to double check everything. She adjusted one of the forks a bit, trying to make everything perfect. When she came to Edmund's place however she found his glass on the wrong side of his plate. She frowned. She must have accidentally put the glass on the incorrect side. After all it had happened before. With a small shake of her head she moved it back to the left.

"Majesty?" She turned to smile at the faun who had called her, giving a little wave before turning back to see the glass on the wrong side again. She frowned again, glaring at the glass and placing it back on the left.

She turned, walking away slowly, keeping her eyes discreetly on the glass in time to catch Edmund move it again. She whirled around, trying to keep the smile from her face.

“Ed!”

The two younger siblings glared at each other, trying to win this battle of wills, until both dissolved into laughter. Lucy clutched at her sides, trying to keep them from aching.

The light atmosphere ended as Peter walked out onto the balcony. Susan drew close, helping Lucy struggle up straight and putting an arm around her. Lucy watched in horror and disbelief as he walked slowly and unsteadily over to his chair, collapsing into it with a weary smile for all of them.

Edmund and Susan exchanged glances before beginning the meal. She understood. The only thing for it now was to wait for the right time.

Lucy watched anxiously for a chance to distract her oldest brother. Susan began serving, starting with Lucy. They were dining informally tonight. On any other occasion Susan would not have been allowed to serve herself or her siblings. Lucy knew that sometimes servants saw it as odd, but it allowed the four of them to have some time to themselves. Some time to be siblings. Susan served Edmund, Peter, and herself, etiquette dictating that they could eat now. The Valiant Queen found she had lost her appetite though. Her food sat on her plate, barely touched. She should probably be eating, she knew that. She saw Susan shoot Lucy a mothering look, a cross somewhere between, eat-your-food, and eat-or-he-will-know-something's-wrong.

But the youngest Queen felt as though her stomach was tied in knots. How did her older sister pretend to be so calm? It was a talent Lucy wished she had at this moment. The last thing she wanted to do was ruin things because she was too obvious. Edmund seemed sure of himself and the plan he had so cunningly devised, but what if something went wrong? Lucy mentally shook herself. Aslan would take care of everything. She firmly believed that. There was not anything Aslan could not do.

If she thought about it, she was more than anxious for this endeavor to succeed. She was not at all sure that this was the best way to go about this. She trusted her brother, and was sure Edmund would never do anything to hurt Peter. Perhaps it was the dishonesty of the plan. Her parents had always taught her that lying was wrong, and this felt so much like lying. She sighed. Her head told her it was wrong, but her heart disagreed. All that mattered was Peter's health. That was all that should matter. It was all that did matter, she decided.

Peter jerked himself from a doze, bringing Lucy's own attention back to the now. He had almost landed face first in his food. Susan laid her hand on his arm, falling into her natural roll of mothering among the siblings. She took Peter's attention, easily providing the distraction that had been needed.

While Susan provided the distraction, she left the perfect opportunity for Lucy to observe Edmund more carefully. She watched him pour wine into one of the glasses from a different decanter. It looked as if Edmund had come ready to avoid deception. However, the powder seemed to have settled to the bottom of the glass from sitting for a while. She passed him a spoon quietly, hoping he could soundlessly stir, or they would give themselves away. Lucky for them Edmund seemed well trained in all things silent. The

ground-up plant residue lingered in the liquid for a moment or two before dispersing entirely. Lucy grinned in delight.

"Peter?" Edmund's voice wavered, noticeable only if one knew how nervous Edmund really was. Peter, however, was far too tired to notice such things. He looked up when he heard his name called a few seconds later, revealing how slow his senses were becoming.

Edmund held out the wine glass for their brother to take, and again Lucy noticed how his hand shook. It was hardly noticeable, only a slight tremor. But it was there nonetheless. The younger queen glanced up sharply, noticing truly for the first time how pale Edmund was. Had he been that pale since the Battle of Beruna? Hadn't he been regaining color? Perhaps he simply looked pale because of the dark circles under his eyes. They were almost as dark as Peter's. Lucy wondered how long memories of the past would haunt both of her brothers.

Peter took the glass with a slurred thank-you, drinking deeply to quench his thirst. And now the waiting began again. Their dryad teacher had told Edmund at most half an hour would pass before someone Edmund's size would succumb to the drug's effects. Considering Peter was, (or at one point had been) heavier than Edmund, they had upped the dosage a bit. But as the meal dragged on, and half an hour became an hour, and the courses went on, it became apparent that something had gone terribly wrong.

The three younger monarchs exchanged what were boarding on panicked glances, and Lucy wondered if perhaps they might want to go call someone. What if Edmund had made some grave error? None of them wanted anything to happen to Peter.

"These sausages are excellent. Su, could you pass me-" Peter began, but never finished. With a soft thud, he landed face first into his mashed potatoes. Lucy saw the guards and ladies-in-waiting all start, one of the more experienced of the guards starting forward. Edmund let a triumphant smile spread across his face. Lucy shook her head, acknowledging to the startled subjects around them that all was well. Susan, gave a small sigh of contentment, knowing that Edmund's plan had indeed worked. She stepped towards the ladies, asking quietly for someone to go inform Silvo of his charge's condition.

"A bit too strong, perhaps, Ed," Lucy commented dryly, keenly peering at their brother's golden locks and potato-smearred face.

"At least his dinner broke his fall. I'll get it right next time," Edmund said offhandedly, sweeping his gaze around as though looking for someone. He strode over to Susan, joining in on the conversation with one of the guards, adding his own requests. Lucy stayed near Peter, resting her hand on his shoulder. She could feel his back rise and fall in time with his chest, reassuring her that he was only asleep.

"I know you will be dreadfully mad at all of us when you wake up, but really Peter, Edmund did the right thing. You'll see that one day. Besides, you brought this upon yourself," she chided him, as though he could hear her still.

Edmund and Susan came back after a while, and Susan began to clean up Peter's face. Lucy's still-conscious brother waited, looking around the balcony. Lucy was not quiet sure what he was waiting for, until one of the faun guards that she had come to know as Erasmus, pattered into view. He gave a sharp nod to Edmund.

"All right, Susan? Grab one of Peter's arms. Lu you grab the other arm. Ready? Okay and lift!"

At his command both girls did as told, and between the three of them they were able to handle Peter's body. Erasmus, who was too old to carry Peter himself, tried to take the load.

"Now really Captain Erasmus. I can assure you that we are quiet fine. We can handle our brother. No what we really need you to do, is go ahead of us and clear the way," explained Susan, somehow maintaining her grace. Lucy beamed proudly at her sister before they began the long trek towards Peter's rooms.

"Careful! Don't bash his head into the wall!"

Lucy never knew how they made it all the way to the chambers without hurting someone, but they did. After they had turned the High King over to Silvo, his faun valet, Lucy humbly thanked Erasmus. Susan joined her, and together the two of them walked the guard back to his post near the balcony.

"I was just doing my job. It was no trouble." The faun smiled, shifting his hooves at the continued thanks.

"We must be getting back to our brother now. Thank you again, Captain. Come on Lu." Susan smiled graciously before starting back down the hall. Lucy beamed, and bounced up to the Captain.

"Thank you ever so much Captain Erasmus!" She exclaimed, standing on tip-toes to give him a kiss upon the cheek. With another dazzling smile she hurried after her sister.

"Come on Susan, I'll race you!" Lucy called as she reached Susan, speeding by her. She hadn't felt so light in a while what with all of their new duties and such. She knew that Peter would be alright now though, and surely whatever was bothering Edmund would be sorted out then.

She heard Susan laugh as she called out a half-hearted reprimand.

"Lucy it isn't right to be running!" But the laughter in her older sister's voice proved that Susan thought otherwise this time. "Oh wait for me!"

Both queens were running through the halls, skirts in hand as they went back to check on their brothers.

Lucy peeked into her oldest brother's bedroom suite, her sister right behind her. Peter had been changed, and was asleep in his bed, far too gone to have any disturbing nightmares. For now, he would rest in peace.

The same could not be said of Edmund, who sat in an arm-chair he had dragged over to the bedside from who knew where. As the girls entered the room, Susan smacked him playfully on the arm.

"Respect the furniture," she teased, dropping a kiss on his brow. He glowered up at her, but otherwise offered no protest. Lucy glowed. At one point in time Edmund would have made such a fuss over that. Narnia was surely changing all of them for the better.

"Night Ed," Lucy chirped, planting her own kiss on his cheek before following Susan towards their chambers. At the door she looked back, and suppressed a small sigh.

Tonight, there would still be one King keeping vigil all night, guarding against the ghosts of the past.

## Chapter Six: Battle of Wills

"You see, Your Majesties, we Red Dwarfs have had a long history of working the western bank of the Rush River. And now the Black Dwarves believe that they may take the far end of the western bank for work even though they know without a doubt that within our agreement, the western side is rightfully ours and the eastern side is theirs. We are humbly and simply asking that you-"

"I protest! We Black Dwarfs have never encroached upon your territory. That western bank is ours, and has been for many a Black Dwarf's lifetime. The agreement struck up by our ancestors says nothing about that far end. It says your territory ends a full stone's throw away. Your Majesties, do not be taken in by the lies of this red-bearded fool. I beg of you to see the facts plain as they are! That territory is rightfully the Black Dwarfs' and as such..."

Edmund barley held back a heavy sigh. Could court really have only started half an hour ago? It felt as if he had been listening to the dwarfs of the Red and Black clans bicker about the Western bank of the Rush River for far, far longer. Every time he went to end the debate, seeing as he had read the penned version of the agreement himself, he was quickly cut off, and the two representatives went at it again, hammer and tongs. He wondered idly if they really wanted this settled or if they simply wanted to argue with each other. If the first was the answer than he hoped they would let him give them an answer soon. However if the latter was the truth, then he could think of several places that would be better suited for them to continue the past time other than in court.

He chanced a glance towards his younger sister. Edmund knew that Lucy was probably still listening to the argument. She tackled everything about their new duties with the same caring and determination that had already endeared her to so many of their subjects. He wondered if she was actually as absorbed as she looked, or if some small part of her was wondering what was going on back in Peter's chambers.

Seeing as their older brother still had yet to wake up nearly six days after that fateful evening, he, Susan, and Lucy had decided to keep an ongoing vigil by Peter's side. The three siblings took turns watching over their sleeping charge during the day, leaving the other two to handle lessons, court, and the various other jobs that presented themselves. They would switch every few hours, always keeping someone in those rooms. Edmund would have stayed by Peter's side at all times if he had his way. Unfortunately he had not reckoned with Susan, who had started watching him almost as much as they were all keeping watch over Peter. When he could finally send her and Lucy off to bed however, when they were too tired to keep their eyes open, he kept watch, keeping his brother safe from whatever haunted him.

Despite his offhand comment to Lucy on the dosage that night, he was starting to worry that he had made some grave error. Surely Peter was not supposed to be asleep for more than a day or two? Did his body need to replenish that much energy? Who knew the plant he had used affected humans so strongly. Given the choice, he would have chosen instead a more carefully considered and controlled way getting his brother to sleep. Edmund felt like kicking himself for such a major miscalculation. The last thing he had wanted was to hurt his brother while he was trying to help him.

"Your Majesty?"

"King Edmund?"

"Ed?"

His head snapped up with a resounding crack, hitting the back of his throne as Lucy called his name. He tried to resist the urge to rub his aching head. If his head hadn't hurt before it defiantly did now. He blinked back the tears, trying to focus on the court before him. The reigning silence pressed in as the two dwarfs waited expectantly, obviously pausing long enough for Edmund to answer their plight. He struggled to remember what exactly they were arguing about. Something about disputed territory. He cleared his throat, trying to buy himself time to gather his thoughts.

"Yes. Well, uh... The court has heard both opinions in this grievance and. . ."

Suddenly, the doors flew open with a bang. The court turned almost as one to see who had interrupted the proceedings. Susan, her hair a mess with pieces of it hanging in her face, all flushed cheeks and large eyes, stood trying to catch her breath. Fear gripped Edmund's heart and he exchanged a terrified glance with Lucy. His eyes traveled back towards his older sister. What could have happened that would make her run to see them?

Aslan please, please let Susan have good news. Please do not tell me that something has happened to Peter because of my mistake. Please please, please, please, please, please, please, please. I'll do absolutely anything just please let him be okay. I can't do this King thing without him, you know that. He's your King. He's my King. I'm begging you please let her have good news.

He rambled on, to the point where he wasn't sure if he was praying or if Aslan was listening to a riot in his head. As long as his prayers were answered though he wasn't sure he minded either way.

"What is it, Susan? Is he..." Susan smiled, and at that moment Edmund thought it was the most beautiful smile he had ever seen.

"He's awake, Edmund."

Lightheadedness rushed in upon him, and he wasn't sure if it was from relief or the fact he hadn't been breathing since Susan had entered the room. He took a deep breath, and strode towards the door.

"Court dismissed!"

"But . . . Your Majesty! What about-"

He paused, turning to the dwarfs. "Good my dwarfs, listen and listen well. If you are interested in an answer to your inquiry, come back at a later date. If your only interested in hearing yourselves argue, do not come back."

"But, King Edmund!"

"Silence! Not one more word. We are done here, gentlemen."

He turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

§§§

Edmund hesitated outside his brother's bedchamber before plucking up the courage and entering the room. It was as dark as the hour of midnight, the only light coming from a candle on the bedside table. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the small amount of light. And there was his brother, sitting with his back propped up against his mound of pillows, arms crossed, his hair a complete mess, and a glower to rival their mother's on his face. It was honestly one of the best sights Edmund had seen in a long time.

"You're awake!" A silly smile spread across his face. He felt as if he could float.

"No thanks to you, Edmund," Peter growled.

Edmund ignored him. Nothing could spoil his joy now, not even Peter's anger.

"So I take it you're angry at me?" he remarked, trying to make small conversation as he slowly headed towards the curtains. It was too dark in the room.

Peter paused, considering the question. "Am I angry with you? No, Edmund, I'm not angry. I'm absolutely furious. Anger doesn't begin to describe how I feel. What were you thinking? Where you even thinking? How on earth could you . . . Ahh!"

He covered his eyes as the curtains were thrown open. Edmund grinned. "Some light will do you some good, brother. And don't worry, I was thinking of you. At all times. Your best interest was always at heart."

Peter's eyes narrowed dangerously as Edmund's grin widened. "First you knock me unconscious, then-

"Wait, wait, wait! I did not knock you unconscious. I drugged you, there is a big difference. Knocking you unconscious would have been barbaric. And I am a civilized brother."

"Oh, yes. Drugging me is so much better. I suppose you did me a great kindness. And now you try to blind me only minutes after I am awake. Ed, there are better ways to kill me."

"I'm glad you see it my way, dear my brother. I did you a kindness greater than you understand at this moment. And really, Peter if I was trying to kill you, I would have succeeded." He finished with a nasty grin. Peter rolled his eyes.

Edmund paused, drinking in every detail he could get. Seeing his brother alive and moving, whether he was annoyed or not, was far better than seeing him asleep or like the living dead. His older brother really was a sight. He had not been eating well before he had been drugged, and six days without food had not helped. He had always been on the skinny side, but this was defiantly taking skinny a bit too far. Scrawny might be a better term; or half starved. His usually neat mop was now stringy and lank. Edmund made a mental note to order Silvo to attack his brother with soap and water after he left.

The worst of it, however, was that Peter was still pale. In fact he had gotten noticeably paler in the last six days, and the dark circles under his eyes were just as bad if not darker than the last time he had been awake. Obviously the enforced six-day rest had not done anything except make things worse. He was sure that Peter knew the reason he no longer slept and Edmund wondered if it might just be easier to face the problem head on and force Peter to tell him what was plaguing him.

Doubt assailed him, just as it had done in his rooms the night of the dinner. What if Peter didn't trust him enough to tell him? Was that the reason Peter hadn't come to him in the first place? He pushed the idea aside. It didn't matter now.

He looked up to see Peter staring at him, worry pushing aside the anger for just a moment. It warmed his heart, to know that Peter was willing to put aside his anger for the moment at least if it was needed.

"Ed?"

Edmund pulled the curtains shut once again, hoping that would cover some of the dark circles. He didn't want to see how bad his brother's condition was getting.

"Yes, Peter?"

"Curtains open, curtains closed. Make up your mind," Peter grumbled. Edmund watched the anger cloud over his brother's face again. He sighed. It appeared nothing was going to detour Peter from trying to get his answers, or at least vent some steam at this moment. However, all he could do was grin like an idiot. Relief that his brother was awake and moving was far greater than anything else at the moment.

Thank you, Aslan.

"You drugged me!"

Edmund chuckled. Peter may have exploded, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to defend what he had done.

"And do you feel better for it?"

"Well . . . "

"And if you'd been sick you would have taken your medicine and slept, correct?"

"I wasn't sick!"

"Says who?"

"I do!"

"Well I beg to differ, but you haven't slept well in over a month and according to Felern, if that's not sick it's well on it's way to getting sick. Now why on earth are you complaining?"

"Because you drugged me."

The two brothers glared across the room at each other. The battle of wills was not going to be won today, that was obvious. Edmund rolled his eyes, crossing his arms in front of himself. There was no way Peter was winning this round.

"What's that?" Peter asked, looking over Edmund's shoulder at something behind them. Edmund spun around only to find the empty air. He turned back around slowly.

"Oh, very mature, Pete - AGH!"

Edmund spit feathers out of his mouth. Peter grinned wickedly, the half empty pillow case falling off the bed. Edmund glared, stooping to pick up a fallen pillow. He stalked towards his golden-haired brother. Peter's eyes grew huge.

"Now Ed, you said yourself, I've been sick! Attacking someone who's sick is rather low don't you think? I'll tell Susan on you!"

"Go ahead, Peter. It'll be worth it." And with a swing, another pillow broke its seams, and Peter was the one spitting out feathers.

"Now you're going to get it."

Edmund grinned as Peter threatened him. "I'd like to see you try."

And the first pillow fight battle in the history of Cair Paravel began.

✂✂

## Chapter Seven: Security Blanket

"He WHAT? STILL? Why didn't you hit him over the head with your morningstar? Oh, bosh, his skull is solid bone, he wouldn't have felt it!"

Peter winced as his brother's fury and frustration carried from the corridor outside, into his chambers. He had really made his brother angry this time. He hadn't exactly promised not to leave his rooms tonight, but he might as well have. By the time he had convinced Susan, Lucy, and Edmund to get some sleep themselves -seeing as they had been watching over him for at least six days now- it was just past ten-thirty. He had only convinced his brother to leave by giving the impression that he would not go anywhere that night. So much for that.

He had tried to sleep, honestly he had. It was obvious that he needed to if his siblings had taken to drugging him, but once he had fallen into a restless slumber he had found no rest. Instead, a ghostly image of Edmund lying pale and lifeless on a green battlefield had sent him scurrying from his bed and in to the dark Cair. He had not meant to run into one of the guards (literally) during his midnight wanderings, but thoughts of events passed and future duties had blinded him to the outside world.

The guard had been so kind as to escort him back to his rooms, and had taken it upon himself to send for King Edmund. Peter idly wondered if the guard regretted his second action as his brother released some of his pent-up anger by yelling.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I will be handling the situation personally now. See to it that General Oreius and the queens are informed that Peter and I might be missing our lessons tomorrow. A good eve to you, sir."

A shudder ran down Peter's spine as his brother dismissed the guard; now he had done it. The door opened just enough to allow the small, dark figure to slip in before it shut once more. Peter gulped.

"Well? Pray explain why you were in the corridors tonight instead of sleeping as any normal human being would be. You promised me, Peter."

"Technically, Ed, I didn't promise, I just gave the impression that I would . . ."

"You as good as promised!"

Peter held back a moan. It was dangerous to deal with his little brother when Edmund hadn't had enough sleep; indeed it was perilous to wake Edmund at any point whether it be morning or night. The only difference was waking him at night meant a greater loss of sleep. Hence the greater danger.

"I suppose I did," he conceded. "But Edmund, I never meant to break that promise. I simply could not stay here. I won't tell you anymore than that." Peter shook his head sadly.

Edmund rolled his eyes, clearly unimpressed. "Why?" he demanded, and Peter wasn't sure as to what he was referring.

"Um, why what, Ed?"

"Why can't you tell me? Or better yet, why won't you tell me?"

Peter sucked in a breath, twisting his head a bit to catch his brother's eyes. He had been sure. For the brief second their eyes had met that he had seen an underlying hurt in their depths. He racked his brains, but could find no reason for his brother to be in pain.

"Ed, what's wrong? Are you all right?"

Peter rose from his seat, taking an uncertain step towards the younger king. Nothing roused his protective instincts more than his siblings being in some sort of pain. Edmund raised his head, a gleam in his eyes that was not painful but determined. He smirked, and Peter took a step back. It never boded well when Edmund smirked like that, with mischief dancing across his face. Before Peter could take another step away from his brother, though, Edmund launched himself at the elder boy, bringing both of them crashing down onto the bed. Quills rattled on the desk, and a book or two fell from one of the shelves. Peter moaned in pain.

"Edmund, what are you doing?"

"Saving you from yourself," was the only reply he received before Edmund motioned to Silvo, who had slipped into the rooms at the sound of books falling to the floor, clapping a hand over Peter's mouth in the process.

"Take his boots off, please."

The valet hesitated for a second before complying. He slid Peter's boots off, refusing to look at his charge, for fear of being met by fury, before depositing them in the closet. Peter glared at his brother, his dread replaced by annoyance.

"That will be all, Silvo, thank you." Edmund nodded, dismissing the faun. The valet nodded in return and bowed to both of the kings before stepping outside. Edmund grabbed the quilt, discarded at the end of the bed an hour or so before, and proceeded to wrestle Peter into submission, tucking the blankets around him. Peter wished he could spit fire, as his brother made himself comfortable by sitting right atop him.

"Edmund, get off of me!" Peter growled the moment his brother removed his hand. Edmund shook his head, grinning all the while.

"Nope."

"Fine," Peter spat, attempting to throw his brother off him. Edmund did not move an inch much to his chagrin. To his younger brother's continued amusement, Peter proceeded to pout in a huffy silence for several minutes. More time passed, with Peter spasmodically trying to push Edmund off his chest, much to his brother's pleasure. Finally Peter gave up and sighed in preparation. He really did not want to do this.

"Edmund?"

"Yes, O High King over all kings of Narnia except the one currently sitting upon your royal person?"

"I invite you to remove your person from mine."

"But my person is comfortable." Edmund complained, unable to hide his bright grin.

"Mine is not," Peter growled in response, his patience wearing extremely thin. The little sod was enjoying this!

"I'll move once you tell me what's wrong."

"What's wrong is my little brother is using me as a chair!"

"Hassock, Peter. You look nothing like a chair."

"Meaning I look like a cushion?"

Edmund poked at Peter's ribs, feeling for bone and muscle. Peter twitched, trying to get away from the ticklish sensation.

"Ah! Stop it, Edmund!" The younger king ignored him, answering his previous question.

"Almost. You're finally eating enough."

Peter rolled his eyes, unsure whether he wanted to laugh or glare at his brother. Both were tempting.

"But Eddy, you're heavy!" He grinned. His brother hated when people called him Eddy. It had been a childhood nickname, but when his brother had reached the 'grown up' age of nine he had completely and utterly despised the nickname, and it was banned from the household and the school yard. Peter, however, had no such qualms about using it if his brother would get off of him.

Edmund glowered, thoroughly put out, but did not back down. If Peter wanted a war of words he was setting himself up against the wrong opponent. "But surely you can bear my slight weight, Peter."

"Slight?" Peter squeaked. "Might I remind you that you've grown five inches this past year?"

"You might, but I wouldn't see your point."

"The point is, you're heavy, Edmund!"

"Not really. I think it's a case of you not sleeping has made you lose weight so I just feel heavier."

"No, I'm certain that's not the case a'tall!" Peter protested as his brother shifted his weight.

"Well, tell me what's made you stay awake to the wee hours and I'll get up," Edmund wheedled.

"Get up and I'll tell you," Peter hedged.

"Nothing doing, brother dear."

"Are you saying I wouldn't keep my word?"

"Wouldn't dream of it. The fact that you haven't been able to throw me off speaks volumes, doesn't it?"

"Oof! Not to me!"

"Then to Oreius, perhaps?" Edmund threatened, a dangerous look entering his eyes briefly. Peter shook his head quick enough to give someone whiplash, terrified of the very idea.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I?"

Peter grasped for something to hurl back at Edmund. "Oreius doesn't like people who tell tales!"

"Oreius knows something is wrong, Peter. Right now I'm Oreius' favorite for carrying tales. Not you."

"Are not!" Peter was horrified that he seemed to have lost the general's protection.

"Are too!"

"Shut up, Pevensie."

Edmund and Peter glared at one another, each trying to gain the upper hand in the silent battle. Peter's glower darkened, and it seemed as though the battle of wills would soon come to a close. Then with a weary sigh, Peter let his head drop back to the pillow, admitting defeat.

"Peter? Perhaps you should talk to someone about why you're not sleeping," Edmund whispered, and he was suddenly very interested in playing with the bedspread.

Peter refrained from pushing his brother for answers. Why was it every time the issue of Edmund's self worth and importance was brought into a conversation that the younger king would back down completely? It was a worrisome problem, one that Peter planned on addressing, as soon as said brother got off of him.

"Please, Peter?"

Peter shook his head. "It's nothing, Ed. Honestly."

Edmund glared at Peter once more before dropping his head to look back down at the quilt. Peter was surprised, and more than a bit worried to see that his brother's eyes were suspiciously bright. With some small amount of difficulty he wrestled one arm free of the blankets and grabbed his brother into a hug. Edmund crashed on top of his brother with a muffled squeak.

Peter smiled, extracting the other arm with difficulty to ruffle his brother's hair. With a bit of trouble, he scooted over on the bed. With a surprised grunt, Edmund shifted until his head lay on his brother's shoulder. Peter hid a grin of triumph.

"So how long did it take you to wake up when the guard sent for you?" Peter asked casually. Edmund chuckled.

"A while. Actually," Edmund yawned, "I don't think I ever fully woke up." He curled closer to Peter.

Peter smiled tenderly and brushed Edmund's bangs away from his eyes.

"Don't do that," Edmund mumbled.

Peter shook with silent laughter. He hadn't felt this light in some time. It was nice to be able to watch his younger brother fall asleep. He hadn't done something like this in years,

since before Edmund had gone away to boarding school. It had been even longer since Edmund had fallen asleep in his arms. . . since he had trusted him enough to do so.

Peter wrapped his arms around his younger brother, nestling both of them under the quilt. He tucked the comforter around both of them, pulling Edmund closer still. In the silence, he fancied he could hear Edmund's beating heart.

"Not fair," Edmund grumbled, his voice already smothered by sleep and perhaps Peter's shoulder as well.

"What isn't fair, Eddy?" Peter asked, doing a poor job of keeping the laughter from his voice.

"You completely avoided talking about not slee-" here, Edmund yawned again. "Sleeping, Peter."

Peter couldn't hold back his chuckle this time. "I suppose I did, Ed."

The High King watched as his younger brother's eyes closed slowly and his breathing evened out. Edmund had been truly tried it seemed. Peter bit his lip, playing with a strand of Edmund's hair. His nightmares were becoming worse as time went on. Would speaking to Edmund help? There was no one else to whom he would rather talk, seeing as his brother had the most experience amongst the four of them when dealing with nightmares. But more importantly, Edmund was his brother, and he had offered to listen as Peter spoke.

Perhaps. . . but perhaps would have to wait until morning. Even now, Edmund's breathing was lulling him to sleep, when minutes before he had been wide awake, terrified, in fact, of falling back asleep. He had held both of his sisters as they had fallen asleep many times before. Why was it that Edmund had such an effect on him? He felt completely safe with his brother near him. Edmund was his security, and his comfort.

Peter sighed, knowing the answers to his questions would not be found tonight. He closed his eyes, letting Edmund's breathing carry him off to sleep once more. Having his brother in his arms, making sure that Jadis had not stolen one of his greatest treasures, was all he needed.

¥¤¥

## **Chapter Eight: A Book and Revelations**

Lucy padded quietly down the hall towards the kitchen. Everyone in the Cair had long since gone to sleep, with exception of those who preferred the darkness of night, and the night guard. She looked around for anyone before concentrating on keeping the slender white candle steady. She was almost silent as she walked down the hall, and she had to grin. It wouldn't do for anyone to catch her out this late at night, now that everyone knew that Peter had been wandering the castle for almost a month at this time. They would probably think she was developing the same habits.

She breathed a sigh at the thought of her oldest brother. A full week after he had woken up from his mishap at dinner, and he still wasn't sleeping any better. They couldn't continue to drug him, since it hadn't helped any, and it was wrong of them to do, but it was obvious that things were getting even more out of hand. Edmund and Susan were coming to lessons

with shadows under their eyes from restless nights, and they got darker every day. Lucy was worried that before long, she would have three worried and sleep deprived siblings. And as much as running Narnia by herself scared her, she was terrified of that outcome because it would mean that all of her siblings would be in declining health.

The light of a candle burned from the large library that was up ahead, creating an eery glow across the stone floor. She crept over to the door, curiosity over taking her hunger.

Edmund sat in one of the arm chairs near the fire, a monstrous book open in his lap. Knowing Edmund it was something about law. They had almost been here for six weeks, and already her brother had dived into the books concerning law. Justice and laws of any kind or country had captured his attention, drawing him in as nothing in England had. Perhaps Edmund had been spurred on by the title Aslan had given him.

But he wasn't reading the large text that lay in his lap. Instead, he was staring into the fire, his face pulled into a pensive frown. Lucy forced the door open a bit more, slipping into the library as quietly as she could. She leaned against the door, slowly pushing it shut. The click of the latch echoed through the silent room, and her brother's eyes flashed up, pinning her to the wood.

She smiled sheepishly.

"What are you doing up Lu?"

She felt heat rise in her cheeks, but refused to look away. Lucy grinned, knowing her question was inane, but needing to ask anyway.

"What are you doing up?"

"Reading." Edmund reply escaped his tight pressed and pale lips even before she had completed her query.

Lucy's eyes narrowed.

"Reading?" she asked dubiously.

"Yes, Lucy, reading. Now, what are you doing up?"

Her stomach chose that moment to gurgle and then groan.

"Not much to eat in here." Edmund gestured around the room full of musty books.

"I can see that."

But instead of retreating, Lucy came closer, pulling another arm chair close to his. Edmund raised an eyebrow. She laid her head on his arm, scooting as close as the two chairs would allow her. Worry bubbled in her stomach, and her hunger left her. She tried to snuggle closer, feeling the need for her brother's comfort very badly. Edmund put an arm around her after a few seconds of hesitation. It was almost as if he had just remembered how to be affectionate.

Silence reigned for several minutes, and Lucy let Edmund stare into space as she watched the fire flicker. It did no good to push him for answers, he would only bristle at the intrusion. But before long, she could not take it anymore. Silence was nice, but now it only made her feel more uncomfortable. Lucy looked up from the fire, her anxiety getting the best of her.

He sighed heavily, and stayed silent. She lifted her head from her arm for a moment, and glared up at her brother before dropping it back down. He was impossible, there was no denying it anymore. The facts were plain. Perhaps if she confessed her own worry, Edmund would confide in her. All he did, though, was frown.

He frowned, as though mulling over something impossible to figure it out. His eyebrows pulled down, only showing how severely he was really concentrating. It was rare that anyone was privy to see Edmund pondering with so much purpose. Lucy was tempted to tell him not to think too hard, he could end up hurting himself. It was dangerous to disturb Edmund when he was like this, he could get annoyed if anyone diverted his train of thought.

They each had unconscious habits when they were deep in thought. Edmund frowned, rather as if he was trying to decode a riddle or puzzle. When Lucy was thinking, she would bite her lip in concentration without even knowing that she had done so. Susan clasped her hands in front of her, her knuckles sometimes turning white. And when Peter was upset or thinking hard and fast, he paced. Lucy had once watched him pace and had gotten dizzy from trying to follow him for so very long.

When Edmund got like this though, there was no reaching him; not until his puzzle was solved. Peter was like that too. In fact, Peter and Edmund were very much the same. There was no denying they were brothers, what they lacked in looks they made up for in mannerisms. They were not similar in the least, but in the same right, they were. Including their capacity for guilt. Since they were so alike, Lucy reckoned, was it not possible that when Peter worried himself into sickness that Edmund would follow suit?

"Edmund, I'm worried. Peter-"

Edmund slammed the book closed with a loud thud that echoed through the library.

"That's it!"

Edmund came to life, leaping out his chair, his eyes blazing with determination. He smirked, the frown chased away by his triumph. He turned to her in excitement.

"Don't you see? This is the answer! I know what's wrong now!"

Lucy frowned. "What answer, Edmund? What are you talking about?"

But her brother ignored her questions. He seemed to have forgotten she was in the room.

"It's me," he murmured. "I'm the reason. Why didn't I see it sooner?"

"What didn't you see?"

Edmund's smirk turned into a full fledged grin. "Of course that idiot wouldn't tell me if he didn't want me to know why he was worried. Not that he should be worried about me in the first place." He frowned at the last mumbled thought, before shrugging it off.

"Luc, you're the best sister a chap could have."

Her brother, who a month or so ago would have never complimented her, let alone allow her to be in the same room as him, pulled her into a hug. She let out a surprised squeak just before he set her down, only to plant a kiss on her forehead.

Lucy blinked slowly, a smile creeping across her face. She had not expected such a response to come from him. Whatever had happened, it seemed to be for the good. Edmund turned, already striding out of the library.

"Where are you going?" she called after him, although she had a good guess.

"To see Peter!"

Lucy smiled softly, perfectly at ease. Having Edmund so excited meant something good for all of them. Well, perhaps everyone except Peter. With another yawn, she snuggled deeper into the armchair, letting her eyes close. She was not hungry anymore, it was almost as though her hunger had been connected to her anxiety. She trusted Edmund was doing the right thing, whatever the right thing happened to be. A peace settled over her, and she felt as if she had been blessed by Aslan once again.

She drifted off to sleep, golden dreams wrapping themselves around her.

¥¤¥

## **Chapter Nine: Stuck**

"You idiot! You are far too bloody noble for your own good Pevensie, you know that?"

Peter smirked, feeling decidedly pleased with himself. Anything he could have done to stop Edmund from throwing worried frowns his way every time he passed by was a victory for him. That night that he had slept peacefully for the first time in more than several weeks, had done him a world of good. Or, so he thought. He was pretty sure that Susan, Edmund and Lucy would disagree, probably violently. He leaned against the corridor wall, crossing his arms and quirked an eyebrow at his younger brother.

"Oh?" he queried.

Edmund shot him a dark look. Peter chuckled under his breath, enjoying his brother's current state. Edmund did not appear in a good temper tonight, in fact he looked a bit riled up. He paused, curious as to what could have gotten his fellow king so angry. His brother continued to glower at him, his lips pressed into a thin line.

"And what exactly do you want me to do about that, Ed?" Peter teased, grinning.

"Nothing. Unfortunately Peter, you're stuck and so am I," Edmund retorted. "I have no cure for your idiocy."

Peter rolled his eyes, resisting an urge to sigh. Edmund understood some things far better than he ever would, so there was no use fighting with him, especially since he was probably right. After all, it spoke volumes that Edmund had already pinpointed his schedule to the degree that he had caught Peter just as the High King had been turning the corner to start down another, well-worn hallway.

"I do know what your problem is, though."

"You do? Well, then, out with it, Edmund."

It was Edmund's turn to smirk, and he drew himself up proudly to his full height before explaining, "Me."

Peter stood, leaning against the corridor wall and just stared at his brother. What in all of Narnia had brought his brother to that conclusion? He knew for a fact the core of his problems rested with Jadis, and his inability to protect his siblings. Particularly the one who had almost died on a battlefield not too long ago. If it had not been for Lucy. . . he was happy to not continue the thought.

"You? And what gave you that idea?" Peter asked, his voice dead.

"I'm related to you, Peter. I know how you think."

"Aslan preserve us," he muttered under his breath. Aloud he said, "You're right, Ed, you must be my problem. Because that makes no sense whatsoever," the High King replied. He tried not to grimace. It was obvious that Edmund knew how his older brother thought, since he had caught him so easily.

"That's what's happening now, right? The reason you wander these corridors is because you're worried. Worried about making the right decisions as the High King, worried of disappointing the people who look up to you, and worried about our sisters and their safety. But what worries you the most is keeping your younger brother safe. After all, it was me who died on the battlefield, trying to save your life. Anyone would probably worry after that. Only you though, Peter, would worry to the point where it started to affect your health!"

"I'm supposed to worry about you and Susan and Lucy, Edmund! It's my job," Peter said. He was trying to weasel his way out of actually explaining what was bothering him so much, and still get his brother to give up this idea. It was by no means Edmund's fault that his older brother was plagued by nightmares.

"Just because you're the eldest doesn't mean you have to do it by yourself. Susan, Lucy, and I are capable of worrying too. Is that why you're out here instead of asleep? I know you love our new home, Peter! I do too! But this is taking it to the extreme, don't you think?"

"Well what are you doing up, Edmund? You should be in bed, too."

"I was reading," Edmund muttered. Peter raised an eyebrow, curiosity and suspicion warring for domination within his mind.

"Reading?"

"Yes, reading. I wanted to study some of the texts that we have in the library. Why does no one believe me when I tell them that? You know, I do know how to read," Edmund retorted and paused. He acted as though he wanted to add something more, but wasn't sure if he should or not. Peter waited, knowing to push Edmund right now would do him no good.

"And, I couldn't sleep either. I haven't really been able to since I fell asleep in your room the other night. I've just been so worried."

"About what, Ed?" Peter asked, anxiousness coloring his own voice. Anything that was worrying his siblings was important, and he wanted to know about it right away.

"You!" Edmund hissed savagely. "Because you won't talk to anyone about why you won't sleep, and it has me worried about my perfect, very dense older brother. Since you refuse

to sleep, you are getting yourself sick. And you refuse to talk to someone about why you won't sleep, and I can't help but wonder if it's because you don't trust me!"

Peter's eyes widened at the same time Edmund's did. With a choked sound, the older brother pulled the younger into a hug, his eyes glistening with tears that had yet to fall. He had known there was a reason Edmund had seemed so unsure of himself, and it pained him to know that it was because he had been working under the belief that his brother still didn't trust him.

"Are you sure I'm the idiot? Eddie listen to me," Peter held his brother at arm's length, and leveled him with a steady glare. "I trust you more than anyone else in this world or the next. You need never doubt that. The reason I can't sleep is because I keep seeing the same memory over and over again. It's always Jadis stabbing you, and this time I can't save you, and neither can Lucy. It is not, and could never be your fault that I am having these nightmares. In fact," Peter smiled warmly, "I sleep better when your there because I know that you're alive."

Edmund pulled away from Peter's embrace and gave him a long, hard look. Peter stood very still, for he suddenly felt as if he had been caught. Finally, his brother's mouth twitched into a bitter smile.

"A word of advice? You should take a page out of my book, Pete. What's done is done, and you have to try to leave it behind."

"I'm trying."

Edmund gently took him by the sleeve and tugged him down the corridor back toward his own room. Peter followed him without complaint, knowing he had been beaten, and having the good grace and common sense not to say anything.

"I know," Edmund replied.

"So now what?"

"Now I have to have Martil shift my things into your room. I'm moving in."

§#§

Peter shook his head slowly as he watched Edmund throw the mass of blankets and pillows onto the window seat. He sank down onto his bed, all the sleepless nights finally catching up with him. He felt truly tired, as he watched their valets fussing, both where put out about the sudden change to their precious routine.

"Why?" There was so much behind that question that he could not put into words.

"Because I need sleep, and you, dear brother, are worth it."

¥¤¥

# The Conscience of the King

*by electrum*

## Chapter One

"What in Aslan's name are they doing, Oreius?"

"Apparently it's a game from the land of Spare Oom. King Peter called it . . . cricket."

"Cricket? Like the insect?"

"Only in name."

Standing beside me, Tumnus watched as King Peter took a running start, then threw a small ball at Queen Susan. There was a steely look in the queen's eyes as she gauged the pitch, her hands tight around a short staff that reminded me of a distorted oar. She stepped in and swung, sending the ball sailing over the hedge. King Peter let out a shout of admiration, setting off at a run to retrieve it. Standing behind Susan, King Edmund let out a groan and hung his head as his older sister hitched up her skirts and began to run. There were two sets of posts in the ground a set distance apart, with something about them I had heard King Peter call a wicket. Susan ran back and forth between the posts, her voice rising in laughter as she called out how many times she ran between them. Off to the side, Queen Lucy laughed and clapped, taking no sides in the game, though King Peter had been teaching her how to swing the odd little staff earlier.

"How is it played?" wondered Tumnus.

I shook my head. "I've been watching almost an hour and I'm none the wiser. All I do know is that Queen Susan is winning."

It seemed Susan had won, as Peter had yet to return with the ball and Edmund, with a dramatic flourish, gave up. It was several minutes before Peter came back, red-faced and with twigs and leaves in his hair. He looked at his brother collapsed behind the posts shaking his head sadly and his sister standing triumphant at the refreshment table nearby.

"I surrendered," admitted Edmund.

The High King tossed him the ball and then dropped to the lawn beside him. "Well done. It's less painful this way."

They looked up as Susan approached, a goblet held out to each of them. Behind her, her younger sister carried a tray of sweet cakes which she set on the ground before sitting with them.

"That was an excellent game, Peter," complimented Susan, passing her brothers the cups before brushing bits of twigs out of the elder boy's hair.

"For you, maybe," said Edmund. They all laughed as they sat together to take a rest from the heat of high summer. I smiled, pleased that they took the time to relax and be children. They needed moments like this lest they be overwhelmed by their duties and I was glad of the chance to observe them unaware, for they were so absorbed in their game and each

other that they took no notice of me where I stood far back in the shadows cast by the trees. There were guards all about, Animals and Dwarves and Dryads, but we all allowed the monarchs their privacy and kept well back.

I turned to the Faun standing beside me. "What brings you here, Tumnus?"

He cast me a look that said he thought me nosy. I cast him one that broached no argument. I knew perfectly well why he was here. Though I had only met him within the last decade, I had known of Tumnus for years. Known of him, and disapproved.

"I've come to see Queen Lucy," was his predictable answer.

"She is otherwise engaged this morn," I replied. "Leave her be for now."

He frowned, marshaling his defiance. "She invited me here."

"So she did." I flicked my tail, annoyed at his presumptuousness and not about to be patronized by his likes despite his greater years. "And your reply indicated you would be here this late afternoon, which is when you will present yourself to her and not before. Her brothers and sister have many duties and responsibilities and rarely get to spend so much time together. She would feel obligated to leave them to entertain you or to include you in their company which, given your obvious dislike of King Edmund, would ruin their sport. So, you will wait."

He stared at me, speechless. Finally he sputtered, "How dare you! You are arrogant, General!"

"I am," I agreed, "and with good cause. You, however, are arrogant with far less cause. Walk with me," I said, stepping directly in front of him. It wasn't a request and for a moment I thought he might challenge my authority, but with a final glare at me he turned around and joined me. Behind us, the kings and queens decided to go swim and play along the shore. I knew the Dogs and Tigers - just about the only Talking Animals at Cair Paravel that actually liked going into the ocean - would follow and so I did not worry after them.

Tumnus was furious and I let him seethe. Everything I said had been true. It seemed to me he hoped that Queen Lucy's good graces and friendship would make people forget what he had been and done. While that might have worked with people who didn't know better, it would never work with me.

We walked through the fresh, lush gardens surrounding Cair Paravel. After a lifetime of nothing but winter I found the grounds particularly pleasing, though this part of Narnia was very different from my family's home to the southwest. I doubted the Faun saw anything of our surroundings, so angry at me was he.

"I knew your father well," I finally said, startling him. "I served under him for years. He was a brave soldier."

"And I was not," snapped Tumnus.

"Your words," I replied. "I have no basis to judge you as a soldier."

"There's nothing to judge. I have never served in Narnia's army."

I nodded. "You called me arrogant. Why? Because I wish for my kings and queens to have a day to themselves? Or was it because I reminded you of your own deceit?" I spat the last word, for it was distasteful in the extreme to me.

"What?" he exclaimed, stopping. "I helped her escape!"

I kept walking, forcing him to run to catch up to me if he wanted the conversation to continue. He darted past and stood before me, blocking my way. He was a fraction of my size and his fury was something almost palpable. I leaned forward, my harsh words for his ears alone.

"You were in the pay of the White Witch, Faun. You can't deny it. The Trees and Robins at the Lantern Waste have confirmed this. You would have turned Queen Lucy over to Jadis for what? Silver? Perhaps to conjure up a sense of pride of having done your duty by a false queen? A swipe at your father? Perhaps simply to save your own life? After having acted so base, you dare to stand in judgement of your own king? Of my king? Of Aslan's king? If Edmund betrayed you it was out of ignorance and enchantment and while you may have suffered her cruelty, so did he. He, at least, has admitted his sin." I stamped the earth. If it were not for Edmund, it really wouldn't be worth my effort to be angry with him. "So tell me, Tumnus, why did Jadis arrest you and turn you to stone?"

I thought back on the moment when we had snatched Edmund from the Witch's encampment. I confess that I had not expected him to be so young, so very small. He had been sorely mistreated. His body bore the marks of exposure and beatings and he was weak from exhaustion and hunger. Edmund had collapsed in my arms the moment the ropes were cut and he fell asleep minutes later, even before we were out of danger.

I had wanted to hate him. I had rescued him expecting to despise him as a traitor. I had thought evil of him and I anticipated his meeting my expectations. All my hatred was completely undone by the trust he placed in me as he fell asleep against my chest. I had no brothers of my own. Until that instant, I had never felt the lack.

Like most Fauns are apt to do when cornered, Tumnus lashed out at me.

"What about Sir Giles Fox?" he snapped.

I frowned. "They have made their peace, though of what concern that is to you or what bearing that has on this discussion, I cannot say. I saw and heard King Edmund apologize to you after the coronation. I also saw you walk away without a word. This I will tell you, Faun Tumnus, son of General Calimus, under whom I served Aslan and my beloved country: Queen Lucy in all her goodness has forgiven you your transgressions against her. Aslan has shown you His favor. Who are you to carry a grievance against the very king you crowned at His behest in Cair Paravel? You may be her friend, but King Edmund is her brother and your king. As his subject you owe him conduct becoming his status." I leveled a hearty glare at him, defying him to argue with me. He stared back, pale beneath his tan. He looked a great deal like his father, though he lacked the general's fire. There was strength of a kind in him, for he had defied Jadis in her lair, but it was not his place to stand in judgement of Aslan's choice for Narnia's king.

"I will tell the queen," he breathed.

I shrugged, unimpressed by the threat. I think we both knew whom Lucy would choose were she forced to decide between friend and brother. "Tell her what you will, so long as you tell her the truth, Tumnus. All of the truth. And if you omit any details rest assured I will provide them to Her Highness. Perhaps you should go find a place to wait and think until this afternoon," I suggested firmly.

He drew a deep breath, knowing full well he had little choice, and turned away.

It was Queen Susan, whose feet were bare and whose long hair was all windblown, who very prettily asked me to take tea with her and her siblings once they came back from swimming hours later. I think my great size frightened her to an extent and the fact that she made such effort was touching. As one does not refuse a queen, I gladly accepted the invitation. I had to slow my steps almost to a crawl to keep apace with her, but she happily entertained me by telling me about her day, unaware that I had observed a great deal of it from a distance.

Narnia's other three monarchs were in disreputable shape - sunburnt, their hair stiff with salt, their feet bare - but they rose to greet me with genuine good will and happily included me in their midday meal. I was pleased to see them so relaxed. As always, I was astonished by how much the kings could eat in a sitting. For such small creatures, their appetites were immense. I smiled as Queen Lucy poured me tea and asked about my day. Where Queen Susan was lovely and gracious, Queen Lucy was charming and welcoming and she put extra effort into making me feel comfortable in the presence of my monarchs. Though the tea was served on a low table set on a blanket, only the queens sat. Peter and Edmund stood all the while to keep me company, knowing how awkward it is for my kind to rise once we've laid down. We had a merry time and I was struck once again at what excellent company these four were.

The light meal was almost at its end when Lucy let out an excited squeal and jumped to her feet. "Mr. Tumnus!" she cried and raced across the lawn to where she'd spotted her friend. I could hear their warm greetings, but my eyes were fixed on the two boys beside me. Edmund pursed his lips, clearly bracing himself for an unpleasant task. Beside him, his brother the High King frowned slightly, his expression darkening when he noticed Edmund's reaction. I was glad to see I was not alone in my opinion of Lucy's friend.

Laughing and skipping, Queen Lucy tugged the Faun along with her, completely unaware of the tension in the air. Tumnus bent over Queen Susan's extended hand and then bowed to the two kings. It was evident to anyone who might be looking for it that both he and Edmund were self-conscious. The small party broke up soon after his arrival.

¥¤¥

## Chapter Two

". . . so I thought that was a bit . . . boorish, I suppose."

"Come again, Ed?"

Before me, on a stone seat next to the training grounds, I heard the sound of metal-on-metal as Edmund smacked his brother's arm.

"Pay attention! Yesterday. After dinner. Tumnus . . ."

Peter's tone was stern and I could tell he knew something of the situation between his brother and the Faun. "If he was rude . . ."

"Not rude. Insulting, actually. You and Susan were helping her ladies sort out that issue of the Ostriches and the Kangaroos racing in the halls. When Lucy left to get her embroidery

to show him, Tumnus said to me that as someone that had also been in the White Witch's employ he had no right to harbor a grudge against me."

"What?" Peter's shock was evident and I didn't have to see him to know his exact expression. His voice betrayed all. He was dumbfounded. "Her employ?"

"Shout it out to all of Narnia, why don't you, Peter? Lower your voice. Yes! He said her employ."

"Tumnus worked for Jadis?"

"Worse yet, he thought I did too!"

"Shh!" shushed Peter. He was quiet, trying to assimilate this information. When he spoke again, his voice was much softer. "What did you say?"

The younger king barked a laugh, but I could hear the strain in his voice as he referred to his inauspicious start in Narnia just a few weeks past. "I told him flat-out I'd never worked for her in that sense and I didn't appreciate him assuming anything about me or what I'd done. He's one to talk!"

"What did he do?"

"It was awkward. I think he was praying that Aslan would appear and swallow him whole."

"No doubt. Does Lucy know this?"

"If she does she never mentioned it to me. You know how she is with confidences."

"True."

Celer and several other officers approached the archway leading to the courtyard opposite from where I stood. I gestured for quiet and for them to wait outside, out of earshot. They obeyed instantly. I did not like to eavesdrop, but it was not intentional. Clearly they needed to talk right now and if I moved from the doorway of the armory they would hear me. Moreover, I was the one responsible for the situation and I dare not let it get out of hand.

"Remember . . . the letter Maugrim left in his cave." Peter spoke slowly, wracking his memory. "Arrested for high treason against her majesty. High treason. Against her."

"Not Narnia. I hear you. All traitors belonged to her."

"And she did turn him to stone."

Edmund sighed. "I don't know what he ever said to Lucy, but in the end he did help her escape and he did stand against Jadis. I'll give him that."

"And what did you do so much worse than what he did?" Peter asked hotly. His tone startled me because I had never heard him speak so passionately before. "Yes, you were a traitor, but what does that make him?"

Only Peter could ask such a question of his brother and I was relieved to hear no hint of offense or hurt taken when Edmund answered.

"I suppose it's a question of scale."

"Scale be damned," snapped the elder king and I blinked to hear anything akin to a curse pass his lips. "He repented and so did you, but somehow his conduct is swept away under the carpet while yours is displayed before the whole country. How is that fair?"

"Lucy adores him. I know he thinks the world of her."

With a snort Peter asked, "Don't we all? Lucy gives her love very quickly. Loving is easy. Liking someone as well is the challenge."

"So I've heard," Edmund answered softly. "For Lucy's sake I want to work this out, though I don't think our Mr. Tumnus is very fond of me."

"Too bad for him." Peter made a scoffing noise and I heard someone, most likely Edmund this time, get smacked by an armored glove. "Perhaps it's because you've owed up to it. That takes courage. Maybe more courage than Tumnus has."

"Or since I'm a king, he holds me more accountable."

"You weren't a king yet," Peter replied. "And it's not his place to stand in judgement of Aslan's choices."

"Nor ours. He did crown us after all, so clearly he's in Aslan's good graces. I for one won't question that choice."

There was a shift in attitude, and the steely resolve I had noted in Peter before now became evident. "Agreed. If Aslan's forgiven him we can't do less. I'll admit I'm not in the most forgiving mood right now, given his conduct towards you, though. What do you want to do?"

"I suppose I'll try talking to him. I just don't want Lucy to get wind of any of it. Or Susan."

"I could speak to him."

"No. No, thank you. I wouldn't want it to look as if I tattled."

"We're kings. He's our subject. If he can't respect the person, he should at least respect the title."

"Can I quote you?" teased Edmund.

"Please do." Peter made a noise of disbelief. "Aslan's mane, where would we be now if he had met you before Lucy?"

Edmund likewise gave a disbelieving huff. "Not here, I can assure you."

"I shudder to think of it."

"Amen."

They were silent, thinking on that hideous possibility. Finally Edmund stirred.

"Peter?"

"Hmm?"

"Where on earth is everyone?"

§!§

I watched the four children carefully over the next several days. My father, whom I had always honored and held to be the wisest of Centaurs, had told me that since I had two ears, two eyes, and only one mouth, I should listen and watch twice as much as I spoke. As I aged, I understood better the sagacity behind his words. I had discovered that there was a

great deal people gave away about themselves without ever uttering a word, and so I knew exactly when King Edmund spoke with Tumnus.

Clearly it had not gone as well as Edmund had hoped because he held himself more aloof than I had ever seen, while Tumnus was an absolute study in rue. I was beginning to suspect there was more truth behind Peter's suggestion that Tumnus lacked the moral fiber to face his shortcomings than the High King knew.

I was watching Sharet and her troop of Cats sharpening their claws on some old, dead tree trunks late Fifthday morning. They gained so much satisfaction from the simple exercise that it was a pleasure to watch, though they tended to reduce the trees to mulch in almost no time at all. Most everything the Cats did was a game to them, even the heaviest training, and their morale was unparalleled even in this most enthusiastic of armies. Wood chips flew as two huge Tigers raced to destroy the remains of the tree trunks, roaring out their excitement. A crowd of appreciative soldiers and gardeners gathered round, cheering and urging them on as they dodged flying chunks of wood.

"General?"

Tumnus. I had been expecting him for some time now. I turned to face him. Clearly he was distressed, though the slightest things tended to set off most Fauns.

"Yes?" I asked.

"I tried speaking with King Edmund."

I made no comment, just gazed at him. He squirmed uncomfortably and admitted,

"I fear I made things worse."

"You fear?" I echoed, arching an eyebrow at him expectantly.

Tumnus looked at me in shock. "How did you know?"

"I pay attention to my surroundings. King Edmund has been rather closed of late."

"I insulted him the night I arrived. It wasn't my intention, but that's what it turned into: an insult. I managed to say everything wrong that I possibly could. And just yesterday he tried to broach the subject again and I shut him out. I could not bring myself to face what stands between us and now he must think I am the worst kind of person. King Peter was cold to me. Queen Susan frowned at me." He shuddered, for his was the type of personality that wanted to be universally liked. "Even Queen Lucy noticed and her I would spare above everyone else."

"Why come to me?"

"Because you understand. Not me so much as the situation."

"A fair enough answer. I ask you, what is it about King Edmund that intimidates you so?"

He opened his mouth to protest, then shut it again, miserable. "You wouldn't understand, General Oreius. You're a brave and noble soldier and I . . . I can't even admit the truth. I worked for Narnia's enemy. I almost betrayed the girl that is now my best friend and my queen. I lack the courage of even a ten-year-old child and I hold that against him."

I eyed him askance, amused. Briefly I wondered if the Faun's complaint of cowardice centered around not being brave enough to do the job he was paid for or because Edmund

so readily confessed his sins, an example Tumnus could not bring himself to follow. "You just admitted it to me."

"You're not the injured party," he grumbled, realizing he had, indeed, just confessed all.

"Aren't I?" I returned. "Perhaps not directly injured but by insulting my king, you insult me. Moreover, he's distracted now and lack of concentration on the training grounds can result in accidents, in which case I would not only be insulted, but furious."

He stared up at me. Though my tone was light, he knew my words were deadly serious.

"You faced Jadis, Tumnus. Find the courage to face Edmund. He at least won't turn you into a block of stone. It's time you learned why he's called the Just."

§§§

The next morning, Sixthday, promised to be wet and dreary. Of course that changed nothing in our morning routine and by five hours past midnight my two young kings stepped into the courtyard in full armor. As usual, Peter was the more alert of the two. Edmund would stop yawning as soon as he started moving in earnest. Our Sixthday training was normally less formal and structured than the previous five days. I knew both boys enjoyed this time the most and I always made sure that they had fun with it since this time was theirs.

So as we stepped out of the armory I was rather perturbed to see Faun Tumnus seated in the courtyard on the same bench Peter and Edmund had occupied several days ago, waiting for us. We stopped in our tracks as he stood up and bowed to the kings. Peter's expression was hard and distant. Edmund struck me as more annoyed than anything else.

"We are holding class, Tumnus," I said, letting my tone tell him I did not appreciate the intrusion

"I apologize to Your Majesties and to you, General, for the interruption" Tumnus replied. He was almost stammering in his nervousness. "King Edmund, would you indulge me with a few moments of your time?"

I caught the look the Pevensie brothers exchanged. Neither boy was very pleased by this development and both resented that the Faun kept them from one of the things they looked forward to the most all week. Peter opened his mouth to speak when Edmund silenced him with a small gesture. Not a word was exchanged, but their body language said all as Peter offered to deal with this development and Edmund gratefully refused.

"Excuse me, Peter, General," said Edmund, stepping away to join the Faun.

We withdrew to the other end of the courtyard. I could tell Peter was agitated and I laid my hand on his shoulder. "Be at ease, Sir Peter."

"I would rather Tumnus had chosen another time to soothe his own conscience," snapped Peter. I had never seen him so cross. It was rather impressive.

I watched the two slight figures at the other end of the yard. Tumnus was gesturing, leaning in towards the king, and Edmund stood straight and dignified, his shield in hand. He was more a king each passing day. Their voices were too soft for us to catch any of the exchange, but I knew it was intense. Edmund listened more than he spoke. When he finally did speak, I could see the tension drain out of the Faun. It seemed he had found his courage after all.

And then Edmund turned and walked towards us, his armor ringing. Tumnus stared after him in surprise. Clearly he had expected something more than what he received.

"King Edmund!"

He looked back, waiting. Tumnus was at such a loss that I almost pitied him. Beside me, Peter watched the scene with a cool, keen look in his fair eyes.

"I . . . I hoped we may be friends," Tumnus faltered, very aware of all attention upon him.

"I've accepted your apology and I've forgiven you, as you've forgiven me," Edmund replied sharply. I could tell he was provoked because that was when he was at his most eloquent.

"At the moment that's all I'm prepared to do. I'm sure some day you'll get your wish and we'll be on friendly terms, if only for Lucy's sake, but not right now. Now is time for my class. Good day, sir."

His face was set but I could tell he was strained emotionally as he joined us. Neither boy looked at the Faun, giving him the opportunity to slip away and lick his wounds.

"All right, Edmund?" Peter softly inquired.

He took a deep breath. "I wish he'd waited until later," he muttered, clearly upset by the confrontation. I suspected he was in far better shape than Tumnus. He looked up at me.

"Oreius, I -"

"Sit," I ordered. "Both of you."

They gladly obeyed. I let them calm down for a few moments, folding my arms across my chest and regarding them carefully.

"Your Majesties, I must apologize. This situation with Tumnus was brought about due to a conversation I had with him the day he arrived."

"It's been coming either way, General," Edmund answered quietly. Beside him, his brother nodded.

"I certainly haven't forgotten his conduct towards Ed at our coronation. And now we find out he was actually working for Jadis! The fact that he was ever angry at anyone that helped overthrow the White Witch strikes me as pretty rich and frankly hypocritical."

"We are not all warriors, my kings," said I. "There is a mighty lesson to be learned here. As my father said, a fool forgives and forgets, a tyrant neither forgives nor forgets, and a wise man forgives, but does not forget. King Edmund, you are familiar with this most of all. You have been forgiven and now you have forgiven."

He nodded his agreement without a hint of reluctance. When he spoke, his voice was firm. "Neither position is comfortable, but I will not apologize to Tumnus again."

"Nor should you, for by doing so you'd be opening yourself up to another affront. Patience is not a bottomless well and you are a King of Narnia. Forgiveness does not require liking. That I can say with authority."

"So now what do we do?" wondered Peter.

I smiled faintly. "You carry on knowing you've done what you can up to this point." I looked up as the clouds, already dark, began to release the first few drops of rain. "Come! We're done here."

"But we haven't had our lesson!" protested Edmund.

"Haven't we, Majesty?"

¥¤¥

### Chapter Three

"Peter, am I arrogant?"

I looked over at the two boys as they stripped off their armor in the next room. Peter was concentrating on a knot in his boot lace and did not so much as look up. Both seemed unaware of my presence.

"Yes," droned the High King, intent on his work.

Edmund glowered. "Allow me to rephrase that. Peter, am I being arrogant?"

In the same bland, distracted voice he said, "Yes."

There was a pause and then King Peter raised his head, catching the expression on his brother's face. "Don't worry, Ed, we're all arrogant at some time or another. You, me, Flisk, Tumnus, the Cat pages. All of us. You're also stubborn and annoying, but at least you're in good company."

"You're right. I have you."

"You're a king, Edmund," Peter reminded. "You're allowed to be a little arrogant now and then and if you ever go too far trust that I'll let you know."

Edmund conveyed his skepticism in one snort. Peter smiled and returned to the knot. "Are you asking what you should do about Tumnus?"

"Yes. I'd hate for Lucy to feel stuck in the middle of this."

"I think this is all a question of bad timing. You tried too soon after the coronation for Tumnus and now he's tried too late for you. But . . . giving it time might be the answer. I know you tried and it didn't work. Now it's Tumnus' turn to know what that feels like."

"I suppose he expected me to be more like Lucy. I doubt she ever accused him."

"Doubtless," grunted Peter. He gave up on the knot and sat on the bench beside his brother. "What kind of reaction did you want out of people after Beruna? Did you want them to just ignore the matter and move on, or did you want to talk about it at all?"

"Ignore. Definitely ignore."

"Then why not do the same for Tumnus? You've acknowledged the situation. Don't dwell on it. It happened, it's over, now carry on like Oreius said. I think Tumnus will come around eventually."

Edmund stared at what I thought was the floor, thinking hard. Then he reached over and yanked one of Peter's boot laces. With a deft twist of his wrist he had the knot undone. Peter cast him a sour look.

"Show off."

"Still in good company, brother."

Edmund gave his brother an affectionate shove. They both smiled, and I smiled along with them.

§§§

It took a day or two, but Tumnus finally caught on to Edmund's conduct and gratefully imitated him. When together, they were polite and proper as if newly acquainted. Edmund kept his distance, not about to open himself up to an affront, and Tumnus wisely gave him a wide berth, talking of nothing more complex than the weather for the time being. Queen Lucy noticed immediately and her flagging spirits were restored now that her best friend and her brother were at least speaking to each other, and that went far towards relieving the tension they had all felt since the Faun's arrival. I was very pleased with Edmund and to my surprise, I found myself somewhat pleased with Tumnus as well.

"General?"

I paused, the sharpening stone suspended in the air over my sword. Tumnus stood ill at ease at the entrance to the armory, eyeing the claymore that was almost as big as he. For a moment I wondered what it would be like going through life in a constant state of nervousness and not surprisingly, I couldn't even imagine such a thing. Setting the weapon down, I joined him and slowly we walked beyond the walled courtyard to the trampled fields where the army practiced maneuvers. At the moment the entire royal family was on the field under the watchful eyes of various officers, the queens practicing their archery and the kings enthusiastically beating on each other with quarterstaves.

"I would like to apologize," Tumnus offered. He fidgeted with the fringe of the scarf about his neck. "I should not have called you arrogant."

Ah, that word again. I shrugged. "At times it's the truth."

"It was not my place."

I glanced beyond him. Queen Lucy had abandoned archery and stood in front of King Edmund. He was guiding her hands on the staff against their older brother. "As you wish. Have you spoken to King Edmund?"

"Not beyond normal conversation over tea. I'm grateful for his approach to the situation. I'm not unaware of the effort it must have taken to give me another chance. We've both erred. He was just more mature about it."

"Being a king, he had little choice."

"You see, I think that was my problem: he addressed the situation head on and I found myself . . . lacking. I don't think I quite expected him to be the king that he's turned out to be. I underestimated him."

"Many have." I smiled inwardly as I quoted King Peter. "It was all a question of bad timing."

He smiled a little sadly. "Yes indeed. Oreius, if you don't mind my asking, how long did you serve under my father?"

"Fifteen years. He and my own father both perished in the same battle."

"Fifteen years. I hadn't seen him for twenty. You probably knew him better than I."

"I knew a different Calimus."

"I envy you."

"You are your father's son in more ways than you realize."

"Perhaps it's better I hadn't seen him for so long. He wouldn't have been proud of me in the end."

"No." I pawed the ground, kicking up dust. "But now, I believe, he would be."

He was watching Queen Lucy as he spoke. "I doubt we'll ever be friends, you and I, but I'm glad we've found common ground. Thank you"

Just then the High King let out a shout and we turned to see Lucy, her quarterstaff guided by Edmund's hands, sweep Peter's feet from beneath him. He landed (properly, I was pleased to note) with a loud crash of metal. Lucy squealed in delight and Susan applauded. The brothers laughed merrily - Peter strewn on the grass, Edmund leaning on the quarterstaff.

Our presence caught the attention of the younger king. Edmund looked my way and his face blossomed into a wide smile that never faded as he included Tumnus in the greeting. I shook my head in warning and pointed behind him, but too late. A second later he yelped in surprise as Peter took advantage of his distraction to return the favor bestowed on him moments before, swinging his quarterstaff in a low, scooping motion that spilled Edmund onto the grass. Lucy giggled and clapped until Edmund seized the hem of her dress and yanked her down as well. She landed right on top of him as Susan darted out of range. All of them were shrieking with laughter.

Beside me, Tumnus laughed and I found myself smiling, still shaking my head.

"Or if not common ground, General, at least something in common sprawled on the ground."

I chuckled, watching as my sovereigns acted like the children they were, confident that at the same time they were so much more. "Indeed we do, Tumnus."

¥¤¥

# Heat Wave

*by FaithfulPureLight*

Hot.

Sweltering, blistering heat. That was the last thing I remembered before the world went suddenly black. Everything around me was dark, and my head felt as if Brickit, the Chief Smith of Blue River Smithy, had taken one of his hammers to my head. My throat was on fire, my lips were cracked, and I didn't even know where I was. The urge to vomit demanded attention, and I clawed my way to the side of my bed, relieving myself of anything that was in my stomach.

With a groan I flopped back onto the mattress. It was our room, Peter's and mine, that I now occupied. The one lone candle cast no illumination, and I wondered at the lack of light. Last I knew, it had been sometime in late morning, the sun well overhead, when Peter and I had taken to the training grounds in full armor. Our lesson had been canceled for the day due to the sweltering heat, and Oreius had been called away for the morning on business. Of course, my brilliant brother and I had disagreed entirely with the decision to cancel training. We decided it was nowhere near too hot to practice, but a debate with General Oreius would have done absolutely nothing to change his mind. So, dressed in full armor and carrying our swords and shields, we had slipped onto the field. Oreius had ordered none were to practice today, not even the higher ranking officers.

I couldn't say which one of us had come up with the, oh, so wondrous idea of disobeying our teachers and friends, but I suspect Peter bears that responsibility.

Sweat had been pouring down both our bodies by the time we had stopped for a rest. Usually, soldiers from the army were there with water when we paused for rest, but today we were on our own, seeing as no one knew where their kings were. After a brief consultation we decided that if we took a drink after we got back, it wouldn't be so bad. I think we might have been wrong.

It was when I went to attack Peter again after our break that my memory stopped. I had a vague impression of the ground rushing up to meet me, and the thought that it was really too hot out for this kind of activity, and then darkness.

Voices, some hushed, some extremely loud and angry from the sound of it, carried in from outside the bedroom door. I wished my head didn't ache so much as I struggled to hear what they said.

"What in all of the Lion's Mane, were they doing out there?" the first voice thundered. That must have been Oreius. He sounded rather angry with someone. Probably my idiotic brother and me.

"Well, sir, it looks as if King Peter and King Edmund were training." A second voice, much quieter than that of Oreius', answered. I grimaced. Now we'd done it.

"In summer tunics, yes?"

"Well, no, General. They were in full armor, and further search found their swords and shields on the training grounds." That second voice, it must have been Felern, answered a bit timidly.

"What? Why did no one see this? Was something not done?"

I resisted the urge to groan again. The next time we were allowed to train was going to be completely, utterly, and totally awful.

"The kings must have snuck out, Sir. No one knew where they had gone, and the queens are down at Glasswater." I could almost feel Oreius' rage. Peter and I were going to have quiet a lot of explaining to do later.

Speaking of which, where was my brother? Usually I would expect to find him hovering over me, like a worried mother hen. I twisted my head towards his bed, trying to catch a glimpse of blond hair. If he wasn't in bed, Oreius would be asking these questions of him, instead of Felern. Ah, there he was. I gave a muffled yelp. My brother looked so pale. Last I had seen him, Peter had been extremely red and the sudden color change was a bit worrisome, to say the least. I could almost hear his heartbeat in the silence, the pace far quicker than any human's should be. Perhaps the most disconcerting of all however, was his slightly sunken eyes and cheeks. I barely recognized my brother, and that terrified me.

Felern hurried through the door, followed by a worked-up, enraged Centaur. Oreius glistened with sweat, his flanks were foamy. He had donned only a sleeveless tunic that morning, and perhaps it was because of the heat. I gulped, sparing a brief thought for what lay in store for us, before returning my attention to Peter.

"King Edmund! Oh thank Aslan you have awoken! Here, drink this." The healer pushed a goblet of water my way. I shook my head, but under Oreius' steely gaze quickly changed my mind, and taking the goblet I drank its contents. Felern continued to fuss around me as I drank, fluffing the pillows, and rearranging the water pitcher.

I didn't expect to be so thirsty, but the water tasted so cool and refreshing. Narnian water is the best there is after all, but today I found it to be even sweeter than usual. I held out my cup for more, which Felern gladly obliged by pouring. I drank again. The dwarf continued to scold me as I drank.

"Your Majesty, I must insist you never try something to that degree again! That was extremely dangerous. Your blood pressure fell far below normal, and you're lucky your brother was found when he was. I already cooled you down, but I am going to prescribe you stay in bed and drink as much water as possible for the time being."

"Wait." My voice rasped, but I pressed on, ignoring the pain. "What happened? To Peter, to me?"

Felern smiled gently despite his anxiousness. "You should not have been training, Sire. It was dangerous in this heat. And for you to have consumed no water before you began the practicing, let alone during the fighting, was insane. I will not hear of you doing something like that again. Your head hurts, does it not?"

I nodded gingerly. Movement was not a good idea.

"And your throat felt as if it was burning?"

I nodded the affirmative again as Felern checked my pulse.

"And the last thing you remember is losing consciousness?"

"Yes," I croaked.

"I expected as much. Young man, you and your brother have suffered from dehydration and an overheating of your bodies known as heat exhaustion."

"But, but Peter seemed all right before I..." I trailed off, confused and worried.

"When you passed out, Your Highness, the High King saw fit as to carry you back to the castle, both of you in full armor. The exertion and distance were too much for your brother to handle. He too, fell unconscious on the way to the healers' ward. Lucky for both of you, some of your subjects found you and thought to fetch me. I cooled you down, and now here we are."

"Yes," the general added dryly. "All Narnians blessed with good sense and reasoning were in the shade and relaxing in the heat."

I swung my legs over the bed and tried to stand. Felern gasped in shock, and Oreius leapt forward to steady me. Dizziness rushed over me, and I swayed on the spot for a minute or more. I shook my head stubbornly, and took a few unsteady steps over to Peter's bed, where I collapsed in a heap. It was just like my stupid brother to carry me all that way, worried for me instead of himself. He could have just gone and gotten one of the healers, there was no need to carry me if this was what it had done to him. I poked him.

"Peter?" No answer came. In stubborn determination I poked him again.

"Peter?" And again there was no answer. I shook him.

"Peter this isn't funny, wake up!" My voice sounded slightly hysterical, even to my own ears.

My brother stirred, shifting in the bed and blearily opening his eyes.

"Edmund?" he whispered. I grabbed the goblet, already full of water and held it to his lips.

"Drink," I ordered, ignoring how awful my own voice sounded. He shook his head.

"I'm not thirsty, Ed."

I ignored him. "I wasn't either at first, but trust me, I needed it. And so do you, Peter, now drink."

Obediently he drank the liquid, and I filled the goblet again and again until I was satisfied. He grinned.

"Well, I suppose that was a bad idea." We smirked at each other for several minutes, forgetting that we weren't out of danger yet.

"Yes, Sir Peter, it was," Oreius whispered darkly. He was obviously already planning our next lesson as soon as cooler weather allowed for that kind of torture. Peter and I exchanged terrified glances before bursting out in laughter.

"You laugh now, my kings," the general warned, but we continued to laugh until we were crying and hiccupping instead, ignoring his warnings. Oh how foolish of us.

§§§

I glanced at Oreius with something akin to dread, catching my brother's eye. He smiled in sympathy. We both knew we were in for a bad time of it today.

"Today I want you to start with running. . ."

Although Oreius acted as if he was no longer angry with us, Peter and I knew differently. We knew he was waiting for the perfect opportunity to present itself in order to teach us a lesson we wouldn't dare forget. And sure enough, in Oreius' eyes I saw what he would never say.

*Laugh now, my kings.*

¥¤¥

# Silence

*by MooMoogle*

Silence. That was all winter seemed to bring to my dear friend.

I held still, perfectly as I could as I did most times, as the soothing bristles of the stiff brush removed the clumps of dried mud marking my thickening coat. Winter was already upon us, and my hair was turning to what felt like, and practically was, heat-trapping fur, and it was becoming increasingly harder to keep myself clean. I wasn't really trying to go out of my way to escape the dirt, either.

My head lowered slightly, an ear flicking at an annoying fly, listening—feeling—the rhythm of the steady, firm strokes, a sense of relief coming to me as more and more dirt fell out onto the chilled ground. I eyed Edmund, who had remained silent all the while, watching as his breath turned frosty in the chilly air. He took no notice of my glance, only moving to brush away even larger clumps of muck from my hocks and lower legs. I tensed there, as though it would help him. There was very little I could do to help him—if he even needed it. He was very thorough.

His lips pressed a tight line as he glanced quickly at the clouding sky outside the Stables. It seemed as though snow was promising in the next week or so. Christmas was only so far off, so I supposed it was only normal. Though, as I stole another glance at my boy, he looked troubled. He lowered his gaze again, matching mine for a split second before snatching up a toothed comb and working the knots out of my tail.

It was the season. The season that he had not come to overcome the fear of.

Rough as his hands were growing, it never failed to amaze me how gently he handled my features, not pausing until I was sure I glistened, or unless time pressed one of us. Even then, I rarely left with an unsmoothed coat. Never once did I wince when he struggled with a knot, though he rarely came across one, considering he groomed me everyday if he could.

He finally spoke when he had one of my hoofs in his hands, and it was out of pure humor and speculation. His words warmed me even before they finished passing his lips. "How can you stand to have all this packed into here?" he snorted, swiping once with the pick and watching the mass fall to the ground. It remained solid even as it hit the firm ground.

I sighed once, gathering my breath as Horses do before they speak. Even the dumb, witless horses carried that trait. For a moment, there was only the scratch of the brush as he cleaned away any grime that remained on my hoof. "I am only used to it. Think a moment on it—before you and your siblings arrived here, there was no one here to groom us as you do. There was no one here who rode us—"

"Even still it is a rarity," he cut in, his voice short.

"There was no offence in you riding me, and there still is none, Edmund," I assured. "But you are correct—it is a rarity." He glanced at me, pausing in his work, before reaching for

my left hind leg. I lifted it to him, and he held it, kneeling to rest the ankle on his knee in my comfort, falling silent in his work again.

The silence cursed him once again. It wasn't that I took it to be rude...it was just noticeable. He had always appeared quiet during the winter, with the exception of the witty remarks that sprang from him, and the conversations he held with his brother and sisters likewise. He had a clever mind; that was apparent. He was remarkable company, silent or not.

It just...hurt.

Once he was done with each of my hoofs, and they were worn completely clean, he moved to my mane. Again, words were not to pass his lips. I sneezed at a fly. He moved to brush it away.

Several more times, the ordeal repeated itself, and he always moved to stroke my muzzle, the flies scattering from the presence. It was private relief when he managed to my forelock, my head lowered to him, his shadow clearing away the bothersome insects. He worked away the traces of coming tangles, one stroke at a time, sometimes laying the tool aside to work away the knots away. They were tiny and hardly noticeable, but he insisted.

He stood back finally, looking me over to see his finished piece. I lifted my head, trying my best to look regal under the young King's gaze, wanting him to take pride in his work. Unfortunately, whatever acceptance that was just managing through his readable expression turned to alarm as I sneezed rather loudly at another fly come to pester me. I suppose it was a good thing Horses could not, and still cannot, blush as the Sons and Daughters of Adam and Eve do when they take to embarrassment.

He sighed, exasperated, swatting the annoying insect away with a flick of his wrist. "It's an amazement they are still out," he muttered; "Especially now that it's winter." An ear flicked forward at the sudden change of tone in his voice, quiet and discrete as it was.

"The first, free, natural winter Narnia has had in over a century," I said softly. He averted his gaze to the ground. "And it's only-"

"A few weeks away; don't remind me," he said shortly. "Lucy won't let up about it."

"And she has no reason not to," I said. "It is something to celebrate over."

He glared at me. "Glad you feel that way, because I don't."

I hardened my gaze, swishing my tail in irritation. "Spring, Summer, and Fall passed easily, and Winter shall do the same. And oh! the first peaceful Christmas. Surely you must look forward to that."

He replaced the grooming tools with haughty demeanor. "Such a shame I shan't be able to join the celebrations in the same manner."

"Do not fear, Edmund..."

"I'm not afraid at all."

I raised my head slightly. If it wasn't fear, it was something very similar to it. I neared him, my now-hollow hooves clapping noisily against the ground. "Have you heard the saying, 'Winter comes in...like a lion...and out like a lamb?'" His lowered gaze rose the slightest bit as he nodded silently. "Well, then. I see no fear of Winter. Not with Aslan-"

"Aslan isn't here!" he lashed suddenly. "Aslan hasn't been seen in months."

"And Jadis has been gone for months," I said coolly.

He quieted then, his hands still clenched into such fists that they shook, so I too remained silent and let my words do whatever magic they may. He had said the very words that had so enticed him were so very lovely to believe at the time; perhaps he would fall to this temptation of his release of whatever nightmare I knew he had feared ever since his betrayal.

It was a few good moments before the tension threatening to shake his entire body relaxed, and the pain finally seemed to leave his face. The only thing that bothered me was that his gaze remained lowered, and the habit of silence was taking over his ability of speech again. When he did speak, though, the words were dry and dampening at the same time.

"I have to go."

And go he did.

¥□¥

# The Most Noble Order of the Table

*by electrum*

*Author's note: The only map of Narnia that I have is a delightful poster published in 1972 by MacMillian. I've relied upon that for the geography in this story, taking some license with smaller details. I know the Hill of the Stone Table wasn't referred to as Aslan's How by CS Lewis until Prince Caspian, but for the sake of this story and my take on Narnia, I'm using the name at the start of the Golden Age. I'm also aware that in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe it was Aslan who knighted Edmund, but I didn't think it was fair that Peter got a whole chapter devoted to his knighting and Edmund barely got a footnote. This is my version of events, and all mistakes are mine.*

## **Chapter One: Departure**

"I'm going with you."

"Ed..."

I crossed my arms over my chest and lowered my head, stubborn to the last, and braced myself for the inevitable argument I knew I had already won. I think Peter suspected as much himself because he features softened a bit.

We each had our roles, we kings and queens of Narnia. Peter, without doubt, was the leader. He always has been and he excels at it. I didn't think there lived a being in this country - myself included - that wouldn't follow him anywhere, even if he charged straight into the Eastern Sea or jumped off a cliff. Susan was the nurturer, not just of her siblings but of all her subjects. She was the peace maker, though I couldn't help but think that too often she chose the easiest path to end a conflict, never seeming to learn that quick and easy are not necessarily best. Lucy was our healer, our joy. She brought laughter the same way sunlight brings warmth.

And me? I was the planner, the watcher, the one who stood back and listened. Yes, I had learned to listen, though not necessarily to Peter. I had always been the one in the family to see deeper meaning in the things around us, things Peter would miss but instantly comprehend when pointed out to him. Having a Centaur for a tutor had honed this skill of mine to a point as keen as my sword and already my brother depended on me to be his eyes and ears. I didn't think he ever forgot I was a king as well as he, but he never, never forgot I was his little brother. Peter had always been protective of us all. My being severely injured in battle rattled him more than even he realized, but I refused to allow his instincts to smother me, either.

"Why don't you want me along?"

"It's not that at all. I'm just...I'm afraid of you getting hurt. I couldn't bear it."

I couldn't keep the sour expression off my face. "As if I could bear it if you got hurt? I'm going."

He gave me a look that melted my heart. I knew exactly what he was thinking: me, bloody, stabbed through the gut and spine, gasping for breath as I lay dying. I would give anything

erase that memory, but I would not give in. I was just selfish enough never to want to face such a sight myself. Peter was not alone in being protective. Besides, Susan would kill me if I let him run off on his own.

"Please, Edmund."

"Peter, on our coronation day Aslan associated each of us with a point on the compass. Remember?"

"Of course."

"Have you looked at a map of our kingdom lately? Do you think it was just chance that Aslan put Lucy and Susan to the east and south and you and me to the north and west?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, and I could tell by his tone he'd never really given the subject much thought.

"The Eastern Sea and Archenland are our best protection. He's faced we kings towards Narnia's enemies and put our sisters at our backs so they would be safe. I'm a king of Narnia. I'm going with you."

§§§

Not for the first time, I wished he would listen. Well, no, he did listen, he just didn't obey. Since he was a child my brother Edmund had always been a force unto himself: smart, clever, and direct. He was my balance, my bulwark, and the burr under my saddle.

Cyn, one of the Gryphon scouts, reported early in the morning that a few remnants of Jadis's army had been seen west of Aslan's How. In the seven months since we were crowned there had been pockets of resistance lead by the Fell Beasts of the White Witch's forces. We were busy, very busy, sorting them out. In the cold weather it was easy to persuade the girls to stay here at Cair Paravel and run things, but Edmund, determined to prove himself, insisted on coming along every time. I wished he could see he didn't need to prove himself, not to me. Quite the opposite, in fact, since I was the one that couldn't get a decent night's sleep until he moved into my chambers. He never complained, never offered empty advice, he simply instructed his valet to move his things into my room one night when I was up far too late. I was fourteen years old and the High King of Narnia. Sir Peter Wolfsbane, killer of Maugrim, the captain of Jadis' secret police. And if I didn't hear Edmund breathing every night I was plagued by nightmares. If it hadn't happened to me I probably would have thought it was silly. It was silly, since I knew he was perfectly fine, but we'd shared a room all our lives. We had never been apart. True to form, he never said a word about it, just gave me what I needed. He was an absolute brick.

And now, once again, he had pointed out the obvious and made perfect sense as he did it. When did my little brother get so wise? Was he always this way and I just never noticed? Or was it something about Narnia that had changed him?

I sighed, defeated, and rang the bell on the table for a page. Immediately a large, silver tabby Cat hurried into the room and jumped neatly onto the table, careful not to step on the maps.

"Majesties?" she asked. She had the lisp typical of the smaller Talking Cats.

"Marin, please inform General Oreius that my royal brother will accompany us and to prepare accordingly."

"Right away, Sire."

"Marin?" asked Edmund.

She turned, purring. Clearly she liked Edmund. "King Edmund?"

He smiled at her and I could tell he was very tempted to scratch under her chin like he used to do to our grandmother's cat, but we've learned not to take such liberties with our subjects. I thought Marin would make an exception in my brother's case, however.

"Please get word to Phillip as well, if he'll come along. He may be out to pasture."

"I will see to it myself, Majesty." He thanked her and she ran out on silent paws. When we were alone again Edmund turned to me, scratching his head and looking as if he was trying to remember something important.

"So...where are we going?"

§§§

"You'll watch over him?"

"Yes, Susan."

"Guard his back?"

"Yes, Susan. Would you like me to tuck him in at night as well?"

She made a face at me, exasperated by my tone, but really, she was the exasperating one. I deliberately heaped on the formalities we were slowly learning in Cair Paravel's court as I added, "And, truly, sister, your concern over my own well-being touches me profoundly."

"Don't be like that, Ed! You'll notice I'm here talking to you, not talking to Peter."

"Why, yes, I did notice. I take it Lucy is saying the same thing about me to Peter?"

She smacked my arm lightly. "I know you can take care of yourself. Peter's the one that needs watching, not you."

"He's our brother and our High King. Trust me, Su, no one wants to keep him safer than I do. I promise you I'll guard his back."

"Promise me you'll be careful as well."

I smiled to reassure her. "I will."

§§§

We left Cair Paravel before dawn the next morning. This was the fourth time since the Battle of Beruna that we set out on such a mission and it did not get easier with repetition. I kissed Susan and Lucy and they both kissed Edmund good-bye. It was always a strange feeling, this moment of parting, and I thought my sisters felt it, too.

"Don't get hurt," Susan ordered, producing an exasperated sigh from Edmund. I didn't have to look to know he was rolling his eyes.

"Yes, Mum," he droned. Susan scowled good-naturedly and Lucy giggled.

"Let's go," I said, wanting the girls to get back inside where it was warm. There was frost on the ground still, a reminder that winter was not far behind us yet.

It was a rather large group that set out. Edmund rode Phillip and I was on Flisk the Unicorn. He was eager for another fight, still offended at having been shot by an arrow during the Battle of Beruna. Two Gryphons and an Eagle had gone on ahead as scouts and with us were six Centaurs, a dozen Fauns, as many Satyrs, five big Cats, and an undetermined number of Dogs. I wasn't sure if Oreius had included the Dogs or they had included themselves, but they were so excited for the first few hours they raced around, constantly talking, until, much to the amusement of Sharet, the Cheetah captain, they wore themselves out completely. Of all the Talking Animals in Narnia, I never met any that talked more, with less to say, than Dogs.

As we rode through the forest many Trees woke up and greeted us as we passed and Talking Animals of all sorts joined us. They would walk with us a little while, mostly chatting with me or Edmund, before returning to the woods, not wanting to hinder a war party, though we politely turned down numerous invitations to tea. It was always like this when we left the castle, though Edmund and I got off lightly by comparison to Susan and Lucy. If our subjects loved me and Ed, they adored our sisters and turned out in droves to meet them. I was glad the girls were back at Cair Paravel. It was bitterly cold out here and the weather was not promising.

Edmund began telling me about his classes with his tutor, Cherroom, and what he had been learning about Narnia's laws and history. It sounded more interesting than the statecraft and diplomacy my own tutors were pounding into my skull. Somehow my brother had decided the best teacher for anyone who was going to be called 'the Just' would be a Centaur. After consulting Oreius he'd sent word to the Centaurs asking them to choose the wisest of their number to come to Cair Paravel to teach him. The result was Cherroom, Oreius's maternal great-uncle, a very wise, very witty old Centaur who told the most marvelous stories and had made a very profound impact on Edmund, his attitude, and his outlook.

"Cherroom wants me to attend Parliament when we return," Ed said. "He thought we'd all do well to attend."

"Parliament?" I echoed, startled. "We have one?" This was the first I'd heard about it, so it couldn't be a very powerful body. Beyond the ring of Fauns and Satyrs around us, I saw Oreius listening. He was rightly proud of his uncle teaching a king.

"Of course," Edmund answered smugly.

I could tell he was up to something and went along with it. "What do they do?"

"Talk, apparently, but not much else."

"What?"

He laughed, smiling. "Owls, Peter. A Parliament of Owls."

"Very funny, Ed." I scowled, trying not to laugh with no success. Flisk snorted and tossed his head, his indigo horn flashing in the wane light. He was amused by our conversation, and Oreius smirked.

"Your face was for a moment."

"So what do Owls talk about?"

He raised his hands in a helpless gesture. "I can't begin to imagine."

Teasing Peter was a thing not to be resisted under any circumstances. He was always so serious and I've gotten better at making him smile. We had been at odds too long with the war back home and Father being away and the horrid time I had in school. There were so many things in my life I resented and I took them all out on my brother with petty, misplaced jealousy. I saw that when we reached Narnia, when I realized how awfully I had behaved. I had learned a lot of lessons in the past months, and since our coronation I was determined not only to be worthy of the title Aslan had bestowed on me, but to be worthy of sitting on a dais next to Peter the Magnificent.

Despite the fact that we were a war party on our way to quell some remnants of Jadis's army, I was happy. Peter was beside me and he seemed more my brother now than ever before. I caught his eye and he smiled back, that warm, kind smile usually reserved for Lucy that spoke of nothing but love. He was more apt to show affection now and I found I didn't mind it when he pulled me into a hug or planted a quick kiss on my head. He would kiss Susan just for being pretty and Lucy just to make her giggle. Such a good person. Such a good king.

"Majesties," Oreius greeted, trotting up between us. I recognized that tone of voice with dread. It was the voice he used when he was teaching us. We couldn't escape even here. "Draw your swords. Shields up. Ride like that until I say otherwise. It will build your stamina and balance."

He ignored the suffering looks we exchanged as we obeyed. He really was an excellent teacher, though a day off here or there would have been a rare treat, especially since we were heading towards a fight. Oreius was not one for wasting a moment, nor allowing us to waste one, either.

I tightened my thighs for balance as I pulled the shield off my back. Phillip grunted. "I won't drop you," he promised.

"I know," I replied, lightening up on his ribs. "Sorry."

¥¤¥

## Chapter Two: Journey

We camped not far from the Great River that first night. Tents were set up, dinner cooked, and sentries posted. When we first went on these missions Ed and I had volunteered to stand sentry duty with the rest of the soldiers. Celer, the Faun captain, pointed out that our hearing wasn't half as good as any of the native Narnians and we didn't have a fraction of their training. He didn't say it, but I know he also didn't want to run any risks with our lives. So we let them do their jobs and made it a point not to compound their duties by wandering off or doing anything too foolish to be corrected.

Both Edmund and I were tired out by the long ride and by the cold of early spring. He retired almost immediately after we ate and I stayed up long enough to help Oreius figure our route for the morning. I was too tired to have any useful input, but I listened and nodded, trusting in these warriors who had saved my life and helped keep my brother and sisters safe, before bidding them a good night and turning in.

"Peter?"

I woke up with a start, automatically reaching for my sword even as I registered that it was Edmund. He knew enough not to stand in range until I was awake, fortunately.

"What is it?" I asked, sitting up partially. "Everything alright?"

"I'm freezing," he said, a tremor in his voice and his teeth chattering despite the fur blanket wrapped around him. This wasn't an uncommon occurrence, and I responded as I'd been responding since he could walk.

"Come on, then," I said, shifting over on the wide hammock and lifting the blankets. He spread the fur atop my bedding and crawled into the warmth. Fully dressed as he was, he really was cold and I could feel him quaking as I draped the covers over us both. It was a little crowded but cozy, and I knew at least now he'd get some sleep. He was beastly on the mornings when he didn't get enough rest.

"How can you be so warm all the time?" he whispered. He faced me as he usually did and I wrapped my arms around him. He was a scrawny, slight thing. I had to get him to eat more.

"How come you're always cold?" I replied, teasing him. He was silent for too long. "Ed?"

His voice was still shaky, though not all from his chattering teeth. "I think...I think she did this to me. I never used to be cold like this, remember? Not since..."

I tightened my hold on him, wishing I could break her hold at the same time. "She's gone, Ed. And I'm here. I'll keep you warm. Warmer than she could ever make you cold."

I could hear the smile in his voice as he answered, "I know. Peter?"

"Mmm?"

"How...how do you face battle? I mean, how can you face it?"

This was unexpected and I opened my eyes in surprise. I had to think before answering. "I faced Maugrim twice. Both times he tried to convince me not to fight, that this wasn't our land and battle, and that I didn't have it in me to be king and to do what needed to be done. That second time, he tried to kill Su and Lucy...Aslan and I had just been talking about family and I realized I did have the strength to protect them."

"And Narnia?"

I shook my head. "I didn't think I could really do it until you said you believed in me."

"I always will."

"I know. And that's why I can face battle."

§!§

I awoke the next morning to voices: Peter, Oreius, Sharet, Cyn, and Manon, the other Gryphon scout. I was still in Peter's hammock, cocooned in all the blankets. Peter, Aslan bless him, never made an issue of letting me sleep alongside him and never said a word to the girls. Now that I'm older I wouldn't have dreamed of it back home, but like all things in Narnia, even the cold seems more intense and deep and penetrating. My time with the White Witch seemed to have touched something inside me, a chill I couldn't quite shake off, so when I got cold it was all-consuming and painful. Luckily for me, my brother didn't

mind sharing his bed, his blankets, or his warmth. That was something I always envied about Peter - he could do kind and gentle things without ever seeming girlish. It was one thing for Peter Pevensie of Finchley to share a bunk with his little brother, but something different entirely for High King Peter to make certain his fellow king didn't suffer unduly from the cold, and I was grateful for the distinction.

"Edmund! Are you awake yet?" called Peter from outside the tent. Had I just thought him kind?

"No!" I moaned back, pulling the blankets over my head. Sharet let out a purr that was the Cat equivalent of a laugh and both Gryphons let out breathless chuckles.

"I'll send Phillip in to get you up!" threatened my brother.

"I'm up!" I answered. Phillip had roused me exactly once before, and that by pulling the blankets off of me and tickling my ear with his nose. I had no desire to repeat the incident and so reluctantly I threw back the covers and grouped for my boots and cloak. I must have looked awful when I stepped out of the tent because a Satyr immediately fetched me some steaming tea and no one expected any pearls of wisdom out of me for some time. Even Peter looked a bit guilty about rousing me and asked someone to fetch us something hot to eat.

The day was similar to yesterday except that fewer Talking Animals and Magical Creatures turned out to greet us and the weather threatened to make our lives truly miserable. The Trees were thicker and mostly evergreens, who tended to be grumpier than deciduous Trees. With no distractions, we made good time, following a trail along the banks of the Great River. Neth, son of the River God Callum, greeted us when we paused to get water. Neither Peter nor I had ever met a River God, just countless Naiads, and I was impressed by his courtly manners. He didn't stay long and seemed to know our mission, but he did ask us to visit the river again when Narnia was secure.

"When our borders are safe and protected and the last of the White Witch's army are gone, my brother and I intend to tour our whole kingdom," Peter promised, standing on the riverbank beside me. "Our sisters the queens will be with us and we would be honored to entertain you, your noble father the River God, and his people."

Neth was pleased by this and so was I. With Jadis's army still lurking about we had yet to see all of Narnia, though Peter and I had seen far more than Lucy and Susan. We had still to visit Archenland to the south. King Lune's ambassadors were a very jolly lot that understood our need to eliminate any rebel factions wandering about the country before we went visiting the neighbors. Until then, a dialogue was started and we were on excellent terms with Lune and gifts had already been exchanged between us. But to see all of Narnia...the notion thrilled me.

"Going vacationing, are we?" I asked Peter as we returned to our mounts.

He smiled. "Sorry, Ed. I thought of it just then. What do you think?"

"I think it's a brilliant idea."

"Good. You can plan it out."

I swung myself up onto Phillip's back. "Do you actually think either of us will get a word in edgewise once Susan and Lucy hear about it? We'll be lucky if they let us pack our own clothes."

Peter laughed, climbing onto Flisk's bare back with a grace I could only envy. He nodded to Oreius and we set out again, leaving the river behind us as we cut to the west towards Aslan's How.

§§

We camped half a day's march from our destination after a long day of hard riding. Cyn, Manon, and Alarens, the Eagle, had reported back at different times with their findings. They had spotted several Fell Beasts in the mountains ahead of us: rogue Cats, a Werewolf, and a Minotaur were among the beasts seen flitting through the trees and surely they knew we were here. Two more Gryphons had joined our party from their nearby aerie and the Dogs were finally calmed down enough to be of use. Oreius set out extra guards and told us to sleep with our clothes on and our swords drawn, his standard orders for when things could get dodgy. We were going to leave the encampment here under guard and press on before sunrise again with enough supplies for a few days.

Edmund and I went to bed almost immediately after eating, too weary and numb to keep awake and not about to inflict ourselves on our subjects. I knew we needed to be rested for tomorrow. Our tent was dry and comfortable, though warm only in that there was no wind. Poor Ed never said a word and neither did I, I just lifted the covers and he crawled into my hammock with me. It had been so damp and blustery even I was chilled, so I knew he'd be freezing, especially after wearing armor all day. I was right. I covered his hands with my own, amazed that anyone could be so cold and still function. But he never complained, never asked to be excused from any of the training or work we did, and I found myself filled with pride that this was my brother. Sisters are wonderful and lovely things to have, but in that moment I was so grateful that Edmund was my brother, my friend, and my peer. I knew there wasn't anything I couldn't share with him and I could only hope he felt the same way about me.

He shifted closer, bumping my chin with his forehead.

"Sorry."

"You're getting tall," I whispered, shifting a bit to rest my chin on his head like I used to do when he was a baby. "You barely fit any more."

"I'm catching up to you," he murmured back, and yawned.

I couldn't help but yawn as well before I said, "I have a three-year head start."

He snorted a laugh and nestled closer, falling asleep almost immediately. I listened to the sound of his breathing a few minutes before following him.

§§

The next morning did not come easily for me. Even at the best of times, I didn't sleep well on these expeditions despite Peter's efforts. I had to force myself to be alert, but I had more trouble forcing myself to be pleasant. Peter rode beside me, occasionally talking with Sharet and Kast, a Panther under her command. He knew better than to try to engage me in conversation right now and so just let me be. Everyone followed Peter's example, knowing I'd come around sooner rather than later if left to myself. Besides, I had a lot to think about from our brief conversations the last two nights and I wanted time to ponder what Peter had said. This way I was guaranteed at least half an hour of being left alone with my thoughts.

"Good morn," I eventually said to him.

Peter grinned at me as if something was very amusing. "Just wake up, did we?"

I made a face at him and then ignored him as I leaned forward a bit. "Good morn, Phillip."

"King Edmund," said my steed. I suspect he thought I had fallen asleep as I rode.

"Have you had breakfast?" I asked.

"I have, Your Highness. Oats and spring grass. A capital start to the day."

"Lucky," I muttered, suddenly starving.

"Field rations for us, Ed," sympathized my brother.

I didn't complain. In Narnia the field rations taste better than the finest meal I've ever had back in England. Everything was better here: the clothes, the music, the people, the water, the air . . . me.

I drew a deep breath, sitting up straighter. I gave myself a little shake, then smiled at Peter. He was watching me out of the corner of his eye and he returned my smile.

"Good morn to you, little brother."

§§§

One of the Gryphons was waiting for us when we reached the valley to Aslan's How, deep in conversation with several Squirrels. Squirrels are funny to talk to since their mouths run as fast as their thoughts and their thoughts seem to run in multiple directions at once. I had to give Manon credit because there were at least five of them chattering at him simultaneously. Edmund, Oreius and I approached him, leaving Flisk and Phillip to graze. The Squirrels chattered quietly amongst themselves, clearly excited by a royal visit to their valley and barely able to contain themselves. They darted about, ran up and down the trees, and teased each other by throwing twigs.

"Majesties, General," said Manon, bowing his head. Gryphons always sound breathless when not in flight. "The rebel band reported numbers at least twenty large Animals and Beasts. They've moved eastwards and were seen five miles southwest of the Stone Table."

The words sent a chill through me. I had never seen the Stone Table, but I had heard about it at length. It was there that Aslan had sacrificed himself to save Edmund.

Then I remembered that Edmund didn't know what had happened there. No one knew the whole truth except my sisters and me. I said nothing, but something in my expression betrayed me and Oreius gave me a penetrating look.

"Majesty?"

I tried keep my voice even. "We were heading towards the Stone Table, were we not?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Then lets get there. We can rest there, then press on."

"Peter?" Edmund asked in a low tone, leaning close.

"Later," I replied just as quietly.

§§§

Something was bothering Peter, something he knows, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out what it could be. I was fully resolved to hold him to that promise of later. In truth I probably would not have waited, but just then a dozen or more Squirrels came bounding through the trees towards us, all of them making a racket.

"What is it?" I asked as they assembled at our feet.

"A gift, good kings," said a gray Squirrel the size of spaniel. He held out a large walnut. "The finest from our stores."

"For us?" Peter smiled in delight and knelt down. He held out both hands for the walnut, saying, "Only if we won't deprive you, cousin."

Another Squirrel held up a nut to me and like my brother, I knelt down to their level to accept it. "We have an abundance," promised my Squirrel in a squeaky voice. "The summer past was a good year in every way."

"Thank you," I said. In moments our hands were filled to overflowing with walnuts. Before we could properly thank them the delirious Squirrels made their way back into the woods, producing enough noise for twice their number as they went. Manon shook his head, clearly glad he wasn't a king, and launched back into the air. We watched him fly off, then we both looked at the bounty in our hands. I looked at Peter, he looked at me, and we both said,

"Let's eat."

*§§*

Poor Oreius. The good general had dealt with many things and faced many foes in his life, but I don't think anything could prepare him for the rampaging appetite of a teenage boy, much less two boys. It's true that Centaurs can eat a great deal, but they're very large creatures – the only time I could look him directly in the eye was from Flisk's back. I know he was astonished by the amount of food Ed and I put away the first time we set out to quell the remnants of Jadis's troops. By comparison, our sisters ate like birds. Constant hunger was just a state of being for us. It took a lot of energy learning to be a warrior and a king. I think Oreius had figured that out, which was why he voiced no comment when Ed and I tucked in as if we hadn't eaten in a week.

Despite my anxiety about reaching the Stone Table, I had to laugh at Edmund as he improvised a nutcracker. The glove on our sword arm is armored while our shield arm is just leather. He held a nut in his left hand and smacked it with the back of his right, neatly breaking it. When I imitated him Oreius cast us both a look and walked off, trying to hide his amusement.

"It's later," said Edmund, cracking the last nut and sifting through the shells. We had made short work of the Squirrels' gift.

I dusted off my hands and stood. "Not yet."

He gave me a look that was entirely Edmund Randall Pevensie. Luckily I was fairly immune to his ire, having dealt with it all his life and most of my own. I held out my hand to help him up.

"I'll tell you," I promised. "We just need to be alone for me to say anything."

He glanced at the Trees, understanding, and his features softened. Gripping my arm, he let me haul him to his feet.

"Peter?" he asked as we made our way back to our mounts.

"Yes, Ed?"

He paused, looking up at me intensely, searching for something in my expression.

"I'm going to hate this, aren't I?"

I couldn't lie to him. "Maybe. Probably. But don't forget that it's over and that we – and Narnia – are better for it."

His eyes narrowed a bit, but he nodded and we turned back to the waiting soldiers.

"Let's go," he said to Oreius, nudging Phillip to set a brisk pace.

§§§

I wanted to get this over with. Whatever Peter had to say to me, I wanted it done. I turned things over in my mind, trying to draw connections between the Stone Table and Jadis's words and what little I knew of Aslan's death and rebirth. Cheroom was teaching me to attack such problems logically and I tried that process now. My conclusions were disturbing and, I hoped, wrong.

Were we better for it?

I glanced at my brother, tall and straight on Flisk's bare back. His armor shone even on this overcast day and I wondered if the light came from within him.

If Peter said we were the better for it, then we were. I clung to that thought for the rest of the morning.

¥¤¥

### **Chapter Three: Discussion**

We reached Aslan's How just after noon. The terrain was somewhat familiar now. Ed and I both had traversed this area on foot last year and we weren't all that far from Beruna and the Beavers' house. It was very rocky in this part of Narnia, unlike the smoother, rolling hills by Cair Paravel. Aslan's How was a low valley in the mountains trimmed by tall pines that grew so closely along the path we had to struggle through the branches on several occasions.

We came upon the Stone Table abruptly. A sudden opening in the trees and we stood at the foot of ancient columns, a wide, square platform, and the broken remains of a table made of granite. It wasn't a very large clearing, but something seemed to keep the Trees at bay. The ruins were clear of growth, standing alone on a small rise. Nothing about it was hospitable, at least not when the weather was foul and the wind was cold and damp. We dismounted and while some of the soldiers rested for a few moments, the rest spread out to search for signs of the rebels with the Dogs in the lead.

After fetching Phillip and Flisk some oats, Edmund turned his attention on the ruins. I hung back a moment and watched my brother as he climbed the worn steps to the broken

table. I hoped Oreius would understand when I said, "Oreius, I need to speak to my brother for a moment."

The good general could read me like a book and I knew he understood immediately why I needed to speak to Edmund alone. He bowed slightly and answered, "You will have every privacy, Your Majesty. All I ask is for you and King Edmund to keep your hands near your swords, for this place is steeped in the Deep Magic."

"We will," I promised for us both. "Thank you."

He stepped away, ordering the troops back towards the tree line so that no prying or curious ears could overhear what I had to say to Edmund. I could hear Celer setting up a perimeter guard as I walked up the rise. To keep Oreius happy I rested my right hand on my sword belt. I glanced at the surrounding evergreens before I turned all my attention on Edmund, bracing myself for what must come next. He was clearly excited by the ruins, probably reminded, as I was, of the time our Uncle Robert brought us and our older cousins to see Stonehenge and Avebury. That was before the war and Ed had been very little, but I know he remembered it as he circled the shattered Table. I could see his lips moving as he tried to make out the runes etched deeply into the gray stone. He looked up as I climbed the stairs and stood close by him.

"Was it always broken?"

The dank wind whipped our hair and capes about, carrying a scent of pine and mud and rotting leaves. I pointed to the jagged breaks where cleaner, unweathered stone was visible. "No," I said, raising my voice a bit to be heard above the wind. "It broke the morning of the battle."

Edmund stared at me, the confusion in his dark eyes slowly replaced by realization. "Did Aslan break it?"

I shook my head, futilely pushing the hair out of my eyes. "I think it broke itself as part of the Deep Magic that Aslan and Jadis were talking about."

Edmund shivered and I knew it wasn't because of the cold of early spring. His voice was barely audible as he muttered, "When she came for me. For a traitor's blood."

I reached for him, cursing the Witch for the flash of dread I saw in those dark eyes. I put my hand on his shoulder, unable to grip him through his armor like I wanted. "That's over, Ed. But I do need to talk to you, to tell you exactly what happened here and why. Susan and Lucy wanted to do it, but I thought it would be better coming from me, even though I didn't see it."

Edmund looked up at me with a pout very similar to Lucy's. "This is the part I'm going to hate, isn't it?"

I couldn't help but smile a bit as a gust of wind sent our hair dancing. "Yes." I glanced around, but there was no shelter up here but the Table itself. Wrapping my cape around me, I leaned against the broken stone, gesturing Edmund to join me with a nod. I could tell he was troubled as he imitated me, sitting a little further away than I would have liked and keeping his gaze firmly locked on the ground at his feet.

"Keep your hand by your sword, too. Oreius doesn't like it here and we're close by where those Fell Beasts were spotted."

Edmund nodded, automatically resting his hand on the pommel of his sword. His voice was resigned as he asked, "So what happened?"

I took a deep breath. This was not a simple task, but I tried to word it gently. "When Aslan told us Jadis renounced your blood, he had agreed to take your place."

His head snapped up. "But she wanted to kill me!"

I lifted a hand to hush him. "The fact that there was a traitor in Narnia was enough to command a sacrifice here at the Stone Table. The Deep Magic required it. But what the Witch didn't know, and what Aslan did, was the true meaning of Sacrifice. According to Su, Aslan said if a willing victim that has committed no offense takes the place of a traitor, the Stone Table will break and death will be reversed."

As much shocked as horrified, Edmund looked up at me, pain in his dark eyes. "He let her k-k-"

He couldn't finish. I reached for him, gripping him by the elbows. "Ed, he knew what would happen. He did it not just to save you, but to save all of Narnia. So Adam's flesh and Adam's bone sits in Cair Paravel enthroned. Everything that happened had to happen. It all comes back to the prophecy."

§§§

I turned away, unable to look into Peter's eyes as I tried to come to terms with this knowledge. Peter held my arms, anxious for some type of reaction out of me, understanding and loving and completely without blame. I was glad of his touch. Fresh guilt swept over me despite the words of comfort and forgiveness Aslan had spoken to me when I had been rescued from Jadis's camp. I felt sick and filthy, as I had then. How could anyone as good and strong as Peter stand to touch me, much less be around me? How could anyone as noble and blessed as Aslan offer himself in my place? There was a feeling in the pit of my stomach, the same feeling I'd had in Jadis's castle when Mr. Tumnus realized I'd betrayed him. The feeling I'd had when I had vainly tried to save Sir Giles Fox from being turned to stone. My chest was tight and I felt frozen all the way to the core of my being.

Then something dark and thin lying discarded on the wrecked table caught my attention. I pulled one arm free of Peter's hold and reached for it. Drawing it closer, I realized it was a rope made of braided leather. There were a few hairs of long, golden-brown hair clinging to it.

We both stared at it, and when I finally found the strength to speak my voice sounded hollow to my own ears. "What did they do to him?"

Swallowing hastily, Peter mastered himself before answering. Each word was chosen with care and his voice was gentle. "He let them tie him up. The Witch ordered them to cut off his mane before they dragged him up here. And then she...used a stone knife to kill him."

"And he didn't fight?"

"No. He went willingly."

"Why?"

"To keep his family safe. Because you're part of his family and he loves you. Almost as much as I do, Ed."

I sniffed, feeling tears burn my eyes, fighting for control. I did not want to cry. I was a king. This incident was well behind me, behind us all, Narnia was safe, and I wanted to be strong before my brother the High King. Biting my lip, I raised my head to see Peter's worried expression. He was so anxious that I managed a small smile to reassure him. He let his breath out in a rush - he'd been holding it—and he seized me in a tight embrace, our armor connecting with a clang! I hugged him back, glad he had initiated the touch.

"I'm still so sorry," I rasped against his neck. The words weren't nearly enough to express what I really felt.

"I know," whispered Peter, sounding as if his heart was breaking, "and it's done. Just as Aslan said. Just remember it all worked out. Everything's all right, Edmund."

"I - "

I stiffened suddenly, realizing something was very wrong with our surroundings. I raised my head from Peter's shoulder and looked around suspiciously. Alarmed, Peter likewise scanned the woods surrounding the ruins. Where were the soldiers? The Dogs? Where was Oreius?

"Ed?" asked Peter quietly.

"The wind is gone," I whispered.

§§§

I dropped my hand to my sword. Edmund was right. The wind that had been roaring all day was gone. The air seemed thicker and the sky was dark with fast-moving rain clouds. All sound was gone save for our breathing and the grit beneath our boots as we edged closer together.

Edmund's voice was faint. "It's the Trees." He slowly turned around, surveying the tree line around the ruins. "We're surrounded."

It was true. The Stone Table topped a small hill on the floor of the valley. There was a clearing about a hundred yards across at the widest point encompassing the hill. Dense, shadowed forest started just beyond the clearing. Though it was not long past noon, there was no more light than twilight and I couldn't see far into the woods. The darkness was unnatural and malevolent and I heard an echo of Lucy's voice in my memory, "He means the trees."

I drew my sword and Edmund immediately followed suit. The high-pitched peals of our weapons rang out for a moment, then the oppressive silence swept back in.

"Side to side and back to back," I ordered, quoting Oreius's constant litany on how we brothers should always do battle. Neither of us had our shields or helmets. Luckily we had been trained to fight with or without shields and Edmund was actually a better swordsman without one. "You have your dagger?"

"Yes," Edmund said softly, checking at his hip. He edged closer to me, his broadsword at the ready.

I stood straighter, looking back on the spot I had left Oreius only a few minutes ago. "Oreius? Sharet? Celer?"

My voice didn't carry and I knew no one but Edmund heard me.

The only warning I had was Edmund's gasp of, "Peter!" before the enemy was upon us.

¥¤¥

## Chapter Four: Battle

Hideous forms large and small erupted out of the surrounding woods: Ogres, a Cyclops, fallen Animals, things I'm sure neither of us could name. There were a dozen or more, one a foul, bat-like thing that screamed with a human voice as it flapped awkwardly. They swept out of the shadows from all sides. There was no time to think or plan before the faster beasts reached the platform.

"For Narnia!" screamed Peter, slicing through the thick hide of a Werewolf that was scrambling upwards towards him. It fell back with a shriek.

"Aslan!" I shouted. Three little grass-colored things that barely reached my knees came at me. They wielded nasty, curved blades and looked capable of considerable damage. I didn't hesitate, but cut them down before they could get close enough to me or Peter to use those blades. Another sprang up after them and I sliced it in two.

Peter grunted loudly as he dispatched a Dwarf, then immediately attacked an Ogre wielding an axe. I whirled, bringing my sword down on a Coyote that had snuck across the table towards my brother. The Coyote called me something truly vile. Much as we all hated killing, especially Talking Animals, I didn't waver. I didn't dare. Killing was not easy. It never was, but it was necessary. I hadn't gotten used to it and I hoped and prayed I never did. Still, every battle came down to us or them, just as it had at Beruna. This Coyote was not one of our subjects, our beloved cousins. This creature had tried to give Narnia over to the White Witch and was therefore our enemy. My enemy.

And now she was dead.

Peter's Ogre fell back, bleeding greenish blood and cursing kings in general and High Kings in particular before it collapsed. A Cyclops took its place, but Peter was already engaging the bat creature and I lunged forward to cover his back, driving my sword under the Cyclops's iron collar and into his throat. My much smaller size was the only thing that allowed me to get close enough to strike. I jumped out of the way as it fell towards me. Another of the little grass-creatures leaped at me and landed on my arm. It tried to slice me open but was instantly frustrated by my Dwarf-made mail. I let go my sword with one hand just long enough to punch it away. My armored right glove came back bloody.

I looked to Peter. My brother had the screaming bat by the throat, holding it at arm's length just long enough to plunge his sword through the horrid thing's body. He pulled his sword free with a cry of disgust. His face was scratched and bloody. He looked around wildly, searching for me. We were too far apart.

"Edmund!"

He was looking beyond me in horror, his eyes wide. I whirled, swinging my sword blindly in the same motion. I felt the blade connect before I saw the Cougar and a terrific blow landed on my right shoulder. In an instant I felt claws work their way through the tabard and chain mail and leather jerkin and quilted clothes all the way to my skin as the big Cat

swiped at me. His claws became entangled in my mail shirt for an instant, locking us together.

"Traitor!" the Cat growled at me, trying to pull me towards his huge teeth. He was scrawny and his breath was foul. "Betrayer!"

"Not anymore!" I screamed right back. We were too close for me to use my sword, so I struck him across the face with my elbow. He howled in pain as metal met flesh and I just hit him again as hard as I could. I barely felt any pain in my shoulder or arm as he shook free and darted away, bowling me over and leaving me with scratch marks to rival Peter's.

§§§

Move, move, move! Never stop, my kings. Don't give them a still target! Make them come to you. Don't forget to breathe, King Peter, else you'll finish their task for them. You're Human. You move and fight differently from anything else in Narnia be it fair or foul. Use that to your advantage. Keep them off balance. King Edmund, you're small and slight - get inside his defenses! You can use your sword and he can't! There is not a part of you that isn't a weapon but don't ever forget your greatest weapon is your mind. Stay in control when you fight. You can't stop because of any pain or hurt. Stopping in the midst of battle is death! Move! And above all, Your Majesties, keep close to your brother, for each of you is the other's shield.

§§§

Never in life had I been more grateful to a relentless schoolmaster than I was to Oreius. His constant litany was rooted firmly in my subconscious as I fought. At times it seemed as though I was watching myself, so automatic were my actions. The exertion of battle was starting to catch up with me and I made every swing of my blade count. I mortally wounded another Ogre and cut down a Hag before she could pounce on Edmund. A small Dog lunged at me and I let him bite my left arm knowing he wouldn't be able to hurt me through the mail. That brought him close enough for me to use my sword and with a whimper of pain he let go and dropped down. I kicked it away from me, angry and revolted that a Talking Animal would turn on its own land, on Aslan.

And that it would delay me trying to help my brother.

I jumped over the fallen bodies littering the platform and yanked Edmund upright, dragging him with me down the stairs, away from the Stone Table, away from that huge mountain lion. It was more open here and we needed room to fight. Jadis' soldiers weren't well trained for the most part, depending on brute strength and hulking mass rather than any real skill. Still, it was enough, especially since there was just the two of us. There was no sign of our war party, though the Trees were whipping back and forth without any wind. It seemed as if our soldiers were fighting a similar battle.

"You alright?" I panted, looking around furiously.

He answered in gasps. "Scrapes. You?"

"Same," I replied, though my face was burning from where that bat-looking thing had tried to gouge my eyes out and I had taken a staggering blow to the thigh from a Dwarf wielding a club. "To the left," I warned, spotting a Minotaur.

"And to the right," Edmund replied. He drew a deep breath and I did the same as we let lose our battle cries.

“Narnia!”

I had never fought such a battle as this, so fast and thick. Even at Beruna there had been pauses, time to catch my breath. The second rank of Fell Beasts set upon us like a tidal wave. As Edmund faced off against a reptilian, snake-like thing, the Minotaur crashed into me with so much force I went down, hitting my head, but I rolled out of the way and onto my feet as his battleaxe shattered the rock where I had been. I slew him from behind before he could reach Edmund, yanking my sword free of his body with so much force I actually smashed the pommel into the face of a Dwarf running up from behind me, dropping him in his tracks. A mangy, rabid-looking Fisher took his place. Beyond it, Edmund whirled, looking for the next attacker and spotting the huge marten.

“Die, upstart!” it hissed at me, swiping its clawed forefoot.

“Not today,” I hissed right back. I raised my sword high as if to strike him down. The Fisher lunged to the left, his eyes on my sword, entirely missing Edmund as my brother yanked his dagger free from his belt and imbedded it deeply into the Fisher’s body. I killed the Fallen Animal an instant later, feeling sick at having to do so.

“Thanks,” I said, stomping on a little creature armed with curved blades that was about to attack Edmund’s knee as he retrieved his knife. My metal-shod boots made short work of it. Edmund stood up again and we automatically took fighting stances. We were back to back and the creatures attacking us were now few in numbers. Few, but foul. Exceedingly so. They were short, misshapen mockeries of Nature, like leftover bits and pieces of animals and people cobbled and blended together. I had no idea of what they were or if their kind even had a name. Awful as they were to look upon, they were obscenely strong. If Jadis had more of these in her army, things may have gone differently at Beruna. There were three of them, all armed with iron staves. How do I describe creatures so alien, so strange? Their movements were graceful, their ability to wield the staves was considerable, and something told me they enjoyed inflicting fear and pain. They were as revolting as they were unnatural.

“Whatever you do, Ed, don’t let them get between us,” I ordered, glancing over my shoulder at him. He swallowed and nodded as the things surrounded us. Only one of them placed himself before me. The other two confronted Edmund.

“They think you’re the easier target,” I murmured, leaning back a bit so he could feel my presence. “Prove them wrong.”

§!§

Oh, Peter, how did you know? How did you always know how to say exactly what I need to hear? At Beruna, the morning we were told Aslan was no more, you were finalizing the battle plans and looked right at me and said, “Edmund, I need you. I need you to protect our rear and cover our retreat.” That was all, and I was yours to command. I realized then why such a statement was so different coming from you than anyone else: you had faith in me. Absolute, unwavering faith that regardless of what the world thought about me, I could do what you asked and you trusted me to do what was right.

Like right now.

I am a King of Narnia. King Edmund the Just, brother of High King Peter the Magnificent.

And this day, in my own eyes, I have earned the right to sit beside him in the Castle of the Four Thrones.

The ugly, melted monsters drew slowly closer, stepping over the bodies and weapons of the fallen. They made low, gurgling sounds I could only guess was laughter. They were trying to frighten us. No matter.

I smiled fiercely back at them.

So unexpected was that move that the one on the left hesitated an instant.

I didn't.

Aslan bless my little sister a thousand times over for teaching me how to throw a dagger. I wasn't as good as Lucy, but that didn't matter. I didn't kill the monster on the left, but it staggered when my thrown knife drove through its forearm. I straightaway attacked to the right and Peter went with me, his sword singing shrilly as he smashed aside the brute's iron staff and yanked it away from its owner. Faced by us both, the creature didn't last long enough to resist and even before it hit the ground we set upon the one that had confronted Peter. It spun the stave before itself, effectively blocking our swords as it waited for its fellow to recover from my initial assault. Peter would have none of that and thrust his sword into the sod, rushing our enemy with the stolen staff. He blocked the twirling rod and in one scooping motion forced both staves to the ground. The thing didn't have the sense to let go and Peter was close enough to land a terrific kick to the head, knocking it down long enough for me to finish it off. Never stopping, Peter threw down the staff and ran for his sword, yanking it free of the earth as we turned the tides on the last of Jadis's army. The Fell Beast knew it had no chance and looked about wildly for an escape route.

"Mercy!" it begged in a gravelly voice, dropping to its knees.

§§§

I frowned, disgusted and afraid of what this creature might say to Edmund, what memories or guilt it might kindle. My brother had fought splendidly and I could tell that despite the horrible battle we had just fought, a sea change had come upon him. I did not want that lost. He had been lost for far too long.

Before I could draw breath to speak, Edmund demanded hoarsely, "How much mercy would you and yours have shown us? How much have you shown our land?"

"I am but a slave! I obey my queen!"

"Your queen is dead," snapped Edmund. "Aslan killed her!"

"You served her!" accused the creature, and I mentally kicked myself for allowing a single word to be exchanged.

"To my regret," responded Edmund, panting heavily. His face, his voice, were grave and determined. "I've paid a price, slave. Far greater than you can imagine."

I shuffled closer to it. We had to end this quickly. Now. What if it was stalling us, waiting for reinforcements?

"Ed," I said warningly, drawing my dagger with my left hand. He nodded, understanding.

"Mercy," he said to the sniveling thing before him, deliberately keeping its attention focused on himself, "is for those who would give it. You only speak out of fear of death."

He shook his head, every inch King Edmund the Just. "You'll be given the mercy you deserve, the same as you would have given us."

With a savage howl it surged upwards at Edmund and I swung my sword with all my strength. The blade slashed through the creature's leather jerkin and thick skin on its side and back, but that didn't stop its lunge towards my brother. I used my momentum to spin completely around, bringing my left arm across my body. I buried my dagger to the hilt at the base of its neck before sweeping my sword in a backhanded motion that Oreius would have despaired over for a complete lack of form or grace. Nevertheless, it did the trick, and the nameless creature was struck down by my hand.

I stumbled to a halt, almost tripping over the body of the thing I had just slain. I looked around, but Edmund and I were the only ones still standing. My entire body ached and I thought I would never again catch my breath. Nausea slammed down on me as I bent to retrieve my dagger, but I swallowed at the bile in my throat and forced myself to straighten. There was no time for physical reactions, not yet. They were a luxury we could only afford when we were safe again. Edmund searched the ground a bit and found his own dagger as well. Then we stood together, swords ready, as we surveyed the bloody scene before us. Nothing stirred. Even the Trees were still. Rising steam marked where the fallen lay.

"Oreius?" I called, though my throat was so raw I could barely raise my voice. "Celer? Flisk?"

All was dark and stagnant, the air still thick, the surrounding forest deep and threatening. A residue of evil deeds hung over this place. I had no way of gauging how long we had been fighting or even if the fight was over. I saw the point of my sword shake as I trembled. I couldn't recall any time I felt so exhausted in my life. I couldn't even begin to think on how Ed and I had just killed so many beings. Edmund was even worse off than I was, barely able to hold his sword up despite his best efforts. I glanced behind me and was surprised to see we were at the base of the broken steps leading to the remains of the Stone Table. I didn't remember being driven back.

✚✚✚

## **Chapter Five: Knight**

When nothing happened for a few minutes I slowly lowered my sword. We were both breathing in shuddering gasps, filthy and bloody and weakened as our strength ebbed with our alarm. It wasn't until the wind stirred again that Peter slowly eased himself down to one knee, leaning heavily on his sword. I sank down beside him, not even able to kneel, dragged down by the weight of my armor. My ears were ringing and there wasn't a single part of me that didn't hurt. Stupid and numb, I found myself staring at Peter's hands still gripping the pommel of his sword. There was blood and tufts of long, dark hair caught in the fine rings of his gloves.

For a moment I wondered if Father ever felt like this.

Slowly Peter looked over at me. His face was bruised, bloody and spattered with gore, his tabard was shredded, and his cloak was gone. I knew I had to look at least as bad as he did. Somehow he managed to smile at me, trying to get his ragged breaths under control. Tears stood bright in his eyes as he hoarsely managed,

"Well done, Ed."

I gave him a crooked smile, knowing he was relieved beyond words that I was whole and alive. We would react later. Right now, we just accepted the fact that another skirmish had been fought and won. "You too."

He coughed and smiled again. I wanted to thank him for his words, for believing in me so completely and for his absolute trust. He had never doubted that I could guard his back and his confidence had carried us both just as my belief had carried him at Beruna. I was about to speak when suddenly there came a crash of branches and angry shouts as Oreius fought his way through the Trees. Where his flanks were exposed was streaked with foam and bloody scrapes. He whirled, both swords drawn, and it was evident that he had fought as hard as we had.

Peter surged to his feet at the first sound, dragging me up with him. We both sighed and sagged, relieved as the general spotted us. There was shock and anxiety written plainly on Oreius's face and with a thrill I realized the Centaur was terrified for us.

"Oh, thank Aslan," muttered Peter, lowering his sword. With a small groan of pain he put one hand to the back of his head and leaned over.

And that was how I saw the Cougar I had wounded earlier gather himself and leap off the ruins of the Table straight for-

"Peter!"

I didn't know I screamed. My body moved of its own accord as my hand closed on my sword. I seized Peter by his tattered tunic with my other hand and thrust him aside. He sprawled, scrambling for his weapon as I lunged at the Cat. The Cougar let out a growl as he leaped, fangs and claws bared. I didn't have time to fully extend my blade and so I turned into those claws, ducking my head down. He had been going for Peter, the taller of us and his teeth overshot my head with a snap! A horrible weight smashed into my back and shoulder, staggering me and knocking the wind out of me. There was no time. The Cougar tried to sink its teeth into my shoulder and met only armor, but its claws were once again working through the mail and into my ribs. I braced the pommel of my sword and stabbed behind me with whatever strength I had left, my voice rising to match the physical effort. The blade sliced through my tabard and slid along the chain mail, guiding it straight past my hip and into the animal's belly. The Cougar shrieked and jerked his head to the side in agony, smacking into my head and sending me reeling. I fell, pain in my neck, in my shoulder and arm. I could hear Peter screaming my name and I was happy, knowing he was alive.

Then darkness.

§§§

"Edmund! NO!"

I saw a flash of silver, heard Edmund yell as he twisted about and took a sharp blow to the head. He staggered, the pain-crazed Cougar trying to yank away from him. I had my sword in hand and rushed headlong to my brother's side as he collapsed. I shoved the beast off of him, ready to strike, but it was dead.

"Ed?" I gasped, dropping down beside him. "Edmund?"

I was barely aware of Oreius galloping up. I wanted to be sick as I fell to my knees. I had seen this scene once before and a familiar panic descended on me. I reached for him, afraid to touch him, afraid of knowing. Was he dead? Dying? Oh, Aslan . . . My hands were shaking too hard even to steady him. What would I tell Susan and Lucy?

"He's breathing, King Peter," assured Oreius.

I barely heard him, so intent was I on my brother. I saw Edmund twitch, then he gasped and jerked awake with a wild cry of, "Peter!" He threw himself upwards, terrified and blind to me right before him. I caught him in my arms and crushed him to me. I couldn't hold him long enough or close enough. I knew I was crying. He held me closer, running his hand through my hair. It comforted me more than I could say.

"Peter. Peter, it's done. It's done," he whispered in my ear, his breath catching. "Are you all right?"

Weary, I nodded and drew back, sniffing as I asked, "You?"

He looked so small. His dark eyes stood out so starkly in his pale face. "Think I sprained my sword arm. It hurts."

"You saved my life."

"And you kept me alive. Side to side and -"

"And back to back," I finished with him, producing a fiercely proud expression upon our general's face.

"Majesties," Oreius pressed, looking us over nervously, "are you injured?"

§§§

We both shook our heads and Peter said, "I don't think so, Oreius. Not too badly, anyway."

We all looked over as several Fauns and Satyrs fought their way through the brush as Oreius had earlier. I sighed in relief to see Flisk and Phillip with them. Several Dogs followed and began sniffing about as our soldiers hurried over to where we sat by the Stone Table.

"What happened?" I asked.

"It was the Trees, wasn't it?" whispered Peter. His voice was almost gone.

"They thought to isolate you and allow the Fell Beasts to kill your majesties," answered Oreius, a stamping hoof and a flick of his tail sure indicators of his fury. "We all were trapped and fighting our way free. There was no way to reach the Stone Table. Even the Gryphons were snared. There are many Trees here loyal to the memory of the White Witch." He looked over at Celer. I had never seen a Faun look more savage or angry, and the good captain nodded at the general. I glanced at Peter, knowing he had the same thought: we two were the targets, not our party.

"Their time is coming," Oreius promised severely.

"Soon," added Celer. He seemed to be taking the attack personally. "They have seen first hand how your majesties deal with Narnia's enemies. I suspect few of them will give us much cause for worry."

Peter sat himself next to me. "Did we lose anyone?"

"All have been accounted for, Sire," answered Celer. "Two of the Dogs, Satyr Tandaric, and one of the Cats have been injured. The remaining Centaurs and Cats are sweeping the surrounding area. The Trees, I believe, have given up for now." His voice was sharp and I was heartily glad we were on the same side. Even as he spoke more of our soldiers, including the Gryphons, joined us by the Stone Table.

Oreius leaned far over and a moment later yanked my sword free of the Cougar's corpse. It was covered with blood and hair and who knew what else from the bodies of the dead. Not that I was in much better shape. I found myself making a face and Peter smirked at my expression as I rose to receive the sword from Oreius.

"Clean your sword, Edmund," Peter said firmly.

"Ugh." It was disgusting.

§§§

I watched as Edmund gingerly took the sword in his left hand and I looked to my own blade. My sword was just as dirty as his and I cast about for something to clean it on. Finally, as I had the day I killed Maugrim, I wiped it on the damp grass and dried it with a scrap of my tabard. Edmund followed my example, awkward with his injured arm. I waited at the foot of the platform until he was done polishing the blade with the remains of his cloak, just as Celer had drilled into us, before I spoke.

"Kneel before me," I ordered.

The Narnians recognized what was about to happen and they all drew their weapons, saluting. The Talking Animals drew closer in excitement and approval. Edmund frowned, confused, but for once he obeyed without question. His movements were stiff as he sank down on one knee with his sword held downwards before him. He watched me, still confused, before he suddenly realized what was about to happen. I saw the flash of joy and surprise in his eyes before he bowed his head.

My voice was still shaky and my hands were unsteady. I had to use both hands to hold my sword as I lifted it and slowly touched the tip to his right shoulder, then his left as I said as clearly as I could:

"Rise, Sir Edmund of the How, Knight of the most noble Order of the Table."

Edmund's face blossomed into a smile that was warmer than summer. I felt a rush of pride and love for him. Sheathing my sword, I helped him to stand. I hesitated a moment, then leaned over and kissed him on top of the head only because it looked slightly cleaner than his cheek.

§§§

"Peter!" I groused, much to the amusement of the soldiers around us.

"It's tradition for the king to kiss a new knight," insisted my brother.

I shook my head in disbelief. "Since when?"

"This moment," said the High King with a finality that made the words law. "And just for good measure..." He grabbed my head and kissed me again.

I couldn't take it any longer and I hugged him tightly despite all our aches and pains. A knight. I was a knight. The first of my order. Peter must have made the rank up on the spot, but it was fitting in so many ways and I was so glad it came from him and nowhere else. His pride in me was my greatest treasure. I knew I was grinning like a fool, and all our subjects seemed just as happy as we were. Peter let go, then turned me to face the handful of assembled warriors.

"Noble soldiers of Narnia, faithful and beloved subjects, I give you our brother Sir Edmund of the How, Knight of the Order of the Table."

"Sir Edmund! Sir Edmund! Sir Edmund!" cried the warriors in Narnian tradition, raising their swords. Peter's voice rose hoarsely as well and the Dogs threw back their heads and howled. I blushed, feeling the heat rise in my face, ecstatic and exhausted to such a degree that I was at a loss for words. I saw Phillip toss his head and I knew he was proud, and Oreius actually smiled at me for a moment.

Peter looked to the Centaur. "Oreius?"

"Let us retire from here and tend to our wounded. This place is yet fell, my kings," said he, back to business, "though the only rebels left are the trees. They will be dealt with."

Peter stood beside me and put his arm across my shoulders, holding me close to his side. "Then let's go home."

¥α¥

# Night Raid

*by warrior4*

The cool night air was still. All the better for those who hid in the shadows. It had taken them seeming ages to get even this far. No easy task given the creatures hidden behind the rocks and trees. Days spent hiding in caves, taking every care not to be seen. The infiltration had taken weeks. Now with their goal so close they could feel their collective pulses pounding. Their quest for revenge had driven them this far and would drive them further. Though their numbers were now nowhere near what they had formerly known, the deep rage of pure hate drove them on. There it stood through the trees. The very symbol of what they fought against. Pennants bearing the hated heraldry of the foe hung slack in the dark from the tops of the towers. There it stood proud and tall, daring any to challenge its might. Few would even think of such a scheme let alone dare to try. However for these creatures there was only one thing that mattered and it lay sleeping there within those high walls. Hatred, anger, rage, and even fear coursed through the hearts of the Fell Beasts that night. Ogres, hags, werewolves, fallen Talking Animals, Dwarves, imps, and even a few Minotaurs all crouched in the dark.

The Minotaur that led them slowly drew his battle axe. This was the signal that the others had been waiting for. The brace of dwarf archers silently inched forward. Stringing their bows they then reached to their quivers. Taking care not to prick themselves on the heads of their arrows they set the shafts to string and drew back. Deadly poisonous darts flew upwards. The attack on Cair Paravel had begun.

As the first sentries fell the Minotaur ordered his force forward. More arrows cut down the gatekeepers. The high walls and iron portcullis were now the only things keeping the invaders from the castle. Silently two winged Harpies flapped their leathery wings and flew over the walls. Making their way into the Gatehouse they quickly surprised and killed the two fauns on duty within. With swift pulls the chains and pulleys began clanking as the portcullis was raised. The main force of the Fell Beasts reached the now open gate just as the portcullis was fully raised.

"Spread out," ordered the Minotaur in a gruff voice. "Kill any you see."

So far the plan had worked perfectly. However the plans of the Fell Beasts had failed to include the numbers that now bolstered the Cair's numbers. Hundreds of Talking Animals, Centaurs, Fauns, Satyrs, Dwarves, and others now filled the castle. One of them a Bat just returning from a night hunting the last insects of the fall now saw the dark shapes crossing the castle courtyard. At the sight of the fallen sentries he winged swiftly to the high towers to sound the alarm.

§!§

Peter was enjoying a nice dream. He was riding swiftly across the fields near the Ford of Beruna. Flisk his war mount sped faster and faster across the wide plain. As Peter had only ridden atop Flisk in time of war he was thoroughly enjoying the rare treat of riding a Unicorn for the sheer joy of it. It was to his remarkable surprise when he felt a fuzzy brush against his ear. Looking to his right he saw what was clearly a Bat flying close to him.

"Your Majesty," it was saying. "Please wake up!"

There was something urgent in the Bat's tone of voice, but Peter was too caught up in the wind whipping over his head to pay attention. "But I am awake good cousin," Peter told the Bat.

"Please your Majesty, wake up! We're under attack!"

"Attack?" Peter laughed as Flisk sped on even faster. "Nay cousin, you only remember the Battle of Beruna too well." It was only when the Bat continued to fly into his ear did Peter realize that no Bat alive could ever hope to match a Unicorn for speed.

THUMP!

Peter fell out of his bed in a tangle of sheets.

"Your Highness you must wake! The castle is under attack!"

Peter was suddenly and instantly awake. "What? Where?"

The Bat's voice came back somewhat relieved now that the High King was finally awake. "Fell Beasts have slain the wall guard and have crossed the courtyard my King."

Peter didn't waste time asking anymore questions. Leaping up he quickly shoved his feet into his boots. As it always was Rhindon was kept next to Peter's bed. Grabbing the sword the High King's shouts echoed off the walls as he loosed the sword.

"Narnia to arms! Narnia to arms! To arms!"

His shouts did not go unheeded. As Peter ran down the corridors shouting the alarm the Royal Guard quickly fell in around their King.

"Sire!" General Oreius all but stampeded into Peter. The centaur had woken at Peter's first shout and like the King was armed. Bathelstane, the centaur's huge claymore, glinted in the light from the torches along the hall. He was followed by Celer one of the other sword instructors.

Peter shouted out his orders as he turned to dash down a staircase. "General with me! Send word for Edmund with as many Guards as can be found to join us in the courtyards. Fell Beasts have entered the Cair. Celer take the first five Guards you find and defend Susan and Lucy."

"At once Sire," said Celer as he turned around to dash back up the stairs.

"How many Highness?" Oreius asked.

"I don't know General," Peter replied. "But it matters not." Further conversation was lost as the two warriors rushed down to the courtyards. Their cries of alarm spreading like wildfire through the castle.

§!§

The Fell Beasts had lost the element of surprise. From the higher turrets they could hear the shouts of the Royal Guard. Still they had laid waste to many unsuspecting victims. The Minotaur leading the raid knew his forces would be cut to ribbons trying to fight the well trained Narnian Royal Guard in their own castle. Lifting his head he gave voice to a deafening bellow. His troops knew it was a sign to fall back to the courtyard where they could fight together.

The Minotaur had just barely survived the Battle of Beruna the previous summer. What he had seen had saddened him. He had watched as too many of his fellows had fallen even before the arrival of the cursed Cat and His reinforcements. The Witch's Army had relied on only three things for victory. Superior numbers, fear of failure and its price of death from the Witch's own hand, and Jadis' wand itself and its abilities. When all of those had failed the Witch's Army had been routed and chased from the field. Few in that dark host had any formal weapons training and it had showed. Individually few Fell Beasts, save the Minotaur's themselves, were a match for any of Narnia's well trained soldiers.

Seeing this weakness the Minotaur had forced the troop of one hundred he now led to drill in basic tactics. His lifelong training in warfare now stood the Minotaur well. At his command he had called his troops back to the Gatehouse. Knowing it would take time for the Royal Guard to organize gave the Fell Beasts the time to make it back across the courtyard and to the Gatehouse. The raised the drawbridge and lowered the portcullis at once thus preventing any more reinforcements reaching the castle. They hunkered down inside the arch of the gate and formed into a shield wall as they had been trained. All they had to do now was wait for their enemy to appear and hundreds more poison arrows would do their deadly work.

§§§

"My Queens! Rouse yourselves the castle is under attack!" Celer bust into the suite of rooms Susan and Lucy shared. With him were the five Guards Peter had ordered him to find, three other fauns and two Leopards. The Fauns and Leopards turned their backs on their Queens and faced the doorway with swords and claws at the ready.

"What? What's going on?" Lucy muttered as she rubbed sleep from her eyes.

Celer answered her as he dashed around the rooms and grabbed two dark colored cloaks for the Queens. "Fell Beasts have attacked my Queen. Your Royal Brother Peter has charged me with your defense."

Susan was now also awake. "Where is Peter Captain?"

"The High King and King Edmund are organizing the Royal Guard near the courtyards where the invaders were last seen," Celer replied as he tossed the cloaks to the Queens.

Donning the cloak about her shoulders Susan then strung her bow and strapped on her quiver along with her horn. "Ready Lucy?" she asked.

"Of course," Lucy replied. She too had donned the cloak Celer had thrown her and buckled her cordial and dagger about her waist.

Celer was stunned that the Queens would be girding themselves for battle. "But my Queens, the High King has charged me to your defense. You must stay here!"

Susan only gave the Captain a cool look. "Did Peter say exactly where you were supposed to defend us?"

"Well no Your Majesty."

"Good then I hope you can keep up." With that Susan and Lucy burst through the line of Guards and began to rush down the stairs near their rooms.

§§§

The fight for the courtyard had not gone well for the Royal Guard. Because of their position the Fell Beasts could not be attacked directly. The Fell Beasts occupied the whole of the Gatehouse, so the defensive positions within were no use to the Narnians. Several head on attacks had only added more to the death toll as the poison arrows found their marks. Arial attacks were also fruitless as Cyn's Gryphon troop could not fly at a safe angle to hurl stones at the beasts. The moment they did they were harassed by more arrows that had been cunningly painted black to blend into the darkness.

Edmund banged his fist against the wall in frustration. "Too many are being killed and there's nothing we can do about it!"

Peter's jaw was set in anger as well. "Where's Adros when we need him?"

"Andros? Why would you want him here?" Edmund asked.

Turning from the doorway in which they were observing the attackers Peter faced his brother. "He could lay down a wall of fire like at Beruna. It would give us cover to attack without those blasted arrows tearing us to ribbons." The High King then turned back to the doorway to try and think another way to rid the castle of the invaders.

Edmund turned as he heard soft paws coming up behind him. "What news Umbral?"

The Panther from the Big Cat troop stole up from the shadows to make her report. "My Kings, as you ordered I scouted the invaders positions. Sadly it is nothing which you do not already know. They control the Gatehouse and have barricaded themselves within. Their numbers may be few, but in their position they can hold for long against many."

Cyn came out of the darkness to make his report. "My Kings," he said as he bowed his head. "The sky is also denied us. Harpies patrol the Gatehouse roof and sound the alarm as soon as we approach. My troop was forced to pull back lest we lose more brave scouts."

"What of our own archers?" Edmund asked. Surely they can find positions to return the volleys that have plagued us."

Xati, a centaur in the Archers Corps answered her king. "Sire, the Fell Beasts have retreated into the Gatehouse and behind their shields. Perhaps once the dawn rises we shall have better aim, but arrows cannot fly through stone." The disappointment and frustration was clearly evident in her voice. A sentiment shared by the entire Royal Guard.

Peter turned back to the council of his Captains. "We must do something! We can't just let Fell Beasts invade Cair Paravel like this!" Rhindon shook in the King's grasp. Looking up Peter nodded to Oreius. "You've been quiet of late General. What thoughts have you on this matter?"

The General took a few steps forward so as to be heard more clearly. "Your Majesties," he began nodding his head to Peter and Edmund. "We have become overconfident. This is as much my fault as anyone's. Since Beruna we have faced only small parties of Fell Beasts. With their Witch dead there is none to lead them, thus their tactics have been poor at best. It seems the Fell Beasts that remain have finally grasped this fact. A direct charge is what they will expect for they consider us to noble to do otherwise."

"So what wouldn't they expect?" Edmund was the first to ask the question all were thinking.

"Why don't you ask them?" A new voice sounded in the dark. It came from overhead in a deep shadow of the corridor.

Swords and claws were instantly bared at the sound of the voice. Xati's bow was nocked and drawn in a flash. "Who goes there?" Peter challenged.

"My King would do well to keep his guard up," said the voice now from near the stone floor with a slight chuckle to it. "Our guests in the Gatehouse are sure to keep up theirs."

Oreius stamped a hoof bad temperedly. "Be still voice! Be you friend of Narnia then as your King has commanded reveal yourself to this company."

A gasp of surprise was heard from Peter as the voice spoke again. "Reveal myself? How many more eyes are needed to see me?" Dog Giles Fox had planted himself about Peter's shoulders. The Fox had a smug look about him that came from him yet again proving his ability to outfox even the greatest in Narnia.

The relief was evident as all assembled saw it was Giles that had spoken. Swords were lowered and claws retracted. "Master Giles, be welcome," said Peter as he lifted the Fox off his shoulders. "Whom were you referring to good my cousin?"

"Your Royal Sisters of course, my King." Giles turned to face back down the corridor and bowed to the forms of Susan and Lucy who had been watching and listening.

Immediately the Royal Guard bowed to their Queens. Peter however had a decidedly concerned look about him. "Susan! Lucy! What are you doing here?"

"We're not about to just sit back while our home is attacked." Susan told him calmly. "And before you say anything Celer is not to blame. In fact he and his troops are still carrying out your orders to defend Lucy and I. You were the one that didn't say where they had to defend us."

Despite the urgency of the situation the tension was broken. First by Giles' sneaky infiltration of the council, then by Susan's calm words that had the effect of rendering Peter speechless. Edmund was grinning at his sister. "Maybe you should come around the King's Yard more often Su. It's rare to get Peter to stop cold like that."

"Majesties, our situation has not changed." The stern warning from Oreius did not go unheeded.

Gathering himself Peter looked again to the council. "Right then, so our enemies are expecting us to just out and attack how do we counter?"

"We could try talking to them," Lucy chimed in. "Ask them why they are here and if they want anything."

"We know why they're here Lucy," Peter said. "They served the Witch who was the sworn enemy of Narnia and all it stood for."

Susan came to her sister's defense. "No Peter you think you know why they're here. However we will not know unless we actually pose the question to them. It would also be something they would not expect."

"You want to just walk up and talk to them?" Edmund asked with a hint of incredulity in his voice.

"Yes," Lucy said simply. "Aslan had no fear of talking to Jadis. Why should we fear to parley with her minions?"

Edmund looked down at the floor stones as he was again reminded of the reason Aslan had talked to the Witch. The gathered Animals and Creatures all stood quietly to let Edmund have time to gather his thoughts. However it was Peter who spoke up instead. "Who then is to be our messenger?"

"I'll do it," Susan said.

"Are you sure?" Peter asked. "Maybe it should be myself or Edmund. We've both had more training with the sword than you."

"Exactly," Susan told him. "There is a time for swords and a time for words. Besides even in battle a sword is often not the most advantageous weapon to have. Words and arrows fly farther than any blade ever could."

"And it is again the last thing our foe would suspect," Oreius looked very proud of Susan as he confirmed her plan.

"Very well, but just because we're going to talk rather than fight doesn't mean we should expect them to honor any parley." Peter looked back to Xati and Celer. "I want our archers to cover the Queen from all positions we still hold. Celer have your troops ready at an instant to be at Queen Susan's side."

Giles then chimed in again. "My King if I may we may have an opportunity to rally the rest of our forces outside the Cair."

Peter smiled at the Fox. "What did you have in mind?"

§§§

"Sir they are coming again."

"Archers to the ready," came the growled command. The Minotaur looked out the door of the Gatehouse towards the castle proper. Indeed there was movement from within. The castle doors were opening and he could see figures moving inside. However owing to the nature of his kind the Gatehouse had been ransacked. Dirt and grime were everywhere and the window he was looking out of was blurred from dried wine that had somehow been spilled over the glass. From their positions he could hear his Dwarves lay shaft to string. Raising his arm over his head he was about to give the order to loose when a voice came from the night.

"Parley! I declare pax to parley with you!"

"Who would declare pax with us?" the Minotaur shouted out the door.

"I am Queen Susan of Narnia. I would speak with you this night," came the reply. "To whom am I speaking with?"

Scorn was thick in the Minotaur's voice. "Why would you care who I am?" he asked as he stepped just outside the door to the Gatehouse. There he saw what had only been a blurred shape from inside. A girl stood alone in the courtyard. She appeared to be unarmed unlike any of the other Narnians that had yet faced him and his forces. Dressed only in a long dark cloak over her nightgown the only thing she held was a sprig of green leaves taken from an olive tree.

"I am a Queen of this castle and it would do me no honor to be misinformed of those who come calling."

The Minotaur gave a peeved snort. "A Queen? Not the Queen. What good can come of a land where power is so split? Since you and yours usurped this land from my Lady all we have known is war at your hand. The Lady brought us peace as we had not had."

"I reign with my Royal Sister and Brothers as Queen of this castle and all of Narnia, under the highest King, Aslan." The mention of the Lion did as Susan had intended. The Fell Beasts within gave a shudder at the sound of the Lion's name. She continued in her calm voice. "It is not we who have usurped the throne of Narnia. None has ever done so. For not even your Lady ruled from the Castle of the Four Thrones. None save the rightful monarchs can lay claim to such. Such is the law as set forth by King Frank first of that name under..."

"Enough!" the Minotaur's angry shout cut off Susan's speech. "You speak of thrones and laws and dead kings. I care nothing for your falsehoods. I follow my Lady and her will!"

"Do you still refuse me your name Minotaur?" Susan once again tried.

"I refuse you, your whelp brothers, your rule, and your Cat!" the Minotaur shouted back at her.

"What grievance do you have against my good cousins that would give you cause to act so?" Susan asked in her gentle voice.

"Grievance? What would you know of grievances girl? Should I list the grievances me and mine have faced? That we have been pulled from our rightful places of power, that our kin were slain on the field of battle, that our councils have been torn asunder and our kind spread as chaff?" The Minotaur continued to vent his spleen at Susan. Yet no matter how often he threw insults at her or her loved ones she only spoke in a soft kindly voice back to him. The Minotaur quickly found he didn't know what infuriated him more. That she wouldn't rise to angry argument or that his plans for revenge had yet to be accomplished.

§§

High above the discussion a lone figure slipped through the night. Slipping from shadow to shadow Giles Fox worked his way carefully towards the Gatehouse. Mounting the castle wall he wove along the ramparts. Careful to remain out of sight from both friend and foe he neared a door set into the Gatehouse wall along the parapet. Ducking further into the shadows behind a pile of stones slingers would use, he used his tail to flick a small rock at the slit where he was sure some manner of Fell Beast was keeping watch.

Sure enough a black painted arrow came shooting through the night. Giles smiled inwardly at the sounds of confusion that came from inside when it became clear that the arrow had hit nothing. Selecting a bigger rock from the pile he sent it flying at the door as well. This time not one but five arrows came flying from within the Gatehouse. The door even opened a crack to reveal the forms of several Black Dwarves searching for what had struck the door. Only when they grew weary of searching and had again closed the door did Giles send a third and still bigger rock at them.

This time the Dwarves came out ready to fight. Disregarding their bows the Dwarves drew their short swords and crept along the parapet searching for the source of the stony missiles. Their search proved fruitless however. Unknowing to them as they had been too

angered by the rocks, they had strayed in range of the Royal Guard Archer Corps. The Dwarves fell without a sound as the Narnian arrows found their marks.

Giles didn't have time to spare for the Dwarves though. As soon as they had come out of the Gatehouse he had crept inside. Wrinkling his nose at the dank smells of the Fell Beasts he melted back into the shadows near the foot of a wall. Dropping his ears flat over his head snuck towards the capstans that controlled the raising of the drawbridge and portcullis. As Cair Paravel had been built with Talking Animals in mind and also as a defensible structure there were many secrets to the building that the Fell Beasts could never have know of. Included were small passages within the walls that allowed smaller Animals to move about without being seen. Giles put these passages to good work.

Scouting around he soon found out that the majority of the Fell Beasts were still hunkered down outside the actual Gatehouse. They were still behind their shield wall under the Gatehouse arch. Only very few Fell Beasts were inside the Gatehouse. Just enough to cover the most obvious lines of attack to be specific. Starting at the top of the Gatehouse Giles saw two Ogres keeping watch over the highest windows.

"MY QUEEN WAS THE GREATEST RULER THIS CURSED LAND HAS EVER SEEN!"

The shout came through the windows from the courtyard outside. Giles smiled as he crept closer towards the two Ogres. Very good my Queen keep them talking, he thought to himself.

"You two! Report to the arch and bolster the shields!" Giles called out in a very passable imitation of a harsh Minotaur voice.

Grunting the Ogres looked at each other stupidly but knew better to disregard the command. Picking up their clubs they lumbered down the stairs and out of sight. Giles quickly hopped up to the window and waved his bushy tail across the courtyard to where he knew his allies were keeping watch for his signal.

§§§

A Raccoon saw the Fox's signal and went to alert the Kings at once. Peter and Edmund had stayed inside the castle while Susan and Giles had put their plan into motion. The time had not been wasted. The Kings called for and were able to don their armor as they waited. Likewise Oreius and Celer had had time to better arm and equip their soldiers for battle. Extra weapons and armor were now available for any who had requested it. Even Lucy was now girded in a chain mail tunic under her cloak. Her dagger and vial were still buckled about her waist.

Peter was just strapping on his last greave when Oreius came up to him. "Sire, Giles has made it safe inside the Gatehouse. "

"Excellent, send word to the Bats. Cyn, take two of your scouts and get word to the rest of the Army. Have them girded for battle and waiting outside the Gatehouse at once. When the drawbridge is lowered I want them inside as fast as they are able."

"Sire the word has already been given. You forces stand ready even as we speak," Cyn told him.

The High King smiled at his Captain. "Very well good my Gryphon."

Peter looked around at his commanders searching their faces. They all knew their plan was risky at best, but they only one they could come up with. He just wished he didn't feel so nervous. The last thing he wanted was to send more Creatures to their deaths. Suppose Susan, Edmund, or Lucy was killed? Suppose he issued the wrong order? Suppose an arrow cut him down before he was halfway across the courtyard? His doubts and fears weighed in on him.

"Relax Peter," Lucy said as she laid a calming hand on his arm. "Ask Aslan to be with us and I'm sure he will be. Just like before."

"She's right," Edmund put in. "We've all been too busy we've forgotten Him."

"Of course Lu," Peter said to his sister. He felt ashamed he had not thought to seek Aslan's protection when he had first heard of the attack. It was a habit he vowed then and there to break. "Would you please pray to Aslan for us?"

Lucy walked to the middle of the circle they had formed while making their plans. Facing east she began speaking. "Aslan our friend and guide, be with these brave soldiers this night. Narnia is in need of your courage and strength. Be our shield as we seek to bring your peace and justice back to the land you have set us in."

A wave of calm settled over the company. They gripped their swords and spears tighter. Shields were held higher. Their eyes shone with a new fire. Outside the first rosy fingers of the dawn were beginning to lighten the Eastern Sea.

*§§§*

Giles had crawled back into the passages inside the Gatehouse walls. He waited there for the Bats that would be flying in the window. As soon as they arrived Giles came out of his hiding place. "Quickly to the capstan room," he told them. "Stay quiet and out of sight until the word is given."

Silently the Bats took to wing again and flew into the rafters. From there they were able to follow the lines of ropes and chains that raised and lowered the drawbridge and portcullis. Hanging on the ceiling over the capstan they found there were no Fell Beasts guarding the mechanism.

Giles was off clearing the rest of the Gatehouse of any remaining Fell Beasts. After letting the Bats in he disappeared back into the wall passages to guard room over the gate arch. From here any defending the gatehouse could fire arrows, pour oil on enemies, cast stones, or mount any other number of defensive actions. Indeed a Fallen Wolf and a Hag were sitting next to a large cauldron that was resting over a slow burning fire.

The Fox tried his Minotaur voice again. "You two! Down to the arch with you! And be quick about it."

At once both the Wolf and Hag jumped up. The Hag seemingly flew down the stairs to follow the order. The Wolf however stayed where he was. "Come out Giles! I know it's you!"

Cautiously Giles walked out to face the Wolf. "So A'toney you survived Beruna. I was wondering if any of the Secret Police had made it."

A'toney only growled low at the Fox "Last I saw you; you were doing a very good imitation of a lawn ornament. Seems the Cat got to you in the end. Foolish Fox, you were told that you were to follow your brothers."

"Aslan never got to me," Giles said. He and A'toney were now beginning to circle each other. "I have been His from my first breath. You were too if I recall."

"And more the fool I was for it!" A'toney snapped back. "What did Aslan get me? Nothing! That's what. My wife and pups taken before my eyes to never be seen again. My pack overthrown by Maugrim and the Police. Aslan didn't hear my prayers, the Cat abandoned me, and so I abandoned Him! My Lady at least was real."

"Aslan is real! How can you say otherwise after the events of this past Greenroof?" Giles wasn't the only one to know the value of keeping an opponent talking.

"My Lady slew the Cat on the Stone Table. Aslan is no more!"

"Funny you should say that when it was Aslan Himself who slew the Witch the very next day!" Giles' tone was almost taunting, but not quite.

"Aslan! HA!" the Wolf spat at Giles. "It was just some dumb lion that likely had wandered onto the field and was simply hungry."

"Is that what they told you happened?" Giles asked. "If it wasn't Aslan how could I even be here? You said it yourself, that last time we met was when the Witch turned me into stone." Inwardly Giles shuddered at the memory. "Yet here I am! Who else but Aslan can breathe life into stone?"

But A'toney was not to be tempted anymore. Growling savagely he leapt at the Fox. Giles felt his own hackles rising as he leapt out of the way of the Wolf's strike. A'toney slipped on the smooth stone floor and went crashing headlong into the near wall. Shaking his head the Wolf leapt at Giles again. Giles was too quick for him though. The Red Fox had once willingly taken a Wolf bite to protect his King and Queens. He had no similar duties this night. Rather he attacked. As he jumped to the side again he lashed out with his own teeth. He caught a sharp bite to A'toney's left hind leg. Giles shook his head once then let go to his opponent again. He knew he could never match the Wolf for sheer strength, yet he knew beyond all doubt he was the quicker and more agile.

Now hamstrung A'toney was slower off the mark. He lunged forward at Giles. The Fox only ducked under the bite and snapped up at the Wolf's throat all in the same quick movement. A'toney's thick winter coat saved him from Giles' attack. The Fox backed away spitting out Wolf fur. A'toney leapt and lunged, yet he only ended up biting air, or smashing his jaw on the walls or floors of the guard room. Giles was too wily a target.

"Stand still!" roared the Wolf.

Giles only laughed at the bigger Canine. "And let you snap my back like you almost did near the Beavers dam? I think not."

Looking around Giles saw his chance. Above the gate arch were the channels that let defenders cast their missiles down on their foe. Normally they were covered by a heavy oaken trapdoor that rose up from the floor. The door was held in its raised position by a rope. With a leap Giles landed so that the channels were between him and A'toney. "Lost something have we?" Giles taunted the Wolf again.

It had the desired effect. A'toney jumped straight at Giles over the channels. Giles himself was also in midair. However the Fox had leapt for the rope holding the trapdoor up. In one go the Fox bit through the rope. The heavy oak planks slammed down on A'toney, pinning him underneath in a mess of limbs and fur. Giles walked around to where A'toney's head was showing from under the door.

"You were once my friend," he said sadly. "I am sorry."

A'toney's voice was harsh and labored as he lay under the trapdoor. "I'm neither your friend nor friends with anyone else that...follows...that...cursed...Ccca..."

Giles' tail drooped at the sight of his old friend lying broken. Still Giles knew that the Wolf had turned his back on Aslan and thus Narnia. Padding over to the window he looked out across the courtyard. What he saw chilled his heart even more than the passing of his former friend. Without thinking he leapt from the window calling out as he did so.

"Release the chains!"

§§§

Susan was exhausted. It was immensely trying to keep her cool while talking to the Minotaur. Even with all his threats, insults, and bluster she knew she could ill afford to respond in kind. Giles needed all the time she could give him if he was going to lower open the castle gates. Still she knew her duty was to her subjects. Even though she bore her bow, quiver of arrows, and horn proudly she much rathered staying at the castle when word of Fell Beasts arose. The sight of Edmund lying wounded and dying on the field the previous summer had chilled her to the bone. Father Christmas had been right when he had told Lucy that battles were ugly affairs and the more she could stay away from them the better for her.

As such she had delved into Chroom's lectures on rhetoric and debate. Gentle, Aslan had named her at her coronation and she lived every day to live up to that title. While her brothers learned the arts of war every morning she and Lucy learned the arts of the healers. She found that it brought such a wondrous joy to her when she tended to those in need of healing such as she had never felt before.

Her budding skills were especially valuable during some of the skirmishes she and her other siblings had faced. Lucy had been almost heartbroken at Peter's command that she not use her cordial save for the most dire of injuries. It was because of Susan's skills that Lucy was able to move more quickly through the wounded troops. Susan was able to tell her sister which soldiers would need her cordial and which the healers would be able to handle.

Yet this Minotaur was trying even her patience. "You stand there telling me and my ilk of the nobility of the Daughters of Eve. My own Lady was a Daughter of Eve yet by your own you cast her as naught but a tyrant."

"Your Lady was no Daughter of Eve, Minotaur. According to our histories Jadis was descendant from a race of Giants and Jinns not of this world. Regardless of what she might have said otherwise. There was naught a drop of Adam or Eve's blood in her veins."

"And there is in yours?"

"Most assuredly, for even you must have heard of the prophecy from the Long Winter:

*When Adam's flesh and Adam's bone  
Sits in Cair Paravel in throne,  
The evil time will be over and done.*

My Royal Siblings and I certainly rule from the Four Thrones and the Long Winter is no more. Thus I and my Royal Sister must be of Eve's line as my Royal Brothers must be from Adam's."

"Not for long you won't," the Minotaur snapped at her.

"Ah finally have we come to your reasons for your uninvited visit?"

"Indeed," the Minotaur replied with a wicked smile. A flash of movement was visible just above him before he began speaking again, but Susan didn't have the time to focus on it. "Our reason is to have our revenge on you and yours for slaying our Lady. Archer! Now!"

The Minotaur stepped aside to reveal a Black Dwarf archer standing directly behind him. The Dwarf had his bow drawn before Susan knew what was happening. Only when the hum of the enemy bow reached her ears did she realize the black dart was shooting straight for her heart. Without time to turn she screwed her eyes closed as the arrow came speeding in.

"Ahhh!"

It was not Susan's voice that had called out. Looking down she saw the form of Giles at her feet. The lethal arrow protruding was from his side. Susan was shocked into action. In one movement she knelt down to the Fox and threw her cloak over her shoulder. Underneath were her bow, arrows, and horn. Raising the ivory instruments to her lips she winded the horn.

The sound of Susan's horn carried bright and clear through the lightening morning air. Clearer than the finest bugle and richer than the best of trumpets the sound was long and drawn out. Behind their shields the Fell Beasts shook their heads as the sound swept over them. Once they had known the taste of victory. Now they only knew the fear of utter failure once again. Inside the castle the Royal Guard felt their hearts leap. The Queen was in danger and the call to battle had come at last.

Peter, Edmund, and Lucy were first out of the doorway. They rushed to Susan's side. Peter and Edmund placing themselves in front of their sisters' shields held before them to catch any arrows. Rhindon and Shafelm bared and at the ready.

"Lucy! Your cordial quick!" Susan was kneeling over the bleeding body of Giles. Swiftly Susan drew the arrow out of the Fox and tossed it aside. Taking her vial from her belt Lucy too stooped over their Fox friend.

The Minotaur only laughed at the sight. "Four children playing at swords and healers is all I see. Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve? You're naught but ....ahh! My eyes!"

The Minotaur's hands flew to his face. Behind the castle the sun had risen over the sea. The rays of the new day shone on the courtyard directly into the faces of the Fell Beasts. When their vision cleared they couldn't believe what they saw.

High King Peter the Magnificent, Queen Susan the Gentle, King Edmund the Just, and Queen Lucy the Valiant stood straight and tall across the courtyard. There was no fear in their faces. Swords, arrows, and dagger all gleamed with the reflected fires of the sun, as if

those pieces of steel were on fire instead. Behind the Monarchs in proud array was the remainder of the Cair Paravel Royal Guard. Pennants displaying the image of Aslan fluttered and snapped as they caught the new sea breezes. At the feet of the Kings and Queens was a Red Fox that stood as proudly as any other in that courtyard.

Resplendent in their red and gold armor High King Peter and King Edmund both advanced three paces. The High King Peter leveled Rhindon at his foe not thirty paces from where he stood. His voice was as hard as the steel in his hand.

"You Minotaur and those Fell Beasts you command have unjustly invaded this castle and slain many a good cousin to me and my Royal Siblings. You have unfairly occupied the Gatehouse of this castle in order to prevent the timely arrival of its loyal defenders. You have twice broken the terms of peaceful parley by insulting our much beloved sister Queen Susan known as Gentle and by attacking the selfsame Queen in the most abominable of means by way of deceit and trickery. You have caused our much beloved cousin Giles Fox undue pain and suffering by means of lethal injury set upon him cured only by our much beloved sister Queen Lucy known as Valiant."

King Edmund held his sword parallel to the ground as he too addressed the Fell Beasts now cowering in the Gatehouse arch. "What say you to these charges?"

Something other than fear now coursed through the minds of the Fell Beasts; conviction. They had been found lacking in their actions. Regardless of their struggles to deny it, none could shake the feeling from them. The burning knowledge that they had done evil and were now called to an accounting. Yet even still the Minotaur remained defiant.

"I say we will never kneel to scrawny kings and queens nor their make believe laws or games!" With a snarl he drew the sword from behind his back and bellowed his defiance to the rising sun.

"Then I find you guilty of the charges leveled against you. You are arrested and condemned." King Edmund's sword rose to point to the sky and into a fighting position. His signal of a guilty verdict rather than pointing Shafelm to the safety of the ground had he found them innocent.

Then seemingly on its own the castle drawbridge began to lower and the portcullis was raised. The Fell Beasts turned to see the whole of the Narnian Army arrayed across the moat all bearing naked steel or what weapons were due their Species.

"NARNIA!" High King Peter's warcry echoed off the courtyard walls as he gave it full voice. It was taken up by the entire host of Narnians as they charged.

High King Peter and King Edmund were first to cross the distance to their foe. Back to back and side to side they fought the Minotaur together. Their Royal Guard and Army rushed to dispatch the other Fell Beasts. Rhindon slashed in at the Minotaur's torso while Shafelm bit into leg muscle. The Minotaur roared in pain as the Kingly Swords flashed down dazzling sunlight shining off the blades.

Together the Kings looked up from their work. The battle was won. Nowhere was a Fell Beast left alive, several soldiers having rushed into the Gatehouse to secure it from any hiding inside. Together Peter and Edmund raised their swords in victory.

"For Narnia!"

"And for Aslan!" came back the roar from the voices of the soldiers. Overhead the sun rose over the horizon to shine down on the Castle of the Four Thrones.

§§§

Three days later the bodies of the Fell Beasts had been disposed of. A large pit had been dug and the entire troop of invaders had been cast in. The Royal Guards that had fallen at their posts had been buried according to the various customs of their kinds. The Cair had been repaired and cleaned of any sign of the fighting that had occurred there.

In the throne room beneath a tunnel of raised swords a lone figure approached the Four Thrones and the Kings and Queens seated on them. Stopping at base of the few stairs leading to the Thrones he waited to be called forward.

The Kings were dressed in their best tunics and sat with their crowns atop their heads. Likewise the Queens were also dressed in their formal gowns of state. Yet none of the four looked uncomfortable in their raiment. Rather they beamed with pride at the Fox at their feet.

"Please come forward Dog Master Giles Fox," the High King beckoned. As the Fox walked up the stairs Peter turned to the others. "We have here one who has served us well and nobly. Not three days ago he volunteered for the most hazardous of missions to set free this castle and those who live within. While doing so he also saved the life of our Gentle Queen by placing himself in harm's way for her sake. Would we say anything for such actions?"

Queen Susan stood and reached down to where her quiver of arrows rested against her throne. Pulling an arrow from the quiver she addressed the hall. "I would say something to this courageous Fox. Kneel before me."

Giles did as he was bidden as Queen Susan knelt in front of him. Gently she tapped the Fox on both shoulders with the arrow she held. "Rise, Dog Sir Giles Slyashlar Fox, Knight of the Order of the Arrow!"

Sir Giles raised his beaming head to his Queen. Bending lower Queen Susan kissed the Fox twice upon his brow before rising to the court. "Noble soldiers of Narnia, faithful and beloved subjects, I give you our cousin Dog Sir Giles Slyashlar Fox, Knight of the Order of the Arrow!"

Cheers rang out loud and long for the new knight. Soon the formality of court was forgotten as dance, music, food, and friendship proved more entertaining than stiff courtly manners. Outside the warm sun shone down on Cair Paravel and all of Narnia.

¥¤¥

# Suitor

*by Capegio*

It is often said, when a room is very, very quiet, that you could hear a pin drop.

Lucy was a bit swifter than most, and quickly pulled one from her hair. When it struck the stone floor of the Great Hall, the sound echoed loudly, and she grinned as she stood in the corner to watch. The hapless young man stood before the four thrones, nervously holding his hands in front of him as he suffered under the stare of every person in the room. A long moment of mind-boggling silence passed. Finally, the foreign prince dared to look up at the face of the High King, who looked as if he'd just been slapped by someone wearing barbed gauntlets.

"...your Majesty?" the prince asked anxiously, twisting his cap in his hands. Peter blinked, as if truly seeing him for the first time, a dazed expression of shock drifting across his face.

"...err...yes..." he stammered, "...I mean no, I mean..."

He looked over at his brother for help, but Edmund was looking rather sick, his mouth open slightly in a look of mild alarm. The younger king caught his brother's gaze after a moment, shaking his head as if to clear it, then shrugging slightly. Peter swallowed hard.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" he choked out. He felt decidedly unkingly at the moment. Rather, he felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach. The prince, who had been introduced as Lorant of some distant country Peter couldn't remember, stood (he'd been kneeling) and looked if possible even more uncomfortable than before.

"I asked if, as the son of a king, I might have your permission to...ah...to court her Highness Queen Susan of Narnia," he stammered. In the corner, Lucy suppressed a giggle. Peter flinched.

"...er, that is...that's...that's not my decision..."

He slowly turned his head to look at the elder of his two sisters, as if afraid of what he might see there. Susan's face was entirely unreadable. She sat ramrod straight in her throne, watching the young prince, but when she felt Peter's eyes on the side of her head she turned with equal deliberation to look back at him.

"Su?" he squeaked. For an instant he thought the corners of her mouth had twitched upwards, but a second later her countenance was again composed and expressionless.

"Why did you come, Lorant?" asked Edmund suddenly. He seemed to be the only person with a voice. The prince shuffled his feet apprehensively.

"Tales of her Highness's beauty and grace have reached even my distant land," he said. "Because...because I come of ruling age soon, it is my duty to marry and um...produce an heir."

Peter looked as though he might faint at any moment. Lucy clapped a hand over her mouth to stop from laughing at loud. To see her brother, the High King, the glorious ruler of all Narnia, sitting there with the most adorably flustered expression on his face; it was

almost more than she could take. She caught Mr. Tumnus's eye from across the room and they shared a gleeful smile. At the last comment, Susan had frowned ever so slightly, one delicate eyebrow raising in skepticism.

"Might I be so bold as to interrupt?" she asked, and her brothers half-jumped to hear her voice. As one they turned to face her. She stared down at her suitor. "I would like to know who asked you to come here."

"Why, your Majesty, I came of my own volition," he said unconvincingly.

"Beauty and intelligence are not mutually exclusive," said Susan lightly, and the poor man blushed a deep crimson. "Was it your father?" Lorant stood there, clutching his cap, staring at the floor. Finally he heaved a sigh.

"Yes," he mumbled.

"And you would much prefer not to be here."

"Yes."

Susan's face broke into a gentle smile and she crossed her legs, leaning back on her throne. The man looked utterly bewildered now.

"You are dismissed, then, Prince Lorant, unless you've other business to discuss here," she said kindly. He looked immensely relieved for a moment, then cringed and looked up at her pleadingly.

"But...your Highness, whatever shall I tell my father?" he said in a very small voice. Edmund sat up a little straighter, trying to look older than he was.

"Tell him that Queen Susan has an overly protective brother who, upon hearing your request, beat you to a pulp and left you for dead."

"Ed!" exclaimed Peter, rounding on him, but he stopped abruptly when he caught sight of the alarmed and confused expression on his face. Peter faltered for a moment, then asked perplexedly, "Wait, did you mean yourself? Or me?"

Lorant looked from one king to the other, then to Susan, who gave him a nod and a small, encouraging smile. Without another word the young prince turned and practically fled the room, his footsteps echoing in the near-silence. The instant he left, the roar of noise that had been present before the prince's proposal returned in full force, now full of speculation about what had just happened and what would happen next. Amidst the chaos Lucy quickly wove her way through the throng to the dais of the thrones, where her three siblings still sat. As she approached they stood. Susan and Edmund came around to stand by Peter and Lucy, and there was a moment of rather uncomfortable quiet between them before Susan swept across the dais and descended to the floor. The rest followed.

Only when they were outside the Great Hall, heading for the gardens, did someone speak. Peter cleared his throat nervously.

"Um," he said, glancing at Susan. "You...you wouldn't have..."

"No," she reassured him. Both her brothers sagged with relief, and Edmund launched into a brutal dissection of the unlucky prince's behavior. Lucy tuned his chatter out even as Susan listened with earnest amusement. The younger found herself walking next to a very agitated Peter.

"Children," he was muttering darkly. "Bearing children. Mad." Lucy giggled.

And as they continued down the hallway, Edmund still rapidly prattling on about how 'creepy' and 'scarring' the whole experience had been, she found herself looking up at a bemused Susan, who shook her head in mock sadness, bent down, and whispered in Lucy's ear,

"I wonder what he'll have to say about this tomorrow."

"What happens tomorrow?" Lucy whispered back. Susan's lips curled into a slightly sadistic smile.

"Princess Ellia arrives."

¥¤¥

# Chaperone

*by Capegio*

The Issue first came up over breakfast, before they even knew She had arrived. It was as innocent as this: Edmund looked down at the list of court appointments, swallowed his toast and asked, "Who's Princess Ellia?"

His brother the High King shrugged and reached across the table to pick up the juice pitcher. His sister Queen Susan coughed and found her eggs quite interesting. Ominously, his sister Queen Lucy burst out giggling, and had to stuff several pieces of peach into her mouth to shut herself up. Edmund looked up at her in alarm.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," said Susan quickly, shooting her sister a look. "Lucy put too much sugar in her tea, that's all. Eat your grapes."

"I h'vn't h'd 'ny tea," Lucy protested through the peaches, to which Edmund added helpfully, "And I don't have any grapes."

Frowning, Peter reached over to take the scroll from his brother. He studied it with a creased brow.

"First thing in the morning," he commented, glancing over at Susan. "What do you know about this, Su?"

She hurriedly stabbed an egg and shoved it in her mouth, then blushed and demurely lifted a hand in front of her lips.

"She can't speak right now," said Lucy seriously. "It would be very rude."

"Does this have anything to do with that...that Prince What's-His-Face-Bearing-Children-Madness from yesterday?" Edmund asked suspiciously.

"No," said Susan, swallowing. "Not really."

"Not really?" pressed Peter, his frown deepening.

Sighing, Susan set down her fork and pursed her lips.

"If you must know, she's here to be presented to Your Royal Highness, Peter."

This news was greeted by silence, save for the blink blink of two pairs of eyes and a thud as Lucy fell off her chair and shook with silent laughter.

"Lu!" Peter demanded. "What do you know that I don't? as High King, I order you to tell me!"

But his sister only laughed harder.

"Oh! Look at the sun," trilled Susan, standing and pulling a struggling Peter up by the ear. "We'd better get going. We don't want to be late, now, do we?"

"I'm not done eating!" protested Edmund. "And what does that even mean, she's here to be presented to Peter?"

"Just be nice," Susan told him, confiscating the roll he'd grabbed in self-defense. "Up you get, Ed. Lucy, stop giggling and make yourself useful."

"Yes, Mum," said her sister obediently. She got up off the floor and took Peter by the hand, pulling him out of the room before he could ask any more questions. When Susan swept after them, Edmund scrambled to his feet and followed, not wanting to be the last one into the throne room. Ten minutes later, the four found themselves seated and crowned, ready to oversee the daily court until lunchtime, as they did most days. At a nod from Peter, who still looked rather flustered, the Cair's head trumpeter cued the fanfare and It Began: a stumpy man (not a dwarf, though; you could always tell) stepped out into the center of the room and announced,

"To the court of Cair Paravel of the Four Thrones, I present Her Royal Highness, Princess Ellia of Negamry!"

"Where?" muttered Edmund.

"Beats me," Peter murmured back.

"Honestly!" Susan whispered hotly, leaning across her throne towards the two of them. "Haven't you studied your geography at all?"

"Not really," said Edmund. He was the Just, after all.

"It's the sixth island to the south of Galma, just northeast of Maurin on the Archenland coast."

"Wait, the one with the king who has twenty-odd wives?" Peter whispered back quickly, but Susan was sitting back on her throne, eyebrows raised pointedly as she stared to the back of the room. He quickly copied the gesture, as did Edmund. And that was when he saw her.

Most people have read about love at first sight. It is said that when such a thing happens, two hearts can leap across any distance to join one another in the truest, most passionate union imaginable. Unfortunately for Princess Ellia, it was only her heart that took the jump, whereas Peter's let out a little scream and tore off in the other direction while simultaneously trying to figure out a way to get back at Susan later.

It wasn't her face - she was actually quite pretty, with big brown eyes and plump pink cheeks - but rather it was the expression upon it. Peter shuffled through his vocabulary and finally settled on hungry though rabid and deranged were close seconds; she was staring at him in such a way as to make him wonder if he had accidentally doused himself in Worcestershire sauce that morning. This look so unsettled him that he rather forgot the ceremonial line that should have followed her presentation, and Susan had to jump in with "Cair Paravel welcomes the Princess Ellia" and shoot him a glare. On the far left, Lucy began giggling again, albeit silently.

"Salutations, oh great rulers of the superb country of Narnia," said the princess, curtsying deeply. "I come from the humble but noble country of Negamry as the daughter of King Troud, seeking an alliance between the courts, the people and the hearts of our countries."

"Ah," said Edmund, nodding. "Right. You may present the treaty."

"Ed," whispered Peter. "I don't think this is about a treaty."

The princess seemed confused by the younger king's declaration, and he in turn found himself rather lost. With a questioning glance at Peter, he flushed and spoke again.

"Er. My apologies. I ah...seem to have been mistaken. Do continue."

With another curtsy, the princess stepped back into her entourage. Abruptly, Peter noticed one lady among them, a tall, portly woman probably in her late thirties. She was clearly Princess Ellia's mother, and if the expression on her daughter's face had been frightening, hers was utterly terrifying. He ripped his eyes away to focus on the rotund little herald, who had stepped forward again.

"On this the forty-third day of spring, in the shining court of Cair Paravel in the ever-prosperous country of Narnia, King Troud and the esteemed country of Negamry do open the suit of the Princess Ellia to the High King Peter. May the stars smile on the promising bud of such a union."

Susan could see Peter's mind scrambling, pulling frantically on the reins of this runaway meeting. He opened his mouth and closed it again, turning just short of beet red.

"I um," he stuttered, the formal words fleeing his brain and leaping out his ears to safety. "The ah...the court of Cair Paravel regrets to inform the Princess Ellia that um...the High King Peter, that is to say I...am...is...not accepting suits...I mean, not sursuing puits I mean not pursuing suits. There! Not pursuing suits. At the moment."

He finished with a sharp sigh of relief and received a glare from the elder of his sisters.

"Our condolences," she said, with much more grace. "We understand you have travelled very far to get here, Princess. You and your entourage are welcome to stay at the Cair as long as you please. In the meanwhile, perhaps another kind of alliance could be brokered between our countries."

"We have prepared a presentation of minstrelsy," said the herald, as if they had not spoken at all. Peter and Edmund exchanged a look. "A showcase of our beloved princess's virtues. No doubt the High King will find it most illuminating."

The little man stepped back, and two young men and a woman shuffled forward with lutes clasped in their sweaty palms. They looked up in expectation to the four monarchs. With a prompting look from Susan, Peter cleared his throat awkwardly and managed to mumble, "Proceed."

And they began to sing.

Edmund had never really thought of chastity as something that you could sing about in depth, but Princess Ellia's minstrels proved him wrong. Of the seven verses of their song, four focused on her utter untouchedness, the wholeness of her virginity, the purity of both her body and her soul. The extend to which they described what she had not done actually made him rather uncomfortable. He hoped that Lucy didn't understand and wished that he didn't - the song was like a health lesson in three-part harmony. When it was finally, blessedly over, an awkward silence settled over the court, punctuated by a few tentative claps from some of the kinder Animals, who quickly stopped.

"Thank you for that most...lovely ballad," said Susan at last, her voice strained.

"It was an honor to play for your majesties," said one of the minstrels, bowing. "Our princess has quite a lovely voice. If it pleases you, we could..."

"...oh no, no, that's quite all right," said Susan quickly. Peter seemed too shocked (and perhaps appalled) to say anything. She looked around for a distraction - something,

anything to finish this unfortunate turn of events (she had predicted correctly only her brother's reaction to the proposal, not the tenacity of his unwanted admirer). But there was nothing to be had. Her eyes flicked back up as the herald came forward a third time.

"To the court of Cair Paravel of the Four Thrones, I present the Lady Vennicus."

"Oh dear," mumbled Peter as Princess Ellia's mother stepped forward - she did not look pleased.

"If I was named Lady Vennicus, I might look that way too," Edmund muttered under his breath to his brother.

"Ed!"

That, of course, was Susan, who was trying to look as engaged in their guests as possible almost as an apology for her brothers.

"Just Lady Vennicus?" Lucy pondered to herself. Then the woman was addressing them, and they all sat to attention in their thrones.

"Most noble kings and queens of Narnia," she began. "We have brought with us some tokens of our appreciation for your consideration of this suit, the finest Nega..."

"...but I'm not consid..."

"...mry has to offer. Firstly, we present to you a casket of aged cherry wine, from our groves on the northern shore. It dates back near eighty years in our cellars. Secondly, we present to you a dress of our finest linen, dyed with authentic crushed Gemmerberries and adorned with shards of lapis from the western mines. Thirdly, we present to you a selection of delectable choco..."

"...wait, wait, wait," Peter cut in, but Edmund waved a hand at him, sitting forward excitedly.

"Sh, Pete. What was that about chocolate?"

"No, no, no! Ed, shush!" Peter burst out in exasperation. He shook his head and looked back up at Lady Vennicus, who looked quite offended at the interruption. "Look, most noble and gracious and whatever else lady, I'm not quite sure you understood me. I said I am not pursuing suits at the moment."

"Actually, you said you weren't sursu..."

"...shut up, Ed. What I mean to say is that though I have no doubts that your daughter is a most suitable candidate for courtship and marriage and all that, I am not simply because I am...well, not. I am simply not interested. I am sorry to have wasted your time. If I had known sooner," and here he gave Susan a meaningful look, "I might have told you not to come at all. I am afraid I can accept neither your gifts nor your proposal. I wish you a pleasant stay at the Cair and a smooth trip home. Thank you."

The lady stared at him a moment, then finally bowed and stepped back with a stiff face.

"We thank you for your time. We shall spend a single night here, then return on the morrow. If you should change your mind before then, please let us know."

Peter gave a nod, and the four monarchs stood to mark the end of the meeting.

"You are free to restock your ship from our stores," said Susan kindly. "May there always be peace and goodwill between our countries."

The looks they received as the entourage dribbled out of the throne room didn't exactly bespeak peace and goodwill.

The four of them did not speak of it again until dinner, because it seemed that before then, wherever they went, the Princess Ellia and her mother went too. They popped up at lunchtime, when the Pevensies were just about to sit down; Ellia casually parted Susan and Lucy to sit between them and proceeded to make eyes at Peter through the whole meal; Vennicus wedged herself between Peter and Edmund and nearly reduced them to tears with tales of her daughter's accomplishments, most of which involved rescuing injured woodland creatures and/or singing in front of large crowds of people (Lucy noticed though that nothing was promised about the quality of said singing). After that, the two women followed the kings to their daily weapons lesson and oohed and ahed over every movement of the javelins the boys were learning to use. When Peter and Edmund finished and went upstairs to bathe, Ellia descended on Susan with a thousand questions about her older brother, while Vennicus inserted herself into a conversation Lucy had been having with one of her minstrels. And at dinner, just minutes into a discussion of said aggravations, they appeared yet again, prompting Lucy to clap her hand over her mouth and desist from relating her own story.

"You know, this is a lovely, lovely castle," said Vennicus, clasping her hands together and hovering over the table awkwardly. "And so big. You could get lost in a place like this."

"Really?" muttered Edmund. "I was just about to suggest that."

"Thank you," said Susan to the lady, forcing a smile and kicking her brother under the table. "I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening as well. We shall see you off tomorrow morning, then."

The implicit goodbye sailed gaily over their heads, dropping at last into a surprised faun's soup with a plop.

"It must be lovely to all have your own chambers, so private and separate," said Ellia with a pretty smile.

"Actually, our rooms are connected," Lucy said before anyone could stop her. "Mine and Susan's on one side of the hall, Peter's and Ed's on the other."

"Oh, is that right?" Vennicus replied vaguely. Peter and Susan glanced nervously at one another.

"Enjoy your dinner," said Ellia breezily, and the two of them floated out.

"I smell trouble," said Susan.

"You smell trouble?" Peter repeated incredulously. "You created trouble!"

"How so?"

"Well I certainly didn't invite them!"

"I didn't know they'd be this bad, Peter. Look, it was going to happen eventually anyway, and she was pretty and around your age and I thought you might actually consider it if you were surprised enough."

"Since when are you so keen to marry me off, anyway? I'm seventeen!" he complained.

"I'm not!" his sister protested. "But at some point, Peter, you're going to realize girls exist and maybe then you'll thank me for forcing you to learn to talk to them!"

"I already know how to talk to girls. I'm talking to you, aren't I?"

"I give up!" Susan cried, throwing up her hands. "Just be careful tonight. I have a feeling they haven't given up just yet, if you know what I mean."

"I don't," said Lucy.

"Good," said Edmund.

"All right, Su, I'll watch out," Peter sighed, setting his fork down. "Ugh. I can't believe it's come to this."

That night, Peter performed a very thorough check of his room before removing so much as a sock. He looked in and under the bed, in the wardrobe, behind both doors, on top of the canopy, in back of his desk, on all sides of the couch, out on the balcony, even in the fireplace and up the chimney. Only when he was satisfied that his bedroom was 100 percent safe from any potentially compromising situations did he finally undo his royal belt and begin to strip down to his royal underwear. He had fastened about half the royal buttons on his royal pajama shirt when a scream from next door shattered the silence of his empty room.

In a flash, Peter had lunged for and drawn his sword, bolting to the door and throwing it open. Never mind anyone who saw him in his royal underwear - his brother's safety came before his own dignity. With a cry of challenge, he charged into the room next door with sword aloft and eyes alight.

"Oh, thank goodness" said two voices at once. Stumbling to a halt, Peter lowered his sword in confusion. His brother was cowering behind the armchair beside his bed, the dagger he kept in his nightstand clutched in one trembling hand. On his bed, the covers were half-drawn as if he'd just been getting in, and a certain princess was blushing covering herself with his sheets, looking at Peter with big, embarrassed eyes. He opened his mouth and shut it again in what Lucy had once affectionately dubbed his "flabbergasted fish face."

"What...what..." he stammered.

"What are you waiting for?" Ellia demanded. "Aren't you going to defend my honor?"

"Aren't I going to what?" Peter repeated in disbelief.

Just then, the door out into the hallway flew open and a red-faced Lady Vennicus burst in. Her eyes quickly took in the scene - Ellia, however naked in Edmund's bed, Edmund himself behind the chair clutching his dagger, Peter brandishing Rhindon in his royal underwear.

"What villainry is this?" she cried in dramatic outrage.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, let's not jump to any..."

"...that your own brother should attempt such..."

"...now you know that's not what..."

"...I'm completely appalled! I presume you will..."

"...don't go presuming anything! He did abso..."

"...expect a public apology by morning, and full..."

"...don't be ridiculous, why would I..."

"...and a duel right this instant!"

"A duel? You must be crazy!" Peter spluttered.

"A duel!" Vennicus repeated, drawing herself up to her full height and staring him down. He gaped back.

"Why?"

"Your brother has endangered the honor of the Princess Ellia! You must challenge him to a duel to defend it."

"Yes, a duel!" the princess chimed in.

Peter let out a short, unamused laugh.

"My brother still believes in cooties, good lady; you can hardly expect me to believe that he..."

"...do not," protested Ed from the floor, but it was halfhearted.

"Shush, Ed. Look, I understand you're quite set on this suit but it simply won't happen. You can slip your naked daughter into every bed in the Cair and I still won't change my mind. I'm going to ask you kindly to leave now. My brother and I would like to get some sleep."

"And I'm actually going to ask you not so kindly," said a new voice from the doorway; Susan stood there in her nightgown, a robe draped over one arm and several of the palace guard behind her. "In fact, I'm not going to ask at all. I'm telling you now that you're leaving, and informing you that you'll be escorted."

Vennicus spluttered, but it was all she could do. Clearly, not one of the guards was even entertaining the idea that Edmund had done anything inappropriate. Recognizing defeat, she drew herself up one more time and managed to stammer out,

"I shall...I shall tell everyone that King Peter enjoys the company of men!"

He shrugged.

"If princes don't expect to be courted, spread the word."

While he and Edmund turned their backs, Susan helped Ellia into the robe she'd brought for her and soon the princess and her mother were shuffling out between two armed fauns and a satyr, heading for their own chambers.

"You know I'm not sleeping there," Edmund said after they had left, eyeing his disturbed bed.

"Why not?" asked Susan curiously.

"Cooties," said Peter.

He wasn't sure if it was that comment that did it, or if Edmund was somehow holding him responsible for the night's events, but Peter found himself sleeping on his couch that night while his little brother enjoyed the comforts of the High King's bed.

The following morning, after Edmund had prodded him awake and smacked him in the face with a cushion for good measure, Peter dressed himself and accompanied his family down to the docks to see the Princess and her entourage off. A few courtiers had gathered to pay their respects but no one was sorry to see them go. As a few centaurs loaded the last few crates of supplies on board, a lone trumpet sounded from the castle entrance to herald the arrival of the travelers, and the Pevensies turned to face them. No one in the entourage looked very pleased, though the minstrels, guards, ladies in waiting et al looked as though they might not be so sad they were leaving empty-handed as that they were leaving at all. Ellia and Vennicus looked predictably disgruntled and sulky.

"Smooth sailing," Lucy wished them kindly, smiling. They brushed past without a word, but she was unfazed.

"Better luck with someone else's brother," muttered Edmund.

While the party started up the gangplank, Lucy sighed and leaned up against Peter's shoulder a little.

"It's too bad for them, really," she said thoughtfully.

"Why's that?" asked Susan, looking over at her sister.

"If you'd gone through with everything and married Princess Ellia, Peter, Vennicus would have become a Lady of Esteem in her own court."

"What's that mean?" Edmund asked, wrinkling his nose. "And how do you know?"

"Peter was right, yesterday," Lucy explained. "King Troud has twenty-six wives; Vennicus is just one of them. But if one of their children marries well, for example to a foreign king, then they become Ladies of Esteem. Naturally that comes with a bunch of special privileges. And I asked one of the minstrels, that's how I know."

"That explains a lot," said Peter.

"Well they can go find some other king to victimize," Susan frowned. "Narnia has enough kings and queens as it is."

"Too true," her older brother muttered, shooting her a look.

"Oh, some day you'll actually want them to come running," she shot back defensively.

"Then you'll thank me."

"Yeah, but by then all he'll be getting is princes," smirked Edmund. As Peter rounded on his brother to cuff him upside the head, the Negamrian ship began to hoist sail and turn with the wind, moving to face out into the harbor. On deck, Ellia and her mother appeared to wave dutifully (if unenthusiastically) at those gathered on the dock. When Peter waved back, though, the princess abruptly made a rude hand gesture.

"You know," said Susan, arching one eyebrow. "I get the feeling that bits and pieces of that song weren't entirely accurate."

"After last night, I'd have to agree," said Peter with a grimace.

"I don't get it," said Lucy, frowning. And three voices replied as one,  
"Good."

¥¤¥

# Black Dwarfs, Blue River

*by electrum*

## Chapter One: Invitation

"This chap Brickit is being deliberately provoking."

Edmund sparked to that just as I knew he would. Anything that could vex his older brother was worth looking at in his book. Clad in loose and comfortable clothes for sleeping but looking far from ready to call it a night, he crawled across my bed so he could look over my shoulder at the letter I held.



"With handwriting like that, I agree. Are you sure you're reading it right? You're not holding it upside down, are you?"

I nudged him lightly with my elbow in response to his teasing. "Listen, will you? I'll read it."

He draped himself heavily across my shoulders and back as I struggled to make out the appalling handwriting. Clearing my throat, I read aloud:

"To Their Majesties, the newly crowned kings and queens of Narnia from Brickit, Chief Smith of the Blue River Smithy, greeting!

"Having survived one queen and all her evils and having been forced in

the past to ply our noble trade without compint . . . compensation - Oh, he can't spell, either - in the form of supplies or valuables, you will understand that we will not willingly place ourselves in the thrall of anyone sporting a crown and the supposed authority and its abuse that accompanies such rank, nor anyone who has not the nerve to face us with their request for armaments and craft but rather sends lackeys bearing parchment decorated with seals and we therefore refuse your overtures and bid you come yourselves or leave us in peace.

Signed,

Brickit, Chief Smith, Blue River Smithy"

I glanced at my brother as I finished. Edmund was staring with wide eyes at the paper. I waited in anticipation for the explosion I knew was about to come. Even as I watched his expression went from amused to indignant; I knew already what the end result of this would be. The situation would be more than Ed could resist.

"Thrall?" he finally sputtered. "Sporting?" He leaned closer and snatched the page from my hand, staring at it, turning it over, and finally he looked at me in disbelief. "This is all one sentence!"

"Told you he was being provoking." I took the letter back. "The thing is, Ed, the Blue River Smithy produces the finest weapons in Narnia. Even the smiths here at the Cair admit that, much as it pains them. We need them willing to work with us."

"They have to be Black Dwarfs," he snorted.

"Oh, yes," I agreed. I had already spoken to Blait, Chief of the Black Dwarf clan, about this Brickit fellow and the report had not been promising even by their low standards. Brickit was grouchy, crass, argumentative, highly skilled, and, just as his letter claimed, a victim of the White Witch's tyranny.

Edmund frowned, that thunderous fury he was so well known for in Finchley and which he was learning to control and apply here in Narnia darkening his expression. He did not like that we had been insulted in this fashion and he was struggling to come up with a suitable response. I let him seethe, having already worked off my (much milder) outrage at Brickit's insinuations.

"Let me see that again," he insisted, seizing the letter. His lips moved faintly as he struggled to read the sprawling script. "Come yourselves or leave us in peace," he quoted softly, savagely. He sat back on his heels and looked at me with smoldering eyes. "Well. That sounds like an invitation to me."

"Invitation? Really? Strikes me as a challenge."

He snorted. "They're Black Dwarfs. It's the same thing. I'll go."

"Go?"

"We need them, Peter. You said so yourself. I'll go to the smithy."

"What will you do?"

Casting me a haughty look, he shrugged and said, "I'll win them over with my charm."

I stared back at him. Charm? Edmund Randall Pevensie? "Lion preserve us," I muttered.

"Oh, he will, Peter. He will," Edmund reassured me. "It's the Blue River Smithy and this Brickit chap that needs to worry."

I found myself grinning, mentally agreeing and wondering if Brickit deserved an advanced warning. I considered my brother's fiercely determined manner, the steely-eyed gleam as he read the letter once again. This would be a good opportunity for him to prove himself, I felt, and really, he was the best one of us to take on a pack of obnoxious Dwarfs. I settled back as he fumed and planned, watching him in silent satisfaction and delight.

Mission accomplished.

§§§

"You think a week is enough?"

Edmund snorted. "I'm sure it will be more than enough for me, Peter."

"I wish you'd at least take Martil along to look after you," I said, slowly folding the tunics he'd tossed on my bed as he packed a few things.

"I know you do, but a week on my own will do me good. Besides, I'm sure he could use a break from me."

I made a little sound of disagreement. Our valets loved to fuss and fret over us. As near as I could figure, it was their whole purpose in life.

My fellow king paused in his packing to gaze at me from across the bed. He knew me too well. "Peter . . . don't worry. I'll be home soon. If I can't win them over we'll send Lucy after them next."

I laughed, a little reassured. It was only a week, after all.

"Lucy could charm a hag into submission," continued Edmund, shoving clothes and supplies into the saddle bags ranged across the coverlet. He buckled on his sword as I straightened out the contents of the nearest bag, slipping in a letter Susan and Lucy had prepared for him to find. I tied it closed and slung it over my shoulder.

"Come on, the girls are waiting to say goodbye."

He paused, smiling. "I'll miss you, too."

¥¤¥

## Chapter Two: Arrival

"This is it?"

I felt my jaw drop. I'm sure I expected something along the line of the blacksmith shops in Cair Paravel - tidy affairs with well-organized ranks of tools and supplies and masters and apprentices. What I got was something entirely different.

"The Blue River Smithy," said my Satyr escort in an uninspired tone. He cast an equally dubious eye at the ancient and ignored slate-roofed structures before us. There were half a dozen buildings that seemed to melt into the hilly riverbanks or got swallowed whole by the ancient trees of the forest. It was a dreary place and I reminded myself - not for the first time - that I had given myself a week to get through to these Dwarfs. Seven days. A sennight. I could endure this place for that long, I was sure. It couldn't be any worse than my old school, except perhaps for the food.

Mayhap it looked better in the daylight. Or in the summer. It was hard to imagine so unpromising a location producing the best weapons in Narnia, and therefore the world. The damp twilight of spring was upon us as we dismounted and I led Phillip and the few guards with me towards the little settlement. There were voices - more odious than melodious - rising up in song from a thatch-roofed long house on the edge of the clearing. Light spilled through the thick glass windows and I gathered the entire population had come together for their evening meal. Leaving Phillip with my escort, I boldly strode through the smithy. No challenge rose up as I approached and knocked.

The voices didn't stop. If anything, they got louder. I felt a growl rise up in my throat. I was tired and hungry and disappointed. I knocked harder.

Nothing.

Furious, I banged on the door with my fist.

The singing mercifully stopped and a moment later the door was yanked open. Inside was brightly lit and I caught a quick glimpse of carved beams, wooden benches, and dozens of black-haired Dwarfs of all ages ranged around a table that ran almost the length of the room. A blast of warm air and the smell of smoke and beer reached me.

"What?" demanded the bristling, wire-haired Dwarf before me. He was almost my height and he stood with his legs splayed and his hands on his hips. By his affected, imposing manner and the fact that he answered the door, I knew this was the Chief Smith. Blait had explained that greeting newcomers was the privilege of whoever headed a Dwarfish community. The manner of greeting, of course, was left to the discretion of the particular branch of the clan. Clearly this was the Blue River equivalent of making a strange traveler feel wanted. I pushed right past him into the room, ducking my head under a beam until I could stand straight.

"Hey there!" he sputtered. "You can't just come in like that!"

"Be you so civilized that you prefer I use a window?" I returned, peeling off my gloves. I bowed politely to an elderly dame and a handful of daughters. "My ladies. Aslan's blessing upon you, fair ones." The delighted girls giggled in response and the dame chuckled with amusement at this show of civility. Obviously courtly manners were in short supply here. All the better.

The Chief rushed around to place himself between me and the table once again. "Who said you could come in at all?"

I pointedly ignored him, casting my gaze around the snug room before addressing him. "You did."

He snorted. "I'd never ask some scrawny spawn of your ilk into my home!"

"Really?" I drew the letter from the pouch at my waist. "This appalling example of penmanship says otherwise. Shall I remind you of your own words?" Without waiting for a response I opened it and read, ". . . we therefore refuse your overtures and bid you come yourselves or leave us in peace. Signed Brickit, Chief Smith." I glared at him. "Leaving you in peace was not an option after such a warm and open invitation. So." I folded it away. "Here I am."

"And who are you?" challenged the Dwarf, at the end of his patience. He was clearly astonished that his challenge had been taken up. Blait had warned me that I could not expect a polite reception and that I had to offer as much abuse as I received in order to gain any standing in the eyes of the Chief. That, for me, was not a problem. I already knew I could handle Brickit and I'd already won over the ladies.

I looked at the smith as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I'm Edmund." I waited, then slowly enunciated as if speaking to an idiot. "Your king."

"Narnia's king, maybe, but not mine, boy!" he bristled, pointing a stubby finger at me. "What do you want?"

"Your good will."

That took him aback. He drew himself up to his full height and glared from beneath his shaggy eyebrows. He had shining, deep-set black eyes and a permanent scowl. Gazing at him, I sensed a familiar hurt. Once upon a time, his trust had been warped and used against him. Perhaps it had been Jadis' manipulations, perhaps he had been betrayed by

family or friends. Either way he bore the scars upon his spirit, making him wary and defensive. That I could understand. All too well.

"Such things are not given," he hissed, poking me in the chest.

"Not if they're worth anything, no," I agreed, leaning into his touch and disarming him further. "They're earned. Hence my reason for coming here."

He stared. There was not a sound from any of the expectant and highly entertained Dwarfs around the table. I dropped my gloves onto the closest bench and removed my cloak, claiming some territory by laying it over the seat. I turned to this Brickit chap with a faint smile.

"So when do I start?"

¥¤¥

### **Chapter Three: Bitter**

I spent a miserable night on a lumpy pallet in a smoky little chamber. The Dwarfs, Brickit especially, did not know what to make of me and I made little or no effort to enlighten them. Phillip and my escort I dismissed the next morning. Much as I would have liked them to stay, their presence would have hindered my progress with my oh-so-charming host and I suspected I would be too sorely tempted to ride off on Phillip before I managed to accomplish anything here. Phillip was very reluctant to go, but he left only after I agreed to send a courier to find him if the Dwarfs got out of hand. Since I had not brought any couriers with me, the good Horse contacted a local family of Fruit Bats that were willing to carry messages for me.

"All your baby sitters run off?" teased one of the Dwarfs as I stepped alone into the long house for breakfast. The Dwarfs were bustling about and seemed incapable of doing anything quietly. Luckily I had been up for a while. I am not the best company in the early morn.

"No," I returned. "I dismissed them. I didn't want you to feel frightened."

The old dame laughed, setting a plate of food before me and pouring me something dark to drink. I thanked her warmly and bid her good morn.

"You like beer?" demanded my companion.

I tasted the bitter stuff in my cup. It was positively grainy on my tongue. "Yes, I do. What is this?" I stared into the liquid's murky depths, hoping this wasn't what they meant by beer.

"Ha!" yelled a new voice. Brickit strode in. "That's one for the tadpole, Brint!"

"My name," I said, "is Edmund."

Brickit snorted. "Not even a tadpole, this one. Spawn you are."

I ignored him and attacked the plate of eggs and toast.

He dropped heavily beside me. Sandwiched between Brint and Brickit, I realized they must be brothers or close cousins for they looked much alike and had the same mannerisms. Brickit reached right across me to snag a piece of toast from Brint's plate. "You speak as if I should care about such things, whelp!"

"What do you care about?"

With a hardened sneer he reached for his belt. On the table before me he set a double-bladed dagger of exquisite and intricate workmanship. The metal shone with a silvery blue tint, the keen edge flashing in the faint light. It was as elegant as it was beautiful.

"Steel," Brickit hissed. "The finest, purest metal in all of Narnia. Its secret is mine and my family's. Take it in your hand, Spawn. You'll never hold better."

I obeyed. The knife was a little unbalanced for my larger hand and longer fingers, but even my inexperienced eye could tell it was a weapon unparalleled.

"It's beautiful," I said, setting it down again. My admiration pleased them. After a moment of deep consideration Brickit demanded,

"So. You're here. Barely invited. A burden to us all. What do you intend?"

"I intend to secure your good will, as I said. You care about steel and metalwork; I care about Narnia and her defenses. The better the weapons, the better the defense."

He huffed and Brint faintly echoed the sound. "Huh. What's that to me?"

"Everything if you want to keep working your craft in peace."

He shrugged. "Peace I had until last night when you darkened my doorstep."

I smirked, tasting that awful beer again and wondering if it was possible to grow used to something so bitter. "Peace you have because the White Witch was overthrown last Sunbend."

Brickit glowered, though at me or his memories I could not say. There was no denying the truth of my words.

"Would you prefer the rank and file of Narnia's soldiers to depend upon inferior weapons? Because even the smiths at Cair Paravel very grudgingly admit that Blue River steel is superior to theirs."

"Ha! And well they might!" crowed the Dwarfs, pounding the table in delight.

"Spy!" decided Brint, pointing at me. "He's a spy for them eastern smiths!"

Not even Brickit could support so outrageous a claim. When I rolled my eyes at the accusation he imitated the gesture. The old dame passed by with more 'beer' and swatted Brint in the head and snapped,

"He's a king, ain't he? Kings have no cause to spy and why should he when all he wants is weapons?" She glared at Brickit. "You listen a'him well, Chief Smith Brickit, and keep your tongue behind your thoughts."

I realized this must be their mother because neither Dwarf dared make an answer. We waited in cowed silence until she bustled away and then the interview continued.

"So what is it you and these other lofty monarchs of Narnia wish of my lowly smithy?"

"If I were so lofty then I wouldn't be sitting here and if you were so lowly then I really wouldn't be sitting here," I replied.

"What do you want of us?"

"We want you to make us weapons. Swords, armor, lances, knives, and so on. We simply ask that you work for us and with us. You'll be well paid."

"I should expect so. Is this 'we' the four of you or the royal we?"

"I'll let you choose."

"How do I know you're any better than her late majesty?"

I swallowed, taking a moment before I made my reply. "Did she come to you herself? Did she ask or did she threaten? Did she give you any reason under the stars to trust her?"

"No," he admitted. "But then you haven't given me a reason to trust you, either."

I thought of pointing out how being here at all, alone, armed only with Shafelm and that back on my pallet, were blazing shows of trust on my part and my siblings', especially Peter's. Instead I said, "Then tell me how I can give you reason."

He gave me an assessing glare. "Afraid of a little dirt, Your Majesty? Can kings work?"

I gave the look right back. "Try me."

¥¤¥

## Chapter Four: Trying

Blessed Aslan, I never knew a person could be so worn out. Lock me in the training grounds with Kanell and Oreius any day over being the poor brute that has to clean not only a blast furnace but the oven for tempering coal as well. Dirtier, dustier, greasier, smellier tasks cannot be imagined. I scrubbed and scraped stone-lined walls and hauled away barrow after barrow of ash and grit. By the end of the day I was regretting not bringing Martil as I emerged from the oven coated with a sticky, tar-like byproduct of coke, with a layer of ash atop that. I reeked of smoke and burnt oil. My clothes were a complete loss and my boots had gone from maroon leather to a nasty patchwork of black soot and sticky tar and dirt. To top it off, it was a cold, rainy day and perfectly miserable in every respect. I must have looked a sight, because the entire settlement turned out to see me when I was done. Brickit, who had assigned me these jobs with a wicked gleam in his beady eyes because he knew I couldn't back down, thrust his frizzy head into the oven to inspect my work.

"Not as clean as it could be," he muttered, shaking his head.

I was sorely tempted to hit him over the head with the bucket I carried, but that would not have secured me anything but an even crankier Dwarf with a concussion. Another annoying factor in all this was that all the brushes and brooms and shovels I had used today were scaled down to a Dwarf's size, effectively doubling the workload, so I considered the bucket inadequate for my intent.

"I'd like to see you do better," I said, setting down the bucket to keep temptation at bay.

"I'm sure you would, but the Chief Smithy does not engage in such lowly tasks as scraping tar off of ovens. We reserve that job for tadpoles and spawn and visiting kings."

I stepped away from the bucket.

"Still," he muttered, eyeing me, "it could be done worse considering this oven hasn't been cleaned in years."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Mmm. Ovens really don't need to be cleaned. Easier to just build new ones when they get this clogged up."

I gave him my deadliest glare.

He smiled, delighted with having infuriated me. "Besides, we just trade with our cousins in the Moon Mountains for coke these days. It's much easier than making our own."

I looked longingly at the bucket as I collected myself. I banished fantasies of cracking him over the head and forced myself to adopt a pleasant expression and voice. "So you're saying all this work was for naught."

"Not the blast furnace, which could have been cleaner."

Temper, Ed, I heard Susan's soft voice in my mind. Temper indeed! It was boiling, but if I blew up now I'd just be giving Brickit what he wanted. The Dwarf was positively glowing with smugness.

"Shall I remind you of your own words?" quoth he with a little too much glee. "Try me."

By the unspoken rules of such combat, I had to concede his victory. Still, I wasn't going to go down without a fight and there was no way I was leaving the field without drawing some blood of my own. Victory may be his, but it would not be complete.

"Well done," I replied. "Do keep trying, Chief Smith."

§§§

All I wanted to do was collapse on that lumpy, so-called bed they had given me and not wake up for a week. My arms ached and my knees were sore from crouching and kneeling. My head was pounding from the stench and fumes. Still, I was too filthy to sleep comfortably without washing up. I pulled out the saddle bags that held my supplies and hunted for some soap. It was then that I found the note tucked in amidst my extra clothes. It was addressed to me and I recognized Susan's handwriting. I sat down on the floor, gingerly stretching out my legs, and broke the wax seal to read:

*Dearest Edmund,*

*Aslan's blessing upon you, brother, and this mission you've undertaken. I know it won't, can't be easy, but don't lose sight of what it will mean for us and Narnia in the end. And for you as well! Look for a balance between their needs and wants, and ours. It's there, you just have to find it, and when you do, nourish it.*

*Don't worry about Peter worrying about you. Lucy and I will keep him busy.*

*With much love,*

*Susan*

I smiled. Asking Peter not to worry was like asking the sun not to rise or the winds not to blow. It was as much a part of him as his protectiveness and his big feet. Beneath Susan's note, written in bright green ink, was Lucy's rougher script. She had yet to master the quill and I smiled at the smudges here and there in her note.

*Dear Ed,*

*By the time you've found this you'll have left Cair Paravel, but I as I'm writing it you're still here and I miss you already. I'm wishing you were back before you've left. I know what you're doing is very important, but please don't push yourself too hard. I know you don't think you do, but you do. Trust me on that. Just do your best and I'm sure the Dwarfs will be very nice. I've been told Black Dwarfs can be grumpy, but then you can be grumpy and nice, too.*

*Love,*

*Lucy*

*P.S. Susan's right, we'll keep Peter too busy to worry!*

I sighed, pleased that they had written this and glad I hadn't found it on the journey to the Blue River. I knew I had their support but it was nice to have that backed up in writing, especially after such a trying day. I read it again, wondering at Susan's words. And for you as well. What did she know that I didn't? I was trying to prove myself, that I knew, but to whom?

I leaned back, too tired to think or move as exhaustion settled in upon me. I fell asleep where I sat, still filthy and reeking from my first, rather awful day as a diplomat.

¥¤¥

## **Chapter Five: Sparks**

"Why is he sleeping on the floor?"

"Maybe boys don't sleep in beds or he doesn't like his."

"Do you think he went to sit down and missed?"

"Quiet, Brack! He'll wake up!"

"That's only why Gran sent us here, Baia!"

Voices - young voices - penetrated the thick, heavily reinforced walls of sleep that protected me from the world and the world from me. I ignored them, desperate to go on dreaming of a hot bath.

"But he's so tired! He fell asleep in his work clothes! Gran would let him sleep!"

"Gran's not the Chief Smith any more, is she? Come on, we have to wake him or Uncle Brickit will be angry."

My shoulder was seized and I was shaken a little too roughly for manners. I woke up all at once and with a savage growl, my right hand going for my left hip even though my sword was hung on the wall. I swung at the hand on my shoulder at the same time, knocking someone away and shouting something incomprehensible to anyone, myself included. Two small shrieks rang out and there was a tramping of feet as my visitors . . . attackers . . . awakeners ran off.

I let out a groan as I forced my eyes open and my situation came back to me in one great and unwelcome rush. I was still seated next to the pallet. Every muscle in my body seemed

to have seized up and cramped simultaneously. I had the most horrid taste in my mouth and when my stomach gave a growl I realized I hadn't eaten since the midday meal yesterday. When I tried to move I discovered the tarry stuff I'd gotten all over myself had solidified and cracked. I hadn't even removed my boots. I dropped my head back with another groan, longing to just drop back into sleep and suspecting it was futile. I was awake and I was not happy about it.

That's not to say I dislike the morning. I like it very well. I just dislike being woken up. Peter knew, from years of trial and error, how to go about it best: a poke here, a call there, a pillow whipped across the room. Grabbing me and shaking me is not the wisest course of action.

With effort I stood and made my stumbling way to the wash basin. I didn't dare look in the mirror - not that my bleary eyes could focus so well yet - and I splashed icy water on my face. It didn't help and in moments the water was too filthy to use. There was nothing else for it. I had to wash in the river despite the temperature. Muttering under my breath, I took soap, took a towel, forgot clean clothes, and shuffled out into the damp morning air and straight into Brint.

Hands on hips, his features twisted into a scowl, his surly crossness was not nearly as impressive as his brother's. He looked about to upbraid me for my rude awakening but before he could draw breath, I let out a vicious sound between a hiss and a growl that shut him up and made him take a step back. I was almost at the edge of the compound when he finally sputtered at my back,

"And a good morn to you, too, Spawn!"

§§§

By the time I made it to the long house, breakfast was almost over and word of my conduct had spread throughout the smithy. By the heaping plate of food the old dame set before me and the pinch she gave my cheek as I thanked her, I gathered I had either impressed or intimidated the lot of them. Seeing as how she smiled and the men tried to suppress their laughs, I suspected it was the former case. Still, I needed to apologize to my unfortunate victims. Well, the children sent to rouse me, anyway.

"Do you always wake up so well?"

I looked up to see Brickit standing across from me. I noticed he kept the table between us. Perhaps I had intimidated them.

"Not always so well," I replied, telling the truth. I took a mouthful of that awful 'beer' and he laughed as I grimaced. With effort I swallowed the stuff and asked, "So what will I do today?"

Shrewdly, he scrutinized me. "Today . . . you run coal."

I had no idea what that meant, but I did not like the sound of it any more than I trusted his smug grin. I dared not sigh out loud, but I knew full well I was in for another exhausting day. I could only hope I'd have enough energy left to make it as far as my bed.

§§§

At least I couldn't complain about being cold today, because I spent most of time next to a furnace. I was assigned to a team of four Dwarfs - a master smith and three apprentices -

and it was my job to fetch and carry. We worked in a structure with only two walls and a roof, one of four such buildings that comprised the heart of the smithy. Initially the Dwarfs were all churlish and rude, but as the work started in earnest there was no time for bad manners.

The work they were doing fascinated me - they were forging spearheads and it was amazing to see the plain metal being turned into beautiful, shining points. Somehow they were able to make each one exactly the same. The ring of the hammers and the hiss of steam mixed with their voices and the roar of the fires blended into an odd sort of music and I enjoyed the day even though I could not watch as much as I wanted to.

"Coal!" snapped the Master and I tore myself away to shovel more coal into the furnace. It was dusty, sweaty work, though I had to keep my leather jerkin on to protect against the flying sparks. None of them resisted the impulse to call me Spawn, though when I didn't respond they all learned my name quickly enough.

More sparks flew at the end of the day. Brickit came by to inspect the two dozen spear points that had been produced in our little corner of the smithy and he grunted with approval at the wares laid before him. He found a flawed one that got tossed into the heap of shavings and bits to get reworked. I was eager to see why he had rejected it and I strained for a glimpse of it. Catching sight of my intense interest, he picked it up again.

"See here?" he pointed to a wrinkle in the shaft. "Looks like a caterpillar? Uneven blending of steel. Apprentice work, that. If this were to break, it would happen here. But," he tossed the spearhead back into the scrap heap, "it won't get the chance. Restock the coal then put up your shovel and barrow, Spawn. You can clean out the ash in the morn when it's cooled. The rest of you, clean up!"

I nodded my thanks, surprised at being dismissed so lightly but anxious to go wash. I was done in minutes, a few barrowfuls of coal sufficing to refill the bin. As I put the shovel back on its hook one of the apprentices called,

"You! Put these tools away. Make sure they're cleaned!"

"Aye," another added, "and give the floor a good sweep."

I turned and faced them. The Master had already left and it was just me and three Dwarfs twice or thrice my age and not quite my size. I recognized their bullying tactics all too well and I knew I had to end this right here and now.

"I don't think so," I said. "I'm here to do my own job, not mine and yours. If you're so lazy that you don't wish to do your own work, then don't. I believe the Master and Chief Smith will know who's responsible for what."

And without another word I left, well satisfied with the day.

¥¤¥

## Chapter Six: Colors

"See? He slept in the bed this time!"

"Brack, do you think he'll shout again?"

"Maybe. I hope. Papa said he didn't talk for almost an hour after he woke up."

"Maybe he couldn't."

"He might just like to growl like the talking Bears over in the Lantern Waste!"

Why, why, why wouldn't they let me sleep? I lifted my head with a moan and I was rewarded with muffled giggles. I finally spotted my tormentors: a boy and a girl, both very young, both very small. I muttered something unintelligible and dropped back down on the poor excuse for a pillow beneath my head.

"Time to get up, Edmund!" said the boy, giving me a shake. I swatted back in a futile attack and forced my eyes open just to glare at him. It rather lost the effect when I shifted a bit and almost fell off the pallet.

"He's up! Come on, Baia!"

Up. Brack said that so easily. When I got home I was going to sleep for a week. A month. I slowly pushed myself to a sitting position and I was surprised to see the little girl standing beside the bed studying me.

"Good morn," I rasped, barely human at this hour. I swung my legs over the edge of the pallet and jarred my feet. I kept forgetting how close to the ground the beds were here.  
"Ow."

She bobbed a little curtsy. "Good morn. Your hair is mussed."

"Hnnn?"

She went over to the dressing stand and came back with my comb, handing it to me expectantly. I sighed, dragging it through my hair once or twice.

"Better?"

"No."

I handed the comb back. "You fix it."

She obliged, spending a few moments making me more presentable. I leaned heavily into my hand so she could reach my hair and tried to stay awake.

"What is your name, my lady?" I asked.

She giggled at being called lady. "I'm Baia."

"My name is Edmund."

She found a knot amidst my tangled hair and tackled it enthusiastically. The pain of having hair ripped out of my head went far towards waking me. "I know. Are you really the king of Narnia?"

"I'm a king of Narnia. My brother Peter is king, too."

"Does he look like you?"

"Not really. Peter looks like our father and I look like our mother. His hair is yellow and his eyes are blue and he's taller than me."

"Yellow?" She sounded horrified and I supposed she had only ever seen dark hair all her life. "His hair?"

"Yes, goldish-yellow. It suits him. He's very nice," I added, feeling a need to champion him. "Nicer than me. At least in the mornings." That last I muttered, and Baia smiled at my tremendous yawn before growing serious. I then found myself the subject of a long and intense examination, and through bleary eyes I returned the favor. Baia had very large, brown eyes and straight black hair hanging in a braid down her back. She was rather cute and it was nice to converse without having to constantly defend myself.

"Are you done growing? You're the tallest person I've ever seen besides the Dryads in the elm trees."

"Not yet. I'm not a Black Dwarf, you know. I'm a boy. We can grow quite tall. At least I hope I do," I confessed.

"I thought you were grown up already. You're tall and you talk like a grown up."

"I suppose I do," I agreed. "It comes from being a king and being blessed by Aslan and talking to a lot of different types of people. I have some strict teachers, too. One of them teaches me how to speak and how to argue."

She blinked. "He's a good teacher."

§§§

My day was very similar to the one before except for the fact that two out of three apprentices tried to make my life difficult. They left things in my path and one of them, Bort, wasted a lot of time trying to trip me. My training under Cair Paravel's three sword masters stood me in good stead and I dodged their traps and ambushes easily enough. The Master caught on to their shenanigans when he tripped over a set of tongs and planted his bearded face into the sand floor. The third apprentice, the only girl in the group, brushed the sand from his beard and quietly advised him that one of her peers had deliberately set it there and why. What followed was a rather spectacular explosion of curses, oaths, threats (some of which were carried out on the spot with my coal shovel), shouts, and sundry other displays of fury that disrupted and amused the entire smithy.

I was very impressed by the Master's vocabulary and his sense of what was right, though I wasn't sure if he'd have behaved quite so quickly if I wasn't a guest of sorts and a king. Later, when I got to know him better, I was happy to learn that he would have responded so loudly regardless. Black Dwarfs may be caustic, rude, and obnoxious but that doesn't mean they tolerate unjust conduct or condone bullies.

"And Edmund! Don't hesitate to crack them in the head as I have done if they disobey the rules of conduct again!" Handing me back the shovel, he rounded on the hapless pair of apprentices. "This is a smithy, not a playpen for children! If you want to play games, go back to your homes at the Caldron and bother me no more!"

Thus ended the tirade that left Bort and his comrade quaking in their boots. It made for a satisfying afternoon and thereafter they left me alone. I still fetched and carried and they could still call for coal and water and supplies, but they did their own work and dared not murmur about it.

Later in the day I was returning from the river lugging two buckets of water (and for once I was glad the buckets were small and therefore not so heavy) when I noticed something that gave me pause. I set my burdens down to rest my sore arms and stared across the compound where another master smith and apprentices were sharpening and shaping

some axe blades on grinding wheels. Long streams of sparks flew off the union of metal and stone like fireworks.

"Now what?" demanded Brickit, striding across the compound towards me and waving his arms in annoyance. "Haven't you caused enough trouble for one day, Spawn?"

I ignored his rudeness and kept staring. "The sparks are different."

"What?"

I pointed. "The sparks are different. On the middle wheel they're long and white but on the other wheels they're shorter and red. Why?"

My observation momentarily startled him, but he hid it quickly. "Cast iron and steel, boy. Soft metal gives a longer, lighter spark. Dense metal has short, red sparks. I'm surprised you noticed."

It was my turn to share that feeling. "Why?" I returned. "I'm here to learn."

He snorted. "What about securing my good will?"

I smiled and picked up the buckets. "Isn't that the same thing?"

¥¤¥

## Chapter Seven: Letters

*Dear Ed,*

*Sorry to bother you while you're charming the Dwarfs, but the Weavers' Guild from Anvard and Chiya-by-the-Sea got here sooner than anyone anticipated - two days after you left - and we got right into negotiations since the Sheep and Alpaca and all the other Narnain representatives were present and eating up the evergreens in the formal garden. We reached an agreement after three days (who knew dyes and wool could be so valuable?) but then the Weaver's Guild got stubborn and insisted that they needed the agreement of all the monarchs on the document to legitimize it. Personally I think they just want it for show, but could you sign this copy of the agreement and write me up something authorizing me to put your seal on it? The Guild members aren't a bad lot, but they keep looking behind the tapestries and moving the carpets and if Oreius trips one more time on a rolled-up rug I think we'll be minus a weaver or two. Some of them brought their families, too, and one of the little girls tried to pick up that big Rabbit buck, Lt. Porida, and carry him around. It was not good. If nothing else, do it to save the garden because the Dryads have taken to swatting the Angora Goats if they get too close.*

*I hope things are going well with your own negotiations and there hasn't been any bloodshed. The girls are driving me mad. They won't leave me alone and I can't get any studying done. Speaking of girls, Blait found me yesterday with a belated suggestion for you to try to win over the women of the smithy. I suppose it's some unspoken secret in Dwarfish circles, but the women have a great deal of authority and influence over the menfolk and if the ladies like you that will go far towards to bringing the men around. He mentioned something about being served bad food and cold beds and no laundry getting done when the women are not pleased, so if you're in need of allies, look to the ladies.*

*Hurry home. I miss you. It's two against one and quiet moments are a thing of the past. I even miss your snoring.*

*Love,*

*Peter*

I smiled faintly as I finished the letter, then I looked up to the Centaur officer before me. He and a handful of swift-moving soldiers had clattered into the smithy at a dead run a little after the midday meal to deliver Peter's letter of two days ago. My appearance had shocked them almost as much as the fact that I was shoveling coal for anxious Dwarfs that bellowed and shouted during some vital point in producing wire. The Centaurs had to wait beneath their brilliant lion banner until the master saw fit to dismiss me and now they were trying hard not to be scandalized at the sight of a king blackened with coal dust and ash.

"The agreement with the Weavers' Guild," the lieutenant said, producing another document.

"Not with these hands," I replied, displaying my filthy palms. Peter's letter was covered with smudges and I could feel the grit coating me. "Let me wash up first."

"Oi!" demanded a familiar voice. "Oi, where you think you're going, Spawn?"

The towering Centaur and Elk soldiers looked with interest and amusement as Brickit stomped over in a fit of fury. I stopped and turned as the Chief Smith cast the little band a sneer. His face was red and his frizzy hair stuck out at odd angles and he was positively dancing with pent-up rage.

"There's work as needs being done!" he sputtered, clearly showing off before the army.

"The master dismissed me for the now, Brickit. I have some royal duties to attend to and a letter to write for the High King."

"What, he can't write his own?"

I displayed Peter's letter. "He writes quite well, Chief Smith. Far better than you. I just have to read and sign a trade agreement and authorize him to use my seal. Is that so difficult?"

"Yes."

I knew that would be his response. He had worked himself into quite the foul mood and he planted himself right before me.

"Wire won't shovel coal!"

"Then let Bort do it!" I said just as loudly. "And seeing as how I need a witness to my signing the agreement and authorizing Peter to make use of my royal seal, I hereby appoint you."

I stalked over to the trough where we all washed up at the end of the day. I hastily scrubbed my arms and hands clean and ducked my head in the cold water to work some of the dust out of my hair. Only then did I take the agreement from the lieutenant. I looked to the Dwarf.

"Coming?"

"You think that by having some fancy-pants soldiers show up uninvited and unwanted and trampling through this smithy you can start ordering a Dwarf around in his own home? I think not!"

"Centaur's don't wear pants, sir, and royal appointments, no matter how brief, are not given lightly." I lowered my voice and leaned close. "Unless you want to feed four Centaur's, Brickit, give me half an hour and they'll be out of your beard. I need two signatures out of you. Wouldn't you like to see your signature on a trade agreement with Archenland?"

I'm not sure which appeal reached him - feeding Centaur's or signing official documents - but he drew himself up to his full height and snapped,

"Fine! Fine! So long as this is the last we see of them. Fine!"

"Thank you," I replied. "Lieutenant, have you paper and ink?"

"Aye, majesty," he said, and he slid a small satchel off his shoulder and handed it to me. "Queen Susan sent this for you."

I opened it up. Inside was paper, Gryphon quills, and a small bottle of ink.

"Bit of a hint, that," commented Brickit sarcastically, peering in at the gift.

"Rather," I agreed. "Wait here, sirs."

§§§

*"I, Spawn, by the grace of Aslan, sometimes called the Just, King of Narnia and Knight of the Most Noble Order of the Table, hereby grant and authorize my elder brother, High King Peter, sometimes called the Magnificent, Knight of the Most Noble Order of the Lion, Emperor of the Lone Islands, etc., the right and authority to affix my royal seal upon the trade agreement with the Weavers' Guild of Anvard and Chiya-by-the-Sea dated the twenty-first day of Mayblossom, 1001. Signed by me and witnessed by Brickit, Chief Smith of the Blue River Smithy on the banks of the Blue River by Aundroe Pass."*

"I know what it says, Brickit, I just wrote it."

"La, very fancily wrote. Too bad you can't spell your own name, boy."

I suspected he was rather tickled to have his signature affixed to something so official sounding because it was the third time he'd read it aloud, each time replacing my name with his nickname for me. I was too absorbed in reading the agreement to pay him much heed. Peter was right about dyes and wool being valuable. No wonder the cashmere and angora Goats was so smug about their wares.

"What's the etcetera?"

"What?" I looked up.

"Etcetera. What else is this Peter?"

He spoke my brother's name with unwarranted contempt, probably because I was here and Peter wasn't. I blinked, my mind on textiles, not titles. "Um . . . Lord of Cair Paravel, Guardian of the Northern Marches, Master of Redhaven, Grand Duke of Terebinthia and . . ." I wracked my memory for the last of Peter's numerous titles. "Keeper of the Lion's Seal."

"How come you don't have so many titles?"

"I'm more fortunate than Peter is." I failed to mention that I had more titles than I'd listed. I just stuck to the ones most important to us both. Most of them were just for show, anyway. I finished my study of the trade agreement and seizing the quill, I signed my name to it. "Here," I said, sliding the parchment over. "Sign right here."

He complied, writing very large and looking very satisfied. I set the sheet aside for the ink to dry.

"Thank you. I'll be back to work in a few minutes."

"See that you are, Spawn."

I waited until he was gone, then I hastily wrote a letter of my own.

*Dear Peter,*

*If I ever attempt anything like this again, have the goodness to stuff me into a sack and not let me out until sanity returns. A week? What was I thinking? Lion's mane, brother, it will take a lifetime to get through to these Dwarfs! Brickit is everything Blait warned us he would be. I've been working here in the smithy doing the drudge work and picking up bits and pieces of how they work metal - they're remarkable craftsmen even if their beer is just a step away from something poisonous. I think they're a good people overall, just cautious because they've been hurt in the past.*

*As for the advice, I think I won the good ladies over from the start. It's amazing how far manners will take you and Brickit's niece has appointed herself my awakener, brave girl that she is. And as for our dear sisters, they worry about you worrying about me, so don't and they'll leave you alone.*

*I want to succeed here, Peter. I can't back down or they'll never trust us or work with us. I promise I'll write some more soon, but I must get back to the smithy. We're making wire. I miss you and the girls and Martil and decent food and my bed.*

*Love,*

*Ed*

*P.S. I do not snore.*

¥¤¥

## **Chapter Eight: Gran**

I had to be reminded in the morning that it was Seventhday. I had no idea of what it meant for the Blue River Smithy, but in Cair Paravel my brother and sisters would linger in bed, linger over breakfast, and unless there were any pressing duties, do whatever they chose with the day. I suspected I would not be allowed such liberties.

Sitting in my usual seat at the long table, I took a few moments to watch the Dwarfs as they interacted. Families sat together or close by one another (Baia and Brack sat between Brint and their sharp-faced mother) and while there was a great deal of grumbling going on at all times, it was good-natured and lovingly meant. I noticed that younger girls served the apprentices that were more distantly related, but Brickit's mother made the trip down the length of the table to set a plate before me herself.

I rose to greet her. "Good morn to you, lady, and thank you," I said, taking the warm plate of food: eggs, sausage, mushrooms, all topped with an apple fritter. She smiled and poured me a cup of that brutal beer.

"Eat afore it's cold, Majesty."

"Please, call me Edmund. Most everyone else does."

Her dark eyes sparkled with amusement. "Aye, except them as wastes their breath calling you Spawn. You can call me Gran, as most everyone does."

I smiled. "That seems too short a title for a grand old dame such as you, but Gran it is, lady."

She chuckled and swatted at me to get on with my meal. I sat down and set to the hot food with good appetite. It was a few minutes before I looked around again. I saw Gran take a seat by Brickit and I wondered that he seemed to have no wife and family besides his mother and brother. I think he would have liked to have children though I was certain he'd do nothing but complain about them endlessly. Family was extremely important to Dwarfs of both the Black and Red clans and children were one of the few things they treasured above gold and jewels.

I finished every last bit of food (Dwarfish plates being disappointingly small) and I was trying to drink the beer without tasting it when Brickit dropped into the seat beside me so abruptly I choked on my mouthful. He gave me a few sharp whacks on the back that almost knocked me into the table as I struggled to recover.

"You won't win any good will by dyin' on us," he grumbled, dropping a plate of fritters before me. "Well, maybe some. Eat. Mother says you're too thin."

His mother must be in league with Susan, then, because she has the same complaint. I happily speared one of the treats and set to, pushing the plate towards Brickit. He gave me a look, then took one.

"I don't know what you do in your palace on Seventhday, but we poor smiths can't not work. There'll be no smithing going on, but there's plenty to keep one's hands busy."

I chewed and swallowed. "Of course. What can I do?"

He grinned and snagged another fritter as he rose. "Whatever my mother tells you."

§§§

As it turned out, I had a very good day helping Gran and I learned a great deal on more subjects than I ever expected. It was pleasant not to be yelled at every few minutes even if I had to fetch water and wash dishes and peel enough potatoes to feed thirty-four Dwarfs and one boy.

"Thank you for the extra fritters this morn," I said as soon as I stood before her.

"You need them. Here now, sit you down and take this knife and see you don't waste too much in the peelin'."

I complied, memories of helping my own mother in the kitchen standing me in good stead, because my efforts satisfied her and the other ladies as they prepared the evening meal. On Seventhday they only ate twice, in the morning and then an early supper so that the cooks could have time off.

"He's trying you again," Gran said, bringing her stool close to mine. She carried a great armload of wild fresney and she immediately began to cut the pale new greens from the roots. "Most menfolk, they'd be shamed to be at a woman's beck and call unless she was a master smith."

"I have sisters," I offered as my defense, "I don't mind." I watched her for a moment, taking in her iron-gray hair peeking out beneath her mobcap and her deeply lined face. "Baia said you were once Chief Smith."

"That I was until I couldn't swing a hammer strong enough to do justice to the craft. That was . . . twenty winters or so ago. We were waiting long for you and your kin."

"What was it like? I mean the Winter?"

"Hard. Hard on life. Hard on spirits. We were luckier than most Animals, being able to trade more. A few we helped, but most assumed we worked for her and kept a distance."

I was silent, sorry I had asked, ashamed of the question that rose in my mind that I dared not ask.

Gran looked at me. "We didn't want to. We wanted to work our smithy in peace, but peace there was none. It was right after Brickit stepped in as Chief Smith that they came, demanding weapons and armor for her Fell Beasts. We refused. Then that Minotaur general of hers -"

"Ottman," I provided, hating the sound of the name. I remembered his stench, his slavish devotion to Jadis, his horrifying strength as he shoved me into a tree and ordered me tied up.

"La, that was his name. He came, foul and twisted thing that he was. It was he as killed my son's wife, and she with their first child, as she journeyed home from the Lantern Waste to see her family."

I blinked rapidly, resting the knife on my leg so as not to hurt myself. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

"It was long before your time. You're not to blame, lad. You're to be thanked for ridding us of them." She sniffed, likewise pausing in her labor. "If you can call what we did working for them, then aye, we did, and I defy anyone to blame us. I'll give Brickit credit, though. Never was an order on time or complete and I never thought I'd be proud of a son for producing such shameful quality steel as to make a good smith weep. Too much sulfur and you get a steel so brittle in the cold that just a smart blow or two will crack it. Ottman may have taken his Blaine, but to be sure we fought in our own way and many a life in her forces were lost to Brickit's sabotage."

"I'm glad to hear that," I replied, impressed by his daring.

"So you see why he's hesitant to welcome you with open arms."

"I do. I hope he can see the difference between the likes of Ottman and us."

"He can. Dense he may be a'times, he's no fool."

I picked up another potato. "I meant what I said when I first got here. We do need his good will and good weapons."

"You just keep going as you are, Edmund. Show him you're not afraid and a true king. Truer than that pasty-faced wench as set herself up as queen," she finished in a muttered growl, and I grinned to hear Jadis called a wench.

§‡§

"Now," and Gran's surprisingly strong hand pushed me down onto one of the benches in the long house. "We make more than weapons here! You've sisters, so you'll appreciate this. Or they will."

The meal was cooking, the room was swept and dusted, and the young girls were resting or sewing or quietly talking. Laid before me was a quantity of silver wire and tools and metal rods of different widths with a shallow shaft cut into their length. There were silver and gold beads and turquoise beads and some brightly colored stones for which I had no name. Without preamble, Gran lifted one of the rods and began to wrap the silver wire around it, twisting the tube as she went.

"Wrap the wire tight," she said, handing it over and guiding my hands. "Each turn right up against the next. Guide it, lad. Feel it. Put yourself into your work."

"What is this for?" I asked. My fingers were turning black from the silver, and the rod grew heavier as I twisted the wire down its length.

Gran snorted and a few of the younger girls came along to see what we were doing. Baia came and sat beside me, watching with her big, brown eyes and learning right along with me.

"Take this," and Gran wielded a small pair of wire cutters, "And fix it in the channel and cut each one on an angle like so. There! Steady now!" She handed over the cutters and watched as I followed her instructions. Soon I had a pile of tiny rings before me.

"So you tell me what this is for," teased Gran.

"Jewelry," I smiled. "I didn't know this was how you made links."

"If we forged each ring we'd take a century to make a suit of mail. String half with beads. We'll make a necklace worthy of a queen."

§‡§

That night, alone in my snug, low room, I pulled out the delicate little necklaces and bracelets I had made under Gran's instruction and laid them out on my pillow. They were very simple and had a few clumsy links, but I was extremely pleased to have been the one that made them. For Susan I had used silver and turquoise beads and for Lucy every other link held a dark green bead like jade. These would be my thanks for their letters and support. I wrapped the chains in a handkerchief and stowed them in one of the saddle bags before I lay down. Resting my head, I pondered what I had learned. So much lost, so much gained. I felt a great sympathy for what these people had endured, but at the same time I was glad to have a better understanding of them.

I started a prayer to Aslan, hoping he approved of my efforts, asking for his blessing, but I fell asleep before I could finish.

¥¤¥

## Chapter Nine: Relative

The following day was rainy. Not a light sprinkle as my first day here, but a downpour the likes of which turned the yard to mud and swelled the Blue River until it roared by the settlement and turned brown with sediment and was unfit for washing or drinking. I growled and hissed at Brack and Baia when they shook me awake, delighting both of them so completely that they shrieked and clapped their hands before running off to tell everyone again how beastly I was in the morning. Why the Black Dwarfs thought this was a virtue I had no idea, but the sight of my savage, shuffling figure heading towards the long house for breakfast made them smile as if Father Christmas had presented them with a new anvil.

Gran set food before me and without thinking I drank a large mouthful of that so-called beer. First thing in the morn it tasted even worse than I remembered. I was awake immediately, gagging and coughing and trying not to spit it out. I caused such a long and loud scene that everyone turned to watch.

"Can't handle his beer," I heard one of the master smiths mutter in disgust when I could breathe again and they were assured I would survive breakfast.

It was not an auspicious beginning of the day. Everyone, it seemed, was in a mood as foul as the weather, though exactly why I didn't learn until later in the day. The Master was frustrated at the rain and mud since he had intended to show the apprentices how to cast ingots of pig iron for the production of cast iron. The ingots are cast in molds pressed into dry, compressed sand, and it was far too soggy to attempt anything of the sort. The Master had expected to be able to collect the sand from the riverbank today (or, more correctly, for me and Bort to collect it) and his lack of foresight infuriated him. He vented his anger at the apprentices and since I wasn't a viable target for their annoyance, they snipped and snapped at each other. For my part, I was cold and tired and stiff and very glad when noon came and we could eat.

I was surprised when I stepped into the long house to see half a dozen strange Dwarfs seated at the far end of the table talking to Brickit and Brint. A bit rougher-looking than my Dwarfs, they fell silent when they spotted me and just stared with their coal-black eyes. I returned the look steadily. I was used to being stared at by my subjects and a few more hard looks certainly weren't going to affect me.

"Who are they?" I asked Gran as she bypassed the apprentices as usual and served me a bowl of stew and some dark bread.

She glanced up the table, not entirely pleased to have guests. Black Dwarfs are unlike most Narnians in that respect, and I was doubly glad I had been (somewhat) invited. "Cousins. Miners from Moon Mountain."

"Why are they here?"

"Jealousy. They want to see if the rumor is true and if my son has a king at his beck and call."

I smiled for her benefit. "He might, if he'd ever learn my name."

She resisted smiling back and instead gave me a fond poke in the shoulder. "They're an unpolished lot, but sharp. Be on your guard around them."

"La, my lady."

The room was a bit quieter than usual and by the tension in the air I got the feeling the cousins were not well liked by the inhabitants of the smithy. They drank more than my Dwarfs and their language and manners were cruder. I couldn't tell if the dislike was personal or professional, but Brickit was clearly laboring on a diplomatic mission of his own. Everyone ate quickly and returned to work early, glad to escape the place.

"Edmund!"

I turned, not in the least surprised that it was Brint who called. He beckoned me to join the little party still seated at the far end of the table. They were finished with the meal and were now eating apple cake. I hoped they didn't offer me any because I'd tried to eat a piece of the stuff at breakfast and it was so dense, heavy, and tasteless that I would have sworn a Centaur had provided the recipe.

"Aslan's blessing upon you, cousins," I said politely, sitting down uninvited.

Naming them 'cousins' disarmed them for a moment, but it was an affectionate term we four rulers had adopted to call the population of Narnia. Susan had found the reference in an old document and Lucy had been beside herself to be able to count everyone in the country as part of the family. These miners might not be a pretty lot, but they were no less deserving of the diminutive than anyone else in the land.

"Cousin?" snorted one of the newcomers. "You're not any cousin of ours!"

I smiled benevolently. "Perhaps not, but you're a cousin of mine. Every being in Narnia is."

They didn't know what to make of that. Brickit shot me a warning glare which I chose to ignore. Blait, Chief of the Black Dwarf Clan, had told me in no uncertain terms that I should never exaggerate or evade or tell an untruth when asked a direct question by his people. To establish a reputation for honesty was vital if I was to succeed here, and really, a king should never speak falsely. I'd done that often enough in the past that the bitter aftertaste still lingered on my tongue and served as a lesson to me.

"Why are you here?"

I glanced at Brickit. "I'm here because your cousin is stubborn."

They couldn't argue that fact, though their quick agreement annoyed the Chief Smith.

"So what are you doing at this smithy?" demanded another Dwarf. His tone let me know that he thought little of his cousins' craft. When he bit into his piece of apple cake and I knew he'd be chewing it for a good ten minutes. I wondered if Brickit had served it on purpose.

"Running coal."

"Why?" sputtered yet another, wisely avoiding the cake. His long beard was braided and held fast with silver clips, and by his finer clothes I guessed he was the leader of this little troop.

"Because until I learn more that's all I'm good for."

They absolutely did not know what to make of me and, just as with the inhabitants of the smithy, I did nothing to help them in their comprehension. I didn't mind the rude interrogation - they were curious and this was simply their way of asking.

"Let me see your hands," demanded the leader.

I obliged, holding my palms up for them to see. My hands were heavily calloused and around the nails was stained by ground-in coal dust.

"I see you can work, at least," he muttered, disappointed at the proof I presented. "You don't act like a king!"

"You've seen other kings?" I asked, borrowing a phrase my brother had used when so challenged by a very young Faun whose father was in the palace guard.

The Dwarf had a similar reaction to that of the little Faun: a blank look followed by a frown. He poked his finger on the tabletop before him, annoyed.

"But why are you here?"

I answered quietly. "Because I was invited."

They sat back, astounded at so simple an answer to what was then a very complex situation. I smiled and rose to my feet.

"You'll excuse me, good cousins, but the Master promised he'd show me how to draw wire today since we can't cast ingots as he planned. Good day to you."

§§§

"Well, Spawn, you confused your new cousins a good deal."

I looked up from the heavy length of wire I was trying to wrap around a wooden spool. The spool was on a crank and I was feeding the wire onto it gradually, but the stuff insisted on twisting this way and that and refused to lie evenly. It had been wrapped before by an apprentice but had not been properly secured and almost half its length had come undone. I was growing flustered as I tried to keep it from tangling more and it must have shown on my face. Brickit stood watching my efforts with mild interest.

"Good," I replied shortly. "It's healthy."

Striding forward, he pushed me off the crank. "Feed it slowly. Let it untwist itself as you go."

I relinquished my position and took up the length of wire, letting it run through my gloved hands to remove any clinging sand as he turned the crank. It was much easier with two people.

"Were they satisfied with what they saw and heard?" I asked after a while.

He gazed at the spool, making certain the wire lay tight and even. "Yes and no."

"Hence the confusion. And what of you, Brickit? Are you satisfied?"

"Yes and no," he echoed. He pointed. "Kink."

I quickly saved the wire from wrapping too tight upon itself and forming a kink. Once the crisis was past I asked, "It will be a week tomorrow. So have I won your good will?"

He was slow in answering. "Not so that I trust you and yours."

"Fair enough," I said, swallowing my disappointment. It didn't come as such a terrible blow, really, because he had said both yes and no. I was fortunate to have made any progress at all. "Tell me what I can do, then."

"I've little experience with kings and boys and spawns," grunted Brickit. "I've only known queens and tyrants and ice. I don't know what to tell you. Not yet."

"I know what you mean," I said quietly, concentrating on the wire.

I fed the last of the cable onto the spool. Securing the end of the wire, he helped me lift the heavy spool off the crank and together we carried to a corner of the shop and set it down amidst a dozen similar spools. Panting a bit, I wiped my brow on my sleeve.

"Well," I said, smiling faintly, "then I'll stay. Let me know if you think of anything I can do."

¥¤¥

## Chapter Ten: Dearest

"Who wants to go first?"

"I will! Let me. Mine's the heaviest. There must be something inside!"

"All right, Lu! Prove to us right now that Narnia's younger king remembers how to write."

I giggled at Peter's happy teasing and took a seat on a foot rest close by the fire. Peter and Susan settled down on the floor beside me and we leaned close and warm in the cozy sitting room that divided my room from Susan's. Three letters had arrived today carried by gigantic black Fruit Bats who lived close by the Blue River Smithy. Though there were only three letters, about twenty bats brought them. After talking to them a little while we figured out that they had all wanted to carry the letters to us, so Edmund charged the lot of them with delivering his messages and they had taken turns carrying them.

We had hurried through our evening meal and dessert, making ourselves wait until we could settle down and comfortably enjoy Edmund's news. I missed my brother so much that not opening his letter immediately was almost as bad as waiting for presents on Christmas morning.

I broke the red wax seal and unfolded the thick paper. Something heavy for its size slid into my lap and I carefully lifted a metal arrowhead. It was shaped very much like a narrow aspen leaf with a heavy stem, and there was a delicate scroll design engraved on the flat surfaces. Susan and Peter leaned forward to see it as I lifted it up. It glinted almost mirror-bright in the light of the fire as if in memory of where it had been born.

"It's beautiful," breathed Susan, her eyes aglow.

"And sharp," Peter said, able to tell at a glance. "Careful," he warned as I placed it into Susan's ready palm.

"Read the letter, Lucy," begged Susan, turning the arrowhead so she and Peter could admire it from every angle.

I cleared my throat, and I was so excited I was almost breathless as I read them Edmund's letter. It was dated from two days prior and showed a few scratches from the Fruit Bats' claws.

*Dearest Lucy,*

*Thank you for the letter from before I left. I found it my first full day here and I needed it badly. I had spent the day doing useless and very messy work and I was very tired and annoyed. It was good to hear from you and Susan. I hope Peter is behaving.*

*The smithy is hard by the Blue River, a full two days gallop from the Cair. The Dwarfs here are all from the same branch of their clan with a few distant cousins serving as apprentices. They're not as friendly as the Red Dwarfs we're used to at the palace, but once you get to know them they tend to smile more than scowl. Most of them, anyway. One girl, Baia, is younger than you and she and her brother Brack wake me up every morning. For some reason they think it's fun. Their grandmother used to be Chief Smith and she's taken a shine to me.*

*I've been working with one of the master smiths and three apprentices. I run around a lot and fetch things and tend the furnace in the shop. It gets fantastically hot and the metal turns white-hot then brilliant yellow-orange and red as it cools down. It's very pretty to see and the master makes the most amazing weapons. I'm including an arrowhead he was going to discard so you can see some of his work. He didn't like the balance on this particular one after it was engraved and sharpened and he let me have it. Pretty, isn't it? They don't believe in making anything plain that can be made beautiful. Be careful, it's very sharp.*

*I know I said I'd stay a week, but that's not long enough. I'm going to stay longer because I haven't really gained Brickit's trust. They've had their experiences with people that ruled Narnia before and they weren't at all good. I have to show them that we're different in as many ways as I can, and since they respect hard work and sarcasm, I'm the one for the job. It also helps that I have dark hair. Baia was horrified when I told her Peter had yellow hair - they don't like things that are too different from what they're used to. I don't think Peter would have survived ten minutes here.*

*Love,*

*Edmund*

*P.S. Don't tell Peter I said that!*

I clapped a hand over my mouth and looked up at Peter, trying not to giggle at his expression. He shook his head, trying to scowl but bursting into a smile that led to a laugh instead.

"Hath he no faith?" cried Peter in mock despair.

"He knows you too well," said Susan, nudging him.

"And what's wrong with being blond?" he wondered, rocking to the side as she elbowed him gently. "As if I can help it."

Susan leaned close, smiling brilliantly at him. "Nothing, Peter, it's just that so far you're the only one we've seen in Narnia. Now read yours."

Grumbling and still shaking his head, Peter broke the seal on his letter.

*Peter,*

*Deliberately provoking is a gross understatement, dearest brother.*

*I'm going to stay another week. My apologies to everyone that expected me back and I hope Martil can find enough dust to keep him busy, but I think Brickit is testing me and my resolve . . . among other things. He said I haven't gained his trust but I think - no, I know I've made some headway. He seeks me out now and then and gives me some instruction or help and I think he likes that he hasn't rid himself of me quite yet. I have to use the momentum I've built up to gain his good will. I know I can do it.*

*I hope the Weavers' Guild has gone away and that the girls have backed off a bit from their 'worrying about you worrying about me' plot. Lion's sake, just don't give them anything to work with, will you? Am I the only one in this family that doesn't worry without good cause?*

*And I do not snore!*

*Love,*

*Ed*

"So you two are driving me mad on purpose?" yelled Peter. He wasn't angry or hurt, not really, he was just teasing us.

"You do worry," I said, realizing we had been crowding him quite a bit.

"Maybe," he said, "but not letting me study won't help!"

Susan gave me back the arrowhead and reached over to put her hand on Peter's knee. "You're right. We were trying to keep you too busy to worry. We won't bother you so much, we promise. He'll be home soon, Peter."

"I'm not worried," he defended. "Not really. I just miss him. We've just never not all been together, that's all. And he does so snore," Peter added under his breath.

"Well, listen to your brother and don't give us cause, then," said Susan, opening her letter.

*Dearest Susan,*

*Here's some of your paper and ink back. Thank you for sending it, I forgot to pack some. Everything here is Dwarf-sized and I probably could only fit a few words on a sheet of their paper anyway.*

*I think things are going well, though I'm extending my stay. A sennight isn't enough time to see this through. I don't know what I was thinking when I took up this challenge. It's a bigger project than I anticipated, and diplomacy has ended up having some very odd demands, including scrubbing out an oven for making coke and learning how to draw wire. I'm willing to do whatever it takes. I will say that I'm enjoying the work and learning about their craft. I'm not enjoying being woken early every day of the week and the stuff they call beer (there's almost nothing else to drink) could remove the paint off my shield. I suppose I should be grateful they don't try making wine, though Brickit's brother thought he could smoke sausages over a coal fire and ruined breakfast this morning. I liken the Black Dwarf cuisine to that of Centaurs - filling but bland, heavy, and in desperate need of salt.*

*The Dwarfs here are gruff but on the whole very kind in their way. You'll be happy to hear Brickit's mother thinks I'm too thin, just as you do, and has taken to feeding me extra at almost every meal, just as you do.*

*I miss you all terribly, but I think these people need us the same way we need them. I have to try my hardest.*

*Love,*

*Edmund*

Susan pursed her lips, glancing over the letter again. "Oh, he's going to come home hungry."

I laughed and raised a finger. "And in want of a bath."

Peter was smiling fondly as he stared at his short letter and something in his expression struck me as very wise and knowing. I think he was reading between the lines and seeing far more in the words than even Edmund meant. Of us all he knew Ed best and was closest to him. There was pride in my oldest brother's voice as he said,

"He's going to come home a success."

And because Peter had no doubt of that fact, neither did I.

✽✽✽

## **Chapter Eleven: Spent**

I could not suppress a groan as I finally sank down onto the wooden bench at the communal table. Every inch of my body was filthy and ached and I knew that without a boiling hot bath between now and going to sleep there was no way I was going to move on the morrow. The only bath available was in the river though, and the thought made me shudder.

The past two days had been an absolute frenzy of productivity at the smithy when a load of finely crushed iron ore arrived unexpectedly from the mines to the south. The ore had been carried across the plains by a trio of Giant brothers who were on their way to Caldron Pool to visit their mother. To the relief of the Blue River Dwarfs, the Giants didn't linger long past breakfast once they tasted the beer.

We had worked each day from the moment we finished breakfast until well into the night to extract the iron from the mineral. It was complex work, more so than I had ever thought it would be, but I saw very little of the actual smelting because the demand for coal never ceased and I never stopped moving. All the furnaces were kept ablaze and Brickit grumbled happily as more raw material was produced. It was almost enough iron to see them into the summer months, he had said as the liquid metal was poured into molds of compressed sand. The molten pools of cooling iron had gone far towards satisfying the Master, and he came dangerously close to smiling at the sight of so much pig iron. They would make cast iron and the steel for which they were famous from this base material. The female apprentice, Binya, most junior of the three, was freed up in order to help me. There was no time for grumbling or petty grudges or even to think about anything other than the level of coal in the bin. We worked together well, Binya and I, wasting no words or precious energy as we got the job done.

Leaning heavily on my hand, I stared at the plate of food set before, unable to bring myself to eat. I was too worn out to have an appetite. I couldn't even smell the food over the

stench of sweat and coal and burnt metal that clung to my clothes. Around me, the apprentices ate mechanically. The table was emptier than usual because the children had already been fed and were asleep. I envied them, wishing there was someone here tall enough to carry me to my bed. It struck me as amazing that I was actually longing for that low and sparse little room in Brint's house, and that the short, narrow, lumpy bed therein seemed the height of comfort. Either I was exhausted beyond measure or I had been here too long. The two options were too closely linked to tell them apart.

"Eat," ordered a gruff voice right beside me.

I managed to move my head far enough to look up at Brickit and let out a long sigh. "I'm too tired."

"Eat," he repeated, sitting down with his back to the table. "Spoon in hand, food in mouth. Simple even for you."

I couldn't even make an effort to return insult for insult. "I'm not hungry, Brickit."

"And do you think I want to explain to a king and two queens that you perished of starvation?"

I snorted. "I'm far from that point."

"Then eat and remove yourself a little farther from it."

I couldn't even taste the stewed venison, but a few mouthfuls down my gullet satisfied him. My limbs felt heavy and weak and the even the tiny spoon seemed weighty as lead in my grasp.

"You did good service these busy days, Spawn," he said.

I smiled faintly, too weary and stiff to do more, but happy to hear it.

§#§

"Edmund! Edmund, wake up! Wake up, King Edmund!"

I coughed and groaned, too tired still to even swipe or growl at Brint's children. I was rocked roughly back and forth for what seemed an eternity and finally I managed to open my eyes. Brack grinned at me. I hated him.

"Wake up, King Edmund! Wake up!"

"Nnnny," I grunted, pushing myself up and him aside. "Go 'way!"

Giggling, they obeyed, rushing off with more energy than was right. I flopped back down and went straight back to sleep. It seemed like mere seconds before I was being shaken again.

"Edmund! King Edmund, you need to wake up!"

This time I roused with my traditional hiss and bared teeth. Repetition had dulled its effect on Baia.

"Breakfast is served!" Baia almost shouted. "It's dawn!"

"I'm up," I snapped savagely. "I'm up! Go away!"

But I lied. The moment Baia skipped off I was asleep again. Nothing short of dumping me in the river was going to wake me up today and Aslan help the Dwarf that tried it.

§§

"Not fevered, is he?"

The voice was muffled, but even so there was no mistaking the concern in Brickit's tone. I couldn't tell if they were in the room with me or just outside and I honestly didn't care so long as they didn't expect me to move. I was neither awake nor asleep, but in some cozy and heavy place between and I hoped I wasn't called upon to leave it.

"No," Gran patronized. "Exhausted he is. Leave him be and let him sleep. You push him too far, Chief Smith."

"I?" exclaimed the Dwarf indignantly.

"Aye," his mother agreed softly, and in my hazy state I could just imagine the frown she unleashed on her eldest son. It was glorious. "King he may be, and a willing hand in the smithy, but you've forgotten he's not more than a boy. He's of an age to Barlon's son and I don't see you working him so hard."

I could sense his shock as Brickit gasped, "What?"

"You let his height fool you, you fool! He's a child! A child filling a man's role and you set him at labor beyond his years and make his task here a chore. The High King of Narnia has entrusted his only brother to you, Brickit! He's given you an opportunity that has your cousins sputtering jealous and has made the Red Dwarf Clan green with envy. Don't be an ass and waste what your kings offer you. They aren't like her. They're nothing like her."

And on that warm and forceful testimonial, I lapsed back into a sleep so deep that I didn't even dream.

§§

I was awake when the door opened and Baia, shy for once, peeked into the room at me. Too comfortable to lift my head, I just smiled.

"You can come in, Baia."

She didn't smile, but she looked pleased to obey, coming in to stand beside the bed with her hands clasped behind her back. "Mama sent me to wake you and see if you wanted to eat. Dinner is almost ready. Are you hungry?"

"Very." I sat up stiffly and hung my head and coughed. I still felt very heavy and I knew that I would sleep well tonight despite a full day spent in bed. If I didn't stretch the moment my feet touched the ground I doubted I'd be able to stand up straight.

"Gran brought you more blankets. Were you sick?" Baia wondered, fetching my comb. "I was sick this winter and I had a fever and threw up my food. It was nasty."

Her candor and self disgust was amusing. "No, I'm not sick. I was just too tired to get up."

She nodded sagely. "I think you scared Uncle Brickit."

"Did I?" I mused as I dragged the comb through my tangled hair. "Good."

§§

Gran pinched my cheek as I thanked her for the heaping plate of food set before me. It seemed to me the Dwarfs were uncommonly merry for their kind, which really isn't saying a great deal since Black Dwarfs tend to look down upon raucous celebrations as a waste of

time. One of the master smiths, the youngest of them, began to recite what at first I thought was a poem. There was a certain pleasing meter to his words. I listened for a little bit and I realized, after almost every word began with a 'B,' that he was telling the family tree to the children. The youngsters all listened raptly and the adults waited with predatory anticipation for a flaw in its telling. I listened for a little while and decided that it had to be the single-most boring thing I'd heard since I set foot in Narnia. I gave my attention back to my dinner and let the sound of the speaker's deep voice lull me like music.

"Better?"

I blinked. The Chief Smith and his brother sat down on either side of me, both of them eyeing me cautiously as if I might break. Brint carried a pitcher of beer and he refilled our cups.

"Much," I said, trying to swallow some of the sour liquid without pulling a face. "Thank you."

"These arrived for you by royal courier over the course of the day," said Brickit, handing over several tightly folded despatches. "Your brother sent them. The last arrived but an hour ago and the courier couldn't wait. My mother didn't want to wake you."

"She wouldn't have been able to," I muttered, suddenly concerned. The wax seals were black, not the normal red, signifying the urgency of the information. I hastily grabbed one of the letters, recognizing Peter's lion seal even as I broke it and unfolded the heavy paper. The message was brief, just a few lines, and I tossed it aside and seized the next. I was aware of both brothers watching me intently as I tore through the despatches. They weren't in any order but all in a similar vein and the last one I opened was the last to arrive.

"Oh, dear."

¥¤¥

## Chapter Twelve: King Nancy

Brickit eyed me keenly. "Chaos at the Cair what without you there to spread early morning cheer?"

"No." Intent on the despatches, I ignored his flippant attitude. "Not at Cair Paravel. More of a local disturbance, really."

"Disturbed he is, now," said Brint, nodding sagely.

I jabbed him with my elbow. "Here. Read this if you're capable."

*Ed,*

*It's definitely a Werewolf and it's heading south along the Great River. It was last seen on the eastern bank not too far outside of Beruna. Oreius has dispatched some soldiers and scouts to the area under Celer. They'll find out if it's a Fell remnant of the Witch's forces or just some unfortunate that's been bitten. Given that it's been avoiding contact, I suspect the former. Luckily we haven't received word of anyone being hurt. I know you're well removed from Beruna, but please do be on your guard and don't travel east until I can get word back to you. Most Narnians are immune to Werewolf bites, but we're not.*

*Be careful!*

*Love,*

*Peter*

I watched Brickit and Brint as they read Peter's last (and most detailed) despatch. Brint moved his lips as he made out the words and it seemed to take an eternity for them to finish. I knew there was no way they could claim they didn't understand because Peter's penmanship was worthy of envy - far more readable than Brickit's scrawl. Better even than Susan's, in truth.

"Those others?" asked Brickit, gesturing towards the stack of letters.

"More of the same."

The Chief Smith frowned at the small pile of paper, which was probably more stationery than he used in a year, and then gave me a quizzical look.

"Is this brother of yours always so nervous?"

"What?" I stared at him and hissed, "Nervous? Lion's mane! There's a Werewolf on the loose!"

He rolled his eyes dismissively. "Well south of here and across the Great River. We needn't worry, Spawn."

"La," Brint agreed. "Seems as if this brother of yours is worried enough for the lot of us."

"Last they saw it wasn't that far away from here!" I argued, trying to get through to them. "Peter's not certain!"

"Took him four letters to get that across?"

I rolled my eyes impatiently. "Brickit, you're missing the point!" Deliberately, it seemed.

"Sure he can be trusted on his own without you?"

I wasn't, but I certainly wasn't going to let them know that. "Peter is far more capable than I am! Now will you listen to reason?"

Brint shook his head. "Far more capable? Not very, then?"

Sighing in mock sympathy, Brickit gave his brother a long look behind my back and went right on teasing me. "King Peter it is? Are you sure?"

"What?" I demanded, confounded and wildly annoyed at the pair of them.

"Very anxious behavior for a king, wouldn't you say, brother?"

"La. Extreme, even."

"As if you have anyone but me to compare him to!" I defended hotly, completely forgetting my original concern at this attack on my only brother.

Brint shrugged. "We make do with what we have. Which isn't much."

"Four letters in a day? Five in a week?" Brickit goaded. "Are you sure you don't have three sisters, Spawn?"

"Perfectly!" I raged, forgetting to keep my voice low. "How could you -"

"Well, they did fulfill the prophesy," allowed Brint in a tone I didn't trust at all. "It never said the Sons of Adam couldn't fret and swoon and worry."

"He does not - oh, that is quite enough! That might have some sting if it didn't come from a Dwarf who wears an apron!"

"Nervous little Nanny he is without his Ned close by," finished Brickit with a wicked gleam in his eye. "Nancy you said he was named?"

I gave him the same look I had given the Boggles at the Stone Table the day I had been knighted. I had killed the Boggles, and Peter and I had slain over a dozen other Fell Beasts including Dwarfs. With effort I clung to what remained of my composure.

"No," I snapped. "Two things, good Dwarfs, before I give in to the desire to knock heads together. First, you will cease mocking your kings. If my brother strikes you as anxious he has good reason!"

"Oh, aye," they agreed far too easily.

"Secondly," I hissed, "my name is Edmund."

Beneath their beards they were grinning. Suddenly it struck me exactly how far I had let them goad me down this path and I felt myself blush furiously. They had planned this from the start and I had walked right into their trap. Blast!

"King Spawn it is," Brickit laughed. "Odd name, but fitting. Now does your brother prefer King Nancy or Queen Peter?"

I stared hard at the table, wondering how much damage I could do with such a small fork. It wasn't a very promising weapon. I took a deep breath and grit my teeth. "Brickit?"

"Aye?"

Forcing myself to keep my voice low and even, I cast diplomacy to the wind and quietly promised, "You are going to die."

He laughed and pounded the table, and I realized that was the first time I had really heard the sound come from him or had seen him enjoy himself outside of working the forge. For all it was at my (and Peter's) expense, it was very nice to see and hear such genuine pleasure, especially out of a Black Dwarf, for there are those that claim they don't know how to laugh at all. I wondered how rare an event it was for him to let loose in such a way, because the Dwarfs around the room were casting us amused, approving glances.

"La," he agreed, "but not today, Spawn!"

I glowered. "Don't be so sure."

Both of them were laughing even harder than a moment ago and Brickit dug a fifth despatch out of his shirt. He threw it on the table before me, saying, "It arrived with the first one, which is why we let you sleep the day away."

Growling, I snatched it up, recognizing Peter's script.

To Chief Smith Brickit of the Blue River Smithy from High King Peter, greeting!

*Sir,*

*Allow me to alert you to a possible dangerous situation arising in the neighborhood of the Great River between the Branching of Rivers and the Southern Marches in the shadow of*

*Mt. Pier. A Fell Beast, possibly a Werewolf, has been reported on the eastern bank traveling towards Beruna. I ask that you take every caution with the safety of your people and my brother and refrain from travel in that direction until the soldiers sent to Beruna can secure the area. I am sending this same warning to other settlements in the region, and I will send news through King Edmund as it becomes available.*

*In thanks for the hospitality you have extended to my brother,*

*Peter, High King of Narnia*

"Guess we have to keep you," chuckled Brickit, wiping tears from his eyes when I looked up from the letter.

They had known all along. They had known and they had taken full advantage of the situation. I didn't know whether to laugh or fume, so instead I loosed my worst glare upon the Chief Smith. "I despise you."

§§§

"They mean no harm or disrespect."

I turned to find Brint's sharp-faced wife standing a few paces behind me. I had stepped outside for some fresh air and to cool my temper and she had followed a few minutes later. She seemed worried that perhaps Brint and Brickit had gone too far with their taunting.

"I know, Lady Bly," I said. "My brother and sisters tease me, too, and I them."

"I have not heard my husband or his brother laugh so well since their younger brother was lost to the Winter," she continued. "That they treat you so, rough as it may seem, is just a sign of their fondness for you."

I thought of the numerous swats and smacks I had received from my Centaur teachers as they showed their fondness. At least the Dwarfs' liking didn't come with bruises. So far.

"Are they fond of me?" I couldn't help but wonder.

She smiled, and her features softened. "More than they know."

¥¤¥

## **Chapter Thirteen: Lithin**

*Dear Edmund,*

*I'm so, so sorry to do this to you again. I'm afraid it can't wait and I hope you'll forgive me, but you're closest to the problem right now.*

*Word came yesterday from the Beavers that the families of the Lithin Satyrs, the ones that sided with the Witch at Beruna, are being abused by some of their neighbors – intimidation, refusals to trade for food stuffs, refusals to teach the children, and so on. According to Mrs. Beaver the families had nothing to do with the conduct of the Lithin and they're rather desperate. Can you spare a day to ride over there with the troop I'm sending and meet with the families? We just need a little show of force and royal good will around Lithin and with the families. Susan will be heading out there herself the day after tomorrow, but she can't go until Lady Maturin of Terebinthia departs, for the lady is quite*

*touchy about such things as protocol and a bit out of humor to find herself demoted now that there are humans in Cair Paravel once again.*

*Celer hasn't spotted the Werewolf as of his last report. It seems to have vanished and I'll admit that makes me nervous. Do be careful, Ed. I'm sending Susan with a large escort and they'll take the road through Pillar Wood, not the Dancing Lawn, to reach Lithin. I've also sent word to King Lune to alert Archenland's northern border, but I doubt the Werewolf will leave Narnia.*

*If you can't make it, I understand and Lt. Silverwing will go ahead and secure the families until Susan gets there. If you can make it, then my heartfelt thanks to the Chief Smith for his assistance.*

*Love,*

*Peter*

I sighed, folding up the hasty letter as I raised my eyes to the massive Mute Swan cob standing before me. Lieutenant Flenleel Silverwing commanded a small troop of soldiers that waited down by the river. To my delight, Phillip had accompanied them and now stood quietly by. The lieutenant fixed me with his small black eyes and shuffled his webbed feet a little impatiently while beside me, Brickit stood with folded arms and splayed legs. The Dwarf was silently fuming at this third interruption from the High King and I knew he thought Peter presumptuous for sending my armor, neatly wrapped in a bundle and strapped to Phillip's saddle.

"Does he do nothing but pick flowers and write to you all day?"

"Not much. He just runs the country and its holdings."

"Well?" Brickit demanded. "Now what can't the Nancy do without you?"

"Don't call him that. He's your High King and mine as well. I have to go to Lithin. It won't take a day."

"Where?"

"Lithin."

"Say it correctly, Spawn, and like a proper Narnian or don't say it at all. Lit-hin."

Silverwing, who could speak but rarely did so, hissed at Brickit's abrasive mannerisms. More used to the Dwarf, I just nodded, correcting my pronunciation. "Lithin. Thank you."

Brickit glared. "So first you impose yourself on this smithy, eat of our food, seek our good will, and now we're just a home base for you to gad about the countryside and show away."

"I cannot forget that I am a king and have a duty to fulfill." I handed him the letter.

"Innocent women and children are being abused and held responsible for the conduct of their Fell kin. Would you have me stand by and do nothing?"

I watched him as he read Peter's words and his anger at me and the sudden appearance of soldiers shifted to anger at the situation. I suspected he had faced similar accusations in the past. Perhaps he still did.

He glowered, handing back the page. "You'll return?"

"I will." An idea struck me. "Why don't you accompany me?"

"What?"

By his expression I knew I had caught him off guard. It was a good sensation. "Come as my guide. I'm not as familiar with this part of Narnia as I would like to be. I need your expertise and I may need a royal witness."

"Use your Horse as a witness!"

"He's not mine. I'm his. Besides, you've already been appointed."

"I never said I'd do it for more than two signatures worth!"

"And I didn't specify the duration of the appointment."

"Half an hour, you said!"

"It didn't take that long. You still owe me at least five minutes."

He stomped his feet. "I'm going nowhere!"

"Why not?"

"I'm the Chief Smith!"

"Then see how well you've taught the masters and leave them to their own devices for a day. These are women and children, Brickit, and they're being unjustly accused. If you won't come along, I still must go, and I would very much like to be welcomed back here."

When he said nothing in response I just nodded and unstrapped the bundle from Phillip's back. "I'll be right back."

Luckily the greaves covered the nastier stains on my boots. As I unfolded the heavily embroidered tabard I found my crown nestled securely in the stiff fabric. There was also a small pouch that jingled, and when I opened it I was surprised to see a handful of coins: small golden Lions and slightly larger silver Trees. I looked at them with interest because, surprising as it may sound, as monarchs of Narnia money was something that rarely passed through our hands. Everything was provided for us and so we had few occasions to need currency. Peter's thoughtfulness (and thoroughness) made me smile, though I knew Brickit would not be able to keep silent at the sight of the finely wrought armor and crown. Hastily I finished dressing. It wasn't easy to accomplish on my own as I was used to Peter helping me, but I managed. I transferred Shafelm from the everyday leather scabbard I had worn here to the decorative sheath that matched my armor. The sword's familiar weight on my hip was very comforting. I tucked the pouch of coins into my tabard and as I settled the silvery crown on my hair I realized that I had missed its presence.

I was aware of every eye in the place focused solely on me as I walked back across the smithy. The strong colors of my red and gold tabard and glittering mail were strangely bright and flashed in the faint sunlight. I was used to having people stare, but in this setting it felt odd. Brickit, Flenleel, and Phillip were still waiting more or less patiently, and the Dwarf snorted in professional jealousy as he took in my armor. It was very finely made, even he could see as much though he certainly wasn't ready to admit it.

I had my foot in the stirrup and was about to swing into the saddle when Brickit abruptly snapped,

"Fine! Get up on your Horse, Spawn, and make room."

I gave him a dubious look. Brickit scowled and pointed a stubby finger.

"You invited me!"

I grinned, turning my face away and catching Phillip's amused look. I mounted up and Brickit upended a bucket and stood atop it as a mounting block. Gripping his arm, I heaved and pulled him up behind me. He muttered and shifted until he was comfortable, seizing hold of my sword belt at Phillip's first step.

"Don't drop him, Phillip!" I called, taking the reins loosely.

"Shan't," said my friend as he found a smooth and steady gait. Flenleel took to the air and gestured the soldiers to follow.

"Upriver to Aundroe, and then west," grunted Brickit. "And slow down, ya nag, you'll shake me to pieces!"

But Phillip just laughed.

¥¤¥

## **Chapter Fourteen: Traitors**

I must admit that it was difficult not to show off before Brickit. Surrounded as I was by soldiers, though, I knew that if a single gesture or useless order got back to Oreius I would be feeling the general's gentle correction in the form of a firm smack in the head that had nothing to do with the Centaur's affection and everything to do with wasting time and energy. Besides, there were better ways to prove myself to the Dwarf.

He clung to my belt tightly and eventually gave up complaining about being bounced about. Used to the motion of horse and rider after a little while, he instead launched into a biased analysis of my crown and armor.

"That's not silver you're wearing on that dense head of yours," he called.

"Oh?" I asked, glancing back over my shoulder. He was rather red in the face. "I wondered that it never tarnished."

"It's an alloy of gold and silver. It's valued above gold and jewels because it occurs so rarely in nature. Electrum it's named. It's found just east of Beruna, in the mines beneath Culros' Tower."

"I haven't seen that yet."

"Nor I, I just know that's where them shifty-eyed eastern clans get their precious metals."

I grinned at his description and assumptions as he started telling me how my mail could have been made better. It was a short and resentful list, which told me the Dwarf smiths that had fashioned this suit - and that at Aslan's express command - had done an outstanding job.

"Oi, ya nag! Stop aiming for every bump and dip in the path" snapped Brickit, swatting at Phillip. "I saw that! That was a'purpose!"

As we rode along the Blue River towards Lithin many greetings were called out as we were recognized - Dryads and Nymphs and Talking Animals and Birds sang out to us and we

soldiers answered in like tones. Brickit ignored all the greetings called out to him and concentrated on being moody. Naiads appeared in the waters and playfully splashed the soldiers and flirted so outrageously that Lt. Silverwing hissed and landed in the river just to scold them. I just laughed, knowing he'd have no effect on their spirits and that he'd probably lose his voice in the process.

The cob caught up with us in a few minutes, looking grumpy and ruffled enough to rival the Dwarf riding pillion behind me. I knew he'd failed in his mission against the Naiads. Waving him forward to join me, I said,

"We're almost there. Do you know exactly where these families live?"

Flenleel looked back at the archers and a Faun hurried forward. "I am familiar with the area, King Edmund, and I can lead us to them."

"Not directly," I decided. "Lead us around Lithin. My brother asked us to make a small show of force and good will. We'll ask about for them. Let word spread." I looked at Brickit. "Walk or ride?"

"Walk, Spawn. Aslan did not make Dwarfs to be parted from the earth."

We walked. Brickit kept close and growled impatiently at Phillip. The Horse had taken a shine to the Dwarf (or perhaps he simply enjoyed annoying him) and spent a good deal of time sniffing and nuzzling him and making a pest of himself as only Horses can. It was very entertaining from my perspective. I asked almost everyone we met if they knew where the families of the Lithin Satyrs dwelt. Many people looked surprised or uncomfortable or a little ashamed and directed us to the northwest and the caves there. I smiled pleasantly and thanked everyone and left a sense of guilt in my wake, though I rebuked no one. These Narnians knew their own failings.

One old Faun, clearly one of the ringleaders against the families, snorted at us. "I know why you're here," he snapped, stamping a hoof and pointing at me. "You think we'll accept them! Forgive them! They're the sons of traitors and deserve what they get!"

I froze, my heart skipping a beat, and I felt myself go a little pale. As I turned to face him, I thought of Peter and the pacific calm my brother displayed when confronting such ignorance and inflexibility. I had seen him do it a hundred times on my account and now I drew upon his example. Do not react, I heard my brother's firm voice in my head as I looked for the right words, but defend yourself without growing defensive, Ed. I took a deep breath and kept my features bland, but when I spoke my voice was loud enough for everyone to hear.

"So what will you call my sons?"

The old Faun's eyes grew huge as he realized exactly what he had said and to whom. I waited. I could feel Phillip seething in fury and I knew the Horse and many of the soldiers were glaring at the Faun. Silverwing hissed dangerously. Brickit watched through narrowed eyes, his arms folded tight across his chest. The tension became almost unbearable.

"I beg your pardon, King Edmund," the old Faun stammered, unable to meet my eye any longer. He bowed his grizzled head in shame.

I thanked Peter a thousand times over in my thoughts as I quoted him directly. "It's not my pardon you need to beg, sir," I said, and I knew my brother would be proud of me.

§§

My spirits were dampened somewhat after challenging the old Faun. Such confrontations were growing fewer in number, but they were always draining and left me shaken. Peter's sterling example had taught me that facing the truth squarely usually resulted with the accuser feeling embarrassed for their conduct, such as in this case, and repetition had eased my own reactions. We stopped a distance away from the scene and I took a moment to collect myself. Leaning my head on Phillip's neck, I made myself match the Horse's long, slow breaths and let calmness and balance return. Idly, I combed his mane with my fingers, the gesture an almost unconscious need to touch someone dear to me. I wondered at myself, for a year ago I would not have done anything so demonstrative. Still, learning to show affection like this was worth a thousand battles with the likes of the old Faun, and Peter's loyalty and faith in me was my foundation.

"Better?" Phillip pressed, nudging me with his nose.

"Much," I replied, managing a bit of a smile.

Brickit was unusually quiet as we made our way to the caves, but I was aware that he was watching me closely, gauging me and my conduct here in my domain versus his.

There were five families in all. The caves they inhabited were snug affairs, not unlike Mr. Tumnus' home, but not nearly as well furnished. I was not surprised to see that the wives and daughters of the Lithin Satyrs were Nymphs and the sons were Satyrs. When Nymphs bear sons they are always the same race as the father while the daughters take after their mothers, which is why there are no female Satyrs or Fauns and no male Nymphs. The wives of the Lithins were unusually grave for Nymphs as they stepped out into the sunlight to greet us. To me they curtsied, all of them very curious and nervous and perhaps even a little frightened.

"Good day, ladies," I said. "I hope we are not disturbing you."

"Not at all, King Edmund," said one of them, a tired-looking girl with pale blue skin and hair. Her clothes were very worn and she looked as if she could use a healthier diet. "May I ask why you have come?"

"Because you need me."

And she burst into tears.

§§

We stayed a few hours with the Nymphs, meeting their families and listening to what they would tell us. I sent the soldiers to collect some wood to restock their depleted supply of fuel and I gave the Faun archer a handful of silver Trees to get them enough food to last a long while. The gold Lions I distributed among the wives. As it turned out, not all the neighbors judged them as harshly as the old Faun, but there were enough people of his way of thinking to make their lives very difficult and their future uncertain.

"My sister Susan will be here in three or four days," I promised them. "She'll be better able to sort out the schooling issues and making sure that you are left in peace."

"We did not agree with our husbands' views," said one of the Nymphs as we sat in her cave drinking tea. Like her blue-skinned sister, she looked weary and spent. "We did not see the White Witch as our queen. But they were still our husbands and they provided for us."

"We'll do everything we can to help."

She smiled as she looked through the open door. A number of small Animals had gathered on the edge of the clearing. Some looked curious and some looked contrite and a few carried bundles or baskets.

"You've already done a great deal, Sire."

§§§

I had Brickit back at the Blue River Smithy before sunset. He had been very closemouthed on the ride back and I suspected he was as lost in thought as I was. The few children of the smithy were lined up to meet us and to see the exotic-looking soldiers in the troop, for Swans and Zebras and Lions usually preferred to stay in more open areas. I think the Animals were equally curious. Dwarf children are rarely seen because they do not leave their homes until they are adults.

"You'll head back tonight?" I asked Flenleel as I assisted Brickit down from Phillip's back. The Chief Smith grunted and stretched his sore legs, complaining as he walked about stiffly. Phillip nuzzled at the back of Brickit's neck, producing a sputtered curse from the startled Dwarf.

Silverwing nodded to me, ducking his head low as we both ignored the many variations of the word 'nag' being thrown at my mount.

"Good. Be careful. Give me a moment to get this armor off and Phillip can carry it back for me. Give a full report to the High King and the queens. They'll want to know every detail." Both of my journey to Lithin and of my condition and progress here, of that I was certain.

"You're not returning?" asked Phillip, laying off of teasing the Chief Smith.

I grinned, for Brickit had grown still, listening even as he pretended not to.

"Not yet. Not until I'm done."

And when the Black Dwarf moaned and cursed his ill fortune at his inability to rid himself of this useless presence cluttering up his smithy, I knew he was well pleased.

¥¤¥

## **Chapter Fifteen: Fiddleheads**

There was a noticeable shift in the smithy's attitude towards me after we returned from Lithin and got back to the business of smithing. Perhaps it had been the sight of armor and crown as visible reminders of exactly who and what this boy in their midst really was. Perhaps it had been Brickit's report of my conduct towards the wives of the Lithin Satyrs. Perhaps it had been the swift and painful conflict with the old Faun and the defensive attitudes the soldiers showed for me. I didn't know and I didn't care. One of the apprentices shoveled coal right alongside me and helped refill the bins at night. It was enough for me that my work load was lightened enough that I wasn't exhausted at the end of each day and I had a chance to interact with the Dwarfs more.

They were a cranky lot, but they honed their ornery natures into being perfectionists in their craft and they were remarkable to observe. The Master let me try out a few more

skills, kindly giving me half a dozen different types of spear points and arrow heads to destroy on the grinding wheels one afternoon so I could get a sense of how different types of metal sparked and smelled and reacted to stone. To his amusement I ground the points down to nubs, but at the end of the afternoon I could tell the different grades of steel apart from the softer grades of iron.

The local Animals began stopping by the smithy to meet or see me and occasionally bring me gifts, much to the annoyance of Brickit and Brint. I did amass a considerable collection of jams and teas and walnuts (my taste for them having been established by the Squirrels just east of the Stone Table), which I gave to Gran and the daughters to use. Brickit might have complained about the interruptions to work but he did not turn up his nose at jam tarts. I tried to warn the neighborhood animals about the Werewolf, but like the Dwarfs they equated distance with safety and didn't take the threat very seriously. They were so complacent that I began to wonder if my concern came more in defense of my brother than actual worry about the Fell Beast.

They had no mercy, Brickit and Brint, now that they had discovered that my weakness was all things Peter, and they rarely wasted an opportunity to call him 'Nancy.' Since I was here and Peter wasn't (never mind that he was helping to run the kingdom) the Dwarf brothers had concluded that the High King was more concerned with picking flowers and fretting over nonsense than actually being a warrior king. They had no idea whatsoever of how forceful Peter could be, nor of what I had put him through at Beruna, nor the intensity of his protectiveness and devotion. They refused to listen to reason and I refused to listen to their insults.

Since the Chief Smith and his chief crony seemed incapable of learning names, I took to correcting them with my elbow. I'd hear that hated name and find an excuse to get close enough to land my elbow in their ribs. Once I cracked Brint in the side and he cried,

"I didn't say a thing!"

"No," I agreed with a smile, "but you were thinking it."

He couldn't deny as much and stalked away, muttering.

Seventhday came again. At breakfast I received another despatch from Peter, delivered by a magnificent Bald Eagle, and its arrival heralded more ribbing and abuse. I was quite tired of their antics by now, but when Brickit and Brint took up their usual stations on either side of me they deliberately sat just out of range of an elbow strike.

"So what has King Nancy's knickers in a twist this fine day?"

"His name is Peter and they've lost the Werewolf," I replied. "Captain Celer thinks it may have doubled back."

"It's in Archenland by now, Spawn," Brint assured.

I gave him a dark look. "Are you in league with it that you'd know? According to my teachers few Magical Creatures venture far past Narnia's borders."

"Which teacher would that be? Dance?"

"You know, you're not nearly as clever as you think yourself to be, Brickit!"

"Clever enough for you, Spa-ow!"

Suddenly Brickit winced and let out a yelp as his mother cracked him in the head with the metal tray she carried. Brint was next and he yelped louder. Then a sharp blow landed squarely on the top of my head and I instinctively ducked and gave a cry, rubbing the offending spot as we looked at Gran. She fixed us all with a wicked glare the likes of which I had not felt since I last trained under Oreius.

"Behave, ye men! There's children present as are more mature," she growled. "There's no one of ye so young as to not get along nor so old I can't put ye over me knee. Call yerselves chief, master, and knight, do ye? Cease this name calling!"

She stalked off. We didn't dare move or speak until she was well away.

"Be you a knight?" wondered Brint, awed at the notion.

I nodded silently and finally grunted in assent.

"She hit him," murmured Brickit, disbelief filling his voice. A moment later both Dwarfs were staring at me as if they hadn't seen me before.

"La, she did, now," realized his brother, looking and sounding amazed.

I rubbed my head. "La, she certainly did."

"Mother's never hit anyone but us before," gaped Brickit. He sounded positively crushed.

Brint was in shock. "She likes you."

"Not too much, I hope," I muttered.

Thrown to her tender mercies once again, I still found Gran to be a far more pleasant taskmaster than her sons. After I helped clean the dishes from breakfast she called Baia and Brack and handed each of us a basket and sent us upriver to pick fiddleheads to go with dinner. Baia was put in charge of the expedition as she was the only one of us with experience, having accompanied Gran on such a mission a few days before. She was very excited at her first command and tore outside as fast as her short legs would allow. Brack and I had to jog to catch up to her.

The children led the way northward to a swampy bend in the Blue River. The river splintered into a number of smaller streams, spreading out into a maze of islets and tussocks before regrouping further downstream. Centuries of rotting leaves and pine needles made the ground spongy and moist and moss and lichens grew thick and lush along the banks of the slow-moving waters. The leaves were still in the bud and the Dryads were not fully awake yet (something I could appreciate), so thin sunlight filtered all the way down through the canopy. At this time of spring the days were growing long and warm while the nights were still cold, and the absence of insects made the task of picking our way through the brush far more pleasant than it would be a month from now.

Baia and Brack were quick to point out the crowns of shuttlecock ferns growing on the mossy banks and we set to harvesting the tightly-coiled shoots. They smelled green, like grass, and stained our fingers and nails. The real challenge was staying dry; the ground was so moist my boots became soaked. I ignored the wet and the chill and simply enjoyed the break in routine and the company of the Dwarf children.

I heard a distinct, hoarse call and I looked up to see a Mallard Duck sitting on her nest in a sheltered little bower on the opposite bank. She was marvelously camouflaged in her suit of brown feathers. I smiled at the quack that was equal parts greeting and warning and said,

"Good morn, cousin. Aslan's blessings upon you."

Her tail wagged quickly and she tilted her head, trying to make me out. "Good morn. You're very tall for a Black Dwarf."

I heard Brack giggle somewhere behind me. "Not a Dwarf of any kind. I'm a boy."

"A boy!" she exclaimed. "Then that would make you a Son of Adam and our king!"

"One of your kings, lady. I'm Edmund."

"Your Majesty." She bowed her head. "The Squirrels over in the tulip trees said there was a king at the smithy. I would stand, sire, to show proper respect, but my nest is full and soon you'll have a dozen new subjects."

"Well met. Congratulations on so many children."

"It is good to nest outdoors again. So this is spring!"

I found myself grinning at her pleasure at the return of the seasons. "The first of many."

"And you're gathering fiddleheads! Last year the season was so swift the Dwarfs had no time to gather any before it was summer." She gestured with her wing. "Up there a little ways is choked with them. You can fill your baskets without walking a hundred feet."

I thanked her warmly. "Baia! Brack! This way!"

The children caught up to me and after meeting the Duck, we pressed on and found the spot she had told me about. The ferns grew thick and deep and with happy shouts brother and sister set to harvesting the shoots. I worked beside them for a while, and then moved a little further up stream so as not to deplete the plants too much. Setting my basket down, I bent to break off a handful of greens when I spotted something in the mud. I pushed the ferns aside to see better.

I felt a chill move down my body from my head to my toes as I realized what it was.

A paw print. It was huge. Not entirely Wolf, neither was it entirely Human. Like the creature that had made it, it was had features that belonged both to animal and man. Humans didn't have such long claws. Wolves didn't have heels. It was so fresh that water hadn't started pooling in the deep indentations.

Werewolf.

I felt my breath hitch, and then a twinge of panic seized me, squeezing my chest like a band as I realized I was not armed. I had left the smithy without Shafelm. Gran had just sent us off. I hadn't given the sword a thought as I tried not to lose Baia.

Sweet Lion, now who was complacent?

A sick feeling settled in my stomach. I stood up slowly, listening intently and scanning the surrounding brush as I struggled to keep my breathing in check. Quiet. It was too quiet. I could hear Brack's and Baia's soft voices. No birds sang. No trees rustled. I could smell nothing but the swamp and the mild scent of the fiddleheads. My mind flew back to the very end of winter, when Peter and I had been assaulted by the rebel Trees at the Stone Table. The crushing silence before their Fell Beasts attack had felt exactly like this.

We were being watched. I could feel it. A cold, ruthless stare. Icy as the Winter that Aslan had banished.

I edged back to the children. How far had we come from the smithy? A mile? More perhaps, it was hard to tell. Could such small children run so far?

"Brack. Baia." I had to force myself not to shout. "We have to go."

"You forgot your basket," said Baia. She tried to push past me to fetch it and I seized her.

"Forget it. Listen to me now. We must get back to the smithy."

Baia put her hands on her hips. "Not without the fiddleheads! Gran said so!"

I shook my head. "No. Back to the smithy. Now!" I hissed the last word, pushing her along. "Brack! Come on!"

"But -"

I whirled on them. "I am your king!" I said tightly. "I command you obey. Leave the baskets. Come! Hurry! Hurry!"

I frightened them, but thankfully they listened. I took each by the hand and moved back the way we had come.

I saw the Mallard before the children did. Feathers and down floated on the air and on the surface of the slow-moving water. The nest was torn apart, eggshells littering the bank amidst a smear of blood on the moss. She never had a chance.

I pulled Baia close and turned her head away. "Don't look! Brack, don't look!"

He gasped and hastily cast his eyes down. They caught my alarm and Baia started to cry.

"Shh. Hold on to my hands," I ordered, pulling them along. "Don't let go. No matter what, don't let go."

They were trembling. I moved them along at a trot and they made no complaint. The swamp seemed endless and in their terror the children could not find the path. Pausing to get my bearings, I listened. Beyond our gasping breaths I could hear nothing.

"Which way, Brack?" I panted. "Look for something familiar. Remember the course of the river."

Wide-eyed, he licked his lips and then hesitantly pointed a little to the left.

"Come on," I ordered, stepping out. "Hurry."

Thank Aslan, he was right. The scrub brush gave way to taller woods and a path. The river gradually picked up momentum and with it Baia's panic grew. She whimpered and tugged at my sweaty hand and started to slip free as she tried to run ahead. I seized her by the sleeve.

"Stay together!"

"Edmund!" breathed Brack.

I looked behind. Something slouched and hairy moved on the path, shadowy and unclean. It stopped, sniffing the air. Sweet Lion, but we were upwind.

"Run," I rasped. "Lion's sake, both of you, run! Run!"

¥¤¥

## Chapter Sixteen: Wulf

Panic robbed Baia of reason even as it gave me the strength to snatch her into my arms. She was slight, barely the size of a two-year old child and she clung to me tightly and whimpered in fear.

"Faster, Brack!"

I still gripped his hand, ready to drag him back to the smithy if need be. He was breathless and terrified but he understood what was at stake. Aslan bless him, his short legs never stopped for a moment. I had never before appreciated how small Dwarfs were. The adults are the size of children and the children are tiny.

A glance behind showed the path was clear, which was almost worse than it being occupied. There was no sign of the Fell Beast, no sounds but our panting breaths and pounding feet and Baia's quiet sobs. I was trying to remember anything I had learned about Werewulfs, but memory failed me and I came up with absolutely nothing except for the fact that they were horribly fast - far faster than Dwarfs or boys. I had seen Werewulfs at Beruna and the Stone Table but I had never fought one. Peter had fought them. Peter had killed them. Peter, who would not have forgotten to bring his bloody sword along!

I let out a gasp of relief at the sight of a slate roof through the trees. We were almost back. I finally released Brack and resisted the urge to put on a burst of speed. I wanted to shout out a warning to them but I had no voice.

Brack stumbled over a root and sprawled on the ground. I skidded to a halt, plowing up the moist dirt, and seizing his coat, hauled him to his feet with might I didn't know I possessed. His face was bleeding but it was of no consequence. I doubt he even felt it.

"Come on!"

Baia's shriek of terror was well timed - the moment she recognized her home she found her voice and almost deafened me with a piercing scream. I welcomed the pain because her cry alerted the whole smithy in one shot. As we staggered into the clearing doors slammed open and voices were raised. I didn't stop despite the questions thrown at me.

"Inside," I gasped. Baia had a death grip around my throat with both of her short arms. "Stay inside! Were-Werewolf!"

I ran straight to Brint's home. Slamming the door open with my shoulder, I almost knocked myself unconscious on the low lintel. Bly and Brint cried out in surprise at the sight of us all muddy and bloody and screaming. Bly jumped up and rushed to tend Brack's face. Baia refused to release me. I didn't stop until I reached my room at the end of the short hallway. I finally pried Baia's arms from around my neck and dropped her on the pallet. Brint rushed into the room as I snatched Shafelm off the wall.

"Edmund, what is this?" demanded the Dwarf.

I shoved past him. "The Werewolf! The Werewolf! It's here!"

"What?"

There was no time to strap Shafelm to my waist and I realized I had forgotten to return the metal sheath when I sent my mail and armor back to Cair Paravel. All the better. It was much sturdier than the leather sheath and I could use it as a shield of sorts.

Bly was tending to her hysterical children. She looked up in alarm as I moved through the main room of the house.

"King Edmund - what?" she asked desperately.

"The Werewolf! The Werewolf Peter's been warning us about! It's here! Now! It murdered a Duck and chased us back here. Move, Brint!" I shouted that last at the Black Dwarf blocking the door.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, incredulous.

"Defending my subjects! Either help me or get out of my way!"

"You're a child!"

"I'm a knight of Narnia!"

"You think you can kill that thing yourself?" shouted Brint.

"I can try!" I snapped hoarsely. "Stand aside!"

The door was shoved open and Brint was bounced aside by his elder brother's entrance. Brickit frowned in confusion and concern.

"What is this? What's going on?" he immediately asked, staring at my disheveled state and furious bearing.

I took the opportunity to move outdoors, pushing past both Dwarfs. "The Werewolf," I panted, suddenly hot now that I was still and had time to notice. "It's here. It followed us."

Lion's blessings be upon the Chief Smith! He did not waste time with questions. He did not hesitate or doubt my word. Brickit just followed me outside and shouted at the small crowd gathered.

"Bowmen! Get your weapons! Move your families to the long house! The Wulf is here! We will defend our home!"

Like Brickit, they never hesitated, but dashed hither and yon to obey, alarm giving them speed. The Black Dwarf looked to me.

"Have you a plan?"

Plan? What sort of question was that? I had no notion of their defensive capabilities or even the full layout of the smithy. I stared at him in disbelief.

"Kill it?" I suggested as if it was the most obvious option.

He was about to lose patience and reply when a scream erupted from across the compound. In that instant I was moving towards the terrible shrieks and yanking Shafelm from its sheath. The scream was picked up by other throats, mine among them as I loosed a battle-cry.

"NARNIA!"

"Edmund! No!"

I ignored Brickit's shout. No time to think. No time to plan. Beyond all thought or sense or reason I raced deeper into the little compound, fear for the Werewolf's victim spurring me on. Instinct told me Brickit and Brint were a few steps behind, laboring to keep up with

my longer legs and lighter frame. I gave them little thought. I did not have to protect them as I did the children. There would be no retreat now. We would only attack and defend.

"This way!" ordered Brickit, veering to the left. At least he wasn't arguing with me.

Beneath the huge trees was cast into shadows, though the ground was kept clear between the few buildings. A small rill cutting through the compound slowed down the Dwarfs. Putting on a burst of speed, I leaped over it, landing heavily and keeping Shafelm well away from my body as I'd been taught. I could hear curses rising as my comrades struggled up the steep slope of the stream. There were other voices, less distinct, and I prayed they were the bowmen because Aslan save me, I had no idea of what to expect from this creature. The last time I had been in pitched battle was two months ago, but then Peter had been right beside me throughout the fight.

Perhaps it was just as well my brother the High King wasn't here with me now. He would be enraged at me for being so foolish as to go it alone.

But then Peter really couldn't argue - he himself would have done no less.

The screaming grew more panicked and I darted around a small chicken coop to see one of the older daughters of the clan backed against the wall of her house. A pitchfork was clutched in her hands and she was using it to keep a dark, wiry form at bay. Another scream rang out, but it wasn't the girl, it was her little sister crouched on the ground right behind her. Both girls were bleeding and the elder fended off a shaggy figure.

The Werewolf was a foul-looking thing - matted hair the color of coal covered its scrawny body. It stood on two feet, though I knew it could just as easily move about on all fours. Long, sinewy arms were raised, displaying clawed hands and fingers with too many joints. A shaggy tail lashed the air, helping it to balance as it stepped closer, taunting the girls and driving them to break and panic to make them that much easier to attack.

I dared not use my sword with the girls so close to the Werewolf, but I still clutched the metal case that housed the weapon. With a shout I swung the flat side of the sheath at the beast's head. It heard me and ducked, but it was a shade too slow and the sheath cracked it in the side of the head a glancing blow.

With a savage growl the Werewolf looked at me. Hideous. The face was mostly wolf - its snout was too wide for a canine but too long and tapered for a human. Long teeth and a scarred nose and blue eyes that were more human than animal finished off the monstrous features. I darted back a step as it sniffed the air, a maniacal gleam filling those eyes. It made a gibbering, crazed sound and finally formed words.

"Man flesh!"

Oh, wonderful. I was a delicacy. I raised Shafelm, gauging the distance between me and the Werewolf, and I tightened my hold on the sheath.

"Kill you," it said in a guttural voice. Saliva and foam dripped from its mouth and in a rush of fear I remembered Peter's warning that we as Humans were not immune to the bite of these fiends. "Kill you, Son of Adam!"

Suddenly it jerked forward and yipped in pain as the Dwarf girl let out a grunt of effort and fury and drove her pitchfork into its leg. Ah, the women of Narnia. There are none more capable in the whole world. Torn between two threats, the Werewolf used the momentum of her strike and lunged at me.

"Run!" I screamed. "Run!"

She seized her sister and they fled. I swung as the Werewolf lurched into range, those long arms reaching across the distance between us. My timing was off - the blow was a moment late. I felt Shafelm impact its ribs, the blade biting into unclean flesh even as its clawed fingers scratched 'neath my jaw and down my neck. I shouted in fury and pain, a cry echoed by the monster I fought, as we became a fouled mass of steel and limbs and confusion.

Then powerful arms seized me around the waist and I was yanked bodily to the ground. I was too caught up in the urgency of battle to understand what was happening and tried to struggle, kicking and fighting.

"Down!" shouted Brickit, trying to hold me.

"Fire!" Brint ordered in that same instant.

The familiar hissing hum of arrows whizzing overhead brought me back and I stilled, letting the Dwarf hold me down. Pain exploded in my head from the blow the Werewolf had landed and the impact on the ground. A flash of memory assailed me: Ginnarrbrick, the bite of his whip, a knife pressed to my throat, his weight pinning me, the cold of snow beneath me, his sadistic, knowing laugh . . .

I panicked.

"Still!" hissed Brickit. "Be still, you fool!"

An unholy cry split the air, a howl of of hatred and defiance and fear. More arrows flew above. I could hear their impact upon flesh and I remembered the razor-sharp points the Master had shown me. The cry of pain became a gasp, then a whimper.

Oh, dear Aslan, that wasn't the Werewolf making that sound. It was me.

I opened my eyes, staring at the branches and the hints of blue sky beyond. It was not Winter. Brickit was not the White Witch's minion. They were gone. Dead. They could not touch me.

Please, Aslan, don't let them touch me.

An unnatural silence filled the air.

"Dead?" demanded Brint nervously.

Someone kicked the Werewolf's corpse.

"La. Dead as a herring, praise be to the Lion."

More silence. No one knew what to say or do. Everything had happened so quickly. Not a quarter of an hour could have passed since Baia and Brack and I had returned from gathering fiddleheads.

I shifted and Brickit let me go. I twisted away from his hold, away from the bloody, hairy heap that had been the Fell Beast. Somehow I gained my feet, stunned and aching and frightened still. I clutched Shafelm's grip desperately, feeling my strength drain away. I took a few, unsteady steps. My jaw burned and my tunic was bloodied and I couldn't breathe without shuddering.

"Edmund?"

I forced myself to look at Brickit. Something about my expression kept him from coming any closer, but something in his aspect told me that he wanted to help as desperately as I needed it. Everyone was absolutely still and every eye was fixed not on the slain Werewolf, but on me. I realized in a rush that their anxiety had shifted from the safety of their home and families . . . to me, their king.

Narnians all, they were. My subjects. My cousins. My friends.

They were nothing, nothing like the Black Dwarfs who had served the White Witch.

The Chief Smith took a step towards me. "Sit before you fall, boy. You received the worst of it."

He caught me as my legs gave out and he eased me down to a seated position, peering at me in concern all the while. I stiffened at his touch and then I looked down at his tan, calloused hands and saw that they trembled slightly as he steadied me and gently wrested the sword from my fingers and set it aside. Brint called out for someone to come dress the scratches on my neck. Smiling kindly, Brickit gave my shoulder a squeeze, then carefully he raised my chin to check the long scrapes, looking but not touching and talking all the while. "I suppose this means I'll be obligated to listen in the future, Spawn, seeing as how the Nancy was right to worry."

I raised an eyebrow, as close to saying 'I told you so' as I thought it would be proper for a king to get.

"Of course, if he hadn't used up all the worry in Narnia, there might have been some left for the rest of us and we would have been more alert."

I snorted faintly, which was all the amusement I could manage. Brickit held me steady and spoke nonsense and wit to distract me from my pain and reaction. I closed my eyes, leaning into his touch, and said a prayer to Aslan, giving thanks to him for watching over me so closely this day.

¥¤¥

## **Chapter Seventeen: Opposites**

I dreamed the most marvelous dream that night.

I was walking on a white sand beach, the lingering heat of the day warming my skin as the gentle waves tumbled in and wrapped around my ankles before quickly retreating. The sky was a deep indigo while the horizon showed a dark rainbow and orange-dyed clouds as the sun made his way to the west and a well earned rest. Stars already twinkled overhead, and I fancied I could faintly hear their song blending in with the voice of the ocean and stirring the faint, scented breeze. I had rarely been so content. It was a perfect evening, a perfect setting, and I had the perfect companion.

Aslan walked slowly beside me, silent and steady. His great paws took small steps to match mine and he lifted his head to test the breeze, his golden eyes half-closed as he drank in the beauty of the evening. I rested my hand in his mane, wishing the dream would go on forever.

Another wave swept around our feet, the water turning my companion's paws a dark gold. As I looked down I spotted a scallop shell, white and shining in the starlight, and I stooped to lift it out of the water. It was a pretty thing, as perfect as the moment, and I held it out for Aslan to see. He looked at it and smiled.

"From the darkest depths of the sea that comes," said the Lion, his voice as soft as the breeze. "It has had a far journey."

I set the shell back down into the salty turf. "I know how it feels."

"Yes, you do. And if you allow yourself, you'll have even greater distances to traverse."

I looked up at him. "If I allow myself?"

"Yes."

I pondered this as we walked, taking the words and the moment into my heart. "What is this place?"

"The shore of the sea."

"Why are we here?"

"Because you need me. What happened to frighten you so today? It was not the foe you fought that caused you to panic, my son, but the foe you feel you cannot fight."

I reflected, remembering the traumatic events of the day. He was right. The Werewolf had frightened me of course, but he had not exercised any real power over me. It was not the Werewolf that had broken my nerve. I had done that to myself.

"I . . . I remembered when I first set foot in Narnia and I first met Ginnarrbrick, the Black Dwarf that served the White Witch. Being thrown down by Brickit like that . . . I . . . remembered and . . . I panicked."

Aslan nudged me with his nose, and his breath was sweeter than the breeze as it filled and fortified me. I welcomed the sensation like the desert welcomes rain. "It is not an unreasonable fear, Edmund, and you faced it bravely. But you know for yourself that the Dwarfs of the Blue River did not serve Jadis as well as she thought."

"I know." I dropped my gaze, staring at the foamy waves brushing my feet and listening to the swish and hiss of the water. "I wish I hadn't screamed like that. I think I scared them." And me, I thought.

He knew my thoughts. "Being frightened is not always a bad thing. Your reaction today drove home a point the Blue River Dwarfs had not considered very well."

"What point?"

"That you and your family have suffered and sacrificed for this land as well as any of its inhabitants, and that as kings and queens you will go on sacrificing for Narnia's sake."

I considered. "It doesn't seem like much of a sacrifice to me."

"That is why you are a king."

I sucked in my breath, startled at this affirmation. Aslan spoke on.

"Ginnarrbrick is dead, Edmund, slain by your sister's arrow. He cannot hurt you ever again unless you allow him to do so. Memories fade faster if you don't dwell in their shadows."

I nodded my agreement. "It's not easy."

"Worthwhile things rarely are." He gazed at me intently and his ears flattened in sympathy. "You miss your family."

"Yes. Terribly. Especially after today," I confessed easily. "I just want to be home. I miss Peter most of all."

"Of course. He knows you best. But you cannot leave the smithy until you are done."

"Done? I'm not done?" I thought of bitter beer and the stench of coal ash and sweat. I had hoped to leave the smithy within a day or two. "What's left to do?"

"You must talk again, to start."

"Talk?" I frowned in confusion.

The Lion looked at me with amusement. "Yes. Talk, Edmund. You haven't spoken a word since you ordered the daughters of the clan to run away. You're frightening your friends."

"Oh." I hadn't realized. "Oh. Sorry. What else do I need to do?"

He sat down in the sand and placed his huge, warm paw upon my shoulder. It was a comforting weight. His eyes glittered as bright as the stars above. Was Aslan almost laughing?

"You must learn all you can from Brickit."

I felt a frown settle upon my features. "But I . . ."

I considered. Time spent at the smithy at Aslan's command promised to be far more interesting than running coal and fetching water. The Lion watched me progress from confusion and disappointment to determination to follow his order to the best of my ability. I could stay another week. It was just a sennight and I had told Brickit that I was here to learn. Covering his paw with my hand, I nodded and said, "Of course."

He leaned closer. "And Edmund?"

"Yes, Aslan?"

"Keep listening to your brother. He is wiser than he knows."

I broke into a smile. He knew full well about my reliance on Peter's conduct and the example my brother set for me.

"Always," I promised.

§§§

I awoke to warmth and darkness in my cramped little room. My jaw ached but my heart felt lighter as I recalled the dream. I wondered if it had really happened, if I had been on that beach with Aslan, but then decided that was a moot point because real or not, the effect upon me would be no different. It had been a long time since I had felt so content and for a while I just laid awake and enjoyed the sensation. It almost seemed a reward for all the trials of the day.

Finally I roused and fumbled about and managed to light the small oil lamp beside my bed. By the white light I took stock of myself. I had been changed for sleeping, dressed in clean tunic and trousers that I had appropriated from Peter's closet long before I left Cair

Paravel. I saw the tunic I had worn earlier today draped neatly on a chair, all traces of blood and Werewolf hair scrubbed away. I found my boots and pulled them on, pleasantly surprised that they were dry once again, and as I buckled on my heavy leather belt my stomach growled, sharply reminding me I had not eaten anything since breakfast. Well. Perhaps I could find food as well as talk in the long house.

Standing, I felt wide awake, as if I had slept myself out even though I had no idea of the time. I was sore and stiff, but this was a feeling I was used to from endless practice on the training grounds under Oreius' watchful eye. My jaw and neck hurt - the Werewolf had landed a blow as well as a few scrapes - but the cuts had been cleaned and salve applied and I felt no fever or hotness of infection.

Carrying the lamp so as not to bark my shins on the furniture or hit my head on the low rafters, I made my way through Brint's cozy house. All was dark and quiet and when I stepped outdoors into the cool spring air I was greeted by the sweet, cheerful calls of the tiny bell frogs inhabiting the banks of the Blue River. I paused to listen and let my eyes adjust to the light of the moon. I could see a ruddy glow from the long house, so I extinguished my lamp and left it by the door before making my way to the thatched-roof building that was the center of the smithy.

At first, by the illumination of the glowing embers in the large fire place, I thought the house was empty. A motion at the far end caught my attention and I recognized Brickit's silhouette by the hearth. He watched as I closed the door and then walked the distance to join him. From his seat by the fire he studied me for a long moment, his expression unreadable in the darkness, and he gestured for me to take one of the low stools. I sat, drawing a bit closer to the warmth and light. For a span we both gazed into the remains of the fire, neither of us willing to break the silence, and finally Brickit stirred.

"I assume you're hungry," he said.

"I am," I replied in a whisper. I had meant to match his tone but somehow I could not raise my voice.

He rose, returning in a few moments with a plate of bread and cheese and dried fruits that he handed to me. Because of my aching jaw I had to eat very slowly, but the food tasted all the better for it. He returned again with a pitcher and a cup for me. He refilled his cup and poured for me and for the first time I welcomed the bitter beer upon my tongue. He let me make some headway with the food before he asked,

"Better?"

"Yes. Thank you." I took a sip of beer. The silence had gone from comfortable to smothering. There was so much we both needed to say and ask and share. Where to start?

"Brack and Baia - are they well? And Beal's daughters - were they badly hurt?"

"They're fine, boy. All of them. More scared than hurt, thank Aslan," he added. "I say it again; you took the brunt of it." The Dwarf sighed. "My brother took a party up the river. They buried the Duck and her nestlings with all due ceremony. The local Animals and Dryads were grateful."

My throat constricted and I had to stop eating. I set the plate aside, realizing I had not known the Mallard's name. "It seems like so long ago."

"Really?" he countered, pouring more beer. "Odd. To me it feels as if it's still happening."

Silence. We stared into the fire, watching the embers slowly crumble and cool.

"Must be past midnight," he said. "You slept the day through."

"And I take it you haven't slept at all."

"Can't. My mind's too full of what might have been."

"Peter's like that. He frightens himself with possibilities. Oreius is always lecturing him about it."

"It will take a long time to fade."

"Aslan told me not to dwell in the shadow of memories."

"With memories like these it's hard not to."

I sighed. "La."

He looked at me shrewdly, knowing I understood him fully. "So what happened that made you scream like that? You scared us all, each and every one. What hurt you so, Edmund?"

I stared at the fire, wishing it was hotter so as to burn away the lingering chill of an unclean touch. My mind registered the use of my name for the first time. I did not want to speak on the matter, but he deserved something, some type of answer. Brickit had saved my life and in return I had terrified him. If I had not spoken to Aslan in my dream I doubt that I would have had the strength to reply.

I looked up, looked at him, willing him to understand and ask no further.

"Jadis," I whispered, and said no more for a very long time.

¥¤¥

## **Chapter Eighteen: Pact**

Brickit left to refill the pitcher and when he returned he was also carrying Shafelm. I blinked in quiet surprise to see my sword in his hands and I received it from him gladly. Once again I had completely forgotten it, but luckily the situation now was not nearly as dire as gathering fiddlehead ferns. I laid it across my knees as Peter and I had gotten into the habit of doing with our swords when at rest. Brickit, wisely not pursuing our last topic, watched me with amusement since I could not hide my pleasure at the sight of the sword.

"What name?" he asked, jerking his chin at the weapon and moving on to much safer subjects than witches and werewulfs and emotions.

"Shafelm." I could not keep the pride out of my voice. "Blade of the Western Wood."

He nodded. "Centaur make that is."

"Yes," I said. "They gave it to me before Beruna. How can you tell it's Centaur work?"

"Easy. The taper."

"Taper?"

He reached for Shafelm and I handed it over. It was too long a weapon for him, but he did not draw it fully from its sheath. He held it up so I was looking straight at the sharpened edge.

"See the flat, how it tapers so gradually to the point? This is a blade for slicing, not thrusting. Give a Centaur a sword and he'll want to cut you to ribbons with it, not stab you. Stabbing is for Fauns and hacking is for Satyrs."

I blinked, realizing he had just summed up Cair Paravel's sword masters (and my teachers) very neatly.

"The cross-guard, too," he added. "Centaur's tend to make them plainer than Dwarfs. 'Tis a good, solid bit of work they gave you. I've seen worse craftsmanship and I've seen better, but not much."

Well it certainly was made well enough to penetrate Dwarfish armor, because Jadis, with her sense of irony and cruelty, had used this very sword to disarm Peter during Beruna and then stab him in the arm. Peter always laughed at the memory and offered to return the favor with Rhindon, which I politely declined. I found myself eyeing Brickit keenly. "Have you made better?"

His eyes grew wide at the notion and the imagined slight upon his work and family honor.

"The least of my blades would put to shame the work of any other smithy in the land, Spawn."

With a little smirk I murmured, "Really?" as I recalled the magnificent knife he had shown me that first day here.

Brickit leaned forward. "I was taught my craft not only under my mother, but under my grandfather, Chief Smith Branset, who was called the greatest sword smith in the world and made blades for knights and kings and even for that Tisroc on his ivory throne."

"Can you show me?" I asked.

"You've seen my work."

I shook my head. "No, no. I mean show me how, Brickit."

He snorted, feigning disgust. "Why should I show anything to an arrogant whelp like you?"

We were definitely on safer ground if we could insult one other again. It was a relief for us both.

"General Oreius says you don't really know a thing until you can teach it."

"And who is this General Oreius?" he demanded, though I suspected he already knew.

"No one particularly special. He just rescued me from the White Witch and led the army next to Peter at Beruna."

He snorted, staunchly refusing to be impressed. "I've taught many an apprentice to make blades."

"Then teach me."

"Why?"

I smiled, remembering Aslan's amusement. "Because I want to learn."

"Again I ask why?"

"Because I still want your good will. You respect learning. I've seen that! I want to learn. So teach me."

He drew a deep breath, staring at me with his dark eyes, and after considering my words and his own he slowly said, "You have my good will, Edmund Pevensie. What is more, you have my respect."

I blinked, astonished by this confession.

"But I refuse to waste my time teaching someone such skills only to have them forgotten or worse still, abused. If I show you this craft how will I know you'll care for it as I do?"

"I would never forget or abuse anything you taught me. I give you my word -"

"Words are easily forgotten."

"Pax! If you'll be silent and let me finish I may be able to prove otherwise, Chief Smith."

He harrumphed and waited impatiently.

"I give you my word I'll return. Let that be our pact – my service to this smithy for your service to Narnia."

"Seems to me I'm getting the short end of the bargain."

"You're one to talk of short! Not many people get to order a king around. Besides, I'm the one coming up short if I have to endure this poor excuse for beer that you drink."

He glared, and I could tell he was highly pleased by the train of conversation. "Two weeks," he finally decided after a long pause. "Two weeks a year at least you must give me, to be made up if missed."

"You have my word."

"Think the Nancy can spare you so long?"

I shook my head. "You know, Brickit, you're going to meet Peter some day and believe me, sir, when I say that you will sorely regret that choice of a name for him."

The Black Dwarf smirked and leaned far back in his chair. "I've no regrets, Spawn. Doesn't matter this way or that if the title fits your Queen Peter or not. It's enough that it drives you spar and gets the blood boiling. 'Tis healthy."

"Ohhh," I breathed, instantly seething and trying to hide it. I was only partially successful, but it pleased him to see me cross. "Oh, good my Dwarf, you will regret that statement."

He grinned. "Never. Drink on it."

We finished our cups of beer to seal the agreement. I grimaced at the sour, bitter, painful, biting tang of it, finishing with a gasp.

"That is awful!"

He chuckled, refilling the cups. "Brint and Bort make it."

I gagged. "Much is explained by that."

"I'm a hard master," he warned.

"Do tell," I returned quickly. "You can't be any harder on a body than this stuff you call beer."

He dismissed my comments with a gesture. "When I work the smith in earnest, boy, it's masters who work under me, not apprentices."

"I'm no master."

"Nor even an apprentice. Spawn you are."

I smiled, wincing at the pain it caused in my jaw. Pleasure filled me as I realized exactly what he was offering. It wasn't an apprenticeship. It was far more specialized. "Then look at me as a challenge, Chief Smith."

"Oh-ho," he laughed. "I already do!"

He slammed back the beer, then stood. "Come! Run and fire up the furnace as you've been taught! Hurry! It's time you learned how to swing a hammer."

It was hours before dawn, he'd been drinking beer since before I'd arrived, and he hadn't slept since yesterday. I had been terrorized and had terrorized, I'd grappled with a crazed Werewolf, been traumatized by old memories, and walked with the Lion all in the span of a day.

I ran.

✚✚✚

## **Chapter Nineteen: Circle, Steel, and Missed**

The fire was burning but still too young to be hot enough for Brickit's purposes. Never wasting a moment, the Chief Smith lit a number of lamps and set them about the shop so that it was almost as bright as day. We weren't in my usual shop where I labored under the master - this one was deeper inside the compound and had a wider array of tools and equipment. This was where the Chief Smith worked to produce such swords and armaments as to be worthy of kings.

He began by tossing me a heavy leather apron such as the smiths wore and a pair of gloves that had spent many an hour over burning coal and metal. He proceeded to name all the tools we would be using - pincers and fullers, the different types of anvils, twist hammers and drop-face hammers and dog hammers and files - the list seemed endless. Then he handed me a rectangular ingot of cast iron and another of steel and I received a lesson on how the two could be married together by hammering and folding to make weapons with the durability of the cast iron and the hardness of the steel. I listened intently, dazzled by the sheer complexity of the craft and the amount of information being thrown my way.

"But this," and Brickit took the steel block from my hand and thrust it into the fire, "is what you'll work with."

He added a few more pieces of metal to the little blaze and extinguished most of the lamps, for work such as this depended upon gauging the hotness of the metal, which is best done in dim light. The Chief Smith then gave me a talk on color and forging heat, having me check the ingot often to gauge the color of the metal as it slowly heated through. The fire was too small for the metal to get white hot, but when it was yellow-orange he showed me how to pull it from the glowing embers with tongs. He showed me, and then he had me don the heavy gloves and fish the metal out of the fire myself. I had thought running coal was scorching work, but it paled in comparison to laboring directly over the furnace.

"Now what?" I squeaked, tongs and glowing yellow ingot in hand. It was so hot that I was afraid to move.

"Put it on the anvil, Spawn, what else? Hold it tight, ya dolt! Now," he yanked the glove off my right hand and gave me a hammer, "see about hammering this to be as long as the hammer itself. Practice, Spawn. Get used to the motion."

I was surprised to find that the actual hammering was easier than I thought it would be. As long as it was hot enough, the metal was malleable and obedient. When it cooled too much for me to proceed easily Brickit had me thrust it back into the fire to reheat. Once I was done mangling the ingot I had a chunk of metal that was no longer even, lumpy, bumpy, slightly warped, and as long as the hammer in my hand.

He examined my efforts with a wry look. "Well. That was industrious." He took the ingot, tongs and all, and turned it this way and that as he explained. "See here now, you pounded this side harder, making it thinner so the other side curved in upon itself. Don't fight it, guide it. Don't waste your strength by hitting harder than you need to. What you do for one side you must do for the other in shaping metal. Here." He shoved the ingot back into the fire. "Take another. Try again."

This time he stood beside and behind me, guiding my moves. I let him take me by the forearm to swing the hammer. He used shorter, more precise motions than I had, and a lighter touch.

"Turn," he ordered, and I flipped the ingot over. "Now try. Light. Even. You want to shape it, not kill it, boy. It's metal, not a cockroach."

I smiled. There was a certain beauty to this art, a unique music generated at the slight bounce of the hammer as it impacted the glowing metal. Even the anvil rang with its own notes as it cushioned and absorbed each blow. The metal was beautiful as it slowly cooled from yellow to orange to red, a thin sheen of carbon building up on the surface and marring the darker colors. Small, vicious sparks flew, burning bright and piercing when they penetrated my clothes, or dull and wasted when they struck the leather apron. I stole a glance at Brickit as I measured the ingot against the hammer and I was thrilled to see the pleasure in his expression as I worked.

Dawn slowly crept over the east and gradually the smithy woke up (if they hadn't already been roused by the racket I was making). Brickit and I had been at the shop for hours and we both were tired and dirty and content with the night's work. For my efforts I had a sore arm, a few new burns, and some elongated ingots. They weren't quite as smooth and even as how they started out, but each effort was slightly better than the previous one.

Brint stomped over, clearly looking for me since Baia and Brack would have discovered my empty bed. He looked us up and down, took in his brother's attitude and my handiwork at a glance, and nodded gruffly.

"Breakfast," was all he said, making it an order.

I realized exactly how hungry I was as I untied the apron and hung it up again. I paused, my hands still resting on the protective clothing. It was armor of a different sort. The leather had been worn smooth by use and sweat and fire. I looked at it a long moment, wondering whose it was and hoping I would not dishonor the owner with my efforts.

"Come, Spawn," said Brickit. "We'll work some more after we've had a meal and a rest."

I smiled, and for once I obeyed when he called me that. As we entered the long house silence fell. Gradually the talking resumed in hushed tones as if the Blue River Dwarfs did not quite know what to say to me after yesterday's events. I moved to take my usual seat at the foot of the table, but Brickit stayed me.

"No," he said. "Not down here. You sit with my family."

I blinked in surprise, staring at him speechlessly. I was well aware of the importance Dwarfs placed upon family.

Brickit grumbled, annoyed at having to explain himself to this ignorant boy he'd been saddled with. "You protected my niece and nephew. You saved two Daughters of the Clan. You defended this smithy with your life. You eat with my family or you don't eat at all."

Great Lion, how far had I come that I was delighted to be so threatened?

Without a word I followed him to the head of the table and he set between him and his mother. I would have sat on the other side of his mother, but he deliberately set me beside him. I looked about and noticed once again that children sat between their parents. I also noticed that every eye in the place was fastened on me. The scrutiny was intense and I wasn't sure what to do to remedy the situation.

"Best say something," muttered Brickit sternly, reminding me of Aslan's instruction to talk and set their minds at ease.

I smiled faintly and addressed the assembly. "Good morn."

That broke the spell and a rush of relief spread through the room. Normal conversation resumed and quickly rose to the usual deafening levels. Bly set a pitcher of beer on the table and with a resigned sigh I reached for it, pouring cups for me and the Chief Smith. Food was served, and for the first time I realized that Brickit was the last one served in the hall. I learned in later days that this was a Dwarfish tradition - the Chief had to be sure his people were fed before he partook. From my old vantage point I was too far (and too busy eating) to see, but a sense of manners and fairness made me set my fork down. Brickit said nothing, but I knew he waited and watched. Gran set her own food down, then fed her son, and it was only when she sat that I began to eat.

The grand old dame gave me a long, assessing look. I smiled to reassure her, realizing how badly I must have frightened her and her family.

"Hasn't worked you too hard now, has he?" she asked, motioning at her eldest.

"Not at all, my lady. He's teaching me."

She nodded and I strongly suspected that Brickit would be getting an earful the moment I was out of range. We ate in silence, and gradually I came to realize I was quite weary with having been up and working the forge all night. I paused, and then smiled at the thought that I had indeed worked the forge.

"Rest for the now, boy," ordered Brickit, snapping me out of my reverie. "We've come far in a night. Get some sleep. After we eat at midday we'll resume."

§§

*Peter,*

*Please sit down and refrain from panic as you read this. I'm fine. The Werewolf can't say the same. Celer was right - it doubled back up river and happened on the smithy this Seventhday past. We managed to slay it before it could hurt anyone at the smithy, though I'm sorry to say it did kill a Duck and her clutch. It was quite a nasty piece of work and I want to thank you for all the warnings and reports you sent. The Dwarfs thought it was all a bit much at first, but in the end you were quite right and there's one less Fell Beast to account for. I will say that the Werewolf's appearance went far towards securing the good will of the Dwarfs here at the smithy. I'll tell you everything when I'm home. Now go back and read that again, Peter. It's dead. I'm fine. I just got a few scratches. I do not snore. Stay at the Cair. Do not come charging out here with half the army! You can fuss to your heart's content when I get home and I promise I won't complain.*

*Word reached us from Lithin. It seems Susan settled things nicely and the wives of the Lithin Satyrs are going to establish a school of their own. I saw lots of children in the area when I went, so with some royal backing they'll do very well. She's probably home already so you know that, but the locals were very excited to receive two royal visits in a sennight.*

*Pray remain seated, brother. There's more. I'm going to stay another week here. The diplomacy is done with and we have the good will of the Blue River Smithy, but I'm not done learning. One more week, please, Peter, and then I'll be back. Tell Martil I want the bath tub filled to the brim with boiling hot water and very clean clothes and anything but beer to drink when I get back.*

*I must go. Brickit has decided I'm to make my first project. He's starting me very, very small - a ring. I suspect I'll be at it all day and night, considering what I've done to metal so far. If you've stayed seated this far into the letter I promise to make you one.*

*My love to the girls. I miss you terribly.*

*Ed*

I stared at the letter. It didn't say as much as I wanted to, but some things, like the fight with the Werewolf, would be better told in person. I folded up the note and melted wax on it to seal it. Across from me the Fruit Bat shifted in excitement. This wasn't one of the ones I had employed previously. She was younger and smaller than the original twenty or so Bats that had taken my letters to the Cair and she had been followed by only five other would-be couriers.

"Where are your brothers?" I asked, eyeing the motley assortment of Bats that matched her in age and wingspan, neither of which was as considerable as the first slew of Bats I had employed. When I asked one of the local Robins to fetch me a Fruit Bat courier, these six curious youngsters had arrived before I could start this letter letting Peter know the Werewolf had been killed. They were happily exploring the long house and the wonders it presented. Luckily most everything here was made of wood or metal so they couldn't break anything. Removed from their element they tended to be clumsy.

"Halfway to Cair Paravel, I suspect, Sire," she said with a laugh. She was eager to be off and see the castle and its lord for herself. Behind her, one of the Bats was well on his way to getting stuck in one of the pitchers used for serving beer. As she spoke I saw him slide in head first and not come out.

I frowned and stood to rid the pitcher of its new occupant. It hadn't been washed from lunch and I feared the beer fumes might do him in. "They went to the Cair? Whoever sent them?"

"Brickit. This he did in the morn, with three letters for your king and queens."

"He did?" I paused, confused, the upside down vessel in my hands as I tried to pour the Bat onto the table. I heard a muffled giggle and looked into the pitcher. The Fruit Bat grinned up at me, the cheeky little scamp. "Pull your wings in, sir."

Why on earth would Brickit be writing to my siblings? And oh, sweet Lion, what if he up and called my brother Nancy? I would kill him. There would be nothing else for it. I'd just have to pray that Aslan would understand.

"Well. Bring this to High King Peter. And remember . . ."

"I must not hand it over unless he's seated and promises to stay that way," she replied, reciting my instructions back verbatim.

I shook the pitcher and dumped the Bat onto the table, petting his fuzzy black head. "You can stay a few days at Cair Paravel if you like and if your colony can spare you. There's lots of Bats there and you'll get to see the Eastern Sea."

They rustled their wings in excitement at the invitation and whispered amongst themselves. I smiled and handed over the letter.

"I have to go, good cousins. Brickit expects me back. Aslan between you and evil."

"And between you and the Chief Smith," answered one of the Bats. I laughed, but I was unable to keep from wondering why Brickit would be sending messages to my family.

¥¤¥

## Chapter Twenty: Hammer to Fall

"So . . . These rings you made. You'll be wanting them engraved?"

I was waiting for breakfast to be served and since I wasn't entirely awake and I found myself grunting something to the affirmative. Brickit, who was being far too helpful to be trusted, looked thoughtful and almost sage as he folded his hands and pondered the mysteries of scratching a letter into a metal surface.

"Bunta is the best engraver here, wouldn't you say, Brint?"

"Aye," said Brint, more intent on his beer than his brother.

"We'll have her engrave them for ya, lad. That will be an 'S' and an 'N' I take it, then?"

I groaned and dropped my head into my folded arms. It was too early in the morning and I hadn't gotten nearly enough sleep. I had spent all yesterday afternoon and a good part of the evening and night shaping thick strips of silver into signet rings. I had learned a great deal and enjoyed the lesson immensely, but now I needed about a hundred hours of sleep and something besides beer to drink. I was very surprised to learn that silver was nothing like steel to forge. The precious metal was worked at room temperature by careful hammering, tapping and shaping, with a minimal amount of soldering and an amazing amount of filing and polishing. It had taken me one full day, two masters, three explosive

arguments over proper technique, four violent arguments over proper technique, and five tries to achieve something like success, and that with the masters breathing down my back as I worked and constantly complaining that I was too tall. In the end I had made two very plain, heavy rings that passed the critical inspection of the masters, the Chief Smith, and me.

That was yesterday. Silly me, I had mentioned to one of the masters that I wanted to give one of the rings - the final and best one I had made - to Peter. I should have known by now that what was known by one Dwarf at sunrise would be known by all of them come sunset.

"No, Brickit," I replied without raising my head. "That will be an 'E' and a 'P.'"

"Right," he agreed too easily. "Spawn and Nancy it is."

"You're not funny," I mumbled.

"Yes, I am," was the glib reply.

"Then you're very easily amused."

"Just as you're easily aggravated, Spawn."

"If I find anything other than an 'E' and a 'P' on those rings I will tell the entire world the Dwarfs of the Blue River Smithy are unlettered and daft."

"You wouldn't be telling them anything they didn't already believe."

Grumbling a reply, I sat up for the sole purpose of glaring at him. I wasn't at my best and it had no effect whatsoever. Brickit smiled winningly at my nasty, early morning persona and asked,

"So tell me, boy, what is it you wish to do?"

I shook my head. Understanding of his meaning had yet to penetrate. What did I want to do? I wanted to sleep.

"You've produced naught but jewelry to this point," explained the Chief Smith as his mother set a plate before me. "Any spawn can work silver. You've proven as much. So what do you want to learn to make?"

I knew the answer instantly. There was no mulling over my reply. Before I could draw a breath to speak Gran set breakfast before the Chief Smith.

"Think on it," he ordered, though somehow I thought he already knew what I would say. "We'll talk after breakfast."

After breakfast, however, turned out to be a bit later than anticipated when three of the grumpy and uncouth cousins from Moon Mountain returned. I could sense the tension immediately and without being told I slipped away and went back to my old task of running coal as Brickit dealt with them. Since my status had changed in the smithy I wasn't yelled for quite so much and the master called me to his side to assist him more than once. It was far more interesting than shoveling coal and fetching water, I must say. He even allowed me, under Bort's watchful eye, to hammer the edges of some spear heads to ready them for sharpening. Bort surprised me by being a patient and able teacher.

When it came time for the midday meal I felt a pang of hesitation as I entered the long house. Brickit sat in his usual spot and the cousins were ranged around him. He glanced

my way and with an imperceptible nod motioned for me to take my seat beside him. The cousins were surprised at what to them was brazen behavior as I greeted them. There was very little room between the Chief Smith and his miner peer, but fortunately I was a skinny thing and I fit neatly between them.

"Well met, cousins," I said pleasantly. "Thank you, Lady Bly," I added as she poured me some beer. I noticed it was grainier and worse-tasting than usual, as if it came from the bottom of the barrel. All they needed to do now was to serve some apple cake to drive off the unwelcome visitors.

"King or no, you've not been invited!" snapped the eldest of the cousins.

Brickit's reply was matter-of-fact and calm. "Nor does he need to be, Biss. The rumor that brought you here is true. He placed himself in danger's way for the sake of this clan and saved four of our children from the Werewolf. He bears the wounds to prove it. He eats with my family now."

I couldn't tell if this was simply shocking or extremely horrifying to the visiting Dwarfs. Biss' expression was carved of stone and his companions drew back and exchanged scandalized looks before eyeing me and the scratches on my jaw and neck with deep suspicion. I suppose the notion of adopting a human rather revolted them, but then Black Dwarfs are not the most tolerant or fair-minded creatures in Aslan's creation. I was fortunate in my choice of Dwarfs, for mine were wiser and more open-minded than most. Brickit had already said that these cousins were confused and Gran had called them jealous of my presence. I wondered if there was any way of resolving their obvious disgust, but I realized that anything I said or any gesture I made towards them right now would be looked upon as trying to mollify them and salve their wounded pride. I decided that until I knew better, I would leave the cousins to each other and trust they could settle their differences in a somewhat civilized manner.

*§!§*

"I suppose thanks are in order."

I dumped my shovelful of coal into the half-full barrow before turning to the Chief Smith. "How so?"

"Your noxious presence has chased off my cousins. The only thing worse than uninvited guests are uninvited guests that are related to you."

"Remind me not to drop in uninvited," I grunted, leaning on the shovel for a quick rest. When I came back here again I needed to bring tools of the proper size, not to mention a decent pillow. "So shall we look at our pact as a standing invitation, then?"

"Only if I'm free to return the favor."

I grinned, shoveling some more of the stone onto the cart. "Only if you learn my brother's name."

"I know the Nancy's name, lad, I just choose not to use it."

I rolled my eyes. Clearly this was going to be a long and drawn out war.

"So," Brickit said. "Have you thought on what you want to make?"

"I didn't need to. I want to make a knife. Nothing as fancy as yours, of course. But . . . something as elegant."

"Elegant?" he echoed, trying out the word. His bushy eyebrows rose as he applied the word to his own work and found it suited.

Facing him squarely, I replied in earnest. "La. Something worthy of a king. Worthy of my king. I want to make something to thank Peter."

"Thank him for what?" demanded the Dwarf, picking up a shovel. He dumped more coal into the barrow.

"A lot of things," I said. "Mostly for not giving up on me."

Brickit gave me an odd look. "Why would he ever think to do that?"

I snorted. "Because I was beastly."

He grunted in response.

"Also to thank him for sending me here," I added after a pause, pushing the shovel into the pile of coal, "and for sending me to Lithin. I think he saw before I did that I was the right person to do this."

Another cascade of shiny black rock was added to the barrow. Brickit was unusually thoughtful and finally he said, "'Tis not a simple task."

"Then you'll just have to make certain I do it right then, won't you? After all, the whole of Narnia will know where their High King's knife came from."

"Aye, his spawn of a brother!"

"Who learned under the gentle tutelage of you," I finished with a grin. I winced as the scratches on my neck reminded me of their presence.

"Sore?" Brickit pressed.

"Only when I smile, really."

"Good. Don't smile."

I rolled my eyes instead. "So will you teach me?"

"Only on the condition that you do exactly as I say and that if the end result is less than perfect, you start again."

"Agreed. I won't give him less than my best. Ever."

He set his shovel down. "Go empty this and get your apron on."

"Now?" I wondered, a faint whine slipping through. It was almost time for dinner and I was tired and filthy and very hungry.

His black eyes were sparkling. "Can you think of a better time?"

I could, but there was no way I would say as much. Despite the pain it caused, I smiled.

"No."

He returned the smile, knowing exactly what I was thinking. This was another test, a test that I had passed. "Then get thee moving, Spawn!"

## Chapter Twenty-One: Trade Agreements

*To Queen Susan the Gentle, Mistress of the South, etc. from Brickit, Chief Smith of the Blue River Smithy, greeting!*

*Understanding, as you must, the trials and burdens assumed when one becomes the elder sibling of a wearisome and obnoxious brother, I approach Your Majesty with a sympathetic proposal equal parts recommendation and request in reference to your younger brother Edmund, King of Narnia. Blessed as you have been with a fine, upright, restive, spruce, and extremely compassionate elder brother in the form of High King Peter, if it please Your Majesty I beg you to consider leaving Edmund here at my smithy, thereby ridding yourself of his tiresome humor while at the same time providing him with food, shelter, and the means to learn an honorable trade, for I tell you plainly the lad has a shining future as a Master Smith.*

*I beg Your Majesty consider this offer.*

*Brickit, Chief Smith of the Blue River Smithy*

I stared at the document in open astonishment, unable to keep an amazed laugh from passing my lips. Looking at Lucy as she perused her own letter from the Chief Smith, I wondered if she had received a similar offer. Her face was puckered into a frown as she mouthed some poorly spelt word or worked through the Dwarf's bad penmanship and I knew that her message had to rival mine for audacity and nerve.

The Fruit Bats employed by Edmund to be his couriers while at the smithy had unexpectedly returned just an hour or so ago while we were holding court. They had delivered their letters to Sir Giles Fox, our chamberlain, and hurried off to enjoy the local caves before their return to the Blue River. At first we had thought Edmund had written again, but when the letters turned out to be from Brickit I had at first been concerned and now . . . now I didn't know what to think.

Lucy raised her eyes from the parchment, stuck dumb with amazement for a moment. When finally she found her voice, it came out in a squeak.

"It's from Brickit! He wants to trade his brother for Edmund!"

"What?" I laughed. "He asked me if he could keep him!"

We looked at each other and burst out giggling. I handed Lucy my letter and she gave me hers. It was an equally verbose offer to trade Brint for Edmund, and like my note it detailed the advantages to be gained by having a master smith around and the joys of not having the likes of our annoying brother (Brickit's words) cluttering up the Cair.

"Is he serious?" wondered Lucy.

I shook my head, unable to reply. The Chief Smith may very well be in earnest, but we certainly couldn't take him that way.

"What's so funny?" asked Peter, striding into the sitting room. He smiled to see our amusement and poured himself some wine.

"Here," I said, handing him the letter with his name scrawled across it. Peter frowned as he recognized the handwriting, but spotting similar letters in our hands and going by our reactions he knew something was amiss but that nothing was wrong with Edmund. He dropped into a chair and sipped his wine and started reading his letter.

A moment later he almost spewed the wine out as he started coughing and choking and trying to breathe again. I hurried over and gave him a few sharp blows on the back. Recovering, Peter stared at the paper, absolutely taken aback, and finally he tore himself away from Brickit's letter to gaze up at us. His gaping expression was very comical and I knew my own face had to be a close reflection of his. I held up my letter.

"He's asking to keep Edmund."

Lucy piped up, waving her own note. "He asked to trade his brother for ours."

Peter shook his head and finally managed to say in a raspy gasp, "He asking to buy him from us!"

We stared at each other for a moment, not a one of us sure how to react to these outrageous and ridiculous offers. Then Lucy giggled, and I felt my own shoulders shake as I asked,

"So how much is Ed worth?"

"Susan!" cried Peter, scandalized. He realized a moment later that I was teasing and he burst out laughing as well. He read his letter again, his amusement growing. "At least he said please."

"Asking to buy him is a bit much," Lucy replied.

Peter collected the letters and read them all. He muttered and fumed and finally exclaimed, "Restive? Spruce? What on earth has Edmund been telling them about me? And does this chap actually think we'd part with our brother?"

"Probably not," I reasoned. "I mean, do you actually think he spoke to Edmund first?"

Lucy giggled and Peter smirked. "A very good point. Obviously he didn't since Edmund seems convinced the beer there is poisonous."

"Really, we should send him some good beer from the cellars," Lucy suggested. She leaned over Peter's chair and read from his letter. ". . . pray that you name a fair price in gold and weapons and other valuables for the continued presence and service of your brother, Edmund." She gave Peter her best wide-eyed and innocent look. "What would Ed say?"

"Just that Brickit could never afford him," Peter returned. "At least, never afford to feed him."

We all enjoyed the moment and the sheer absurdity of Brickit's proposals when Marin, one of Peter's Cat pages, slid into the room.

"Majesties, your pardon," she lisped. "Couriers have arrived for King Peter from the Blue River Smithy. The message is from King Edmund."

Peter was in high spirits as he smiled at the tabby. "Send the couriers in please, Marin. I can't wait to hear what he thinks about Brickit's notion of keeping him," he added quietly as the Cat moved towards the door.

"Wait! Slow down!" she called suddenly, and we all looked up.

A moment later the room was full of excited, clumsy, squeaking Fruit Bats that didn't have the sense to pick a spot to land, but flapped about the room and knocked into things and each other. There were six of them, but from the racket they made there seemed to be many more and Lucy and I ducked for cover. For a moment there was pandemonium, and then Peter jumped to his feet and caught one of the Bats in both hands.

"Silence!" he ordered. "All of you! That's enough! Land now! This is no way to conduct yourselves!"

He had the disadvantage of being the tallest thing in the room. Bats being Bats, they all swooped in and landed on him from every direction, covering him from head to waist in fuzzy black.

"Ow! Stop that!" he ordered as one of the Bats tugged on his hair.

"It's real!" exclaimed the Bat, ignoring the order for a moment. "Zante, Corinth, look! It's real!" Little sounds of awe rose up and the couriers completely forgot their duty in light of examining Peter's hair for themselves.



Peter sighed and in a monotone said, "I refuse to believe I'm the only blond in the history of Narnia."

Suppressing a smile, I went to his rescue. I helped the Bats untangle themselves from his clothes and each other and set them around the room. It occurred to me that they were rather small and young. They were all very eager and happy and charmingly curious and they left Peter disheveled and a little irked, with one juvenile Bat still on his hands.

"What name has your mother blessed you with, lady?" asked he, holding the Bat at eye level.

"Sultana," said she, bowing her head as she realized in whose hands she rested.

"Welcome to Cair Paravel. I believe you have a message for me."

She remembered the tightly folded letter she clutched in her claws, and I saw her grip on it tighten. "I do, King Peter. It's from your brother."

"May I have it, please?"

"Not yet, Sire. King Edmund told me I was not to give it to you until you were seated and promised not to panic."

"What?" he demanded instantly. "Panic?"

"King Edmund made me promise to make you promise," she said in a small voice.

Thoroughly fed up, Peter was about to protest when I simply said, "Peter." It was not Sultana's fault that Edmund knew his older brother so well.

He drew a deep breath, mastered his impatience and anxiety, and resumed his seat. "I promise I will not panic."

She handed over the letter and he set her down on the nearby table. Hastily he tore open Edmund's message and I saw him blanch and suck in his breath as he read the first few words. Unconsciously, he slowly stood. I knew he wanted to pace, but little Sultana piped,

"You promised, Sire!"

"What?" he wondered, completely distracted.

"Sit, Peter," I reminded softly.

"Oh." He dropped down again on the foot rest before the chair, eyes locked on the document. Three seconds later he stood and started to stride across the room, his voice rising up. "Lion's mane!"

"Peter!" Lucy admonished. She pointed at the frightened Bats.

With a little growl he sat on the window ledge. As we watched him read the letter, he went from pale with fear to red with emotion and I could only imagine what Edmund had to say. I turned to the couriers, suspecting they could be very easily distracted.

"Why don't you go rest before you return to the Blue River? The page Marin can direct you to food and a place to rest."

"Can we see the Eastern Sea?" one of the Bats exclaimed, and immediately they all clamored to see the ocean.

"Ask Marin to show you," I replied.

They enthusiastically swooped off in search of their duly appointed Cat guide. I closed the door and then Lucy and I stood close and regarded Narnia's High King. There was a tumult of emotion on his face - relief, anxiety, desolation. I felt my heart go out to him and taking Lucy's hand; we settled on either side of him and leaned close.

"He won't be back for another week," Peter said dully. "He's not quite done."

I felt a pang of disappointment, but I suspected it would take more than that to generate such a strong reaction out of Peter. "Is that what's upset you so?" I pressed.

He shook his head, looking up at me. When he spoke, his voice was soft and conveyed so much more than mere words ever could. "The Werewolf. The one I'd been warning them about. It attacked the smithy."

I gasped, and Lucy echoed the sound.

"Was Edmund hurt?" we both demanded.

"Scratches, nothing serious. Here. Read for yourselves."

He handed over the letter and Lucy came to my side to read. Peter let out a sigh and rubbed his temples and I knew he was well on his way to a headache.

"He's well, Peter," I said, knowing the source of his distress. "He hasn't been hurt. You did what you could and Edmund and the Dwarfs did what they had to."

He let out a shuddering breath and Lucy, dear sister, twined her arms around his waist to comfort him. He bent over and held her tight.

"You miss him," Lucy stated simply, and Peter nodded. She looked up at him, trying to lighten his mood and get him to smile. "Even though he snores?"

"Especially because he snores," Peter said quietly. "Then at least I know he's right there."

Oh, Peter. How well he loved his only brother. I smiled and joined their little knot, resting my cheek against Peter's shoulder. We all missed Edmund. By his own words he missed us as well, but I had a great sense of pride that he was seeing this challenge through. Clearly the Dwarfs adored him enough to try to keep him there. I smiled at the notion and then smiled at my elder brother, knowing he held the same pride for Edmund.

"He's doing very well," Lucy consoled.

Said Peter, "I knew that he would."

"Well," I replied, resolving myself, "If he's not back in a week, I say we go and get him. He's had enough fun."

To my relief, Peter smiled faintly. "Fun? I don't know if he's exactly having fun, Su, but whatever he's having I'm sure that by the end of the week he'll have had quite enough."

¥¤¥

## Chapter Twenty-Two: Aim

"Your aim needs some work, boy."

I looked up from where I instinctively clutched my left hand to my chest with crushing strength. My poor fingers, caught between hot metal and a hammer by an ill-timed, poorly-aimed hammer strike, were already throbbing with agony and holding them so tightly did not really help, but I could not bring myself to let go.

Brickit sighed in sympathy for what I was feeling and with a small groan I doubled over, resting my head on my knees as I waited for the pain to fade. Finally he sat beside me, and after a few minutes of letting me suffer he nudged me with his elbow.

"Let me see," he ordered. "Come on, Edmund, give me your hand and I'll let you know if you'll get to keep some or all of it."

I uncurled just enough for him to inspect my fingers. They simultaneously felt on fire and flattened and I gasped as he ruthlessly forced my hand to unclench. Seeing stars for the second time in just a few minutes, I bit my lip to keep from crying out . . . or just crying.

"Aye, it hurts, but it won't last forever and you've probably felt worse learning to swing a sword," he said, ignoring the tears in my eyes and the sweat on my face as he felt down the length of each finger on my left hand, flexing and curling each one in turn. "Naught's broken, though you might wish otherwise. You shouldn't lose any nails."

I couldn't help but make a sound of revulsion at the thought.

He chuckled. "We've all done worse, Spawn, and so will you in time. You got the lesson over with early in your career: keep your fingers out of the way of a swinging hammer. We'll get you something cool to keep it from swelling and you'll be right as rain."

As good as his word, he sent an apprentice to fetch a bucket of fresh water and he had me soak my hand in the cool liquid. I sighed in relief as a chill gradually replaced the pain.

Tired and miserable, I sat hunched over with my hand in the bucket. He left me for a few minutes and came back with the piece of steel I had been shaping. It was cold and gray by now, and Brickit leaned over to hold it at my eye level.

"'Tis a good start," he said. "But it won't do. See here? The tang's not long enough for the balance you want. Don't forget who and what you're working with and who and what you're making this for. Hold up your hand. The dry one, Spawn. I've no mind to get wet."

Resisting the urge to splash him, I obliged. He pressed his hand against mine to compare the sizes. His hand was wide and his fingers stubby, the skin rough with calluses and scars and burns. In contrast my hand was slight and my fingers long and fine.

"See? They keep trying to make a knife for a Dwarf, not a Son of Adam. You've got to keep in mind that you're making this for the Nancy and I assume his hand is larger than yours, and will just get larger."

I nodded in agreement.

"So the blade must balance against the hilt. See here."

He drew his knife and held the elegant blade beside my rough first attempt. I wondered at my temerity at thinking I could make something a fraction so beautiful.

"The weight of metal and wood and leather must be considered, the cross-guard and pommel and grip, to oppose the weight of the blade."

I stared, trying to take this all in. Brickit displayed the knife I had started.

"It's well shaped. Nice and even. You've an eye for this sort of thing, Spawn."

If it was the truth or just an attempt to lift my flagging spirits, his kind words were what I needed to hear. I smiled, my jaw a little less painful than the day before, the ache in my hand lessened as I reached for the hunk of steel. I turned it this way and that, examining my own handiwork and looking at what was right and wrong with this first attempt. It was a good start. It was well shaped. The Chief Smith had praised my work.

I would do better tomorrow.

§#§

"Better," grunted Brickit, looking hard at the fledgling blade I held tightly clamped with pincers, "but it's too thick to be flexible and balanced. Narrow the blade, Spawn, and don't forget it's for Nancy, not for Baia!"

I didn't sigh or grumble as I thrust the hunk of steel back into the fire to reheat. Rather I glared at the glowing white blaze, annoyed with myself for forgetting to keep so many factors in mind. Balance, weight, shape, flexibility – each aspect had its own demands that had to be met, and my complete inexperience was hampering me. I shifted my glare from the fire to the Chief Smith.

"Show me what I have to do," I said, and it was as much ordering as imploring him to help me. He cast me a look, gauging my mood and fatigue, and slowly shook his head.

"Take a rest first," he replied, relieving me of the hammer I gripped. "Rest, a drink, sit for a spell. You've been going all morn. I'll come back and we'll work on it."

I wanted to argue, but he was right. I was worn out. Reluctantly I nodded and he shoed me off and away from the forge. I dragged my arm across my forehead, wiping at the sweat and dirt gathered, and I wondered if I would ever really be clean again in this life time.

Retreating to the furthest corner of the shop, I sat on the floor and bent my knees close to my chest, waiting for the aches to fade. I rested my head against the plaster wall and let out a long sigh, willing my body to take advantage of the moment of peace. As I stared at the soot-blackened rafters, my mind wandered to Mathe, my rhetoric teacher, and I tried to think of as many words for 'tired' that I could. It was a long list. Eventually it occurred to me that save for an extra 'r,' tortured was an anagram for tutored. I snorted. Mathe would be proud.

I wondered at the time and what my siblings were doing right now. Probably having tea. We did that a lot for some reason. I didn't particularly like the stuff, but I would not have refused some right then. Anything but that grainy beer. My letter to Peter should have arrived and I could only imagine his reaction. Poor Peter. I knew it would alarm and upset him, but better that he should hear it from me than anyone else. I still didn't know what Brickit had written to my siblings but I assumed I would find out eventually.

"King Edmund?"

I looked up and was pleasantly surprised to see Baia standing before me with a dewy tankard in her hands. I had not seen her since breakfast (waking me up didn't count since I rarely remembered actually seeing her) and I hadn't had a chance to talk and ask her how she was since the Werewolf attack. Before I could stand up and greet her properly she held out the cold tankard to me.

"It's ginger water, with a little early mint and honey. Gran made it. I thought you might like some."

"Thank you, my lady," I replied, grateful and touched at her thoughtfulness. I relieved her of its weight and she sat down beside me. I drank a mouthful of the spiced liquid. It had a sharp, sweet taste that was pleasant on the tongue and it went far towards cooling me and my sore fingers. After a few minutes I looked at Baia.

"How are you?" I asked. "You weren't hurt on this Seventhday past, were you?"

She shook her head, studying me closely. "Papa said that you were the worst hurt of us all. Does your neck hurt?"

"A little. Were you very scared that day?"

Nodding, she said in a serious tone, "I was very scared. I was afraid the Werewolf would eat us all."

"I was afraid of the same thing," I admitted, taking another drink.

"You?" she asked, awed. "But you saved Bess and Belleel! Mama told me that you ran right after the Wulf and didn't even wait for the archers."

"I'll admit it wasn't the smartest thing I've ever done, Baia, but I'm glad I did it. Would you like some?" I offered the tankard and she reached for it with both hands. We slowly savored the treat, sharing it between us.

"If you were so scared why did you chase after the Werewolf?" she asked softly.

I smiled, handing over the tankard. "Finish it, Lady Baia. I chased after the Wulf because as a knight it's my duty and as a king of Narnia I have to keep my people safe no matter how frightened I am."

"Uncle Brickit says you're part of the clan now."

"I'm greatly honored that he says so, too."

"I'm glad you're in our clan. That makes us really cousins." She smiled and leaned close to whisper, "Cousin Biss was very angry with Uncle Brickit that he did that, and Uncle Brickit said he's seen rocks that are smarter than Biss!"

I chuckled more at her expression than to hear Brickit lace into his suspicious and moody cousin. Baia giggled and I thought how well she would get along with Lucy. "You know, Baia, if we're really cousins then you're also related to my brother and sisters."

Her eyes flew open wide. "Even your brother with the yellow hair?"

"He's the only brother I've got."

She frowned, digesting this unforeseen and unsettling development. "But how can a Black Dwarf have yellow hair?"

"The same way a Black Dwarf can be a boy. Family is what we decide to make it."

After a few moments of quiet contemplation, Baia said, "I think I'll just count you for now."

§!§

"Now," lectured the Chief Smith, "this is a respectable start and cold filing can work wonders, but that's not why you're here or what I intend for you to learn."

Brickit had collected me soon after the midday meal and he hovered close as he tried to cram years of knowledge and skill into me all in an afternoon. It was overwhelming and exciting all at once as he critiqued my latest efforts.

He lifted my third attempt, the blade that was too thick. "Better than the first two, especially considering the distraction of two masters trying to instruct you at once. But you can do better and I know you want to."

"La," I agreed quietly. I looked up at him, tired and determined. He seemed to recognize something in my expression. Perhaps he had been in my position once upon a time, because he nodded sagely and clapped me on the arm.

"So. Build up the fire, Spawn! I'll help you choose your metal and we'll get to work."

¥¤¥

## Chapter Twenty-Three: Temper

"Patience, King Edmund. You didn't learn to run a kingdom in a day."

I sighed in frustration and disappointment, looking up from the table to give Gran a wry look. Another round of labor – this time with Brickit himself breathing down my neck and complaining that I was too tall – had resulted in yet another failure. The blade had cracked

and had to be abandoned. "I've been at this more than a day. And I'm still not too sure about my ability to run a kingdom."

She chuckled and patted my shoulder. "We've a saying among our people, young king: Only a fool gilds refined gold. What you lack in skill and experience you make up in drive. You can do this, unskilled though you may be. I can see it in you. You've the glint in your eye that tells me you will do your brother the High King proud."

I considered for a moment. "And Brickit?"

The old dame smiled. "Oh, lad, he couldn't be prouder than he already is."

Her words pleased me more than I could say. To think that when we met Brickit and I had done nothing but exchange barbed words and snide remarks! We still did, but the intent behind them had changed so gradually over the past few weeks that all the bite was taken out. "I have only three more days here before I have to go, Lady."

Gran gave me a look at once sly and wise. "Mighty Aslan sang the world into being in a single morn. Think of what you, his chosen king, might accomplish in the time you have left here. Remember success is not always measured in the finishing, but in the trying."

I blinked, astonished at her faith in me. It was amazing, really, the level of confidence Narnians placed in us, their kings and queens. At times it was daunting, but right now I let her trust bolster my enthusiasm.

Brickit sat down beside me a few minutes later. As soon as we were fed our evening meal I poured him some beer and fixed him with an indomitable look. "Hurry it along, Chief Smith," I insisted. "We've work to do."

He smirked at my expression and tone, but I noticed he also ate faster than usual.

§§§

Once again I started with a blank hunk of silver-gray steel, and just as every time before I thrust it deep into the glowing embers of the fire until it shone yellow-hot and ready to be shaped. I hammered and sweated and ignored the sparks burning me and my clothes as I poured every effort into keeping my word to make something worthy of Narnia's High King. The only difference now was that I had the Chief Smith directing every move and every hammer strike with a precision that was remarkable. He stood opposite me at the anvil, with a slim wooden stick in his hand that he used to point to the exact spot for me to strike with the hammer. By the tone of metal impacting metal he could tell if the strike was hard enough as I pounded the steel into shape, and under his direction a long, narrow blade began to form that was superior to anything I had produced thus far.

"Harder," he ordered, pointing to the cooling metal. We were both intent to the point of obsessive. There were no words exchanged between us. There was no calling for conversation. The only sounds were a hammer hitting steel, the soft rush of the fire, and the Dwarf's gruff voice as he commanded each step. "Again. Turn. Here. Lighter. Again. Again. Back in the fire with it!"

And so we went on, coaxing the steel with heat and hammer blows, finding balance and heft and symmetry between us and in the metal. We were alone in the shop, the masters having left long ago. I had no notion of time or any thought beyond following his terse instructions. Now and then he took the hammer and worked the knife a few blows, his expertise correcting the flaws my inexperience wrought. Still, the majority of the actual

labor was mine. I was so focused, so bent on following his orders that it didn't seem like work at all. I didn't grow tired, my attention never wavered. The need to work and to do this well consumed me utterly, overshadowing any desire to pause and rest. We moved from the hot aura of the forge to the relatively cool air by the anvil, sweat mingling with sparks as the day turned into the evening and then into the night.

It was very late when Brickit left me for a while, grunting at me to watch the fire. The knife was resting back in its fiery bed of coals when he returned. To my surprise he had two buckets of fresh water and he dumped them into the slate slack tub close by the forge.

"Pull that free," he ordered, motioning towards the knife.

I obeyed, pulling the glowing metal free with a pair of tongs. It shone with radiant heat in the barely-lit shop, a brilliant cherry red. I studied my handiwork at a safe distance. It felt right this time. It would not crack. It was balanced and well shaped.

This was a knife for my brother. Finally.

"Steady," said Brickit, staring at the blade. "Wait a moment. When I say, into the bath with it. Point first."

I waited, staring, wondering what he was waiting for. Brickit never even blinked as he looked at the knife. A few long moments passed as I tried to calm my pounding heart, and then he snapped, "Now!"

I dipped it into the stone tub. Immediately an angry, almost pained hiss rose up sharply and steam filled the air. The sound was squelched as abruptly as it began when the knife was immersed and at Brickit's order I dropped it fully into the tub and backed away. Hot steel met cool water and the liquid instantly boiled. I wiped my brow, suddenly tired and breathless. It was a good feeling, similar to the end of a long, hard practice session on the training grounds at Cair Paravel.

"Why did you have me wait?" I asked after the water and my heart both calmed.

"Hmm?" he rumbled, frowning.

"Why wait? Why not quench it immediately?"

Brickit realized what I was talking about and a faint smirk touched his lips. Taking the tongs from my hand, he moved to the tub, fishing about in the steaming water. He lifted the knife by the tang and examined it from all angles in the dim light. After a long while he nodded, satisfied with what he saw.

"Because timing, Spawn, is everything. For the temper a blade such as this needs, the metal was too hot." He offered me my own work, and I tested the metal with my gloved hands before I took it from the tongs. I turned it this way and that, aware that he was minding me closely. I could not keep a slow grin from spreading across my face. I held it out to him.

"What say you, Chief Smith?"

He took the still-hot blade in his calloused hands, holding it between his fingers by the point of the blade and the tip of the tang. It was more than a foot long and the metal shone with a dull, silver sheen.

"I say get some rest," he replied after a few minutes of contemplation. "Tomorrow we'll make the cross-guard and you'll get to learn the very fine art of filing and polishing Blue River Steel."

*§§§*

*"Talons, feet, and claws,  
Belly, fins, and paws,  
Hooves, hands, and tails,  
Wings, mouths, and nails."*

Baia and I straddled a bench in the long house, hands before us as she taught me a Narnian clapping game. Unlike the clapping games I had seen Lucy play with her friends, Baia and I each kept one hand before us at all times, the backs of our hands maintaining constant contact. Our free hands met above and below the stationary ones, sometimes clapping against our own hands or thighs, sometimes twisting over to strike our partner's hand. My fingers were still quite sore but she had mercy on my novice status in the game and moved slowly enough for me to follow.

*"Southern Marches swampy,  
Northern Marches cold,  
Eastern Sea so soggy,  
Western Woods so old."*

Like many Narnian games and rhymes, this one taught as well as entertained – in this case the game focused on navigating around Narnia. I smiled as Baia concentrated. She had much further to reach when playing with me as opposed to her friends that were closer to her in size, though I tried my best to make it easier for her.

*"Leopard, Ship, and Horse,  
Spearhead pointing north,  
Culros, Hammer, Crown,  
Shine when sun goes down."*

I missed a beat and her hand and she giggled at my efforts as I tried to compensate. Brint came and sat beside his daughter, watching us play.

"Teach him well, daughter," he said with a laugh, and there was obvious pride in his voice. "We don't want him getting lost in this land he rules."

"I still get lost in my own palace," I admitted, much to their amusement.

"And by the by," added Brint, "the parents of those Fruit Bats you sent to Cair Paravel came looking for their brood last night while you were making a racket."

I stopped mid-clap. "What?"

"Seems the Robin you sent asked the wrong family for volunteers."

I closed my eyes. I should have known. "Oh, no . . ."

Brint let me suffer a few moments longer before he shrugged. "No worries, boy. They're more upset with their offspring than with you. They at least should have known better." He chuckled. "Every family has its idiots. This generation of Bats is just more blessed than most."

Shaking my head, I said, "I'll have to apologize."

"Don't bother. It will do the young ones some good and as I said, the parents laid the blame where it belongs."

"Still."

There was no time for further conversation as the daughters began to serve breakfast. I thanked Baia for the game and took my usual seat. Almost immediately a plate of food was set before me and Brickit dropped down into his chair next to me.

"Hurry it along, Spawn!" he all but yelled in my ear. "We've work to do!"

I grinned, delighted to obey.

¥¤¥

## Chapter Twenty-Four: Worthy

If I thought there was anything in the least bit romantic or magical in making weapons I quickly abandoned those childish and silly notions when it came time to polish a blade. The best I could say was thank Aslan I hadn't tried to make Peter a sword because I would have had to stay at the Blue River Smithy an additional month just to get the thing polished. Polishing was a long, boring, and in the end quite smelly job, though at the same time the end results were very satisfying.

Brickit wouldn't let me touch the blade I'd forged the night before, but he made me start out by heating and tempering one of my earlier attempts and practicing on that. Polishing was accomplished by rubbing the metal with a series of flat stones, each one of progressively finer quality all the way down to clay from the banks of the Blue River. Each stone had to be moved in a different, consistent direction to avoid scoring the metal too much and Brickit told me in no uncertain terms that I was not to touch the tang. After leveling a few choice threats, he explained that polishing the tang was counter-productive and could cause the grip to come loose.

With a series of five polishing stones, a bowl of clay, and a bowl of water arrayed before me, I set to work. The practice blade was tightly clamped in a vise on a work bench and after a quick tutorial in even pressure and water as a lubricant and the importance of following but one direction Brickit let me have at it. He came back often to check my progress and told me when to switch stones and direction, each time showing me the exact angle and starting point for each swipe of the stone. That didn't happen as often as I would have liked, but I will say that I was fascinated to see the steel gradually acquire a smooth sheen that got shinier and brighter as the morning wore on until Brickit threw a rag at me and told me to switch to the clay. I had thought the clay would be easier to use than the stones, but I was wrong. It clung and got under my nails and it stank. My hands were aching by the time I was done, but I had never been so pleased to get so muddy (even though some of the clay got in my hair and dried as hard as plaster). When I wiped the steel down one final time the blade had a surface that was almost mirror-bright with a faint bluish tinge to it.

"Not bad for the first try," Brickit allowed in a grudging tone that told me he was very pleased with my first efforts. "Fairly respectable work. 'Tis easier to polish double blades

like this with no false edge, believe it or no. Of course," and here he freed the blank from the vise and turned it over, "you'll want to be doing both sides."

I made a sour face at him as if that was obvious, but in truth I had completely forgotten the other side of the blade. I stretched my sore shoulders and shook my hands to ease the tightness in them.

"Now," he said, rambling on in much the same manner as he wrote invitations, "were this the Nancy's present it would get polished and the cross-guard added, then go to Master Boont for the grip to be fitted and sanded and then you'd have two more times at it with this clay mix and some oil. But, seeing as how you didn't destroy this, you can start on what you made last night. Mind, now, you must take care not to distort the shape and 'ware the edges! These things don't need to be sharp to cut a finger."

He set up Peter's knife in the vise and once again showed me the right angle to move the roughest of the stones. I hesitated, and the Chief Smith gave me a little poke in the arm.

"It won't polish itself, Spawn."

I flicked some water at him in retaliation and with a chuckle he let me get to work. If I lingered longer and rubbed the stones with greater care than before, I think I can be forgiven. I watched the metal grow smooth and buff under my strokes and I tried to imagine Peter's expression when he finally saw this and held it in his hands. In my mind's eye the knife was done and I could see it clearly, a neat dagger for everyday use, sharp, strong, and elegant. He would be thrilled in his quiet way, just as I was thrilled to think that I was the one to make this for him. It was more than a weapon or a tool by now. This knife was a pledge and an icon for Narnia's High King, a symbol that spoke of a depth and passion the words for which I did not yet possess. I could say I loved Peter and I had, but this gift would show my brother how great my devotion had become these past few months since Beruna. My actions, my work, would speak for me, and all the emotion I could not express fully I now poured into my labor.

Since coming to Narnia I had learned that the merest of things – a handkerchief, a kiss, a quiet promise – had a greater, more profound meaning and dignity than any monuments or memorials of metal and stone. And so it was with the knife. From the rough ore taken from the heart of Moon Mountain to the ingots cast in sand to the steel blank I had hammered into shape to the knife gradually taking on a dull sheen beneath my hands, love and devotion and skill had followed this gift at every stage of its journey. Like me, it had come from darkness to light, shaped and tempered with care, and like me, I knew it would be loved and treasured. And so, like me, I had to make it into something worthy.

¥¤¥

## **Chapter Twenty-Five: Shagreen and Hornbeam**

"Well now," Brickit said, standing over me to look at my finished handiwork. "Well now, lad," he echoed as he carefully loosed the blade from the vise. He held it by the long, full tang and turned it slowly, examining the shaft of metal from all sides. I waited anxiously as his dark eyes studied the shining-bright steel in the fading light. For some reason the blue tint to the metal seemed more pronounced to my eyes than on the first blade I had polished. I thought it was beautiful.

"Well now, King Edmund," he finally said, sinking down to sit beside me on the bench. He gazed at me with wonder and something akin to admiration. "This . . . is very well done. Would that all our apprentices approached these things with such passion."

I stared at the knife blade, once again amazed at my own work. It was worth raw, aching fingers and sore arms and back to have silenced him this way, if only for a moment. "Now what happens?" I asked, and I was surprised that I could not raise my voice above a whisper.

"Now I make the cross-guard." He glanced at me, looking almost apologetic. "You haven't the skill for that yet and it's more than I can talk you through. My mother said you're leaving in two days, so if this is to be completed we need more help from the masters."

I nodded gratefully. I was surprised I had made it this far on my own.

"After we add the cross-guard, Master Boont will make the grip. She's already got wood aplenty; it just needs to be affixed. Then you polish it some more and my mother wraps it in leather and my brother sharpens it. After that the masters decide if it will be allowed to leave our smithy."

I suppressed a smirk. "And if it's not allowed to leave?"

"You get to visit it next year when you come. Don't worry, lad, I'll take good care of it."

Giddiness overwhelmed me and I snorted. Brickit chuckled, pleased to have made me laugh. He gave me a push.

"Come along, Spawn, and I'll show you how to fuse metal to metal."

§§§

Brickit was absolutely right – the cross-guard was far beyond my skill level to make and affix to the blade. He made it look very simple – almost annoyingly so – but after I ran some coal and sweated for another hour or so, the blade had a plain cross-guard and a small rounded pommel, both of which were made of bronze and fused neatly to the tang. I was anxious that the heat would undo my polishing, but Brickit scoffed and dismissed my worries, reminding me that I had to polish it a few more times anyway. He was rather casual with my time, but I supposed since this smithy was his kingdom he was allowed to be.

We left the fire to cool and Brickit walked me over to the carpenter's shop. He was already speculating on the type of wood Master Boont would choose for the grip. He dismissed ebony and mahogany as too heavy and boxwood as too light and finally decided that some sort of ironwood would suit to balance out the finished product. My opinion on the matter was not solicited, not that I had one to offer.

I had not been paying close attention before when Brickit mentioned Boont. The master carpenter, it turned out, was female and the first Black Dwarf I had ever seen with blue eyes. She was, nonetheless, all Black Dwarf and she cast the pair of us a hearty glare.

"What were you about all day that a simple knife took from sunup to sundown to polish? What have you taught this boy, Brickit?"

Without waiting for a reply she stomped off into her workshop, leaving us to follow if we dared. Brickit motioned me on and we stepped into the large shop. I paused and let out a little exclamation of amazement at the sheer number of tools filling the place and hanging

from the rafters and walls. Most of them I couldn't identify, nor could I identify the dazzling varieties of wood piled and stacked all about the place. Completely distracted, I ran my fingers over woods of every color and grain imaginable – pale green and golden blond and red and brown and even dense, dark ebony from Narnia's southernmost mountains. There were bows and poles stacked up against the walls, bundles of arrow shafts ready for heads and fletching, axe handles, and wooden swords. Weapons weren't all that was produced here – there were cooking utensils and bowls and other household implements, some of them intricately inlaid, and I smiled to see some beautifully carved animal toys.

"Edmund!" snapped Brickit, bringing me out of my reverie. He spoke my name quickly, as if it were distasteful and needed to be dispensed with quickly, but at least he didn't call me 'Spawn' in front of the master. I suppose being polite tasted sour to him, but I nonetheless hurried over to join him and Boont. The carpenter was examining the dagger, testing the weight and balance on her finger tip. She stared hard at it with narrowed eyes, deep in thought.

"Well?" Brickit pressed.

He earned himself another glare. I was glad to see I wasn't alone in receiving them.

"An ironwood," she announced. "Hornbeam, I think."

"Ha!" crowed the Chief Smith, smacking me on the back hard enough to make me stagger.

After another smoldering glare, Boont demanded, "What kind of leather?"

"Shagreen," Brickit replied without a moment's hesitation. I had no idea of what he was talking about, but Boont did and she nodded.

"Come back after breakfast," she ordered, walking away with the knife in her hands, and we beat a hasty retreat.

"Now what?" I wondered.

"Dinner," he replied, "lest you have a better idea."

I had scarce heard a better suggestion, and I realized I had forgotten to eat lunch. Maybe there was something to Susan's regular nagging to eat more. "Not I."

§§§

"Wake up! Wake up, King Edmund!"

I groaned. How, how, how could Baia and Brack be so wide awake? They were worse than Peter. Not even Lucy was so chipper when she woke up. I hissed and threw my pillow in their general direction. A moment later it was thrown back and hit me in the head.

Dragging myself upright, I staggered to the basin and washed up, tempted to dunk my head in the water. I couldn't remember when I had last washed my hair and suddenly I longed for my valet and the deep marble bathtub in the dressing room Peter and I shared. A hot bath was quite my idea of paradise at the moment.

"You awake, Spawn?" Brint called.

"NO!" I growled, rounding on him as he stood in the doorway.

"You look awake," he countered brightly.

"Well, I'm not!"

He chuckled. "Then sleepwalk yourself over to the wood shop after breakfast and I'll see you after my mother is done with you."

I muttered something unintelligible, not really following him, and I didn't speak again until I thanked Gran for my breakfast. Afterwards I made my way to see Boont. The master carpenter smirked at me and my nearly alert state as she presented me with the knife.

I stared speechlessly. The tang was completely encased by grayish-yellow wood. It was perfectly smooth and swelled slightly in the middle. I took it in both hands, amazed at the difference the grip made. I had thought it looked like a knife before, but I hadn't realized until that moment how greatly I had been influenced by what I wanted to see. This was a dagger. What I had made up to this point was merely a skeleton of one. Boont watched me closely, enjoying my reaction.

"It's beautiful, Lady," I finally managed to say.

She gave me a little bit of a smile. "Respectable work for a first try," she agreed gruffly. "You're not done yet, though. Off to the river for some clay and polish it again."

I thanked her time and again until she threw me out of her shop. I didn't have to go so far as the river initially – I still had my bowl of river clay saved from the day before and this I used, under Brint's critical eye, to polish the blade again. I polished the cross-guard and pommel for good measure, giving them a dull luster. I wiped it down time and again until the blade shone bright in the late morning light, and then I leaned my head in my hand, staring at it, weary and happy at once.

"It's not very becoming on a king," Brint commented, suddenly standing over me with a smirk on his lips.

"Hmm?" I looked up at him in surprise.

"Clay isn't your color, Spawn."

"Wha? Oh!" I finished in disgust, realizing there had been clay all over my hand that was now ground into my hair. He laughed as I stomped out of the work shop.

So I ended up going to the river after all to wash the mud out of my hair. The water was cold and the bugs were swarming and I was tempted to wear clay in order to stay dry and unbiten. Brack intercepted me on the way back and told me I was to fetch my riding gloves and join Gran in the long house.

I found the grand old dame examining my handiwork. There was a pleased gleam in her dark eyes as she hefted the knife and felt it for balance and strength. She had an assortment of unfamiliar tools laid out on the table and a strange hide the likes of which I had never seen before. It reminded me of a huge, dark, dried mushroom.

"What is that?"

"Shagreen leather," she replied, amused at my tone. "It comes from queer ocean fish from far to the south where the Eastern Sea is always warm. The fish is flat and shaped like a diamond with a long barbed tail, or so they say."

"A ray?" I wondered, but there was no more time for speculation as Gran expertly measured the grip against the edge of the leather. Moments later she took a blade and

began to cut the hide in a long, continuous strip. It seemed a shame to cover such lovely wood, but even I could tell the grip was too smooth for a proper hold. Under Gran's instruction I wrapped the wooden grip, but no matter what I did the leather – which was very rough against my fingers - wasn't long enough. She let me struggle for a while before taking knife and leather out of my hands and once again I was shown by a master craftsman how to make something work. She pulled and stretched the black leather until all the wood was tightly covered and the strip overlapped only slightly.

"See? Now unwind that and we'll affix it in place."

The glue she used was nasty stuff and smelled so foul that I did not want to know how it was made. The strip wrapped over itself at the base of the grip and at the top it fitted tightly into a narrow lip left in the pommel and clamed tightly around the leather. I was rather amazed at the detailing Brickit and the other masters had put into this because I would not have thought of half the things that were to the Dwarfs quite ordinary.

"There." Gran handed me the blade with its rough coat of leather. I stared in quiet awe, barely noticing as she pulled out more, heavier leather pieces and said, "Now for a sheath."

I proved quite hopeless at sewing the layers of leather together that she cut out for the sheath, though. I wore my gloves at this point to protect my hands from getting lacerated on the thread. Two long, heavy needles were used, passed in opposite directions through the holes punched in the leather, but I pulled the oiled thread too tight and broke it so many times that Gran got fed up and, like Boont before her, threw me out.

"Go annoy Brint!" she ordered, slamming the door behind me, her patience with me gone.

So I sought out the master smith in his den with the express desire to annoy him. Brint was expecting me (Gran's voice having carried very well) and he held his hand out for the knife.

"Now what?" I asked hesitantly.

He grunted. "Now we eat. After that, you watch as I sharpen it. Unless the Nancy can't be trusted with anything sharp, in which case you're done."

I made a face at him and shook my head, thinking of Peter's remarkable skill with a sword or javelin. I slapped the knife into his waiting hand. "Don't hurt yourself, Brint."

¥¤¥

## **Chapter Twenty-Six: Waiting**

I did not sleep well that night. The day had been misty and my bed felt damp and I was more anxious than I wanted to admit. Tomorrow, after breakfast, the Masters of the Blue River Smithy would make the final decision as to whether or not the dagger I had made would be allowed to leave.

A strange sense of nervousness gripped me. It was rather like knowing I had to take an important test in the morn or put on some type of performance where I had to remember a long soliloquy. I had done all I could up to this point; the final decision on my labor was completely out of my hands.

I thought if this was how Peter felt when he worried. Small wonder he had so much trouble sleeping those first few weeks after our coronation. The fact that I missed him – and my

sisters and my valet and my bed and food that hadn't been endlessly stewed – did not help me find any relief. For a long while I just stared into the darkness of the room, wishing the morning would come just as greatly as I dreaded its inevitable arrival. I had no idea of what I would feel if they found the knife inadequate and refused to let it represent the smithy. Would I be able to withstand such crushing disappointment? And I would be disappointed, terribly so despite my best efforts. I wanted to succeed here. I had succeeded here. I just . . . I just so wanted to watch Peter's expression as he realized what I had made for him. I wanted him to have this knife. That would be my reward: to see all our hard work in the hands of the High King.

Rising, I lit the small lamp beside my bed and crossed the room to retrieve the knife. It flashed silvery-blue in the light as I drew it from its leather sheath. Brint had sharpened the blade to a razor's keenness, tapering the point and edges. There was a certain deadly beauty to it now, but part of its beauty was the sheer simplicity of its lines. It was as much a tool as it was a weapon, and somehow I had crafted it. After a while I returned it to its sheath and extinguished the lamp. I didn't feel any better than before as I lay down once again to await the dawn.

I sighed, tossing on the lumpy pallet. I had to learn not to borrow trouble.

*§§§*

I was up early and I shocked Brack and Baia the next morning by waking them up. It was Bly's idea, one I eagerly latched onto, and I'll admit I derived a great deal of pleasure out of rousting my tormentors from their warm beds for once. Both children were delighted and screamed as they defended themselves with their pillows. By the time they were up we were all breathless from laughing and Bly had to hurry them along to get dressed in time for breakfast.

Brint was waiting for me just outside the door. I stood before him, the knife in hand, waiting anxiously and hoping my emotions didn't show so plainly as to betray me.

"Come eat," he ordered gruffly, waving me along. I had the feeling he knew exactly how I felt, as the labor of every apprentice here at the smithy had to undergo similar examinations. "After breakfast the masters will call for you."

"Wonderful," I muttered, close on his heels.

I kissed Gran on the cheek in thanks for sewing the sheath for me. Brint, catching wind of our exchange, threatened me if I tried the same thing to thank him for sharpening the blade.

"I'd sooner kiss my horse," I retorted. "At least I know his hair is combed."

"La, I take it you do it for him." He snorted and pointed a stubby finger at me. "Don't be trying that, either."

I dropped into my usual seat beside Brickit and sulked. I hadn't felt this unhappy since my second or third day here. At least then I'd just been miserable and lonely, not miserable, lonely, and sick with worry that all my hard work would be rejected. Really, at that point I hadn't started working hard. I leaned my head on my hand. Sweet Lion, was this diplomacy? I preferred the parts where I got to hurl good-natured insults or clean ancient coke ovens. This waiting for council meetings and the decisions of cranky authorities was,

in some ways, as nerve-wracking as waiting for a battle to start, which I for one could say with certainty.

"Something wrong, Spawn?" Brickit asked with something akin to cheer in his voice. He clapped me on the back as he sat down.

Still not lifting my head, I looked over at him, reaching my free hand to pour him some of the small beer. "Diplomacy," I replied, unable to keep from making a face.

He gave me a little push. "And what's the worst that can happen, lad? King Nancy waits another year for a better knife. No lives will be lost and you just smashed your fingers flat for naught."

I couldn't cling to my foul mood when he put things in such perspective. A small laugh escaped me and I finally sat up straight, better able to put a brave face on things as I swiped at him in defense of Peter.

Brickit raised his cup of beer. "You've accomplished your goal in securing our good will, great Aslan save us all from ourselves. What you achieve beyond that is your own."

His words merited some thought. I looked at him perhaps more intently than ever before, and I wondered at the changes we had wrought upon one another these few brief weeks. I looked at him and I realized he was happy, genuinely happy, perhaps for the first time since he lost his wife and brother. There, then, was my foremost personal achievement, both as a king and a would-be diplomat. No matter what happened, in the end I hadn't failed.

### §§§

The masters waited after breakfast, shouting at the nosy apprentices who would have lingered to take themselves outside and get to work. When the hall was clear they all sat down again, facing each other across the table with Brickit at the head. Mercifully I wasn't expected to stand up or do anything other than wait in my seat next to Brickit. Indeed, as Brickit put it, I was allowed to be still, silent, and it was permissible for me to sweat, but I could do little else.

There were seven masters in all with Gran counted among them. Only one of them I did not know personally, a gruff-looking (relatively speaking, that is), older master whose long beard was shot with gray. He looked somehow familiar but I could not place him beyond having seen him at meals every day for the past three weeks. My own master was there, and Beal, father of the two girls I had saved from the Werewolf.

"So," Brickit said, "we're here to decide if the work of yon apprentice is worthy of representing our smithy. Moreover, it falls to us to decide if the work of one king is worthy of serving another." He reached for the knife where it rested on the table before me. "I helped to forge this blade. It is not for me to decide."

I blinked, surprised, as he handed the blade to his brother. Brint took it and handed it to their mother, saying, "I helped to sharpen and shape this blade. It is not for me to decide."

Gran passed it to Boont. "I helped to finish this blade. It is not for me to decide."

"I fashioned the grip of this blade," Boont declared, drawing it to have a look at the finished product. "It is not for me to decide."

A sinking feeling was filling my stomach. At this rate would there be anyone left to make a decision?

My master spent a long while staring at the dagger, feeling its heft and testing its flexibility and strength by driving the tip into the tabletop, which earned him savage hisses from Gran and Boont. He ignored them as he went on with his examination.

"It is well shaped and tempered," the Master finally declared. "It is less for a king and more for a brother. I would allow this work to leave our smithy so long as it goes only to a brother's hand."

Brickit smiled slightly as I let out my breath.

"There is no question of that," said the Chief Smith.

Beal now held the dagger. He stared long and hard at it, then at me. Slowly he rose to his feet and when he spoke his voice was thick with emotion. "I did not help to fashion this blade, though I wish to Aslan that I had. That way I might have been able to express some thanks to the knight who risked his own life to save my daughters from the jaws of a Fell Beast. I cannot speak without being biased, and therefore it is not for me to decide."

My own throat tightened in sympathy for the difficulty he had in speaking. I regretted not seeking him out myself, but it seemed I had not had an idle moment since the Werewolf had been slain. Beal nodded his head to me and resumed his seat, handing the knife to the last master.

"Well, Master Barret?" asked Brickit.

The gray-bearded Dwarf cast me a sour look as he took the knife. He drew it, scowled, snorted, and finally sneered, "Manling work. It might do for a Son of Adam but not for our smithy."

I couldn't decide which stung more – his rejection of my work or being called a manling. Clearly it was meant as an insult, and not in any way one of the playful slurs Brint and Brickit and I had gotten used to exchanging. I sat in stunned silence, staring at Barret, aware that all the masters were glaring at him.

Brickit slowly stood. "You, Barret, are no less biased than Beal save that he is fair enough to remove himself from judging. You are here to judge the work, not the person that did it, nor the one it is meant for. Nor are you here to fight for our cousins in Moon Mountain. Your brother is well enough equipped to fight his own battles. So tell me now, and tell me in truth with one hand upon the Lion's tail, what it is about this blade that is flawed."

I realized then that Barret look very much like Biss. The miner's resentment of my presence at the smithy must have affected his judgment. I suspected there was a deeper bitterness here than met the eye, something beyond letting a dagger leave the grounds of the smithy. I had landed in the midst of a family civil war.

Barret snatched up the knife again, clearly furious at being so cornered. "The balance is off."

"I balanced it," Boont immediately snapped. "If that is the case, the fault is mine." She stood up and held out her hand. "Give it me that I may correct the flaw. The High King of Narnia will receive naught less than my best."

He glowered, clearly not about to cross the carpenter. I couldn't blame him. Barret cast Brint a look similar to the one he had thrown my way and snapped,

"The tip of the blade is too thin. It will snap the moment it touches bone."

"Say as much to the table!" the Master replied in kind, pointing to the half-inch deep gouge he had made.

"And I smelted the iron that made the steel," Brickit added. "You used steel from that very batch just last week, Barret, and you found no flaw in the metal you forged. So I bid you tell me why this blade should not represent this smithy."

Silence. The full weight and might of Barret's glare was unleashed upon me and I, Edmund, King of Narnia, returned the stare with ferocity to match. It may not be my place to speak or move, but nothing prevented me from defending myself from his wordless attack.

"After all," Brickit said, "the knife is going to a Son of Adam. It comforts me that you think so highly of men and kings that this work is not nearly good enough to grace their hands. You have my thanks, Master Barret, just as I'm certain you have the thanks and good will of the other masters."

If thanks and good will equated to murderous intent, Barret certainly had it in good measure and from every direction. I was too cross at his groundless hatred of me to be anxious.

"Twist my words and opinion as you will, Chief Smith." He pointed at me. "This one eats with this family but he has no name. You call him apprentice but he has paid no price and no servitude. If his sad attempt satisfies you and your masters then who am I, your cousin, to argue?"

"He has paid with blood and his servitude will last a lifetime," Brickit replied evenly. He smiled faintly. "And given that he will visit but once a year, so will his apprenticeship. He called us family first and this clan's name is his. Open your eyes and you'll see that the only sad attempt here is a grown Dwarf pitting himself against a boy."

Barret glowered, glancing at his peers. Boont very much wanted him to say something more, that was obvious, but he gave her no satisfaction.

"It is my right to refuse its leaving."

"Indeed," agreed the Chief Smith. "Just as it is Edmund's right to hear you explain to him and us everything he has done incorrectly in fashioning this knife, so that we might mend his ways. So." He resumed his seat, motioning for Boont to follow suit. "Begin."

The master smith said nothing. We all knew that there was nothing he could say that would not be based in resentment of the fact that I was not a Black Dwarf. Time passed without a word being exchanged. I knew the masters of the smithy were prepared to wait all the day through.

Barret abruptly stood. He glowered at the lot of us and finally snarled, "Then begone with ye, Son of Adam, and take your knife when you go. 'Tis good only for your - "

"Enough!" Beal commanded, standing. Of the two he was by far the taller and more imposing, and he spoke with quiet authority. "You will not insult a member of my family, Barret. Take your own words and begone. We are done here. King Edmund has our

permission to take the knife from this smithy." He deliberately turned his back on his cousin, picking up the knife as he faced me. "Pray tell the whole world where this was made, Edmund of Clan Welent."

I leaned across the table to take it from Beal's hand, my heart racing. "I shall do so with pride, good my cousin."

¥¤¥

## Chapter Twenty-Seven: Bid Me Not Farewell

"I need a drink."

Brickit chuckled as I sank down onto the bench once again, the knife clasped in my sweaty hand. Save for me and the Chief Smith, the long house was empty. The masters returned to their work shops. Gran had returned to her own chores. Brickit poured us each a cup of small beer and then dropped down beside me.

"It's never easy," he soothed. "That went smoother than I thought it would, though."

"Smooth," I echoed, forcing down a mouthful of beer. I grimaced. "What have I ever done to Barret?"

He snorted, amused. "You were born, lad. You've met his brother, our cousin. They both resent the existence of anyone that's not a Black Dwarf, they resent the fact that you're here, and they resent the fact that I've adopted you into this clan."

I eyed him keenly over the top of my cup. "Did you adopt me just to annoy them?"

He laughed. "No. No. Not entirely," he muttered, hastily taking a sip.

"Ha!" I exclaimed, elbowing him. He laughed into his beer.

"We've a saying in these parts, a saying my cousins are learning is very true, and that being it's easier to catch the lion than to let him go. Barret caught a larger one than he anticipated, and he's fortunate to emerge with his hide intact."

I thought of Boont and her simmering fury, and I had to agree.

"So," the Chief Smith said, looking over at me, "I take it we can expect to be up to our waists in soldiers tomorrow, sent by Nancy to make certain you get home without any scraped knees or dings?"

"Yes, they should be here on the morrow, but based on your height there won't be that many soldiers, Brickit. Won't you be glad to be rid of me?"

"No," he replied. "I've gotten used to your noxious presence."

"Your charm overwhelms."

"As does yours, Spawn." He clapped me on the knee. "Away with your knife, lad, then get thee to work. This is a smithy, not a tavern, and we must earn our keep."

I smirked, finishing my beer in one swallow, then I rose and followed Brickit to the door. We both shouted in surprise when dozens of huge, dark objects poured into the long house and flapped around noisily, all of them calling out to us and each other in piercing tones. The Fruit Bat couriers had returned from Cair Paravel.

I stumbled back into the table as something hit me squarely in the chest. I looked down to see Sultana clinging to my tunic and grinning up at me, well pleased with herself. More of the younger bats alighted on my shoulders and back as Brickit bellowed at the rest of them to land. An instant later I got slapped in the face with a large, delicate wing as a Bat set down on my head, clinging to my hair. It took a few moments, but finally all the Bats had landed about us and the room. A great swirl of dust filled the air, knocked down from the rafters and the thatch.

"We're back!" Sultana exclaimed breathlessly.

"Really?" I couldn't keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

She nodded. I could hear Brickit fussing and fuming at the older couriers ranged along the rafters. One of the little Bats dropped down to the table and stuck his head in our abandoned cups, looking for the last drops of beer.

"And did you deliver my letter?" I asked, trying to shoo the Bat away from the beer.

Another nod, and all the little Bats felt the need to tell me every detail all at the same time so in just a few moments I got the entire tale in a nutshell. I had known Peter would be so upset. Oh, well, that just meant I would have to put up with his fretting and delayed reactions to his only brother being imperiled.

"Did you see the Eastern Sea?" I asked, interrupting a description of the fruits available at Cair Paravel.

"We got wet!" they squeaked happily. "It's salty! We can't swim!"

"Do tell." Why wasn't I surprised that they would try?

"Look! See? It's really real!" said the Bat on my head, and he leaned over into my face to display his prize. I stared at the scattering of fair tendrils he clasped in his paw. First I was astonished, then I was horrified.

"You tore out my brother's hair?" I exclaimed. "That is - You are never to do such a thing again! And what do you intend to do with that? Oh, don't tell me. Whatever it is, it's disgusting."

Clinging to his tangled prize, the Bat giggled. They all did. I put my hands on my hips, but it's rather hard to be stern or forceful when enveloped in Fruit Bats.

"And why didn't you tell me you're not from the family Phillip asked to help me?"

Completely unimpressed by my anger, they exchanged confused looks (except for the one on the table, whose head and shoulders were deep inside Brickit's cup) and Sultana said,

"You didn't ask."

I sighed. I would have rubbed my head but there was already a Bat there. "Well, your families are worried. You'll have to go home directly. Thank you for delivering the letter for me, but next time you have to let me know if you're allowed to leave this area or not. Agreed?"

They nodded, delighted at the prospect of a next time.

"And there is to be no pulling out of hair ever again."

"Nfff," muttered my disappointed hat, easing his grip on my bangs.

"Come along." I scooped up the drunkard and ducked outside. "Home with you! All of you!"

They giggled and called good-byes as they flapped off. Well, all except for the one I held. I recognized that cheeky grin. I was tempted to pitch him in the air, but with my luck he was too drunk to fly and would just plummet back to the earth.

"This is a habit you need to break, sir," I said. I set him down on a bench outside the long house. "I expect you gone when I get back here later." He just rolled over and spread his wings out to catch the morning sun, asleep instantly. I sighed, then looked up as Brickit exited the long house, one of the couriers - the real couriers - hanging from his arm.

"Ah, well, never hurts to ask," he was saying, and for the first time in my life I saw a Bat shrug. I remembered then that Brickit had written to my brother and sisters and I was immediately curious as to what he was talking about. A moment later, though, at some unseen signal, all the Fruit Bats swooped out of the building and into the sky, black against blue. Brickit caught up the Bat on his arm and gently tossed him upwards, calling,

"Aslan between you and evil!"

"What doesn't hurt to ask?" I wondered, eyeing him closely.

He cast me a smug, sidelong look. "Questions," was all he said, not about to enlighten me. "Get on now, Spawn."

§§§

That evening we celebrated with food and spirits and music. Gran said they always honored an apprentice whose work was accepted by the masters, but Brint said they were just happy to be ridding themselves of me. I suspected that most people's attitudes - the apprentices in particular - fell somewhere in the middle. The meal was less organized and noisier than usual. There was a wider variety of food than I had seen before and for once the meat wasn't stewed but roasted. The table was heavy with game pies and fish caught in the river and great, round loaves of bread and seed cakes and nut cakes and all sorts of pastries and cheeses. There was even wine - or so that's what the Dwarfs called it. It was almost as clear as water and tasted like turnips and for the first time I found myself wishing for their small beer. I contrived to knock my cup over and after cleaning the spill I hastily reverted to the bitter, grainy drink that was slightly less awful than the wine.

A grumbling from Bort's direction told me that this feast was, perhaps, a bit more elaborate than usual, but one of the Daughters hit him with a tray and reminded him that I was also a king and a guest. No one but the most steadfast Black Dwarf (in this case, Barret, who left as soon as he had eaten) could not have enjoyed the gathering and presently the apprentices got over their muttering and threw themselves into the festivities. I made it a point to thank all the masters and I even met Beal's daughters, Bess and Belleel. Both girls blushed and curtsied to me, shy as they faced me. I praised the elder girl's daring in fending off the Werewolf with her pitchfork and for stabbing him in the leg, then hastily heaped some praise on the younger girl for screaming so loudly to rouse the whole smithy. Beal listened with quiet pride, his gratitude and pleasure plain upon his face.

As I stepped away from them to greet Boont I was struck by a pang of regret that I would be leaving tomorrow. I realized I didn't know half of these good Dwarfs as well as I would have liked. I think that if I hadn't already negotiated my return next year that I would have found any excuse to return. I recalled my dream of Aslan and I was suddenly doubly

grateful that I had stayed. If I hadn't I never would have made the knife or gained such allies in the masters or made Brickit so happy, nor would I have learned so much about being a diplomat.

One of the apprentices began reciting the family tree and most everyone fell silent to listen and wait for mistakes in its telling. I listened closer this time, rather amazed that anyone could keep so many names and generations straight. Bad enough I had to learn all the kings and queens of Narnia! There weren't nearly as many monarchs as Black Dwarfs over the past thousand years. When the apprentice, so young that he didn't even have a beard yet, missed a name, there was a good-natured roar through the house as everyone pounced on the error. I laughed along with the rest of them and drank his health. Then someone produced a lute and began to play. The Dwarfs that weren't eating burst into song, a loud and raucous and not very melodic sound filling the long house. Since I didn't know the words, I just ate more and let myself be entertained.

The Daughters of the Clan all gathered together and sang a song of springtime, and Brack stood on his bench and gave us a silly piece about a Squirrel that was burying acorns and was annoyed because he kept finding gold wherever he dug. More individuals sang then, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups. The songs were simple, as were the melodies, and most of them I had never heard before. I was thinking of how much Lucy would enjoy this when Brickit plopped down beside me and said,

"Give us a song, Edmund of Clan Welent!"

"What?" I blinked, caught completely off guard.

Brickit grinned, realizing he'd surprised me with such a request. "A song! Surely you can sing! By Aslan, you can't be any worse than my brother!"

He had a very good point. Brint sang like a Horse. No, he was worse. I stared, trying to think, and my traitorous brain went completely blank as more of the Dwarfs caught up the Chief Smith's request and called for me to sing. Slowly I stood, for our Dryad voice instructor insisted that we always stand to sing, and I automatically clasped my hands together, one atop the other and held at the waist. I tried to think of a song, of anything to give them. A hush fell and they all looked to me in expectation.

"Um . . ."

I floundered. In an attempt to help, the lute player picked out a few random notes and by lucky chance hit on a chord that jogged my memory. One of the last songs I had learned before leaving Cair Paravel sprang to mind and I happily seized upon it. The song was very old, a poem set to music in a style that had been popular in the Fourth Century. The style was whimsically called 'hurry and wait.' It was very expressive, each stanza sung at a leisurely pace and the chorus slightly faster and more melodic. I drew a deep breath, grateful for the first time that I had been blessed by a good voice and the inability to forget song lyrics once learned, and I began to sing.

*"I beg you bid me not farewell  
Bid me fortune on my journey.  
For the span I dwelt 'neath your peaceful spell  
Was spent in blessed company.*

*But time it flows  
and ceases not*

*I leave, my love,  
to seek my lot.  
So bid me not a fond farewell  
Ask the Lion to bless my journey."*

I abruptly realized I was singing a love song. Sweet Aslan, could I have picked anything less appropriate for this setting? The lute player managed for a while to accompany me, but gradually he fell off and just listened. I certainly couldn't stop now, so I cast my apprehensions to the wind and let the song fill the silence, praying that this was not the moment my voice chose to break.

*"The fairest treasure in all the land  
has begged me one more day to stay.  
But 'round her finger a golden band  
is my promise to return one day.*

*For time it flows  
in ceaseless stream  
let memory serve  
to preserve this dream.  
So kiss me now, bid me not farewell  
Beg the Lion to bless my journey."*

I held the last note, letting it fade as I'd been taught. As I dropped my hands there was not a sound. No one moved. Every eye in the place was fastened on me with an intensity I could feel. Suddenly self-conscious, I wondered at their reaction and if I had somehow offended them. I looked to Brickit. He had his hand pressed to his mouth and his face downcast. His eyes were closed, and to my shock and grief I realized he was fighting a losing battle against his tears. I stole a glance at the assembled Dwarfs and I realized Brickit was not alone in his reaction.

What had I done? What had I said? I searched for Gran in the crowd, but she was leaning into Bly's shoulder, her face hidden. Still, no one made a noise or moved and I felt confusion and panic grow in my breast. I looked around, wishing someone, anyone would make a sound.

"I'm sorry," I finally managed, unable to endure the pain I had unwittingly caused. "Sorry," I mumbled as I clambered over the bench pinning my legs and bolted out the door.

¥¤¥

## **Chapter Twenty-Eight: Blaine**

I had no idea of what to do or where to go the moment I stumbled outside the long house. I stood uncertainly for a while in the cool evening air, half-expecting to hear laughter or voices behind me, but the smithy was unnaturally quiet. It was as if the world was holding its breath, waiting for a sound to break this silence. There was no relief coming, though, and finally I sought my room in Brint's house. I thought to pack my things for the return trip, wishing the soldiers were already here to take me home. Given the chance I would have left immediately.

My worn, stained, singed clothes had been laundered and were neatly folded on the bed. I laid hold of one of the saddle bags and began to bundle the clothes inside, barely aware of what I was doing. My heart was hammering in my chest and I set my jaw against the painful tightness rising in my throat. I sniffed, pausing to wipe my eyes as my vision blurred slightly.

At last I gave up and sat down on the low pallet, holding my head in my hands. What had I done? I could only think my choice of song had, indeed, been completely wrong for reasons I could not define. I pressed my head hard into my palms, trying to counter the pain of the headache I felt growing behind my eyes. I wanted to understand. I wanted to cry. I wanted Peter. If my brother was here right now, I knew his arm would be around my shoulders and I'd be pulled close and warm into his ready embrace and he would not say a word if I gave way to tears. Somehow he always made things right, and I wondered how I had ever thought I could survive without him.

What had I done? How had I managed to move Brickit to tears and cause Gran such grief? Why had that song silenced everyone present? What did it mean to them? I went through the words in my head. It was a love song, a song of parting and hope and promise. I did not know who wrote the original, nor yet the melody, but I knew it was quite old. Why would it move them so?

I lowered my hands, staring at my discolored fingers and dirty nails without really seeing anything. I could not shake or explain the image of the Chief Smith bowed in misery and heartache. Had I undone all my hard work with one song? With a sigh I leaned against the wall, wishing I was home, wishing my brother was right beside me and not a two-day ride away. I leaned back in the corner, too miserable to even brace my head with the pillow, and I tried vainly not to think.

What had I done?

*S#S*

"May I?"

I started, sucking in my breath as I roused from a stupor and squinted at the brightness suddenly filling my vision. Brint stood in the doorway to my chamber, the oil lamp in his hand casting a white glow. I had no idea of the time, but it was dark in the little cottage. I slid over to the edge of the bed, not getting up as I silently nodded for him to enter. I wasn't sure if I wanted any company outside of my family, but then like it or no, Brint was my family.

It had been a trying day. A trying week. I was paying the price for so much anxiety and labor and so little sleep. Brint looked very tired as well, I thought, as he set down the lamp on the table, and with a long sigh he sat close beside me and imitated my posture by leaning his elbows on his knees. We sat for a long time, and I felt worse with each passing moment.

"I'm sorry," I finally choked out. I didn't know what else to say. I gestured helplessly.

"It's not you, Edmund," he finally said in a subdued tone. "You're not at fault."

I didn't even look at him as he laid a warm hand upon my shoulder. It wasn't relief that I felt, just confusion. The master smith drew a deep breath and tried again. "That song you sang, Bid Me Not Farewell. Know you that was a poem before it was a song?"

I nodded. "So my music teacher told me. She said it was from the Fourth Century."

"Aye, written by a Black Dwarf named Blaytom. He was a warrior and a craftsman and one of the finest poets of his age. It's because of him that we Dwarfs never say good-bye, even to those who pass into Aslan's Country. We bid people a safe journey, and if we like them, we also tack on a wish for their safe return."

"A very Dwarfish thing to do," I mused.

"We don't do it often," he admitted, trying to make me smile. I obliged him a little. "We none of us knew it had been set to music, nor yet that a king would know of our ancient Clan poets, nor yet that our king should have so fine and clear a voice." Brint's hand squeezed my shoulder, bracing us both, and he got to the heart of the matter. "You know my brother was married."

"La."

"Blaine was from the Lantern Waste. Bright and beautiful was she, learned, wise, too valuable a pearl to be buried in the mud of the Blue River. She would have none less than Brickit for her husband, though, and he just a master then. He didn't just love her; he lived her. She was his earth, as we Dwarfs say." He swallowed. "Then Brickit was made Chief and within a month's span the Witch's Minotaur general came here demanding we make weapons for her army. Brickit refused, praise Aslan, against the wishes of some of our own masters."

"Would one of them be Barret?" I asked dully, already able to guess the answer.

Brint grimaced. "One would."

I sighed, quoting my rhetoric tutor, "Much is explained by that."

"Blaine was off visiting her family. She hadn't said a word to anyone but her mother, but she was with child. Their first. Just north of Aundroe, Ottman killed her along with her brother and cousin who were escorting her home, in order to punish Brickit for his refusal. To protect the Clan and his wife's people, Brickit gave in to their demands."

"Gran said he did a terrible job of it."

"Shameful, even, I'm proud to say, and they too stupid to ever think he might exact some revenge. So." Brint settled his stocky self a bit deeper in his stance. "So. Bid Me Not Farewell was Blaine's favorite poem. She quoted from it all the time, and since her loss it has not once been recited by any of this clan. The last thing she said to Brickit when she set out to the Waste was 'So kiss me now, bid me not farewell -'"

"Beg the Lion to bless my journey," I finished.

"He begged Aslan. He pleaded and he prayed when she didn't return. Finally we set out to search and found her . . ." Brint let out a mournful sigh. I knew he didn't want to tell me, but I also knew he wanted me to understand, to save both me and his brother from any more hurt.

"I thought he would die, as our younger brother had died. We were all born to the Winter, my brothers and me. We'd no notion of what seasons were. Up until then, we waited in hope that Aslan would come and deliver us from the cold and the White Witch. When he lost Blaine, and later learned he had lost a child as well, Brickit became angry. Bitter. Dark. There was an emptiness in him nothing could fill. He felt abandoned by Aslan, felt Narnia had been abandoned by Aslan, and he lost faith."

I bit my lip. I knew what it was like to be so lost. That I could understand all too well. I remembered my first impression of the Chief Smith when I barged in upon the smithy. I had sensed a deep, lingering pain in Brickit, and in my ignorance I had laid that pain open.

"And then in a mad rush Aslan returned and brought the spring and suddenly the Four Thrones were filled by obnoxious children who refuse to leave us alone. The High King sent us his only brother and you would not be put off or intimidated or shamed despite Brickit's best efforts." He smiled. "I have rarely been so pleased by anything as when you stood outside that coke oven and looked as if you wanted to murder my brother for making you clean it." A laugh escaped him at the memory, but he looked up at me in all seriousness. "You have no notion, Edmund Pevensie, of how greatly my brother needed you. Needs you. He almost wept when he told me about all you said and did in Lithin. If he didn't trust in your promise to return, he would never let you go."

I stared, his words rendering me speechless. While I had been needed in the past, it was always because of what I was, be it a Son of Adam, a brother, or a king. I realized then and there that Brickit, like Peter, needed me for who I was.

"He did not mean to hurt you, Edmund, any more than you meant to do anything but give us a song," Brint was saying. "He would never . . ." He paused and took a deep, shuddering breath. "Brickit was not prepared for you to know that poem, or to have it sung so beautifully."

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"In his shop. Probably making another battleaxe. It's what he does when he's upset."

Brint watched me closely, anxiously, and I wondered what it must have cost him to come here knowing that I, and not he, was what his only brother needed most. I wasn't sure that I would be able to do the same. I was still far too jealous of Peter's affections, and Aslan willing I would never have to find out. How could anyone ever call the Black Dwarfs cold and lacking in affection? They were guarded against strangers, yes, and suspicious, but beyond that barrier they were passionate and devoted to those they loved. There was such proof of that sitting beside me, and if the day ever dawned that I was faced by a similar situation, Aslan help me face it with the same dignity as Brint now displayed.

I stood up, feeling stiff and sore and tired. I shrugged off my fatigue and squared my shoulders.

"I'll go run coal for him."

§!§

I could hear the savage pounding of metal on metal long before I reached the shop. The Chief Smith of the Blue River Smithy was working out his frustrations in the only way he knew how: by pitting his own strength against fire and steel. Despite the lateness of the hour many of the Dwarfs were not yet abed, lingering by their doors. The interruption of the celebration had upset them all, and clearly they were deeply concerned over Brickit. I sensed a wave of relief in my wake as I made my way through the compound. I entered the shop silently and went straight for the leather apron that was mine. It wasn't really necessary to wear the apron to shovel coal; I simply preferred to wear it. It was a different kind of armor.

Brickit noticed me as I was pulling on my gloves and he paused in mid-swing, staring at me in relief and regret and a whole torrent of emotions not easily expressed. I met his gaze steadily, knowing exactly what he felt. We each had hurt and been hurt and all of it was pointless because it was not meant, would never be meant.

Words were inadequate to the moment, and so I took up my shovel and got to work. We worked until dawn, with never a word needed between us.

¥¤¥

## Chapter Twenty-Nine: Home

“Edmund?”

I jerked awake, blinking stupidly as I lifted my head from my folded arms. Gran stood at my side, her hand on my shoulder as she leaned over to catch a look of me. I made a noise and slowly started to move, stretching in place like a cat and rubbing my eyes to clear them. I had fallen asleep at the table in the long house waiting for the inhabitants of the smithy to rouse. Brickit and I had worked all night long and for the life of me I could not remember a single thing he had made, if, indeed, he had made anything at all. We had ended up in here to rest and the moment I put my head down I had succumbed to exhaustion.

I wiped the soot on my face onto my sleeve and ran a hand through my filthy hair before forcing my eyes well open. Gran smiled at my antics and set a plate of food before me. I stared at it, surprised. It was later than I thought and when I looked around I realized that the Dwarfs, all the way down to the youngest children, were present at the table and had been quiet to let me sleep. They were busy eating, but many of them stole glances my way and gradually subdued conversation filled the room when they figured out I was not going to drop off again. Through bleary eyes I stared at my plate of food, knowing I needed to eat but lacking the energy necessary to pick up my fork.

“Eat,” said a voice close beside me, and I looked to my left to see Brint in his usual place just beyond Brickit’s seat. He leaned across and poured me some beer. I picked up the cup and stared into the murky depths. I could not bring myself to taste it.

“I hate this beer,” I finally declared, setting it down. I sounded and felt like an obstinate child.

The master smith frowned at me. “So why didn’t you say so before?”

“What?” I exclaimed, turning on him. “I’ve been complaining about it from the start!”

“The morning after you arrived you said you liked beer!”

“This is not beer! This - this is . . . liquid torture!” I sputtered, not caring in the least that I insulted the smithy’s so-called brew master.

He stared at me as if he’d never seen me before. “Then have coffee.”

I stared right back. Coffee. They had coffee. For three weeks I’d been drinking bitter, grainy, almost-flat small beer day in, day out, and now, at the eleventh hour, I learned that they had coffee. Words failed me.

“Bly,” called Brint, catching his wife’s eye as she bent over the fire, “pray bring some coffee for the Spawn.”

I was so nonplused I couldn't even thank Bly as she set a steaming mug of coffee, cream, and sugar before me. It was hot, strong, and fresh and quite possibly the best thing that I had tasted in three weeks. I didn't care that I scalded my tongue as I drank.

"You could have told me!" I finally snapped at Brint.

He shrugged in that infuriating way of Dwarfs. "You could have asked."

I grumbled and set to my food with good will. Halfway through the meal I finally asked, "Where is Brickit?"

"Setting our cousins from Moon Mountain straight. They arrived soon after you fell asleep. When he refused them entry to let you rest they started arguing and he dragged them away so as not to disturb you."

"Oh, no." I dropped my head back on my arm, barely missing my plate. "Tell me they're not arguing over me again."

"As you wish: They're not arguing over you."

"Liar."

He chuckled in reply. With a groan I stood, and Brint reached out and seized my arm.

"This is his battle, not yours, and he's in fine trim today."

"Brint, I've caused enough grief."

He let go of my arm, smirking. "I wouldn't call what you've caused grief, Edmund."

I gave him a wry smile and climbed over the bench. I was a little light-headed from fatigue as I made my way to the door and I blinked at the brightness of the dawn. It looked to be a beautiful day, a good day to travel. Pausing, I listened. I could hear raised voices close by the entrance of the smithy and I followed the angry sounds. On the far side of the thicket-choked entrance to the compound I saw Brickit and Barret and the same three miners that had been here before. I slowed down before anyone noticed my presence, listening and watching and wondering if coming out here had been wise.

Arms folded across his chest, his long beard flowing almost to his belt and his frizzy hair running rampant, the Chief Smith of the Blue River Smithy was indeed in fine trim. His eyes were bright with suppressed anger and I could read tension in every line of his body. He was listening to Biss. Clearly his cousin could match his ire and I saw Biss gesture and rant, his voice rising up.

". . . insult my brother for the sake of some manling that's been here less than a month and somehow managed to worm his way into your good graces! You grant your countenance too easily, Brickit!"

"Are you so jealous of his presence that you would rather I not grant it at all and alienate our monarchs?" snapped Brickit. "Are you and your brother so short-sighted? Barret looks to be insulted at every turn. He rejected Edmund's knife not on its own merit but because it was the work of Human hands. And damn fine work it was for someone who's never swung a hammer to metal before he came here."

I felt a flush of pleasure at the praise, able to ignore Biss' insulting remarks in light of Brickit's defense of me.

"You go further than can be tolerated! Than will be tolerated! Jealous? Ha! Next you'll be calling him your son and letting him speak in council!" thundered Biss, waving his arms.

Brickit seemed to consider that a fine idea. "And if I take that advice? Then what? Your options are very limited, cousin. You'd speak against your own clan? Remember that a king bears the name Welent now, given him by the Dwarfs here. I doubt he'd take kindly to what you imply."

With a growl Biss said, "I've implied nothing, Chief Smith!"

"See that you don't ever, then. I do not speak for Moon Mountain, Biss, nor do I try to. Don't you try to speak for this smithy. Your brother is not chief here, nor will he ever be. It is not his place to call you every time he's displeased with my decisions." He glared at Barret. "Aslan granted you were born with two feet, Barret. Stand on them. If you're so dissatisfied with your lot here, then pack your tools and return with your brother. I'll not stop you. On the same note, though, I will not abide any insult to my family be they Dwarf, Human, or otherwise."

"You insult your race by naming that manling part of this clan!"

"Do you want to repeat that statement to Beal and Boont?" invited Brickit, effectively stopping Biss in his tracks. "You're very brave when backed by your brother and masters. Allow me to call mine and we'll see how well they receive your opinions."

There was no answer. I couldn't blame Biss. I would not have wanted to tangle with Boont and clearly the miners had no desire to face her either.

Brickit's voice was calm, but I could hear the stubborn finality in his tone. He would discuss this no further. "How I choose to run this smithy and this branch of the clan is my business, cousin. What do you care who sits beside me at meal times? I tell you now, Biss, that boy has done more good in three weeks here than you've done in your whole life."

I blinked, astonished and pleased by his testimonial. I backed away from the meeting and took a seat on a low wall outside the nearest cottage to wait. I could still hear them quite well. Most likely half the smithy could, too.

"Unless you're here to negotiate for another load of ore, Biss, remove yourself from my smithy. And Barret! Think on what I've said as well. I am Chief here and no other. Remember that."

Brickit stalked away through a break in the overgrown hedge, leaving his cousins to see themselves out. He started slightly when he spotted me. Whether it was because I was there waiting for him or awake or if I looked a sight, I could not say, but his anger turned to amusement. He even smiled a bit as he came and sat close beside me, his expression telling me that I was less than presentable at the moment.

"I'm surprised you're up."

I hung my head, my body devoid of energy. "So am I. Gran woke me so I could eat."

"You should get more sleep."

I shrugged. Sleep sounded wonderful right now, but I wanted to talk instead. My tired mind just couldn't find the right words.

"I'm sorry if I caused you any trouble with your cousins," I finally managed.

He turned on me sharply. I blinked as he pointed a stubby finger in my face. "Don't you apologize for their misconduct, Edmund," he said fiercely. "You've done naught wrong, and more right than you know." Realizing that he was actually yelling at me, Brickit calmed himself. "Besides, it's an old feud, an old jealousy that you revived."

I could tell he very much wanted me to ask what it was about. I said nothing, letting him stew for a little while. He was growing increasingly agitated. When he couldn't take it any more, he elbowed me in the ribs.

"Well?"

With a laugh I asked, "So what makes Biss so jealous? Is it your dashing good looks or that rapier wit?"

"Beyond those, which, I may add, were well guessed, our dear cousin Biss has had a marriage suit rejected not only by my dear Blaine but by Bly as well and more recently -"

"Boont?" I ventured cautiously. Brickit nodded and I winced. "Oh."

"One's pride doesn't recover so easily from such smart blows," he agreed, "especially pride on a scale such as Biss possesses. So many refusals should come as a sign for him to mend his rude ways. And now his chiefest rivals . . . have you, king and kinsman and manling."

I snorted at his gentle teasing and leaned heavily into my hand. Manling. It was a silly word. "Such a prize."

He gazed upon me, and he was perfectly serious as he said, "I can name none greater."

"It has been a good three weeks," I replied. "I've learned a great deal."

He scuffed at the mossy ground. "As have I."

"Thank you for showing me how to make a knife. Maybe I'll do better next time."

"La, you will," he assured me. "Not that this try is any call for shame."

We fell silent, neither sure what to say, neither of us quite willing to face the fact that I had to leave.

"I am glad you came," Brickit admitted softly, staring out across the smithy. "And yet more glad that you stayed."

"I'll be back."

"I know," said the Chief Smith, and he smiled.

§§§

Celer was at the head of the troop of soldiers that arrived an hour later to escort me on the two-day ride home. There were a great many of them, far more than brought me here, and I sensed the first inkling of the gigantic ado Peter was going to make over me. Clearly telling him that he could fuss to his heart's content had been a mistake.

The Faun captain grinned widely as he greeted me and I realized at that moment that I had truly been missed in Cair Paravel. It was a good feeling even though I knew I would be missed by the Dwarfs here as well. Phillip nuzzled me warmly and snorted at my dusty clothes before he wandered off to harrass Brickit a final time. I hastily and haphazardly packed my things, taking care with the necklaces and silver rings and knife and stuffing everything else into the saddle bags by brute force. Shafelm I strapped around my waist

before I darted outside to find that everyone in the smithy had turned out to see me off. Some, like Bort and Barret, seemed glad to get rid of me. Others were not so pleased to see me leave. Baia turned her face up to me for a kiss on the cheek, and I kissed Bly and Gran as well, thanking them for their hospitality. Not a one of them said good-bye, but many of them wished me a fair journey and a safe return.

The moment I swung up into the saddle I knew I was going to be sore by the time I saw the Eastern Sea again. I had not said farwell to Brickit, nor would I. Instead I smiled at him where he stood with Brint and Gran.

"I'll keep the Bats busy if you will," I proposed.

"Done, Spawn," he replied gruffly.

"Aslan between you and evil, Chief Smith."

"May He stand between you and evil as well, Edmund of Clan Welent."

§§§

We were six hours west of Cair Paravel when a shrill cry caught our attention. Looking up into the noon sky, I saw a Gryphon scout wheel upon the wind.

"Cyn?" I wondered, looking to Celer.

The Faun shook his head. "Manon, Sire." He smiled. "Your family must be just ahead."

I found myself smiling back. "Thank you for the warning, Captain."

Minutes later we heard hoofbeats, then shouts and laughter, and then on the road ahead I could see the unmistakable form of Peter on his black mare Jett, reigning the big horse hard back so as not to outstrip (or trample) Lucy's little palfrey. My heart leaped at the sight of them and I instantly yelled,

"Hi, Phillip! Run!"

The good Horse obliged me, letting out a neigh as he raced ahead of the soldiers. Peter was waving and called my name long and loud, giving Jett her head. We met midway between us. My joy at seeing my brother again was matched only by his joy at seeing me, and I could not reach him fast enough. He was dismounting before Jett stopped and the moment my feet touched the ground I was enveloped in a crushing hug that I returned with all the force that I could.

Suddenly Peter stiffened. Then he coughed. Then he gagged. Just as quickly as I'd been seized, I was at arm's length and my older brother was gulping for breath. Finally he raised his head, staring at me. There were tears in his eyes and they weren't quite tears of happiness.

"When is the last time you had a bath?" he wheezed.

Oh, dear. "Um . . ." I tried to remember. "When I left?"

"You're riding downwind all the way home."

Then Peter laughed, held his breath, and hugged me again even tighter.

¥¤¥

## Chapter Thirty: Anniversary

*To King Edmund the Just, knight, adopted Son of the Clan, etc., etc., etc., from Chief Smith Brickit, greeting!*

*Many thanks for your kind invitation to help celebrate the first anniversary of Beruna. Sadly, I and my Clan must plead off due to a previous engagement at the same time. If you're still a king next year we'll come then and you can entertain us in royal fashion. In the meantime, I trust you're eating properly and I don't care how much weight you say you've put on, it's not enough. Eat more or my mother says she won't let you play in the smithy until you're stuffed at every meal.*

*Chief Smith Brickit*

I lowered the letter, disappointed. I had so hoped the Dwarfs at the smithy would be willing to make the long journey to Cair Paravel to celebrate the first anniversary of the victory at Beruna. It wasn't as if we didn't have enough guests coming and the celebration would last a fortnight, but I missed Brickit and I would have liked to introduce him to my siblings. Well, the girls, at least. I had no idea of how he and the others would react to Peter. Civilly, I hoped. With a sigh I set the letter aside.

"Something wrong, Ed?" asked Peter, looking up from the letters and notes stacked all around him as we helped the scribes sort through responses to our invitations.

I waved at the message, feeling my disappointment mount each passing moment. "Brickit can't come."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was hoping to meet him. Next year, maybe?" He sounded hopeful, innocent that he was. I had not, would not tell him about the nickname Brickit had bestowed upon him. He had enough titles and didn't need any more, especially if they were meant to be rude.

"That's what he said."

He pushed a pile of letters my way. "Well, here's a remedy for your sorrows. Let's see who else can come. I swear most of the Narnians are more excited about receiving their first piece of mail than celebrating our victory."

I chuckled, folding Brickit's letter and sliding it under my leg so it wouldn't get lost in the general crush, and got to work.

§§§

"Oh, look! There's Flisk! And Peter, look, he brought four . . . five . . . all six of his brothers!"

I looked to where Lucy was pointing, torn between excitement and awe at the sight of seven tall and graceful Unicorns. They made a large white splash in the midst of the crowd filling the courtyard. Beside me, the High King made a little sound of dismay and I bit my lip to keep from snickering. Unicorns were notoriously fussy and finicky, though fierce when roused, and now Peter had seven of them on his hands.

"Wonderful," he said with badly forced enthusiasm.

We stood on the landing before Cair Paravel's main doors in the cool of the morn, greeting guests and helping to sort out where so many people would be sleeping and eating

as we had done every morning for the past few days. I was amazed at how organized the staff at the palace turned out to be, but since the celebration was our idea (well, it was Susan's at least) we were helping them as much as we could. Right now, by order of our overworked and beleaguered chamberlain Sir Giles Fox, we were making sure that all the visitors were happy and was aware of where they were to be housed. Massive as Cair Paravel was, we still weren't forced to utilize all the rooms for our guests; many Narnians simply preferred to sleep outdoors in the gardens, especially in the heat of the second high summer they'd ever known.

"That must be Lady Avalyn's mother," Susan exclaimed, pointing as a stately Giraffe passed beneath the towering gates. "And oh! The Mice came!"

We all strained to see Narnia's most recent (and despite their increased size, still the smallest) addition to the ranks of Talking Animals, for the Mice had been granted speech the very morning we fought at Beruna, a gift from Aslan for their gesture at the Stone Table. When they freed Aslan of the bonds holding him, he had in turn freed their tongues, and from what I'd seen and heard they were trying hard to make up for a millennium of silence because they rarely stopped talking. There was only a handful of them in the land, but it looked as if they were well on their way to establishing themselves because I saw several children keeping close to their parents.

"Ed?"

Peter's voice was full of pleasure as he leaned close. I looked up over my shoulder to see that he was smiling, well pleased with himself as he said, "I believe you have some company."

Instantly suspicious, I followed his gaze to the happy, milling crowd of people in the courtyard, searching for what he saw. A dark look from dark eyes caught my attention and with a thrill I saw Brickit and Brint and Boont blocking the flow of celebrators. All three of them looked pleasantly cross. I let out a shout of surprise and excitement.

"He refused my invitation!" I exclaimed.

Peter laughed and gave me a push. "But he accepted mine!"

"What? Oh!" I swatted at him and set off down the steps as fast as I could run. I darted through the crowd, my anticipation and delight growing with each step until I slid to a halt before the Chief Smith and the masters.

"You told me you weren't coming!" I shouted without any preamble. If Dwarfs didn't say good-bye then they could certainly forego saying hello.

Smugly, Brickit produced a well-worn letter. "That's because the Nancy's invitation was so much nicer and far more polite than yours, Spawn! And I quote, 'I beg that you will refuse his invitation and accept mine instead. It is my hope to surprise him with your presence, and by accepting my invitation you can in all honesty plead off for a previous engagement if you choose to come.' Far more impressive and engaging then your terse afterthought of a letter."

"Don't be fooled, boy," Brint grumbled. "He had it memorized the day it arrived."

Boont folded her arms and glared up at the palace. "We should have brought more food. We could starve to death by the time we found the kitchen in so huge a place."

"Is it just the three of you from the smithy?" I asked brightly.

"Aye, 'tis all we could spare and that could walk so far and that could abide putting up with such frippery and carousing," said Brickit.

"Good. Three of you are quite enough," I snapped. I motioned them to follow me. "Come along!"

They all frowned and glared and looked stubborn. "Where?" Brickit demanded.

I put my hands on my hips. "To meet your host. You're not my guests. You're Peter's. The least you can do is say hello."

"Must we?"

"Yes!"

They all looked up to the landing. Peter was talking to one of the Platypus farmers that raised trout and water plants in the wetlands down by Glasswater. Both were very animated and Peter laughed aloud at something the farmer said, for few Narnians can tell jokes better than a Platypus, who by their very natures are rather facetious creatures. Even at this distance I could tell that Peter - tall, lean, tan, with his blond hair bleached almost to the color of straw by the summer sun - impressed them more than they would ever admit. Plainly my brother did not spend his days writing nervous letters and picking flowers as they assumed.

"Mighty tall," muttered Brickit.

"Mighty strange hair," Brint replied.

"Mighty sight gentler on the eyes than you lot," said Boont to her companions, straining to get a better look at Peter. "I like that one already."

My Dwarfs grew quieter and fidgeted more as I practically dragged the brothers up the steps. Boont alone climbed up without a guilty conscience and she gave up waiting for the men folk to stop acting like fools and children. I had no worries about either Brickit or Brint misbehaving at this point - I could tell they were both uncomfortable to meet the object of their disdain. Peter, blissfully ignorant of their abuse, caught sight of us and said something to the girls before he was drawn away by Sir Giles. The two queens turned to us with wide smiles and I knew instantly that both Dwarfs were smitten. I took a second look and decided my sisters did look particularly pretty today, so the Dwarfs probably weren't alone in their sudden adoration. I supposed their coloring helped - red and black hair were tones any Narnian Dwarf could relate to. I noticed they were both wearing the jewelry I had made them, too. That wasn't saying much in Lucy's case because she almost never removed hers, just as Peter never removed the signet ring.

"Those are your sisters?" gasped Brint, staring. "The queens?"

I frowned, wondering who else's they could be. "And my brother the High King!" I said through clenched teeth.

"Hang the Nancy," they muttered, dismissing Peter's existence. "You never told us they were so pretty!"

"You never asked," was my glib reply, which shut the pair of them up. It was quite a good feeling, actually.

Lucy had already dashed down a few steps to meet Boont. I could see Susan studying the carpenter closely, surprised to see a woman wearing trousers (though I'd be equally surprised to ever see Boont in skirts). Joining them, I quickly and properly said,

"Master Boont, these are my sisters Queen Lucy and Queen Susan. Dearest sisters, this is Boont, Master Carpenter of the Blue River Smithy."

"You look mickle easier to get along with than your brother," was Boont's rather blunt assessment of the introduction, looking the queens up and down in an approving manner.

"We are!" chimed Lucy without thinking, throwing fuel on the fire.

Having thus charmed Boont into a good mood at my expense, I aimed my younger sister at Brickit and Brint.

"Good cousins of Clan Welent, allow me to introduce Queen Lucy. Lady, I present to you Chief Smith Brickit of the Blue River Smithy and Master Smith Brint, his brother."

Lucy bobbed in a curtsy, her curls bouncing and she smiled widely. She was just the thing to ease them into relaxing and perhaps even be nice. "Thank you for teaching Edmund so much. I'm sorry I had to say 'no' to your letter, Chief Smith, but I'm sure we would have both missed our brothers."

Or maybe not.

"What?" Brint and I asked together. I looked to Brickit, who looked as if he'd swallowed a hot coal, and Brint looked to my sister.

"Oh," Lucy said in a tiny voice, one hand going to her lips. She blushed as pink as her gown as she realized she'd misspoken.

Brint and I exchanged a suspicious look and then we each turned to our closest relative.

"Hold on! What's this about?" I demanded. "Lucy!"

By the rate of her squirming I knew it had to be something that had been kept from me for a while. I checked Brint's progress. He was nose-to-nose with his older brother and they were bickering back and forth. Boont had abandoned us completely and was off talking shop to some Dryads.

"Well," Lucy began, darting a desperate look to our older sister. "Well, you see, Brickit wrote to us while you were at the smithy and - and - Susan!"

At Lucy's squeak, Narnia's Gentle Queen swept over to us, dazzling Brickit with her smile. I folded my arms impatiently, immune to her charms.

"What's this about letters from Brickit while I was at the smithy?" I demanded. "Lucy just said something about how we'd both miss our brothers . . . ?"

Susan's smile went from dazzling to forced as she looked between Lucy and Brickit. I knew without question there was a conspiracy going on here. I was about to pounce when Susan turned.

"Peter!" she called sweetly, waving him over.

Mild and smiling and pleasant, the High King unwittingly entered the fray. He bowed in greeting to the Dwarfs. "Welcome to Cair Paravel, Chief Smith Brickit. I'm so glad you -"

I held up my hands to silence him. "None of that!" I exclaimed. "What did he write to you?"

Peter blinked. "Which time?"

I whirled on Brickit. "You've been corresponding with him? When you write one letter for every three that I send?"

"What?" asked Peter, lost.

"No!" cried Brickit, stung at the accusation. "Just the first note and then about the Werewolf and . . ."

"And?" I prompted. "You said it doesn't hurt to ask! What did you write to my family? Why did those Fruit Bats tell you 'No'?"

"Ah!" Peter caught on. He cast Susan and Lucy a quick look, incapable of telling an untruth. "Well . . . let's just say you very favorably impressed the Chief Smith, to the point where he asked to extend your stay . . . indefinitely."

I stared at Brickit, open-mouthed. Finally I found the words. "You tried to keep me?"

He shrugged, and sensing he had an unlikely ally in my brother, eased a bit closer to Peter. "It was worth a try. You never know until you ask, after all."

"So I've learned! But why did Lucy say both brothers?"

"Aye!" agreed Brint, braced to be offended.

Susan gestured. She glanced at Brickit apologetically and tried her hand at a bit of diplomacy. "Well, Ed, he thought, possibly, we might enjoy Brint's company in exchange for yours."

The silence that followed was broken when Brint hissed, "I'm telling Mother!"

I looked at my brother. None of my suspicions were relieved. "So . . . He asked to trade me for Brint . . ."

Lucy nodded, grinning. "He asked me that, actually. And he asked Susan if he could keep you and Peter -"

She broke off and blushed again and hid behind Peter and Brickit.

I wasn't sure who deserved my glare more, the stubborn Chief Smith or my smug and serene brother. I leaned in close.

"What did you write to my brother, Brickit?"

The Black Dwarf drew a deep breath. "Well . . . I proposed an exchange of gold and goods."

That last was mumbled so fast and low that I could barely make out what he was saying. I gaped, then looked to Peter. "He tried to buy me?"

"He tried." Peter smiled at the Chief Smith, shifting my ire from the Dwarf's to his own shoulders where, Aslan help me, it would have a short life. "He could never afford you, Ed."

I blinked. I did not know what to say or think or do. Should I feel complimented? Insulted? Scandalized? Amused? Finally I settled upon smiling at these my dear families,

knowing it wouldn't be long before I gave in and spent the day entertaining the Dwarfs. For now, though, victory in this particular field was mine.

"I'm so very glad they're your guests, Peter! Enjoy them!"

And I walked away from the lot of them.

§#§

Later that evening the celebration was moving down to the beach beside the Cair. A huge bonfire was to be lit and the feast and revelry would last until dawn. I was looking forward to the novelty of it, for tonight was the first anniversary of our victory at Beruna. It promised to be an exciting ending to a wonderful and thrilling day, a night of music and dance and rejoicing.

Peter was already getting changed when I entered our room and I hurried to shed my dress clothes for the plainer outfit Martil had already laid out for me. The valets had insisted we not wear our best clothes to the beach. They knew us too well. Without my asking Peter helped pull off my boots and I noticed he could barely suppress his amusement. He burst out laughing when he tugged too hard and stumbled back gracelessly, my right boot in his hand. Relenting, I laughed along with him and he dropped down beside me. Quietly he said,

"It's a measure of Brickit's affection that he went to such lengths to keep you."

I snorted. Not an hour after I had left them, I had gone back and saved Brickit from Peter's enthusiastic company. My brother had completely ignored the Dwarf's growing frustration as the legend of Nancy was undone (for a day, anyway) by Peter's poise and charms. "La, I doubt he'd written so much in all his life as in this year."

"By his handwriting, I'd say you're right." He leaned against me, pulling me close in a one-armed hug. "Not that I blame him for trying to keep you, of course."

"Of course," I replied in sarcastic tones. "Anyone would have done the same. Peter?"

"La?" he asked, imitating me.

I looked up at him slyly, unable to resist asking, "So how much am I worth?"

Chuckling softly, Peter kissed my hair. "More than all the air or the water or earth could ever produce. You are the world, good my king, and such things can't be bought at any price." He gave me a shake, his eyes bright with anticipation. "Come on, Ed. Let's grab the girls and get down to the shore. We have so much to celebrate tonight!"

I grinned. Truer words had never been said.

¥¤¥