

The Chronicles of Narnia

Of Hearth and Home

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

Once I began Peter's book, I knew I'd be writing the other Pevensie children as well. This story spent a while longer than Edmund's and Peter's in my head, because of other projects—but I couldn't seem to put it down. It was also slow going, compared to the other books in the "Blades of Narnia" series, because I had other works to write. You might want to read the other books in the "Blades of Narnia" series, because events in each book hinge on a lot of what has happened in the previous ones. See my FanFiction.net profile for a list of the books in order.

Susan's an interesting character. She alone of the main characters was not allowed back into Narnia at the end of the Chronicles. I always wondered what would have driven her to deny and forget Narnia, and it's one of those things I wish I could ask C.S. Lewis to this day. I like to think there's more to it than the little Lewis tells us. I figured maybe she'd tell me herself...

Happy Reading, *Caleon*

If you're interested in rounding out your reading of Of Hearth and Home, 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.

Of Hearth and Home

Soundtrack

1. Thusness - Mars Lasar
2. Speech - 10,000 B.C.
3. Athair Ar Neamh - The Taliesin Orchestra
4. Evenstar - The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers
5. Homeland of the Moon - Avalon
6. The Blitz, 1940 - The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe
7. Enchanted - Mars Lasar
8. Prince Caspian Flees - The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian
9. New Moon (The Meadow) - The Twilight Saga: New Moon
10. Lady Of The Moon - 2002
11. Pale - Within Temptation

Missing Children

Helen Pevensie scrubbed a cup and saucer, humming along to the radio in the parlor. She glanced out the kitchen window into the little backyard. The *empty* backyard.

Where on earth were her sons and daughters? Since the beginning of summer holiday, not one of them had spent any more time than necessary indoors.

After their stay at Professor Kirke's house during the war, Helen felt a different set of children had been returned to her. Quieter. More focused. Less prone to the play and laughter that *ought* to accompany children. And everywhere they went, strangers stopped to stare, as if quite uncertain what they were looking at. Whenever this happened, Helen returned the stares with a stern, protective look. They were simply children, after all. *Her* children. And yet ... not.

Peter, like a little man with his pensive scowl and constant attention to his brother and sisters' whereabouts. Not very unusual, she supposed after all. During the war, she'd made Peter promise to look after his siblings. But she hadn't realized then how seriously her eldest would take his duty.

Then there was Edmund. Perhaps the most confusing of alterations, since before the Professor's house, he'd shown absolutely no interest in academics. Now his marks rivaled Peter's, and often bested them. To say nothing of that disturbing situation about the maps and the drawings of trees. Well, the doctor had told her Ed was fine. Still, it was a mother's nature to worry....

Lucy, even Lucy, somehow not as carefree as Helen remembered her. Oh, she still smiled and laughed and jumped on the furniture when she thought Helen wasn't looking. But at odd moments, Helen would find her youngest crying quietly, and the other three would draw close around her—a silent wall that seemed to comfort Lucy but somehow left Helen feeling shut out.

And Susan. Susan's change pained Helen the most. Before, Susan would join her to bake and sing and talk in the kitchen, mother to blossoming young woman. They shopped and cooked and gossiped about the latest fashions ... before.

The Susan who returned from Professor Kirke's didn't care for cooking. She rarely paid any heed to the telephone when it rang—seemed not to know what to do with it, in fact. And though knee-length skirts were the norm, Susan often pored wistfully over the longer Victorian styles that went all the way to the ankles. When Helen broached the subject with a cautious comment on the price of cloth, Susan stopped looking at those old catalogs at once.

Although she didn't participate in the cooking, Susan was always the one to call everyone to supper. No one was ever late. The other children seemed to revolve silently around some internal schedule Susan had organized.

It wasn't until Lucy fell ill that Helen realized the little mother Susan had become. Without being asked (and well before Helen discovered Lucy had awakened), Susan was up in the middle of the night spooning out cough medicine for Lucy and soothing her with warm compresses.

When had her children stopped needing her?

Something thumped in the next room. Helen froze with a dripping plate in her hand. For a long time after the war, every unexpected noise brought on a knee-jerk reaction to gather her family and hurry to the air raid shelter. Even now, she found herself staring out the window and looking for her children ... in vain. She forced herself to relax. The war was over.

Someone jabbed her sides. Helen yelped and dropped the plate in the sink with a crash. She whirled around to find her husband laughing. "Michael!" she scolded.

"Sorry, dearest. I just got home. I'm going upstairs to wash for supper." He gave her a peck on the cheek, then left the kitchen.

Helen turned back to the sink to pick the broken pieces of the plate out of the dishwasher. "Shout out the window for the children," she called after him. With a sigh, she pulled out the dustbin and threw away the pieces of broken ceramic. She hated to throw anything out. Perhaps she could have—

Another noise from the next room. Maybe her children had returned after all. She wiped the counter, then replaced the dustbin and turned around. "Peter? You—"

Not Peter. A wild-eyed blond man stood in her kitchen, pointing a pistol in her face. Helen screamed.

The gun fired.

A world away, Susan sprang upright from a sound sleep in her bed, eyes wide and heart pounding. "Mother!"

Desperation

Still in her shift and barefoot, Susan rushed along the castle corridors, barely giving a thought to how undignified she would look if she ran into anyone. She must look a fright, half-dressed and panicked in the middle of the night.

She knew the way to Peter's rooms, but in the torchlight, shadows flickered along the halls, and she kept seeing that wild blond man, ready to leap from every crevice to attack her. Her heart slammed in her chest, *Mother-Mother-Mother*, with every running step.

For pity's sake, why were her rooms so far from Peter's?

She turned a corridor and flew down a hallway. At last, she found his door. She tried the handle. Locked, of course. She banged on the oak. "Peter! Peter! Peter, please wake up!"

The door flew open, and Susan found herself at the business end of a large crossbow. Peter, stubble-faced and alert, looked past her into the hall. Behind him, Susan glimpsed Corisande, heavily pregnant and worried-looking, sitting in the large bed. Cori replaced a lit candle on the nightstand.

When Peter found no armed assassins behind Susan, he turned his attention to her. "What is it?"

Now, Susan fidgeted. Rushing up here because of a dream, waking her brother and pregnant sister-in-law when there was no real threat, seemed downright silly. "I—I—it's about Mother."

Peter pushed the door open. "Come in."

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"You say you saw her get shot?" Edmund spoke low from his seat across the breakfast table. Susan barely heard him, but worry flashed through his eyes. Beside him, surely sensing his fear, his wife Asha leaned slightly closer to him.

"I didn't see it," Susan said with a little shudder. "I only saw the gun firing."

"What did he look like?" Lucy asked. Susan and Peter had decided not to wake Lucy and Edmund, and they were only now learning of Susan's

dream.

“He was wearing a German soldier’s uniform ... but it was all torn and stained. I don’t think he’d been in service for some time.” She lowered her voice to a frightened whisper. “Do you think—do you think it could be real?”

From her seat nearby, Corisande laid a hand over Susan’s. “In Telmar, we believed dreams to be guidance from the saints. Not prophecies, but warnings. And not always literal.” She squeezed Susan’s hand gently.

Though Cori wore a loose-fitting, flowing dress, and her hair was bound in a soft, feminine twist befitting the High Queen, her gaze remained steady and strong. Susan was forcibly reminded of the soldier Cori had been prior to her marriage with Peter. She had given up that life in favor of her pregnancy, but her every action remained filled with the unwavering confidence she’d had as a military captain of Telmar.

Susan wished she could claim that confidence for herself. The seed of a troublesome idea had begun to form in her mind. Something terrifying and alluring at the same time. The more she thought on it, the more she wavered. She looked around the table. At Edmund and Asha and their son Silas, with another child on the way soon after Cori’s was due. At Peter and Cori, expecting Narnia’s next heir. At Lucy, vibrant and carefree as ever, happier here than she’d ever been in England.

No. It cannot be done. Should not.

I can never go home.

But Mother and Father are in danger.

Aslan had not been back to Narnia since Peter’s wedding more than a year ago. Only he might have been able to say whether or not the dream was truly real. But he wasn’t around to help this time, and there was no telling when or if he might return to Narnia. Aslan followed no one’s whims.

What would happen to the rest of them if Susan tried to return to England? Would her sister and brothers be forced to follow? Peter had mandated that one of them remain always at Cair Paravel when the others went somewhere, a caution against their abandoning Narnia ever again. Whether or not the measure was futile, none of them had ever learned, but since Edmund’s call had brought them back to Narnia, they had remained here without interruption.

Edmund’s call.

Susan’s thoughts flew to the silver birch leaf Edmund always carried with him. A token from Asha, one filled with such love that it had somehow brought Edmund back here, and subsequently the rest of them when Edmund

most needed them.

It *could* be done. Whatever gate stood between the worlds, it was passable from both sides, and not just by Aslan's will. Love was the key that opened it.

A painful longing for her mother's smile and soft words filled Susan's heart. Love. Susan had enough of that and more to get to England, but no token of her mother to seal the passage.

How could she get one, so far away?

Someone mentioned Cori's due date, a scant two months away, and talk turned to speculation on the baby's gender and still-undecided name. Chatter resumed around the table, but Susan did not join in. She stared at her untouched eggs, thinking hard of her parents and of favorite objects they possessed.

Suddenly, she was glad that no one could hear her thoughts.

3

Hello Again

“Ed, everyone in Cair Paravel already knows these people are here,” said Lucy, frowning over the parapet at the castle’s new arrivals. “You can’t possibly expect me to *lie* for you.”

Edmund’s frown darkened into a scowl. “I can, and I do. Susan isn’t to be bothered, and especially not by him. Keep him busy. I don’t care what you tell him, but I don’t trust him, and I don’t want him near her.”

“Does Peter know about—”

“Peter has enough trouble minding the whole of Narnia. I’m asking you to mind one ... person.” He clipped off the last word as if he doubted whether the object of their discussion warranted the term.

Of all her siblings, Lucy was closest to Edmund. Since his disastrous foray into the clutches of the White Witch so many years ago, Lucy and Ed had grown very close ... but privately, she thought he still had his failings. While before he had been too quick to trust, his encounter with Jadis seemed to have forced him in quite the other direction. A fine trait for a diplomat whose job was to meet and assess representatives (and possible threats) from other countries, but rather irritating when applied to an overprotective brother.

Lucy fixed her gaze on the dark-blue smoke trailing the arrivals. When the party arrived at the outer gate, the smoke cloud behind them solidified into the human shape of a Jinn. Saris raised his sulfur-yellow gaze to the parapet as if he had known they would be there. When their eyes met, he nodded. Lucy smiled and waved back.

Ed turned his scowl on her.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said. “He’s been nothing but civil since—”

“Since he impersonated me and went around kidnapping women and ravaging the countryside of Narnia?”

“He was acting on orders. You know as well as I—”

“He’s deceptive.”

“And people can change,” she snapped, giving him a pointed look.

Ed turned the scowl back over the parapet, but he didn’t say anything further. What would he say? He couldn’t argue. He had changed, himself.

Lucy just wished he'd believe others capable of that, too.

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"No, no, no," Susan cried, surveying the seating arrangements for supper. "You cannot place Tarkaan Halumvar near Lord Morunt. He'll be offended. Last time they were here together, Morunt beat him at every game of chess. Now please, move Halumvar closer to the Selbarani dignitaries. He spoke highly of their fruit exports."

When the faun hurried away to correct the error, Susan sighed. Battles might be won on the field with swords and spears, but they could begin with something as little as a lapse in ceremonial etiquette at dinner. The last thing Narnia needed was to play host to a fight between the proud Calormene Tarkaan and the brash young Archenlander lord. Susan often wondered how many lives she'd spared simply by overseeing the arrangement of Cair Paravel's social functions.

Her job was important, she knew. She ought to be paying the closest possible attention to every flower arrangement—something personal and thoughtful toward the guests at each table. Bouquets of pine sprigs and dogwood flowers for the people of Selbaran. Lush desert plants for the Calormene guests. Mountain flora for the Archenlanders.

None of it, absolutely none of it, held any interest for her. Her mother was in danger. Possibly mortal danger.

After Cori's words of comfort at dinner last week, her brothers and sister hadn't spoken of their parents. They seemed to take Cori at her word—that it might simply be a metaphorical warning.

But it felt so real.

And Susan had been dreaming it every night since.

How she hated magic. Nothing about it was logical.

Every time she thought on the dream, her mother's frightened face etched itself into her memory until she shook with fear. Was Mother even alive? What about Father? He never even appeared in the dream after that first time.

Troubled, Susan stalked the feast hall, absently straightening a fork here, a centerpiece there. Everything was perfect. She drifted on, haunted by a problem she had no power to fix.

"Su, there's no salt on the— What's wrong?" came Lucy's voice.

Susan looked up. She had walked out of the feast hall and down a

little-used corridor without knowing where she'd been going. "Hi, Lu. I'm fine, really," she lied.

Lucy grabbed her hand. A flash of alarm crossed her features, drawing Susan out of worry and into curiosity. "Why don't we go out to the—"

"Good afternoon, Your Majesty," said a deep voice behind Susan.

She spun around and took in a bare chest, hairless scalp, earrings, yellow eyes, and sardonic smile. The Jinn bowed.

Susan found her tongue. "Jinn Saris. When did you arrive?"

Saris looked past her. Susan followed his gaze to find Lucy looking shamefaced. She turned back to Saris to find him watching her with one brow arched. "I've been here all day, my lady."

Susan eyed Lucy again. Lucy's cheeks reddened. "Ed's going to kill me," she muttered, just loud enough for Susan to hear.

4

A Delicate Conversation

“Would you like to tell me *why* you think Ed’s going to kill you?” Susan asked her sister.

Lucy grimaced, guilt written clearly across her features. Her gaze slid from Susan to Saris and back again, and then Susan realized the Jinn was Edmund’s problem. Puffing up like an offended hen and not caring, Susan said, “You may tell Edmund to mind his own business. If you’ll excuse me, I have something I’d like to discuss with Jinn Saris.”

The Jinn looked as surprised as Lucy, but when Lucy left, her cheeks still cherry red, the Jinn bowed again. “I am at your service, Your Majesty.”

Now that they were alone in the hall, Susan had no idea where to begin. She stared at the floor, his words echoing in her ears. *At your service.* He’d been forced to serve others for most of his existence. She stared at the gilded bracelets on his wrists and the broad, flat golden necklace that lay over his collarbones. She felt an uncomfortable kinship with him—he, bound by whomever called him to their will, and she, by the constraints of her office as queen. “Are you—Are you here under—”

“Duress?” The Jinn smiled. “My lady, I have seldom done something which was not on someone else’s orders.” He must have seen the upset on her face at his words, because he drifted along down the hall until she was obliged to walk with him. “Do not concern yourself about it, Your Majesty. This ... handler ... has, thus far, not been the worst of them.”

She remembered the terrible episode with Sir Elian: a Telmarine mad with power, one who had enslaved not only Saris, but Corisande, and who had nearly seized Narnia with his deceit and violence. Had Saris endured worse masters? What terrible things had he been forced to do during his lifetime?

She steeled herself, trying to ask her next question as delicately as possible. “How do you come to be always under someone else’s service? Can the cycle not be broken?”

A funny look passed across his face, and he paused. “There are too many curious people willing to poke their noses into old magic, my lady. There are fewer of the Jinn than there once were, and so I am pressed into service more often. Were I to find those old texts, do you not think I would destroy them until not a whisper remained?”

She shivered, as much at the vehemence in his eyes as what she knew she must say next. Susan took a deep breath, forcing the air to fill her lungs until it hurt, then let it out again. "I have never ... Saris, I never really asked you for anything in return for helping to free you that night ... when Elian was killed."

The Jinn's brow arched. "Your help was indirect at best. It was Peter who killed Elian." His sulfur eyes lost some of their sardonic gleam. "But I take your meaning."

She closed her eyes, hating herself. A lump formed in her throat and she struggled to speak past it. "I must ask you for a wish."

Silence.

When she dared to open her eyes, she found his gaze steady and impassive. For several moments, he did nothing but look at her. Susan couldn't decide which was worse: her discomfort under that yellow stare, or the way she wanted to take back the request but couldn't.

At last, he folded his arms and tilted his head. "Am I to guess what it is, or will you tell me?"

She couldn't take it any more. "Saris, I am so sorry to ask this of you. I tried to free you before, only to see you back in servitude, this time to—to—Whom?"

His eyes hardened. "It is of no consequence whom I serve. That I serve another is more than enough."

Breath clutched in her throat. What a horrible woman she was. She shook her head. "Never mind. I have no right to ask anything of you—"

"Speak, my lady."

She gulped, filled with pain and regret and the sting of unshed tears. "Send me home."

He frowned, clearly confused. "You are home," he said.

Darting forward, she laid her hands on his folded arms, startled that she had dared to do so, more startled at the sun-warm heat of his dark-blue skin. "England," she whispered, afraid to speak it any louder lest anyone but him overhear her.

Again he stared at her. Long moments without words, during which she could only guess at what went on in his head. He did not move, not so much as a twitch, until she felt a tear slide down her cheek. He drifted backward, just enough that her hands fell to her sides again. "You have never been happy here," he said.

When he looked at her this time, she knew she couldn't hide the truth

from him.

Tears ran down her cheeks. She wiped clumsily at them. “Sometimes I am,” she confessed. “When Aslan is here, you can’t help but be happy. But the rest of the time ... Nothing ... Nothing makes sense. It’s all so out of our hands, so out of control—”

“Maybe you should let it be so.”

Desperate for him to understand, she spread her hands in a pleading gesture. “My parents, Saris. I worry so. And I dream. Horrible things.”

“I know. Queen Lucy told me.”

Susan’s tears poured freely now. Blinded by them, she stared downward at the blurry image of her dress slippers. “I don’t even know if they’re alive. If I had only stayed home, they might be, but now ...”

She felt warmth, and looked up. Saris had drawn close again, with that odd look back in his eyes. “Is this the same woman who faced death at the Stone Table last year?”

Her temper flared, and she gave him her fiercest glare. “Do not mock me!” Scrubbing at her tears, she pulled herself together. “Edmund’s experience leads me to believe you must have a token, something from a loved one to open the gate between our worlds. I don’t have one from my parents. My only alternative was to ask you. If you will not do it, say so and cease your torture of me.”

The Jinn’s brows rose. “You mean to do this, no matter what the cost may be.”

“I do.” She raised her chin. “I have to know.”

He sighed and closed his eyes. An expression very like pain crossed his face, and when he opened his eyes once more, she found him frowning as if he’d lost something precious. A muscle clenched in his jaw, and he looked her in the eye at last, unreadable as ever. “There is a way, my lady. But you may not like what comes of it.”

Squaring her shoulders, she said, “Let it come.”

5

Running Game

The wind rushed in Susan's hair, tugging it loose from its pins and wooden combs. She wanted to stop her sweating, galloping horse, but Saris had told her they mustn't halt for anything. He trailed over her head in a fanned-out umbrella of smoke that was bluish below and, she knew, camouflaged above to look like the plain on which she rode. The whole effect hid her escape from the air, cutting off any detection by Narnian griffins. Saris had told her their success depended on getting to the Archenland border before any of the inhabitants of Cair Paravel knew she had left.

She didn't doubt it. She'd been sick to her stomach since packing the first item in her plain leather satchel. She hated deceiving her brothers and sister. None of them would understand how desperately Susan needed to know the truth of that insistent, terrifying nightmare. They'd launch a search the moment they noticed her missing. If Peter even thought she was trying to return to England, the search would triple in size for fear that her flight would draw them all home in her wake.

She had taken all the precautions possible—riding a dumb horse, dressing as an Archenland commoner, sneaking out while all the others were busy with the feast over which she should have been presiding. They were almost to the border, a safer choice than taking an easily-followed Narnian ship. Susan carried nothing by which anyone could identify her—except for one thing Saris didn't know about.

At last, she saw the shining flicker of the Winding Arrow River. Her mount, a steady, pale dun stallion (probably one of Cori's breeding stock—Saris had chosen him as the most suitable for a long run after a careful look at the mounts available from the stables) shook his sand-colored head and eagerly surged forward as they reached the water. "Saris, can we stop yet?"

"No," came his voice from the smoke. "There will be border patrols."

"But this poor beast needs to rest," she protested, though the stallion didn't seem any the worse for his run from the castle. Really, it was she who needed to stop, to settle her cramping stomach. Even now, she almost wanted to turn back, torn between her need to know her parents' fate, and the need to stay in Narnia for her siblings' sake.

"We will pause for a few moments, and then go on."

Did he have no mercy for her poor horse? Or was he trying to keep her from changing her mind?

She *had* made a wish. And as far as she knew, once you made a wish to a Jinn, there was no retracting it.

The stallion waded into the shallows and stopped, swishing his long tail. He plunged his muzzle into the cool water and drank deeply.

Susan slid off his back and splashed into the water. She checked the waterskin tied to her saddle. Full. She wished she'd brought more containers. Where they were going, fresh water would be in desperately short supply.

She recoiled, full of bad memories of the last time she had been to their intended destination. She had vowed never to return there, never to risk letting them take her by force, if that was still their plan (and she had no doubt it was).

Saris had told her she wouldn't like what came of her wish. Maybe he'd meant returning to that horrid place. But she knew that no matter what happened, he would get her back to England, because he'd agreed to grant her wish.

She just hoped they wouldn't have to be long in Calormen.

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"Peter, Peter!"

Lucy burst into the state room, flushed and messy-haired. With the feast over and everyone gone to bed for the night, Peter feared it could mean only one thing—something had happened to Corisande. His wife's pregnancy had been perfect so far, but as her due date neared, he dreaded complications. They were a world away from proper medical care. What if—? "What is it, Lu?" he asked quickly.

Lucy caught her breath. "Susan's missing. I can't find her anywhere in the castle. Ed's furious. I know I should have—"

Edmund opened the state room door and Lucy stopped talking at once. Cherry-cheeked, with tears brimming in her eyes, she folded her hands.

Edmund entered the room, letting the door thump shut behind him. He was white-faced, his dark eyes glinting with hard fury, but he wasn't looking at Lucy. Dropping the letter he'd been composing onto his desk, Peter asked, "Are you certain she's not somewhere on the grounds?"

"She's not," Edmund said. "It isn't your fault, Lu, I know that." To Peter, he said, "She's nowhere near the castle. I had the griffins search. Jinn

Saris is gone also."

Now Peter understood that murderous look. Ed had never liked the Jinn from the start, so he would naturally suspect foul play. Peter couldn't believe the Jinn would have abducted Susan right out of the castle during a busy feast, with so many possible observers.

But then, the feast would have been a perfect distraction. And a Jinn was capable of many tricks.

"I'm sure there's an explanation," Peter said before he could formulate more accusations without proof. "Send out a brace of fauns and hawks for a wider search."

"Already done," Edmund said. "But Peter, it's worse than that. I'm not sure she went by force."

Peter pushed up from his seat. "What do you mean?"

"Her crown is still in its box in her bedchamber, so she isn't intending to make a visit of state. She wouldn't at this hour, anyway." Edmund paced a tight circle. His hands clenched. "I should have known! That deceitful, scheming— He played on her fears, I know it."

"Ed," Peter barked, feeling his brother's frustration compounding his own.

Ed turned back to face him again, visibly struggling for control. "Peter, her horn is gone. I think she's going home."

What Must Be Done

Susan had never seen such a silent expanse of earth and sky. The desert of Calormen stretched away into the gleaming sun. The last time she'd been to Calormen, she had come by ship—faster and safer than braving this route.

Waves of heat shimmered over the uninterrupted, flat sand, and the waves of unease she'd been battling since their run through Archenland threatened to swamp her. "You're certain you cannot conjure water?" she asked Saris.

"Not the kind you would be able to drink," he said. "We will make it to the oasis, Your Majesty."

"You shouldn't address me so formally," she said. "If someone overhears—"

His laughter boomed into the silence, completely at odds with the forbidding desert before them. "Who is around to overhear?"

"You have a point," she muttered. She turned in her saddle to stare back at the Archenland foothills, the last greenery she might see for days. Farther away was Narnia ... which she might never see again. Remorse stabbed her. She knew that Aslan, if he were here, would understand why she needed this. Days of running had not changed the nightmare that plagued her, except to make it more real each night. She could barely eat for the gnawing fear.

But Peter. Edmund. Lucy. *Please, I beg you to forgive me*, she thought.

She sat up straighter. "Let's go, then."

Saris led the way, down out of the mountains of Archenland into the searing heat of the desert floor. Susan pulled lightweight robes from her saddlebag, and a length of cotton that she wrapped around her head and face, turban-fashion as she'd seen Calormenes do, to protect herself from the sun. She might be mistaken for a desert warrior in this disguise, and left alone.

Saris had told her many caravans passed through the desert and used the oasis. He planned for them to reach it at night, when their discovery would be less likely. Even so, he'd said, it was best to attract as little attention as possible.

Then it was on to Tashbaan, the last place she wanted to be in all of

this world. Rabadash ruled there now. *Peacemaker*, they called him, but she knew different. Aslan had cursed him, confined him to his city as punishment for his disrespect and hostility. Susan suspected confinement had not bettered the man who would have forced her to be his wife.

Cold now, she rubbed her arms in their billowing sleeves. She looked to Saris to find him drifting silently beside her, frowning. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing, my lady.” He did not look at her.

“You look like Peter,” she said.

His gaze shot up then, surprise evident in those sulfur-colored eyes.

“When he’s brooding,” she explained. “What is it? Will there be trouble?” When he didn’t answer, she gripped the reins of her horse tighter. Unaccustomed suspicion rose in her breast. She’d never doubted the Jinn’s intentions, even when he’d held her captive at another man’s orders. But now, far away from safety ... “Tell me why we’re going to Tashbaan, once and for all,” she warned him, “or I’ll go back.”

He fixed those eyes on her. “You have no choice. And I don’t either.” Saying nothing more, he drifted past her into the desert.

After a full, wrenching minute, she nudged her horse into a trot, and they followed.

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“All of you must go?” Cori’s voice betrayed none of the worry Peter knew she must be feeling. Down the staircase, in the courtyard, Lucy mounted her horse. Edmund and Asha stood beside Barton, their heads close together, dark and silvery blond, with their small son in Edmund’s arms. Even this far away, Peter saw Asha trembling while Silas fussed with his father’s collar.

Peter took Cori’s hand in his, stroking her palm with his fingers. He placed his other hand over her swollen belly and stroked it while he tried to swallow the knot in his throat. “I’ll return,” he said hoarsely.

She wrapped her arms around him and embraced him hard, then gave his cheek a lingering kiss. “I will be strong for us both, my love.” When she drew back, her cheeks were dry, but in her eyes he saw an ache he found difficult to endure.

Peter nodded to Oreius, who stood silently beside the gate. The aging centaur nodded in silent acknowledgement. He would guard Corisande until

Peter's return.

If he returned.

Peter descended the stairs without looking back at his wife. If he did, he wasn't sure he'd have the strength to keep walking away from her.

When he reached Barton, he paused. "Ed."

His brother's face sobered at once. Edmund kissed his son and then handed him back to Asha. She hugged Silas close, burying her face in the boy's wild brown hair. Edmund leaned in to kiss Asha's cheek. A choked sob escaped her, and she fisted a shaking hand in his shirt. He covered her hand briefly with his own, and then gently pulled her hand free of his tunic. He swung up into Barton's saddle.

Peter climbed astride his tall black stallion. He nodded to his brother and sister, and as one, they rode toward the outer gate.

Peter would look north. Edmund would search westward. Lucy would go south along the sea coast. It was the first time since Elian's bid for power that all of the Pevensies would be absent from the castle. Peter had dreaded the outcome then, but now, he feared he could feel the balance of fate shifting with every step he took away from their home.

Susan, whatever were you thinking? He knew the question was futile even as he thought it. The only way to know would be to find her, and he hoped to do that before fate shifted far enough to tumble them out of Narnia for good.

As they passed the outer gates, Peter heard Silas's plaintive, sobbing cry echoing behind them. "Papa! Papa! *Papa!*"

Edmund's expression twisted sharply into one of gut-speared agony, and then his eyes slitted in a grim mask. His hand clenched on Barton's reins.

Peter stole a look at Lucy. Her eyes were wet with tears. *Do something*, she seemed to beg him. "Ed—" Peter began, not knowing what else to say.

His brother's voice came out shaky and unrecognizable. "Peter, you'd better hope you're the one to find her." Without another word, he and Barton spun westward and bolted away.

I
The Search

Peter raced along the Narnian plain, aimed northward. Narnia had driven back the threats from Ettinsmoor over the past years, but he still feared for Susan's safety if she and the Jinn had gotten that far.

Boom. Boom. Boom. Running footsteps shook the earth behind him and his horse. Humrubble had asked to join him, as had Salvia, his hawk companion. Over his shoulder, he shouted, "Any sign of their passing?"

"None, sire," the giant puffed, "though I ain't gonna say as I can track a creature what floats through the air. No hoofprints from Her Majesty's horse, least."

"I've spread the word, King Peter. No one has yet seen Queen Susan or a Jinn," called Salvia overhead.

"Keep searching," Peter called, though he knew it was unnecessary. Salvia would be loyal to the letter. Humrubble had served Cair Paravel since coming back with Edmund from Ettinsmoor. They each would follow their orders to the last.

It was that "last" that worried Peter.

- # -

Edmund flattened himself against Barton's neck. They galloped through a field as if the White Witch and all her hundred years of winter were on their tail at once. His heart slammed into his throat and back down into his belly again with each step the stallion took. His eyes burned and watered. *The wind only*, he snarled to himself. Even now, he couldn't face the thought that he might have seen the last of his pregnant wife and firstborn son.

Susan! How could she? Selfish, so selfish! Didn't she see the danger she'd put them all in? *Oh, Aslan, I won't forgive her.*

"Edmund! Oi! Stop, you blundering two-legs!" screamed a voice behind them.

Ed laid a hand on Barton's neck to let him know he intended to obey the voice. Barton shuddered to a halt, wheezing.

Bracken snapped and parted. Leina, Ed's wolf companion, shot into the open and skidded to a stop with her tail swinging. "Leaving? Not saying a

proper goodbye? No guard? Idiot!”

Ed gathered his composure—what remained of it. “You may not be able to follow this time, my friend.”

“Not follow? Are you calling me too old to chase after you, pup?”

Barton turned his head to look at Edmund, as sympathetic a look as he’d ever seen on a horse. Nothing ever needed to be made plain to Barton. The horse was as tacitly understanding as he was loyal. Grimly, Ed turned his attention to the wolf. “I fear my return is in question, Leina.”

Leina’s ears flattened against her head. “I heard the speculation. For the record, I’m not happy about it.”

Struggling to maintain his slipshod self-control, Edmund said, “You will have Corisande, and Oreius to guard her, should anything happen to us.”

The wolf gave a scoffing snarl. “Get yourself killed, like as not, fool. I don’t serve Corisande.” She looked away, her posture screaming sudden unease. “Shut up and keep going. You need a decent tracker, don’t you?” She loped ahead of them, her nose low to the ground, before Edmund could answer. But he noticed she never strayed far from him.

A sliver of affection pierced the wall rising around every emotion Ed had fought since leaving the castle. “On, then,” he said. Barton broke into a gallop again.

- # -

Lucy trotted on her horse, careful to search the ground as she went for tracks. All morning she had ranged along the eastern coast, traversing gentle slopes and sheer cliffs alike with patience. Of herself, Peter, and Edmund, she knew she was the only one with a head currently clear enough for this terrain. Peter must have known it, too. One wrong step, and a more preoccupied person might have broken their neck.

Poor Peter and Edmund, she thought. Both of them with wives, pregnant wives who might bear their children while they were away. Children who might never meet their fathers, should she and her siblings be pulled from Narnia again.

You wouldn’t do that to them, would you, Aslan? As well as she thought she knew the Lion, Lucy would never have presumed to understand his intentions for them. She merely accepted them without question, because it had never occurred to her to do otherwise. She loved Aslan, and anything he wanted of her, she would do.

Including leaving Narnia again, if he willed it. Even if the idea broke her heart.

She shielded her eyes and looked toward the sun, then twisted in her saddle to examine her surroundings. So far from the castle. They were nearly into Archenland now. How had Susan and Saris managed such a distance so quickly? A night had passed already—wasted time during which the Jinn could have led her anywhere. What was Saris thinking?

Surely nothing untoward. Lucy believed him innocent, even now. He might have harmed her or Susan at any time on several occasions, and never once made the slightest show of disrespect.

A shadow blotted the sky. A griffin swooped low. “Hullo,” she called. “Have you seen travelers pass this way?”

The griffin swung round and lighted on the field before her. “Your Majesty,” he said, clearly unsurprised to see her (and that troubled Lucy most). “There was an odd wind yesterday, low over the plain while I flew to seek my meal. Shouldn’t have been—no breeze at all to soar on, you know. When I looked closer, I found a dust cloud trailing it. After it cleared, I spied horse tracks.”

Lucy’s heartbeat stumbled. “A lone horse?”

“Yes. I thought it a wild horse, not of Narnia, and tried pursuing it for my supper. But the tracks were pressed deep. Bearing a rider, you see, though I never saw one for that strange wind and dust.”

Magic, no doubt of that. “Which way did the horse go?”

“Into Archenland,” the griffin said, and Lucy felt a terrible shiver.

“Sir Griffin,” she said, “I must call upon your aid. That horse bears Queen Susan, and I cannot express the urgency with which I must find her. Can you follow it?”

The griffin spread his wings in an elegant bow. “I am Your Majesty’s servant.” His feathered tail lashed his flanks. “My name is Arrow, my lady.” He launched into the air again. “This way!”

Lucy urged her horse to follow him. Valiant or not, she quailed at the thought of why Susan would want to take the difficult coastal route through Archenland. If Archenland had been her goal, she might easily have taken the pass toward Anvard, the seat of that country and the home of King Lune and his sons Cor and Corin. There would be hot meals, and help, and safety. By taking the coast, Susan was bringing herself within frightening reach of Calormen and the Tisroc, Rabadash. *Aslan watch over her*, Lucy thought.

The Lion was not, and would never be, subject to their needs for his

aid. Lucy knew his help often came in unexpected ways, that sometimes he sent others when he could not come himself, and only when most needed. And then a disturbing, sobering thought came to her.

Maybe that help was Lucy.

Danger In The Desert

Even though it was not much more than a day's travel through the Calormene desert to Tashbaan by the easier route from the Archenland pass, Susan knew she and Saris had chosen a more difficult path. They had been traveling for hours under the fiery sun. She knew she mustn't take long drinks from her waterskin, but a body accustomed to the cool, shade-dappled glens of Narnia was not suited for desert heat. Between watering herself and her horse, the skin was almost empty already. And the sand stretched on and on.

It seemed the desert had become a living thing, bent on preventing her from reaching Tashbaan. Even hidden under heat-deflecting layers of cloth, she wilted in the sun. Her lips had long since dried and begun to crack. She wondered at her horse's stamina. They had rested little, under a canopy fashioned by Saris's magic. Only the thought of what horrors her parents must be facing kept her in the saddle past bearing. Even the lowering sun did little to cool the air.

Her ears rang with the silence. The horse's sand-muffled hoofbeats, and the jingling of the metal bits on his tack, were all that broke the quiet. Saris, for his part, seemed unaffected by the heat (but then he was a creature of fire, himself, she thought wistfully, and this must be comfortable for him).

She watched him as he drifted along, slightly ahead of them. She had begun several times to thank him for assisting her, but each time she stopped, troubled more and more by *why* he would help her. She hesitated, then opened her mouth. "Saris ..."

After so many hours without speech, her croaking voice sounded like a thunderclap. He turned, not to fix her with that sulfur gaze, but to squint past her. He went so still that she turned also to see where he looked, but spied nothing except shimmers of heat rising from the sand.

Then she heard it. Felt it in the ground beneath her mount's hooves. She searched harder for the source of the disturbance.

Horses. Many of them.

"Raiders," said Saris, his voice smacking her eardrums after the silent stillness. "Run!"

But it was too late. She heard voices cry out in the Calormene tongue, and their pursuers charged toward her. Their horses ate up the distance

between themselves and her, and suddenly it became all too clear how very alone she was out here.

At the least, they'd steal her horse. At worst ...

She bolted. Her horse lunged across the desert sand. Saris swirled into smoke that she spied from the corner of her eye. A rumble filled the air.

She looked over her shoulder to see wind whipping the sand into spurts, then dust devils, and then a soaring wall of sand that blotted out the sun and left her and her horse in shadow. Before it, the blue smoke of Saris streamed like a flag, infinitely small against that yawning blackness.

Her pursuers shouted, and she heard their horses' muffled, fearful whinnies. Her own mount snorted and redoubled its speed.

Then she heard the galloping hooves again, close by. Risking another look, she saw that two of the raiders had escaped the sandstorm and were almost on her.

She took quick stock of her weapons. No bow, no arrows. A keen observer might have identified her too easily by those. Only a short knife that was no use against these raiders. Her only defense was to run, run, run, and hope her horse could withstand the pursuit.

Closer they came, and closer, one on each side and drawing in fast. She could see the men's eyes now, wild and gleaming black. Her sweating horse strained forward, its ears flat back against its head. The riders veered inward, hemming her in on either side.

A flash of blue caught her eye. She heard a shriek and the left rider's horse stumbled and fell. Saris's face appeared out of the blue smoke. "South!"

She veered due south so fast, it seemed her horse had turned before she even twitched the reins. A splotch of darker color appeared ahead against the sun glare.

The oasis.

The other rider pounded after her, and closed in so that his horse brushed hard against hers. A sun-browned hand clamped onto a fold of her robes. Susan's stallion calmly arched its neck around to look at the other horse.

And the Calormene's mount skidded to a stop.

The rider's hand jerked away from Susan's robes. He flew over his horse's head, landed with a thud in the sand, and went still.

Susan stared in shock, then scanned the desert. Terror settled in, now that the immediate threat was gone. Had the rest fallen behind? Were any

alive to follow? She couldn't see through the clouds of sand still in the air.

Squirming at the thought of being responsible for the death of others (even someone bent on harming her), she charged ahead to the oasis. Saris appeared beside her again, a plume of blue smoke abreast of her horse. Her heart pounded so that she couldn't even speak to him.

They arrived at the oasis after what seemed an interminable amount of running. Only after they passed a stand of trees did she allow herself to breathe. The foliage grew deeper, the trees thicker, and at last they arrived at a wide pool overshadowed by palms.

Her stallion stopped at once and plunged its muzzle into the water. Rubber-legged, she slid off his back and fell heavily onto the bank of the pool.

Her hands shook. She stared at them as if they belonged wholly to another person. Another person living this nightmare. Another person who'd ruined the lives of her siblings in pursuit of parents she might never see again. *What am I doing?* Before she knew it, she felt hot tears streaming down her cheeks. She reached to wipe them, and her fingers came away smudged with dust. And the tears only came faster. She stifled them into little gasps, but couldn't stop them.

Stupid, stupid fool. Did you think this would be simple?

Her horse's muzzle brushed against her hand. Its ears came forward and it nudged her, then gave a wet snort. Still sniffing, trying desperately to get control of herself, she stroked the animal's sweaty cheek. Remembering how the other horse had stopped when confronted with her mount's attention, she whispered, "Can you speak?"

The stallion didn't answer, but turned away to continue drinking. Susan watched him for a while, oddly disappointed.

"Are you well?" came Saris's voice.

No, she thought. I'm scared. I don't know what's ahead of me, and I'm afraid to look back at what might be behind me. I'm trying to do what's right for my family. All of them. And I feel horribly, horribly alone.

She wiped her tears with a fold of her robes, but doubted it had done much good when her robes were as full of dust as her face must have been.

Saris reached down and clasped her hand. Surprised, she let him pull her to her feet again.

His eyes skimmed her from head to foot. "Answer me," he said, softer now.

"I'm fine," she said, but she was still shaking. Harder now, so hard that her teeth chattered. All the anxiety of the past days compounded with the

terror of their flight through the desert. She might not be safe even now. She thought incongruously of the air raid shelter at home in Finchley, and at that moment she wanted more than anything to shut herself inside it and shut everything else out. “No, I’m not. I want ... I want ... oh, I want to be away from this! Away from bandits, away from magic—”

Saris dropped her hand at once and slipped away.

She pulled in a trembling breath. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“It is no matter what you meant,” he said quickly. “I know what you meant.” He drifted around the edge of the oasis, holding his hands up in the air toward the ring of trees around it. His hands gave off a soft glow that rippled out into the air and faded.

“I didn’t mean *you*,” she insisted. She stayed where she was, doubting he’d welcome it if she followed him around the clearing. She unwrapped her turban and removed it, then dipped it into the pool and wrung it out, more to have something to do than to use it to wash the dust from her face. She stood there on the bank, watching Saris awkwardly. “I meant magic—”

He whirled around, imposing, proud, stone-faced. His eyes glowed in the growing shade of evening. “The magic you hate is protecting you tonight,” he said. “Anyone who approaches this pool will see no other visitors. Keep silent, and you won’t be discovered.” With an angry flick of his hand, the sand at her feet swished and resettled into a pallet of blankets.

Startled, she looked up to thank him, but he had turned his back and moved to her horse. He flicked his hand again, and her mount’s tack unbuckled itself and settled to the ground. The horse snorted and shook its head as if glad to be rid of the trappings.

Susan sat, exhausted. She had barely rested, stopping only to allow her horse time to recover. Sinking back onto the blankets, too tired to eat the stale bread and cheese in her satchel, she watched Saris as he drifted to the edge of the trees.

They didn’t speak all night.

9

Tashbaan

“She comes, O Blessed of Tash!”

The knock-kneed servant blundered into the throne room and belatedly remembered he ought to have been bowing. He plopped face down on the stone floor so quickly, in fact, that Rabadash spied the filthy mongrel’s now-bloody nose with a certain amount of satisfaction even as it stained the silk carpet.

Let that be a lesson from Tash for your forgetfulness, he thought with a smile. The servant caught the grin, and a wary look entered his eye as though he feared a howling, black pit would open up underneath his trembling form and swallow him forever.

Ha. A mere look, and any one of his servants cowered before him. Not fire, nor frost, nor flood could produce such an exacting look of terror on any of his subjects’ faces as could one frown from Rabadash. Could that barbaric, mangy lion of those barbaric, mangy northerners say the same?

Content to let the servant grovel a bit longer, Rabadash slowly uncoiled his plump form from the mass of cushions heaped upon his throne. Confinement to Tashbaan (even if he wasn’t convinced of Aslan’s promise to return him to that cursed long-eared, braying body if he left the city, Rabadash took no chances) had lent the Tisroc rather a lot of expanse to his waistline. He liked the statement of wealth it conveyed. He had vast riches to fill his dining table as much as his closet or his coffers, even before his father’s death.

And now, he would add his twentieth wife to those riches. A plaything, a bauble to display and dangle before jealous visitors to the Tisroc’s court. Narnia’s precious jewel of the sun, plucked almost without effort from their crown. All his, as it should have been, but certainly not in the place of honor she might once have held. No, she would be the lowest of his harem, nearly a servant girl. And she would learn her place, or be beaten into it. Her beauty might fade under the harsh use she’d endure, but his satisfaction with acquiring her at last never would.

On his feet now, Rabadash towered over the prostrate servant. “Saris is to bring her directly to me as soon as she passes into the shadow of the city walls. Go!” He aimed a kick at the man’s bleeding nose, and was rewarded with an anguished cry before the man bowed out of the room.

Sneering at the blot of blood on the toe of his slipper, Rabadash waved to another servant without looking at him. “You! Have the household staff prepare my bedchamber for company.”

The servant dashed away with the requisite bows. Rabadash smiled, seeing in his mind the way Gentle Susan’s soft blue eyes would widen with panic and fear once she realized her inevitable fate. Inevitable, and inexorable. Much like him, as she would learn all too well.

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“I don’t like this plan, Saris,” Susan said uncertainly. The walls of Tashbaan loomed up, a dark, doming shadow after the golden blaze of the desert. She tried to pause her horse, but the stallion walked eagerly toward the open gates and would not be swayed by rein or heel. The animal shook its head and fought the bit, then flattened its ears and rolled an eye back at her in such a demanding way that Susan wondered again if it did not understand everything she’d said and done since leaving Narnia. Reluctantly, she let the animal have his head. The stallion paused only at the threshold of the city.

Saris stopped beside her, no longer a plume of smoke but in his Jinn shape. “I have promised to bring you home, my lady, and that I will do.” And then he laid a hand over hers, shocking her with the gesture as well as the warmth of his skin. Still puzzling over that (he rarely touched her), she watched a darkness come into his sulfuric eyes. Even without understanding what caused it, she felt a pang of sadness. “You have not come to harm yet,” he said, “and you shall not even in the cobra’s pit.” He removed his hand and turned away before she had time to process that troubled look on his face.

They walked on until a little dark man in finery at odds with his bony, bloody-nosed appearance scrambled up to them. He bowed profusely, muttering something about an escort to the palace. Increasingly nervous, Susan followed Saris along the rising, winding path through the city. A growing crowd clustered around them as they went, curious onlookers who might be wondering what a supposed outland commoner was doing with a Jinn. Saris stayed close, his expression once again that forbidding mask that prevented anyone coming too near.

Closer and closer they came, and the crowd expanded until it choked the streets. Susan fought to control the twisting in her belly. When they reached the palace at last, two guards opened the gates let them through. Susan dismounted and stepped, trembling, through the portal. She shot a

wary look at Saris, who nodded.

And the stallion followed, in spite of a servant who came to take his bridle. When the man reached for the cheekstrap, the stallion clicked his teeth in a calm but firm gesture that had the man snatching his hand away. It shook its sand-colored mane and lifted its head well out of the servant's reach. It made no other motion, but somehow the crowd of Calormenes had drawn back to give it room.

"No," Susan whispered, eager not to draw more attention than she already had. She pushed at the stallion's head, but it wouldn't be moved back.

And then it trotted right inside.

Oh, no! Too shocked to form any further thoughts than that, Susan rushed after the horse.

Saris raced alongside her. Together, they outpaced the still-shocked castle staff as they turned down a deserted hall. "What are you doing?" the Jinn called. "Let it go!"

"This is all wrong. Everything's wrong. He's bound to be alerted to this, and then he'll find me!" she cried, running after the horse's swishing tail.

"Stop!" A sun-warm hand grabbed hers, forcing her to halt. Saris's eyes blazed into her own. "That is the wrong way," he whispered. "Let the horse be, and it may create enough of a distraction for us to go where we must."

She saw the sense of that at once, and let Saris lead her where he would. A bell pealed somewhere, perhaps signaling a midday meal or prayer, accounting for the lack of people in the halls. They hurried on. And on. And on.

And they came at last to a courtyard which boasted a single, large fountain. "Step in," Saris ordered.

Open-mouthed with confusion, Susan did as he instructed. Water soaked her shoes and the hem of her plain skirt. Saris raised his arms and began to chant in a deep, mellow, hollow voice that both intrigued and frightened her. The courtyard glowed with an otherworldly light. Saris reached up to one of his jeweled wrist cuffs and pried loose a ruby gem that must have cost fortunes. He tossed it into the water and it melted, swirling around Susan's skirt, staining the water a disturbing blood-red.

Warmth spread up her body from her feet to her waist and reached higher. Susan felt as if she were back in the desert with the sun beating down on her head. The air shimmered. She thought of her brothers and sister, of Narnia, of everything she was leaving. So fast, everything was happening so

fast! Her heart beat like the frantic flutter of a trapped sparrow.

“Stop!” cried a voice she knew to her terror-filled bones. Rabadash, Tisroc of Calormen, barged into the courtyard with six men-at-arms. He gave her a scalding smile. “Your task is well accomplished, Jinn Saris. What is this foolish blather you are doing?”

Saris’s voice hitched once, but he kept chanting, though now it sounded like he spoke through pain-gritted teeth.

“*Him?*” Susan cried. “You serve *him?*” Even in the midst of her fear, Susan went rigid with outrage and betrayal—and a surprising amount of hurt.

“I said *stop!*” Rabadash cried. To his men, he shouted, “Surround them!”

The tramp of feet echoed in the courtyard, and the men aimed crossbows at her—not at Saris, for steel could not best a Jinn. Through it all, Saris kept chanting, though he paused to pant. “Saris?” she called, her voice shaking. The men drew back the triggers on their weapons, and she thought, panicked, of the little dagger strapped to her ankle. “Saris!”

The clatter of galloping hooves sounded out in the hall among the patter of running feet. More servants and soldiers crowded the doorway. Oh, they were lost, lost!

Susan’s stallion plunged through the doorway with a great bellowing whinny. He kicked at the men until they scattered back from him. Even Rabadash whirled aside, his pudgy mouth open with shock. As Saris’s voice reached a crescendo, the horse’s shape blurred, brightened, blinded and changed.

Into Aslan.

“*Fire!*” Rabadash shrieked. “Fire at them all!”

Susan caught one glimpse of the Tisroc’s mad, wild eyes, and Saris rushed her. The Jinn flung his arms around her, shielding her with his own body, and then the air shattered apart with the ear-splitting sound of Aslan’s roar. Saris grunted. Hot wind rushed over them both, searing her with as much heat as that of the Jinn’s skin. Susan whimpered with discomfort, then gave a cry of real pain as she felt the sensation of her very body being blown off the earth. She caught a glimpse over Saris’s arm of cool green woods and pools of water stretching far away, and then her stomach pitched as if she were falling upward. Then, all was darkness.

10

Peter

Oh, Aslan, how his head ached.

Had he fallen from his horse? The last thing Peter remembered was following Humrubble along a mountain path in Ettinsmoor, a steep climb that plunged away into nothing on one side. Salvia had been flying right overhead when Peter's mount shied at something. Something. He couldn't remember anything being in front of them but the giant.

Oh, his pounding head. Worse than the ache from a few too many drinks of dwarven ale.

A bird shrieked now, sounding distressed. Peter cracked open a cautious eye.

He might well have left it shut for all the good it did him. Pitch darkness greeted him. Had they been taken by Ettin giants and brought into a cave? He felt the ground underneath him and came in contact with solid rock. "Salvia?" he whispered.

The bird shrieked again, unintelligible. Fluttered.

Peter found he was sprawled flat on his back as though he'd been knocked down by an enormous, invisible fist. That might account for the headache, if the giants had been fighting them and hit him. But why not bind him? A king went for a king's ransom. Even the largely dull-witted giants would have come to that conclusion. He patted himself down and found no blood, no piercing pains indicating broken bones. Just that horrid ache in his skull, as if something were grinding at it from the inside.

He struggled upright and smacked his head on the rock ceiling. "Ow! For pity's sake." Rueful, seeing stars, he rubbed his head. "Salvia? Say something."

More incoherent cries.

Peter hurried, half-crouched, toward the sound. Was it not his hawk companion?

Feathers brushed his arm and stilled. The shriek died to chirping. Still confused, Peter said, "Once for 'yes,' and twice for 'no.' Are you Salvia?"

Chirp.

"I can't understand you. What's happened?" He knew the bird couldn't answer him, and Salvia must have known it also, because he didn't

try. Instead, the bird climbed onto Peter's leather glove. "Never mind. Let's get into some light and see where we are. We'll sort this out."

He crept, still crouching, to the cave's wall and felt his way forward. A twist here, a turn there. More convolutions. Gradually the blackness began to take on a yellowish glow. Firelight, maybe. His arm began to ache from Salvia's weight.

Then, without warning, the space opened to brightness.

Peter found himself in a cavern with six men in tattered German military uniforms. For the first time in long memory, Peter, High King of Narnia, victor of hundreds of battles, cool-headed planner of countless hazardous campaigns, froze on the spot.

- # -

Helen knew every pore and crack in the stone wall before her by heart now. She'd been gagged and tied to a crude, makeshift chair for who knew how many days. From the moment the stranger in her kitchen fired his pistol and shattered the lamp overhead, she'd been living in terror that the next bullet would go to her. And no explanation why—not one she could understand, no matter how they roared their angry questions at her.

She noted the passage of time only by the instances when they brought her food, let her attend to nature's call, or when the desperate need for sleep overtook her worry for her husband and children. Had Michael endured this kind of torture while away at war? He never spoke of the fighting, and to this day she wasn't sure what terrible things he must have seen.

And then, breaking into the interminable monotony of stamping feet, clinking metal, and voices speaking guttural foreign languages, came a curious sound. A shrieking, chirping noise. Voices rose in alarm.

Fighting. The first she'd heard since being brought to this horrifying place. It went on for endless frightening minutes, and she could do nothing, not even hide from this new threat.

Her bound arms ached and shook, and she felt tears begin to slide down her cheeks. The salt stung the cuts on her cheek and lip. Her nose felt so terribly bruised, it might have been broken. They hadn't shied from striking her when she couldn't answer their demands. They would certainly kill her now.

And then the noises stopped. Firelight blasted into her makeshift cell, almost blinding her in contrast to the little lantern they'd placed on the floor

nearby. She could only make out a bizarre, rumpled outfit that looked like it had come from a Shakespearean play.

As soon as the man saw her, he dropped his torch with a clatter. It sputtered and died, but the dimming light couldn't hide the wild look on the bearded man's face. Long, dark-blond hair, well out of fashion, hung to his collar. His breath shuddered out. He bolted toward her.

Helen screamed though the gag in her mouth.

True alarm flashed into the man's bright-blue eyes. Crouching, he clapped his hands over her skirted knees. "Mum!"

Helen stopped in mid-scream.

The man glanced toward the opening to her cell while jerking a knife from some sort of pouch. "Salvia!"

Helen started to whimper at the sight of that knife, but the man slashed through her bonds as if he did this every day. Then she noticed what looked like a sword hilt in a scabbard at his belt. Despair flooded her. Her arms and legs ached so, Helen couldn't even raise them to stand and fight. Even well, she couldn't outmatch a man with this stranger's height and breadth.

An enormous bird soared into the cavern, its wings nearly touching the walls on either side of the opening. It landed on the floor and turned round to study the doorway.

Too stunned by this, Helen didn't even think to move, until the man reached for her face with that knife. She whimpered and arched back as much as the chair allowed, but he cut through the gag in one swipe that didn't even touch her. "Can you walk? *Can you walk!* Did they hurt you! Are there more than six!"

His rapid-fire questions made almost as little sense as those of the strangers. She managed a tearful head-shake and tried to wobble upright. He rose with her, and she toppled right into his arms.

He nearly squeezed the breath out of her as soon as he had her. Building up another scream, Helen struggled with all the strength her wearied limbs had left.

And then she noticed he was kissing her hair. His voice cracked as he spoke. "I've got you, Mum. Nothing's going to hurt you, nothing, I swear it, I swear it."

She arched away to find him crying, too. The pure shock of it stopped her struggles, and she studied his face, the tears streaming from his blue eyes into the gold-brown beard. A strange, drifting sensation overtook her. Disbelieving, she whispered, "Peter?" and passed out.

Edmund

Something was wrong. Really, really wrong. And his head hurt so, Ed thought Barton might somehow have kicked him. He'd dismounted, that much he knew. Had they been ambushed? No, Leina would have smelled any attackers. Unless they were downwind.

He opened his eyes. Broad, blue sky arched overhead. Trees, check. Cliffsides, check. No, that boulder was in the wrong spot. Or hadn't been there at all. And it was bloody cold. The wet from the ground underneath his sprawled-out form soaked into his tunic.

Body in once piece and not bleeding, check. Weapons, check.

Something snuffled nearby. Seconds later, Edmund heard running, padded feet. He scrambled into a kneeling position that sent his aching head into a pounding spin.

A wet nose jammed itself into the back of his neck. He smelled wolf pelt and heard a grunting, growling sound. Leina leaped around to his front and slung her broad paws over his shoulders. She sniffed him all over.

He pushed her back far enough to look into her yellow eyes. "Why aren't you speaking?"

Her ears flattened. The *stupid-human* glare to which he was accustomed filled her face, and she growled again.

The cold of the air and wind and ground no longer mattered. Icy needles of horror started jabbing him all over. "Leina, you're not speaking. You're speaking ... wolf."

She stilled, her mouth open. Then she circled him, wider and wider—sniffing, listening, everything she did when they were in foreign, possibly dangerous territory. Then Edmund knew where they were, and a piece of his soul ripped away. He sat there, hollow, until the truth sank in.

No. Please. Please, please, *please*, no.

Sick, he bent and pressed his forehead against the cold ground, hoping the chill would banish his too-real headache and wake him from this nightmare. No. No. No.

Nothing disappeared. Not the headache, and not this waking hell that wasn't Narnia. With his face still pressed into the grass, he let loose a long, rage-filled, pain-stricken scream that echoed off the rock and rang into the

sky. The grass muffled it only barely. Lying there, gasping, he thrust his hands into his hair and let everything left inside him spill away like sand. He would never see his wife and child again. *Children.* Would never know the other. Would never know if it was a boy, or a pale-haired little wisp of a girl to match her mother.

Asha, Asha. He couldn't even feel her anymore. The bright spot inside him that was his soulbound connection to her had gone, and the only reason he knew it had been there was the awful vacuum it left behind. The pain sharpened, dug at him like a jagged axe, choked him like a strangling rope. He drew enough breath to scream again and tear at the earth with clawed fingers.

Leina was there in an instant, shoving her nose at his hands, urging him up, pressing her body underneath him. Boneless, he let her get him seated. She stayed in his face, her coarse-furred ruff against his cheek, her muzzle hard alongside his nose. He glimpsed in one yellow eye a depth of empathy he could no longer summon from himself.

Unless.

He shoved her away and scabbled at the smallest of the pouches on his belt, nearly tearing the antler button off in his haste. He plunged his hand into the soft deerhide and came out with nothing. Snarling, he ripped the pouch from his belt and tore it open. The seams snapped apart. No silver-sheened birch leaf fluttered down from the empty scraps. No connection to Asha. No way home.

With a third scream, he flung the pieces as far away as he could, then jammed his knuckles against his temples and stared upward as if the sky had an answer. His headache slammed. He didn't care. Didn't care if it chose to grind him into powder.

Susan had gotten her wish. He hoped, with the last bit of feeling he had left, that she choked on it.

- # -

The first sensation that came back to Helen was pain. Her arms and legs, so long tied into one position, now pulsed with aches that made her start panting as soon as consciousness returned.

But much unlike the days of her captivity, she was blessedly warm—a warmth that, if not for her aching limbs, might have made her think she was safe at home in Finchley.

Except that even Finchley wasn't as safe as she'd once believed.

Then sound came back. The man's voice, the man who'd rescued her. The man she'd thought might be ... No. Impossible. Ridiculous, even.

"Where do you think you're going to go?" the man hissed. "You're lucky I found you before you froze to death. It's full dark."

A decidedly British accent, thought Helen. Which, though it didn't answer the question of who he *was*, at least told her he wasn't one of her captors.

And then another voice answered it, not as deep but just as British. "I'm not stupid. And I don't bloody care if the whole world ices over at this point."

"Shut your mouth!" snapped the first man. Then, less harshly, he added, "You, of all people, ought not to be wishing for that. Here, the Germans must have stolen a store of coffee."

Helen dared to open her eyes then. The warmth came from a wool army blanket and a flickering fire, over which was roasting something that smelled like ambrosia after the stale fare her captors had given her. The blond man passed a tin cup across the fire to a darker-haired one who didn't drink it, but curled his hands around it and set it on his knee.

Beside the dark-haired man sat a giant of a wolf.

Helen gasped and flung off the blanket, prepared to run and never mind her rubbery legs.

Both men twitched as if to follow, but the blond one held up a supplicating hand. "Wait! Wait. We won't harm you." A pained look passed across his face in the shifting firelight. "I promised you, didn't I?"

She hesitated, looking first at him, then the enormous wolf (who did no more than stare as a quizzical dog might do), and then at the roasting meat over the fire. A hare, maybe. Reluctant, but too famished to resist the lovely scent of that food, she sank back down on what she saw were more blankets, and pulled the one that had been covering her over her shoulders.

The darker man passed his untouched coffee to her. He gave her an awkward smile as he did it, and their hands touched. He snatched his away and gave her the same surprised examination as she must have been giving them, as though he had thought her an illusion. He wore the same strange clothing as the other man. Helen still wasn't certain that the lack of adequate food and rest hadn't addled her wits.

The blond one broke the awkward pause by clearing his throat. Softly, he said, "Are you hungry, Mum?"

She hunched deeper into the blanket and found her voice. “You’re not my son.”

He frowned and prodded the fire until it burned higher. In the glow, Helen saw the bird from earlier, sitting on an outcrop of rock nearby. “Peter Pevensie,” the blond said. “We live in Finchley. My father is Michael, and he served in the War. You sent us away then to Professor Kirke’s house, to keep us safe from the bombings.”

Outrage and hunger fought for her attention. Anyone could learn those things. Anyone at all who wanted gain her trust, and then to kidnap and hurt her and her family. At the end of her patience, and near to tears again, she said, “My son is a boy!”

“Was a boy. Isn’t now.” The man—she refused to call him *Peter*—sounded troubled.

“And no one bloody knows why!” snapped the darker-haired one. He shot a guilty look at Helen. “Sorry.” Then he glared at the blond again. “But it’s true, and until we find ... Peter, it’s all over. There’s no going back.”

“We don’t know that, Ed.”

Warmth drained from Helen’s face. “Edmund?”

The dark-haired man turned a drawn, frowning face on her. The expression reminded her so much of her second son, a lost ten-year-old boy missing his father, that her heart went out to him no matter who he professed to be. “I don’t understand,” she whispered.

The frown lines around his mouth deepened. The wolf beside him laid down, so close that it touched his leg. He gave its shaggy cheek a distracted brush with the back of his hand, as if to acknowledge it was there. “And we can’t explain.”

Lucy

Lucy groaned softly and sat up, rubbing her forehead. “Aslan?”

She had seen the Lion, followed him from the oasis to the palace at Tashbaan, known him even when no one else had seen through the horse illusion by which he had carried Susan across the desert. In the crowd Lucy hadn’t been noticed, smaller than many of the Calormenes and able to hide among them.

Why would he not have shown himself to Susan? Was it because of Saris? Lucy couldn’t believe Saris capable of deception even now. None of this made sense. She had seen the horse—Aslan—rush through the doorway into the courtyard where Susan and Saris had gone, remembered the Lion’s roar—but nothing else. “Aslan?” she called again.

She looked around. She was alone.

No, not alone. Not at all alone. The sound of feet tramping through the grass reached her, magnified in the dark. Standing up at once, Lucy braced herself to be discovered any moment. But no one came. She heard voices, and a terrible chill went through her. German voices—she recognized the accent from newscasts she’d seen when her mother didn’t realize it. Could it possibly be ... ? Had Aslan sent her home to England after all? Was Susan here also? Lucy examined herself—clothing, hands, face—and found she was still a young woman, rather than the child she would have expected to be once returned to England.

How strange. Was this part of Aslan’s plan? What did he mean by it?

Very well, Aslan, she thought, confident that the Lion would reveal his intentions at the right time, as he always did. She must find Susan as soon as possible. Until the Lion instructed otherwise, she would continue her search.

She was in some sort of wooded area. Lucy hurried into deeper cover. Her brothers had drilled safety into her head for so many years that it was second nature. She checked her belt and found her dagger and cordial. No other weapon, though, and as her brothers always said, the only alternative was to make one or to steal it. And so she crept cautiously toward the source of the talking.

She circuted the voices and found herself on the fringe of an encampment of Nazis, though their uniforms were well out of the repair Lucy

expected from active servicemen. Moreover, their supplies were a hodgepodge of furs, handmade objects, and British army gear that must certainly have been stolen. A glance toward a few crates tucked under an overhang of rock suggested they'd been here a while. Doing what? Certainly the British government couldn't know of their presence.

She looked up and found the stars overhead in a clear, black-velvet sky. Lucy had made a habit of studying the stars in Narnia, and also when they returned to England. Her mother had caught her often asleep on the back lawn and scolded her and her siblings for it. But she was a flawless navigator, and the stars told her she was facing east, well northward of London—perhaps even in the Scottish Highlands (there was The Plough, affirming her guess, and stars she might easily have noticed in her London backyard were now lower on the southern horizon). *Why here?* She wondered. *What am I to do?*

She caught the faint scent of food—a soup, perhaps, and strong coffee. Her stomach rumbled. The last thing she'd eaten was a bit of cheese and a store of berries as she entered Calormen.

The men in the encampment seemed to go often to one soldier in particular, though he wore nothing indicating a higher rank. Now and then, one or two of the men (there were about two dozen, she guessed) went in and out of a cavern in the rock. Oh, for a talking sparrow! The little birds had been indispensable scouts in Narnia, except during spring when they could hardly keep their minds on business other than catching a mate.

Speaking of spring, she thought, it was either that or coming on to winter, with this chill. She rubbed her arms. No cloak, either. And no Arrow. The griffin had landed just outside Tashbaan to await her return. She could have ridden him for an aerial survey of this camp. No one would notice him in the dark; it didn't look like these men had anything stronger than lanterns.

Bother. Whatever were those men doing? There went another pair of them.

No hope of getting in or out of that cavern without notice, and Lucy doubted there would be help for several days' ride in any direction. She waited until a brace of men left the site to risk stealing some food and a blanket (with a quick apology to Aslan for the theft), and set off on a circuit around the encampment. She couldn't face the men unarmed, or armed with a lesser weapon than the closely-guarded guns she spied in their possession. Either she would discover what these men were doing, or she would find Susan—but she could no longer stand still and wait.

- # -

Michael Pevensie had lived through war, capture, torture, and escape, and never once given the enemy any information they wanted to know. Only now had he ever considered doing such a thing—now, when the men threatened his family with immediate harm. He knew Helen must be in their custody, but his children were still missing—or so he learned from the enraged questions of the Nazi deserters.

And deserters they were, for no one ever visited this knock-together assembly. Whatever they were doing, it was not under direction from a higher rank.

Exhaustion had been digging at his strength for the past two days. Even during his capture in the War, it had not come to this. He and the two other men who'd been captured had orchestrated an escape which returned them to British command armed with intelligence that earned them decorated status.

Blast the decorations. Where was his family? Were they alive? Had his children come home to an empty house and wondered where their parents were? Did anyone even know? He guessed that wherever Helen was, they hadn't hurt her yet, because they were still yelling at him to answer their questions. Whatever they wanted, it seemed they thought him the only person who could give them that information. How long their patience would last, he didn't know.

Conserving his stamina, he nodded off, only to be shaken awake again. His tormentor glared down at him, an older man he hadn't seen before, and in a uniform in better repair. Ah, this must be the leader of this ragtag bunch.

"We are tired of your lack of cooperation," the man said in clipped, impatient German. He tore the gag from Michael's mouth. "Where are your sons and daughters?"

As before, Michael shook his head to indicate he didn't understand. Better not to let on he knew every word they'd spoken, even if none of what he overheard made sense.

The man backhanded him. Pain flashed across Michael's cheek, through his jaw, and all the way down his neck. He tasted blood.

His inquisitor grabbed the front of Michael's shirt and jerked the chair to which he was tied closer. He thrust a paper into Michael's face. The pencil lines on it blurred, and Michael blinked at it. Then they resolved into a sketch of plains and rivers and forests, with an ocean bordering the right

coast.

Ed's drawing, one of the many he'd carried around incessantly since returning from Kirke's house.

"I will not ask again," the German snarled in English. His eyes were wild with a fervent gleam that set Michael's skin crawling. "*Where is the boy who drew this map?*"

Susan

Cringing where she stood, Susan opened her eyes. Arms still circled around her, and she expected to be greeted with a wall of bluish skin that she knew to be Saris's chest—but instead, she found a swath of white gauze. She looked up.

The man holding her had skin like oiled cedarwood. His eyes were squeezed shut as if he were in pain. Atop his head was a short thatch of black hair.

Susan gasped and sprang backward.

He opened his eyes then—eyes almost as dark as his hair—and the first thing that registered, apart from a look that said he recognized her, was confusion. He raised his hands and stared at them, then examined his simple white tunic and loose pants in the Calormene style. He brushed a hand down the front of the garments. “What is this? What happened?”

The voice, she knew. She struggled to form words and force them past the throbbing in her head. “S-Saris?”

His gaze came back to hers. Alarm now. He glanced around and saw, like her, nothing of the palace in which they'd stood moments ago. Forest surrounded the clearing where they were, brightly moonlit and silent and bitterly cold. She shivered and wished for warmth again.

He looked back at his hands, and then once more at her. “No.” He said something in harsh Calormene which she was glad she didn't catch clearly. Then he started toward her and hesitated. In an accusing voice, he said, “You should be a girl!”

Surprised into an acerbic reply, she said, “Thanks, I'm sure I am.” But then she looked down at herself. No, not a girl. A full-grown woman. *Still*. She raised her own hands. “What ... ?”

He grabbed her wrists. “The spell went wrong. I should not be here.”

“You shouldn't look like *that*,” she retorted, jerking her hands away and casting an angry glance up and down his figure.

His gaze met hers again, this time full of fury. “I meant to *die*!”

She blinked. Opened her mouth and shut it again. Finally she whispered, “Why?”

He touched his face, the hair on his head. Frowning, he stalked around

the clearing. Susan followed his broad-shouldered outline with a curious stare until he came back to her. "There is only one way for a Jinn to escape servitude, and not many take it," he said.

Colder now, she longed for him to stop speaking, but he didn't.

Stalking again, he added, "My orders were to bring you to Tashbaan, and prevent you from leaving again. I brought you as I was told. Rabadash built a fountain in the center of the palace—the fountain where you stood for the spell—a monument to himself." He paused to look at her. "Did you not see his likeness at the top of it?"

She shook her head, as much to answer him as to try to stem his words. But still he spoke.

"In that very fountain I planned to send you home, and in so doing, break his power over me and his chance to harm you." At last he stopped before her again. In his eyes was an unfathomable weariness. "I heard his enmity for you and your family, every day growing worse, from the moment he summoned me with the curse that bound me to him. He meant to have you, to humiliate you, to force you to things I will not mention. And I would rather have disobeyed the curse and died for it than let him."

Susan thought of all the terrible things she'd done and been, not the least of which was to ask him to do something that would lead to his death, even though she hadn't known. Tears blurred her vision and trickled down her cheeks. "Why? *Why?*"

He gave her a sad, rueful smile. "I am over a thousand years old, Your Majesty. I was alive before Narnia, before any of that world. I saw it born. In all those ages, yours was the only wish I ever wanted to grant." He took her hand then, and his skin was just as warm as she remembered it. "You have been a friend to me."

Her heart crumbled at that awful, sorrowful look in his eyes. For a thousand years, had his life been so horrible that her suggestion to free him when they met was the kindest thing anyone ever said to him?

She made to say something, though she had no idea what, but he let go. "We must find your mother and father. If my spell did not work correctly, it may have had other consequences."

"Aslan," Susan whispered at last. "Whatever he did ... it must have acted on your spell. Changed it. He must have meant you to come with me. He must have meant you to become ..."

"This body has no magic," Saris told her. "Your world ... I have no power here."

Susan felt for the large pouch she'd strapped to her belt. Inside lay the reassuring bulge of her horn. "Can you fight with other weapons?"

He smiled then, and it transformed him from a dark, brooding figure to a man of startling handsomeness. The amusement on his face lay at complete odds with the gravity of being dropped weaponless, powerless, into unknown terrain, and she took a strange comfort from it. "I have fought in many guises and with many weapons in my lifetime, my lady. I will manage."

"Good enough," she said. And they set off at once.

- # -

The first thing Susan realized, as they hurried through the night-chilled forest, was that they were well away from Finchley. When they emerged from the trees to a clear, star-strewn sky, they met with mountainous terrain, dotted with the reflected sparkle of lakes. She checked the sky again, comparing what she knew of the constellations to the landscape below them.

Scotland. *Scotland?*

In the distance, she saw a pinprick of light. A fire.

Right then. She gritted her teeth and started the march toward it, and Saris followed.

Loved Ones And Strangers

“Certainly we cannot hold the Coronation Festival outdoors this year,” Cori said. “What if it rains? We will have to use the great hall as is tradition.”

She walked in the orchard beside Asha, weighted with worries and trying not to show it. At a respectful distance behind them walked two dryad ladies in waiting, and a pair of satyrs stationed as their constant guard. Peter’s orders, before he’d left.

Cori frowned. They might not even have a Coronation Festival, though she hated to think of that. She held an uneaten apple in one hand. Her sister-in-law had been quiet all morning. Cori had asked Asha along for a walk in the hope that the distraction would do them both some good. Days, and no word from any of the Kings or Queens.

She realized Asha had stopped walking beside her only when her sister gave a soft outward breath. Cori turned to see Asha dropping to her knees with a hand pressed over her breast. Her face had gone deathly white except for the greenish cast under her eyes. “Edmund,” she gasped out.

Cori dropped the apple. “Asha, what is it?”

Asha’s gaze came up. The pain and fear written there, and that frightening paleness in her cheeks, struck terror in Cori’s heart. “Gone,” Asha whispered. “They’ve left Narnia.” An instant later, she clamped her arms over her belly and gave a long moan of distress.

Oh, no. Asha’s baby. Too soon. Far too soon. Shaking, Cori hurried back to her. “Guards!”

- # -

After a hot meal (the first she’d had in how many days?) and perhaps another hour’s sleep, Helen and her “rescuers” broke camp. She still didn’t believe a word they said. British, yes—but certainly not her young children, who were probably at this moment back in Finchley searching frantically for her. She wondered if she could escape these men and find help. *Other* help.

She walked along behind the one calling himself Peter, whose bird had shot off into the sky as soon as they started out. The other man came behind her, trailing that frightening wolf. She did notice they were heading for higher

ground. They stayed strangely silent until dawn broke across the landscape, when the blond called a halt. “Blanket, Mum?” he asked when they'd built a small fire.

He insisted on calling her that. Neither he nor the darker-haired one had been anything less than respectful to her, even when they pressed her for information about the circumstances of her capture and confinement—of which she knew nothing. After determining she couldn't tell them anything about the Germans, they had decided to move on and put more distance between themselves and the camp from which they'd taken her. She found herself grateful, no matter what they headed into next. “Yes, thanks,” she said as she took the blanket.

The darker one disappeared for a while, then brought her a poultice of some mashed plant, wrapped into a handkerchief, for her cuts and scrapes. When he handed it to her, he still had that desolate look in his eyes, mixed with obvious concern for her injuries. She noticed what must have been real gold thread in the scrap of linen—astounding in a time when even cloth was rationed in England. She looked closer at his clothing. His costume, or whatever it was, bore a repeating pattern in—she gasped—silver thread, all over the shirtsleeves. She forced herself to look him in the eye again, studying that sorrowful expression. “Thank you.”

“I'm glad you're all right,” he said softly. He smiled, just a flash and then it was gone, and he was too. Frowning, she watched him go. She'd seen that look on soldiers returned from the war. She had volunteered at the hospital when she could, and remembered that expression on men who'd lost things much worse than their own lives. She pressed the poultice to her cuts, and had to admit it soothed her injuries.

The blond man was no less inscrutable, though he did most of the talking. “Ed, see if you can scare up some breakfast,” he said.

The darker one nodded, and he and the wolf melted into the trees as if they'd never been there to start with. When he'd gone, the blond unwrapped a rolled army blanket he'd been carrying on his back all morning. Helen gasped when he uncovered two German rifles and an alarming store of ammunition.

His blue eyes fixed on her. He must have noticed her fear, because he gave her a gentle smile. “I don't expect you to believe us. I'm not even sure I believe it myself.” He frowned then, and Helen remarked a shocking similarity to the look she'd often found on her eldest son's face. “Until I find Lucy and Susan, I'm not going to be easy.”

Her daughters' names, falling with such familiarity from this man's lips. And there went that line between his brows again. Helen huddled into the blanket. "You really do think you're him, don't you?"

"I have no reason to lie to you, Mum. I have learned to take certain things on faith." He grasped one of the guns, studying it carefully, and somehow she thought he must be more at home with that lion-headed sword at his belt.

She hesitated, and then sat down. "Peter never touched a gun," she said softly.

He grinned. "Dad showed me when he got home from the War. Said I was old enough then." The look of amusement faded. "We'll find him too, don't worry." His voice dropped much lower then, and she wasn't certain whether she was meant to hear when he said, "Aslan wouldn't lead us wrong."

The Gathering Of The Four

Susan covered her mouth with her hands. She shot a wide-eyed look at Saris. "That's my father," she whispered. "Where are they taking him?"

Saris jerked upright and held up a hand for her silence, looking like he was listening, not for the chatter of the column of marching Germans in the valley below them, but behind them. His dark eyes gleamed in the early-morning light. He swept his hand toward her, palm-down, indicating that she should stay where she was. He started back into the woods.

Still unarmed, Susan crouched in the bushes and listened for the Jinn's fading footsteps. A moment later, there came a stifled yelp. Susan's heartbeat suspended for a long minute, and then a flurry of steps reached her ears. Saris came back into view.

Hurrying behind him was Lucy.

Susan bolted out of the bushes and ran to her sister. She wrapped Lucy in a fierce hug that her sister returned just as tightly. "Are you all right?" Susan whispered.

"Yes. They're moving him. Farther north, I think something scared them into it. We'll want to stay well ahead of them—they've got scouts ranging on either side of the column."

Susan nodded. There would be time for talk—and of her part in their return to England, she thought guiltily—later.

"From this time, speak in Calormene," Saris told them. "They will not know the language, and will not know you for your father's children if we are captured."

Then Susan realized why they'd been returned as adults. Even in her fear, a wash of relief went through her. Aslan knew what he was doing, as he always knew. The sooner they got out of these Narnian clothes and into something less conspicuous, the better.

They tracked the group well into morning. Susan walked last, and Saris first, leaving Lucy protected in the middle. Lucy knew better than to argue this. They paused to eat when the Germans did—late-summer berries that did nothing to fill their bellies. The smell of food from the Germans' camp made Susan's stomach growl.

Saris returned from one of their foraging searches, and as he neared

them, something flashed in the trees nearby. Susan tensed to grab a stone, a branch, anything—and then Edmund lunged into the open stabbing a sword-point toward Saris’s chest.

Susan had just enough presence of mind not to scream. Lucy gasped. Saris leaped backward and missed the blade by a breath. Fruit scattered from his hands and bounced to the grass.

“One breath to tell me why I shouldn’t kill you,” Edmund hissed in Calormene.

Susan scrambled to her feet. “That’s Jinn Saris!” she whispered harshly.

Edmund didn’t move his gaze from Saris. “Not one step, sister.”

Susan froze. Edmund trembled, white-faced, looking horribly ill. Leina appeared beside him, her posture full of surprise and confusion.

It was Lucy who broke the breathless tension. She paced carefully to Edmund and pressed his sword arm down. “This is *Aslan’s* doing,” she murmured. “Where is Peter?”

- # -

The hawk returned to “Peter” as he readied to break camp. He spoke to it as if it could understand, in yes-or-no questions, and indeed it seemed the bird answered him. Helen marveled at the exchange.

“Salvia’s found Dad,” Peter said, and his voice betrayed a slight quaver. “He’s all right, or was, last night. They’re on the move.”

A rustling in the grass interrupted them. Peter whipped the rifle from its strap on his shoulder into his hands, so fast she didn’t see it happen. Into the camp ran two women, straight for him. He let go the rifle and gave a great whooshing exhalation, then the three embraced, a little grouping of otherworldly characters in outlandish dress.

“Peter, I’m so sorry,” said the taller of the women, a beauty with lovely long, dark hair.

“Never mind now, Su. You were right to come.”

The woman gave a little gasp as if she were about to cry, and hugged him again. She noticed Helen the same instant the smaller woman did, and both rushed at Helen at once.

Their hug knocked Helen back a step. Startled, Helen met one pair of blue eyes and one pair of brown, and she could no longer deny the resemblance to her children. The youngest especially looked just like the little girl to whom Helen had served breakfast only days ago in their kitchen.

“Girls?” she whispered.

The smaller of them nodded enthusiastically, and both dealt Helen another ferocious hug. The elder one kissed her cheek, and Helen felt the wetness of tears. “I knew I'd find you. I knew you needed me,” cried the young woman.

Over their shoulders, Helen saw a mahogany-skinned man in white enter the camp. Behind him came the wolf, and—How could she not have seen it before, her dark-haired, brooding son?—Edmund. And Peter, wearing that selfsame look of peace on his face that he always wore at home when all three of the others were in his sight.

These were her children. Her children—*her* children, who had been missing from her life since their stay in the country during the War. Helen couldn't explain it, not at all. She hugged the girls again—her girls. Peter's image blurred with Helen's tears. For days, she had prayed to God to deliver her out of the terror of her capture.

But she'd never expected her angels to be her own children.

Soldiers Anywhere

The Germans skirted a cottage which looked to be unoccupied at the moment. Helen's children took some clothing from it and replaced it with their costumes, and—she gasped—a handful of silver. Each coin bore a lion-head stamp. She thought at once of Peter's sword, but before she could ask where they'd gotten such a shocking amount of money, he dropped the coins on a table.

He gave an approving nod. "That'll more than pay for what we've taken. Hurry."

And they were off again, tracking her husband through a forbidding wilderness that seemed to bother her children and their companions not at all. An entire day went by. The ache of forced stillness during Helen's capture dissipated, became the ache of near-constant motion, and then resolved into a new purpose and stamina that she hadn't thought possible. It was as if the collective determination of her strange little rescue party had affected her very sense of self.

When evening fell, Peter ordered a halt, and it seemed to be the moment they'd tacitly been waiting for all day. He produced the pair of rifles and handed one to Lucy, and the other to Susan, an action which made Helen squeak with protest. "You don't mean my daughters to fight?" she burst out with alarm.

"If we're going in to get Dad, I'd as soon have the girls armed with the best we've got beforehand, Mum. Salvia will help me. Leina, I'll need you, too. Saris?"

"I will not require a weapon," the dark man growled with a sureness that made Helen shiver.

Susan must have seen the worry on Helen's face. "We'll be all right," her daughter assured her. Helen had never seen such a look of certainty on Susan's face. Even Lucy gave a ready nod. None of them quailed at the dangers they were about to face. Who were these confident, unwavering men and women who had her children's eyes?

Peter stood. "Ed, you're to stay up here and—"

"I can manage a gun," Edmund growled, his gaze fixed on the direction of the German encampment.

"Protect. Mum," Peter said. "That's an order."

Ed's face sobered at once, and he nodded. No further argument, no defiance. In as little as a few words, Peter had asserted an authority that the others followed without question. Helen began to understand all the changes she'd seen in them since the War ended. And, seeing Edmund slide a glare toward the stranger in white, she realized Peter had posted Edmund with her as much to guard her as to keep the group's tensions from distracting them from the rescue. Or, she thought with a worried frown at Edmund's sweaty face, to keep him out of the worst of the danger himself.

Her eldest son led the rest of the group away into the darkness, and Helen prepared herself for a long, breathless wait without three of her children.

Long minutes went by, during which Edmund circuited their hidden camp. He returned, paler than she would have liked, and sat. When he saw her looking, he gave her what he must have meant to be a reassuring smile, but butterflies still ran riot in her stomach. Finally, she sat beside him, needing to talk of something else. "Edmund ... who is Aslan?"

He gave a soft snort, as if she'd said something amusing, then said, "Aslan is the reason we are who we now are." Then his brow furrowed, and a shadow entered his eyes which Helen found difficult to see.

She edged closer. "What's troubling you?"

He didn't speak, merely stared at the low fire Peter had built before he and the others left the camp. Helen did something Edmund had rarely allowed her to do since his birth. She stroked a lock of his hair back from his forehead, and he didn't move away. "You always were my sensitive one, darling," she said softly, aching for him even though she didn't know why.

Ed took her hand and kissed the back of it, then lowered her hand to his knee, and they sat there with their fingers linked. "I have a family, Mum. And I may never see them again."

The shock of this news made her jump where she sat. She let the crackle of the fire fill the stunned silence, and then said, "A boy? A girl?"

"A son, and another child due." He still didn't look at her, but in the firelight she caught the glint of tears in his eyes. "I named the first one Silas. He looks like me."

"Silas," she said, and she couldn't help but smile as she imagined a little boy with Ed's unruly hair and dark eyes. Then, sadly, she said, "And your wife?"

"Everything that makes me whole," he whispered, and she wasn't sure

he'd meant her to hear.

With a heart strangely at once full and hollow, Helen laid her head against her youngest son's shoulder. She felt him lean his head against hers, and together they waited.

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Susan stood breathlessly in the darkness. Peter had instructed her and Lucy to stay away from any hand-to-hand combat. The girls' job was to cover the others, who would go in and get their father. She worried especially for Saris, who was unarmed—but when she mentioned it to him, he merely smiled at her and told her that her fears were unfounded.

How could he be so cool about it? Susan rarely fought in Narnia. She was always the keeper of the peace, the builder of ties. Peter and Edmund and even Lucy were more experienced in battle. Had they remained in England, Susan thought Lucy would have chafed at not being allowed to go into the service and defend her family and country as she was used to doing. How brave her little sister was. Unlike herself.

The rifle felt heavy in her hands, foreign and almost unwieldy. She wished for her bow, wished she were more secure in the instruction Peter had given her on the rifle's use. Wished this could be over.

And then it began. Peter scurried into the camp with Leina running beside him, that stealthy, quick gait he'd developed when hunting game. Saris and Salvia approached from another direction. Seeing the Jinn's clothing in the dim light, she feared he might be given away, but then there was too much activity to focus on him.

Gunshots.

With her heart pounding, Susan fixed the rifle butt against her shoulder and fired at the soldier aiming for her brother. The kickback bruised her shoulder and she stifled a yelp. The distraction of her shot allowed Peter to knock the man out and take his gun. More popping gunfire. Lucy, covering Saris. The Jinn's tunic flashed in a lick of firelight, and she watched in amazement as he felled a soldier with his bare hands. An uproar in the camp now. Leina attacked a soldier. Salvia swept low over the camp, snatched a rifle, and dropped it into a tall tree. Everything was confusion; these men hadn't been prepared for any opposition, much less from an enormous hawk and wolf.

Hardly able to breathe, Susan kept firing, trying not to think about the

lives she was ending, and to focus on the one they were all trying to save. *Daddy, where are you? I can't see you. Oh, forgive me, Aslan, I never wanted this. Be over soon, oh, be over soon.* He shoulder ached from the pounding of the rifle's butt. As soon as this was over, she knew she would be violently sick.

Saris's pale shirt flashed in the dim again, and with eyes trained to find an arrow target in any light, Susan saw two soldiers creeping toward him. He saw the first and turned to face off the attack, but the second aimed his gun at the Jinn. The German fended off an aerial dive from Salvia, then aimed again.

Susan tried to fire her rifle. Out of ammunition. She sprinted toward them. "Saris!"

The German soldier turned. Shock swept across his features at finding a woman racing toward him. Susan reacted out of instinct and smashed the rifle across his nose and cheekbone. *Whack, whack.* The Nazi soldier crumpled before she could take another breath.

Saris spun to face her, and on finding her there, his features relaxed. "My gratitude, Your Majesty."

"Thank me later," she panted, scanning the camp. The few remaining soldiers tried to rally, but it was clearly lost when Leina gave a blood-chilling howl that, Susan knew, terrorized the staunchest of Narnian enemies. A rout, and thank Aslan for it.

"I've got him, I've got him," said Peter, close at hand and so sudden that Susan jumped. He was supporting a sagging man of similar build to his own. "Let's go, quick!"

Father, Susan thought, and a moan of worry escaped her.

Saris joined Peter at once, lifting their father's arm over his broad shoulders. They melted into the shadows, and it looked like they were getting away clean.

Pop. A last gunshot, and with a grunt, Saris collapsed.

The Measure Of A Man

Pain.

Not the pain of magic, nor yet of the summoning curse he'd hated for all of his eleven hundred and thirty-eight years. Real, breath-robbing pain, as of something physical torturing his body from the inside.

The sensation so surprised him that Saris opened his eyes. The pain that stole his breath had also taken from him his clarity of vision. Figures loomed over him, shapeless in the dim.

“—bullet's still in there—”

“—cordial won't heal it unless ... cut it out—”

“*You'll kill him!*”

Queen Susan. Saris strove for a glimpse of her, but could make no sense of the shadows rushing around over him. Then, cool hands cupped his face. A flowery scent, jasmine-sweet, surrounded him. He closed his eyes and inhaled it with what breath he could manage. Sound muffled out, and all that remained was the touch of her hands and the scent of her skin.

Death, then, and more welcome than any he might have invented for himself.

Instead, there was only more pain. Other hands turned him onto his belly, worsening that terrible stabbing agony in his chest, and rather than her skin—Cursed serpents, could they not let him have his peace?—he smelled damp earth.

He opened his mouth to snarl at them, only he couldn't speak and got a faceful of grass and stone. He listened hard for her voice, caught snatches of panic that made him claw the dirt and want to rise, and then they were holding him down.

“Quickly, quickly,” said a voice. “He may be suffocating—”

And he was, the pain now so sharp that he couldn't even pant, nor scream when something bit into his shoulder and made stars burst in his vision. He struggled, enraged at the weakness in his limbs, enraged that they'd stolen what would have been the last and only good sensation in his too-long life.

“Back over, back over, quick before he bleeds out ...”

Someone was sobbing. Over he went again, onto his back and that

stabbing sensation returned. Someone else forced open his mouth, and something dripped into it. Something hot, fragrant, like a strong tea but sweeter.

And the pain ceased. Susan's hands returned, and he wondered if this, at last, was the Heaven of which the prophets spoke. He wouldn't have known, had never believed in any afterlife. Had never had the opportunity to consider one.

It was she who was sobbing.

His eyes snapped open, and he looked for her at once. Blood covered her face and the rough farm shirt she'd stolen from the cottage.

Still struggling to breathe, he leaped upright and whirled around where he stood, looking for an attacker. His head spun. He saw Edmund, hiding Helen's face in his shoulder. Peter, Lucy, likewise covered with blood. The hawk and wolf. The Pevensies' father, lying beside the fire.

And when he turned around again, Susan, tear-streaked in the firelight. He took a step toward her, only to collapse to his knees with his head rushing in mad circles. He struggled to keep his eyes open, his focus on her. "Are you hurt?"

"Me?" Her voice caught. "This is *your* blood. Saris, lie down."

He had no choice. He trembled and his senses dimmed. He caught a last glimpse of her stricken face before darkness claimed him.

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The next thing to greet him was daylight, slanted and golden as though it were midafternoon. Someone was washing his face with a damp cloth. That jasmine-sweet scent wafted around him. Saris took a deep breath of it and covered the ministering hand with his own.

It stilled at once. He opened his eyes. Susan again, of course, with tears in her eyes and blood still on her shirt. A few tears dripped onto his cheek, and he welcomed them more than any amount of bathing. "Thank you for saving my father," she whispered.

He would have said that Peter did most of the work, that the others had had their part. But when he saw the redness in her eyes, he said only, "I would do that and more, my lady."

She helped him sit. He had been laid out on the cottage floor. The light came from the front window. He wore no tunic, and his chest was clean of blood.

“We thought it best not to move you, to let you rest and regain your strength,” she said shakily. Her gaze fixed on his back. “I’d better help you ...” She dabbed at his back with her cloth, then squeezed it out into a bowl of water rapidly growing pink. “The wound is closed, but you lost so much blood, we feared ... we feared you’d ...” She dabbed a couple more times at his bare back and stopped. Her cheeks pinkened and she shot upright. “I’ll get Lucy to help you—”

“I do not want Queen Lucy,” he said quickly, then stopped, shamed. He had no right to gainsay anything Queen Susan might want. He bowed his head. “As you say, my lady.”

Her eyes softened then, and if he could, he would have captured that look and locked it away in an iron-banded chest to keep it forever. “I’ll send her right in.” The Gentle Queen fled the cottage as quick as a disappearing Jinn.

Family Reunion

Michael Pevensie woke that evening to a bed warmer than he'd had in days, if not much softer. Blankets covered the ground beneath him, and more of them had been spread over him.

The first sight he met on waking was the face of his wife. "Helen," he whispered, and shot up to embrace her.

"Oh, Michael," she said, kissing him and hugging him tight.

Over her shoulder, he spied a motley assortment of men, women, and animals. Most of the people wore common work clothing. One wore no shirt at all, and a loose pair of pants that looked almost Turkish. Alarmed, Michael put Helen behind him. "Who are these people?"

"I'm not certain you'll believe me unless I let them tell you themselves, dear," Helen said with the puzzling hint of a smile in her voice.

The blond man, easily the tallest of the group, strode toward him. In spite of the man's clothing, Michael recognized at once the gait and the air of a command of a high-ranking military officer. Allies, he guessed, judging by the lack of wariness in the man's posture. Answers would be forthcoming, and expected in return. The Nazis were not here by chance. Just how much Michael could safely reveal was another matter.

The man knelt beside a nearby fire and pulled a tin from it. "I think the farmers will forgive us for appropriating some of their provisions." He offered Michael the tin.

Beans, no more than the fare he was used to as a soldier, but Michael took the tin and spoon with a grateful nod and ate with unseemly appetite. The Nazis had fed him hardly at all. He looked for his wife again, and despite a few healing cuts and bruises, she looked well. He offered her the tin, but she shook her head, so he finished its contents. He turned back to the man at the fire. "Who are you?"

The blond laughed, surprisingly hearty. Whatever the jest, Helen was privy to it, for she smiled back. Not just allies then, but friends. Michael cast a doubtful look at the rest of the party.

"'It is a wise father that knows his own child,' " the blond quoted. The mirth left his eyes, and he stared very hard at Michael. "It's us, Dad ... plus a few."

Michael had no earthly reason to believe that, of course. He scanned the group. Not counting the shirtless stranger (and, to his shock, a wolf and hawk, both well over the size they ought to be), he noted two women, and then another man, dark-haired, with his wife's eyes.

And he understood at once. "You've got to get out of here!"

"*What?*" The echoed word went around the camp from every human throat.

Peter—for Michael knew it was him, without the slightest question—moved closer to take the empty tin from him. "This isn't news to you."

Michael clamped his hands over Peter's. His son—grown son—stared at him with a mixture of alarm and amazement. From there, Michael sought out Edmund. His second son took what he must have meant to be a furtive step toward Peter. He looked deathly pale even in the reddish firelight. "Where have you come from?" Michael demanded. "You've got to get back there right away! You're what the Nazis are looking for!"

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There was little time for explanation, and Peter wasted none of it. They sat in a circle around the fire, and Michael revealed that his captors had questioned him about Ed's map of Narnia. Their father had further learned that the Nazi deserters were part of a radical group—radical even by Nazi standards—focused on finding weapons of the dark arts and using them to rebuild the Nazi empire.

And one of them had been to the places on Ed's map.

"What is that place?" Michael asked. "Where have you been? Why are you ... like this?"

"Narnia," Peter answered. Nothing he could add would encapsulate all they had done since stumbling into that country through Professor Kirke's wardrobe. It was too much, too profound, too everything—and so he said nothing else. He thought of his wife and unborn child, then quickly turned the thought away into some dark corner of his mind. He couldn't afford to dwell on them now. But the ache remained.

Michael hesitated. "And ... these weapons. Are there such things ... there?"

Nodding, Ed said, "Good magic ... and evil."

If it weren't for the seriousness in Ed's tone, Peter felt certain their father would have disbelieved it. But after a moment of studying his sons'

faces, then the worried expressions of Lucy and Susan, Michael nodded in return. Helen looked terrified. Peter hurried to add, "But we have Aslan."

The Lion's name swept around the group with an effect that reminded Peter of the first time he'd heard it. Everyone sat a little taller, their posture a little more determined. But their father's reaction was the most curious of all. A light came into his eyes, and Peter could have sworn the name wasn't strange to him.

Susan spoke next. "He was with me on the way to Tashbaan, though I didn't know it. He roared, and when I looked again, we were here. He wanted us to come." Her gaze went to Saris, who returned it with an unmistakable lingering look.

A shifting sound brought Peter's attention back around. Edmund got to his feet and stalked away into the shadows. Instantly, Leina rose and trotted after him. Susan followed their brother's movement with a troubled frown. Lucy made to go after Ed, but Peter shook his head to forestall her.

He would talk to his brother himself, after speaking to their father and out of earshot of the others. Edmund looked worse with every passing hour. Peter wished for Cori with his whole heart then, for she was the only one to whom he confided absolutely everything. And though he couldn't afford to say it and spread fear through the group, Peter worried that the binding spell that connected Edmund to Asha was slowly killing them because of their cross-world separation. And worse, Peter believed Ed knew it.

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"Dad," Peter said after most of the group had gone to sleep. Ed still hadn't returned. Peter kept half an ear tuned for his brother's approach, though he stopped shy of sending Salvia after him.

Michael wasn't asleep, no more than Peter. Men keeping watch over their family. Both moved away from the group in silent concert. Michael glanced back at the slumbering camp. "Your mother thought you were angels, come to rescue her."

Peter studied the trampled grass underfoot. "I've been a lot of things, but not that."

A few moments passed, then Michael said, "I never told your mother, and I'm going to trust you won't repeat it. I was captured by the Nazis four months into service."

Alarmed, Peter looked up, but Michael was staring into the camp. The

banked firelight threw his features into sharp planes and shadows. “Myself and two other men. A week without food and water, half-dead and desperate to get away. We crawled under the fence on our bellies through a mine field.” His father turned to him then. “We got through because something guided us. It wasn’t an angel, either.”

Then Peter knew that light in his father’s eyes for what it was, and nothing more needed to be said.

A Cloak Of Stars

As a Jinn, Saris never slept. He did not require it—a good thing, since he was liable to be summoned by some new master at any hour without regard to his personal welfare. So it was with surprise that he found his human body succumbing to exhaustion some time during the evening. He slept only a few hours, whether out of force of habit or concern for Queen Susan's safety, and woke with night still veiling the world.

Her world, where he'd been sent, powerless and disgustingly vulnerable to attack, by their Lion. Why would Aslan have done such a thing? In his Jinn form, Saris could have protected her from any danger. But as this human—one bullet had nearly ended him.

“Foolish,” he whispered.

But then he stilled and watched Susan's sleeping form, curled under a blanket and shivering in spite of it. Saris needed no blankets or extra clothing. Even the pants were a measure of modesty, rather than protection from the elements. He retained his Jinn attribute of inherent heat; no frost or chill wind bothered him. Watching her shiver, Saris moved to sit closer.

She seemed to relax a bit in her sleep. Her hair spread out around her, such a mass of silk that many more than Rabadash had coveted her. What madmen. To want a woman merely for her hair or her beauty—though the Gentle Queen had enough of that to warrant the desire. No, kindness was the gem in the crown of her, the thing that would not die even as the years passed. The Lion must have known that when he titled her.

Perhaps not so foolish after all.

If the spell Saris had woven in Tashbaan had gone the way he planned it, he would not be here now. He would have sent her home alone; he had not intended to draw the rest of her family with her.

Alone, she would have been thrust into this ordeal. To face the abduction—and possibly murder—of her mother and father at the hands of these Nazis.

Everyone else believed Aslan knew what he was doing. But why send him? The kings, surely, and Queen Lucy—as brave a fighter as any Saris had ever seen on a field of battle. But himself, like this? Saris, who had spent all his life wishing he could wish away his own power, now only wanted it back to

keep Queen Susan safe.

Troubled, he stood and walked out of the camp, past Salvia who was keeping watch. He nodded deferentially to the bird; hawks and falcons were creatures of high regard in Calormen, and that Peter called one of them friend was one of the reasons Saris respected the High King. Salvia nodded back.

Saris walked some way, until the myriad small sounds of the slumbering camp faded and he could hear only crickets, and at last ended at a small cove of rock where the wind eddied down in lonely whistles. He leaned against the granite and stared at the sky. Stars, too, were well-regarded in Calormen, though the Tisrocs often bent their heavenly wheelings to their own purposes, rather than obeying what was written there to begin with.

How strange, that he could find the constellation Leo with no effort. He stared at the brightest star, Regulus, sometimes called the Heart of the Lion. Saris was familiar with many worlds and many cultures in the course of his thousand-plus years, but on this night and in this world, that star absorbed more of his focus than anything had in his long memory.

“I worried you had gone.”

Queen Susan's voice splintered his focus. She stood at the top of the cove with her blanket wrapped around her shoulders. “I am not accustomed to sleep,” he said. “How did you find me?”

“Salvia directed me.” She picked her way down to the cove floor and came to stand nearby. “What are you doing?”

“Seeking answers,” he said without thinking.

“You're wondering why he sent you with me.”

Still watching Leo, he replied, “I wonder why he did not send someone else.” He shook off his contemplations. “The High King will not linger long in this place. He may want to move on before sunrise, and bring your mother and father to safety. He would want you to get rest.”

The Queen stepped nearer. “My brother is not here now. Saris.”

He looked at her then, porcelain-skinned in the starlight, and the affection in her eyes humbled him. “You have been as much a friend to me as anything I have done for you,” she said. “More so.” Her hand slid into his. “Of all the men who have ever come to Narnia to seek me out, not one offered me his life, nor in return for so little given. I haven't deserved what you've done for me.”

He started to protest, but she held up a hand to stop him. “I can't even come close to the hardships you have faced, but I do know how it feels to be wanted only for what gain you might provide to others. I lost all hope that

there were any men of honor in that country." She stepped nearer still. "And that's why Aslan sent you."

"Do not class me so honorable," Saris said, sneering as he thought of all the unspeakable things he'd done over his lifetime.

"A queen does as she wills," Susan said, and when he looked at her again he found her smiling. The smile faded. "I don't fear magic when I'm with you." She closed the space between them and leaned up, her mouth a breath away from his. She closed her eyes.

Regret tore through him. Gently, he pressed his fingertips to her lips, a touch he would not have dared but now memorized to the last detail. She opened startled eyes, and he could not make himself meet them. "I am not worthy of such a gift."

She curled her hand over his wrist and lowered it, then angled her head until he was forced to look at her face. The expression in her eyes was sweeter than wine and more painful than the bullet that had almost killed him. "Please don't make me wish for it," she said softly.

Defeated and elated, he said, "I can deny you nothing, my lady." He cupped her cheek and ever so slowly, pressed his lips to hers.

Overhead, though neither of them saw it, Regulus pulsed, and a ripple of light spread across the sky.

Night Visitors

“We've got to get to Professor Kirke,” Peter said. “If the Nazis knew of us, they must know of him. The Professor knows as much of Narnia as we do, and he may be in danger as well. There wasn't any clear movement from the Nazi camp we attacked, so they must have been waiting there for someone ...”

Edmund stopped listening. The empty space inside him was now an ache that forced him to strain for each breath. He had lied to Peter, said it was nothing. Perhaps the first lie he'd told Peter in years. He was certain Peter didn't buy it, but none of them could afford to dwell on the troubles of one while the safety of all was at stake.

He closed his eyes and summoned Asha's face. He wasn't dead himself, and that was the only hope he had that she wasn't, either. He focused all his energy on the curve of her cheek, the way her eyes slitted when she laughed. The way her eyes had lit when they first learned she was carrying their son.

And what of their other child? Silas would be well enough; the bond between Edmund and Asha didn't affect Silas at all. But what of the one Asha carried? If Edmund were so ill, and Asha by extension, how was it affecting their unborn child?

He forced his thoughts away from that probability at once. He needed motion, action. Something, or he'd go mad. They would get to the Professor if Edmund had to tow the lot of them in a cart the whole way.

He had spoken to Cori before he left, and made plans with her in case the four of them didn't return. He was certain Peter had had a similar talk with her, because she didn't seem startled by the notion that her husband and his siblings might not come back. Ed hadn't needed to elaborate, not with her. He simply told her he had written out a few new laws covering that possibility, and given her the names of those he thought most fit to carry out his duties. Cori had not fretted, nor burst into tears. She merely nodded and assured him she would see to it that his instructions were carried out. Peter could not have chosen a better wife.

The others were getting up. Ed followed suit, glad for the distraction.

Professor Digory Kirke should have been used to disturbances by now. When the Pevensie children stayed in his house during the War, it seemed to begin a tradition of pestering him just as soon as he sat down in his favorite chair for a pipe. Only instead of broken windows and running feet, it had become tax collectors and home visits from nurses and doctors. He'd let most of his staff go to pay expenses, but Mrs. Macready refused to leave his side, bless her irascible old heart. Nor would she let him sell the remainder of his antiques.

Well, he supposed it hadn't reached that point. Yet.

The latest of his unwanted arrivals was a tall blond man with a British accent so carefully enunciated that the Professor wondered what native language lay hidden underneath it. He had simply introduced himself as Mr. Brown, and asked for a tour.

The old place hadn't seen one of those since about mid-War. Mrs. Macready was nearly beside herself to accommodate the man, and the Professor couldn't disappoint her. He was left blessedly alone, listening to the rain pummel the windows, while she conducted their guest around the house. When Mrs. Macready returned their visitor to him in his study at the end of the tour, the man shared tea with him. Brown was polite, observant, and eager to listen—qualities the Professor dearly valued in this day and age.

But he was no fool, either.

Brown circuted the room, studying first the suits of armor flanking the fireplace, then the cupboards and shelves, and finally the figurines on the Professor's desk. His gaze particularly lingered on the silver apple in which the Professor stored his favorite tobacco. "Your collection is most impressive, Professor. I thank you for your hospitality."

"If nothing else, my dear boy, you've provided my housekeeper with a revival of her favorite pastime," said Digory. He fumbled with his pipe tobacco (it seemed that once Brown realized that was all the apple contained, he lost interest), and intentionally spilled a bit on his desk. Digory swept it up, doing his level best to seem the addlepatred old man his doctors believed him to be. "Is—Is there a specific bit of, er ... history ... you're interested in, lad? I confess I have to write things down these days. I'm afraid I've forgotten more about the British Empire than is quite seemly since my retirement."

"It is all quite fascinating," the man said, and as soon as he finished his tea he politely took his leave.

Once he was gone, the Professor immediately called Mrs. Macready to his study. "What did you show him?" Digory demanded.

She gave him a look not unlike his tiresome doctors. “Only the usual, Professor.”

He lowered his voice, even though the visitor was long gone. “Did he seem particularly interested in any piece?”

“Not that I saw. We had a look at each room, and then left it.” Mrs. Macready looked concerned. “Did you ask him here to make a purchase?”

“No, no. Did he seem as if he expected there to be more?”

“Now you mention it, he did seem to be searching a bit. I thought he was admiring the antique furniture—”

“Wardrobes? Did you show him any?”

“You’re not talking about that enormous thing in the empty room upstairs, are you? Heavens, Professor, it’s not even an antique. Why would I show it to him?”

“Quite right, quite right, I’ve no idea what I was thinking.” Blast, even with Mrs. Macready, he was reduced to playing the befuddled old man who might soon require institutional care. At least the doctor visits were good for something.

He followed her downstairs. They often dined in the kitchen together these days, being virtually the only people in such a large house. It was getting on to supper now, and he could smell the faint but tempting odor of bangers and mash. Bless her twice over, the old lady did know her cooking.

The front bell sounded out in the hall. Mrs. Macready huffed and adjusted her shawl around her shoulders, clucking irritably about more company and the late hour.

Curious—and not a little concerned that Brown had returned after all—Digory waited at the top of the hall stair to see who it was as she opened the door.

Into the doorframe crowded a rain-wet assembly that might have made a traveling circus look plain by comparison. The man in front was tall, long-haired and wild-looking. Behind him, Digory spied a woman and—he had to blink a few times to confirm it—a wolf.

Mrs. Macready squeaked and tried to close the door, but a second man stopped it with his hand. “Please. Let us in, if you’d be so kind, Mrs. Macready. It’s quite urgent.”

Michael Pevensie.

Digory hurried down the stairs, much faster than he was certain his doctors would have liked. “Let them in, Mrs. Macready, let them in. Do see about some coffee, and whether we have anything else to eat in the house.”

She clearly didn't want to obey, but opened the door to let their arrivals in. Digory stared at the wolf, and then gaped as a giant bird flapped in, dripping water on the tiled floor. It landed on the newel post. From there, Digory looked back to the tall blond man, who was unwrapping a bundle. Digory caught the gleam of steel, and then the man revealed the object—a lion-headed sword.

Digory sputtered for a moment, then rubbed at the beard on his chin. "Oh, dear."

A Homecoming Feast

Professor Kirke stared at Peter, recognition obvious in his eyes, and Peter found himself relieved at not having to explain to him. The Professor's gaze flicked toward the kitchen, where the Macready had disappeared, and then to Mr. and Mrs. Pevensie. "How much do they know?"

"A bit," Peter said.

The Professor bowed to him. "Your Majesty— Pardon, I mean Majesties."

"Er, not that bit."

The Professor looked embarrassed, perhaps for the first time since Peter had met him. His father cleared his throat, and Peter, who hadn't had to answer to anyone in years, felt his ears get hot. "You might want to enlighten us," Michael said.

Supper was quite late—a result of there not being much to eat in the Professor's house (since it only had to support two occupants) and a pause while Peter, Salvia, Edmund, and Leina went out to bring down a doe from the grounds. The work was short, as the Professor's grounds bore an abundance of game, and between Salvia's sharp eye and Leina's nose, they found a doe very quickly. Edmund he kept with him, not because he needed the extra hunter, but because he still didn't trust his brother not to attack Saris if left with him. His brother must have known it, but he didn't question Peter. Acceptance, Peter wondered, or worsening health?

Mrs. Macready nearly had an attack of nerves at having animals in the house (and a man scandalously lacking the proper public dress of a shirt), but the Professor advised her firmly that he considered them guests and their personal traditions would be respected. She left the matter alone after that, but Peter caught her muttering about the Professor's fragile state and breakable antiques before she left off for bed pleading a headache. Peter suspected horror at the idea of a man walking around half-clothed in her respectable house.

The Professor was delighted and fascinated when they returned with the kill, but he seemed to rein himself in until the Macready left their company. After that, one might have thought him a boy again, fairly bursting with the eagerness to discuss Narnia openly, now that they were allowed to do

so. And so, over the remainder of a supper of venison and potatoes, for the first time since their return through the wardrobe, they talked of Narnia to people from this world.

Funny, how he didn't call England "home" anymore. He thought his mother must have noticed, because she had been staring at him since they told her of the Coronation. In the middle of Lucy's explanation of fauns, Peter reached under the dining hall table to squeeze her hand. "Some things haven't changed, Mum."

She smiled then, and squeezed back.

"Fascinating," said Michael when they broached the subject of Talking Animals. His gaze went to Salvia, perched on the back of a chair and looking distastefully at a stuffed eagle on the wall. "And they can understand everything you say?"

Salvia's gaze snapped to Michael then. His feathers puffed up, and Peter chuckled. "I think you've insulted him, Dad."

"My apologies," said Michael. "I meant no offense. I've never met a ... talking animal ... before."

Salvia's feathers smoothed out. He did a perfectly splendid bow, spreading his wings out over the chair so wide that his wingtip nearly touched Lucy, who sat on his other side. Lucy merely gave the bird a look of amusement. Peter smiled. Salvia wasn't given to informality.

"And what of you?" The Professor addressed Saris, who had sat silently beside Susan on the other side of the table up to this point. "Your attire is most unusual, certainly. You must forgive my housekeeper. She's not what you might call familiar with exotic custom ..."

"I am a Jinn, sir," Saris said smoothly.

The Professor's bushy eyebrows shot up. "A Jinn? Really? How dreadful, my dear boy, I'm terribly sorry."

Saris's own brows arched. He shot a glance at Susan, who looked surprised and pleased. The Jinn turned back to the Professor with something like respect in his eyes. He nodded. "Thank you."

Ed worked his way through a salad as though he hadn't heard a word of the exchange, but Peter noticed a muscle twitch in his jaw. That usually happened right before Ed skewered someone on his sword. His brother kept his attention firmly on his plate for the rest of the meal.

The Professor pressed a napkin to his mouth and coughed. Peter expected the fit to pass, but it didn't. "Sir?"

"Nothing, my boy, nothing. A bit of a chest cold." But he didn't seem

to be able to shake the cough for a few minutes. When it did pass, he seemed to cover it with a great sigh of contentment, for everyone had finished the meal. “Wonderful hunting, sire, wonderful.”

“Just Peter, Professor,” Peter told him.

“Well, then, I don't suppose you'll mind if I ask you to call me Digory at last.” The Professor smiled. “Tea?”

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The pleasantries were over. Everyone stayed up late in Professor Kirke's study, discussing what they thought might be of interest to the Nazis. “You clearly can't go home to Finchley,” Peter said to their parents. “It's not safe, even if they have learned everything they would want there of Narnia. You never wrote anything else down, did you, Ed?”

“Just maps, sketches. Trees—” Ed flinched and hurried on. “Some portraits of animals. I burned the other stuff, because I was afraid Mum might get it and start wondering.” He gave Helen a crooked smile that reminded Peter of his brother in happier times, then sobered again. “Nothing they might use against us.”

“Still, Finchley is unsafe,” Peter said.

“Of course, of course,” said the Professor. (*Digory*, Peter reminded himself.) “Plenty of room here, plenty of room.” He coughed again, but took a quick sip of tea. Peter sat near enough to catch a whiff of something medicinal in it.

When it became clear they wouldn't arrive at an answer tonight, and the late hour was taking its toll on his travel-weary charges, Peter ordered everyone off to bed. Susan knew the old house as well as any who lived there, having shadowed the Macready around it after their first return in an effort to oversee a household as she had been used to doing. Of any of the “children,” the Macready seemed to like her best by the end of their stay during the Blitz, and allowed her some of the duties of caring for the place. And so Susan arranged their rooms, saw them off, and made certain everyone was accommodated—except Ed and Leina, who had vanished well before the talk of Nazi interests was over. Peter had an idea where they'd gone, and decided it best to leave his brother be for the night.

He waited until the others had all left, and turned to Digory as the old man was shutting a cupboard containing books they had extracted in their discussion. “Professor. Digory.” Even now, he felt odd calling the man by his

given name.

Digory turned around, and paused when he saw what must have been the concern in Peter's eyes. They both glanced at the crumpled handkerchief by Digory's empty teacup.

Digory sighed. "I've been ill, my boy, more so than I like to say. If only it were as easy as going to Narnia to fetch an apple and make myself well again."

Peter remembered the Professor—Digory—telling them he'd done that to cure his sick mother as a boy. A journey during which Digory had witnessed the birth of Narnia, and thus why he was more than a kindred spirit underneath all that eccentricity. "How ill? I beg you to speak plainly, sir," Peter added, lapsing on purpose into formal address. He doubted Digory would have answered otherwise.

Digory sighed and sat in the armchair behind his desk. "I may have to leave this old house," he said, and for the first time he sounded tired. "I fear my funds may not outlast my illness."

"Can your health be improved, sir?"

Digory gave a rueful chuckle. "Oh, yes, at the cost of this dear old place and its contents. I'm afraid the time to sell might be coming sooner than I thought."

Outraged, Peter came to stand on the other side of the desk. "I won't hear of it." He fished along his belt and found the leather purse he'd kept from his Narnian clothes. Opening it, he dumped the contents on the figurine-littered desk surface. Narnian gold spilled out and clinked against the silver apple. "It's yours. All of it."

Digory looked scandalized at the sheer quantity of coin on his desk. He opened his mouth on what looked like a protest.

"If I have to order you as a king, I'll do it," Peter said, trying not to grin. "Use it. Get better. Take care of my parents, let them think they're taking care of you." He dropped the purse on the desk and drew Rhindon from its sheath while Digory stared. Very seriously, and very gently, Peter touched the tip of the sword to each of Digory's shoulders. "Guard Narnia's door, Sir Digory Gatekeeper, Knight of Narnia. You were the one who showed us there."

The old man looked up with tears in his eyes, and Peter felt that even if Aslan weren't visible, he just might be with them after all.

Soul Of Magic

Saris had gone to the room Susan appointed for him earlier in the evening, and merely stood at the window looking out over the grounds. After a time, he had left the room and gone to the one Susan shared with Queen Lucy. He sat in the hall, discomfited by the idea that other Nazis might come to the house in the night.

A clock ticked somewhere in the silence. He studied the diamond pattern in the walnut paneling on the opposite wall, and let his mind drift.

“What are you doing?” a voice whispered.

He started awake. He had fallen asleep against the wall beside the door. Queen Susan stood over him in a borrowed dressing gown and shawl. “I do not like leaving you alone,” he said, standing up.

Her lips curled upward. “Thank you for your chivalry.”

“It is not chivalry.” When she frowned, he took her hand. “Chivalry is politeness. We are still in danger, my lady. This house is not as secure as a castle, and if harm were to come to you, I would have myself in the way.”

She looked downward, then tried to pull her hand from his. “Let me dress in something else—”

He chuckled. “The Tarkheenas of Calormen wear less than what you are wearing now. Do not fear for propriety. What woke you?”

“I left my ...” She sighed. “When you agreed to take me to Tashbaan, I brought my horn with me. I wasn't sure ... I thought ...”

“Walk with me,” he murmured with a nod at the closed door of the bedroom, where Queen Lucy still slept. Susan did, and he followed half a step behind.

They descended the stairs to the house's silent first floor. She retrieved her horn from the bundle she'd left in the hall. Holding it in her hands, she said, “I'm sorry I didn't trust you.”

“I am used to distrust, as I am used to hatred. A Jinn has few allies, my lady.”

“Susan,” she said quickly. Softer, she added, “Please.” She shouldered the horn on its strap and approached him to take his hands. “You have one.” She reached up to stroke his face. “Thank you for everything you've done for me.”

He couldn't help leaning into the touch. Just as irresistible was the urge to reach up and caress her cheek in return. Her skin was silk-soft under his palm, and her eyes a well in which he wanted to drown. What twist of fate had blessed him with her? How had he deserved this after all the evil things he had done?

Taking her hand, he led her to a sitting room, where he lit a fire in the grate and they sat on a couch before the fireplace. Saris watched her, watched the reddish glow of leaping flame against her face and waist-length hair. "Rabadash is a fool and a coward," he said.

She looked up, surprise evident in her eyes.

He sat back on the couch. "The Tisroc merely saw beauty when he looked at you. It was all he spoke of during my time with him. A prize, he said, to be won by him and desired by others. I think he would not acknowledge everything else you are because he feared you would outshine him." Saris smiled and took her hand, then kissed the back of it. "As well you do. I have known few women with such heart."

Rather than smile at his compliment, she surprised him by lowering her gaze to her lap, where she twisted her fingers in the fabric of her nightdress. "I'm not so courageous."

"I am not speaking only of courage," he said, "though I have seen that in you, too. I mean your capacity to forgive and care. Your Aslan must have seen this in you. I believe he knew Narnia would need the qualities each of its Kings and Queens possesses."

"I'm sure Edmund would be shocked to hear he possesses anything you find admirable," she murmured. "He hates you, and it's my fault. My fault also that he's been torn away from Asha. I began this. I would not forgive me, if I were him."

"Your brother is strong-willed, and he is not without his reasons for disliking me," Saris said. "Aslan himself traveled with you to send us here. Do not blame yourself ... Susan." He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand.

She looked up, and he found it difficult to see the sorrow on her face. "Everything I touch goes so wrong," she said. "Peter's so vigilant. Lucy's so brave. Even Ed ... so fair, except to you. But me? What have I done but go along with them?"

"You listened to whatever was inside you that told you your mother and father needed you," Saris said. "You befriended a Jinn, though you cannot abide the chaos of magic. You refuse to see your own power, but it is plain to

any who might simply look for it.”

She studied his face then, and he wondered what she was looking for.

“How many worlds have you seen, Saris?”

“I have lost count,” he said. “I remember most the one where I was born. That was Charn, the world the White Witch destroyed before she came to Narnia. You will know something of Charn.”

She nodded. “Jadis—did you know her?”

“Yes. It was I who put the sleep on her and the other nobles of that world.” Susan’s mouth dropped open. When she said nothing, Saris went on. “I was bade to do so by my first master, her sister, Lelene. I could not put the sleep on Jadis without affecting Charn’s other nobles, including Lelene—such was the power of that spell—and so it was a last resort. I cast the spell as Jadis spoke the word that destroyed Charn.”

“Where is Lelene now?”

“Asleep still, in the ruins of that world, I believe,” he said. “The portal is closed now. No one, even myself, may return to it.”

“Don’t you see?” Susan demanded, her voice sharp with bitterness.

“All magic does is devastate and destroy. If we had never gone through the wardrobe—”

“Then Narnia would still be in the grip of the White Witch, and she may have destroyed it, too,” Saris said gently. “Even this world has magic. A different kind than Narnia possesses, to be certain. Magic has no one side. It can be as beautiful as it is terrible.”

“Funny to hear you say that, when all it has done is bring you pain,” she murmured.

“No.” He touched her face again. “It brought me you.”

They sat together a while longer, hands linked, until the fire died out, then Saris returned her to her room. At the door, he made up his mind, took her face in his hands, and kissed her. He breathed in the scent of her and smiled, wondering at how he could feel so content in the midst of their jeopardy. “Rest well, Gentle Susan.”

She smiled back. “Please promise me you won’t sit outside my door all night.”

He nodded. “It is a promise.” He kissed her again, lingering this time.

When she went in and closed the door, he turned and started back to his own room.

Edmund stepped out of the shadows at the end of the hall, and Saris stopped short. Edmund’s eyes flashed. “You are treading dangerous waters,

Jinn Saris. If I see you lay a hand on her again in any fashion, I will watch you hang.” With a last glare, he stalked past Saris down the hall. Leina followed him, a silent lupine shadow.

Aslan's Paw

The next morning, everyone began to gather around the dining table for breakfast. The smells coming from the kitchen seemed to lift everyone's spirits in spite of the task at hand—discovering once and for all what the Nazis wanted with Narnia and its Kings and Queens.

While setting out the breakfast dishes, Lucy noticed Ed and Leina hadn't joined them. She slipped upstairs, up, up, up through the big house to the top floor. She stopped at the door of the spare room and quietly opened the door.

The wardrobe stood where she had last seen it, of course, except that the sheet had been removed from the room. She walked to the wardrobe. The last time she had seen it, she could barely reach the top of the tree carving in its center panel. Now, she reached up and reverently stroked one of the carved lion heads at the top. She paused with her hand hovering over the latch of the door.

"It's not there," came Edmund's voice. "I've looked."

She turned around to find her brother and Leina sitting in one of the corners of the room. She frowned at the drawn expression on his face. "Have you been here all night?"

He nodded.

Lucy started to tell him he should have rested, but stopped. She knew without asking why he'd spent the night in this nearly-empty room, even if the door to Narnia wasn't there. She approached her brother and held out her hands. "Breakfast is almost ready. You should eat."

After a moment, he took her hands and got to his feet. He started for the door, but she held him there. He turned back, a question in his eyes.

"Saris isn't to blame for this," Lucy said softly. "Aslan isn't, either. He wouldn't have sent us here without reason. We have to trust him."

Ed stared at her hands, then gave them a gentle squeeze. "I wish I had your faith, Lu."

"Whatever happens," she said earnestly, "I know Aslan's watching over us ... and over Asha, too." She paused, then studied her brother's weary, pale face. "She would want you to eat. She'll need you to do so, Ed. You need each other's strength until you're back together."

“If we are.”

His breath hitched, and a look of pain flashed across his face. He covered it so swiftly that Lucy wondered just how sick Edmund was. Alarm rushed through her. She hadn't seen him look so ill since his escape from Jadis. She glanced at Leina to find the wolf standing so close to Ed's knee it seemed she was trying to support him on his feet. The wolf's eyes met hers, and the concern there worried Lucy more than anything else. “Go,” she insisted. “Eat something.”

The corner of Edmund's mouth twitched, and he gave her hand a last squeeze, then left the room. Leina made to follow. “Psst,” Lucy whispered, just as the wolf started through the door.

Leina turned back, her ears cocked. Lucy glanced at the door to be sure Ed had left, then knelt down before the wolf. “I know how much you love him, and that's why I'm asking you this,” Lucy murmured. “Professor Kirke said he was visited by a stranger whom he thought might be a Nazi. The trail may be cold, but we'll need you to track that man, wherever he went.”

Leina's ears flattened.

Lucy laid a hand on the wolf's shoulder. “I know you don't want to leave him. This may be the only way we discover what the Nazis are up to, and the only way to get home. One wolf isn't as conspicuous as the lot of us running round the countryside. Find that man. Stay hidden as well as you can. Then come back to us. I will look after Ed until you return, I promise.”

Leina stared at her a moment. Then, with a nod of her shaggy head, she bowed, and was gone.

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Susan invited Saris to walk with him on the Professor's grounds that afternoon, after a particularly exhausting day of hunting answers. Saris accepted, but she noticed him looking around before he did so. Even when they left the house, he seemed more silent than usual. “What's bothering you?”

“It is nothing.”

“Saris.”

They paused under an oak that spread so wide, its branches touched the ground. He took her hand and towed her deeper into the shadows at its trunk. He kissed her palms. “I have no desire to cause you more grief

amongst your family.”

“Edmund spoke to you.” She frowned. “Did you tell him to mind his own business?”

Saris smiled. “You are his business. He feels he is protecting you.” Stroking a lock of her hair between his fingers, Saris added, “And he is grieving and ill. I would be angry as well.”

“He has no right,” Susan protested. “Oh, Saris, I wish—”

A light flashed between them. “Stop!” Saris cried.

Frightened, she jumped back. He looked even more alarmed than she was. He stared from his hands to her face. “My power has returned ... and I am bound. To *you*,” he murmured. He reached out toward one of the oak branches, hesitated, then touched it. His fingertip glowed where it contacted the tree, and new leaves sprang forth from the branch. He met her gaze again, shock in his eyes.

Susan clapped her hands over her mouth, horrified. She stared from his face to the new leaves and back again.

His expression darkened, and for a moment she feared he was angry. Saris pulled her hands away from her face and towed her back out from under the tree's sheltering branches. “Do not say 'I wish' *anything*. Hurry. We may be able to get everyone home yet.”

They rushed back to the house as Leina came racing across the lawn with something in her mouth and a wild look in her eyes. She didn't wait as they opened the door. She raced to the Professor's study, whimpering, every hair of her hide on end. They hurried after her.

The three of them burst through the door. Everyone in the room was on their feet in an instant, Peter with his sword drawn, Edmund with his. Leina skidded to a halt in their midst and spat out the thing in her mouth—a leather wallet which unfolded, and its contents spilled onto the rug.

Rings, three sets of them, green and yellow.

At once, Lucy bent beside her and reached for them.

“Don't!” the Professor cried. All eyes turned to him.

“They're magic. There should be more of them,” the Professor said.

“They draw a body who touches them to—”

“The Wood between the Worlds,” Saris finished for him. He turned to Leina. “Where did you get those?”

Leina cringed, whining. She circled toward the door and then stared imploringly at Lucy.

“Oh, no,” Lucy whispered. She touched the wolf's shoulder. “The

Nazis. Did you steal these from them?”

Leina spun in another circle. She gave a choked-off howl and raced to Edmund, then rushed in circles around his feet.

Edmund looked up, worry in his haunted eyes. “They're coming.”

Change Of Plans

“The Professor said there are seven pairs of rings,” Peter called to Saris in mid-run across the Professor’s lawn toward the stables, and his remaining few horses. On property this large, with so many attack points, mobility would be key to their defenses. Salvia streaked past over Peter’s head. “If we have three pairs of the rings, we’ll have to assume the Nazis still have the other four.”

“A wise guess,” Saris said.

“Saris!” called a voice behind them.

He nodded Peter on toward the Professor’s stables. Turning, he saw Susan running from the house, her hair flying behind her. “What are you doing?” he demanded. “Get back inside!”

She skidded to a halt and seized his hands, a look of worry in her eyes. He noticed a bow and quiver on her shoulder, no doubt borrowed from Professor Kirke. “I fight with *you*,” she said.

Behind her came Lucy, with one of the German rifles slung over her shoulder. “That’s right. Ed can’t fight, he’s too sick. You need all the help you can get.”

Saris hesitated. Every fiber of his being resisted sending Susan into danger, but Lucy was right. He nodded to the young woman. “We need a distraction. I am going to find the rest of the rings.”

Lucy nodded and sprinted away.

Saris started away in a different direction, but Susan gave a little squeak and pulled him back. “Alone? They’ll kill you!”

He smiled and called on his power, then felt his human shape melt away as his Jinn form replaced it. His magic flowed, snapping, down his arms and into his fingertips. “Queen Lucy needs you.” Cupping her face, he kissed her soundly. “Steel and bullets cannot harm me, my heart.”

Her lashes fluttered, and such a look of love came into her eyes that it pierced him more than any magic spell had ever done. He started away again before he couldn’t. “Saris!” she cried. “What if they have magic? Saris!”

He kept going, forcing himself to do so, on toward the direction of the Nazis’ approach. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Susan, silhouetted in his vision in white, as all living creatures were when he wore his Jinn shape. The

lawn around her was a cool blue shadow by contrast. She ran toward Lucy.

Saris believed in no god, no afterlife. But as he watched her run, he sent a silent plea for protection to Aslan, her Lion. Then he shifted into smoke and raced away on the wind.

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“They've scattered,” said Michael, standing at the window. He checked the trigger of his borrowed hunting rifle to be certain it was loose and ready to fire.

Helen choked off a desperate cry from her place on the couch of the room where Ed, his parents, and the Professor had set up their last-ditch defense. “They'll be killed,” she sobbed.

Ed shifted closer to the couch from his place on the rug. He tried to keep the breathless pain out of his voice. “Peter knows what he's doing, Mum.”

She turned her gaze to him, and he knew she was unfooled by his bravado. “How sick *are* you, Edmund?”

He shook his head, and even that motion sent his equilibrium into a tailspin. He shot a glance at his father from the corner of his eye, hating that he could do nothing to defend his family. Their barricade depended on Michael and the Professor.

Michael turned from the window. “Are you sure you can't ring—”

“Who on earth would I call?” the Professor sputtered. “They're bound to ask why Nazis are on my lawn, and I certainly can't tell them about *Narnia*.”

“They're going to ask questions when they find a bunch of bodies lying around,” Michael muttered, too low for Helen's ears, but Ed caught it. His father was right.

Ed struggled to his feet. “Professor, the rings. I need them.”

“Whatever for?” the Professor asked.

Straining for breath, Edmund said, “We can't leave evidence of any of this here. The first thing the constable will do is point the finger at you and Mum and Dad.” He held out his hand.

Helen shot to her feet. “You're not *leaving*?”

Edmund nodded and forced himself to focus. “And we're taking them with us.” He turned to the Professor. “To this Wood between the Worlds.”

“But you'll have no idea how to get to Narnia from there!” protested

the Professor. "Every pool looks alike!"

"Aslan sent us all here," Ed said, "and I think this is why. The rings, Professor. Please." He clenched his teeth on a stab of pain.

Helen gripped Ed's arms. "Edmund, you'll die!"

He kissed her cheek. "I love you, Mum. Always, no matter where I am." He looked to his father. There was no time, no time to say everything he wanted, son to father and man to man.

Michael's eyes softened. He nodded. "Go."

Ed took the leather wallet containing the rings and started for the door, against which they'd pushed a table and the room's two wingtip chairs.

"No, no," the Professor said, taking his arm. He towed Edmund to a tall panel in the room's woodwork beside the fireplace, and pressed it. It popped open with a *click*. "An old fox always leaves himself a bolt-hole, my boy." He leaned closer, and smiling, said, "For Aslan."

Ed smiled back and slipped out of the room.

Artifact

Saris found the Nazi intruders quickly—five men, almost at the Professor's house. Still traveling as smoke, Saris rose higher into the air, listening for the distinctive hum of the rings. He heard it coming from the last man in the march. And he sensed something else, unfamiliar, jarring, hidden in a long crate carried between two soldiers in the middle of the column.

Soaring down among them, he changed back to his Jinn shape and cast an explosion spell. The earth all around the Nazis erupted with a deafening *boom*. Soil shot into the air, raining down on the soldiers' heads. The men shouted and broke ranks, scrubbing at their eyes, blinded. Saris raced toward the last man before the ranks could reform around him.

Gunfire popped—*rat-tat-tat*. Saris flinched, remembering the pain of his gunshot wound, but the bullets pinged harmlessly off his skin. His target saw him as Saris closed in. The man's eyes went wide, and he gave a shout as Saris cast another explosion that blew him off his feet. Gunfire again, closer. Saris sent out a blast of heat in a circle around himself. Soldiers cowered back, shielding their faces. Saris tore open the man's overcoat. Leering, he snatched a pouch from an inside pocket. The humming told him the rest of the rings lay within. Saris closed his fist around the tiny pouch and swept away toward the Professor's house.

Men shouted behind him, and then he heard the sound of splintering wood. Saris looked back to find two of the soldiers prying at the crate with iron bars. He ignored them and rushed on. The Professor's house loomed into view. He saw Peter and Susan, astride a pair of horses. Toward them ran Edmund, stumbling, clutching something in his hand. Lucy and Leina and Salvia, too, all of them together. Saris cried a warning. The Nazis were too close, and coming too fast. They were not ready.

Edmund, nearest to him, looked up first. He jerked to a stop, white-faced and open-mouthed, staring past Saris with such a look of terror that Saris felt a chill.

Turning around, Saris saw the Nazis racing onto the Professor's grounds. At the head of the group was a tall man with a long spear of ice and steel. The man raised the spear, and Saris saw a blue-white glow at its tip. Edmund shouted something. Saris thought *Wand!* and prepared to

countercast, then lost all sense of everything in a flash of light.

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Edmund watched the wand blast hit Saris. Light flooded the lawn. The Jinn resisted for a split second, then slammed to the ground, stone-solid. Edmund's bones turned to water. He couldn't move, couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

Her wand. *Her wand. Oh, no, oh, no, oh-Aslan-how-did-that-get-here-NO!*

A woman screamed behind him. People were running, shouting. Gunshots blasted the air apart. Shaking, sweating, Edmund remained with his eyes locked on Jadis's wand. "I broke it, I broke it, I broke it," he whispered.

"Edmund, what are you *doing*?" Peter's shout cut through his fog. His brother slammed into him, dragging a horse. He let the animal go and grabbed Edmund's arm.

Stupefied with horror, Edmund stumbled along with Peter, then remembered the leather wallet. He fumbled with it. "The rings," he gasped out. "We've got to get them all ... into the Wood ... out of England. Protect Mum ... Dad ... Digory—"

He saw the echo of his thoughts on Peter's face. "We have three pairs! Saris had the rest. It's no good!"

Flash. Peter's horse whinnied, reared up, and instantly froze into a statue.

Panic sliced through Edmund. He looked from the stone horse to his brother, pleading silently. *She's back, she's back, she's got to be back, Peter, do something!*

Another scream, this time full of rage. An arrow whizzed by them and sank into the arm of the man wielding the wand. He shouted in pain, and the wand dropped to the grass. Susan bulleted past on her horse with murder in her eyes.

"No, Susan!" Peter cried. "Salvia, the wand!"

The hawk shot toward it and snatched it up, struggling to lift it into the air. Nazis grappled at the bird. Salvia flapped wildly. Gunshots began again—Lucy, trying to clear Salvia's way. The remaining Nazis turned their rifles on Susan, missing only by chance. Susan's horse bucked, frantic to escape the fray. Susan lowered her bow and scrambled at something on her saddle. She raised it to her lips.

The blast of Susan's horn sounded across the lawn, and with it came a long, earsplitting roar that seemed to echo from far away.

The Nazis cringed and bunched together around their leader with fear in their eyes. Salvia rose out of the pack and lunged through the air toward Peter with the wand. Leina galloped toward Edmund, who grappled with the leather wallet. "Now, Peter," Edmund choked. He threw the pouch at his brother.

Peter seized it and ran to Lucy, then grabbed her arm. Salvia dropped the wand. Peter snatched it from the air and shoved it at Lucy. "To Edmund!"

They raced to Ed, who bolted for Susan as she fell from her rearing horse. He gripped her dress with one hand, and Leina's ruff with the other. "The leader!" he screamed with the last of his good breath. "Grab onto him!" From the corner of his eye, he saw Peter and Lucy running toward them. They had a split second to get this right before the Nazis broke apart. Less.

Susan gave a desperate cry and lunged toward the stone figure of Saris. "No! Susan, no!" Ed tried to shove her toward the soldiers. His grip slipped. He grappled for her dress, her arm, anything. His fingers closed around her wrist and, letting go of Leina, he leaped toward the Nazis with his other hand outstretched.

Peter slammed into his back, and there was another flash of light, then nothing.

The Wood Between The Worlds

Susan's senses came back to her at last, and she had to force herself to action past a curious feeling of lethargy. She opened her eyes. She stood in a shallow pool in the middle of a vivid-green forest. Edmund was on his knees beside her, clutching her wrist and looking as dazed as she. She could still feel the scrape of stone on the fingers of her other hand—her empty hand.

Saris was not with them. She felt sick.

Fluttering reached her ears. Salvia hopped on the ground, trailing a broken wing.

Water splashed. She turned around to find Lucy and Peter stumbling across the pool toward them, still holding hands. In Lucy's other was Jadis's wand. Peter held the leather wallet containing the rings under his arm.

Edmund turned where he knelt. On seeing the wand, he lurched to his feet and leaped back.

Lucy let go of Peter and grabbed the end of the wand like a cricket bat. She swung it at the nearest tree. The wand cracked across the trunk, but remained whole. "It won't break," she said, shaking her hand.

Peter saw the injured hawk and sloshed through the pool. "Salvia."

"I cannot move it," the hawk said.

Everyone exchanged a look of relief at understanding the hawk's speech. Peter helped the bird onto his arm. "Don't, don't try. Lucy, your cordial."

Lucy obliged, while Edmund stood in the middle of the pool staring into the trees. "Where's Leina? Leina? *Leina!*" His voice echoed through the trees, stronger than it had been during their time in England. He bolted.

"Ed, no!" Peter called.

He, Lucy, and Salvia chased after Edmund, and Susan had no choice but to follow or lose them in these woods, too. She glanced back at the pool to England with tears in her eyes. It looked like a half dozen others she could see through the trees. She took a step, hesitated, then took another, aching. *Saris*. Grimly, she turned and raced after her siblings.

The sound of snarling reached her, and she ran toward it. Then came gunfire. Susan nocked an arrow on her bowstring. She and her siblings burst into a clearing, where two of the Nazis were shooting at Leina. Blood stained

the wolf's ruff. Susan let fly two arrows—*thwack, thwack*. Both hit home, and the Nazis toppled to the ground.

Ed dropped to his knees. "Leina!"

The wolf galloped to him, and his hands flew to her ruff. "I'm fine, I'm fine," she growled. "It's *his* blood, that tall one. I bit his hand. Wish I'd got more of him before he ran." She showed her teeth.

Ed pressed his forehead to hers and murmured something. The wolf nuzzled his cheek. "Stupid human," she said softly.

"What's happened here?" Peter asked.

Susan noticed, for the first time, that the clearing in which they stood was nothing more than a large, wide, shallow depression in the grass. "There was a pool here," she guessed. Looking through the trees, she saw three other clearings, identical to the one in which they stood. She remembered Saris's account of what had happened to Charn—*The portal is closed, now*—and a shiver ran through her. "This world is destroyed."

They stared at each other, each wearing horrified looks. "Narnia," Peter whispered. He spun toward Edmund. "Asha! Can you sense her?"

Ed sat back on his heels. Closing his eyes, he pressed a fist to his chest. In the silence, Susan almost felt she could hear the trees growing. A moment later, Ed opened his eyes, and his chest heaved as if he hadn't taken a decent breath in days. "She's there," he choked out. "She's there, she's there. But something's wrong." He got to his feet.

"How can we find the pool to Narnia?" Lucy asked, turning in a circle.

"And where are the other Nazis?" Peter added, scanning their surroundings. "Did we draw them all with us?"

"The tall one escaped as soon as I arrived here," Leina said. "He came, at least. Two dead—" She nodded toward Susan's handiwork, "—so that leaves two others."

Peter rubbed at his beard. "Which means they must be—"

Gunfire erupted again. Wordlessly, everyone scattered among the trees. Peter and Edmund snatched up the rifles of the dead soldiers as they went. Susan readied another arrow and hid behind a towering tree, wondering if the Wood had ever seen this much activity in however long it had existed.

And then came silence, so complete and so deep that she felt it sinking into her bones and whispering to her to sit, to rest, to sleep—almost as if the entreaty had come from the trees themselves. Her lids drooped. How long since she had rested well?

She forced herself to focus. Hearing nothing but that strange, dim, shifting noise of vegetation growing, she turned around.

Right into a Nazi, whose eyes were wild with madness. He stood too close to use her bow. She tore the arrow from its string and tried to strike with it, but the Nazi snatched the arrow and flung it away. A knife gleamed in his hand.

Something shot in from of her, and the next thing she knew, the Nazi was hanging in the air off his feet, choking, his throat in the grip of a blue hand. It flung the Nazi toward a tree. Susan heard a sickening *crack* and the Nazi crumpled into a limp heap.

Saris loomed beside her, his sulfur eyes gleaming furiously at the dead man.

The War Begins Again

“Saris!” Susan said. “How? *How?*”

He took her hand and towed her through the forest. “Aslan arrived. He searches for the Nazi leader even now.” Saris swept a hand toward the shallow meadows visible through the trees. “The Nazi and the Witch have been destroying worlds one by one.”

Susan gave a cry. “The Witch!”

“She has been resurrected. Who has the Witch's wand?” Saris demanded.

“Lucy,” Susan whispered fearfully. Saris drifted faster, forcing her to run to keep up. “Wait! Saris, my parents! Digory, Mrs. Macready! What's happened to *them?*”

“I have sealed the pool. The Witch cannot get there now.” He paused in their flight to give her a rare look of distress. “You cannot, either.”

“Bother that!” she snapped. “They're safe from *her*. Let's get to Lucy!”

They raced together through the trees, hand in hand, Susan with a fistful of her skirts in the other to keep from tripping in the long grass. As they ran, she noted with growing alarm the number of meadows that had sprung up where pools ought to be. With her heart in her throat, she said, “This—This is their work, then?”

Saris nodded, paused, changed their direction. Another gunshot sped them on. “Taking each world's greatest riches, destroying it, and fleeing it. That is why your Lion sent us all together to your world—to capture the Nazi leader while he pursued the Witch.”

“And?”

“She has not been found.” He looked at her then. “But she will come for the wand, or the Nazi will. It was he who resurrected her.”

Susan ran faster, outstripping Saris. She spied a flash of red—Lucy's dress—and readied her bow. A Nazi soldier took shelter behind one of the trees and used it as a barrier behind which to volley gunshots at Lucy. Hampered by the wand but clearly unwilling to release it to fire back, Lucy could only duck behind another tree.

Farther off, Susan spied Peter, trying unsuccessfully to get round the trees behind the man. Susan nocked an arrow and fired it, all in one smooth

motion. The soldier gave a cut-off grunt and fell dead. They joined Lucy and Peter, and Leina appeared beside them a moment later. "Where is the last one, the leader?" Susan asked.

Peter shook his head. "Gone—I don't know where or how. I have the rings." Salvia landed in the grass beside him. Peter saw Saris then, and his eyes went wide. Lucy's mouth opened, but no sound came out.

"I am well, my friends," Saris told them. "I have destroyed the other rings, but there are more pressing matters."

"Peter, the Witch has returned," Susan said breathlessly.

Lucy gasped and clutched the wand closer with both hands, as if she expected the Witch to spring out from behind a tree to snatch it at any moment. "Where's Ed?"

Someone cleared his throat. Susan looked up. Several meters off, Edmund stepped out from behind a tree, stiffly, furious-looking, with his hands spread out to his sides. A second later, the Nazi leader appeared behind him with a frightening leer. Susan yelped. The way the Nazi's arm was positioned, she knew the man had a pistol pressed into Edmund's back. In no way could they fire at the Nazi without risk of hitting Edmund. Rifles were not perfectly accurate, and the way her hands shook, she worried that the aim of this bow, not being hers, wouldn't be as true.

Leina's growl filled the forest. She stood beside Lucy with her eyes blazing and her still-bloody ruff on end.

"The rings and the wand. I want them now," the Nazi called. "Drop them in the grass, and your weapons as well. Then back away."

Susan tried desperately to catch Ed's eye. Her brother's body tensed, a slight, almost unnoticeable drop in his center of gravity. When his gaze passed over her, she shook her head frantically. *Please don't do anything stupid, Ed!* She looked to her eldest brother. "Peter?" she whispered.

Peter stood stiffly too, as if he could somehow put himself in Edmund's place. "Saris. Can you destroy the rings and wand?" he murmured.

"Not without touching them. I cannot hit him with a spell either, without also hitting King Edmund. Any other action might cause him to shoot."

Peter's eyes went stony, and Susan knew he was running through their options as he did in battle. At last, he frowned. "Then do as he says." Slowly, he crouched and laid his rifle and the leather wallet in the grass.

"Peter, the wand. You can't mean—" Lucy protested.

"Do it," Peter said again. He backed away. Salvia launched himself

into the air and followed.

Susan laid down her bow, and Lucy her gun and the wand, then they retreated also.

With an eager blaze in his eyes, the Nazi pushed Edmund forward, using him as a shield should they reconsider attacking. Ed went, clearly shaking with fury but making no move to counter the Nazi. Susan realized he worried, not for himself, but for Asha's life. Susan glanced at Saris. "Can't you do anything?" she pleaded in a whisper.

"No, my lady ... but you can," he murmured. When their eyes met, he nodded to her. "I cannot attack the Nazi with King Edmund in the way. Make your second wish, and send us all back to Narnia. *Say 'all.'* We may have some chance against the Nazi in the confusion."

She nodded. The Nazi ordered Edmund to pick up the wand. As soon as her brother bent and touched it, she whispered, "I wish all here to go to Narnia."

There was a blinding flash, a high wind, and then that sickening feeling of falling up.

Then bitter cold enveloped her. When she was able to see again, the first thing she noticed was Cair Paravel, and the lawn before it covered in several feet of snow.

Breaking Point

Edmund dropped the wand in the snow in his shock. The instant he realized where they were, he crouched, spun, and knocked the man's gun hand away with his arm. He drove the heel of his other hand into the Nazi's sternum. The startled man huffed and stumbled backward, gaping like an air-starved fish.

Peter shouted something, and all at once, the others swarmed over the Nazi.

"The wand, the wand!" Lucy yelled.

Edmund snatched it up again. The Nazi made another desperate grab for it, and then there was a blinding drift of snow in Ed's face. Something pulled at the wand so hard it began to drag him forward. Ed planted his feet. His side, the place where the Witch had stabbed him long ago, began to burn, and he gritted his teeth against it. More shouting reached him over the roaring wind.

Leina snarled and appeared out of the snow, seizing the tail of his shirt in her teeth. The wind jerked at the wand again. One of Ed's hands slipped and hit the fan-shaped pommel of his sword. There was a chilling shriek, a cry of hatred he'd have known anywhere, one that speared him with ice. Then the snowdrift settled.

The Nazi was gone.

Everyone looked around in alarm and confusion. Peter stared toward the castle, his beard frosted with ice crystals and his eyes blazing with worry. "Cori."

The lot of them raced, stumbling, through the snow toward the castle gates. Most were shivering and wet through by the time they got there. "For pity's sake, open up!" Peter shouted, huddling with his arm around Lucy.

A pair of centaurs appeared behind the gate, and faun archers popped into view over the battlements—a score of them, glaring down with bows at the ready. One of the centaurs looked barely old enough to be a guard. He squared up and eyed them. "Who goes?"

"Who do you think goes?" Peter called over the frigid wind whistling through the ironwork. "King Peter. Open the gate!" He and Ed shared a glance, then Ed looked to Lucy and Susan, whose lips were blue with cold.

“What is the password?” the centaur demanded, now staring at Peter with a worrisome concentration.

Edmund pushed forward. “Damn your password! We're freezing to our deaths out here, and we have the Witch's wand. If you won't let us in, get Asha. My wife will know me, even if you don't!”

The centaur's eyes widened. He stared from Edmund's face to the wand in his hand. He nodded to a crow who perched on an unlit sconce farther into the courtyard. The bird flew off over the wall.

Shivering, they waited. Edmund noticed that Susan had huddled closer to Saris, who raised his hand into the air. His fingertips gave off a faint glow. Hot air flushed outward from the Jinn's hand, warming them all. Edmund scowled and stepped farther away, not wanting any comfort from the Jinn. He had begun this madness, and he was not to be trusted. Watching Susan step closer to him, Edmund gave Saris a warning glare. The Jinn met it briefly, then looked toward the gate again.

At last, a pair of dryads arrived, one of them Amelan, Asha's lady in waiting. Edmund began to feel the first stirrings of foreboding. Why had Asha not come herself?

Amelan came right up to the gate and stared hard at Edmund. “Come closer,” she said. “Hold up your hand.”

He pressed his hand to the iron bars. Her hand met his through the scrollwork, and he felt a slight, warming sting against the tips of his fingers. Amelan's eyes widened. “Let them in!” she cried, falling back beside the other dryad.

The gates swung wide. “Y-Your Majesties,” Amelan said, bobbing a curtsy. Her gaze went to Edmund and quickly away again. “Forgive me—I'm sorry, I—”

“What is the matter here?” Peter demanded, echoing Ed's thoughts. “Why's it snowing? Take us to Cori this instant.”

Edmund bolted, following the faint call of soulbound magic that resounded inside him. He heard Peter calling after him, but didn't stop. Right, right, left, up. His feet smacked the stone floors, echoing in the eerily silent halls. He passed the throne room, whose doors were closed. There he met his first resident aside from Amelan. A young female satyr stood at the door. She shouted after him, clearly not recognizing him in his English clothing, and then pattered off after what he assumed were reinforcements. What in hell was going on here?

He raced up a staircase and down the hall to his rooms, and smashed

open the door.

Asha lay still in the bed, pale as birch bark, her hair shorter than his own. Her hands rested in empty bowls. An ancient badger leaped to its feet from the chair beside the bed. “K-King Edmund?” she cried.

Still staring at his wife, noting how thin she was and the way the embroidered bedspread lay flat across her belly, Edmund began shaking. “Of course. We've returned. Tell me what's going on, Badger, and be quick.”

The badger wrung her hands. “We're at war, Your Majesty. You've been gone seven months. Queen Asha ... your wife ... I'm sorry, Your Majesty.” Edmund met the old badger's gaze, and the pained look in the creature's eyes drove a new spear of ice into him. “Sh-She lost the child, Your Majesty. It was a girl.”

For a blissful three seconds, he felt nothing. It simply wouldn't sink in. Then it hit him with the force of a charging bear—*slam*—the truth, unavoidable, undeniable. Edmund staggered to the bed and crashed to his knees.

“Oh!” the badger cried. She tottered toward him—Ed heard it, but didn't look, couldn't care—and a paw came down on his shoulder. He barely noticed, pressing his face into the coverlet. He reached blindly for his wife's hand and felt it cold, unresponsive. He closed his fingers around hers, and touched the grit of Narnian soil in the bottom of the bowl.

“Y-Your Majesty? S-Sire?” the old badger said, her voice trembling. “W-We could not bring ourselves to name the girl. Queen Asha has not wakened, and you— We weren't c-certain, sire ...”

Edmund raised his head now, dry-eyed, unable to draw enough strength even to feel this last and worst blow. His child, dead. His wife, dying. And he, still breathing, damn all. He stared at Asha's face and squeezed his fingers around hers. He found just enough voice to speak. “Helen. Name her Helen.”

Bittersweet

Peter and the others followed Amelan and the second dryad into the castle. As Amelan updated them on the growing threats of Ettinsmoor and Calormen, Susan listened with mounting anxiety. Both countries boasted larger size and a corresponding population of ready men-at-arms. Pinned between them, with no sign of Peter, Edmund, Susan, or Lucy for seven months, Narnia had been forced to rely on Archenland and Telmar to help it withstand the increasingly frequent border skirmishes. The way the fights had been spaced out, both in distance and time, Susan realized their enemies were feeling them out for weakness.

A way in which to invade.

Saris looked at her, and she knew he was thinking the same thing.

“Have the trade agreements with Telmar held?” Susan asked.

“So far, yes, Your Majesty,” replied Amelan, “and Selbaran has given its support as well. But your return is a great relief.”

The second dryad had remained silent since their walk from the gate. Now, she folded her hands before her and drifted along with an even more withdrawn air. Susan knew what the dryad was thinking: that the Kings and Queens' second disappearance had rendered Narnia vulnerable to this hostility. The dryad's posture all but screamed *I blame you* when she looked at Susan, Lucy, or (less boldly) Peter.

Susan walked a little faster and gave the dryad a kind smile, though she felt anything but kind at that moment. “I don't believe we've been introduced.”

“Ruenilan.” The dryad gave a brisk nod. “A recent addition to the castle, given its lack of staff.”

“Where is everyone?”

“Gone to war. The centaurs, almost all the satyrs. Many of my own people.”

The dryad's brisk, clipped speech touched a chord of dismay in Susan. She tried to catch Peter's eye, to gauge his opinion, but her brother and Lucy were intent on reaching the upstairs room where they would find Cori. Peter's wife had come back briefly to Cair Paravel, in between campaigns to Ettinsmoor and failed summits discussing peace treaties. The unsaid result of

these dealings was clear.

Without its Kings and Queens, Narnia had been losing this game of tenuous balance.

They passed a pair of guards, then arrived at the rooms where Amelan had said Cori would be. When they opened the door, the first thing Susan saw was a dark-haired little boy—Silas—playing on an ornate carpet with a tow-headed infant.

Peter rushed into the room, wide-eyed.

Whoosh. A snarling wall of chain mail appeared in front of him, and he drew up short with his hand hovering over Rhindon's hilt.

The instant the werewolf's eyes landed on his face, its snarl cut short. Susan didn't even see the moment it changed from growling beast to her open-mouthed sister-in-law. "Peter!" Cori threw her arms around him and gave a desperate squeak as she buried her face in his neck.

Peter held her so tight, Susan wondered that Cori could even breathe. "Are you well?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes, yes. Have they told you what's happened?"

Peter nodded and stroked her cheek with a strange mixture of sorrow and pride in his eyes. His gaze went to her armor, and then back to her face. He said something too low for Susan to hear, then kissed Cori's hand.

Silas got up from the carpet and ambled over to them. He peeked out from behind Cori's leg with a wariness that broke Susan's heart. She knelt and opened her arms. "Remember me, sweeting? Aunt Susan?"

The boy jammed his thumb into his mouth and blinked owlishly at her. She could almost see the wheels turning in Silas's head—*survey, review, decide*, just like his father. Finally, Silas reached out and tottered to her.

Susan scooped him up and hugged him close, taking comfort in the warm little body snuggled up to her face. Narnia's future was wrapped up in this tousle-headed little boy, and any other heirs to the Narnian thrones that might come after. She looked back to the carpet, where the pale-blond infant squalled at the lack of his play companion. Realization clicked as Peter spoke.

"Is that ...?" Her brother's eyes went round again.

"Your son," Cori murmured. Smiling, she stepped aside.

Peter's breath shuddered out. He approached the carpet as though he thought the floor might shatter if he treaded too heavily. Kneeling, he reached for the infant. From where she stood, Susan saw tears in Peter's eyes. "Hello," he said softly.

The baby quieted and rolled onto his belly, then studied Peter with a

gaze that seemed years too old for him. Blue-eyed, like his father, but with Cori's fine nose and the shape of her brow. A tiny, wolf-pup rumble of a growl reached Susan's ears. Peter heard it too; he froze, even more wide-eyed than before, with his fingers just a breath away from the infant's face. The baby's nostrils flared then, and the growl changed instantly to a squeal of delight. He seized Peter's fingers and waved them about.

Peter gave a shaky breath and picked the infant up. The baby bear-hugged him around the neck. Holding him, Peter gave them all a look that eclipsed the day he'd been crowned.

"He recognizes your scent. He knows you're family." Shining-eyed, Cori laughed. "His name is Aedan."

"Aedan," Peter repeated, his voice full of reverence even as the infant tugged on his hair. He met Susan's gaze, and hope filled his features.

She glanced at Saris, whose approving look went from Cori, to the children, to Susan. He smiled, and she returned it wholeheartedly.

Narnia was not yet lost.

Strife And Unity

Each of the Pevensies bore a part of the whole responsibility of monarchy: Peter, the military strategist; Edmund, the lawmaker; Susan, handler of public affairs; Lucy, the constant presence among their people, bringing their news and concerns back to the castle to be heard. In all their reign, the four had never been needed in Council at once—until now. The situation with Calormen and Ettinsmoor had grown desperate indeed. But Susan could hardly think on it.

The seats, perches, and platforms in the Council were arranged in a ring around the perimeter of the space, whose size rivaled the throne room. Each of Narnia's peoples was represented—centaur, satyr, faun, dryad, naiad, or talking animal. In the compass points sat Narnia's rulers: Peter in the Northern seat, Susan in the Southern, Edmund in the Western seat, and Lucy in the Eastern. In this way, no creature of Narnia could be considered lesser than another in their address to the present company.

Susan stared across the floor at Peter. Her elder brother's attention remained on the old Fox who stood in the center of the ring, presenting evidence on the weakening northern border of Narnia. A glance at Lucy confirmed a pale face and downturned lips. Lucy had been crying intermittently from the moment she learned of Asha's illness and the baby's death. From there, Susan looked reluctantly to Edmund. She knew he'd shut right down if he saw her watching.

It was obvious he wasn't thinking about sentries or blockades. All the evidence of pain was there in his posture, in the restless way he flicked his thumb along the leaf-sculpted arm of his seat. When he spoke, his answers were as they always were. Logical. Responsible. Always within the scope of Narnian law. But now, as unemotional as if he gave them by rote.

The look in his eyes when he got up to present his thoughts worried her. As alike as they were, Susan and Edmund had never been particularly close. He sought Peter when he needed to talk, or Lucy went to him and coaxed the words from him. He had not gone to Peter. And it appeared that over the course of the past day, he had gone out of his way to avoid Lucy. There was too much unreleased turmoil in that darkly brooding gaze. An iciness that had never been there before.

Council concluded with plans to investigate the whereabouts of the Nazi and if he had brought others with him to Narnia, as well as to search for the White Witch and any of her sympathizers. Edmund stiffened during this discussion, but gave no reply other than a nod to Peter's instructions. The wand, Susan had been told, was safely locked in Cair Paravel's treasury.

She waited as the others filed out of the room, hoping to catch Edmund, who had remained behind to talk with a Bear about the western border. There was a pause afterward, and the Bear went to lay a hand on Edmund's. Ed stepped back with a stiff nod and turned to the door. Susan stepped through it into the hall, not wanting to seem too much like she'd been hovering.

Saris was in the hall when she emerged, and in his human shape. As soon as he saw her, he sidestepped the last few stragglers out of the room and backed toward an alcove, beckoning her with a meaningful look. She followed him.

"I have spoken to some of the Jinn in Calormen," he told her when they were out of sight of the departing councilors. "Rabadash has found a man he trusts to do his bidding. They will try to attack Narnia by sea."

"Our fleet can hold them for months, if need be. The Calormenes are not the strongest of seafarers," Susan said. "I worry more about Ettinsmoor. There are long stretches of undefended border in the north. We're spread too thin."

"Do not fear for your country, my lady," he murmured, bringing her hands up to kiss them. His gaze softened, tugging at her even through her worry. "I will defend your home to my last breath, merely because it is yours."

"What about the binding spell?" she fretted. "Someone will find the magic and call you forth, and ..." Her voice caught, and she held his hands tighter, realizing only now how horrible that possibility would be. "... they'll send you away from me."

His hand came up to her face, warm as sun-washed sand. "Rabadash's last wish to me was to bring you to Calormen. When Aslan changed my spell, he bound me to you. I cannot be bound to another until the course of this spell has finished." Saris took her hands in his again, and his thumbs passed over her bowstring-callused fingertips. "You are given three wishes when you bind a Jinn, Gentle Susan. You have made two." He kissed her softly. "Do not make that last wish."

Heartsick, she pulled away. "You cannot ask me to keep you a slave—" "To do otherwise would be to send me away," he interrupted, his dark

eyes burning with a gravity that was unusual even for him. “Maybe to a task that could harm you. Death is infinitely preferable, and do not fool yourself that I would not seek it.” He kissed her again, and his warm hand slid under her hair to curl around the back of her neck. A delicious warmth washed through her. Saris touched his forehead to hers. “I would rather spend all the rest of my days in servitude at your side, than one moment of freedom away from you.”

“If there were any other way to do this—”

“I know you would take it,” he said. “And for me, that is enough, my heart.” He stroked a long lock of her hair, and a shadow crossed his features. “If I were a free man and a better one, I would have asked you to marry me.”

“You are a better man than many I've known,” she responded, her heart suddenly lighter than it had been in days. “And if you were to ask me, I would say yes.”

The stunned look on his face almost made her smile. He looked as if it were too terrible a thing to contemplate. “You deserve better.”

“What I want is you.” With her heart full, she touched his face, then touched her lips to his.

Footsteps sent them lurching apart and bolting from the alcove like the guilty lovers they were. Edmund halted in front of them. His rigid posture told her he knew what they'd been doing, but the stony look in his eyes was all for Saris. His sword hand twitched as if seeking a hilt that wasn't there. None of them wore their arms inside the castle unless there was a ceremony or some emergency. Edmund looked as though he wished such were the case. For several seconds, Susan held her breath, waiting for that lightning-strike attack.

Saris stood resolute, clearly waiting for it too, but unapologetic. Like a pair of wolves, they held each other's gaze, and neither backed down.

“Papa, Papa!” Footsteps pattered down the hall. Silas ran to them. Edmund scooped him up, and Silas began chattering about supper, oblivious to the glare Edmund shot over his shoulder as he walked away with his son.

Torn, Susan watched them go until they disappeared out of sight around a corner. When she turned back to Saris, she found him studying her with a pained expression. “I would have you smile, my lady,” he said softly. “I do not like to see you unhappy.”

She took his hands in hers. “Then marry me,” she pleaded.

“My lady ...”

“Narnia is being torn to pieces and attacked while it suffers,” she

interrupted, willing him to understand. “The only way to fight back is to stand together.” She laid his hand against her cheek. “Stand with me.”

He drew her close and brushed his lips over her knuckles. “I would stand nowhere else.”

Shatter

Three days. For three days, the inhabitants of the castle held their breath while Asha's life hung by a thread. In that time, Edmund never came to the private breakfast the Pevensies had always shared in a quiet, sun-filled room of the castle. He had not yet spoken to any of his siblings about Asha or his lost daughter. Even Leina was sent away when she prodded him too deeply, and Silas, who might have been a comfort to him, spent most of his time with Lucy or Amelan. The farther Edmund retreated into silence, the more Susan worried.

She managed a pained smile as she stopped at the library door that evening. Her younger brother was ever to be found here, if not at Asha's side. She shook with dread, almost turned back, then screwed up her courage. She knocked softly.

“Enter.”

She opened the door and walked in, swallowing the knot in her throat. Texts on warfare tactics and scrolls detailing great battles littered the tables. Edmund sat in a chair facing the window; she could see the top of his head over the high back. Only a pair of low-burnt candles in their sconces flanking the window lit the room.

He had never before stood on hesitation when something needed to be said, whereas she, in her office as queen and bastion of court etiquette, had always relied upon a properly placed silence. *Out with it*, he would have said. She drew a breath and held it for a moment before plunging in. “Edmund ... I'm to marry Saris. I'd like your blessing.”

“I will not give it.”

She had expected that, but it hurt all the same, as did the emptiness in his voice. She swallowed again. “Please look at me.”

There was a long pause. Finally he stood and faced her across the library, his expression unreadable. He gripped the chair's back. Anyone might have thought the motion casual, but she knew he was steadying himself on his feet, still weak with the effects of his separation from Asha. Shadows lingered under his eyes. Had he slept since their return? Guilt riddled her, and she wondered if this was the same hollow-chested feeling he had carried all those years after Jadis. Still carried—no doubt somehow blaming himself

for his daughter's death. *Why, Aslan?* Susan rallied again. "I am so desperately sorry for your daughter—"

"You will not mention her. Nor will you mention Jinn Saris to me again."

"You cannot tell me whom to see," she pleaded.

"I can, and I will. I made it clear I don't trust him, and that hasn't changed."

"You were willing to trust him enough to rescue our parents."

"Peter was willing. It was not my place to countermand him. It is my place to protect Narnia as I see necessary."

Frustration clawed at her. She could have dealt with bullheadedness from anyone else. Anyone but him, who should have understood that she loved Saris enough to return here. She, of all of them. Lost for words for the first time since her coronation, she sputtered, "You're ... *blinded* by your hatred, Edmund!"

He stalked closer. His dark eyes flashed. "He is a loose cannon that we cannot afford, especially not now. What if he's summoned and starts murdering Narnians again? What if someone sets him on *you*?"

"He can't. He *won't*. He would have died for me!"

Nose to nose now, Ed glared at her. "I rather wish he would."

She gasped. Pain and insult and outrage flared through her, and without thinking, she slapped him across the cheek.

Ed stood there and took it, eyes gleaming and still locked on hers. He exhaled sharply, shakily, through his nose but didn't move.

Tears filled her eyes and ran unchecked down her cheeks. Oh, she should not have come, should not have tried! She'd wanted to comfort him as much as to mend the rift between him and Saris, but it was all going so wrong. "Can you not see how much he cares for me?" she begged. "Have you seen nothing he's done for us, heard nothing I've said? Please, Edmund—can't you allow me this one thing? What have I ever asked of you?"

"I follow Peter. Not you," he said. His Adam's apple bobbed, and he closed his eyes as though warring for control of himself.

Ashamed to be crying, she whispered, "Peter's given his blessing."

A muscle clenched in Ed's jaw. When he opened his eyes again, it was that same hard glare, unwavering but now resigned. "So be it." He turned away and walked, slump-shouldered, back to his chair as if he were headed to a gallows.

Hardly able to see him through her tears, she wrung a fold of her skirt

in shaking hands. In her mind she saw Asha, pale and stricken, lying in that bed while Edmund kept his grim watch. “Ed ...”

“Get out.” His voice broke as he said it.

She stifled her sob and ran.

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Cori pushed open the door to the sunny courtyard. Susan's tearful account of the previous evening's failed talk with Edmund weighed heavily on her mind. “Edmund?” she called.

“Here.”

Puddles and sodden grass filled the space. Someone had cleared it of snow. She found Edmund on the other side of the leaping-faun statue, his breath steaming in the air. A makeshift table had been erected there, on which lay an overwhelming mass of freshly-soaped leather armor for the fauns, satyrs, and centaurs of Narnia's First Guard. More of it, also cleaned and gleaming, covered the swept stone pathways beside the table. Edmund was up to his elbows in grease and leather soap, scrubbing at a stained tabard as though it had done him personal offense. A faint whiff of salt carried across the table under the sting of the soap and the bite of chill weather. She spied the tracks of drying tears on his cheeks.

She didn't need to ask to know what he was doing. The half-wild look in his eyes was explanation enough. “Susan asked me to come, but it is on my own account that I am here,” she said.

His gaze came up, silent and patient.

Her mouth twitched. “All right, then, Peter as well.” Making up her mind, she went closer and rested an imploring hand on his arm. “Lucy will say nothing, for she cries so. My heart is broken for you and Asha both.”

He paused, and for a moment she thought he would lunge away from the touch—but he laid a hand over hers and gave it a brief squeeze that encouraged her to speak further. “You must understand,” she added gently. “I did not trust him, either, and I had as much a right as you to hate Jinn Saris when he stole your face to kidnap me. But he is not an evil man. A *man*, Edmund ... not a monster. I have reason to know the difference.”

He looked at her then, and the wildness in his eyes lessened a little. “You're not a monster, and you never were.”

“Because I fought against it,” she said. “I had the choice. Saris did not ... until now. He loves her, as she loves him. Susan has made her choice,

and she would be moved from it no more than Asha or I. What has happened is not his doing, and I think if he had known, he would have refused Rabadash long before it came to this. Forgive, good brother.”

Edmund turned away long enough to clean the grime from his hands with a linen cloth. When he turned back, he met her imploring gaze with a look that was only briefly the Edmund she had met three years ago. He took her hands together in his, and pressed his lips to her knuckles. “I would trust Narnia to the hands of few others,” he said quietly.

She stared at him, puzzling. Only then did she catch the gleam of his sword and scabbard on the table. He never carried it within the castle walls, unless— “You are leaving,” she realized.

He nodded once and released her. “For Selbaran, and the Well of Opals. We sail at sunset, as soon as I finish here.”

As soon as he finished a last task to care for his kingdom. As soon as he finished filling his every minute with something that wasn't thoughts of his daughter and his terribly sick wife. If the Well of Opals could not strengthen Asha's health, nothing would.

A month-long journey. Would Asha survive it to reach the healing waters at its end? Would Edmund?

Her brother, the first real friend she had ever had. The first man who had seen in her the makings of the soldier and queen she had become. How could he have planned all this under her nose, and she not have known? Fighting tears, knowing he would not want to see them, Cori hugged him. “Be well,” she said, wishing it with all her heart.

He kissed her cheek, then pulled away to belt the sword to his waist. From another corner of the table, he shouldered a cloth bundle. He nodded at all the cleaned leather. “I've already told the fauns from the armory to retrieve these and take down the table. I will write to Lucy. Tell Peter ... Never mind. He'll know.” He raised a hand and brushed a lock of her hair back from her face. “Take care of them, Cori.” His voice wavered. “All of them.”

And he was gone.

There Is Yet Hope

How strange, Lucy thought, that when there is darkness all around, a happy thing shines so much brighter.

The throne room was filled wall to wall with Narnians and people from all its allied countries. Lucy didn't think she'd seen so many onlookers present even at Peter and Cori's wedding. It was as if everyone had come to see Queen Susan, renowned and sought by so many for her beauty, and to see the man she had chosen above them all.

Jinn Saris, in his human shape, wore a white tunic and pants of ornate Calormene style. Susan wore a flowing white dress whose golden stitching matched that in his attire. A string of sapphires graced her throat, but nothing in all of Narnia could match the radiant look on her face when Oreius joined them in marriage. The cheer as they kissed shook the hall, full of a joy that was all the deeper because of the strife against which this day was set.

They were at war. The Nazis, and the White Witch, if she had indeed returned, had so far evaded the Narnians' searches. Edmund and Asha and Silas had gone away to Selbaran, and no word had reached them yet of a safe landing or intent to return. Lucy glanced across the dais to Edmund's empty throne with a knot in her throat.

A hand slid into hers. "Don't cry, Lucy dear. I don't have a handkerchief."

She smiled through her tears at Faun Tumnus, who had appeared beside her throne. "I'm all right," she said. When Susan and Saris turned to face the gathered onlookers, she cheered with the rest.

With a startling grin, Saris tugged Susan closer to kiss her again. He raised his hand outward as their lips met, and from his fingertips burst a flash of light that soared over everyone's heads and showered the guests with what looked like stardust. The guests oohed as the glittering stuff changed to magical birds, whose music filled the hall before they dissipated into nothing. More cheering echoed off the marble walls, and Lucy joined the clapping. She spied the griffin, Arrow, among the gathered people and nodded to him. The griffin bowed his head to her in return.

She caught Peter's eye and beamed. He smiled back, and then, as Cori

approached him carrying their son, he took Aedan in his arms and stood up to give the newlyweds their official welcome to Cair Paravel. And when he glanced at Edmund's throne, the somber look on his face was quickly eclipsed by a smile for Susan and their new brother-in-law.

With a heart full of hope, Lucy stood up to join them.

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The ship's deck beams creaked as it rolled through another wave. Edmund's gaze went to the lantern swinging on its hook, then to Silas, asleep on a cot tucked between a pair of cupboards. Finally, Ed looked back to Asha, who lay still in the bunk the captain had reserved for them. He stared at her face, and a long-ago memory of Aslan's voice came back to him.

One day, Son of Adam, you will have to be that which everyone now thinks of you, the Lion said in his memory.

What? he had responded in dismay. *A traitor? I can't.*

You must, said the Lion. *For Narnia. For me. For the family who has fought so bravely to rescue you. For everything you will come to hold dear in this world, and already do in your own.*

No one will believe it, not after I show them I'm sorry, he said—a child's last hope against a thing he wanted desperately not to do.

They will believe. The Lion's great golden eyes fixed on him, and Edmund felt every cut and bruise the White Witch and her minions had dealt him like the sting of a wasp. *You will lose something you value more than your own life. A deep sorrow filled the Lion's face. Nothing less would convince Narnia's enemies that you would turn to them. Nothing less would make your family believe you have ice in your heart. For the good of all, you must make everyone believe.*

I can't, I can't, I can't do it, he pleaded, almost at tears, but he knew there were members of Aslan's army watching them.

The Lion gave such a sad smile that Edmund could hardly meet his gaze. *Following me will never be easy for you, Son of Adam. But I will be with you, that I promise you.*

A soft sound brought Edmund back to the present. His remembered vision of Aslan cleared, and he saw instead his wife's face, her lashes fluttering. His breath rushed out in a strangled *whuff*, and he snatched her hands.

Asha's eyes opened and focused on him. "Edmund?"

Half laughing in his relief, half tearful, he kissed her hands, her lips, her cheeks, her hands again. He stroked her hair.

“The baby ...” Her leaf-green eyes dimmed with tears of her own. He knew she sensed the turmoil in him, even as he felt her fear and sadness. Aslan had said everyone would believe ... but Edmund couldn't hide his heart from his wife. “It's time, isn't it?” she whispered.

Frowning, he let his fingertips slide along her cheek. He gave a single nod. “Rest,” he whispered back, then leaned forward to kiss her. “I'll bring you a bowl of earth.”

He got up to fetch it—Narnian soil, from one of several sacks they'd brought aboard to supply her during the ship's crossing. As he returned to the bed, he glanced up at the deck beams again, where the lantern swung back and forth. Strapped to the top of the beams, hidden carefully out of sight, was the White Witch's wand.

He sat beside the bed again, and laid the bowl beside Asha's hand. He didn't have to tell her of all the anguish in his heart, the sorrow over their daughter, the fear of what might happen now that Narnia was at war. She knew without words, and that comforted him.

Instead of reaching for the soil, she took his hand. “I knew you'd come back,” she said. “That was one hope Aslan gave me.” Her fingers curled around his and squeezed. “He'll watch over us all, my love. I have faith.”

~ The End ~