

The Chronicles of Narnia

To Be Just

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

Edmund's always been my favorite character of the series. I felt there was a lot that C.S. Lewis didn't explore with him, that Lion was more about Ed's journey than that of any other Pevensie. This story is respectfully dedicated to those of you who, like me, admire Edmund for what he overcame to become a King of Narnia: himself.

Happy Reading, *Caleon*

If you're interested in rounding out your reading of To Be Just, 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.

To Be Just

Soundtrack

1. Procession of Sages and Warriors - *Cantiga*
2. The Amulet - *Cantiga*
3. The King's Quest - *Cantiga*
4. From Western Woods to Beaversdam - *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*
5. Journey to the How - *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*
6. The Kings and Queens of Old - *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*
7. The Battle - *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*
8. Sorcery and Sudden Vengeance - *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*
9. Only the Beginning of the Adventure - *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*
10. The Kiss - *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*
11. What About Now - *Daughtry*

Masquerade

How did I manage to fool everyone?

The numbness of Edmund's reaction to the coronation had begun to fade, and the crown sat heavy on his brow. He stared across the dais at his brother and sisters, schooling his expression so that none of his confusion would show. They all smiled at their subjects, nodded graciously, wore regal looks that didn't seem silly on children's faces.

They deserved it.

Peter caught his eye and grinned. Edmund flashed his teeth in response, trying to shrug off his brooding thoughts. He ought to be enjoying this. King of Narnia. Just as he'd wanted, just as *she* had once promised him, though it hadn't happened by her hand.

Someone called for a dance, and the floor cleared to make way for it. Aslan stood nearby, watching. Even now, Edmund wanted to cringe before that solemn golden stare. Aslan's eyes seemed to pierce right down inside him and ferret out every little doubt, every worry, every wrong decision Edmund had ever made. Not judging, no. Even when he'd spoken to Edmund after his rescue, the great Lion didn't scold or condemn. But every word crashed through Edmund's head like a hammer blow, reminding him that without the courage of his brother and sisters, without the strength of Aslan's army, without the love of a family who should have gotten better in return, he might not be here today.

King of Narnia.

"Come on, Ed. On your feet," Peter whispered. "They're starting to stare."

Edmund realized that the others had gotten up and made their way to the floor at the foot of the dais. He sprang up, brushing his robe back. "What do they expect us to do? I don't know any Narnian dances."

"I don't think they'll mind," Peter said.

"Oh, look!" said Susan.

Into the great hall swept a line of dancers, male and female. Fauns, satyrs, dwarfs, all manner of Narnian creature, in a dizzying swirl of color and laughter. Lucy giggled and snatched Peter's hand, and the two went spinning onto the floor in something resembling a waltz. Susan accepted Tumnus's hand and joined them.

Edmund hung back, pretending to be interested in a fruit platter on the feast table. When a centaur approached to congratulate him, he accepted the goodwill with a broad smile that he didn't actually feel.

He found his gaze wandering back to Peter and Lucy. They danced round and round, circling in and out of a group of satyrs and laughing aloud at their clumsiness. No one seemed to care whether the King and Queen's steps were exact. A few meters away, Susan curtsied to Tumnus.

Edmund reached a furtive hand up to the clasp of his robe, wanting to pull it off. His family thought all had been forgiven and done with. And maybe it was, for them. But Edmund knew the hardest task lay before him yet. Breaking the White Witch's wand hadn't been heroic. It was a moment of pure panic, pure instinct to strike at her most powerful weapon. Pure luck that he'd destroyed it.

Heroes didn't panic. They *chose* to act.

Edmund slipped out of the great hall through a doorway at the side, noticing as he did so that Aslan was slipping out an opposite door.

Maybe a king needed to be alone sometimes. Even one as powerful as Aslan.

An Unpleasant Reminder

The years since Coronation Day flew by for most of the Pevensies, full of raids and routs of the last of the White Witch's army, and of visits of state and grand balls and this or that thing. As High King, Peter handled most of the battle plans, with input here and there from Edmund. But most of the time, Edmund was called upon for his counsel. He was good at it. He always made the wisest decision. Narnians in need of the best advice came to him, because he thought before he spoke.

Would he never stop trying to undo the harm he'd done as a boy?

Edmund sighed and ran his hand over the stone of his bedroom balcony. It looked out over the sea, the sea that he'd heard in his sleep for five years, and he still didn't quite believe he belonged at Cair Paravel.

Today was the Coronation Day anniversary feast. At this moment, castle staff were preparing dishes of the most succulent Narnian foods. Distant countries had even sent offerings of exotic fruits and spices, sharing in the festivities by showing their alliance. Faun Tumnus had arrived to recrown the Kings and Queens in ceremonial celebration.

Just one more reminder of how much I didn't earn this.

Edmund turned from the balcony and pulled his robe from the foot of his bed. He'd never gotten used to servants fussing with his clothes and helping him with tasks he could do himself. In light of the upcoming feast, staff seemed to have doubled overnight. In all his seventeen years, he'd never seen so many people crowded into one building.

Peter met him in the hall, already dressed for the throne room. "Ready, Ed?"

"As I'll ever be." Ed buckled his robe.

"Did you see the Archenlanders sent an embassy?" Peter grinned. "Did you see the girl, the singer who came with them?"

"No."

"Now *there's* a voice I could get used to. She sang a bit when they arrived. You must have been in council."

Actually, Edmund had been walking in the apple grove with his friend Phillip, the talking horse. About the only being in Narnia who had an inkling of his troubles. Ed forced a smile. "Looking for a Queen to rule with? The castle's already full, don't you think?"

“There’s no harm *looking*.” Peter chuckled and clapped Ed on the back. “Come on. Let’s go to the kitchens and see if we can steal a chicken. I’m famished, and these things always take so long to get to the feast.”

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Edmund sat through two formal declarations of alliance, three dances, the presentation of a silver-leaved tree gifted to Narnia from a distant land called Selbaran (privately, he thought it beastly - what if the tree were a dryad, and they’d uprooted it to bring it here? - but it didn’t move or transform once when they brought it in, in its golden pot), and a man who swallowed flaming swords. Ed tried not to yawn as yet another dance was announced. He ought to have gotten more sleep last night, he thought as he struggled to keep his eyes open.

But then something happened to snap him straight awake again. Tumnus raced into the great hall, white-faced and sweating. “Your Highnesses!” he cried. “A word with you!”

Edmund rose from his throne and gathered round the faun with Peter, Susan, and Lucy. “What is it, Tumnus? Quietly, now,” Peter asked.

“The giants, Your Highness. The giants of the north are on the move to attack Narnia! They say we’ve stolen something!” The faun patted at his dripping face with his handkerchief. “What are your orders, sire?”

“Whatever can we have stolen?” Susan said. “We’ve been ordering all Narnians to *avoid* the north and stay out of danger.” For months, the Narnians had been in border skirmishes with the giants still loyal to the White Witch, but it was unheard of for the giants to have mounted a full attack.

“I don’t know,” said Mr. Tumnus. “Our allies in Ettinsmoor weren’t able to say.”

Peter looked to Edmund, who nodded. Then Peter said, “We don’t want to frighten our guests. Ed, will you slip out and take a scouting party to the northern border?”

He meant *Ed, no one will miss you if you sneak out, you’ve been doing this at boring functions for years*, but Edmund was in no mood to argue. If the giants had found the organizational skill to mount an attack on Narnia, someone had to be leading them. They’d never have thought it for themselves.

“Oh, Edmund, do be careful.” Lucy’s face had gone as white as Tumnus’s, and she embraced him hard.

Ed laughed. “Don’t worry, Lu. You won’t even know I’ve been gone.”

A Not So Minor Complication

Leather tunic. Cloak. Leggings, warm leggings. Maybe he ought to bring several pairs. It got cold up north.

Oh, how he hated the cold.

Narnian winters were mild and short, but they still served to remind Edmund of the White Witch and her cruelty. Even Aslan's return to Narnia couldn't circumvent the natural turn of the seasons. Thankfully, it was only late spring, but he would still have to contend with low temperatures at night, and who knew but that he'd have to cross a mountain or two? Giants tended to hide in the wildest countryside.

In the end, he decided to travel light. They'd need speed for a scouting party, and that mattered more than comfort. Edmund had chosen from the most skilled scouts available—a Fox (a son of the very same Fox who had aided Narnia as a spy before the Battle of Beruna), a satyr, and a Centaur. Phillip would accompany them also. Ed had never trusted anyone else to carry him into a battle so much as he trusted the talking horse. And anyway, having a friend along would make the journey rather a lot more tolerable.

A knock at his door brought Edmund's attention up from his makeshift rucksack. "Come in," he called.

Susan entered the room looking worried (which wasn't unusual for Susan, since she tended to mother them all, even though Peter was older than she and the others quite capable of looking after themselves by now), and she carried a leather satchel. "I think you ought to bring this with you," she said.

Ed took it and opened it. Inside lay her ivory horn.

A prickle of anger swelled up from his belly. "Don't you think I'm able to do this without help?"

Susan's expression changed from worry to annoyance in a flash. "Not at all, and don't be such a beast. I'm only trying to be sure you'll stay safe."

At this, Ed swallowed his pride and accepted the horn, and kissed Susan's cheek. "Thanks. I didn't mean to be like that."

"It's all right," she said, and then she got that look in her eye that made her seem far wiser than her years, much more so than when she actually pretended to be. "Ed, I know you haven't been very happy—"

"I'm fine, Su," he interrupted, shouldering the satchel. "I've got to go to the kitchens and get something for the journey. Will you say goodbye to

Lucy for me?” He smiled to ease the tension in the air. “She cries whenever Peter or I go away to battle, and I hate to leave her like that.”

Susan nodded. “Be careful.”

“I will,” he said, and they parted company with a last hug.

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As Edmund was passing from the kitchens up to the castle’s main gate, he heard a scuffle down a hallway to the side. Hoofbeats echoed against stone, and the clink of armor sounded in the air. “Where’s she gone? I just saw her!” said a voice.

“I don’t know,” called another.

Edmund turned down the hallway to find two Fauns in guard uniforms standing in the middle of the hall. “What’s the matter?” Edmund asked.

“There was a girl, sire. She was just here, not a moment ago, and she vanished!” said one Faun.

“She looked like she was sneaking about,” said the other.

Then Edmund recognized the hallway in which they stood. At the end stood a suit of armor that looked like it had taken the strength of ten giants to move it to that spot. Edmund knew that behind it lay a secret passage up to Peter’s bedchambers. At the beginning of their reign, Peter had used it often to steal out of the castle for some time alone when he tired of the daily trials of being High King. He used it less now, having grown accustomed to his obligations, but Ed remembered meeting him at the end of this hall in the small hours of the night so they could escape the castle and wander Narnia undisturbed by loud, pretentious entourages.

As far as Edmund knew, he and Peter were the only ones who knew of the passage—but he wasn’t taking chances. “Go alert the guards and give them her description. I’ll find this girl and put a stop to whatever she’s doing,” he said.

The Fauns left to do his bidding, and at once, Edmund slipped behind the statue and pressed at a stone in the wall. Peter might be in his rooms right now, unaware that he might be in danger. Ed drew a dagger from his boot and slipped into the dark, musty passage, making no noise.

He had no need of a torch. He knew the way led straight upward; a flight of stairs, a landing, another flight, and finally a window at the top of the stair just outside Peter’s room, where another suit of armor stood beside the oak door.

He hadn’t gone far when he heard a rustle. Threaded through the musty air was the faint scent of a nighttime forest. *I don’t recall another window*, he

thought, *and anyway, there'd be light—*

And then he bumped into something soft—another body. Long hair brushed his face.

He heard the girl draw breath to scream, and quickly wrapped an arm around her and covered her mouth with his hand. He put the dagger to her throat with the other. “Don’t make a sound unless I tell you to,” he warned. “Do you understand?”

Her body went rigid in his grasp, and though her hands clutched at his robe as though to thrust him away, she nodded.

Ed gripped a handful of her hair and the back of her dress—something smooth and filmy and finer than the most expensive silk—and pressed the point of the dagger to her back. “What are you doing in this passage?”

“Murdering a murderer,” she said, low and full of rage.

Fear for his brother gripped Edmund. Had she already killed Peter? When had Ed seen him last? “You had better hope you haven’t accomplished your mission,” he growled, pressing harder with his dagger. “Up the stairs, and quickly.”

The girl stifled a cry, but did as Edmund ordered. At last they reached the top of the stairs, and Ed could see in the moonlight filtering through the narrow window. He still had a fistful of her hair, but he saw now that it was so blond as to be silver, and her dress seemed to be made of mist. What kind of a murderess wore such clothing? “Is Peter alive?” he asked, barely able to wait for the answer.

“Yes,” she said in the same hostile tone, “and more’s the pity.”

The girl turned on him then, and Edmund found himself transfixed. Eyes the color of lilac leaves glared out from a face like porcelain. She looked about Ed’s age, but he couldn’t bring himself to believe that she aged at all. “Who are you?” he demanded. Without thinking, he released her.

Instead of answering, she fled down the hall past Peter’s room in a flurry of airy skirts.

Damn, Ed thought, and gave chase. *First giants, and now this.*

He’d wanted a chance to prove his right to his throne, but he ought to have been more careful what he wished for.

4

Old Wounds And Some New Ones

Asha ran toward the great hall (she hoped) with her heart thumping. In her dress, she'd be taken for nobility, perhaps part of a foreign embassy. If she were lucky, no one would notice her bare feet. King Edmund hadn't.

Even the loyal Narnians would raise an outcry if they saw the younger King attacking her in the open. The confusion might allow her a chance to escape. She might even get lucky and spot King Peter. If she died trying to kill him, so be it. Her life counted for nothing against what the Narnians had done.

Barbarians! she thought, hearing King Edmund's running footsteps behind her. *Murderous barbarians!*

Panting, terrified at facing the horrible end she'd been warned of her entire life, even if she were resigned to it, she turned a corner—

Right into a dead end. A pair of poleaxes hung criss-crossed on a stone wall in front of her. She snatched one off its hooks and spun to face her certain death.

King Edmund jerked to a stop as soon as he rounded the corner. She saw the moment he realized his dagger was no match for her poleax. His eyes went wary and watchful—sharp brown eyes just the shade of chestnut bark. He brushed a fringe of earthy-brown hair back from his forehead. “Drop the ax,” he said, and he sounded quite as if he weren't outmaneuvered.

“Not on my life,” she said, angling for the opening back the way she had come.

He blocked it with broad shoulders. She swung the poleax. He caught it by the stave, and instead of pushing back, he bent and twisted. Asha's body sailed over his back, drawn by her own momentum, and she found herself slap on the ground with the breath knocked out of her. The poleax slipped out of her hands.

King Edmund dropped on top of her with his knee pressing against her breastbone, and the poleax stave jammed against her throat. “I'll ask again. Who are you? The guard is coming, and they have less patience than I do,” he growled.

“Get—off—you—blasted—oaf!” she snarled, pushing at him and gasping.

His eyes bored into hers, almost willing her to be still. “Your name.”

“Is of no importance to you—you—murdering—cur!” She raised her knee to jab him in the groin and couldn’t—*damned dress*—and then realized he’d noticed her bare feet. Ha. She took advantage of his distraction by grabbing his fallen dagger and stabbing him in the belly.

She heard tearing fabric, and he let out a *whuff*. She pushed the poleax and Edmund aside and leaped up, already running, her feet smacking the stone—*Oh, how she missed the feel of earth and grass*—

He grabbed her and stopped her headlong flight. “You. Dungeon,” he said, without a trace of leniency in his tone. Even in her fear, she understood how he had come to be a king. A voice like that brooked no refusal.

He pulled her hands behind her and tied a thick strap of leather around them—a belt, probably. “You picked a fine time to cause trouble,” he said. “We’ll see what’s to be done with a would-be assassin.”

“Just you give me the chance at that overbearing—*oof*—killer you call a king!” she cried, struggling, but his knots held fast.

“I call him *brother*,” Edmund said, “and you’d better watch your mouth. I might be the only defense you have against him.”

5

In The Castle Dungeon

As soon as he'd shut her in the dungeon, Ed hurried back to the grand hall. Cair Paravel's dungeon was more like a sparsely appointed room, with a cot and a stand to hold a water pitcher—*A lot more comfortable than the White Witch's dungeons*—but he still felt a moment of regret about shutting the nobly-dressed girl inside.

Don't be a fool, he scolded himself. *She's admitted an attempt on Peter's life*. Even though she'd said Peter was alive, Ed broke into a run.

He arrived in the grand hall out of breath to find Lucy talking with one of the satyrs. As soon as she spotted Edmund, her expression changed to one of alarm. "Ed?"

The satyr bowed and retreated, obviously seeing that the King and Queen needed to converse alone. Ed approached and took his sister's arm. "Where is Peter?"

"Hearing people's petitions in the state room, I think," she said. "Why?"

"Nothing to worry about," he said, hoping that was true and the girl hadn't brought help with her on her mission. "Find Oreius and send him to the state room, would you?"

"Are you really going to fight the giants?" Lucy asked, her face drawn with concern.

Mention of Oreius, captain of Peter's personal guard, had not helped matters, Edmund saw. Quickly, he added, "Not fight them—just scouting. I promise I'll come back safe."

Once he'd alerted his brother and Oreius, Edmund returned to the dungeon. No matter what the girl had done, her story must be heard. Even if she'd threatened Peter's life. He had to remind himself that it was his duty to allow anyone's concerns to be heard—even those of a confessed assassin—until the full truth had been sorted out. He brought a pitcher of water and some bread and cheese on his return, trying not to begrudge her even that small hospitality.

When he reached the door, he was startled to hear her weeping. When he looked through the iron grill in the door, he saw her sitting on the cot staring at her bare feet. He cleared his throat.

She stopped crying at once and raised her head. A cool mask of

haughtiness swept across her tearstained face. “Don’t you Narnians usually send others to do your dirty work?” she snapped.

“Even a prisoner is allowed to eat and drink,” he said. He unlocked the door and set the pitcher and basket of food on the table beside the cot.

Her eyes followed him in the torchlight as he locked the door again behind him. She didn’t move to touch the food. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll attack you?” she said.

He tried not to laugh. “I’m twice your size, and twice your weight, and honestly, if it came to hand-to-hand combat, I don’t think you’d last long.”

“I see,” she said, “so you only confront those weaker than yourselves.”

“I came here to hear your story,” he told her, doing his best to keep his rising temper in check. “You might want to tell me before Peter arrives.”

“Why wouldn’t you just let me kill him and get it over with?” she said coolly. “You’re his brother, and you could take the throne. You look like a perfectly traitorous dog—”

“Enough!” he roared, snatching her by the arms and pulling her to her feet. Her green eyes went wide—she was scared, no doubt, that her taunt had prompted such anger. A tremor ran through his body, and it took all his willpower not to shake her. *Remember your place*, he told himself. “I won’t have you or anyone calling my loyalties into question.” He pushed her away as gently as he could. When he was sure of a calm tone, he said, “I’m not going to ask again. What is your name?”

She sank to the cot once more. “Asha,” she said, watching him from the corner of her eye as if she thought he’d jump at her again.

“And what is it you think Peter’s done that deserves his death?”

“Just what I said. He’s a murderer. He killed my parents.” Her voice trembled, but she didn’t start crying again.

He managed to hang onto his temper, but only just. “When, and how?” he asked, forcing the words past his own doubt.

“Your stupid war. You stole the right to rule Narnia. I’ve heard the stories!” she snapped. “You don’t even belong here, and suddenly you’re kings and queens. Queen Jadis—”

“Jadis was never queen,” he said, “and she wasn’t born a Narnian, either.”

“She was here a hundred years before you arrived. She had more right than you to rule!”

“The White Witch was cruel and cold,” said Edmund. “I didn’t come here to discuss my right as king.” He poured a cup of water and offered it to her.

“How do I know you haven’t poisoned it?” Asha snapped.

Edmund tipped the cup back and downed its contents. He poured another cupful, and set it on the table with a pointed look. When he saw her gaze slide toward the basket of bread and cheese, he took a few pieces and ate them.

Only then did the girl take some of the food. “What kind of king eats with his prisoners?”

“One who cares about the truth,” said Edmund, calmer now. “Who were your parents?”

“They fought alongside Queen Jadis,” Asha said, and Ed ignored her use of the title. “Your brother and his rebels killed them in the charge at Beruna.”

“We did what had to be done to pull Narnia out from under the White Witch’s boot.” Ed softened his tone, remembering his own mother and father, so very far away. Regret pulled at him. “I am sorry about your parents.”

“You lie,” Asha said, and he heard tears threatening in her tone again. She wouldn’t meet his eyes.

His temper flared again, but he slapped a lid on it. “I won’t be called a liar, any more than I’ll stand an accusation of treason. I don’t like war any more than you do,” he said. “If I had my way, Narnia would never have to fight. But to keep the peace, we have to confront those who would make our people suffer.”

“You nobles all hide behind your crowns,” she said bitterly. She sniffled.

Ed drew a handkerchief from his sleeve and offered it to her. After a moment, she took it, but she hid her face to wipe away the tears. He dreaded asking his next question, but Peter would be with Oreius and his personal guard by now. Lucy and Susan would be watched by the castle guard, according to Ed’s direction. Everyone was as safe as he could make them. “Are you here alone?” he asked.

Asha raised her eyes to his. “I came with others,” she said, cool pride ringing through her voice, “but I very much doubt they know I accompanied them.”

“How do you mean?” Edmund approached the cot again and pulled her to her feet, staring hard into her green eyes. A ball of ice began to form in his belly. “Where are you from, and where are your people?” He gripped her wrists, noticing when he raised them that the veins under her pale skin ran not with the bluish cast of human blood, but something almost green. A thought stirred in the back of his mind, but he couldn’t focus. She’d let other assassins into the castle. His brother and sisters were in danger.

“I failed!” she said, inches from his face. Tears spilled over and ran

down her pale face. “Kill me, kill the Selbarani, kill the giants. All you Narnians do is murder—”

“Selbaran?” This time, Edmund did shake her. Not hard, but enough to stop her tirade. “How many are there? What have the giants got to do with it?”

“They’re in league, you fool,” Asha said, “and with any luck, I’ve helped them overthrow you.”

At that moment, Edmund heard footsteps outside the door. “Ed?” Peter’s voice echoed off the dungeon’s stone walls.

Great. Edmund wondered if it were possible for things to get any worse.

Asha's Fate

Neither Edmund nor Asha bowed as the Narnian High King Peter entered the dungeon. Ed didn't have to; he merely nodded, while the girl stood stiff as a statue with her chin high.

"What seems to be the problem?" Peter asked. Ed noticed the centaur Oreius standing outside the dungeon door with a stern look.

"There's no *seem* about it," Asha said before Edmund could reply. "You killed my parents at Beruna, and whatever the giants do to you, it's no less than you deserve."

Peter held onto his temper and any indication of his thoughts with admirable ease, something he'd learned in the years since their coronation. Ed wished he were that good at it, but his own face probably betrayed every bit of his thoughts. "How are the giants involved with you?" asked Peter.

"Why should I prepare you with information to help your cause?" she shot back.

"Peter, the Selbarani and the giants are declaring war on Narnia," said Edmund. "She's with the Selbarani embassy." Asha glared at him, and he stared right back, not caring that she probably saw his anger and agitation.

"Your information might lighten your sentence," Peter said. "It may even shorten your stay in the dungeon."

"And rush me to a hanging?" Asha laughed. "I so look forward to it."

"You'd rather die?" Ed interrupted. Whatever sentence Peter decided, Edmund couldn't stomach the thought of hanging the girl. He doubted his brother would want that on his head, either.

Peter stared at Asha, his gaze calm and unwavering, every bit the High King of Narnia. "Every battle must declare terms," he said. Louder, he called, "Oreius, alert the castle guard to round up every Selbarani who arrived with that embassy for questioning. Edmund, take the girl to the northern border and parley with the giants' leaders."

"What?" Every fiber of Edmund's being resisted the order to abandon his brother and sisters while they were in danger.

Pete's gaze found his. "Ed, you're our best diplomat. I don't trust anyone else to do it."

Asha gave a soft snort, and she crossed her arms. "What makes you think I'll go willingly?"

Peter stared at her a long time. “Because it’s the only opportunity you’ll have to get out of this dungeon anytime soon.”

The girl’s skin paled even further in the torchlight. Ed wondered what she was so scared of. The dungeons would be a lot safer than a journey to meet hostile giants. “Peter, are you sure about this?” he asked.

“If this is our only chance to prevent another war, and more families being destroyed,” Peter answered, holding Asha’s gaze, “I’m willing to take it.”

I
Away To The North

“I hope you don’t think your brother is terribly noble for letting me out,” Asha said as Edmund followed her on Phillip. She rode another talking horse, the loyal grey mare named Hrura, without benefit of bit or stirrup. Ahead of her walked the centaur Nalis. Far ahead of them all ranged Brodear the Fox, scouting the trail, and behind was Celan, the satyr, known well for his speed. In no way could Asha escape without being captured again, though Ed doubted she’d try without shoes. He’d offered to find her a pair before their departure, but she looked at him with such dismay that he wondered if he’d somehow insulted her.

A fine thing for me to be worried about insulting her, he thought. *She’s the one who’s put Narnia in danger of war!* He hoped Peter and his sisters were managing all right without him.

At the beginning of the journey, he’d worried that the girl might slow their party down. Now, well into their first day of travel, he wondered at her stoicism. At first he’d thought it merely disdain, but she had to be as tired of riding as he—especially bareback, while he rode with the reasonable comfort of a saddle. She’d refused to bridle or saddle Hrura, just as she’d refused shoes.

He admired her quiet fortitude almost as much as he admired her slender shape astride the horse. She seemed somehow more alive outdoors, looking left and right with an avid curiosity that pleased him in spite of himself. *Let her see what beautiful country she means to destroy.* Even her taunt about Peter had sounded empty, now that she was outside stone walls. “If you like, we can stop to rest,” he called.

“I’m fine if you are,” she called back.

Liar, he thought, seeing her wince when the mare stepped into a rut in the trail. “I daresay I could do with a rest and a bite to eat. Nalis. Celan. Let’s make camp here for the evening. There’s a clearing just there.” He indicated a break in the trees, where a small creek wound among ferns and flowering bushes.

He dismounted and walked to Hrura to help Asha, but she slipped off the horse on her own. The moment her toes touched the soil, she sighed and closed her eyes. She stayed that way so long that it worried him. If she fell ill, it could mean trouble. She might be the only way to appease the giants and

convince them to call off their attack. “Asha?”

Her eyes fluttered open. “I’m fine,” she repeated.

Broadear joined them. “The way ahead is clear, sire. I spoke with a Raven who says there’s been no sign of the giants in this area.”

“Thank you,” said Edmund. That meant the giants were still over a day’s travel from Cair Paravel, and any possible siege on the castle. The further north Edmund and the scouting party got without trouble, the more time Peter would have to prepare for trouble. Terms might need to be declared for a war between most parties, but Ed didn’t trust the giants to stick to the protocols. “Are you hungry?” he asked Asha.

“Hungry enough,” she said, which surprised him. No acidic reply. She must truly be happy to be outside, even if it meant riding toward danger. He looked at her, and there was no trace of sarcasm in her expression, either. “I need a moment alone, if you don’t mind,” she said.

He did mind, but neither could he be so boorish as to refuse her a moment to freshen up. He followed her into the trees at the opposite side of the clearing, then turned his back. “I’ll be right here.”

He waited what he thought was an appropriate amount of time. The clearing bustled with activity as his scouts set up tents and prepared dinner. When he turned back to the forest, however, he saw no sign of Asha.

Alarmed, cursing himself, he rushed into the trees. “Asha? Asha!”

Only the wind replied. “Damn!” Edmund glanced back toward the clearing. “Broadear! Celan! Asha’s missing!”

“If I may, Your Highness,” said Phillip. The horse favored him with a wry look. “You might consider tying her to my saddle. I suspect she’s going to be nothing but trouble on this journey.”

“No kidding.” Ed scowled. He ought to have thought of that before the girl disappeared. Things like this were probably why Peter was High King, and he wasn’t.

A Tense Conversation

Asha slipped back into the clearing without any of Edmund's scouts noticing. Let them try to track her. Even the fox's nose wouldn't find her scent among the trees. When she reached Nalis, the centaur, she asked, "Where's everyone gone?"

"To find you," rumbled the broad-chested centaur. He stamped his hoof and gave her a long look. His tail lashed his chestnut sides as he drew a horn from his belt and blew three short blasts.

Slowly, everyone came back into the clearing. When Edmund reached them, astride Phillip, his eyes flashed with anger. "Where were you?"

"Taking my moment alone," she said, "and I've returned, haven't I?"

Nalis drew close and bent toward her. "Whom did you go to meet?" he demanded.

"No one," she said, trying her best to hold the centaur's gaze. His dark eyes seemed to penetrate down into her soul. She looked away. Selbaran had no centaurs. She'd heard of them in her preparation for coming to Narnia. They were legendary fighters, brave and unflinching, and wise as well. Perhaps too much so, she worried.

The wind rushed through the treetops, and she shivered. Perhaps leaving the dungeon was a mistake after all. What if she were found out? What could she hope to accomplish by going north with King Edmund?

Revenge, whispered a voice in the back of her mind. If she led Edmund into a trap set by the giants, his blood wouldn't be on *her* hands. The usurpers must pay their dues for the death of her parents.

But when she looked up, she found it hard to meet Edmund's gaze. What would happen to Narnia's people if their kings and queens fell? Another voice in her mind whispered, *Death only breeds more death*. Angrily, she shook off the dark thoughts.

No one spoke to her over supper—they were angry with her, no doubt, for disappearing—but she'd been desperate to escape watchful eyes, even if it was only for a few moments. The forest beckoned, with its sweet-scented breezes and lush, dark hollows. Almost like being back in Selbaran. She tried to push that thought away as well, but she found herself drawn into the evening song of birds and insects, and closed her eyes.

"Aren't you hungry?" Edmund asked nearby.

She jumped and opened her eyes. She'd only nibbled at her supper, but when she saw Edmund's unreadable expression, she stuffed a chunk of bread into her mouth and chewed it.

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me where you went," Edmund said. He sat beside her, and she shifted with discomfort. "Broadear found no trace of you," he added.

She gulped down the bread. "I stayed within sight of the clearing," she hedged. "It isn't my fault if your tracker couldn't track me."

He looked at her silently for such a long time that she wanted to get up and move away. "The rest of the Selbarani embassy who arrived with you will have been brought forward for questioning by now," he said. "Would you like to share your side of the story before it's been shared for you?"

"I told you everything that involves me," she told him.

"You told me you were hoping to overthrow us."

She forced herself to meet his eyes. "I actually don't care *who* rules your country," she said. "What I want is justice. However that happens—"

"What you want is revenge," he interrupted, "and it isn't as satisfying as you might think."

Curiosity pierced her. His face bore no inkling of his thoughts, but *something* was going on in his head. "What do *you* know about it?" she asked.

He didn't answer that. Instead, he looked up at the treetops, gilded by the setting sun's glow. "You seem more comfortable outdoors. Do you live in the forest?"

"Tell me about revenge," she insisted.

"Tell me about your home."

"Yes, the forest. Revenge?"

He sighed, still staring at the trees. "A long time ago, I tried paying someone back for what I thought was mistreatment. I nearly killed the people who care most about me."

"You call killing someone's parents mistreatment?"

Now, he leveled a frank stare on her. "I call it a tragic act of war. That makes it no less painful, but I don't doubt your parents knew the risks of fighting alongside the White Witch."

She didn't know what to say to that, and didn't have time to answer in any case. Celan raced up to them. Behind him flew a Crow, which landed on the nearest tree branch with a raucous *Caw, caw!* "Sire!" said the satyr. "A message from the giants has arrived!"

9

The Message Of The Giants

Edmund stood at attention, trying to regain command of his scattered thoughts. The crow gave another *Caw!* and eyed him with disdain. “The giants will accept no parley, Narnian.”

He had expected this. “Then they risk a war which does neither of us any benefit.”

“They are quite prepared for that,” said the crow. He gave a cawing laugh before adding, “It seems you’ve made it easier for us, alone outside the protection of your castle, where I can give the giants your position.”

“He’s not alone,” said Asha. Ed cursed, wondering if she were about to give away the number and strengths of his scouts as well.

The crow eyed her now. “Asha Faywater. Well done—”

“There is a forest full of creatures here that will do battle against the giants at a moment’s notice,” she interrupted. “Do you not think they should hear what the Narnians have to say?”

Both Edmund and the crow stared at her—no doubt, Edmund assumed, both wondering what new game she was playing at. But Asha merely gathered up the rest of her supper dishes and carried them away to the creek.

He spent a frustrating hour convincing the crow to talk the giants into parley, using every last shred of his diplomacy and patience. Nalis looked ready to pluck each of the bird’s feathers out and stuff a pillow with them. Even Celan, who had great patience, seemed about to roast the crow over the campfire.

When he’d finished, and confirmed that the crow had left with his reply to the giants, Ed stumbled to the creek, bone-weary. Asha sat by the creekbed, watching the water flow over granite rocks worn glossy and smooth. “What did you do that for?”

“Do not think I’m defending you,” she said, but she sounded less harsh than she had that morning. “I simply wish to avoid more unnecessary bloodshed.”

“You mean, before we meet the giants and they try to assassinate me,” Ed said, carefully avoiding that she’d tried to do just that to Peter.

She gave him a sidelong, green-eyed look. “It does the giants no more good than it does you, to try to attack you here. This forest is full of dryads.”

“How do you know?” Ed hadn’t seen a single one all day. The leaves of

the trees surrounding them did no more than shift in a stray breeze, and then stop again. He looked around, just to be certain.

“I would like to sleep at the edge of the clearing,” she said, looking at the sky instead of him. Stars began winking into being in the darkening blue.

Ed shrugged. “It makes no nevermind to me, where you sleep. Which reminds me.” He reached into a clinking pouch at his belt and withdrew a length of chain with manacles at each end. He clapped one on his own wrist, and before she realized what he was doing, clamped the other over her wrist.

Her eyes flew wide. “What!”

“After your disappearance this afternoon, you don’t think I’m going to snore away the entire night while you flee into the woods, do you? Don’t bother getting all out of sorts about it, because one of my scouts carries the key, and I’m not telling you which.”

“Ooh!” she growled, in the exact tone Susan used when Peter annoyed her about a suitor.

Ed couldn’t avoid a grin. “It seems, my dear Asha—*Faywater*—that you and I will be troubling each other for some while yet.”

A Wiser Being Than I

Long after Edmund had fallen into slumber—curse him, how could he sleep so easily?—Asha remained awake. She'd tried all the things he probably expected of her—smashing the chain with a stone, wetting her hand with spittle to relieve it of the manacle—and nothing worked. She'd have considered using his own sword to attack him, but he'd wisely removed any weaponry from his person before lying down. If she meant to attack him now, she'd have to resort to her own strength to do it. And against him, broad-shouldered and well-muscled, with battle experience, she knew she wouldn't fare well.

The manacle bit into her wrist, chafing her skin. She squirmed, desperate to get the thing off. Ed's arm twitched when she tugged on the chain. She froze, fearing he'd wake, but he simply rolled onto his back and went on sleeping. Grumbling, she picked up the stone she'd tried using to smash the chain. She had half a mind to hit him with it.

But he'd let her sleep near the trees, as she'd wanted.

She stared at his sleep-calm face. His features had lost any trace of his usual sternness. What sort of dreams did a king have, when he already had everything? Riches, land, family. Gold held no great lure for her, nor for any of her kind—but land. Land would always be meaningful. As would family.

Edmund had family. Would his sisters cry inconsolably when they lost Peter and Edmund to a giant attack?

Of course they would.

Pummeled with guilt, Asha renewed her struggle against the manacle.

“Be still, daughter of the forest,” called a deep voice. The sound struck a chord within Aesa that hadn't been plucked in years. She remembered being very small and watching her father, her tall, proud father, as he trained for battle. She remembered pride and awe and a sense of things out there in the world, much greater than she knew. The voice echoed among the trees, which wriggled as though they were dogs being stroked by a loving owner.

And she went still.

“Who are you?” she called. “Where are you?”

“I am he whose claws and teeth smote the witch who would be queen,” said the voice. Into the clearing walked a great Lion. Moonlight shone on his fur and regal mane. His tail lashed back and forth. Even in the darkness, his

eyes were sun-bright. "I am Aslan, King of the Kings of Narnia and the son of the Emperor-beyond-the-sea."

The very weight of that voice bent Asha to one knee. "Are you—Are you here to punish me?" she asked, looking at the grass instead of him.

"No, forest-child. You have done that well enough."

"The king, then. You want to speak to him?"

Aslan—Great spirits of the wood, she could hardly even form his name in her head—walked toward Edmund's prone body. His whiskers bristled in the moonlight in what Asha swore was a smile. He opened his mouth, revealing dagger teeth, and breathed across Edmund's face.

The fringe on Ed's forehead fluttered. He murmured something in his sleep and rolled onto his side. His face, solemn before, was now positively serene. Asha watched in fascination, but then the Lion turned to her, and she froze like a spooked rabbit.

"I have spoken all to Edmund that he need hear during his time in Narnia," said the Lion. Asha wondered at his choice of words, but Aslan neared her, and it took every last bit of her resolve not to cower. "My words are for you, Asha Faywater."

"Yes?" she prompted in a very small voice. The grass at her feet absorbed all her attention.

"Look at me, Keeper of Trees, for I know what you are."

Asha lifted her gaze. She didn't even question how he knew she was a dryad.

The Lion opened his great toothy mouth and breathed on her as well. It was warm and sweet, as of a summer wind carrying the scent of cherry blossoms. Whole forests of them bloomed back home in Selbaran, and she imagined dancing in it, helping the trees grow wild and strong. She remembered how good life had been before the war, when her parents were alive.

"The dryads of Selbaran are unlike those here," said the Lion. "You are able to stray from the forests you love. Do you not miss your home?"

"Yes," she said, "but—"

"Your errand has taken you on a dangerous path that leads only to despair," Aslan said. "You are meant for a greater task."

"Me?" What could be greater than justice for her parents' death?

"There is no better aim than that of peace," said Aslan, "and you are meant to help the king win it. And when his task is done, and Narnia has lived the full summer of his reign, you will see him home."

"Home?" She felt impossibly stupid, echoing everything the Lion said. What could he mean? She stole a look at Ed's sleeping form.

“The kings and queens of Narnia were not born to this land. They have lives to lead elsewhere, and one day they must return to them, for their wisdom will be needed greatly. Never let them know it, child of the forest. Never let them learn that you will be the guide to send them back when the time is right.”

“I don’t understand, As—Aslan.”

Instead of answering further, the Lion turned away. “Remember,” he said, and vanished into the trees.

The Dwarves' Village

Edmund followed Asha on Phillip. Her own mount, Hrura, seemed to have grown attached to the young woman over the past few days. The two murmured to one another as they walked. Broadear darted among the ferns on either side of the trail, sniffing and scouting. Nalis walked in front of them all, and Celan came last. For her part, Asha rode straight in her saddle, looking left and right with no trace of disdain on her features. Once, he even thought he heard a faint thread of song.

She'd changed since that first night. Ed couldn't discover what had altered, precisely, but she hadn't complained about being manacled at night, and even seemed willing to help set up and break camp without complaint. *Don't trust her*, he warned himself. *She's only waiting to spring a trap.*

But when she asked each evening for a few moments alone, he found he couldn't refuse. She came back each time looking more at peace than she'd been since their meeting. *Maybe the magic of Narnia's working on her*, he thought.

"Sire. There are folk ahead," said Broadear.

They emerged at last from the thinning wood onto a wide moor overarched with cloudless blue sky. Ed squinted in the sudden brightness. A small town lay ahead. Already, people were ducking their heads out of doors to see who had arrived.

Dwarves, mostly, Ed saw, taking count. Many of them bore suspicious looks. He wondered how many had served Jadis. "Your Highness," said one, bowing low until his beard swept the ground. Ed couldn't catch any inflection of sarcasm in his tone.

Edmund nodded. "We seek shelter and food for the night."

"Many of our houses were destroyed, sire, by strong winds this spring. We have a common stable, but I wouldn't presume to make His Highness sleep with horses—"

Phillip snorted and stamped his hoof.

"That will be fine," Edmund said. "Nalis?"

The centaur came forward with a leather pouch. The dwarf gave him a sidelong look until he heard the clinking inside the pouch. "For your trouble," said Nalis, handing it to him.

A female dwarf hurried up to Asha's mount and, assuming the girl was

royalty as Edmund had (and he was still unconvinced of her lineage), bowed to her. "This way, please."

"Your Highness," Phillip whispered as they followed along, "this place smells of fear. We ought to step carefully."

"Too right, my friend," Ed muttered.

They passed between a pair of flimsy houses missing much of their thatched roofs, and Ed caught sight of vast fields behind the village. Tall grasses waved in the wind, row after row of them, dry and brittle. They must have gotten precious little rain this spring.

As he returned his gaze to the slipshod dwellings, Ed's suspicion rose. Dwarves would not have chosen such dwellings on their own. Given the opportunity, most chose to live within hollowed-out trees, caverns, or earth homes. None that he knew opted for houses erected in such a human fashion.

They were awfully close to Narnia's northern border, too.

"Be on the lookout for trouble," he murmured to Nalis, who trotted alongside Phillip. The centaur gave a grim nod.

"Here we are," said the female dwarf presently. She had led them to another thatched building, larger than the rest, but not in much better repair. It stood on the edge of the village, near the fields. "I'll set a pot of stew cooking."

"If she doesn't try to poison it, I'll eat my belt," muttered Celan. The dwarf appeared not to hear him as she hurried away.

Ed and Asha dismounted, and he pushed open the "stable" door. Inside were five stalls, two occupied with horses who did not respond when addressed. "They're not Narnian, sire," said Phillip. "I'll bet my tail upon it."

"Broadear, you'll take first watch tonight. Celan, you're second. Nalis, you'll take the hours before dawn," said Edmund. His scouts nodded. "Asha —"

She held out her wrists, mute but not scowling. "Sleep lightly," he said.

Her silvery brows rose. "You're not going to chain me?"

"If I need my sword arm in a hurry tonight, I won't have time to undo a manacle. I'd just as soon not have the distraction." He piled up a nest of straw in one of the empty stalls. Broadear positioned himself at the main door, while Celan ranged about the stable, looking for weak points in the other walls where enemies might try to enter and surprise them.

Asha came into the stall and sat beside him. "Thank you," she said after a few moments of silence.

He met her gaze and paused. She stared back, and something akin to respect passed across her face. Their mutual stare lengthened, and finally she looked away. A faint blush colored her cheeks as she bent to pile up more of

the straw. “Your scouts are very loyal. They must trust you a great deal. As you do for them?”

“We’ve had occasion to build that sort of trust,” he told her. He grinned. “Peter and I once ran afoul of a minotaur party, and I wasn’t doing so well, for all I had just taken one’s ax and was laying about with it. Hard to swing those things, you know, you get tired fast. Peter had just been wounded in the arm, and he was—” He broke off, suddenly uncomfortable telling her about his brother.

“Go on,” she said, with a smile curling at the corners of her lips.

“He was hurt, you see, and battling two of the minotaurs,” Ed said slowly. As he recalled the incident, however, he began smiling again. “And every swing of their weapons got closer to his head. I kept trying to get nearer to him, to guard his weak side, and then this big monster of a bull swung an ugly double-ax at him. Beastly-looking ax, that, had to be maybe half the weight of my body. I jumped forward without even thinking. I don’t know what I thought to do. Lose my own head, I’m sure.”

Here Ed broke into a full grin, and he caught Nalis smiling from his place at the end of the makeshift stable. Asha looked wide-eyed and worried. “And then,” Ed said, snatching up a nearby shovel and swooping it through the air, “in jumps this big red centaur with a battle cry like you’ve never heard, and he swings his own sword and chops the minotaur’s arm clean off—” He stopped short, feeling like a cad. “Sorry. Probably ... er, probably not something you want to hear.” He laid the shovel back in its place.

“And then?” Asha prompted.

“And then,” Nalis added, walking toward them with a smile, “this upstart king tells me he’s got it handled, and dispatches two minotaurs, *and* the one I’d surprised, just like that.” The centaur’s laugh boomed through the stable.

Ed rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced.

“Great thrashing oaks,” Asha breathed out. Her eyes swept over Edmund. “Were you hurt at all?”

“A few knocks,” he admitted, “but I made out better than Peter.”

“The dwarf is coming back,” called Brodear.

Supper was a quiet affair. The dwarf set the pot down and hurried out with little more than a bow of excuse, as though she’d been chased. Celan insisted on testing the food before Edmund ate any of it, but Ed noticed that Asha picked up her spoon and ate right away. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“They haven’t poisoned it,” she said. “I could smell it if they had.”

Ed’s gaze slid to Celan, who had scooped up some of the food and

spooned it into his mouth. When he nodded, Ed ate. The stew was bland and watered-down, nothing like what he ate at Cair Paravel, but serviceable enough.

After that, all were very tired. Ed had ordered his scouts to take watches, but he slept lightly anyway, and only got bits of rest here and there. Asha had long since curled up in the straw and fallen asleep, without having taken her evening time alone. Restless during Celan's watch, Ed sat at the edge of the stall and watched her.

When he found himself unable to sit still, he picked up his leather satchel and tossed a few rolls of bread inside. He went to Celan. "It's the end of your watch, anyway. I'll take a turn and let Nalis sleep."

Celan went to sleep then, and Edmund made a circuit of the stable. For a long stretch, he heard nothing, and decided to look outside as well.

Moonlight cast everything in shades of grey. Ed circled behind the stable toward the vast field—obviously the source of the entire village's roofing thatch, as well as the straw in the stable. He wondered why they hadn't fixed their houses, when there was so much material at hand.

Then he heard low voices, coming from the field. "He is a king, isn't he?" muttered the first. "What happens if there are only three to rule, instead of four?"

"Easier to kill the rest, do you think?" said another voice.

"Better favor at court when we arrive home, that's sure enough." Quiet laughter floated through the grass.

Aching for his sword, Edmund crept closer, straining his ears even as he reached for the dagger in his boot. Whomever it was, they were moving, and not making much effort to conceal their noise. *Armor*, Ed thought, hearing the clink and rattle of steel plates and mail. They seemed to keep just ahead of him. Wondering where they were going, he followed silently. The grasses waved overhead in the breeze, taller than he, concealing him. He glanced back at the trail he'd broken through the grasses. Just as he decided to head back and get the others, he heard a low, muted rumble coupled with cracks and hisses.

And then he smelled smoke.

He broke into a run, back along his own trail, only to stop when confronted by searing heat and angry orange flames. Dodging back, he ran in the other direction. He'd gone ten meters, maybe fifteen, and was stopped by another wall of fire. With his heartbeat speeding in his chest, he raced in a third direction. More flame, and now, choking smoke that blackened the sky. The field was on fire in all directions. Sweating and choking, he ran north toward the armored strangers.

He burst into a clearing to find a group of men—tall, heavily armed. Not dwarves. Ten or twenty, he saw, counting fast. When they saw him, every one raised his sword and closed in. On their breastplates he recognized a stylized black tree. *Selbarani*.

No way could he best them all. Ed wiped pouring sweat out of his eyes and went for his satchel, scrambling, throwing bread rolls left and right until he got to the bundle at the bottom. Throwing his dagger down, he unwrapped the bundle and put Susan's horn to his lips.

The horn blared out four clear notes into the smoke-filled sky.

The Battle In The Threshing Fields

Edmund ducked the swipe of the closest man's sword. "I told you this was a bad idea!" the warrior yelled at another man.

"Get behind him, behind him! Block the way out!" shouted another.

Desperate, Ed dodged another sword swipe, searching for his dagger, a rock, anything. The sword came at him again and he rolled. Susan's horn dropped out of his hands into the grass. He lunged for it, but another soldier blocked him, laughing. Still on the ground, Ed kicked at the man's knees and was rewarded with a *thunk* and a howl as his boot smacked the steel shinguard. *Full bloody armor*, he thought. *This was an ambush.*

The soldier staggered. Ed seized his opportunity and burst upward, hammering at the man with his fists, aiming for face, throat, anything not covered with armor. His fist landed on the man's nose with a *crunch*. The warrior's hand loosened on his sword. Ed grabbed at his opponent's wrist and twisted, using his body to wrest the weapon away.

And just in time. Two men leaped in to aid their comrade, and Ed swung his pilfered sword to meet theirs. The clash of metal on metal rang out in the stifling air. Spinning, Ed parried the blow of the soldier behind him. And another. Another. Coughing, gagging on the scorching, smoke-filled air, he wondered how long he could hold them at bay.

"Rrrrrrr-aaaa-rrrrrrghhh!" A huge, dark shape sprang over a wall of flames into the clearing and began swinging two swords at any soldier standing near. Nalis. Metal clanged and screeched. Men shouted in pain and surprise. Ed had no time to be thankful. More enemies began rushing them even as the fox arrived. Broadear raced among the men, biting at unprotected legs and leaping away before any of the men could strike back.

Dodging again, Edmund tried to angle for the last unburned section of the field, the way he'd come, but the soldiers were too many. He swung at another soldier. "Where are the others?"

"We lost Celan, sire. Phillip is trapped outside the flames."

"What about the rest?" Just as Ed spoke, an arrow zinged past him. He lurched away, but the arrow sank into the exposed neck of a soldier who'd been about to skewer him. Three more arrows followed, *zip-zip-zip*, and took out three soldiers. Finding himself with more room to move, Ed swung his sword to meet another opponent. Their swords clashed together and

screached.

Another shape leaped into the clearing, paler, with a wispy shadow of a woman on its back. Hrura, with Asha riding at a gallop and carrying a longbow. “Get on!” she cried. “There are more! Too many to fight!”

Ed glanced toward the centaur, who was busy with three soldiers. “Go, sire! We’ll hold them!”

Ed ignored him, unwilling to lose more of his scouts, less willing to ride away with someone he couldn’t trust. The soldiers rushed the horse. Hrura reared. Her tail lashed inches from the flames. Asha fired an arrow at another soldier, who shouted in pain but kept running. “Edmund!” she cried. Her eyes met his, wide with urgency.

And then the decision was no longer his. Flames roared at his back; searing him with heat even though layers of tunic and leather jerkin. He pounced toward the horse and onto her back. The instant he’d clamped his knees around her sides, the mare bolted through the tangle of soldiers. One seized his leg as they flew past. Ed slashed at him with his sword. The man screamed and dropped away, but another grabbed Asha’s dress. He tried to cut the soldier down, but Asha cried out and began to slip from Hrura’s back. Ed clamped his arm around her middle and slashed again. His swing hit home, and the soldier fell. “Go!” he shouted to the mare. Hrura picked up speed, heading for the only way left to them—back toward the village.

Still more soldiers snatched at the horse as she ran past. Ed swung at them, trying to buy them enough room to get past, but one grabbed his leg and hung on. Twisting, Ed punched the man, who fell back.

The way was clear now. Hrura’s hindquarters bunched, and she leaped over a last barrier of flame. Asha fell forward over the mare’s neck, almost falling, but Edmund grabbed her around the waist again with his free arm. Hrura neighed in pain as her hooves landed in sooty, flame-scorched grass, but then they had reached the road that ran past the stable and through the village.

Celan’s body lay in the road, his broken pike nearby. Ahead, another group of soldiers blocked the road.

The one in front came toward them, wearing more ornate armor than the rest—obviously a captain. Ed scanned the area for any sign of Phillip or his scouts. Nothing.

Hrura snorted and danced sideways, nervousness evident in the tautness of her muscles. Asha tensed in his grasp as the captain came forward. “Edmund Wandbreaker,” said the man, angling his head in an arrogant, uninterested pose. “The boy who stopped the White Witch.”

“King Edmund to you,” he answered.

“Narnian kings bleed, don’t they? Shall we find out?” The captain flicked a hand, and five soldiers came forward and drew their bows. “We already know that satyrs do.”

“Come and find out,” Ed challenged, even as he wondered how to escape this latest dilemma.

“Stand down!” shouted a man from the midst of the crowd. The soldiers parted like windblown grass, and another man came forward, wearing black armor with the same stylized tree embossed on the front. Ed recognized the man from the Selbarani embassy back at Cair Paravel. A general, he guessed, by the finely worked mail and breastplate. “Get down, girl. Our business is with the king.”

“If I get down now,” Asha whispered, “they’ll just hack you to pieces.”

“How do I know you didn’t call them here to attack us in the first place?” Ed hissed back. He withdrew his arm from her waist.

Instead of answering, Asha bent low over Hrura’s neck. “Can you outrun them if I get us out of the range of their archers?”

“Yes, my lady,” the horse whispered back.

“Get down, I said!” called the general.

“Edmund,” said the girl, meeting his gaze again with a pleading one of her own, “you must trust me. I know I don’t deserve it.” She turned back around and closed her eyes.

The ground began to rumble. Stones shifted on the road. Men began to lose their balance, swaying with the earthquake. The ground began to crack, and roots shoved upward through the soil.

At that moment, Phillip came galloping toward them from one direction, and Nalis and Brodear from the other. All bore the marks of battle. “Run, Hrura!” Asha cried.

The mare spun and bolted northward. Ed ducked over the mare’s neck, pushing Asha down with him. He had no idea what had just happened, and didn’t care. A rain of Selbarani arrows flew past them, one after the other, and then stopped. Cries of alarm rose behind them, and Ed risked a look back.

A score of dwarves had gathered on the road, and were fighting the men. “Go, my king!” shouted one of the nearest dwarves. His yell seemed to urge Hrura onward even faster, for the mare doubled her pace.

Phillip closed in beside them on one side, and Nalis and Brodear on the other. “Are you injured, Your Highness?” Phillip called. Ed saw bloodstains on the horse’s flanks.

“No,” Ed called back, but then Asha went limp and began to slip from Hrura’s back. He reached both arms around her and held on, but the girl had fainted.

By the time they had put enough distance between themselves and the village, everyone was near exhaustion. Ed slipped from Hrura's back and pulled Asha down. She hadn't wakened once. He laid her on the moor. Seeing Hrura's shaking legs, he said, "Rest, my friend. You've earned it."

Nalis came forward, scowling. "We managed to get out of the fields before they finished burning around us. The soldiers were trapped by their own fire."

"Celan, poor Celan. A nobler beast I never knew," said Broadear.

"He was brave to the last, sire," said Nalis. "He gave us the time we needed to get to you." The centaur reached behind him to a pack strapped on his back. "You'll be wanting these."

He handed over Edmund's sword and Susan's horn, both blackened with soot. Ed took them gratefully. "Susan was right," he said softly, feeling a rush of affection for his older sister.

They had reached the flats of Ettinsmoor. Now they were infidels in another country, and there was no cover. "We can't make a fire tonight," he said, "or it will lead them straight to us. The best we can hope is that the dwarves have delayed their pursuit. I'm sorry I didn't have more time to thank them for allowing our escape." He sighed, lamenting Celan's loss, and checked on Asha. She was breathing, and didn't seem to be hurt. He glanced at the longbow that had dropped onto the short grass, and then the quiver of arrows that lay beside her. "How did all this come about?"

"I shall tell you, sire, but it's a long tale, and I believe I might want breakfast first," said Phillip.

Phillip's Tale

“It was quiet for most of the night,” said Phillip. “I only woke because I smelled smoke. At first I thought it was someone’s hearth fire. But then I noticed you had gone, sire, and I left the stable to investigate. While I was searching for you, a group of soldiers came toward me. They were shouting that I’d gotten loose and must be rounded up. Me!” Offended dignity filled the horse’s tone. “I realized then that these men had mistaken me for one of their poor beasts that can’t talk. Before I knew it, they’d thrown ropes over my head. Ropes! Choking me so that I began to lose my vision!”

Hrura whinnied, clearly affronted by such uncouth behavior. “What then?”

Phillip helped himself to a heap of oats Edmund had pulled from the saddlebag. “Well, I yelled as best I could, and that’s when Celan heard me and came running. He tore right through that rabble, as good a warrior as any I’ve ever seen—save yourself, sire—and freed me from their clutches. He told me I must run to find you. No thought for himself, he simply bellowed at those attackers to come try their luck. I think that’s when Nalis and Hrura must have woken.”

Hrura nodded agreement. “Asha wouldn’t have me leave her behind, sire. She insisted that if you were in danger, she ought to be there to help you.”

At this, Edmund frowned, eyeing the sleeping girl. Too many reservations clouded his gratitude for her rescuing him from the fire and soldiers.

“The dwarves rebelled as soon as they saw us fighting,” Phillip went on. “The soldiers had taken them prisoner, threatened them with their children’s lives. The whole of the town was transformed into a trap for us.” The horse stamped his hoof. “Cowards and barbarians!”

“Well,” Edmund said, “The giants should be fully aware of our coming, and from which direction, if this is any sign. None of us will sleep easily now.”

“I certainly won’t,” said Phillip. “You haven’t heard the worst of it yet.”

“What’s that?” Edmund asked, worried at the tension in the horse’s tone.

“The soldiers we met are merely an advance party. Selbarani is sending troops to attack Narnia. They’re crossing the ocean this very moment.”

Flight Across Ettinsmoor

Edmund never wished so hard for a griffin in his life. He could not live with the consequences if something happened to Peter or his sisters without him there to prevent it or even warn them. Had the Selbarani troops already landed? They might be laying seige to Cair Paravel right now. Phillip had no answers to give. On foot, they were closer to the giants than to the seat of Narnian rule. Their only hope lay in convincing the giants—the intractable, violent-tempered giants—to give up their quest for war.

“Sire, we must move fast,” Nalis said. “The sky does not bode well for fair weather.”

Ed looked up to find iron-grey clouds gathering overhead, moving in fast from the north on an icy wind. Seething with frustration and worry, he slammed a fist into his other palm. “Brodear, you must relay a message to the first friendly Bird you can find. Search through the next day if you have to. Send a message to Peter that the Selbarani are coming over the sea to attack. Tell him we are making our way north with all speed.” He looked at all of them in turn—Nalis, Phillip, Hrura, Brodear—and then to Asha’s prone form. “We have no choice.”

They rode hard. Hrura, still injured, ran without a rider, while Nalis or Phillip carried Edmund and Asha, two astride, by turns. She didn’t wake during the journey, and Ed had to hold her in front of him. He checked her during their short rests. She breathed evenly, but her closed eyes were shadowed with blue-green bruises. What if she didn’t wake to help him plead Narnia’s case when they reached the giants? What if the Selbarani troops reached Cair Paravel before his warning message? What if? What if? What if?

His doubts sped them along across Ettinsmoor, over a giant bridge spanning a great chasm, and all the way into the snow-covered mountains.

He trotted behind Nalis on Phillip, puffing hot air into his chilled hands and longing for the warm leggings he’d decided not to bring. Asha remained still in his grasp, but even her body heat and long skirts seemed to do nothing against the frigid air as they rode up into the snow.

Snow. He jerked his short cloak tighter around his shoulders and gave a silent snarl. He hated nothing more than snow. The sight of it always came with the memory of a pair of icy, soulless eyes.

That time is over, he reminded himself. But he could not help listening,

hard and intent until his ears rang, for the blood-thawing sound of howling. Nothing broke the silence except wind and the sound of hoofbeats.

Phillip's forehoof sank into a rut in the trail, jarring him in the saddle. "Sorry, sire," the tired horse murmured.

Asha murmured and raised her head. "Where are we?"

A wash of relief surprised Edmund. "Ettinsmoor, on the way to Harfang. Are you well?"

He watched her take in the snowy surroundings. Her pale skin seemed to go whiter, and a faint tremor ran through her body. "Asha?" he prompted.

She would not look at him. "We don't get snow in Selbaran."

He smiled, trying to relieve her obvious discomfort as well as his own residual unease. "Sounds like my sort of country."

She shivered again and he pulled the cloak from his back to wrap around her shoulders. This time, her gaze did come up. Green eyes met his for an instant, and then her lashes lowered. "Thank you, Edmund."

It was only the third time he recalled her addressing him by name, and he gave a little start. Recovering fast, he said, "You saved us back there in the village. You have my gratitude."

She nodded as Phillip traversed a thin ridge of rock where the trail fell steeply away into a chasm on either side. Each drop was lost in mist and cloud cover. Had they ridden so high then? He began to relax—things were going according to his plan, and with Asha's help, he might even convince the giants to abandon this battle—but then Asha swayed and went limp.

The uneven weight dragged at the saddle. Phillip snorted and Ed heard Hrura cry out a warning just as Asha fell. He caught at her hand with a shout that echoed in the freezing air, but her icy fingers slipped through his grasp and she dropped out of sight into the mist. "Asha!" he cried.

In his hurry to catch her, he overbalanced. His foot twisted free of the far stirrup and he plunged from Phillip's back. Mist blinded him and stifled his breath. Frigid air poured into his lungs. Everything went white, and the only thing he knew was the sickening sensation of falling.

Asha's Secret

Cold. Oh, Aslan, he was cold. He couldn't see. His teeth chattered and darkness surrounded him. The icy chill pressed in on him, wetting through his clothes, smothering his movement, freezing his face. He thrashed, but it was no good. *Get off, get off!*

He couldn't even move, could barely breathe. Horrible memories of the White Witch assaulted him. His side was on fire where she'd speared him during the Battle of Beruna, or maybe he only imagined the searing pain. Had she returned? Locked him in a frozen dungeon? A witch never really died

Fighting panic, he went for his sword only to find that his arms wouldn't budge. His numbed fingers dug into something bitter cold and soft.

Snow. He was surrounded by it, buried in it, with only a little pocket of air around his face. Stark fear jammed a fist through his belly. He gave a shout and thrust out at the frigid powder.

Someone called him, muffled. He dug through the snow toward the voice, scraping handful after handful only to have more replace it. *Will. Not. Panic.* He shook with the effort to contain the fear. His heart pounded with the need for more air than the little pocket could provide.

The voice came again, and something shifted above him. The sound of digging reached him, and then chilled fingers caught hold of his own.

Asha pulled him from the snow, sunk to the knees into a drift of it herself. Her silvery hair lay matted in damp trails over her shoulders. Her face was as white as before. "Are you injured?"

"No," he panted, shivering. He wrapped his arms around himself to quell the chills and looked around. The snowy mountainsides surrounded them, obscured by mist after only a few meters. He couldn't see the sky to gauge their direction. "Phillip?" he called, as loudly as he dared lest an avalanche bury them again. His voice was hopelessly muffled by the mist, and no one answered him.

Lost. In giant country.

"Edmund," Asha said, her voice thin and wavering.

Alarmed, he turned back to find her shaking hard in spite of his cloak. The greenish cast under her eyes had deepened. Her veins stood out in her pale skin, vivid and frightening. Great Lion, was she dying? "Asha, what is it?"

“I need ... earth. Please, Edmund. We have to find a place. Dig.” She swayed and toppled toward him.

He caught her and pulled her over his shoulder, with no idea what to do next. Shivering again, he staggered ahead into the endless whiteness, praying for shelter.

He stumbled on, unable to feel his fingers digging into her clothing as he held onto her. He had no idea how far he walked. Ten meters? Five? Barely two? It seemed hours before he found a shallow cave with a high ceiling, but the floor was rock. Dig? Dig where? With what?

Laying her down against the cave’s inner wall, he went back outside and thrust away scoop after scoop of snow. *What I wouldn’t give for a phoenix to light a fire right now*, he thought grimly.

He managed to carve a tiny, pathetic handful of soil out of the frozen ground and brought it back to the cave. “Here,” he said, bending to one knee in front of her.

Her eyes fluttered open. When she saw the handful of soil, her mouth opened in a soundless *O* and she took it in her fist. Her lids fluttered shut again and she sagged against the rock with a shuddering sigh.

For a few desperate minutes he worried that she really had died, but her hand fell open and he realized the soil was gone.

He had only seconds to process this before she struggled upright. “Outside. I must get outside,” she whispered.

“Are you mad? We’re going to freeze to death!”

“I would rather freeze than starve.”

Confused, he followed her outside the patch of earth he’d scraped bare. What he saw next astounded him.

Asha dug her toes into the frozen earth as if it were as fine and soft as butter. With a soft cry of relief, she raised her arms upward ... and *changed*.

Her skirts fluttered and drew in against her skin. Her hair swept upward, wild as if caught in a wind, and her skin paled into silvery-white. The whole of her body lengthened, slendered, grew taller, until not a girl, but a swaying birch stood in the patch of earth.

“Great Aslan’s mane,” he whispered.

She was a dryad.

Differences

She no longer had eyes. No longer had ears. Though Asha couldn't see or hear Edmund in the normal way humans could, she sensed him nearby. Dryads, in their natural tree forms, sensed the world through magic—changes in the air and soil, the reactions of creatures around them (though there were no creatures in this frigid place—Asha had never seen such desolate country, because even in winter her homeland remained green and vibrant, though it did grow cooler).

She drank deep from the earth, and welcome strength flowed back into her limbs. She'd never come so close to starvation. Her mother had told her once how she'd been stranded in the desert, with no sustenance in the sand and no water to help draw it up into her roots in any case. Her mother's terrible account hadn't even compared to the lethargy and pain Asha had felt. Dryads needed to eat daily, more so when they used their magic, and the consequences of not doing so came fast and severe. Asha vowed never to be far from fertile soil again.

Narnian soil tasted better than any she'd ever known. She gave a conflicted shiver that rattled her leaves. When the dryads of Selbaran learned of the rich soil of Edmund's country, they'd have all the more excuses to fight. She couldn't bear Aslan's disappointment if that happened.

Nor did she want to face Edmund.

She sensed him coming closer, and though she had no ears in this form, the sound of his voice vibrated against the green shoots at the ends of her branches. "Asha?" He sounded worried.

Worried. For her. A dryad in her tree form couldn't blush either, but she wilted a little with shame.

He touched her, a light hand. She jerked in surprise and changed back to her human shape to find his hand still on her backside.

Ed saw this and snatched his hand away. He avoided looking at her, and the tips of his ears went faintly pink. "Sorry," he muttered.

She blushed too, a real blush this time, one that drew fluid warmth to the surface of her skin all over. She knew how she must look to him—not red, as humans did, but ghastly greenish, and somehow that bothered her. "We should see if we can find a way back to your scouting party."

He looked at her then, and she could tell he was forcing himself to do

so. His ears went redder, too red to blame on the cold alone. “Are you ... done?”

“Yes,” she said. “And I’m warm enough now, so you may have your cloak.” She returned it to him, and now it was she who had to make herself look at him. He’d saved her life. “Thanks.”

He took it and put it on. “Can you travel all right through this snow?”

“Yes. It’s not easy. I’ll need to rest more often than I would in warmer country, but I don’t need extra clothing the way ... well, the way you would. We ought to hurry,” she added as vanity pricked her. “Selbarani dryads lose their leaves in the cold.”

He seemed embarrassed then. His chestnut-bark eyes darted anywhere but at her. “What ... er ... Will you ...?”

“My hair will break off and become short,” she said quickly, not wanting to think about what he’d been going to ask. Dear towering pines, he probably thought she’d lose her dress. She pointed to a misty gap between the sheer mountainsides, frantic to change the subject. “North is that way.”

He plunged forward with a look of relief. She followed in his footsteps.

Neither of them spoke during the long walk to higher ground. Presently they found a trail winding up the mountain, overgrown with brambles but protected from the wind by the sheer, overarching rock. “I think we might get back up to the trail yet,” he said, sounding much more himself now. “Look here.”

The trail widened out and she was able to walk alongside him. He shivered, she saw, but not as much as when they’d been standing still. Their way was clearer now, less misty, and climbing steadily so that she thought they might indeed reach the scouting party again.

After a few moments of silence, he said, “How do you eat regular food, then? Stew? Bread?”

She took a deep breath and tried not to blush again. “Everything was earth once. It’s simply a different way of taking in the food we need. Soil is better,” she admitted. “I imagine you might be able to survive on grasses and leaves and such for a time, but you wouldn’t like the taste of it.”

“I’ve never actually spoken to a ... dryad,” he said. “Not personally.” He seemed as hesitant as she was to voice their differences aloud. As if somehow that might draw a line they wouldn’t be able to cross.

Nor should they, whether they voiced their differences or not. Asha still didn’t know what to do once they reached Harfang. “I’ve never actually spoken to a king,” she said.

His eyes darkened. “And yet you were willing to kill one.”

Her blush came without effort now, as did the memory of Aslan’s

gentle but crushing disapproval. But she noticed, after a moment, that Edmund had said *were*. And her heart lifted.

Just a little.

On The Road To Harfang

Edmund gritted his teeth to keep them from chattering. His cloak was no match for the stray gusts of wind that whipped up the mountainside and found the sheltered trail. But if Asha could deal with the cold, so would he.

He struggled not to think of the way he'd accidentally touched her. *Where* he'd accidentally touched her. Did Peter ever have such humiliating moments, or were those just reserved for less "Magnificent" rulers?

Right. Hands off the tree from now on, he scolded himself. He kept his eyes on the trail, now and then looking about to be certain no foes lurked in the rocks. Occasionally he pulled his sword partway from its scabbard and dropped it back again, to be sure no snow or ice had jammed the blade inside. They'd need every precious second if they ran into a—

"Edmund!" Asha whispered, pulling him back against the rock. Her green eyes were wide, her face pale.

She cast a worried look upward and Edmund followed her stare, but all he saw now was the dark arch of rock overhanging the trail. "What?" he whispered back.

Giant, she mouthed, her eyes filled with terror.

Ed pressed her back against the rock and crept back out into the middle of the trail, wishing fervently for a crossbow. Squinting upward through the thinning mist, he saw the enormous, dark, lumbering silhouette of a giant in furs trudging along a higher route on the mountainside. He stepped back into shelter of the rock. "We'd do best to avoid him. We'll have to take another trail."

"But we'll never find the others," said Asha.

"With any luck, they'll have come looking for us. Nalis has good hearing. He'll know of the giant before the giant finds them." He spoke calmly, but he worried about the uncertain look of the sky. On top of all else, it appeared they would have darkness soon.

They traveled in silence for hours, stopped more often than not by a blind trail that ended in a stretch of rock too sheer to climb. They had to pause often so that Asha could transform and draw strength from what soil they found. It never failed to startle him to see her a girl one moment and a tall birch the next. Quite lovely really, for a dryad, he thought. She hadn't lost any of her silvery-green leaves yet and he wondered if they'd get out of the cold

before she did. And before he froze to death.

For his own part, he fashioned a sling and killed a rabbit, but cooking it took a beastly long time without flint or tinder to strike a flame quickly. Gathering firewood from the few trees they found ate up another good hour. By then it was so late he decided simply to keep the fire going and banked it for the night, lying as close as possible without actually sticking his boots into the ashes. Even then he shivered.

Asha sat on the other side, staring into the flames.

He lifted his head to watch her, but her face remained impassable. “Does the fire bother you?”

“It was fallen wood anyway, and not from a dryad’s tree,” she said. “I’m not so horrified that I’d rather you spend all night catching your death.”

He managed a wry smile. “Not so long ago, you had other ideas on that. My side still hurts where you tried to stab me. I expect I’ll have a scar at some point.”

She returned the smile and he stopped talking to look at her. The darkness hid the color of her eyes, but in the light of the flames her hair and skin had taken on a golden color. He wondered that she wasn’t shivering as hard as he was. Lovely, he thought again. Were all the dryads of Selbaran as graceful? Certainly none of the girls who’d come to court from other lands carried themselves so well. Even Narnian dryads couldn’t compare, and they and the naiads were about the most graceful creatures he knew. Asha didn’t walk so much as float.

At the very least, he thought with another wry grimace, he’d have something nice to look at while he expired from the cold.

He shifted to make himself more comfortable on the rock, spreading the short cloak over himself and drawing his legs in. Chills ran through his body. His clothing hadn’t completely dried from his dunking in the snow. Grimly he closed his eyes. He’d need what sleep he could get, but he doubted it would be much.

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He woke half-thinking that he was in his own bed at the castle. He was warm, but the mattress was harder than he remembered it. Then he smelled woodsmoke and opened his eyes.

The banked fire smoldered in the grey dawn. There was no wind at this hour, and the smoke curled into the lightening sky.

Something pressed along his back, and the warmth came from that. He twisted to look and found Asha lying with her back to his, curled into a ball of

her own underneath his cloak. She smelled like a forest in high summer—pleasant and green and earthy—and he wished at once to be out of the mountains and the snow and back in Narnia. He sat up and the woodsy scent clouded around him.

She stirred and opened her eyes. When she met his gaze, she looked away. “I got cold overnight.”

“That’s all right,” he said, his head still swimming with images of riding through the forests back home.

They broke camp in silence after that, each reluctant to talk after a night spent in such close quarters. A light snow had fallen, and it took some time to clear it away so that Asha could change, and then he ate the cold leftovers of his evening meal while they hiked.

Neither of them seemed to know what to do with one another now, and the awkwardness was almost worse than fighting giants might have been. He knew what to do with a sword and shield and armor plate. The question of what to do with a would-be murderess who no longer wanted to kill him or Peter, and who curled up under his cloak at night to stay warm when she’d said she didn’t need extra warmth—that was another thing altogether.

Not to mention, whenever he caught a stray whiff of that earthy forest smell, it reminded him all too well how much he preferred a forest in summer to the heartless, icy blasts of winter.

What Happened At Speartooth Pass

Travel was harder after that, with biting wind and snow that caked on their faces and in their hair. Edmund began to wonder if they'd find Phillip and the others, or if the scouting party had run afoul of the giant after all. Each night they slept back to back as before, and Edmund began to notice Asha's hair seemed a bit shorter. He refrained from mentioning it, sensing she'd be upset enough. Having two sisters had taught him when to keep his mouth shut.

Besides that, he realized, her shorter hair was an indication that the cold was beginning to affect her more severely. She transformed one evening, and when she changed back and went quietly about setting up camp, he noticed a silvery birch leaf on the ground. He picked it up and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger. It was soft and smooth like most leaves were, but this leaf felt stronger, less brittle than the ones shed by normal trees in the fall. He meant to say something reassuring, but when she looked up he merely pocketed it and made an offhanded comment about the possibility of clearing skies. In truth, he wondered if they'd make it out of the mountains alive.

Over the next few days, their chatter stopped entirely. Each of them seemed to be conserving their strength as best they could. Then, when Edmund had ceased caring about weather or food supplies, they arrived at a forbidding valley running between two towering spires of rock. Asha trudged ahead of him toward the spires, barely looking up from the trail at her feet, but when Ed saw the enormous boulderlike obstructions in the pass, he clapped a hand on her shoulder.

She started, but made no objection when he pulled her into a shallow crevice with a finger to his lips. They looked back into the pass, and when Asha realized what he'd seen—three giants, resting with their backs to the spires on either side of the valley—her eyes went round and fearful. "We can't get by them without being noticed," she whispered, though she might have shouted and not been heard over the wind whistling through the pass.

Frost edged her lashes and slender eyebrows. Without thinking, he smiled and brushed a dusting of snow off her cheek. She blinked and jerked away, and Edmund stifled an awkward desire to rub at the back of his neck. He forced his thoughts to the problem at hand. "Well, that's the idea," he said finally. "I don't intend to hide."

“Wha—”

Backing off, he dusted at his clothes and tried to make them look presentable—though he doubted the giants would care in any case. He stripped off his belt and sword. He laid the sword aside and held the belt up. “Give me your wrists.”

Asha’s drop-jawed, hurt look worked on him like a gut-punch. He shook it off with a mixture of exasperation and discomfort. “I’m not going to keep you tied up. Just trust me. I trusted you,” he pointed out.

She looked from the belt to his face and held up her wrists. Ed looped the belt over them and drew it tight. “Pretend you don’t like me,” he said with a grin, and towed her out into the open.

“Ha,” she said behind him, but there was no bite in her tone.

He pulled her all the way into the pass where they stopped beside the first boulderlike giant. The giant’s foot stuck toes-up into the air, bare and hairy and well over the top of Edmund’s head. “Hullo up there!” Edmund called.

The giant gave a deafening roar of a yawn and stretched, blinking his eyes. When he spotted Edmund, there was a dodgy moment where it looked like he might club them with a nearby log, but Ed pulled a resisting Asha forward (really, he had to give her credit for her lack of enthusiasm at his plan, though he supposed the notion of being squashed flat might have given her some motivation). “King Peter of Narnia sends his regards to your honorable person!” Ed yelled.

“Eh? What’s that?” the giant bellowed.

“No use talking to him, he’s deaf as a stone,” said the second giant. The third giant gave a great snore and rolled over, fast asleep. “What’s that you said?” the second giant asked.

“I bring greetings from King Peter of Narnia, and a gift for your king at Harfang castle,” Ed shouted. He shook the end of the belt.

“A gift, you say? What sort of gift?”

“I understand His Majesty’s fond of certain delicacies.” Ed nodded at Asha, who gave him a frightened, white-faced look of amazement. “I request an audience with your king, and I bring this gift of goodwill as a token of my earnest desire to discuss our future relations.”

At this, Asha began pulling at the belt. “Edmund, are you mad? Do you mean to tell them to *eat* me?”

“They wouldn’t eat you if you were the last creature in Ettinsmoor,” Ed hissed back. “Me, on the other hand ...”

“You!” She pulled harder, and he actually had to plant his feet to keep her from dragging them both backward. “Once they learn you’re the only

human, the giants will just accept me as the gift and eat you instead!”

“I’m counting on them to try that,” Edmund whispered. “Now hush.”

Aloud, he said, “Will you take us to the castle, good sir?”

The second giant thumped his sleeping fellow, and the sound rumbled like a landslide in Edmund’s ears. Once all three were awake, they discussed the situation in whispers (though, being giants, their every whispered word was as loud and plain as a thunderclap).

After a few moments where it seemed like they might want to make sure of getting some kind of reward for delivering this “gift” to the king, the giants seemed to come to a decision. The second giant slapped his chest. “We accept your token. You’ll want a hand up onto my shoulders. Much faster that way.”

“The quicker to the feast,” muttered the first giant, but whether it was his deafness or his lack of realization of how loud he was, the words carried through the pass with a booming echo.

Edmund fetched his sword and towed Asha back to the giants, whistling a Narnian folk tune. Asha stared at him with her mouth agape. He winked as the second giant, Humrubble, scooped them up and set them on his shoulders, where they settled into the giant’s deep, warm, furry shoulder mantle.

Asha still gaped at him. Ed just grinned back.

Sometimes it was better to be smart than magnificent.

The Giant King

Once Asha got over her astonishment, she had to laugh at Edmund's ingenuity. For the first time in days, they were warm and comfortable and reaching Harfang much faster than they had even when traveling with the scouting party. Once when the giant stepped over a great frozen creekbed, she slipped and Edmund caught her. When she steadied on Humrubble's shoulder, Ed let go and gave her another smile that sent her into a whirl of confusion. By the swaying willows, he had a smile that could charm the sun out of the sky.

He kept a light hold on the end of the belt, but she knew it was only for show. Whenever the other two giants looked (hungrily, she thought with an inward shudder) at them, Ed adopted a much fiercer expression. But he kept up an easy discourse with Humrubble, very much as though he weren't in dread of being eaten once they reached their destination.

Humrubble seemed a genial fellow, for all he was bringing them into a possibly deadly situation. The other two giants weren't so friendly. Each time they looked at her, she worried that they'd begun to see she wasn't human after all. She focused on drawing into herself, trying to avoid giving off the woodsy scent all Selbarani dryads possessed. She knew nothing of the giants' sense of smell. Selbaran was blessedly free of them, and she'd only learned of them when she set out on her failed quest.

She assumed that as a prisoner, she oughtn't to speak, so she watched Ed while he talked. He leaned against the back of the giant's neck with one knee drawn up and his arm propped over it. He looked as if he might be sitting in his home country in some sunlit field, rather than riding the shoulders of a giant who might or might not be planning to serve him with a haunch of venison on the side. How ever did he manage to keep such a cool head?

When she'd been planning to kill Peter, her heart pounded fit to burst. And when King Edmund had surprised her on the stair, she came very near to fainting. He carried himself with such a dignified ease that she almost forgot his startling anger when they'd met. *Traitorous*, she'd called him, and his sudden ferocity nearly scared her out of her wits. She'd only meant to get a rise out of him, but his reaction ate at her. She ached to ask about it as much as she feared the subject.

Ed noticed her quiet. “All right?” he murmured near her ear. “Need my cloak?”

She shook her head. He slid a hand over hers and squeezed discreetly. Asha noticed only then that she was shivering, but not from the cold. She tried to withdraw her hand from his, but he kept hold of her for a moment. His serious, chestnut-bark eyes remained on hers, and her heartbeat sped up.

“Harfang castle,” Humrubble boomed. “And we aren’t the first to arrive.”

She and Ed sprang apart, both seeming to become aware that they weren’t alone. Asha saw a pair of familiar horses being led into the stable, a grey mare and a chestnut stallion. When Phillip looked up at them, he opened his mouth, but Asha shook her head frantically. Phillip said nothing.

Ed noticed the talking horses too, and Asha saw him scan the courtyard for Nalis. He looked back toward Phillip, but by now the horses had allowed themselves to be led into the stable.

Humrubble lowered them to the ground. “Thank you for your kind help,” Edmund said with a bow.

The giant grinned, which would have looked ghastly on most creatures his size, but Asha found herself beginning to like the fellow. She hoped he didn’t have the same tastes as his other brethren, particularly now after he and Edmund had chatted so freely about fishing and shot-putting stones.

She didn’t have much time to dwell on this however, because the giants led them directly into the castle, Edmund resuming his stern façade and tight hold on the belt.

Guards escorted them to the throne room at once when they saw Humrubble leading the party. Round-eyed and edgy, Asha went along behind Edmund, who remained as composed as before.

They entered the throne room to see a towering giant in acres of robes sitting on an equally large gilded throne. The giant’s long black beard curled over his chest, and his crown must have been made from a fortune in gold. Asha stared, quite aware that it was impolite but without the slightest ability to stop.

“Greetings, sire, from the Kingdom of Narnia, and from High King Peter the Magnificent, Emperor of the Lone Islands and Lord of Cair Paravel,” Edmund said with another bow (how did he do that without shaking in his boots?). “I am King Edmund the Just, Duke of Lantern Waste, Count of the Western March, and Knight of the Noble Order of the Table. I have come on a matter of parley, and I hope that you’ll forgive me for my lack of formality. It’s been a terribly long journey.”

“Ho-Ho,” the king bellowed. “The little thieves have come to steal

another trinket, eh?" He leered at them until Asha worried that they might try to eat her after all, dryad or no.

"I have heard tales that you believe us to have stolen something," Edmund continued calmly. "Pray tell me, what is this thing? I'm only too happy to right a wrong, if such a deed has occurred."

"Not stolen from us," said the giant with great, deafening laughter. "From our allies in Selbaran. I hope you believe me when I say they won't stop from destroying your kingdom for it, either."

"Do explain, sire," Edmund went on, nodding his head as if this were a talk about the weather or the price of salt or the quality of the local wool.

"You've stolen a sacred tree," the giant king said, "and they mean to have it back, though I can't say they'll cease their warfare once they've gotten it. And may I add that I see their point."

Asha felt a sick, swooping sensation in her belly, and she tugged at the belt.

Edmund glanced at her and seemed to remember something. "We were gifted a tree at our annual Coronation Festival."

"Not just any tree." The giant laughed again, his large belly rippling with the motion. He seemed to be enjoying the joke, while Edmund watched him with an expression of confusion. "A tree spirit that's sacred to them. A dryad."

Ed dropped the belt and stared at her. Asha wondered if she should run.

Edmund Hedges His Bets

“We thank you for the gift,” said the giant king. “Lord Humrubble, please be certain that it is sent to the kitchen pantry. As you can see, Edmund of Narnia, we have no intention of carrying on with such bothersome details as parley.”

Ed thought fast. Asha started edging away from him toward the door of the throne room, but Humrubble scooped her up. She squirmed and fought, but Ed had to admire that she didn’t yell for his help. He knew by the look on her face that she didn’t believe she’d receive it. He gauged the distance to the throne room door. He’d be no match for the ten to twelve giants in the enormous throne room—thirteen, if the king decided to enter into it. What he needed was—

Boom. Boom. Boom.

The giant king sat straight up in his throne at the noise outside. “Guards! See to that disruption!”

There was rather a lot of milling around after that, in which the giant lords and the guards all hurried out of the throne room. “Humrubble,” shouted the king, “see that this ambassador of Narnia is shown proper Harfang hospitality.”

Ed felt pretty certain that he’d be shown straight to their ovens. He put a hand on his sword hilt—by Aslan, he’d die fighting if he were to die at all—but Humrubble picked him up in one huge fist, pinning his arms to his sides, and tromped out of the throne room with him and Asha. Out of one large window, Ed caught sight of fireworks bursting madly in the sky.

Striving for his best show of calm (not easy when one is about to become tonight’s main course), Ed said to Humrubble, “Tell me this isn’t how you treat all of your ambassadors.”

“I wouldn’t treat them anyhow if I had my druthers,” the giant grunted. “One’s got to have a job to feed one’s family, eh? Who knows how I manage that on this salary.”

“Which is ...?” Ed avoided responding to Asha’s astounded look. When Humrubble told him his rate of pay, Ed scoffed. “*That’s* your wages? How big is your family?”

“My wife, myself, two little’uns, another on the way.”

“You know,” Ed said, “I do have a solution to that problem.”

Humrubble eyed him as he tromped along. "I'm listening."

"Narnia could use a heavy guard like yourself. We certainly pay better for a family of five." He smiled, and Asha's mouth dropped open. "Cair Paravel's right on the sea. Excellent fishing."

Humrubble stopped walking then and Ed could see the wheels turning in the giant's head, calculating the cost of living for his family in Narnia as opposed to the dismal rate of pay a soldier got here in Ettinsmoor. Uncommonly smart, for a giant, Ed thought. He was glad he'd guessed right on the giant's disposition toward his job. Humrubble had mentioned a taste for seafood, as well as a dislike for Harfang's "blasted freezin' winters and roastin' summers."

Finally, Humrubble gave another grunt and resumed walking. "Have you ever tried to defect from an alliance? They hunt you until there's no rest, let alone a spot o' fishing."

Ed smirked. "Actually, I do know something about that." From the corner of his eye, he saw Asha snap her mouth shut. Humrubble's attention zeroed in again, and Ed made the most of it. "You'll have the full backing of the Narnian army, as well as that of our considerable allies. I doubt serving us for dinner will provide your family with such lasting satisfaction."

Humrubble paused, his face dark and beetle-browed, and Ed wondered if he'd pressed too far. But then the giant gave a roaring belly laugh. "What do they call you at home, King Edmund of Narnia, Duke and Count and Knight of somesuch? Awfully long name for a working man to remember."

"Just Ed."

"Well, Just Ed," Humrubble said with another booming laugh, "if it's you offering, then I'm accepting." He set Edmund on the ground and gave him a teeth-rattling thump on the back.

Edmund staggered a little. Asha gave him a frantic look. After a stern pause in which her expression grew more terrified, Ed nodded toward her. "About my ... er, gift to the king? I'm sure you feel that since he's rejected my offer of parley ...?"

Humrubble plopped her down as well. Asha stumbled and landed on the floor, her wrists still bound by his belt. Ed hauled her to her feet by its end. "Edmund," she began, "I—"

"Later," he interrupted. "Humrubble, how do we get out of here?"

Escape And Explanations

The fireworks outside proved just the thing to allow Edmund, Asha, and Humrubble to slip out to the stables. The castle was in an uproar. Someone had set fire to an outbuilding where they stored a supply of fireworks meant for a winter celebration. In the confusion, Edmund found Phillip and Hrura. "Where are the others?" he asked as he released his belt from Asha's wrists.

"Nalis set the fire," Phillip said. Edmund swung gratefully onto his back.

Asha hurried to Hrura. "Are you well enough to carry me?"

"Yes, my lady." Asha leaped onto Hrura's back.

"This way," said Humrubble. "Most of the gates are locked, but the kitchen staff has outside access from the rear of the grounds."

Asha seemed reluctant to follow him at the mention of the kitchens, but Ed and Phillip hurried on at the giant's word. "Where is Nalis?" Ed called over the noise of the fireworks booming overhead.

"He's already slipped out. He's to meet us round front," Phillip said.

Ed looked back over his shoulder at the chaos of the castle grounds. "I suppose I'll have to tell Peter the embassy has failed."

"I'm sorry we could not find you faster, sire," added Phillip. "We ran into trouble with a group of hags and boggles on the road to the castle. They thought we were dumb horses." The talking horse snorted and shook his head. "Nalis had to hide so they wouldn't suspect us for Narnians. He's quite sore about that, as he'd rather have charged in with his swords flashing."

"I'm sure," Ed said.

When they got to the gates leading from the kitchen to the road out of Harfang, the party found them locked. Phillip turned in a circle while Ed scanned the grounds, but Humrubble assured them there would be no other way. If any gate were left relatively untended, this was it.

"Looking for help?" came a voice outside the iron gate. There was a flash of red, and Broadear bounded into sight with a set of keys in his mouth. "The guard never knew what hit him. Always trust a mission of cunning to a fox. Quickly now, milord."

"You're a welcome sight!" Ed said. "Did you get a message to Peter?"

Humrubble took the keys the fox slipped through the bars and they

were running again, out through the gate and on the road leading away into the mountains behind the castle. “I met a Hawk who carried our message on to Cair Paravel,” said Brodear. “Fear not, sire. The High King will have our warning by now.”

“And Nalis?”

“Fighting a giant on the southern road to distract them from our rescue. He will escape and rejoin us as soon as we’re away.”

“You’re all worth your weight in Narnian gold,” Ed said with a grin. “Now, let’s leave this blasted place and get back to Peter before it’s too late.”

The flight into the mountains seemed to take less time than it had to arrive, perhaps because they were no longer on foot, but Ed still longed to get back to Cair Paravel with as much speed as possible. His brother and sisters needed him. He wouldn’t let them face a battle without all the help and protection he could provide. And information, too. What about this business of the Selbarani believing the Narnians had stolen Asha? She’d said their embassy wasn’t aware that she’d accompanied them.

Nalis rejoined them soon after they set out, and his return was heartily welcomed. Humrubble advised him that his family lived at the southern edge of the mountains, and they’d find shelter there for the night. It was a long journey, even with a giant who knew these mountains guiding them by the shortest routes. During all that time, Ed and Asha did not speak, each too occupied with the business of getting out of the mountains. Or, if he were being honest for his part, too reluctant to speak aloud the words which would surely ruin their already tenuous trust.

A few days into their trek, a Narnian Eagle found them. “I bring you tidings from the High King,” he said.

Mention of his brother lifted a great weight from Edmund’s shoulders. “Are he and the queens well? Have the Selbarani attacked?”

“No one is harmed, sire. We’ve sent griffins over the water to watch for their arrival. We will be prepared in case of assault.”

Edmund let out the long breath he’d been holding ever since he learned of Selbaran’s plans. The Eagle told him of Peter’s call for all available Narnian soldiers to be ready for battle. He’d tried to send Lucy and Susan to safer quarters, but they refused to leave him. Ed smiled at that. He’d known from the start that practical Susan would think Peter foolish to waste a battle-experienced archer. And Lucy—brave Lucy, she’d never shrink from defending all that encompassed Narnia and Aslan. No doubt Peter would have an unexpected battle on his own ground if he tried forcing their sisters to go. “Tell Peter I’m on my way back, and I will find any allies I can to bring with me as I come.”

And so they went, rounding up anyone Humrubble thought sympathetic to their cause, or to the better life that awaited them if they chose to ally themselves with Narnia. By the time they reached the southern edge of the mountains, Humrubble had found them three more recruits, another giant and two Black Dwarves who'd found living under the giants no better than conditions had been under the White Witch. Ed had reservations about the dwarves, who regarded him with suspicion, but he decided to follow his instincts and trust Humrubble's judgement.

When they arrived at last at Humrubble's home, weary and in need of food and water, Edmund found time to speak with Asha. He found her carding wool in a shed behind the giants' home. Firelight from a little stove flickered on her face. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Paying a debt," she said, placing a newly carded roll into a basket. "We're uprooting this family. On top of that, we're eating their food and drink tonight. They'll need money for the journey south, and this doesn't get done by itself." She eyed him. "I'm not as dishonorable as you think."

"I'm sure sneaking aboard a ship bound for Narnia and inciting a war is quite honorable in your country," Ed said coldly.

The line of her mouth thinned. She seemed to be trying to choose her words. "Have you never changed your mind about a course you've taken?"

Edmund sighed. "Yes. Tell me the truth. Why did you come to Narnia?"

She set the wool cards down. "The Selbarani embassy intended to bring you a tree from the castle's orchard. I simply adopted a glamour to make myself look like the tree they wanted to bring, and slipped aboard the ship instead. My main concern was to find King Peter. I cared nothing for your politics. The Selbarani are the ones who declared war on you."

"You must have known they would do so. How did they find out you were missing?"

"We're closely guarded," she said. Her face darkened. "Free, but free within boundaries. Selbaran is a forest nation. They depend on dryads to maintain the trees by which our country thrives. Since your Battle of Beruna, the dryads have not been allowed outside Selbaran's borders. So you see, Edmund, I have simply exchanged one captivity—" She pointed at him, "—for another."

"Asha," he said, without knowing what else to add. He stepped forward, closer.

She shot out of the chair. "At the time, I didn't care whether or not the Selbarani would declare war on you. I welcomed it. My parents will never come home." Her voice broke, and tears shone in her eyes.

With no other ideas, Ed took her hands and made her look at him. “And now?”

“Now ... Now ...” Her gaze came up to meet his, clear green even in the dim light, glistening with unshed tears. “I’ve come to see that the Narnians aren’t all that they seemed. At least one isn’t.”

Ed couldn’t help it. Whether it was that he’d completely lost his senses, or that she’d kept him from freezing to death during their journey through the mountains, or the sorrowful admiration in her eyes—he kissed her.

For a few wonderful seconds, he ceased to be a king, with the weight of a country’s troubles on his shoulders. Ceased to be a brother, struggling to live up to the expectations of his family. Ceased to be anything but right here, right now, kissing Asha and feeling her press softly against him.

And then she pulled away with a little, pained sound, and touched her fingers to her lips. “I’m sorry, Edmund.” She hurried from the shed in a flutter of skirts, leaving him confused and frustrated.

The Journey Home

They did not speak for days. Asha swung back and forth, one moment resolute in her need to avoid him, and the next, terribly missing his wit and companionship. Aslan had made her promise to return him to his home world. She couldn't let herself fall for him if she had to let him go, couldn't afford to.

What was his world like? Like Narnia, with its wide, sunny plains? Like Selbaran, with its deep, cool forests? Or like neither, a world she'd only imagined in her wildest fantasies? Would he be happy when he returned? Were there others in that world, missing him?

Could she follow?

Asha shuddered fearfully. It had taken all her resolve to come to Narnia, to abandon the world she knew. Hatred had driven her then. Now, without the rage to spur her on, and faced with the possibility of entering another unknown place—one that might not have trees, for all she knew—she recoiled.

Captive or not, she missed her forest home. Every part of her yearned to go back to it. But first, she had to right the wrong she'd done. She would go back to the Selbarani and show them that this war was folly, that she'd chosen to come here. And somehow, she would convince them that the dryads ought to be free to leave Selbaran if they chose.

They crossed the Narnian border with mixed relief and trepidation. During the trek home, they found signs of increasing battle between the Selbarani and the Narnian people. Homes had been burned, crops spoiled. One afternoon, when they came upon a whole wheatfield blackened into soot and ashes, Edmund turned to her in his saddle. "How many others came with the embassy ship that didn't make themselves known to us?"

"Five score, maybe half again as much," she admitted, keeping her eyes on the field.

"A hundred and fifty soldiers," Edmund said. Anger filled his words. "These people may starve this spring if they can't absorb the cost of this damage."

A moment later, an elderly pair of satyrs emerged from the cabin at the edge of the field. "Your Highness," greeted the first. He tugged at a long, greying beard, then bowed. "It is an honor. Do you need shelter for the

night?”

“No. Thank you,” said Edmund. He reached into a pouch at his belt and withdrew a few golden coins, which he handed to the satyr. “For your fields.”

The satyr’s eyes went round, and his wife began chattering. “Thank you, sire. Thank you! M-May your rule be long and fruitful!”

“One can hope,” Edmund said. “Good day to you.” And they were off again.

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A few days into Narnia, they made camp in the forest they’d passed through on their way north. Edmund found Asha carving a long, thin piece of wood with a knife borrowed from one of the dwarves. Their recruits had swelled to thirty, with word of more coming. Ed watched her carve with long, efficient strokes. “Making a longbow?”

“I’ve bartered the wood from a Narnian dryad elder,” she said, eyes on her work. “I don’t know if you know this, but a bow made from an elder dryad’s wood, and carved by a dryad, is unbreakable. It rarely misses, and only fire can destroy it. You’re going to need good weapons.”

Surprised, Ed watched her. She sat cross-legged in front of the campfire with her lips pursed in concentration. He fumbled for something to say, trying to make sense of this change in her. “What did you give the dryad in return?”

“A promise to stop the Selbarani. They’ll redouble their efforts once they realize how fertile the soil is in Narnia.”

Edmund pulled a water flask from his pocket and sat beside her. “Are you thirsty?”

She shook her head and went on carving. She’d tied her long, pale hair back with a leather lace. He preferred it loose around her shoulders, and kept a firm grip on the flask to keep from tugging the lace free. His gaze lingered on her mouth. “About what happened ... in the wool shed ...”

“A mistake,” she said, finally looking at him. “I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression.”

She didn’t look like she’d been giving him the wrong impression. Her eyes remained on his a few moments longer than necessary, and that familiar, pale-green blush rose in her cheeks. On a human, the color might have looked sickly. On her, he found it strangely beautiful. “I’m not sorry,” he said.

Her mouth opened and her blush deepened. An expression flickered across her face, a brief shadow of the sad look she’d given him back at the wool shed, before she went on carving. “I’ll fight with this bow, if it comes to that. I can make you one if I find another dryad willing to—”

“Asha.” Ed pressed a hand over hers, stalling her. “I don’t need a bow.”

“Right.” Blushing further, she drew in a breath and held it. She sat motionless as only a dryad could.

They sat like that for several lengthy seconds. Ed made himself smile. “If you don’t say something, I’m just going to have to kiss you again.”

She gave a nervous laugh. “I found some apples in the forest. They’ll help expand our provisions. I can show you, if you like.”

Edmund stood up and gave her his hand. She took it and he helped her to her feet. Instead of releasing her, he pulled her closer. “We’re not done talking about this.”

She gave that light laugh again and slipped out of his grasp, already setting aside her bow and walking out of the clearing. If he didn’t know better, he’d have said she was running from him. With a resolute sigh, he followed.

A Painful Discovery

Signs of warfare grew increasingly worse the further south they went. Asha shuddered with each new piece of evidence of the harm she'd caused. Each burnt crop, each ransacked home was like a physical blow because these were Edmund's subjects. Every ill that befell them was an attack on him. When they arrived at a house burned to the foundation, where a family with three young children struggled to recover what little of their belongings remained, Asha halted on Hrura before the wreckage. Tears filled her eyes. "What have I done?" she whispered.

Nalis overheard her. "You did not light the fires. The king will make right this damage."

"If he stops to right every wrong the Selbarani have done, his pockets will be empty by the time we reach Cair Paravel," Asha said.

Nalis's deep laughter echoed across the burnt property, startling her. "You have no concept of the coffers at Cair Paravel. The Kings and Queens of Narnia will not let their people go hungry. Worry not, my lady. All will be made good."

She noticed that this was the longest talk she'd had with the centaur since their meeting. "You are more confident in me than I am in myself. Do you not worry that I'll turn back to my treachery?"

Nalis fixed his dark eyes on her. "King Edmund trusts you. Whomever he trusts, I shall trust." He nodded, stoic and stern, then moved away.

A bright spot of warmth filled Asha's heart. That brightness carried her most of the way across Narnia, during which the weather warmed and Edmund's recruits more than tripled in number. They grew so numerous that their ragtag assembly could now afford to travel with tents, and Edmund insisted that Asha be allowed the best of them. Weary, Asha lay down that evening on the soft grass inside the tent (she'd refused the tent's groundcloth, since she didn't need it) and closed her eyes.

She dreamed of home that night, of vast green forests and secret hollows that called to her to roam and explore, to use her magic to help the trees flourish.

She woke in the morning feeling homesick. The sound of metal clanging against metal reached her ears, and she left the tent to find a Black Dwarf forging a set of armor at a makeshift forge. Each clang of the hammer

on the metal plate drove the truth home. “We’re really going to war, then.”

“I hope so, or I’m doing a lot of work for nothing,” the dwarf said.

“You’re one of the dwarves who fought with the White Witch,” Asha said.

He grunted. “Wemblenik.” Sweat beaded on his bearded face, and he paused to wipe it away with a stained cloth.

“Asha Faywater.” She sat on an upright log and pulled an apple from a basket by the fire. “Did you believe in the Witch’s ideals?”

“I believed in money, and I believed in staying out the way of someone in power. There are worse reasons to fight in a war.”

Asha wondered why her parents had decided to fight with the Witch. They’d never told her. “And now? Why side with Edm—King Edmund?”

The dwarf paused again, this time to stare at her with a long, penetrating look. Finally he returned to his work. “He seems a sensible sort, for all he sided with *her* once too.”

A chill raced through her. “What?”

“Didn’t he tell you?” The dwarf’s thick brows twitched upward. “It was he who started the war that ended at Beruna. Sold out his family to the Witch. Tried to, anyhow. His family fought the Witch as much to keep Edmund out of her grasp as to take Narnia from her.”

Choking on her horror, Asha hugged herself. It all made sense now. His disapproving talk of revenge, his anger at being accused of treason.

Edmund was the reason her parents had been killed.

Grieving anew, Asha laid the uneaten apple back in the basket and left Wemblenik to his work.

She found Edmund in his tent, studying a map spread on a low table. Tears poured down her face and anger rushed through her, making her tremble. “It was you. You are the reason they went to war. My parents would still be alive if you hadn’t turned traitor to your family.”

He looked up and his face gave no indication of his thoughts, but she saw him grip the edge of the table until his knuckles went white. “The Witch would have gone to war anyway. Aslan’s army had already assembled. I was just an excuse to hurry things along.”

“How could you? How *could* you?” Sobbing, she snatched up an earthenware pitcher to throw at him.

In the next instant he was across the tent with her wrist in an unbreakable grip, and his eyes were hard and implacable. Without breaking her gaze, he eased the pitcher from her grasp and set it back on the table. When he spoke, she had to strain to hear over the thumping of her heartbeat. “I have spent five years trying to undo what I did in five minutes of

selfishness. If you're free of mistakes, I welcome you to start throwing stones." He released her, but kept staring with that blazing look of challenge in his eyes.

Still crying, and feeling like a fool for it, she watched him turn away and fold up the map with such care that it might have been made from sheets of hammered gold. His shoulders remained rigid under his tunic. His silence stabbed at her heart. "Why did you do it?" she whispered.

He stopped fussing with the inkwell and pens on the table, but didn't turn back to her. For a few moments he didn't speak, and she wondered if he would. At last, he said quietly, "I don't know."

His words were filled with a cutting bitterness that echoed the silent cry in her heart. Feeling hollow, she retreated from the tent.

The Eve Of Battle

By now, Edmund had amassed two hundred experienced soldiers, many of whom had fought at Beruna. They were almost to Cair Paravel, and had run into Selbarani troops. Each time, Ed's militia routed the enemy soldiers with little trouble. His troops cheered with each victory, but Edmund remained grim. He knew that while these skirmish victories boosted morale, the true test would come when his band of followers arrived at the castle tomorrow and faced whatever lay in wait there. The Selbarani were sure to have saved their strongest fighters for a siege on the castle.

On top of that, he had not spoken to Asha since their argument. At first, he resented that—resented wanting to talk with her when she was the very reason Narnia was at war. Then he felt guilty—troubled and unable to sleep because he knew that he was once again paying for a past treason against his family. One that had spread its poison into Selbaran, and into Asha's life.

And finally, late in the night when he lay staring at the ceiling of his tent and listening to the wind, he admitted that he cared for her. No matter what evil he had done her, no matter what her intentions had been when she came to Narnia. Could they lay all those past wrongs to rest?

He thought of her sharp tongue and the aloof way she carried herself. By Aslan's mane, he missed her.

Edmund threw aside his blankets and scrubbed his fingers through his unruly hair. Snatching up his short cloak, dagger, and sword (he went nowhere without them, so close to Selbarani enemies), he left the tent.

No one was awake at this hour. Moonlight silvered the edges of tents and the outlines of wagons. Pride warmed him at the way the Narnians had answered his call to arms. These people cared about their country, and he would not fail them.

Not this time. Not ever again.

Before he could lose his determination, he strode toward Asha's tent. He called to her, but she didn't answer. Concerned, he stepped inside.

Asha was not within. He took in her sparse furnishings. A low-burning lantern, a chair, a table. No bed, just blankets. She didn't need a bed, after all.

He spied her handmade bow and quiver on the table. A set of arrows lay beside it. He touched one arrow, admiring the smooth, straight wood but careful not to touch the fletching. Goose feathers, or so she'd told him when

they were on speaking terms.

“What are you doing here?”

He spun around at the breathy sound of Asha’s voice, completely at a loss. She stood in silhouette in the doorway of her tent. “Nice work,” he blurted. “The arrows. Very neat. Er ... well done.”

“Thank you.” She brushed past him to collect the arrows and slide them into the quiver. “Why did you come?” She halted and sighed, and when she spoke, her voice softened. “Is something wrong, I mean?”

He took his time removing his cloak and weapons, using the action as an excuse to avoid looking at her. He laid them on the table and finally looked her in the eye. “I’m sorry, Asha.”

She froze then, like a deer caught out in the open. After a moment, she relaxed a little. “Me, too.”

They spoke at once.

“Edmund, I didn’t mean to accuse—”

“If I’d known what would happen, I never—”

They both stopped. Awkwardness filled the tent. With his heartbeat banging in his chest, Edmund said, “I’ve been tearing myself apart trying to find a way to tell you how sorry I am. You’ve no idea ... You’ve no idea what it’s like, living with what I did, with how many lives might have been spared—” He choked on his own words and dropped into the chair. “—if only I’d made the right choice.” Unable to speak further, he put his head in his hands. His gut churned with anger, humiliation, pain, guilt. Always that crushing guilt.

Silence, and then a whisper of fabric. Soft hands pried his away. Asha knelt before the chair with her eyes full of sorrow and concern. “*You* aren’t as dishonorable as you think, either, Edmund Pevensie.”

He stared at her, at the way the lantern light flickered across her skin and hair. Reaching up, he stroked a long, silk-soft lock that fell forward over her shoulder. This time, when he kissed her, she didn’t pull away.

They talked for hours about things other than the looming war. About Selbaran and what it had been like years ago. About England, so far away it seemed like a distant memory or something he’d read about in a book. He told her about cars, about airplanes and telephones and a hundred other things she’d never see. She listened to it all, and finally, when he started to get up from the blankets, she tugged at his hand. “Edmund?”

He stopped and looked back at her.

Faint worry lines appeared between her brows. “Will you stay? Just a little while? We—” She took a deep breath. “We might not get this chance again.”

He knelt back down and took her hands in his, kissing each. “Whatever happens, Asha, I promise you. We will work together, fight together, to make them see reason. They’ll have to.”

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Asha waited until she was absolutely certain he was asleep. His chest rose and fell, his breath came evenly. With a trembling hand, she stroked the earthy-dark fringe of his hair off his forehead. Very quietly, she whispered, “I love you.”

Siege

The journey back to the castle was long, but not difficult. Still, Asha worried. Edmund's militia would be tired from the trek, and would likely have to face battle at the end of it. Could she have avoided this by remaining home? Edmund thought he would have to pay the rest of his life for a moment of blind anger. Now, she knew all too well how he felt. *Please, please let us get there before it's too late to stop this.*

She rode at the head of the column beside Edmund. He caught her looking and smiled, then reached over and squeezed her hand. She tried to smile back, but it came only with a forced effort.

When they stopped to rest and eat, she dished out hot food for the soldiers. Edmund accepted his bowl with a grin, and a lingering touch of her hand that made her shiver like a sapling in a restless breeze. She found her gaze locked on his so long that the soldier behind him cleared his throat.

Blushing and turning back to her work, she continued to fill plates and bowls. Presently she overheard a small group of soldiers muttering a meter or two away from the mess table. Her sensitive ears could not help picking up parts of the conversation.

“—reason we're fighting—”

“—turn her over to them—”

“—doesn't belong here—”

“—what King Edmund's doing with her, I don't know.”

They were discussing *her*. Face flaming, Asha glanced at Edmund to find his expression stormy. He set his bowl aside and vaulted into the back of a nearby wagon, where he stood well above the assembled crowd. He put his fingers to his lips and gave a loud whistle that carried across the valley where they'd camped.

All eyes turned to him. In a mail shirt and pauldrons, he made an imposing figure. “Today we march into battle,” he announced. His voice echoed off the valley walls. “All of you are militia, and many of you have families. Each of you is free to leave as he chooses, but know this. I do not place my trust in others lightly.” He cast a long look at Asha, who ducked her head in embarrassed gratitude. “If you follow me,” he added, “you do so because you're willing to believe that I will not lead you wrong.” He turned his attention to the group of soldiers who had spoken ill of her. Edmund

merely looked at them, but each of the soldiers hung his head. The one in front, a big satyr, paused and then gave a solemn nod.

The soldiers nodded to one another. A centaur raised his sword. "For King Edmund, the Wandbreaker!"

Others echoed the call. "For King Edmund! For Narnia!"

Only then, when each soldier was cheering and raising his sword into the air, did Asha realize that not one of the soldiers had slipped away.

- # -

Smoke.

Dear Lion, Cair Paravel was burning. It was too late for talk. Edmund's heart stuttered in his chest. Were his brother and sisters safe?

He'd brought his troops along the Great River, using the landscape to help conceal them and get them as close as possible to the castle without losing the element of surprise. Fortunately, trees bordered the river to help conceal their approach from any enemy lookouts that might fly overhead. But now, with the castle in sight, Edmund knew that the time had come to attack.

Enemy soldiers surrounded Cair Paravel. While its position on a sea cliff protected it from seaward attack, the landward side remained vulnerable, and the Selbarani were making the most of that. Ed counted three massive trebuchets, as well as a hundred cavalry and many more foot soldiers and archers. And giants, he noticed grimly. Ettinsmoor had obviously sent soldiers in advance of his effort to parley with them.

Humrubble saw this and gave a frightening scowl. "Never had a chance, did yeh? All about attackin' first and talkin' later. I've had enough of that rot. I ain't known a day o' peace in fifty years."

"If we win," Ed assured him, "you will."

They were a short charge away from the attackers. Edmund had sent a Narnian swallow to Peter to convey his strategy. The plan was to pin the Selbarani against the side of the castle and prevent escape to the landward side, while Peter's soldiers would attack from the castle. Between them, they might force the Selbarani into surrender.

And if they couldn't ... He tried not to think of that.

He signaled Nalis, who summoned the centaurs for the charge. On Phillip, Ed drew his sword and prepared to signal.

Asha rode up beside him on Hrura with her bow drawn. "What are you doing?" Ed demanded. "Why aren't you with the archers?"

"I will fight up here beside you," she told him.

He drew Phillip closer to the mare. "Absolutely not," he said in a low,

urgent voice. The first charge was always the deadliest. The opposing army would be fresh and hungry for blood.

Asha merely looked at him. “Do not think to stop me, Edmund. This is my place.”

Warmth washed through him as he looked at her, wanting to tell her how much that faith meant to him—but there was no time. He nodded. “On my signal.” He raised the sword, feeling the expectant energy of the soldiers behind him, and let it fall.

They shot forward in a glorious thunder, out of the valley the river had cut through the earth and onto the plain before the castle. “*For Narnia!*” Ed screamed. Behind him, the roar went up from his troops, drowning out the pounding of hoofbeats.

He counted Phillip’s strides in time with the slamming of his heartbeat. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

They crashed through the shocked front line of the Selbarani soldiers like a tidal wave. The momentum carried him several meters into the fray. Phillip leaped over a fallen Selbarani warrior and Ed swept his sword out at one of their pikemen. The metallic clang of the blade rang in his ears as the impact bashed up his arm into his shoulder. He spun to face another foe as soon as the first fell. Beside him, he heard the deadly *zip-zip* of Asha’s arrows. Phillip dodged another attacker. They fought like one creature, anticipating each other.

Ka-thoom. A trebuchet released a boulder, which went sailing through the air and smashed into the castle wall. “Destroy the trebuchets!” Ed shouted.

Humrubble and the other giant who had joined them each turned on one of the enormous siege catapults, smashing them with their fists and with the very boulders the Selbarani had been using as ammunition. The two trebuchets splintered and broke. The giants each seized a long piece of timber and began using it as a club. Humrubble tried to advance to the last trebuchet, but by now he and the other giant were engaged with the Ettinsmoor giants and fighting bitterly.

The last trebuchet flung a boulder that slammed through the castle battlements. Narnian archers fell screaming over the wall. “Phillip! Get me closer!” Ed yelled.

They galloped over the battleground, slashing a path through their enemies with gleaming steel and flashing hooves. The moment they were close enough, Ed leaped from Phillip’s back and gripped onto a rung of the trebuchet. He scrambled up the side, one-handed, slashing at the rigging and counterweights with his sword. Ropes snapped.

Thunk-thunk-thunk. Enemy arrows lodged in the wood beside his head, driving him back. A Selbarani soldier had seen him and climbed up the huge catapult to stop him. The man shouted to his allies and more arrows flew past Edmund. Ed plunged upward, but his sword caught in a snarl of chains and ropes.

The soldier gave a wicked laugh and slashed at him with a dagger, missing by a hair's breadth. Ed jerked at his sword, but it barely budged. He tried again.

The soldier came at him once more, but Ed heard a sickening thud. The soldier's eyes went blank, and he fell away with a goose-feather arrow in his back. Edmund searched for Asha, far below. Already, she had turned to fire on the archers aiming at Edmund. She was on foot now, with Hrura fighting beside her.

With a last jerk, his sword came free and he charged up to the top of the last trebuchet. There, he hacked at the pulleys until they broke. The top of the trebuchet shuddered. Too late, he realized he'd cut the lines that kept it steady. The tower collapsed, and with a yell, he plummeted through the air.

A griffin flashed through the air and caught him. Ed collided with it and gave a painful grunt. "Thanks," he puffed.

"You've returned just in time," the griffin said. "The High King—"

But in the next instant, the griffin gave a terrible shriek and folded its wings, falling like a stone. A Selbarani arrow stuck deep in its breast. Ed dropped away and smashed to the ground. Dazed, he groaned and felt for his sword.

A familiar face loomed over him: the Selbarani general he'd met at the dwarven village. With a bloodthirsty leer, the general raised his sword to strike.

Thwack. An arrow sank into the man's neck and he crumpled. Asha again. Edmund barely had time to give her a grateful look before everyone went quiet around them.

The Selbarani soldiers parted to reveal a woman in a high-collared black dress, with violet skin and lurid red eyes. She walked slowly, smiling at him as if she were on a pleasure stroll.

Edmund found his sword, but his fingers would not close around the grip. He stared in uneasy horror. *What new foe is this?*

Ice And Vines

When she saw the violet woman, Asha's breath shuddered to a halt in her chest. Panic swirled through her. *Witch!* "Edmund!" she cried, already running.

A Selbarani soldier sprang into her path. She reached for an arrow, only to find them gone. Her quiver was empty.

She slashed at the soldier with her bow. The upper limb smashed across his cheek. He staggered and fell. Another soldier tried to stop her, but Hrura charged forward and battered him away.

Another soldier ran at her, and instead of attacking, he seized the bow and hauled it away. No match for his strength, Asha could only watch he flung her bow into the mass of fighters.

Wemblenik came to her rescue, stabbing the soldier with his dagger. Asha ran on, dodging Selbarani warriors in a desperate effort to get to Edmund before the witch harmed him.

But it was too late. Edmund gave a raw gasp and turned pale, clutching at his throat. His fingers went blue, and his veins stood out starkly against his skin. The ends of his hair went white with frost. He dropped onto his back and writhed with agony, unable to breathe.

"So much fear in you," the witch said, staring at him as if in affection. "So much for me to feed on. I'm glad the Selbarani asked me to come, truly."

Oh, dear loving maples, she's killing him! Asha's heart gave a frantic, painful thud and she leaped between them, thrusting out her hands and summoning all the magic that was in her.

Vines sped outward from her hands, bashing against the icy wall of the witch's fear-spell. They knotted upward and down in a living shield, sprouting leaves, snapping off with frost and growing again, then wilting. Asha forced her magic to obey, forced the shield to grow and spread and not react to the fear welling in her own heart. Images of her dead parents sprang into her thoughts. Images of whole forests burning, of her fellow dryads screaming in pain. Every horrific thought the witch could put into her mind. And then the very real memory of Edmund behind her, freezing to death. Asha whimpered, and it took all her will to stand fast.

Edmund's chest gave a great heave and he sucked in air, shaking and stunned. *Cold, so cold.* He struggled to his knees.

Asha stood before him, trembling and sobbing with her fingers pressed against a frail net of vines edged with icicles and frost. "No! No!" she begged. "Please, no!"

Beyond her stood the violet woman, still smiling, but shaking her head as if calling a wayward child to task. "You cannot stand against me," the woman purred. "You know it, dryad."

Asha cried out and cowered behind the vine shield. Her hair froze in long, pale strands, and when the ends snapped off, they changed to silvery birch leaves that fluttered to the ground. The vine shield cracked, and Asha gave a frightening wail of pain. *Oh, Aslan, no,* Edmund thought.

"Come, stop this foolishness, dryad," said the violet woman. "In the end, nothing can stand against its own fears."

Still shaking, Edmund grappled for his sword. The grip was bitter cold. He forced himself past his panic, forced his fist around the grip, and raised his sword. "I can," he said, and thrust the sword through the vine net and into the witch's belly.

The witch gave a long, piercing shriek and burst into a cloud of black smoke that hissed away into the sky. Asha collapsed and the vine shield crumbled to the ground. The fear-spell dissolved, and the tide of battle turned. Narnian troops surrounded the Selbarani, shouting with renewed vigor. Then Edmund spied other fighters, not Narnian, battling the enemy army. Members of every allied nation that had come to Narnia to pledge its allegiance, all beating back the remaining Selbarani fighters, wedging them against the castle wall until the very last Selbarani and Ettinsmoor soldier surrendered his weapon in defeat. A deafening cheer rose from the throat of every Narnian.

Edmund cared for none of it. He pulled Asha into his lap and brushed trembling fingers through her hair, now nearly as short as his. Silver leaves littered the ground all around them. "Asha," he rasped.

She moaned and tried to cringe away, but he held her close. When her eyes opened, she looked on him with disbelief. "You're alive?" she whispered.

"Thanks to you." When he saw that she would be all right, he found a smile. "It seems you came here originally to kill a king, but managed instead to save another."

Her eyes flew open wide then, and with a cry, she sprang upward to fling her arms around his neck.

The impact almost knocked him onto his back. "*Oof!*" But he wrapped

his arms around her with a laugh and held on.

They'd done it. It was over. The Narnian allies had begun collecting the surrendering army's weapons. All was chaotic celebration around them, but all Ed could think about was the girl in his arms.

The Honor Of A King

“Your Majesty!” Phillip cried, galloping to them. “Are you all right?”

Asha got to her feet. Hrura arrived, and Asha put a steadying hand on the mare’s shoulder.

Reluctantly, Edmund swung up onto Phillip’s back. He wanted nothing more than to tend to Asha’s injuries, but a king’s duties would not wait. “I’m better than expected, my friend. Well done, and thanks. But where are King Peter and my sisters?”

Tumnus pushed through a group of fauns, gasping. “Your Majesty! King Edmund!” He gave a breathless bow. “Thank the Lion you’ve come! If you hadn’t stopped the witch ... She nearly destroyed us. A moment longer —”

“My brother? My sisters?” Ed demanded.

“*Edmund!*”

Lucy’s voice. Ed sagged in relief when he spotted Lucy and Susan running toward him through a gap in a crowd of centaurs led by Nalis.

But they stopped short, their joyful expressions gone serious, and looked behind them to something Ed could not see.

The crowd parted, quiet and solemn, to reveal Peter limping toward them. His blond hair was streaked with blood, and an ugly gash ran down one side of his forehead from hairline to eyebrow. His shield was missing, and his tabard had been torn almost in half. Panting, he carried his bloodstained sword, Rhindon, to the place where Edmund sat astride Phillip. Lucy and Susan followed, clearly worried about Peter and glad to see Edmund, but unwilling to interrupt. Peter said nothing, just stood there looking at Edmund, catching his breath. His gaze flicked toward Asha and back again.

All eyes turned to them. Edmund could feel their curious stares on the back of his neck. Why didn’t Peter say something?

Nalis trotted forward beside Oreius, and both centaurs bowed deeply. “Your Majesties,” they echoed.

“*His Majesty,*” Peter called, and his voice carried across the plain. He looked back at Edmund and his gaze softened with something that could only be called pride. “You saved us, Ed.” He stood his sword on its point, and with a solemn nod, he knelt down.

Behind Peter, the others bowed: their sisters, the centaurs, the satyrs,

the fauns and all the animals. And then, to Edmund's amazement, all of the soldiers from the allied armies, bowing in an expanding wave until every last Narnian and Narnian ally had bent to one knee in front of him.

At a loss, he looked for Asha, but she, too, had dropped into a smiling curtsy.

Stunned into silence, Edmund looked at them all, showing their respect. To him.

So this was what it felt like to be a king.

- # -

Asha could not remember a happier moment, not even when her parents had been alive. She danced with Edmund in the great hall of Cair Paravel all night, under a glittering glass roof that reflected the starlight and moonlight of Narnia's clear night sky. The Narnian soil had revived her, but could not yet restore her hair. "It's so short," she said, patting it. "Is anyone staring?"

The music of the violins swelled in her ears as Edmund whirled her around. He caught her against his chest, his chestnut-bark eyes blazing with a look that made her dizzy. He bent his head to whisper in her ear. "If they are, it's only because you're the most beautiful creature in the room." He spun her again, then caught her hands in his. "Marry me, Asha."

"Wh-What?"

"Not now, of course," he said. "Not yet. There's time." He kissed her hands, then gave her such a look of fierce emotion that she went breathless. "I love you, Asha. I've never been more certain of anything in my life. Promise me you'll think about it."

Her heart staggered, and she remembered another promise that she'd made what seemed a lifetime ago. *You will see them home ... their wisdom will be needed greatly ... never let them know it.* She longed to deny those words, to take back any promise she might have made to Aslan.

How could she let Edmund go when she loved him so desperately?

But it could be years. Decades. Aslan had never told her *when*. Her heart leaped at the chance, even as sadness tugged at her. "We have so much to do, Edmund. I have to go back to my people and undo the damage the Selbarani have done. And ... my mother's ring..." She looked sadly at her hand. She'd always imagined that someday, when she married, she would wear the beautiful carved-wood ring her father had made for her mother on their own wedding day. "It was lost ... I can never wear it."

Edmund led her through a complicated spinning dance step. "Don't

answer today.” He gave her that heart-melting smile. “Just think about it. I can wait.”

“All right,” she said at last. And she gladly lost herself in the celebration of the day and the lightness in her heart.

Asha's Return

Seven Years Later

Edmund ducked into the state room. The last petitioner had left, and his brother had risen from his seat at the large oak desk. "Peter, can I speak to you for a moment?"

Peter rubbed a hand through his beard. "Of course." He took a closer look at Edmund, and Ed must have looked as agitated as he felt. Peter frowned. "What's wrong?"

Hardly able to breathe, Ed sputtered, "Asha's back."

Peter grinned. "Grand! Have the kitchens prepare a feast. She's been long overdue, and this is cause for a celebration."

"That's—That's just what I want to talk to you about," Ed said. His ears burned. "Peter, I mean to ask her to marry me."

At this, Peter gave a booming laugh. He strode closer and slapped Edmund on the back. "You've been asking her for seven years. I think she knows you want her for a wife by now."

"Right, and it's not been the time for it." Ed jogged alongside Peter as they left the state room. "Between our trips to Calormen and Archenland, and Asha's work in Selbaran, and Aslan knows what else, we haven't been able to see one another more than a visit here and there. I've got stacks of letters from her, but I want more than that. I want her." Ed released a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding. "I've always wanted her. I'd like your blessing."

Peter studied him, his eyes serious, and finally gave a broad smile. "You've always had it, brother." He clapped Ed on the back once more. "I guess this *is* a celebration, then! Come, let's see how a man wins himself a bride."

- # -

Asha stepped off the gangplank of the ship with her emotions tumbling inside her like stones in a shaken jar. An entourage of Selbarani waited behind her and a crowd of Narnian citizens waited to receive her. At the front of the Narnians stood a gray-muzzled Fox and a chestnut horse. Her heart

lightened at once. “Broadear! Phillip!” Dashing aside courtly propriety, she rushed toward them.

They accepted her hugs with laughter, and when she drew away she said, “Phillip, I’ve brought someone who’s been missing you.”

Phillip looked past her to where Hrura was trotting up the pier. He whinnied with joy, and there was talk and laughter and smiles all around. “Talking of missing you,” Phillip said at last, “we’re to escort you to the castle right away. King Edmund’s beside himself for your return.”

A wind blew across the pier then, carrying not the salt of the sea, but the scent of cherry blossoms. Aslan’s breath. And then she knew.

It was time.

No, no, her heart pleaded. All these years that had gone by—too many distractions, too many tasks that had to be done—all pale now, in comparison to the thing she’d wanted more than any other. The man she’d wanted. Each of his letters had been like a kiss, a caress, something to hold close to her heart when she hadn’t been able to see him.

And now, letters might be all she ever had of him.

Asha drew a painful breath and gave her friends a smile. “Let’s go, then.”

- # -

Ed fidgeted. Made himself sit upright. Fidgeted some more. Damn these stiff ceremonies. He’d be required to plaster his rear to the seat of his throne and smile and nod and say welcome, when all he wanted was to snatch her up in his arms and not let go.

When the doors of the great hall opened, Broadear and Phillip trotted in with their heads high. Behind them came Hrura, and he gave her an affectionate nod. And finally, when Asha entered, the marshal said, “Her Majesty Asha Faywater, Queen of the Dryads of Selbaran and Ruler of the Selbarani People.”

Ed barely listened to the title. He sat straighter, leaning forward in his seat. Asha entered the great hall wearing a silvery vine crown and a dress very like the one she’d worn so long ago. The long train swept the velvet runner.

But when his gaze went to her face, he saw nothing else. His breath stalled. In the years since her people had made her queen, she’d only grown lovelier. She curtsied to his sisters and brother, in front of each throne from right to left. And when she reached him, she curtsied low, with a little smile on her lips and a telltale gleam in her beautiful green eyes. “Your Majesty,” she murmured. “You look well.”

He found his voice with an effort. He laid his hands on the armrests of his throne with studied concentration, but his heart was in his throat with all the words he wanted to say to her. “I am well, my lady, now that you have arrived safe.”

He suffered an introduction to the rest of her entourage, and a general confusion as the lot of them was sorted out and shown to guest rooms in the castle. Then they were obligated to sit through a long, dull feast where he had no opportunity to speak to her beyond the required topics of her homeland and his. All of this, he already knew from her many letters of state. It was the other parts of her letters, the pages she’d tucked in after the discussions of borders and disputes and embassies, that he wanted to talk further on. But this was no place for that.

She did not look at him through much of the talk, with her attention drawn by his sisters and Peter and the many succulent dishes set before them. Edmund grew more and more frustrated by this, until at last when she reached for the salt cellar and her gaze met his. Unconcealed, helpless adoration shone from her eyes.

His heart surged in his chest. He couldn’t help smiling back.

Hourglass

How can I let him leave? How can I make him do so when I don't even want him to? Aching, Asha backed into a quiet alcove to watch Edmund across the crowded great hall. He laughed as a satyr led Queen Susan through a jovial dance. Asha's heart clutched at the way Ed's face lit up with merriment.

Oh, Aslan, please. Just a little more time, I beg you. She had no idea whether the Lion could hear her thoughts. He seemed to know everything else.

Hoofbeats sounded on the marble floor. "My lady, what is wrong?" Hrura asked quietly. "People are looking for you."

Tears filled Asha's eyes, and even then she could not look away from Edmund. "Hrura, I cannot do it. I will not."

At once, Hrura was grave. She alone knew of the task the Lion had given her mistress. "Aslan would never have given you a needless duty, my lady. We must believe that he knows its purpose."

Biting back a cry of pain, Asha said, "How can I know that he even cares?"

Hrura gave her a long, stern look that reminded Asha of her mother. "The king's own world needs him."

Asha took a shaky breath. "I need him," she whispered.

Unable to endure a moment more of putting on a serene face for the crowd in the great hall, she hurried away to the chambers the Pevensies had given her. The moment she closed the heavy oak door, she burst into tears.

- # -

She woke late in the night, uncertain what had roused her. The rushing of the sea filtered in through the open balcony doors, laden with the scent of salt and the sharp odor of autumn leaves. Narnia was breathtaking in the autumn. She'd never seen such a glorious blaze of color as that worn by the Narnian forests, even in her homeland. Narnia truly was a place of magic.

The knock at her door came so softly that she almost missed it. Worried that something might be wrong with one of her entourage, she pulled a warm robe on over her dress, went to the door, and opened it.

Edmund stood in the hall, holding a large, wrapped parcel and looking like he wasn't sure how he'd found himself there. He brushed his hair back in that awkward way that reminded her of when she'd first met him. "My lady." He backed away from the door as if to give her room to exit.

Asha stepped away from her door to allow him entrance. When he hesitated, she said, "You once spent the night in my tent. Don't you remember?"

His gaze shifted to the floor. "We were different then."

"Not so very different," she said softly.

He seem to make up his mind then. An odd look of determination crossed his face, and he stepped into the room. Rather like facing the gallows, she thought with puzzlement. "I brought you something," he told her. "I wanted to give it to you when you arrived, but ..." He held the parcel out.

With a smile, she sat at an ornately carved chair to undo the string and brown paper. All the fine wrappings that must be available to him, and he'd chosen this. How well he knew her. She untied the last knot and pulled the paper away.

Her elderwood bow. Speechless, she ran her fingers along the smooth-polished piece.

"I found it afterward," he said. "They'd trampled it into the earth, but it never broke."

"I recall telling you it wouldn't," she said, amused and touched. "You were a silly, stubborn boy." Setting the bow aside, she stood up and leaned forward on tiptoe, aiming to kiss his cheek.

He turned his head and she stopped with her lips a breath away from his. She froze, and his eyes went soft. "I'm not a boy anymore," he murmured.

Asha began shaking even as her heart rended in two. "No," she whispered. "No, you're not." And she kissed him.

To Catch A Wish

Edmund could barely sit still through the morning council. He'd promised to find Asha the moment his obligations were completed. Every bit of him was on edge. Today, he would propose to her. Not just in letters, too impersonal and too inanimate to show her how much he wanted her in his life—but for once and all.

Peter sat beside him, listening to grievances. Edmund tried to keep his attention on what was being said, but his mind wandered. Peter cast him a wry look of understanding.

The instant the last petitioner left the council room, Edmund rushed out the door. Peter laughed behind him, and Ed slowed down to let his chuckling brother catch up.

"Don't stop on my account," Peter said. "I can see that you're on a quest, and you won't be shaken from it. Where is she?"

"In the apple grove, I think," Ed said. He strode into the great hall, intending to take a shortcut.

Lucy and Susan saw him, and both women beamed. Peter had obviously told them of Ed's plan. "I told Hrura to be sure Asha isn't disturbed while she's in the apple grove," Susan said. "Good luck, Ed."

Lucy gave a little hop of excitement, her eyes shining.

Ed smiled and put his hand on the latch of the door that would take him down to the grove.

The clicking of hooves alerted them to an arrival. Faun Tumnus hurried into the great hall. He tugged at the graying beard on his chin. "Your Majesties," he puffed, bowing to each of them. "I do apologize for my hurried arrival, but I didn't want him to get away."

"Who?" Peter asked.

"The White Stag has been spotted in the Western Wood," Tumnus said. "He's said to grant wishes to whomever catches him."

Edmund smiled again. "Tumnus, you're a positive boon."

Lucy gave Ed a puzzled look. "Why?"

"I know just what to wish for," Ed said. He laughed at the confused expressions on his siblings' faces. "Asha's ring, the one her mother wore."

"We can't just leave off and go hunting with all these guests here," said Susan.

“It would be terrible manners,” Lucy agreed.

“Fine,” Ed said, throwing the door open with another laugh. “You girls wait at the castle. I’ll get the stag myself.”

- # -

Asha listened to Edmund as he searched the apple grove for her. He wouldn’t find her, not with the glamour she’d cast on herself to appear as one of the apple trees. Her heart crumbled a little more each time he called her name. When he passed nearby, she almost gave in and ended the glamour, but a cherry-blossom breeze fluttered through her branches and she remained still. She’d rather have been torn apart by giants or destroyed by fire than listen to the rising anxiety in his voice. *I cannot do this, Aslan, I cannot.* Her branches shuddered.

Hrura had told her to have faith that Aslan knew what he was doing. The mare was as deeply loyal to the great Lion as she was to Asha. Hrura’s belief in each of them never wavered. *As yours should not,* Hrura had said. *You are stronger than you know, my lady. Strong enough even for this.*

And so Asha let him go, though she wanted desperately to call him back as he left the apple grove. The moment he left, she changed into a scatter of silver-yellow birch leaves and followed him on the wind.

- # -

Edmund rode hard. Peter had overtaken him, but Ed had no intention of letting that continue for long. He might even catch the stag and be back to Cair Paravel with Asha’s ring almost before she knew he was gone.

He’d wanted to propose before he left, but could not find her in the grove. No matter; he realized after a while that she must have gone into the forest for her time alone, as she’d done on their journey to Ettinsmoor together all those years ago.

The Western Wood was a glory of browns and yellows. As he and Phillip galloped along, something brushed his cheek. A flurry of yellowing leaves blew past them. Another whisked against his cheek before they rushed away to blend into the other leaves. A thought stirred in his mind, but before he could concentrate on it, Phillip slowed, and then halted. “Are you all right, Phillip?”

The horse looked back at him, panting and apologetic. “I’m not as young as I once was.”

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Asha had chased the stag as far as she could go. She hadn't the will to continue on. She waited until Edmund and his brother and sisters dismounted from the horses. Before the four stood an iron post, wrapped with vines and topped with a lantern. Asha changed back to her human form, and almost—almost—gave up and rushed out into the little clearing. With her heart breaking and tears running down her face, she called on her magic. “Forget,” she whispered. “Forget.”

A breeze swirled into the clearing, and a few moments later, Lucy darted into the trees. The rest followed, and Asha's longing gaze remained on Edmund until he, too, was gone.

Only when the forest was silent again did she allow herself the agonized cry that had been in her throat all afternoon. She wept until the tears would come no more, and then walked as if in a dream to the lantern. She touched the cold iron and peered into the trees where Edmund had gone, hoping that somehow he'd reappear. When he didn't, she dried her tears and straightened where she stood. “I don't believe you make deals, Aslan,” she said aloud, “but I have honored my promise. Please ... I have to believe that you wouldn't have made me send him away if you didn't intend someday to send him back to me.”

A Token And A Gift

Edmund tumbled out of the wardrobe onto the floor of the old house, falling in a heap with his brother and sisters. For a moment he lay there, disoriented and panting, until he noticed his shoes. Not the leather boots he'd worn that morning. Certainly not the saddle-colored leggings or blue tunic he'd put on. Instead he saw two knobby knees exposed under a pair of short, grey tweed pants. *What in Aslan's name...?*

He raised his hands to pick at the strange clothing, only to find them small and not nearly as callused as they should have been.

Then he saw his brother and sisters. Children. He touched his face. Him, too. They stared at one another in shock. What had he been looking for a moment ago? Something important, something he wanted more than anything.

The door opened. In walked a man with a bushy white beard and hair. "There you are," he said. "What were you all doing in the wardrobe?"

Edmund remembered a White Witch, a great battle, years of peaceful rule of Narnia. Extraordinary.

But after that ... nothing.

He remained silent most of that day, thinking hard on the blank spot in his memory. When it came time for bed, he pulled his pajamas from the dresser, trying to reconcile the boy he was—again—with the man he'd been mere hours before. Peter seemed to be having the same difficulty. All of them had wandered the house in such a quiet confusion that the Macready demanded to know what game they were about.

Peter put out his light at last and settled in to bed. Edmund left his own bedside candle burning while he put on his pajamas and folded his day clothes. What was it, that nagging suspicion that he'd left something important undone?

He went to stuff a turned-out pocket of his pants back in when his hand touched something smooth and cool. Curious, he pulled it out.

A silvery birch leaf, as supple as if it had been newly plucked from its tree, and almost the perfect shape of a heart. For the barest second, he remembered a flash of pale hair, and his chest hurt so badly he had to stop and just breathe.

When he climbed into bed and blew out the candle, he tucked the leaf

into the chest pocket of his pajamas. Silly, really, but he couldn't make himself put it down somewhere to get lost.

He kept thinking on the puzzle while sleep stole up on him. And just before he crossed into slumber, no matter how outlandish it sounded, he vowed with absolute certainty that he wouldn't rest until he brought the leaf back to the tree from which it had come.

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On their return home, he and Peter went back to the boys' school, and Lucy and Susan to theirs, as if nothing had changed.

Except that it had. Edmund and Peter worked harder than ever in school, no matter how they disliked it, no matter how they chafed at being children on the outside when they'd lived to manhood on the inside.

The administrator of the struggling school saw this—especially saw Peter and how diligently he worked to get high marks—and it worked like a tonic on him. He'd lost his only son in the war, and Peter resembled him so much that the man was both comforted and proud to have such a student. He renewed his efforts to get funding for the school. The teachers were happier and the classes got better, and thereafter any student who went through his school was sure to be a man of high worth in the world.

Edmund befriended a shy, unpopular boy and shared his talent for law. The boy went on to be a great man in Parliament, and all of England came to benefit from the knowledge of a boy who'd once been a Narnian king.

Lucy and Susan, too, had this strange ripple effect on everyone around them. People who saw Susan's grace and Lucy's buoyancy could not help but see the good in the world. Every person whose life the Pevensies touched grew happier, more hopeful, somehow better for it.

For his part, Edmund noticed none of this while it happened. Each night he climbed into bed and took the birch leaf out of his pocket and just looked at it. And each night, before he turned out the light, he whispered to it without feeling at all foolish. "I'll find you."

~ The End ~