

The Chronicles of Narnia

On Faith

A FanFiction by Caleon

Disclaimer: This is a fan fiction and for entertainment purposes only. Caleon does not own Narnia or any of its characters and has made no monetary profit from writing this story.

Notes From The Author

I intended Ed's first story, *To Be Just*, to be a standalone fic, right up to the end. However, so many people begged me for a sequel that I began wondering how Edmund's story could continue and still remain within the basic boundaries of the world C.S. Lewis created. The problem is, it can't. Fah, said my romantic-sucker side. What care I for canon? What care you that your author page says you like canon? Just jump in and let Ed take you where he wants to go. We're not done pushing you around yet, sister. Then Ed himself pulled me aside and said, much more diplomatically, Caleon, let me tell you a story about a girl

Happy Reading, *Caleon*

If you're interested in rounding out your reading of *On Faith*, try listening to the soundtrack Caleon has compiled below. All of these songs were used in writing key scenes of this book. Caleon does not own the rights to any of the below songs, nor is Caleon profiting from their use here.

On Faith

Soundtrack

1. Straighten Up And Fly Right - *The Andrews Sisters*
2. Hills Of Ireland - *A Celtic Romance (Mychael & Jeff Danna)*
3. Saltarello (2) - *Calliope*
4. Under High Branches - *A Celtic Tale (Mychael & Jeff Danna)*
5. What Must A King Do? - 300
6. The Blood Of Cu Chulainn - *A Celtic Romance (Mychael & Jeff Danna)*
7. Goodbye My Love - 300
8. Pax Deorum - *Enya*
9. From Western Woods to Beaversdam - *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*
10. No Mercy - 300
11. Immortals Battle - 300
12. Loch Etive - *A Celtic Tale (Mychael & Jeff Danna)*
13. Somewhere - *Within Temptation*

1

The Little Matter Of Sanity

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Pevensie, but I’m having difficulty understanding the reason for your distress. You have here what seems to be, in every way, a perfectly healthy boy.” Doctor Sorensen pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. The boy, meanwhile, kept on staring at him with that calm, motionless attitude, as if he found the whole visit rather entertaining. Much as opposed to the dozens of other squirming, crying, eager-to-leave children the doctor had seen that morning. The doctor did wish the boy would stop looking at him like that. No eleven-year-old child ought to look at anyone like that. It was awfully disconcerting to be looked at by a child as if he were thinking, *I could run rings around your medical degree and have time left for cricket. Let’s be done with this bothersome thing and send me home, shall we?*

“Doctor,” said the boy’s mother, “are you certain you checked ... everything?” She stroked the boy’s head, and this time the boy showed some semblance of his age by grimacing as he suffered his hair to be ruffled.

“His blood pressure’s excellent. His heart rate’s excellent. He’s in much better health than many of the children of his age that come through my door.”

“But ... Well ...” Mrs. Pevensie blushed. “You see, doctor. He has this ... interest. In ... trees.”

“Trees?” Doctor Sorensen scratched his cheek.

“Yes. He draws pictures of them. He has maps.” The mother pulled a few sheets out of her handbag.

The first page was a skilled rendering of—well, the doctor didn’t know what sort of tree, but a nice one. The second page was indeed a map, not of anyplace he recognized, with checkmarks here and there in what looked like the forested areas. The doctor eyed the boy, wondering how a child his age might have drawn such expert pictures. “I think they’re remarkable,” he said. “Perhaps your son is interested in pursuing a future in botany?” He looked at the boy as he said it.

The boy simply shrugged.

The doctor didn’t know quite what to say, but the worried expression on his mother’s face drove him to ask, “Son, is there anything you’d like to say about these pictures?”

“No, sir.”

The doctor scratched his chin and handed the pictures back to Mrs. Pevensie. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I don't think an interest in drawing and—trees—is anything to be concerned about."

He met the boy's gaze for another moment, then looked uncomfortably away, wanting to straighten his tie. Winston Churchill had a less commanding stare than this strange little boy. When he and Mrs. Pevensie left, he was enormously glad to see the back of them.

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"It's not fair to worry Mum like that," Peter said as they walked down the busy street.

Edmund peered through a display window at a bunch of vinyl records, then considered whether he had enough pocket money to buy any of them. He doubted it. "What am I worrying her about? A few sketches? You'd think she'd be happy that I've got an interest in something."

"Ed, you're scaring her with it. You were barely interested in recess and lunchtime, and now she never sees you without your nose in a book." Peter gave him a look of understanding. "Listen, we all know the tree you're looking for isn't in England. And we might not even get back to—"

"We will," Ed said, cutting him off. "I will."

"Ed, you've got a map of Narnia in your pocket. Don't you think that's going a bit far?" Peter sighed. "I don't know if this is your way of ... dealing ... or what ..."

"I'm going to find it, Peter. I remember almost every birch grove within two days' ride of Cair Paravel. None of them had silver leaves."

Peter stepped in front of him, and Ed was forced to stop on the sidewalk. "What are you going to do with that map if we never get there again?"

Scowling, Ed grabbed his brother's coat sleeves. "There is a reason I can't remember parts of our reign, Peter. I remember everything else. *In detail.* I can tell you how many steps were in the castle staircase. I can tell you how many medallions were on the cheekstraps of Phillip's hunting bridle. I know *exactly* how many steps it took to get from my room to the castle library, and I haven't seen it in months." He realized he was crushing the sleeves of Peter's coat, and let go.

They started walking again. After a while, Peter said quietly, "All of us are like that, Ed. Susan can't remember the last feast, and she's the one who

planned it.”

“Then there’s got to be a reason for that, don’t you think?” Ed demanded.

Peter shrugged. “Maybe ... Aslan ... *wants* us to forget something.”

“Maybe something else does,” Ed blurted. Then he thought about that. Why would Aslan have any reason to keep parts of their memories from them? No. Much more likely that something else was at work here. Reaching into his pocket, Ed thumbed the smooth birch leaf that lay there.

Whatever it was, it couldn’t stay hidden for long. Not if he kept working on it.

Alone Or Not At All

Edmund took a different route home than his brother, cutting across a park. He'd made some excuse about ducking in to the soda fountain for a Coke float. Peter wasn't fooled. His siblings tolerated his distraction with every tree in their London suburb at first. They all knew the leaf Ed carried came from that—other place—even if it wasn't strictly Narnian.

After a while, though, their hopeful attachment to the leaf that meant Narnia became impatience and frustration. They, too, wanted that substantial connection to Aslan, but after months of waiting and nothing coming of it, each of them had resigned themselves to life in England for as long as the Lion willed it. Even Lucy.

It had gotten dark, he realized as he passed a lamppost whose light flickered on. And it looked like rain. Ed shrugged deeper into his jacket and pulled his cap down over his brow.

He heard laughter and footsteps behind him, and moved aside so that whoever it was could pass.

But they didn't. Ed paused and looked back over his shoulder. The knot of five older kids had paused too, tossing what looked like a shoe back and forth between them. One of them swung a cricket bat and knocked the shoe across the park. They were still laughing when one of them spotted him. "Hey," the older boy called.

Ed knew bullies when he saw them. Some poor child was even now wandering Finchley, crying, in search of that lost shoe. He turned and kept walking.

Faster footsteps. "Hey," the bully called again. He swept Ed's cap off his head.

Ed didn't even break stride. He jammed his fists into his pockets and kept walking. *Not fair, they're just kids. Mind your temper.*

"Whatcha got, kid? Any money in those short pants?" The bully snatched Ed's wrist, trying to pull it from his pocket.

Ed spun around and smashed the boy's elbow on the backside, forcing it the wrong way. The boy shouted in surprised pain and staggered back, but his four companions surrounded Ed with jeers and laughter.

The biggest of them took a boxer's stance and beckoned to Edmund.

“Think you can take me? Come on, shortstuff, give it a go.”

One of me, and five of them, and I'm eleven bloody years old. They've got to be seventeen, Ed thought, sizing up their posture and probable strength. This is going to get ugly, and Mum's probably going to kill me.

When he didn't move, all of them rushed him at once and knocked him on his back. A fist landed in his belly and he grunted. “That's for my arm, pipsqueak.” Another fist. “And that's for whatever else you get in while we pound you.”

They tore at his pockets, chuckling about money and maybe stripping his clothes off and making him walk home naked.

Rain started pattering down, getting into Ed's eyes. He brought his knee up and connected with the biggest bully, who moaned and rolled away.

The first boy got his fist in Ed's left pocket and came out with it. “What's this?” he taunted, holding up Ed's birch leaf in the light of the lamppost. “Is this silver? That's worth a pawn.”

The boy with the cricket bat swung it and bashed Ed in the hip. Ed bit off a shout of pain and snatched the end of the bat, rolling onto it until it slapped the ground underneath him. He came up swinging it like a sword, aiming for knees and soft bellies because even now he remembered it wasn't a fair fight. He didn't want to do any permanent damage.

He knocked the smallest boy down first with a sidelong whack at his shins. The next one fell to a well-aimed punch in the nose. Ed dispatched the third quickly, and the biggest bully and the first boy—the puncher—began to look like they were reconsidering tangling with him. But the big one got hold of his sword arm—bat arm—and twisted behind him to trap both of Ed's arms. Ed dropped the bat. The other boy started in punching Ed's belly again with the fist with Ed's leaf in it.

With his arms stuck in the big one's grip, Ed drove the top of his head into the puncher's breastbone. The puncher stumbled backward and fell. Ignoring the pain, Ed rocked back and slammed the back of his head into the big one's face.

The boy let go at once with muffled swearing. Ed scrambled forward and stomped on the puncher's wrist. When the boy opened his hand with a scream, Ed snatched the leaf out of his hand and ran.

By now the others had gotten back up, and he heard them running after him. Ed held his bruised and aching belly. He didn't think he could stand another hand-to-hand fight with all of them at once, not when comparing their size and weight to his. He raced through an alley behind a general store, up a

tilting stack of wooden pallets, and over a fence.

But the boys were following him. Somehow they'd found a way to cut off his escape, and Ed heard some of them in front of him. He ducked under a construction barrier and into a half-built bookshop whose door and windows were still missing.

Panting, he hurried to the back of the skeletal building, where he found a supply closet with a new door. The handle was U-shaped, he saw. Some luck at last. He found a crowbar, intending to barricade himself in the closet until the bullies got bored and stopped looking for him.

But when he opened the door, filtered sunlight spilled into the half-finished storeroom.

Ed froze, looking at the waving trees and the sunlight glittering through their leaves. His heartbeat, pounding before, began hammering so hard he thought it would surge out of his chest.

Did he dare? Without Peter and his sisters?

He stroked the leaf still in his hand. Did he dare not to?

Angry voices came from the front of the bookshop. They'd found him.

Ed leaped through the doorway and slammed the door behind him.

3

Not What I Expected

Warm sunlight. Soft, sweet breezes. A jewel-blue sky, where he could see it through the forest canopy. Edmund sucked the air deep into his lungs and closed his eyes, soaking it in.

Definitely better than getting the stuffing beaten out of him in a rainy park in Finchley.

He felt the cold iron of the crowbar in one fist, and the smooth leaf in the other. He raised the hand with the leaf and went to stuff it back in his pocket.

His hand slid right past where his pocket should have been. He opened his eyes and looked down.

Velvet. Dark brown velvet. The material hugged his legs and he looked—a lot farther down than he'd been used to—to a pair of high leather boots. A belt. An embroidered green tunic.

He dropped the crowbar and ran a hand through his hair to find it much longer, brushing the nape of his neck. Looking at his hand, he found it large and work-callused. He laughed, and his voice was much deeper.

Edmund jumped into the air, punching it with his fist. “Wooooooooo!” His voice echoed through the forest. He stuffed the leaf into a pouch on his belt and snatched up the crowbar, running through the trees as fast as he could go. He stumbled at his longer stride, laughed at himself, and then scrambled up the nearest maple tree to see where he was.

The forest canopy stretched as far as he could see. On the air lay the faint, salty smell of ocean. He looked up at the sun, trying to gauge a direction. Late morning, he guessed. No idea where he was.

Did it matter?

Grinning like a fool, he jumped down from the tree and started running again, just because he could.

He remembered these legs. These lungs. The way he seemed to be able to run forever in this otherworld air.

He burst into a clearing and skidded to a halt, swinging the crowbar sword-fashion. His body remembered this, too, the almost-dance of swordplay. The swing, the parry, the thrust and retreat, then the advance again.

Then he felt eyes on him.

Ed spun in a circle, ready to defend himself, but saw only trees. The wind played through the their branches. "Show yourself," he called.

A large grey wolf stalked out of the forest with her yellow eyes fixed on him. Instantly Edmund went on the defensive. When she came closer, he lunged at her with the crowbar.

She leaped aside with a snarl. "Testy, aren't you?"

"Only with followers of the White Witch," he said, swinging again as she circled him.

The she-wolf laughed. "I follow *me*, human." She dodged another of his feints. "And right now, I'm following lunch, so if you don't mind—"

"I have no intention of *being* it, if that's what you mean," Ed said. He attacked again, but sunlight flashed in his eyes at the last moment.

The wolf leaped at him and pinned him down. The crowbar thumped onto the grass as the wolf flattened her ears at him. "Will you *stop* that? I had a perfectly good doe, and your screeching frightened her away."

Confused, Ed stared into her yellow eyes. "You don't act like one of the Witch's wolves."

"Well, you act like a very nice example of your own race, thank you very much," she said, her voice full of sarcasm. She backed away. "You owe me a meal. Who's this witch you're so huffed about?"

Ed got to his feet and grabbed the crowbar again, even though the wolf made no move to stop him. He angled for a more defensive posture. "You don't know Jadis?"

The wolf's ears twitched once. "Jadis, the Narnian witch? The one that made it winter all those years?" She burst into laughter. "I'd like to see myself throw in with that lot. Game's hard to find in winter. Even if I were born then, I wouldn't have set foot in Narnia."

That stopped him. "What do you mean? This is Narnia."

The wolf laughed even louder. "A master of navigation, too, I see. Did someone blindfold you to get you here? This—" She turned in an exaggerated circle, "—is an island. In the middle of that great blue thing you humans call the ocean."

Ed's memory spun through a rundown of all the islands he remembered. Galma, the Seven Isles, the Lone Islands, Terebinthia ... "Where are we?"

"For the love of whimpering pups." The wolf sat on her haunches and stared at him as if she wanted to bite him on principle. "How does a man wind up on Selbaran and not know he's in Selbaran?"

4
Missing Pieces

The wolf, Leina, showed him to a pool of clear water in the forest. Ed scooped up a handful and drank deeply, thirsty after his run. He touched his face, studying his reflection in the pool's surface. A grown man stared back him—the same age, maybe, as he'd been when they left Narnia.

Left it. Abandoned it.

“What year is it? What's happening in Narnia?”

“You're awfully concerned about Narnia for a man who's not currently in it,” Leina said. “Where have you been, that you don't know what year it is?”

Looking at his face again, Ed said quietly, “Away.”

“We wolves don't care much for calendars,” she said, “but the last I heard when I bothered with any of you men, they called it ... 1016.”

That made it two years since they'd left. Ed would be twenty-six. No wonder he felt uncomfortable in his own skin, with this jumping around of ages. “And Narnia?” he prompted again.

“Well, it hasn't leaped off the map,” she said. “You're one boat and a month shy of getting there, though. What's Narnia to you, anyway?”

“Home,” he said without hesitation. Thinking of the leaf in his pocket, he sat at the edge of the pool. *None of them had silver leaves*, he'd told Peter. He took the leaf out. It pulled at him as always, a reminder that there was an answer out there for everything he could not remember. Aslan must have called him to Selbaran because the tree was here. “What's in Selbaran? Where's the nearest village?”

“What's in Selbaran?” Leina chuckled. “Trees. Lots and lots of trees. Plenty of food, if you're good at catching it. Not very many villages, though. A castle, a good day's run due south from here. I try to avoid it, since the Selbarani like to make coats out of us wolves.”

“Who rules here?”

“I think we've established that I don't chat overmuch with men,” she said with a wry flick of her ear.

Ed showed her the leaf from his pocket. “Have you seen a tree like this before?”

She cocked her head at him. “You are a strange one, aren't you?”

Ed stared at her, challenging that yellow gaze.

The wolf sighed. "I'm going to regret this, but yes. The forest near the castle has a few of those. You're on your own getting there, though. I wouldn't _"

But Ed was already up and running, his heartbeat thumping. *Due south.* The words burned into his mind until he had no other thought.

Behind him, the wolf growled, and he heard soft footfalls hurrying through the grass after him. "A day's run for *me*, you idiot," she called. "You're just going to get lost. Stupid human."

"If you're so worried about being a coat, why don't you just stay here?" he said over his shoulder.

She caught up to him, keeping pace with his jog. "Maybe I've got a soft spot for fools. Besides, you owe me dinner. Got a name, human?"

"Edmund Pevensie."

The wolf stopped in her tracks and stared at him with her ruff standing on end. "I wouldn't go around sharing that tidbit, if I were you."

A chill swept up the back of Ed's neck, and he stopped. "Why not?"

Leina eyed him, and Ed recognized the motion as the evaluation of a possible threat. "How much do you value your life?"

- # -

My Darling Edmund,

I have no words for the ache in my heart. It seems only to have grown over time, a black shadow that pervades everything I do. Some days I fear I have forgotten your voice. I fear that if I forget your face also, I will certainly lose myself. They say a dryad's memory is forever, but those who claim so must never have known such consuming emptiness.

I have tried hard to remain hopeful that Aslan will bring you back to me, but if the Lion is aware of my grief, he has not answered it for reasons known only to him. It is two years since your disappearance in the Western Wood. Narnia goes on without its Kings and Queens. I find myself wondering how I may do the same without you.

It seems I have no choice. Selbaran cannot stand on a broken crown. So while my country may see me upholding my duty, they shall see only the shell. The heartwood that is my love for you has gone on to wherever you are, and I must content myself that if I cannot be there in body, some spirit of me is there by your side.

Always,

Asha

Asha sanded the letter carefully, heated a stick of wax, then sealed the letter shut with the stylized tree of Selbaran. Firelight flickered across the stone floor as she brought the sealed letter to her window. There on the wide sill sat a copper brazier. The coals inside, scented with clove and cinnamon, were an homage to the spirits of the wood. Closing her eyes, she pressed the letter to her cheek and held it there, wishing it were his face. Then, just as carefully, she lowered the letter into the brazier and let it burn away.

The paper curled into embers, which caught on the breeze and scattered to the wind. It was better that her words were not seen by any of the castle's inhabitants. And perhaps, she thought as she stared into the darkness outside, the wind might carry them across worlds, to him.

5

At The Well Of Opals

“My family was Narnian, actually,” Leina said as she loped along with Edmund the next morning. “Originally, I mean. They came to Selbaran, oh, twenty, thirty years ago by human reckoning.”

“To escape Jadis’s winter,” Ed guessed, walking beside her.

Leina nodded. “I’ve never seen the place myself. I heard it’s better now, but don’t ask me who rules it now that you’re gone, because I can see the question on your face, and I don’t know.”

Ed stared thoughtfully at the trees around them. “When I was king, they called it the Golden Age.”

“Don’t get all full of yourself or anything,” the wolf said sarcastically. Then she said, “Why did you leave the country?”

“It wasn’t intentional. We were hunting, and we crossed through a portal to the world I came from before coming to Narnia. And now that I’m back, I suppose it’s because I’m searching for this silver tree.”

“Lot of hopping around, you two-leggeds.” Leina snorted. “Anyway, you might think of not spreading your name about here. Even the animals who do talk know not to use it. The name of Pevensie on any Selbarani’s lips comes with a nice rope to hang yourself by. I think they’d try to make *you* into a coat if they knew who you were.”

“Are we at war?”

“Oh, no. It’s the decree of the Royal House. Are you *sure* you want to go to the castle? I feel as though I’m leading a lamb to the wolf’s den.” Her tongue lolled out in a wolfish grin.

“You won’t find me such a lamb when I get proper weapons,” Ed said.

“Oh, yes. That iron bar. Very intimidating,” said Leina.

Ed twirled the crowbar absently as they went along. “For a human-hater, you seem to know a lot about our affairs.”

“You’d mind them too, if you like staying in your own skin,” Leina said.

They stopped to eat (Ed caught some brook trout with his bare hands, and the wolf pointed out that humans might have some talents after all), then they traveled on again. Though the wolf had made the snide remark about her traveling faster and more easily than him, they had gone much further than either of them intended by late morning.

They entered a tiny clearing, in the center of which was a pool bordered with crumbling white stones. Moss grew up between them. The surface of the pool reflected, not sky, but a shimmering whiteness. Over all lay the dappled shade of the forest around them, so deep that it seemed like twilight. "This is where I leave you," the wolf said. "Any further, and I'm as good as a rug. You'll find your trees scattered about the forest past this pool. And don't drink it, human." She flicked an ear. "I'd wish you luck, but you seem to be pressing what little you have."

Ed smiled. "Thank you, Leina. Good luck to you."

With a last snort, she loped away.

He sat down to rest for a while, but the shimmering pool drew his curiosity. He stood again and started toward it, but a motion caught his eye. He backed away into the trees, remembering that here, he was in danger.

A figure in a dark blue cloak emerged from the forest and bent at the edge of the pool, face hidden. A pale, slender hand emerged from the deep sleeve and scooped up a handful of the water. Another hand swept the hood back, and the new arrival brought the liquid to her lips as if to drink.

Pale, silver-blond hair. Eyes as spring-green as new grass.

He dropped the crowbar. He saw stacks of letters in his mind, dozens of them, written in her elegant hand. He knew the echo of her laughter at once, though she hadn't made a sound. He knew the shape of her lips when she smiled. He knew what it felt like to kiss her.

Recognition slammed through him. Every barrier went down, and all the holes in his memory washed away. He choked and slumped against the nearest tree. His chest burned for air.

She froze, her eyes darting among the trees. The shimmering water dripped through her fingers. Her gaze passed right over him without stopping, without expression. She seemed to change her mind about drinking from the pool and stood up to walk away.

Edmund pulled the leaf from his pouch with a shaking hand. A dryad leaf, one she'd dropped years ago in the mountains of Ettinsmoor, and he'd carried it ever since.

His voice wouldn't work. His legs barely did. He staggered forward out of the woods. Her eyes were on him again, but without focus, without any sign that she knew he was there.

He dropped to his knees in front of her and held out the leaf like an offering. When he found his voice, it came out in an aching whisper. "Asha."

The Price Of A Memory

A tremor ran through Asha's body. A ghost, she thought, *nothing more*.

But the pain in his eyes rooted her there, and she looked at his hand. A silver leaf lay in his palm. Unable to help herself, she gave in to the apparition and reached out.

When their fingers touched, she gasped and snatched her hand away. Wide-eyed and shaking, she reached for his hands once more. When they touched again, she fell to her knees with a sob. "Oh, sweet oaks, you're real, you're real." She launched herself against his body and threw her arms around his neck.

His arms came around her and he held her so hard she could barely breathe. His cheek pressed against hers, rough with the hint of stubble, and only then did she dare to hope she wasn't dreaming again. "Edmund, Edmund," she cried, kissing him.

He seemed as reluctant to release her as she was him, but after a while he drew back to look at her. "I knew I'd find you." He got to his feet and pulled her to her own. He kissed her again. For several blissful moments, neither of them spoke. At last, he wiped away the tears running down her face.

"How did you know?" she asked finally. "You should have forgotten."

The instant the words left her lips, she regretted them. He tensed. "Tell me what you're talking about," he demanded.

She felt as if lightning had split her in two. "Aslan ... He made me promise to send you back to England, to say nothing about it to you."

"Aslan." He dropped her hands and lunged away. Rage radiated from the hard line of his broad shoulders, his battle-ready stance. He raised his head and screamed, "*Stop toying with my life!*" The scream echoed through the forest and faded. Birds shrieked and flew into the air.

Shivering, Asha dared to touch his shoulder and found it unyielding as stone. "Edmund ... Aslan *gave* you your life."

He rounded on her, his eyes ablaze. "What?"

She cringed away from that hard stare. "Did no one ever tell you what happened at the Stone Table the night before the Battle of Beruna?" she whispered.

He looked like he wanted to hit something. His fist clenched

convulsively, but he stared at her, waiting.

She searched for the words. “He ... Oh, Edmund. Aslan gave himself up to the Witch in your stead. She killed him. She tried. The Deep Magic brought him back.” She went to touch him again but stopped, uncertain. “That’s why the Table cracked.”

A shudder ran through his body from head to foot. She’d never seen Edmund so full of anger, not even on a battlefield. “He took away my memories.”

She couldn’t meet his gaze for a moment. “I did that.”

“Why?”

“Would you have gone if you remembered me?”

“Asha,” he said hoarsely. She couldn’t stand the hurt and reproach in his eyes. He rested his forehead against hers, then brought his hand up to her cheek. “You took away the best part of being here.”

“I had no choice. I had to send you h-home,” she pleaded.

Arching back, he gave her an echo of that angry look. “This. Is. Home.”

“He said your world needed you. All of you. You, your brother, your sisters. I sent you back—”

His fingers clenched in the fabric of her cloak. His voice shook. “You sent me back from the man I was to a ten-year-old boy, with no memory of why I couldn’t look at that leaf without hurting. How do I know I haven’t forgotten anything else, Asha? How do I know *this* is even real? What part of me, is *me*?” He let go of her and gave her an accusing glare.

Grass rustled between the trees. A grey wolf skidded to a stop in the clearing, her yellow gaze switching from Edmund to Asha and back.

Edmund relaxed when he saw the wolf. “I’m all right.”

“I wasn’t *worried*,” the wolf said with a twitch of her tail. But the look on the creature’s face spoke volumes. Asha knew the wolf recognized her. Recognized that she knew Edmund. The wolf’s ruff stood on end, a certain sign that she was preparing for danger.

Edmund backed toward the edge of the clearing. “We can go.”

Asha lurched toward him, terrified to let him out of her sight for an instant. “Edmund!”

He picked up an iron bar that lay by a tall beech and gripped it in a white-knuckled fist. “I’m going back to Narnia.”

I
From King To Commoner

Dear Peter,

You know that I hate writing you letters. I don't even know why I'm doing so, as I have no idea how to get it to you anyway.

I remember her, Peter, and I don't know if that means the rest of you do as well, back in England. It was Asha who took away our memories—anything to do with her—and I cannot see past my anger to reconcile myself to it.

The few people I've been able to question have said that Narnia is under the care of a regent now. This is a Selbarani ship, and to hide my identity, I find myself in the curious predicament of having signed on as a common sailor to pay for my voyage. It's fortunate that we spent enough time at sea during our reign to allow me to pass as a man of the crew.

Though the Selbarani and the Narnians bear no love for one another, trade relations are still viable. The Wolf who is my companion tells me that the current strain is not Asha's doing, but that of some other force within the Royal Household of Selbaran. The Wolf does not have details, and I could not bring myself to stay with Asha to hear more. I am at a loss, and the only other place that might hold some answers to what has been going on is Narnia.

As to Aslan, he has neither appeared nor sent word to me of his plans. I've grown weary of allowing others to decide my course, and I now feel the only right action is to find a way to return us all to the thrones of Cair Paravel. I don't believe there's been a greater instance when I could have used your counsel than this, where we're removed by untold margins in space and time.

Your Brother,

Edmund

Ed finished penning the letter under the midmorning glare of the sun at sea. He folded it carefully into a miniature parchment replica of a World War II bomber. Holding the tiny plane in his palm for a moment, he listened to the remembered echo of dropping bombs. He'd stood at their parlor window the night of the air raid that had sent them to the country, too awed to do more

than marvel at the explosions of light and sound, until Peter snatched him away to the bomb shelter.

Standing, Ed launched the little plane over the water. A breeze caught it under the wings, and the plane soared outward for many meters before dropping into the ocean.

“That was a waste of effort and paper, don’t you think?” Leina murmured. She lay beside him on the deck, licking the last of his uneaten stew from his bowl.

Ed packed up his quill and ink in a leather case and hooked it to his belt. He’d traded his attire for more common clothing—a rough-spun shirt, pants and less finely made boots—and to obtain the writing case and a dagger before boarding ship, he’d bartered his services as a woodsman, cutting trees.

Ironic.

“When you’re able to write, you do what you will with your paper,” he said to the wolf. “As it is, you ought to hold your tongue. If the other sailors find you can talk, you’ll find your decision to come with me a grievous error.”

“Oh, do you think so?” The wolf flicked an ear at him and went on eating. Ed suppressed a smile. For all her bluster, Leina had been a useful companion on his trip through Selbaran. She’d resigned herself to his company and that of other men during the voyage across the sea only after a great deal of complaint, but Ed suspected she liked him as much as he liked her. *You need someone to watch your tail feathers, human, as they’re likely to be plucked before you know you’re about to be stewed*, she’d said. *Besides, it’s high time I saw if the Narnians are as fur-crazed as the Selbarani.*

One unforeseen effect of having a wolf for a companion was that the other sailors allowed him a wide margin. While it helped the matter of his hidden identity, it also afforded him too much time to think of Asha. He wondered if she knew he’d kept the leaf. After so many years, it had become a part of him, a silent reminder of her. No matter how betrayed he felt by her removing his choice from his own hands, he couldn’t do away with the token.

At night, he could do little more than lie in his hammock, staring at the beams of the deck above him, and remember her. Now that he *could* remember, it seemed as if his mind was doing its level best to drive him mad with thoughts of her—especially the pain in her eyes as he’d turned away.

When that image knifed him, he tried to turn his thoughts to Cair Paravel. Who had they made regent? Was it chaos now? What sort of welcome would he receive when he returned?

Could he find a way to call his brother and sisters back from England to

their rightful home?

8

Follow

Asha returned to the castle without drinking from the Well of Opals. Dryads especially drew strength, wisdom and magic from it, but since the Royal Council had appointed Heren as High Counselor, all except Asha had been forbidden its use, and the penalty was severe. *We must conserve its waters*, the Counselor had said. *They are not infinite.*

The other Council members nodded sagely at Heren's advice and then followed it. Asha had felt the noose tighten ever so slightly around the future of her race. Someday, Heren would move to stop even Asha from drinking from the Well.

Lately he had been accompanying her on her walks through the orchard, a constant and attentive presence. *Would you like a rest, my lady? Can I fetch you anything? A bowl of the finest earth, perhaps?*

Asha remembered a young man, his face red and raw with cold, bringing her a fistful of frozen mud that had saved her life. Pain struck her like a barbed arrow, and she sank to the velvet stool at the foot of her bed. "Oh, Aslan, what can I do?" she whispered.

Aslan, too, was a forbidden name in Selbaran, just as it was forbidden to speak of the Pevensies. Another Council decree—put in place, they said, to keep Selbaran from setting its relations with Narnia above its own needs.

Oh, they put it in grander terms, designed to draw out the patriot in every Council member. But Asha knew the truth. Those on the Council still loyal to her pitied her broken heart and felt they must remove some of Selbaran's troubles from her shoulders. The others—entirely Heren's men. And Heren, from the date of his installation as High Counselor, forbade any mention of Edmund or Aslan.

Let him forbid it, she thought fiercely. Even now, she believed in the Lion's wisdom, had believed it ever since he'd first looked on her with his blazing golden eyes. The Council had done more to keep Aslan's name in Selbarani thoughts by banning it, than if they'd left well enough alone.

As for Edmund (her heart clenched even at the thought of his name), no power in the world would make her stop thinking of him. Had the others come too? Would Narnia be whole again?

Would *she* ever be so?

She stood and marched to the panel behind her bed. A silly thing, a bed in her own castle when all she needed were blankets—but again, Heren had intervened with his poisonous tongue. *A Selbarani queen should not be relegated to the floor. Even if visitors do not see this lowly thing, the castle staff will talk. Appearances must be maintained.*

The best night of sleep she'd ever gotten was in an army tent with an earthen floor, beside a young man she desperately loved to this very day. Asha opened the panel in the wall and withdrew a polished longbow. Made of the wood of an elder dryad, it was nearly indestructible. Indeed, it had survived these many years without so much as a blemish on the limbs or a fray in the string.

She smoothed her hand along the wood. "I will not stay behind again," she vowed. "Where he goes, so shall I."

- # -

Edmund coiled a rope around its cleat, then paused to wipe his sweaty forehead. He tied his short ponytail back with a bit of leather lace and continued working. His hands were suntanned now, and his face as well, he imagined. He must look like a true sailor.

"You there," barked the first mate. "Move these crates below before someone trips over them. Quick now, or there'll be a lash waiting for you."

Ed kept his mouth shut and did as he was told. Leina was somewhere below decks hunting rats (one of the reasons the sailors tolerated her presence aboard ship). He stowed the crates in the hold and returned to the deck to finish his work.

As he returned to his post, he bumped into a boy carrying a pail of water. The grimy water spilled all over him and the recently scrubbed deck, as well as on the boots of two sailors passing by.

"Oy!" shouted the first sailor. He cuffed the boy, who stumbled back.

The second sailor went to hit the cabin boy as well. The boy cringed in expectation of the blow.

Edmund stopped the sailor's fist before it landed. "I'm sure he meant no harm," Edmund said. "He'll be happy to clean up the mess and polish your boots for you. Right, boy?"

"Yessir," the boy said to his feet.

"Who do you think you are, stuffy?" demanded the sailor. "A right prince, I'll warrant. Maybe you'd like to take the hit as well as make the little

rat's apology for him, eh?" He swung at Edmund.

Ed ducked the blow and flipped his crowbar out of the makeshift scabbard he'd made for it just as the second sailor started after him. With a grin, he rapped the first sailor on the knees with the hook end, spun the crowbar, and smashed the second sailor on the foot.

Both sailors howled in outrage. Round-eyed, the boy stared at Edmund, who ducked another attack and whirled to put a mast between them. Ed hooked the end of the crowbar over a beam and swung up into the rigging. The men began to climb after him.

Still grinning, Edmund edged along the beam to another series of ropes. A winch for cargo hung at the end of a swinging beam. He grabbed it and scooped the hook under the first sailor's belt, then swung the beam out over the water. The sailor yelled in surprise. By now, the rest of the crew on deck were staring at Edmund.

The second sailor lunged toward him with a knife. Ed parried with the crowbar and smacked the man's knuckles where he hung onto the beam. With a yelp, the sailor crashed to the deck below. Leina emerged on deck and glared up at Ed. Hanging in the rigging, he called, "Anyone else want to pick a fight?"

One by one, the sailors went about their business. With a hostile sneer, the second sailor helped his comrade down from the cargo winch.

When Edmund climbed down, Leina was waiting for him. "A fine way you have of remaining inconspicuous," she muttered.

"I didn't countenance bullying as a king, and I won't now," he said.

Too late, he realized the cabin boy was still standing nearby. He stared wide-eyed at Leina, then Edmund. Unease prickled along the back of Ed's neck, but he smiled and rapped the boy's shoulder. "Back to work, boy. The deck'll need cleaning again."

His words seemed to unfreeze the boy's tongue. "Yessir," he said, and hurried off.

After a moment, a voice said, "Dangerous bit of work, that. Captain wants to see you." The first mate pushed Ed toward the upper deck of the ship. With a resigned glance, Leina followed.

Captain Arondel waited at the wheel with a stern expression. "Leave us," he ordered the first mate. The first mate gave Ed a leer and went back to the lower deck.

"I don't tolerate fights on my ship," the captain said. "Fights usually lead to a lashing."

"Yes, sir," Edmund said.

“You know that, do you? And you’re still down there trading blows with my men.”

“Yes, sir.”

The captain thumbed his moustache. “Care to tell me why, sailor?”

“The boy was being treated unfairly, sir. I felt I should intervene.”

The captain stared hard at him then, with a squint born of long hours in the sun-glare at sea. At last he smiled. “I’ve a ship bound back for Selbaran a week after we land in Narnia. It’s in need of a good first mate, and you’ve shown yourself a worthy sailor. Are you interested?”

“Thank you, captain, but I have pressing business in Narnia,” Ed said. “I’ll be staying on there.”

The captain shook his hand. “All right, then, please yourself. If you ever need to make another crossing, I’d be glad to take you on.”

“Thank you, sir,” Edmund said. But as the cry went up from the crow’s nest that land had been sighted, he knew that he’d soon be right where he belonged.

9

Edmund's Return

Edmund hoisted his worldly possessions over his back—his hammock, filled with an extra set of clothes, a book or two, and his mess kit—and stalked along the pier with the wolf at his side. No one paid him notice at the docks. He was simply another sailor who'd helped unload the ship, taken his wages from the captain (he'd worked off his passage and then some), and then blended in to the bustling port crowd.

Even if they had noticed him, they were avoiding him. Leina trotted at his side, drawing suspicious looks from the citizens gathered at the pier. "Well, I can see Narnia was a waste of my time," she muttered.

"Here, no one's going to try to skin you," Ed said.

"I like how they're looking at me as if I'm rabid."

"Some of them may remember the Witch's wolves a little too clearly. You might try *looking* friendly."

Leina showed her teeth in a lupine smile. A little female faun clung to its mother and looked like it was going to cry. "Yes, that works much better."

Ed chuckled.

When they rounded the tallest building on the docks, a tavern with a lion's-head sign, Ed felt his heartbeat skip. He looked up, up, up the sea cliff at the end of the port town to the shining-white structure perched there.

Cair Paravel.

His throat tightened. Had it only been months? It felt like years.

He only realized he was walking faster when the wolf broke into a lope after him. "That your castle?"

"Was. Will be again," he said, following the crowd winding up the path that led to the main gates. He tried passing through the crowd faster, but the crush of people was too great.

Leina groaned. "This should be entertaining." She loped ahead of Edmund and gave a loud snarl.

The travelers gasped and parted like windblown grass. Laughing, Ed jogged after the wolf along the now-clear path. "You're a true friend, Leina."

She snapped at a portly old satyr pushing a cart. The satyr zipped out of the way with a bluster of surprised fear. "They'd better have loads of meat at this castle. And it better be fresh," Leina grumbled.

- # -

It was easier than he'd thought to gain entrance to the castle's outer courtyard. During his rule, each visitor was interviewed before admittance. Edmund wondered if that meant Narnia had entered a true peacetime.

They were stopped at the inner gate by a pair of young centaurs. The blond one glared at the wolf. "Name your business," he said.

"My business is getting something to eat," Leina snapped. "Talk to me when you've been on a boat for a month, eating scraps from a human's plate."

The centaur's head snapped up and he stared at Edmund. Ed guessed that meant Narnia was no more used to humans than it had been. "The regent," he said. "I want an audience with him."

The blond centaur hesitated, but after studying Edmund, he motioned to two fauns standing inside the gate.

The fauns escorted them into the castle, along with a few other petitioners—satyrs, bears, a pair of leopards, and—Ed's heart stopped for a moment—a dryad. Not Asha. This was a Narnian dryad, a human-shaped swirl of leaves without the solid form of a dryad of Selbaran. He found himself staring anyway.

He had been returned here to find Asha. And now he'd chosen to leave her.

At least it was my choice, he told himself. But he had to grit his teeth against a pang in his heart.

He knew the castle halls by memory. Every turn of a passage, every hollow and crevice. He stopped paying attention to where the fauns were leading him and followed his own feet to the great hall. His chest tightened at the sight of the four thrones, backed by a soaring stained glass wall and overarched by a glass roof.

Home. At last.

His feet carried him faster, past the bears and a group of naiads who murmured in surprise. Leina hurried to catch up.

A large satyr leaped in front of him, wielding an ax. "Hold, human."

Ed skidded to a stop. Every eye in the room turned to him. Leina gave him a grim, rueful look and flattened her ears, preparing to fight.

"Stay your weapon, Master Satyr," said a voice. The satyr did as he was told and backed away.

A large red centaur stepped forward. His hair and hide bore threads of

silver and grey, but Edmund recognized him at once. Nalis.

The centaur eyed him, his gaze traveling from Ed's worn boots, over the linen pants and shirt, and finally to his face. His mouth opened and a shudder ran through him. "Your Majesty," he whispered, looking as if he thought Edmund were a mirage. He bowed low.

Edmund cleared his throat until his old friend rose again. "Take me to the regent, Nalis. It seems I have a lot of catching up to do."

Unexpected, Again

Nalis brought Edmund to the state room. When Edmund asked why the thrones were not occupied, Nalis laughed. “Even if our regent were able to sit there, he would not,” the centaur boomed. “Since your disappearance, those thrones have remained empty, and they will stay so until their rightful occupants return.” He smiled and gave Ed a nod. “And now one has.”

One.

Edmund pictured himself sitting alone in that towering marble chair, without the other three filled beside him. Once, he’d wanted that—a kingdom to himself. But not like this. Definitely not like this.

He clenched his jaw, wishing he had Peter to turn to for advice, or Lucy for her unfailing support. Even Susan, who more often than not had merely brushed a piece of fluff off his tunic and scolded him until he looked presentable.

Nalis opened the state room door to reveal a centaur with slate grey hair. Even now, his hide silvering with age, the centaur looked as powerful as he had on the battlefields at Beruna. “Oreius,” Edmund said gladly. If anyone deserved to rule Narnia in Peter’s stead, it was his loyal right hand.

Oreius looked up at once from the table, which was covered with documents. His reaction was much the same as that of Nalis, but once Oreius recovered from his shock, he went straight into action. He ordered servants to prepare a feast, and staff to prepare Edmund’s old room (the thought of a real bed was almost worth all the travel by itself, Edmund thought). Finally, marching tall with pride, he led them back to the great hall to announce their king’s return.

Once the announcement was made, such a roar went up from the people at Cair Paravel that it must have been heard all the way to the Western Wood. Edmund smiled and accepted their well wishes. Someone brought him a velvet robe and his silver crown, and Nalis set the crown on his head. When he sat on his throne, the he felt the bittersweet rush of coming home.

“Where are the others, sire?” asked a young faun.

“They have not come with me,” Edmund said, “but I will find a way to bring them back.” He passed his gaze over every one of them, and a blaze of purpose lit inside him at the hopeful looks on their faces. “This is where we

belong.”

- # -

Asha remained in hiding—either disguised as a tiny cedar tree or hidden in the cargo hold—during the entire passage on the clipper to Narnia. The ship was the fastest she could find, but one that had been delayed in the port at Selbaran for repairs. She hadn’t seen Edmund for a full six weeks, and he must have landed at least two weeks ago. Every moment lost without him tore at her. What if Aslan sent him back to England? She couldn’t bear that thought.

Even now, Selbaran’s Royal Council must be looking for her. They would first have looked in the forests, of course, but she knew that Heren would suspect foul play the moment they didn’t find her. He might not yet know that Edmund had returned to Narnia, and that gave her hope.

She wore a thin, plain linen cloak over her dress, the dress commonly worn by all Selbarani dryads. The clothing she wore as a queen would have given her away as soon as someone laid eyes on her. Now, she pulled the cloak’s hood over her face. Though it was early summer, the sea breeze at the docks was cool, and it wasn’t unreasonable to wrap the concealing garment around herself.

On her back she wore a cloth bundle that held her bow. She made her way to the castle, blending into the crowd. Would he even receive her? She could call on the protocols of a royal visit, insist that she be seen, but she had no desire for that. All her crown had ever given her was a separation from him. Besides, any use of her title would merely call attention to her presence in Narnia ... and there was only one person she cared to know that.

Let the world go away, she thought. She’d paid for her duty to her country—to Aslan—with her heart. Surely the Lion would allow her the time with Edmund that she couldn’t have all those years, for why else would Aslan have returned him to Narnia?

As soon as she reached the castle, she found the way blocked with many more travelers. They muttered with excitement among themselves, but she couldn’t catch their words. *What is going on?* she wondered. Unable to gain entrance through the main gate, she went around the side. In a deep thicket, she stowed her bow, then she changed to a flurry of silver-green leaves and rushed over the castle wall. Nothing and no one would keep her from him any longer. Six weeks she’d been away from him, and she would not waste another moment. Not now, when he was so close.

She let the wind blow her through the iron gates and down a hall. Other windows were open, many of them, as if the castle were open to all the sunlight Narnia could hold. She used the breeze to soar into the great hall. A nearsighted faun gave her a suspicious look, but she quickly changed direction, whirling as if she were a simple wisp of leaves caught in a capricious wind. The faun looked away. Not sensing Edmund among the people gathered there, she followed another hall and rushed up the stairs.

The library door was open. She sensed *him* the moment the wind carried her inside.

She saw him with her magic, limned in the afternoon glow of the sun. Dust motes sparkled in the air around him. He sat on top of one of the long oak tables with one elbow propped on his knee and his chin in his hand. Books and scrolls surrounded him on every spare bit of tabletop. He looked troubled.

She swirled back into an eddy by a bookshelf and resumed her human figure. Her hair fluttered to a rest around her shoulders.

The moment she materialized, he saw her. His hand dropped away from his mouth and he shifted as if to get up.

“Stay,” she said softly. Her heartbeat stuttered at the resolution on his face. “I came to apologize. I hardly know how.”

His gaze lowered to the books. He pushed a few aside and propped his boots on the seat of a chair. “What’s done is done.”

“What about us?” She hated the hurt pride in her voice, in the question.

The first flash of lightning entered his eyes. “You had a chance—We had a chance—at that. You couldn’t even leave me my memory.” He shoved off the table onto his feet. He prowled toward her, anger written in every line of his posture. “Months of that pain, and not knowing why. You had no right, Asha. My will is *mine*. It’s the only thing that is.”

She tried to keep her voice even. “Who are you angrier with for being sent back, Edmund? Me, or Aslan?”

A muscle clenched in his jaw. “Aslan didn’t take my choice from me. He didn’t take my *home* from me.”

“No. He asked me to do that.” Ed’s fist clenched, and she saw his willingness to defend the Lion even now. Asha pressed on. “He knew before I did that you wouldn’t go if you knew I was sending you back. He knew you’d choose to stay with me.” She raised her hands to touch him, but didn’t. “And he was right, wasn’t he?”

For the briefest second, his gaze softened. He stepped toward her—his hand rose toward her—but he stopped. He retreated to the window. “What does it matter now? It’s done.”

“*What’s done?*” she burst out. “I’m here now. *You’re* here now. We have another chance.”

His hands went to the windowsill. She saw his fingers clench on the stone, but he didn’t look at her. “I’m getting married, Asha.”

Empty Thrones

“Lord Heren.” The soldier that ducked into Heren’s lavish parlor gave a quick, nervous bow. “There’s been no sign of the queen in the forest.”

Heren stroked his short, iron-grey beard and sat back in his desk chair.

“Have you questioned her ladies in waiting?”

“She dismissed them, sir. They’ve no idea what she did after that.”

“And the talking beasts?”

The soldier reddened. Rarely did a soldier seek out one of the forest’s few talking creatures. Never on command. “None of them s-spoke of her, sir.”

“Her fellow dryads?”

“All gone, sir. Deeper into the forests, we believe.” Beads of perspiration appeared on the soldier’s brow.

Heren smiled. “Worry not, my sweating friend. I know where she’s gone.” He pushed aside a mirrored bowl containing a reddish soot to uncover a map of the world. He picked up a silver letter opener and stabbed it through the map into the desk, right over Narnia. “I believe it’s time for a visit of state, but we’ll send our advance greeting first.”

- # -

Edmund scraped up the scrolls on the oak table and laid them in a basket. He replaced the books too, all without speaking. Asha remained by the bookshelf where she’d appeared. Her gaze drove through him like a heavy lance, but she said nothing.

He wished he hadn’t said anything. He wished she hadn’t come.

When he’d done everything he could to straighten out the books and was ready to leave the library, she still hadn’t moved. He paused at the doorway. “You may as well stay for a few days.” Oh, Aslan, how cold that sounded. As if all the years he’d wanted her, the years of letters still in a carved box in his bedchamber, meant nothing.

There was no sound for a moment, but when she spoke again, he wasn’t surprised to hear her right behind him. Her voice was steady—steadier than he thought his was. “Who is she?”

Please don’t ask me to do this. Don’t ask me to tell you about her. “The

marchioness of a small province in Telmar. A cousin to their royal family.”

“And her name?”

He turned around and gave her a pained look. “Stop it, Asha.”

“Why shouldn’t I know? Why shouldn’t I be interested in the woman to whom you’ve transferred your affections in a mere two weeks?”

He slammed the library door behind him and stalked toward her, then grabbed her wrists. “You know better than most that ruling a country means doing your duty. Narnia and Telmar have been practically at war with one another for years—worse now that Peter and my sisters and I left. This may make peace between us.”

She flung his hands off and her eyes blazed. “*Damn* your duty. It’s not about duty. It’s about you, not forgiving me.”

He hated this. Hated hurting the one person besides Peter to whom he had ever been able to be totally truthful. He knew his voice was shaking, but he didn’t care. If he got the words out, maybe she’d leave and forget him. “Peter and the others may never return. Narnia needs an heir before other countries step in and tear it apart.”

“And why not Selbaran? Why can it not be both love and politics?”

“Selbaran hasn’t been planning an invasion since our disappearance.” He fisted a hand in his hair, dislodging the short ponytail that he’d worn since sailing to Narnia. He sucked in a deep breath of air scented with the pungent odors of candle smoke and old books. “I made a selfish decision once, and Narnia had to pay for it with its own blood. *Aslan* had to pay for it. I’m not going to make that mistake again.”

“Will you stop trying to hang yourself on what you did with the White Witch?” Asha shouted. “She’s dead, Edmund. Even *Aslan* forgave you!”

He went rigid, fighting the will to scream and throw something. Summoning some reserve mask of composure, he gave her a stiff bow. “He’s better than I’ll ever be.” And he left the library and quietly closed the door behind him.

Of Marriage And Mates

“Nicely done,” Leina panted, dodging a thrust of Edmund’s wooden practice sword. “Alienate the woman who followed you all the way from Selbaran, when she could’ve stayed home and dealt with her own troubles.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Ed lunged again. This time, he rapped the wolf on her haunch with the flat of the blade.

Leina gave a surprised snarl and redoubled her efforts. She circled the perimeter of the courtyard, her pelt shining in the afternoon sun, and came after him again. “Oh, I don’t know,” she snapped. “Why would you marry a marchioness when you could be with a queen?”

“I don’t *care* about *rank*,” Ed shot back. “I care about keeping Narnia from being picked apart—” He gave her a sneer and jabbed her lightly with the tip of the blade, “—by the wolves.”

“Ha. The worst of us isn’t worse than those bloody Telmarines.” Leina caught hold of the protective pad on his calf and tore it off, then leaped away. “Are you sure you aren’t hiding behind this excuse of a girl because you’re still bitter?”

“What if I am?” Puffing with exertion, he jumped onto a statue of a leaping faun and used it as a barrier. “At least something good may come of it. Narnia will have peace.”

“That ought to be nice when you’re sitting in your peaceful kingdom beside a girl you don’t know, with your pups in her arms.”

“Do I detect a soft heart under that sharp tongue?” Ed taunted. He sprang off the statue and charged at Leina.

She hopped away, only to turn and trip him. Ed landed on his back with a thud and his head spun. Leina jumped on top of him and jabbed him in the belly with her forepaws. “Merely commenting on the ridiculous behavior of your species, mating with someone you’ve never even sniffed. At least wolves take the full measure of their prospects first.” She backed away with her tail swishing smugly.

Ed sat up and rubbed his shoulder. “I’m sure it’d be loads better if I tore my clothes off and fled into the woods to live like a wild thing.”

“Please don’t,” Leina said with a mocking tilt of her head.

“Were you ever married? Mated? Whatever you want to call it?”

“Yes, actually,” she said, and for once, all trace of sarcasm had left her voice.

“What happened?”

“He was killed by a Selbarani fur trader.”

He sat cross-legged and brushed his hair out of his eyes to study her. Her posture stiffened and her ears drooped. He wanted to say something, even opened his mouth.

Leina hopped away, her ears erect once more, all business. “Up, human. Someone who wants to kill you isn’t going to stop to let you rest.”

Ed got to his feet and they began sparring again. “What did you mean before, about Asha taking care of her own troubles?”

“Selbaran hasn’t been without its problems either,” Leina told him, dodging again. “The Royal Council has been trying to draw the power away from the dryads—and your Asha. I only know this because they’ve made hunting a lot less strict than it was when Asha alone held the final say.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” Ed parried her attack and whacked her lightly on the leg.

“I didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to agree to mate a human you’ve never seen, instead of her. Have you *seen* yourself around her? Today, when you were walking through that apple orchard? A parade of courtiers watching you both, and you pretending you’re as cool as icicles. Try to act otherwise if you like, but you even *smell* like a lovesick fool.”

He lunged harder this time, jabbing her in the side, and she gave an affronted yip. “Sorry.”

“Touch a nerve, did I? That’s the problem with your race. You let your hearts run away with you, and you don’t pay attention. Then you do stupid things.”

“Protecting my country isn’t stupid,” he panted, leaping away from her attack.

“May it bring you much happiness,” she shot back.

“I hadn’t figured you for a romantic,” Ed said, only half taunting.

“Don’t get used to it, human. I might have been once, but I’m all teeth now.” With a wolfish grin, she jumped at him and caught the wooden sword in her jaws. The practice blade snapped in two. “Ha! You owe me a nice, fat leg of lamb.”

When they finished sparring, Edmund waved her off and headed back to his chambers for a hot bath. He still disliked letting servants do mundane tasks for him, but he drew the line at dismissing his chamber servant. Hot water was

one of the few luxuries of England that he truly missed. And baths were the only time he was left alone anymore.

Nalis knew his mind, knew how Edmund felt about Asha, but he and the others in Ed's council of advisors had stressed the growing problem with Telmar. The Telmarines had grown bolder in the two years since the Pevensies vanished, raiding Narnia's outlying lands and moving inward.

It was Oreius who had suggested the match with the Telmarine girl. Her relation to Telmar's royalty would assure Narnia's safety from attack. Oreius, ever the patriot, wanted only to make certain of Narnia's solidity.

Ed wanted that too, but he wished it wouldn't cost him ... what it was costing him.

He sank into the water and let it wash over his head. He had already sent a griffin to Telmar with his offer of marriage. What would have happened if he'd chosen to stay in Selbaran? To forgive Asha everything as soon as he saw her?

Why did he have to be such a stubborn fool?

He stayed in the bath until it got cold, then he got out and dressed for dinner. Meals and social engagements were less elaborate than they had been under Susan's watch. He missed the joyful air that had always accompanied a Narnian gala. His sisters had taken it with them when they left.

Edmund fought a pang of loneliness. His brother and sisters were so far away. He'd combed every book of magic in the library and consulted anyone he thought might have an answer on bringing his family back to Narnia. Would he ever see them again? What would Peter think of his decision to marry a Telmarine? Ed had always been able to go to his brother for advice. Except now, when he needed it most.

Birch And Flower

She was stunning. The Telmarine girl had long, glossy dark hair, olive skin, and the daintiest features Asha had ever seen. She looked young, perhaps four or five years younger than Edmund. She walked to Edmund's throne with her eyes demurely downcast, and all the Narnians and visitors gathered in the great hall murmured with appreciation at her splendid dress and graceful carriage. A bevy of men and women had accompanied her to Narnia. Some of them had brought chests, which they carried behind the girl—no doubt her impressive dowry, judging by the number and the way the carriers strained under the weight. Asha wondered if Edmund would be bothered by the notion that Telmar had bought him a bride, and then realized she already knew the answer.

He would hate it as much as Asha did.

She stood back against a marble column, beside a dryad appointed as her lady in waiting during her stay at Cair Paravel. Her station would have afforded her a seat closer to the throne—and a better view—but she chose to remain standing. The courtiers and visiting emissaries from other lands were growing bolder in their plays for her attention—particularly the men—and she'd make a faster escape if she weren't seated. That was, if she could tear herself away from the scene before her.

Leina stood beside her. She and the wolf had become friends since their meeting, and Asha saw why Edmund liked her. The wolf's prickly exterior disguised a warm and loyal heart. "You sure you want to watch this?" the wolf muttered, so low that only Asha could hear. "He's about to make the dumbest mistake I've ever seen a human make."

Asha said nothing. She didn't trust herself to speak.

The man walking ahead of the girl stopped at Edmund's throne and bowed. "Greetings from Telmar, King Edmund of Narnia. I present to you the flower of Tolyndar, the Marchioness Corisande."

The girl stepped forward and gave a low, artful curtsy, but she kept her eyes downcast.

With a sympathetic smile, Edmund leaned slightly forward on his throne and angled his head lower to catch her eye. "Welcome to Narnia, my lady. I hope your journey was pleasant."

“Yes, sire. Thank you,” the girl said. Even Asha’s sensitive ears had to strain to pick up the girl’s voice. Corisande looked up at him then, and her cheeks took on a pinkish hue before she looked back to the floor.

Edmund stood and called for music. Someone began to play a lute. Gazes turned to the platters of fruit carried into the hall, and Asha realized that Edmund had diverted their attention away from the shy girl on purpose.

Even bruised, her heart warmed.

She didn’t want to feel warmth. She wanted to hate him for turning away their second chance, but she knew it would never happen. He was doing what he thought he must, as he always had, and she loved him still in spite of herself.

So she avoided him, avoided that moment when he would surely have to present her to his future wife. She chatted with the dryads, naiads and fauns about Selbaran. Visiting dignitaries from other nations approached her with offerings of fruit and drink, but she politely denied them all. Good work could be done here, relationships made with other countries that would help improve trading and talks with Selbaran.

In the midst of a discussion on Selbaran’s fruit trees, someone cleared his throat behind her. The fauns and bears listening to her bowed at once, but Asha needed no clue to know that it was Edmund. She pasted a polite smile on her face and stepped back to open the circle of her listeners.

Edmund gave a brief bow. He wore the serene mask of a royal, but she knew by his eyes that he’d rather fight giants than make this introduction. “Your Majesty, may I present Corisande, the Marchioness of Tolyndar. Marchioness, I’d like you to meet Queen Asha Faywater of Selbaran.”

Asha’s ears alone could pick out the way his voice wrapped around her name. She heard the discomfort, the apology, the way he wished he didn’t have to do this. She tried not to look in his eyes, for fear she’d give herself away. Instead she nodded to the girl. “My lady Marchioness. It is a great pleasure to meet you. I have been admiring your dress since your arrival.”

The girl pinkened as she curtsied. “The pleasure is mine, Your Majesty. The king has told me of your country. He says it is beautiful.”

Asha smiled, surprised that the girl had the courage to speak so many words at once. Dear dogwoods, the poor thing was near to trembling. “You must be tired, Marchioness. Travel is difficult even at its smoothest. Amelan,” she said to her lady in waiting, “perhaps you’d be willing to show the marchioness to my chambers to take her ease?”

Corisande looked grateful. Asha was familiar with talking animals, and

certainly with tree and river spirits, but the whirl and color of the Narnian creatures crowded into the great hall had once startled even her.

When Amelan led the girl away, Edmund nodded toward a balcony and offered his elbow. Perfectly acceptable behavior, but as Asha laid her hand lightly on his arm, she could not resist curling her fingers into the velvet of his doublet sleeve.

He felt the contact; the muscles of his arm stiffened under the fabric, though there was no other reaction. “That was kind of you,” he said when they were alone, looking out over the seashore.

“She is very sweet.” Asha drew as deep a breath as her lungs would hold. “I am trying, Edmund.”

His gaze flicked to the archway back into the hall, as if to assure himself they were alone. Her turned his back to the doorway. When his gaze returned to her, he was there—not the duty-bound king, but the man. His chestnut-bark eyes blazed with anguish. “Asha, please take a ship home. I don’t want you to see me do this.”

She forced a smile past the stab of that look in his eyes. “I’m fine if you are,” she said in as light a voice as she could summon.

He hesitated before laying a hand on her sleeve, as if he weren’t certain it was safe to touch her. “I’m begging you, Asha.”

Oh, how she wanted to lean into him, to absorb that touch and let it fill all the empty spaces within her. But she straightened her spine and lowered her arm, letting his hand fall away. “I can and will endure this,” she said, and she was proud of the way her voice didn’t tremble. “And so will you.”

Truth Among Kings

Among the Narnians, Edmund missed Phillip most of all. His old friend had passed on in his absence, but left behind a son from his marriage with Hrura. Barton looked much like his sire, so much that Ed teased him that he was really his father in disguise.

The young horse had come to court as soon as he learned of Edmund's return, to pledge his loyalty and offer to take his father's place as Edmund's battle charger, should the need arise. But what Edmund really needed, and what Barton was glad to provide, was an escape from the castle.

They rode southwest, with Leina running in front and a pair of leopards behind. The leopards were there ostensibly as an honor guard, but Ed suspected they were afraid to let him out of their sight, lest they lose a ruler again.

They slowed to a walk after a while. Ed soaked in the sunshine and let the sweet air soothe his nerves. "This is good," he said at last. "We might stay here the whole day, and I won't tire of it."

"I've no problem with that," Barton agreed. He lowered his muzzle to pick at the long grass.

Ed slid off the horse's back and walked beside him. "Phillip and I rode the length and breadth of Narnia together. He was a tribute to his kind."

"I've heard the stories," said Barton. He gave a snort of humor. "I could never tell how much was true, and how much my mother exaggerated."

They emerged from a copse of trees to a gently sloping hill. At the top were a stone arch and a broken platform.

Edmund froze. Very soberly, he said, "They're all true."

Leina trotted back to them. "All right, you layabouts, what's the delay?" Seeing Edmund, then seeing where his gaze went, she flicked her ears back. To Barton and the leopards, she said, "Can't you blockheads realize when someone ought to have some breathing space? Away with you, before I bite your ears off one by one." She snapped at their heels as the lot of them moved away.

Edmund gave her a grateful smile. Leina snorted and followed the rest of the animals away into the trees.

Ed walked up the hill to the Stone Table and stared at it for a long time,

noticing the worn runes etched along its perimeter, the way the rain had pitted the stone. He knelt beside it—it seemed too shameful a thing to sit on it—and touched one of the runes. Gradually he realized he was shaking. He spread his hands on the table and listened to the wind whistle through the stone arch.

A storm of emotions welled up in this throat. Knifing doubt filled him, and tears burned at his eyes. How ever could he support his country when he could barely stand on his own two feet?

And then loneliness. Peter. Susan. Lucy. Asha. And Aslan, who had died right here on this table. For him. Edmund shook harder, powerless to stop it. He hid his head in his folded arms and gave a wrenching moan of pain. “Aslan, oh Aslan, I’m so sorry.” Sobs wracked his body, sapping all the strength out of him until all he could do was press his forehead against the cold stone and cry.

Gravel ground into his knees. Tears streamed hotly down his cheeks and into his sleeves. He wanted to curl up into himself and disappear.

Something warm and coarse brushed against his ear. Still trembling, he raised his head to find the Lion himself pressing his face against Edmund’s cheek. Edmund’s heart gave an agonizing squeeze. He wrapped his arms around the Lion’s neck and buried his face in Aslan’s mane.

“I forgive you, Son of Adam,” Aslan said softly. The Lion pressed his great head against Edmund’s chest and stayed there, letting Edmund pour himself out.

Drained at last, Edmund sat back and brushed the rest of his tears away. But he found he could look Aslan in the eye now, where he never could before.

The Lion gave him a smile, then breathed on him, and Edmund felt the ragged edges of his heart begin to mend. “Welcome back, Edmund.”

“Why did you call me?” he asked hoarsely.

“I didn’t,” Aslan said. “You came.”

“How could I?”

“The silver leaf you carry was only a token until you made it more than that,” Aslan said. “You filled it with your love. Love of Narnia, and love of the one who gave it to you. There is no deeper Magic.”

“Why only me? Why not my brother and sisters?” Edmund tried hard not to resort to pleading with him. “Can’t you call them? This is our home.”

“Even I am subject to a greater will,” Aslan said. “They will come only if it is meant to be so.”

“Why did you send us away in the first place?” Here, Ed couldn’t resist a sharp tone.

The Lion gave a soft growl, and Ed ducked his head in apology. “England needed you as much as Narnia does,” said Aslan. “Narnia has touched you, and you in turn brought some of Narnia to your own world by returning there.”

Edmund stood up. “I have to find a way to bring them back. We belong here.”

“It will take a great deal of magic to return all three, and the Deep Magic as well.”

“I’ll find a way,” Ed insisted.

Aslan merely smiled. “Be well, Son of Adam.”

Edmund said goodbye to the Lion, and found that while he was still troubled, he was able to bear it just a little more.

Smoke And Subtlety

The thin man made certain his door was securely closed before he pulled the mirrored bowl from his trunk. He struck a flint and lit a fire in the bowl. The red soot in its bottom caught flame and smoked with the scent of sandalwood. And out of the smoke, a voice whispered.

“Have you arrived in Narnia?”

“Yes, my lord,” said the man. “I’ve been here these seven days.”

“And is she there as well?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Humorless chuckling issued from the smoke. “Predictable. It is time. You know what to do. And do not let her flee, or I’ll add your life to the tally.”

“Yes, my lord.” Shaking, the thin man put out the flame and pushed the bowl away into its trunk. He readied his tools with a grim purpose. He would not for all the world cross Heren.

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Asha laid her few possessions in her trunk. She wondered what Corisande had thought about her sparse bedchamber, whether the girl were accustomed to more lavish living.

She couldn’t dislike the girl, no matter how she tried. The poor thing was probably bewildered and frightened about traveling so far to marry a man she’d never met. It was done, and done often, among royalty, but Asha felt certain that the shock would be the same no matter how common the practice.

“Amelan, please prepare this trunk for travel. Tomorrow—” After the wedding, after her heart was broken forever. “—we will leave for Archenland. It’s time I visited King Lune.”

“Yes, my lady.” The Narnian dryad curtsied and hurried about the room.

Asha left her chambers to fetch her bow from the archery range. She’d practiced a bit yesterday. It felt good to hold the bow in her hands, to surrender to the rhythmic *thrum-whack* of arrows finding their target.

She found her bow hanging in a cupboard beside the range. When she turned, she was startled to find Corisande there. She wore an expression of shy

determination. “Your Majesty,” she said with a curtsy.

“Good afternoon, Marchioness.” Asha nodded.

“I need your advice. Will you walk with me?”

“Of course.” They left the archery range. Corisande seemed to be leading them somewhere, and Asha wondered what could have put the look of distress on the girl’s face. “What troubles you?”

They entered a small room that led to another. “Only ... There are so few women in the castle of higher stations, Your Majesty. I have no wish to look—out of place—tomorrow among the king’s people.” She pushed open the inner door to reveal a well-lit room with several human-shaped dress dummies in various states of costume. One bore a long dress of the finest pale-blue silk. “Can you advise me on my dress? The tailor insists the veil is right, but I’m so unused to the customs of Narnia. And your clothing is so ... elegant ... I thought ...”

Asha smiled past the surprise and pain. “I wear a dress that’s common to my people in Selbaran. It’s not even noble.” She pressed on through the look of astonishment on the girl’s face. “Might I suggest you wear it in the Telmarine style? You ought to wear your country’s customs with pride.” Asha lifted the unfinished veil from the dummy and held it up to Corisande. “Your hair is lovely. If you pin the veil like this, perhaps—”

The girl’s cheeks went rosy. “I’m sorry,” she blurted.

Asha lowered the veil. “Whatever for?”

Corisande wouldn’t meet her gaze. Her cheeks colored even further. “I’ve seen how he looks at you.”

A tremor ran through Asha’s body. She managed to avoid dropping the veil, and laid it carefully back on the dress dummy. When she spoke, her own honesty startled her. “Part of being a noble means you aren’t necessarily free to marry whom you will.” A sobering thought occurred to her. “Did you have someone back home?”

“No, Your Highness. It was only my father and younger sister.”

Asha laid a hand on the girl’s arm. “You will find Narnia warm and welcoming, my lady, if you give it time.”

Corisande gave her the tiniest of smiles, and Asha felt herself returning it freely. Laying aside her bow, Asha moved about the room to study the other clothing. She stopped before a dark-blue doublet threaded with gold. Edmund’s wedding attire.

Corisande absorbed herself in studying her veil, but Asha wasn’t fooled. The girl recognized a need for privacy.

Asha ran her fingers along the neat seams of the doublet collar. The tailor must have spent great time and expense on that gold thread. She stroked the row of buttons along the front. Tears pricked at her eyes, and she pulled her hand away to wipe them.

And stopped.

She sniffed her fingers, and dread blossomed in her stomach. A dryad's sense of smell was never mistaken.

Poison.

Whirling, she cried, "Where is Edmund?"

Corisande paled. "I don't know, Your Majesty. What is wrong?"

Asha snatched her bow. "Oh, spirits of the forest. Corisande, run! Find Nalis and Oreius, and tell them to close the castle gates!" She fled the room with her heart in her throat.

Don't Go

“Are you sure this is necessary ... again?” Edmund held out his arm while the tailor bustled around him with a knotted string, taking measurements.

“You don’t want to look poorly fitted, sire. And my reputation is at stake.” The thin, jumpy little man gave a disturbing smile, as if he thought this one doublet pattern would make or break his career.

Edmund tried to rein in his impatience. After all, the man had traveled far and wide fitting other nobles, and he was probably right. Ed shifted, and the broadcloth on his arm slipped. “I thought you’d finished the sleeves, Master Tailor.”

“A few more measurements, sire. There, just an adjustment to the shoulder.” He withdrew a threaded needle from a small wooden case and poised it carefully, then rounded Edmund’s back. “And now the collar.”

The needle jabbed Edmund in the back of the neck. “Ouch!”

“Oh, my apologies, Your Majesty. You’re bleeding a bit. Let me fetch a damp cloth.” The tailor gave a swift bow and retreated from the room.

Ed rubbed the back of his neck and came away with a drop of blood on his fingertips. Grimacing, he pulled the broadcloth pattern off his arm and let it flutter onto his writing desk. He touched the carved box resting there, running his fingers along the intricate leaf pattern bordering its edges. Flipping the brass latch, he opened the box and touched the yellowing letters within. Asha’s. It still amazed him that the Narnians had left his bedchamber untouched since he and his siblings disappeared.

He stalked the room. For the love of Aslan, where had the jittery man gone?

He noticed nothing out of the ordinary until he began to sweat. When he turned, the room swayed and blurred. *Stress*, he thought, *and no wonder*. People running to and fro the past few days. Everyone flighty, himself included. He blinked and tried to shake off the stupor, but it wouldn’t fade.

He heard running feet in the corridor outside as he turned back toward his bed. His chamber door slammed open. He saw a tall figure with pale hair, but couldn’t make out who it was.

Edmund reached for the bed to sit, but crashed into the writing desk

and fell when he found his knees unable to hold him. The wooden box slammed to the floor, spewing papers everywhere.

“Edmund!”

Asha. He wanted to respond, but he couldn’t find his voice. His heartbeat boomed in his ears as he tried to get to his feet. His skin felt like it was on fire.

There was a clatter of something wooden against the floor. Cool hands pulled his head into a soft lap. “Oh, Edmund, no. Please, please. Don’t go again, I can’t take it ...”

He tried to ask what she was so worried about. All he needed was a little rest. He closed his eyes, blotting out the blurred images that didn’t make sense anyway.

“Edmund, please! Stay awake!”

She was crying now, but he could do nothing. The fire racing over his skin had turned inward, burning a path into his bones. The first unbearable seizure of his muscles shot through his body and tore a scream from his lips.

Still crying, she pulled him to his feet—how, he didn’t know, he remembered her being such a slight thing next to him. He staggered against her and she brought him to the bed, where he collapsed with another scream.

She was gone for a moment. She heard the slam of his chamber door and the heavy metallic *thunk* of the deadbolt.

Rustling. He caught a muddled glimpse of green eyes as she brought a hand behind his head and lifted his face to hers—*please don’t cry, Asha*—and then she pressed a bottle of something shining white to his lips. “Drink this. Quickly, drink it,” she begged.

She gave him no choice. He choked down the cool liquid just as another seizure ripped through him. He screamed again.

There was a crash of glass on the floor, and she brought another bottle to his lips. “Another.”

He tried to turn his head away, struggling against the teeth-grinding shudders now pouring through him. She pressed her cool hand to his burning face, sobbing. “Please, my love, please.”

He drank it, and none too soon. Another screaming seizure. His back arched with it, and only her weight on top of him kept him on the bed. She jammed one knee into his chest, pinning him there, and tore open the neck of his shirt to press her palm against his blazing skin. Even against the fire raging within him, her fingers went white-hot.

He heard a hiss and rush, and the smell of a nighttime forest surrounded

him. He smelled the mist, clean and cool, the only thing besides Asha's crying that was clear against the madness hammering at his body and mind. Between her tears, Asha spoke.

"Oak. Ash. Pine. Fir. Beech. Birch. Alder," she cried. Desperation filled her hoarse voice.

Someone pounded at the door. "Your Majesty?" Nalis. The seizures started again, and Edmund couldn't answer. It took all his strength not to scream.

"My lady Asha!" He recognized Amelan's voice, high with alarm. "No! You'll kill yourself!" The pounding came louder, more insistent, and then someone was slamming against the door.

Asha went on speaking, running off the names of a dozen other trees. Seizures wracked him again. The mist clung wetly to his skin, almost suffocating. Asha's hand burned against his chest. He thrashed, but she ground him into the bed with her knee.

"My skin, to thee. My bone, to thee. My muscle, my heart, my blood, my breath. My magic. Draw in. I bind to thee." She recoiled with a moan, but her hand never left his chest.

The mist rushed against his skin, seemed to surge into his chest through her fingers, icy against the blazing pain in his body. Edmund gave another scream. Asha moaned and shuddered, but stayed with him. Dimly he heard wood splintering, then something crashed.

The mist washed through him, putting out the flames in his muscle and bone. His head spun until he squeezed his eyes shut, and only sound was left to him. And then everything rushed back out of him again into her hand.

Asha cried out. Her fingers clawed convulsively at his chest, and he felt her fall away just as blackness slammed down over him.

Sousbound

He heard the voices before he saw anything, and even then, his ears felt stuffed with wool.

“She saved his life,” said a deep male voice.

“But water from the Well of Opals, into a human body?” A female, distressed. “And *binding* to him? She could have killed him as easily as saved him. He’s not of magic.”

“Wasn’t,” said the male, quieter now. “Not of it, but touched by it. Perhaps that helped save him.”

“He may die anyway!” cried the female. “She’s done nothing but rob us of our king again.”

There was the stamp of a hoof against stone, and only then did Edmund realize the male voice belonged to Nalis.

“Both of you shut up,” growled an impatient third voice. “If you weren’t so busy arguing, you’d have heard his breathing change. He’s awake.”

Leina. Edmund’s lips curled into a weak smile. He forced open his heavy eyelids.

A broad, furry face with yellow eyes hovered beside him. Leina cocked her head. “Welcome back, human. Nice to see your feathers haven’t been plucked yet.”

“Squawk, squawk,” Ed whispered. His throat felt like he’d swallowed sand.

“Water,” Leina said.

Nalis turned to a nearby table for a pitcher and goblet. He helped lift Edmund’s shoulders so that Ed could drink.

Edmund was startled to realize he was shivering. Chills ran through him, even though he saw several blankets on the bed.

“Aftereffects of the poison,” said Leina. “You’ll be stronger soon.” She cast the dryad a yellow-eyed glare, then turned her attention back to Edmund. “And you’ll be glad to know the tailor never made it past the castle gates.” She clicked her teeth together.

Ed drank down a full goblet of water, and then another, before he was able to speak with some shadow of his normal voice. “I count myself lucky to have run into you in Selbaran, Leina.”

Her ears swept back, as he knew they would. “Save your poetry, and worry about getting well. You’ve been in and out of consciousness for four days.”

“What about Asha?”

No one spoke. Nalis busied himself returning the pitcher and goblet to their table. The Narnian dryad hung back in the corner, looking uncomfortable. Even Leina’s ears drooped, and that scared Edmund worst of all. He struggled up onto his elbow. “Leina. Nalis. Out ... please.”

The wolf and the centaur looked at each other, and then the dryad, who seemed to shrink together. They retreated, though, and closed the door behind them.

It took a while for Edmund to gather the strength to sit up. He wore a long, loose shirt. He avoided turning the blankets back, not only because his teeth were chattering, but because he wasn’t certain whether they’d dressed him in anything else. No need to scare the poor dryad—she was already cowering. “What is your name?”

“Meleyen, sire. Younger sister to Amelan.”

“What did you mean? About me dying?” At her hesitation, he added, “I’m not angry with you. I’d like you to explain.”

The dryad came away from the corner at last, but she looked no more comfortable. “Queen Asha ... She bound herself to you—her life force, the thing that makes a dryad a dryad—hoping to save you. In doing so, she took some of yours in return.” Meleyen paused. “It’s done only by dryads, Your Majesty, and even then only rarely, because from then on, the two are bound together by pain as well as by joy.”

A sinking sensation began somewhere in his middle and spread outward. The chills kept racing through him, a warning that he didn’t want to heed. “Go on,” he made himself say.

“She gave you water from the Well of Opals,” said Meleyen. “It’s not meant for humans. The magic is too strong, and she ... you almost ...” The dryad sank to her knees and laid her hands on the bedspread as if asking for forgiveness. “Your Majesty, Asha is dying.”

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In his long shirt, and now a pair of breeches—he hadn’t the strength to fuss with more—he made his way to Asha’s chamber, leaning heavily on a staff borrowed from one of the satyrs. It took him forever. He had to pause for

breath every few meters.

He was beginning to understand what Meleyen meant by saying Asha had bound herself to him. Some of the weakness in his muscles was not his own, but it debilitated him as if it were. The shaking—only partly his. And in spite of the shivering, a fine sweat covered his skin. *If she dies, will I?* Meleyen seemed to think so. She had said that soulbound dryads shared pain too. The way she spoke—the things she *didn't* say—indicated that included death.

And he sensed other things he hadn't before. If he listened hard enough, he could hear the squeaking of mice in the walls, and it sounded almost like a language. If he paid attention, he could smell food, though the kitchens were far away from this part of the castle. His stomach rumbled. How long since he'd eaten?

He arrived at Asha's door to find it open. A cool ocean breeze wafted into the hall. He stepped inside.

Corisande rose from a chair beside the bed as soon as he appeared. She curtsied, and he was surprised to see her meet his eye. "Your Majesty. I'm glad you're awake!"

"My lady. Forgive me." He hobbled forward on the staff, vaguely embarrassed to appear so weak before her, but she said nothing about it. She merely stepped aside and offered him the chair, which he took with a grateful nod.

Corisande dipped a cloth into a basin on the table by the bed. She wrung it out and laid it on Asha's forehead.

Once the motion brought Edmund's gaze to Asha, it stayed there. She was pale, her veins standing out green against her skin. Her hair had lost some of its length and silver luster. He remembered seeing her like that only once before, in the mountains of Ettinsmoor when she'd been near to starvation. "Narnian soil," he said.

"The moles have been bringing it by the hour and setting her hands in bowls of it," Corisande said. "She absorbs all of that and more. The dryads say that if she cannot rise and change, she may not make it." Corisande gave a worried frown. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I shouldn't have said anything."

"I appreciate honesty, Corisande." He laid a hand over hers. "One of the fauns told me it was your call for help that stopped the tailor from getting away. Thank you."

She paused and smiled. Edmund smiled back at the warmth in it. "You are welcome, Your Majesty," she said.

Corisande sat on the edge of the bed. She studied Asha, her dark eyes

soft with admiration. “She’s very brave, isn’t she?”

“I know of few who are braver,” Edmund said. “She has saved my life more than once.”

Still watching Asha, Corisande added, “I can see why you love her.”

His mouth dropped open, but he couldn’t find anything to say.

Corisande smiled at him again, and blushed. “It is hard to miss, Your Majesty.” She wrung out another cloth and patted it against Asha’s sweat-damp skin.

“Let me,” he said, and took it from her. “How long have you been here with her?”

“I don’t mind,” Corisande said. “She has been kind to me. Still, if Your Majesty would like, perhaps I’ll bring a tray of food?”

He started to say that a servant could fetch it, but the look on the girl’s face plainly said that the food was only an excuse. And he *was* hungry. Ravenously so. Would Asha get better if *he* gathered his strength? “Thank you, Marchioness.”

Corisande gave a last curtsy and left the room, shutting the door quietly behind her.

18

Vigil

He ate. He rested. He took air out in the orchard with Leina, Barton, and Corisande (Corisande, he discovered, had an intense liking for apples). Slowly, the weakness and chills that were Edmund's own receded, though the illness that tied to Asha's still lingered like a physical echo. He felt more like himself, but strangely altered. Now, if he thought about it closely enough, he could see and smell and hear much more sharply than he remembered.

"A lot like being a wolf. Except uglier," Leina sneered as they walked among the trees.

Edmund grinned and bit into an apple. It felt strange to grin, when Asha's fate was yet undecided. He only made himself leave her side because it might help her if he got stronger. Sometimes, late at night, the feverish chills came back to torment him, and he knew they were hers. Then, he would make his way to her bedside and simply hold her hand, waiting.

"I love the scent of the air here," Corisande said. "You are lucky to live on the sea."

He was lucky to *live*, he thought. He took the girl's arm. "Has your father written to you?"

"He is not happy that the wedding was postponed," Corisande admitted with a frown. "I told him he can hardly expect us to marry if you are not yet well." She angled her head and smiled sadly at him. "I wish there were a way to convince him that the marriage cannot happen, without creating problems between Telmar and Narnia."

Edmund sobered, but quickly covered it with another smile. "Let's not talk about that today." Today, he would simply hope.

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She sensed dryads coming and going at all hours, whenever she slid into consciousness. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Asha knew they were present because they were trying to combine their magic to help revive her. The air shifted against her skin with mist one hour, and a sun-washed warmth the next. They brought bowls of earth. Narnian earth, and its strength seeped into her body.

But there was another power too, more solid than those. A resolve and a will as unbending as oak, that trickled through her in increasing strength like rising sap in spring.

Edmund.

Relief so strong it hurt swept through her. She opened her eyes.

No one was in her room just now. She pushed herself upright, shaking but determined to get to her feet. After a moment of uncertainty, she struggled upright and tottered to the window. She drew the salty air into her lungs and let it wash away the stale feeling of illness.

With her relief came an expanding joy—not just to be alive, but that *he* was alive. Her desperate spell had worked. Not perfectly. Not the way her parents had once described it—that union of thought—but *something* had worked.

She closed her eyes and listened with her senses, with his. Sunshine. A mild summer breeze. The smell of apples. She summoned her strength and borrowed from his, then changed into a flurry of leaves and rushed out the window.

The moment she reached the orchard, she shifted into her birch form and dug deep into the soil. She shivered at the pleasure of being back in this shape, taking strength from the earth the way she ought. Several minutes passed where she did nothing more than soak in the sun and air and soil.

She sensed voices. She knew the others, but one stood out among them like a point of light. “Asha!” he cried.

Running now. She changed back to her human shape.

He didn’t even stop. Edmund’s arms opened and he collided with her, swinging her around with the happiest smile she’d ever seen on his face.

The others cheered around him. Asha laughed. Nothing else mattered at that moment. Not their stations, not their duties, not who they married. They were alive.

He wrapped her into a suffocating hug, and then set her on her feet. Leina hopped in front of him, her tail waving (possibly the most cheerful she’d ever seen the wolf). Asha bent to hug her as well, and then Barton.

Finally, Corisande approached. Asha gave her a proper (though kind) nod.

Corisande shook her head violently and hugged her instead. “Your Majesty! I sat with you every afternoon! I think I read every book in the library to you.”

Asha smiled. “I sensed you sometimes. Thank you, Marchioness.”

They walked together for a while, and it occurred to her that after Hrura had returned to Narnia to be with Phillip, Asha lived a lonely existence in Selbaran. Here, she had true friends.

Presently a pair of satyrs hurried up to them, wearing the armor of the castle guard. "Your Majesties," one said, and they both gave a quick bow.

The second satyr wore an expression of worry. He spoke to Edmund. "There is a Selbarani ship in the harbor. They've sent a messenger who demands Queen Asha's return. They insist we abducted her."

Serpent And Steel

Not one moment's peace. Not one moment's rest. Edmund fumed. He led the group back into the castle, angrily lamenting the loss of all the research he had planned to do that day. He went to the library daily, searching again among its magical texts for a way to bring his brother and sisters home. Whenever he studied, he set his birch leaf on the table before him like a silent motivation. If his will alone could have brought them back, it would have happened the moment he arrived ... but he would not give up.

He entered the great hall ahead of the others. The Narnians and guests in the hall bowed upon seeing him, and then murmured in surprise when they realized Asha was with him.

A large group of men stood near the dais. Oreius stood beside them. The centaur bowed when Edmund reached them. "Your Majesty—"

"Lord Heren," Asha broke in, surprise in her tone.

A man with short hair and an iron-grey beard turned around when she spoke. He didn't look pleased. His gaze shifted briefly to Edmund and went sharp as flint. He turned his attention back to Asha. "It is good to see you well, Your Majesty." He gave a short bow.

"We demand you release our sovereign," another man burst out.

Edmund gave him a hard stare, but it was Asha who spoke. "I came by my own choice."

"And you've tampered with her mind, too, no doubt," said Heren. "We've heard the stories of your Narnian witchery."

Edmund's hand went for a sword hilt that wasn't there, but he saw the men take his meaning. "Careful, my lord. The queen is right." From the corner of his eye, he saw Nalis, and gave him the smallest of nods. The big red centaur disappeared from the great hall.

Asha moved forward. Her gaze went to a pair of Selbarani dryads standing among the group, recognizable only by the finely-wrought tunics made of the same cloth as Asha's dress. One of the dryads looked from Asha to Edmund and back. His mouth opened. "My lady, what have you done?"

"What was necessary." She lifted her chin.

Heren glared at her. "What?" he demanded, all trace of respect for Asha gone from his voice.

When Asha refused to answer him, one of the Selbarani dryads spoke instead. "She's soulbound to him, my lord."

"Traitor," Heren hissed at Asha. "You aren't worthy of the crown of Selbaran. Narnia is nothing to us, and you insist on placing it before us."

Asha's voice rang out through the hall. "And this has nothing at all to do with you wanting the crown for yourself, Heren. Was it you who ordered him poisoned?"

A fierce murmur went through the onlookers, both Selbarani and Narnian. At that moment, Nalis returned to the hall, carrying Edmund's sword. He cantered toward them with a grim look.

Heren's eyes blazed. He drew a sword from the scabbard at his side.

Nalis threw Edmund his sword. Edmund snatched it from the air and ripped it from his scabbard. The blade clashed with Heren's as the man pointed it at Asha. Edmund fixed him with a steely glare. "Get. Out. Of my. Castle."

Heren snarled and dealt him a ferocious undercut that nearly knocked the blade from Edmund's hands. Edmund sprang back and parried Heren before he could strike Asha.

Narnians and Selbarani alike surged forward. "*Get back!*" Edmund roared. Even the Selbarani obeyed.

Corisande took Asha's hand, though Asha seemed determined not to leave Ed's side. "My lady, you are not well enough for this," Corisande whispered, and pulled Asha back against the wall. Leina stood her ground with her hackles raised. Barton flanked her with his ears pinned back.

Heren and Edmund circled one another, each glaring as if a look alone could kill the other. "You're one to talk of treachery," Edmund said. "You *smell* like a liar."

With a hideous chuckle, Heren stalked forward. "Soulbound to a dryad," he sneered. "How touching. I wonder." He jerked his chin at his men, and Edmund didn't see why because Heren leaped toward him at once. Their swords clashed again and screeched against one another.

Heren was heavier, though not as fast. Edmund found himself relying on the speed of his feet to stay ahead of the man's violent strikes. *Crash. Crash. Crash.* The ring of the blades was almost deafening.

Until Asha cried out, and at that instant Edmund felt a slash of pain in his side. He shouted in surprise and staggered. Heren struck again, and the tip of his blade sliced across Edmund's thigh. Pain swept through him, and he heard Asha cry out again. Ed swung back to avoid another blow and looked

for her. She struggled with one of the Selbarani men. Greenish blood stained the side of her dress, and she favored her leg as if that, too, had been hurt.

And then Edmund understood what it meant to be soulbound. “Leina!”

The wolf was already running. She leaped in front of Asha, snarling, and drove the Selbarani man back from her.

The Narnians yelled in outrage. The Selbarani spread out and drew their weapons, intent on defending Heren. Dear Lion, there were more of them than Edmund had thought. Everything fell into chaos.

Deep Magic

People were fighting and shouting around him, but Edmund's eyes were for Heren alone. When he found an opening, he bared his teeth and lunged at the man. His sword slashed over Heren's jerkin, cutting leather but not flesh.

Heren launched himself forward, and Edmund fought off another blinding volley of sword strikes. Panting, limping, he pressed back until he regained his space.

"Not so fast, now?" snarled Heren. "What a shame."

"If you kill me, you murder her," Edmund said. Rage burned through him. "Your country will hang you before they make you a king."

"My country doesn't believe in her power anymore. She's weak with her sympathy for you Narnian rabble." Heren raced up the dais to higher ground, and Edmund followed.

Heren leaped through a gap in the thrones. Ed flushed him out in front of Peter's throne. Growling, Heren swung the blade at him and Ed dodged. Heren's blade arced toward the back of Peter's throne, but Edmund blocked it before it could strike the marble.

Heren gave him a startled look, wondering, no doubt, why Edmund would defend a chair. Ed knew the man would never understand. He drove Heren back with a volley of swings and a forward leap that just missed the man's chest.

Heren stumbled backward down the dais steps. Edmund swung his blade in a circle, loosening his wrist. He stalked forward, but did not leave the dais. His side and his thigh burned with pain, and he felt Asha's pain too, a lesser torment but enough to make him lightheaded. "One more chance, Heren. Take your men and go."

"Don't you have the heart to fight?" Heren snarled. He charged up the steps again, and his sword thrust past Edmund's ear.

Ed leaned into the attack, turned his sword, and smashed the hilt into Heren's nose with a *crunch*.

Again the man staggered back down the steps. His nose bled freely, and his eyes filled with deadly menace. Ed paced, watching for the man's next move. In an instant Heren was on him again, pressing forward with his rage.

Crash-crash-crash. The bones of Edmund's arms echoed with the weight

of Heren's strike. He saw an opening and lunged. His sword slashed past the man's side and he heard Heren gasp. Edmund didn't wait. He surged forward down the steps, pushing Heren back, back, back.

Heren closed again, then swung low. Ed leaped and then stomped on Heren's blade. It smashed against the marble floor and Ed swung his sword, stopping just short of the man's neck. "Go."

"Coward," Heren snarled. His gaze shot to the side. Edmund saw the flash in the air just before Heren caught the sword his man had thrown him.

Ed ducked in time to avoid losing his head, but not fast enough to escape a slice in his side. He bit off a cry of pain. His head began to swim. *Asha*. He recognized her hovering on the edge of consciousness, weak with pain, lingering illness, and loss of blood.

Heren charged at him again, and this time Edmund was too slow. The man crashed against him. Ed flew off his feet and slammed to the ground. He rolled onto his side in time to avoid one jab, but the blade swept down toward his neck and he had no room to block it.

Another sword flashed down, blocking the strike across Edmund's body. Panting with pain, Edmund looked up to the man standing over him.

Peter.

Edmund had no time to stare. He rolled to his feet and lunged at Heren again. His brother volleyed with him, protecting Ed's weak side. The two pushed Heren back into the center of the great hall. Edmund caught sight of Susan with her bow. Lucy with a quarterstaff. His family closed in around him, warding off the Selbarani now attacking from all sides.

The roar of Narnians filled the hall, and some of the Selbarani seemed to lose their courage. Edmund let the roar surge up in his own throat to join the deafening cry of the others. With renewed strength, he charged at Heren.

The man's eyes filled with terror. He shuddered and dropped to his knees. His sword clattered to the ground.

Edmund lunged and stopped short of Heren's face with the tip of his sword. Gasping with exertion, he said, "Call them off."

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The Narnians were still cheering when Heren's men surrendered their weapons. Edmund stood in the midst of the activity, still gasping.

He turned around to find Peter staring at him as surely as he must have been staring at Peter. Panting, his brother lowered Rhindon to his side. Then

Peter grinned and sprang forward.

Edmund caught his brother in a bone-crunching hug.

With a laugh, Peter swept a hand through Ed's hair, then stood back.

"Can't stay out of trouble, can you?"

Ed grinned back.

Like Arrows

Edmund limped back to Asha, Leina, and Corisande. His arm ached too much to hold his sword upright anymore and the tip dragged across the marble floor.

His sisters ran to him, smashing against him in a hug that stole his breath. Ed dropped his sword and closed his eyes, putting his arms around his sisters and holding them tight.

When he opened his eyes, he found Asha smiling tearfully at him over his sisters' shoulders.

The girls stepped back, beaming. "Edmund, that was the most amazing thing I've ever seen!" Lucy cried. "How long have you *been* back in Narnia?"

Two months? Three? More? Edmund had forgotten.

"How did *we* get back?" Susan wondered.

"That was Edmund's doing," Asha said softly.

A group of Narnian dryads approached, and then there was too much activity for him to ask what she meant because the dryads were healing her. He felt the sting in his side fade where Heren's man had cut her.

When they turned to him, he gave a start, but a pair of them linked hands over his wounds. They, too, stopped bleeding and knitted together.

"How ...?" Susan started to ask.

Struggling for the words, Edmund related everything that had happened to him since his return. His siblings' eyes went rounder and rounder. Finally, when he spoke of his betrothal to Corisande, Peter's gaze shifted to the Telmarine girl in disbelief.

Corisande went pink and her gaze fell at once to the floor. She looked like she might faint from lack of breath as she gave a shaky curtsy. "Y-Your Majesty," she said in barely a whisper.

Peter nodded. Then his gaze went back to Edmund, who stood less than two meters from Asha's side and felt it must be acres. Asha explained that he carried a part of her magic now, and that made him susceptible to dryad magic.

"Was that what brought us back?" Lucy wondered.

"That," said Nalis, walking toward them, "and the Deep Magic." He looked to Edmund. "I saw you defend the High King's throne, sire, even when he was not here." He bowed, and when Oreius approached to stand beside

him, Oreius bowed as well. "I have never seen such an act of love and honor," said Nalis.

Oreius had never looked so glad as when he embraced Peter. "Welcome back, my king. The stars changed last night, but I was afraid to hope." He drew away with his hands on Peter's shoulders. "I feel a new age has begun."

Edmund and his brother and sisters made their way to the dais. The Narnians had crowded before it, smiling and eager. When he and his siblings sat on their thrones, the stained glass windows of the great hall shook with the roar of Narnian voices.

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Peter walked beside Edmund along the beach. "Why would you do such a thing, Ed?"

"There wasn't exactly anyone else to stop them from invading Narnia. Marriage was the only thing I could think of to prevent it."

They heard voices ahead, and he saw Asha, Corisande, and his sisters chasing one another along the sand. Peter stared ahead, his gaze on Asha as she spun and raced after Susan, laughing. "I thought you loved her."

Edmund followed Asha with his eyes. He could sense the smile in her heart, the feeling of friendship as she sprinted after his sisters. "I do. More than I knew, brother."

Peter scoffed. "Let me deal with Telmar."

Edmund stopped dead, staring at him.

Seeming to realize Ed was not with him any longer, Peter halted and turned back. "You heard me."

Someone cleared his throat behind them. They turned around.

Aslan stood on the shore. "It is good to see you again, Peter. Your return has saved Narnia once again." He gave Peter an affectionate smile.

Peter and Edmund knelt before the Lion.

"Rise, Edmund. I believe there is a box waiting for you by the laurel tree." Aslan nodded toward the end of the beach where the women were.

Edmund went where the Lion directed. Aslan stayed behind to speak with Peter. When he reached the laurel tree, Ed saw the carved box that had held Asha's letters at the base of the tree. Wondering how it had gotten there, he bent and opened it.

Inside lay a carved wooden ring. Edmund scooped it up and ran to Asha.

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Corisande had been happy to release Edmund from his vows. Peter assured him that Telmar wouldn't dare attack Narnia with its kings and queens returned to their thrones, and he'd begun a long series of letters back and forth with Corisande's family and the Telmarine nobles.

Now, Corisande stood in a forest clearing beside his sisters and Leina, watching him with a smile on her face. She spoke freely with him, and with his sisters and Asha also, though privately Ed thought Peter still scared the poor girl out of her skin.

Peter stood on the other side of the clearing with Nalis and Oreius. A mass of Narnians (and many Selbarani who had remained loyal to Asha) had crowded into the remaining space. Far off, he heard the rush of the sea. The trees bordering the clearing rained flower petals down around them, but as soon as the crowd parted for her, Edmund had eyes only for Asha.

When she took his hands, he felt as if he'd been waiting his whole life for this one moment. Everything faded out as he stared into her eyes. He was vaguely aware of someone speaking the words that would make her his, but he didn't need them. They had belonged to one another for years.

He slid the wooden ring onto her finger and closed his hand over hers. When the dryad elder who married them asked him to kiss her at last, Ed touched her face and stared at her. She smiled back. He knew she sensed everything in his heart, just as he knew the fierce joy in hers.

"Your Majesty ... Majesties?" the elder dryad said uncertainly.

And then, Ed couldn't wait another moment. He took her face in both hands and kissed her. He barely heard the cheer that rose from the spectators. It didn't matter. Nothing else mattered. He had Asha. He had his family. And he was home.

~ *The End* ~