

The Chronicles of Narnia

The Guardian

A FanFiction by Caleon

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Notes From The Author

Peter being Peter, he wasn't about to be outdone by Edmund in any way, shape, or form. He's been hovering (sulking?) in the back of my mind since finishing Ed's books (Why does he get two books and I don't even get one?). And there's no telling the High King of Narnia anything he doesn't want to hear. Then, of course, there was the irresistible temptation to put under his nose the one creature in his world that didn't utterly worship him....

Happy Reading, *Caleon*

If you're interested in rounding out your reading of The Guardian, 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.

The Guardian

Soundtrack

1. Theology/Civilisation - *Conan The Barbarian*
2. Ja Nuns Hons Pris (Live Edit) - *Cantiga*
3. Balcony Scene - *William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet*
4. Aran Boat Song - *Cantiga*
5. Selene - *Mychael Danna*
6. The Stone Table - *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*
7. The Duel - *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*
8. Battle at Aslan's How - *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*
9. The Funeral Pyre - *Conan The Barbarian*
10. Dierdre of the Sorrows - *Celtic Twilight*
11. Viva La Vida - *Coldplay*

1

An Unwanted Reunion

Dearest Father,

It hurts me to be gone from you now, when your health is so poor. Nothing could have moved me from your side save your wish that I return to Narnia for education (Yes, you've told me these many months how vast their libraries are, and how much I could learn from another visit to their Royal House, but I still worry for you), and I know that Ines is there to tend you. But you know also how she forgets your teas and tonics, and how uninterested she is in the daily maintenance of Tolyndar.

I beg of you to let me return home sooner than the autumn. I will do my best to uphold a daughter's duty and learn all I can. King Edmund has promised a thorough study on politics and foreign relations. He's been most generous, Father, and Queens Susan and Lucy have been more than accommodating about my visit. But I still feel awkward—

Corisande crumpled the parchment and stuffed it into her brocade pouch. Another letter she could neither finish nor send. Her father had gone to great trouble to secure her another visit to Narnia, and no matter how she wanted to go home to her quiet province in Telmar, she couldn't disappoint him. Not after her first visit had ended in her return home without the husband her whole country had been expecting her to marry. Simply put, King Edmund loved another who returned his affections. Seeing them together, Corisande couldn't bring herself to come between them. How wonderful it must be to love someone so much.

Peter, the High King of Narnia, had intervened on his brother's behalf and canceled the engagement between Corisande and Edmund. He'd written to Corisande's father and to the Royal House of Telmar, explaining—Corisande knew not what, but somehow the High King had managed to keep the Telmarines from acting on the uproar created by her refusal to marry Edmund.

She'd thought him generous at first, and wanted to thank him. But from the instant she first saw him—sweaty and bloodstained and looking murderous as he battled Selbarani warriors in his very own great hall—she'd been flat terrified of him. And in no moment during the rest of her stay at Cair Paravel last summer did he improve upon first impressions. She went out of her way to avoid the tall, imposing, unquestionable king, taking her meals earlier in the day or slipping out for a walk with the queens when she saw him approaching.

And while she'd heard he was more jovial than his brother Edmund, she had yet to see it. Every time she saw him, he wore a scowl that made her want to blend into the stonework and disappear from sight.

Now, riding toward Cair Paravel with an armed guard before and behind her, she stared up at the white marble shining in the afternoon sun. With any luck, Peter wouldn't be at home. The summer would pass much more smoothly if she didn't have to worry about crossing his path at every turn.

Corisande reached a furtive hand into a fold of her skirt and crossed her fingers.

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Peter watched Edmund kiss his wife's hand, a lingering brush of lips that spoke such volumes Peter found himself averting his gaze. Still not looking, he cleared his throat. "Not to shorten the interlude, but you're going to miss the tide if you keep that up."

Asha shifted the baby boy in her arms. "Say goodbye to your father, sweeting," she cooed.

Edmund kissed the infant's forehead. "Goodbye, Silas. Take care of your mother." He stroked Asha's cheek. He said nothing to her, but Peter got the impression he didn't need to. A long, wordless look passed between them.

Peter stepped forward and kissed Asha and his nephew. "Goodbye, sister. Come home soon." Asha boarded the ship, and they and Susan and Lucy waved it off, along with a crowd of observers.

Lucy gave a sad sigh. "It's going to be a long summer."

"She won't be gone that long," Edmund said. "A short trip to Selbaran to present Silas to her people, and then home to us. It's custom."

"You should have gone, Ed." Susan frowned. "She shouldn't be alone on the journey."

"Alone?" Ed's brows shot up. "She has twenty Narnian soldiers with her, *and* Nalis. She's better protected than we are."

"I meant *you*, blockhead. You are her husband."

Ed gave Lucy and Susan his arms as they strolled back up the docks toward the castle. "And miss all this fun? Besides, we have a visitor from Telmar this summer, and she's probably at the gates at this moment."

Lucy gave a very un-royal squeal of delight. "Corisande! Oh, let's hurry!"

Let's not, Peter thought, slowing down to enjoy his last few moments of peace while his siblings jogged ahead. He couldn't think of a worse way to spend the summer than trying to court a woman who neither knew of his bargain with Telmar, nor cared that he was alive.

2

Let's Begin

More squeals followed Corisande's arrival in the great hall. Susan and Lucy ran to her (the Narnians in the hall thought nothing of this undignified behavior, and rather seemed to enjoy their monarchs' enthusiasm) and embraced her.

Corisande laughed and hugged them back. "I feel as if it's been ages."

"It has!" Susan said. "Wait until you see all the fun we've planned for you this summer!"

When Susan and Lucy parted to make way for Ed, Peter wrestled a surprising lightning bolt of jealousy at the way Corisande's face lit up. "Edmund!" she cried, and rushed toward him. She threw her arms around his neck, and he swung her around while both of them laughed.

He set her down and she staggered a few steps toward Peter. When her gaze met his, her smile vanished and she averted her gaze to his boots. "Your Majesty," she said with a formal curtsy.

Thunk. He actually felt the moment when his pride hit the floor. *This is it,* he thought grimly. He lifted Corisande's hand (she had the softest, smallest hands he'd ever seen on any woman), bowed over it, and pressed his lips to her knuckles while keeping his eyes on her face. Except she wasn't looking at him. Her gaze remained on his boots. Shoving his frustration under some mental carpet, he said, "Welcome back to Narnia, Marchioness. It's an honor and a pleasure to host you this summer."

"Thank you," she murmured. No one but Peter seemed to notice the awkwardness in the air.

Not two seconds later, his sisters stole her away to the rooms they'd picked out for her. Peter found Edmund staring at him with a disturbing amount of calculation. "Want to share?" Ed asked as they walked toward the state room.

"Share what?"

"How about starting with looking like you've been stuffed into a suit of armor that's three sizes too small, then move on to the way you're staring at her like—"

"A wolf with food?" interrupted a voice. "You *were* drooling a bit, I thought."

Leina, the wolf Edmund had befriended on his return to Narnia last year, appeared at Ed's side and trotted with them. Peter liked the wolf, most of the time. She kept Ed in line. Right now, he'd have liked to tie her muzzle shut. "I'll thank you to keep your opinion to yourself, Leina," he ground out.

They arrived at the state room door, and Ed barred it with his arm. "What's going on, Peter?"

Peter ducked under it and pushed open the door. "Tax collections. Land disputes.

A nasty little skirmish on the Calormen-Archenland border that I'm trying to help them resolve before it gets to be a nasty *big* skirmish. Are you going to help, or do you two have some goofing off to do?"

"Touchy," Leina said as Peter leaned over the desk to arrange some papers. "Want me to bite him until he talks?"

"Hush," Ed said. Peter heard the state room door shut. "What are your plans with Corisande?" Ed asked behind him.

Damn. Peter often found his brother's talent for spotting schemes useful...until that talent was directed at him. He turned around to see Edmund and Leina staring at him with identical expressions of suspicion. Sometimes he thought Ed had picked up some of the wolf's less desirable traits. "I have no plans for anything right now save paperwork. If that isn't appealing to you, feel free to be elsewhere."

Edmund's penetrating stare lingered on him. Finally, he said, "Come on, Leina," and the two left the state room.

Peter breathed a sigh of relief, however temporary he knew it to be.

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"Have you ever shot a bow, Corisande?" Susan asked. The queen shaded her eyes against the late-day sun. She stood at the edge of a wide field, at the other end of which stood three archery targets.

Corisande sat beside Lucy on the picnic blanket spread over the grass. "No," she admitted. "I'm afraid the most lethal thing I've ever wielded is a letter opener."

"It's never too late to try," Lucy said. "I'm a fair shot, but if you want to learn, Susan is the best teacher to be had. She trains all the new archers."

"You're so free here," Corisande said with envy. "At home, women are expected to keep their minds on babies and matrimony."

Susan made a noise of disapproval. "No offense meant, Cori, but I believe I'm glad to have landed in Narnia. I've had enough of suitors and courting."

Lucy wrapped her arms around her knees and gave a long, musical sigh. "Not me. I keep hoping that someday I'll meet someone...."

"If you can get him past Peter first," interrupted Edmund, strolling toward them with Leina at his heels.

Corisande cheered up. "Hello, Leina. Edmund."

Edmund nodded in greeting. "Lu? Are you up for a sparring match?"

Lucy's eyes brightened. "Of course!" She got to her feet and picked up a quarterstaff that had been leaning against a tree. She handed another to Edmund, and the two started off into the field.

Leina lay down at the edge of the blanket. Smiling, Susan sat beside Corisande. "This will be entertaining. Last time, Lucy landed him slap on his back inside of five minutes."

"Won't she get hurt?" Corisande fretted.

"Not at all," said Susan. "She's quite good, you'll see. Peter and Ed insist we train to fight. After what happened with the White Witch, and what with the occasional dispute

with the giants, we can't be too careful about defending ourselves."

Lucy advanced with her quarterstaff and dealt Edmund a swift strike that glanced off his shoulder. He spun and struck back. She blocked it. He lunged again, and his grunt of exertion carried across the field. Lucy danced away as though she were made of air. Corisande watched the rapid step-dodge-step of Ed's feet as he tried again to land a blow. Remembering the speed with which he'd fought Lord Heren last year, she said, "He's impressive." She blushed as soon as the words were out of her mouth and turned her attention to Lucy's effortless work with her quarterstaff. For Heaven's sake, Susan would think her enamored of him.

Susan didn't seem to notice the slip. "You should see him spar with Peter. Peter fights angry, with his whole body, and he throws his weight behind it. Ed's got more...finesse. He uses speed instead of strength. He waits."

"Ouch!" Lucy's indignant voice floated across the field, and Ed's laughter followed it. Susan grinned at Corisande, who smiled back.

"Thought I'd find you out here," came Peter's voice.

Corisande's sunny, restful day clouded over. Peter carried a cloth bundle. Kneeling, he extracted an apple from the bundle and handed it to Susan. "A little something for you hard workers," he said with a teasing note in his voice. The first humor Corisande had sensed in him, and the tone sent an unaccustomed shiver through her.

She stamped it down, but then Peter held an apple out to her. "And you, my lady?"

The blush she'd felt burning on her face a moment ago intensified. She loved apples, and apples out of Cair Paravel's orchard were the best anywhere. Just the smell was enough to make her mouth water. "No. Thank you," she said.

For the briefest second, the line of his mouth thinned. He withdrew the apple and bit into it himself. When he broke her gaze, she felt enormously relieved. "How's Lu doing?" Peter asked.

Ed gave a muffled oath, and there was a thump. "Well enough," Susan said. "She just knocked him out again."

3

The Letter

Corisande managed not to see Peter even once over the following two days. She began to hope that in a castle as big as Cair Paravel, she might reasonably avoid him for the entire summer.

She and Lucy and Susan had fallen into the pleasant pattern they'd established last year of morning walks in the orchard and horseback rides before supper. In between, Edmund sat with her in the library and began her further education on governing her province and its people. Her father wouldn't be around forever (though she hated to think of it), so she absorbed all she could. When Ed broached the subject of learning some of the information from Peter, who was better versed in certain areas, Corisande shied away from the suggestion.

"I'd rather not skimp on this bit," Ed pressed. "The language gets tricky, and Peter knows it cold."

"I'll risk it," she said. Sitting in the library with Edmund for an entire afternoon of studying law was infinitely more comfortable than five minutes in the same room with the High King.

Ed took an apple from the basket on the table and crunched into it while he turned the pages of an ancient leather volume. "I've been thinking of rewriting some of these. Condensing them, removing outdated clauses. Some of these laws haven't been exercised in centuries, and with good reason. They actually made a law requiring citizens to pay their taxes in chickens if they couldn't afford coin."

Corisande laughed. "I wonder if there might have been a featherbed shortage in the castle that year."

"Fresh eggs, more likely. I heard King Frank liked omelets." Ed grinned.

Still chuckling, Corisande laid a hand over his. He froze, and dismay flashed through her, but she forced a smile past it. "I don't think I've thanked you yet for doing this."

He relaxed again, though she wondered how much was put on, and how much was true ease. "No problem." He patted her hand, then withdrew his.

"I mean it," she said. She lowered her gaze to the book in front of her. "You're generous...and kind. I've never had friends like you and Susan and Lucy. And my father... He isn't in the best of health anymore, and he's taught me everything he can about running the province after...after..." She broke off.

"It's all right, Cori."

She raised her gaze to find him smiling again, this time with understanding in his eyes. When they wrapped up the day's research and put away the books, she wondered for

the first time whether life might not have been so bad with King Edmund after all.

She returned to her bedchamber to prepare for her evening ride, and found a letter on the bed bearing the star seal of Telmar's Royal House. Startled, she opened it. A quiver of discomfort passed through her as she read the two lines.

You will be receiving instructions from a messenger this evening. Follow them exactly.

– O

Short. Succinct. King Oro of Telmar had no need for flowery discourse, and it was clear he expected to be obeyed without question, whether or not he explained his desires. For what reason would he have bothered to write to her? They had not spoken, in letters or otherwise, since her father wrote to the king of her broken engagement with Edmund.

Most of the nobles of Telmar would be elated to receive personal attention from the king, but Corisande felt only a crawling unease.

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"What do you think she likes, Onyx? Picnics? Boating?" Peter shoved a hand through his hair. "This is utterly ridiculous."

"I'll say," replied the unicorn walking beside him at the edge of the Great River. "I've carried you into battle, and you looked cooler-headed than you do right now."

"You're no help, either," Peter snapped. "This is worse than battle. In battle, you know why you're there—to have an honest go at killing each other. I'd rather do that any day than court a woman. One mistaken look, and you might be disemboweled before you realize you've done anything wrong."

"I don't see what's different, all of a sudden. Every woman in Archenland has been itching for you to think of her. You've got half of Selbaran and even some of the Calormene women hanging on your words. This doesn't seem all that difficult."

"It is when the woman whose favor you want won't come near you."

"What is it about this girl?" Onyx shot him a sidelong look. "She's nice, for a girl, I suppose. Don't get me wrong. But a Telmarine?"

Peter looked around, making certain they had no listeners. "You may as well know, but don't go sharing it. Corisande doesn't know, and neither does Ed. Yet." He drew a deep breath. "I broke the engagement between them by promising Oro I'd take Ed's place."

Onyx snorted. "Are you joking?"

Rubbing his forehead, Peter said, "He was in love. What was I supposed to do? I figure *one* of us ought not to have to marry out of obligation."

"How very noble of you, Your Majesty."

"Save your sarcasm," Peter growled. "There was no other way to keep Telmar from attacking us out of spite. And I don't want Ed and Corisande knowing until I find a way to break the news, so you'd best keep it to yourself."

"Oh, to be present at *that* conversation," said the unicorn with a mocking swish of his tail.

Peter sighed. He could have bet the castle that no one in Narnia would be less happy about that little talk than himself. He turned his steps back toward Cair Paravel, and Onyx turned with him. "Time for supper," Peter said, and put on the face he used when he was about to go into battle.

4

Smells Like Ambrosia, Tastes Like Lead

Corisande sat in a place of honor in the dining hall, beside Susan. Across from her sat Edmund and Lucy, and at the end of the table (of course) was Peter. Ed and Lucy were having a friendly debate about their next sparring match.

"I missed this about Narnia," Susan said. "The feasts, the balls—" She beamed. "That's what we ought to do! A ball! We haven't had one in ages. We've have it in your honor, Cori. There are several eligible men who I'm certain would vie for—"

"She just got here, Su. Give her a chance to settle in before you marry her off," Peter said. He sounded testy, but since that went with his usual scowl, Corisande thought nothing of it (though privately, and very, very reluctantly, she agreed for once with Peter on something).

"Now that Su's given up letting anyone court her, she's turned her attention to matching up everyone else in Narnia," Ed said, wagging his fork at his older sister.

Corisande watched Ed from the corner of her eye. She'd had the chance to be his wife last year. Over the past couple of days (fraught with the perils of taxation policy and the proper way to settle a land claim), she'd found herself warming to his company more than she realized. She liked Asha—genuinely liked and respected her. Which only made it more difficult when she looked at Edmund tonight and found her stomach fluttering. She might have been truly happy with him. He listened to her and talked like they were equals, something no one in Telmar seemed to care to do with her. *That will teach me to decide too quickly who I will or won't take for a husband.* She picked at the lavishly seasoned fish and potatoes on her plate without any real desire to eat.

"Su might be matching every eligible couple in Narnia, but she won't be able to get to me," Lucy sulked. "Peter won't let me—"

"Peter has his hands full keeping the kingdom together without men tearing through it after *your* hand," Peter told her.

"Don't worry, Lu," Ed said. "He'll get his comeuppance the first time a woman won't fall at his feet." He glanced at Corisande then with a look she couldn't interpret, but she was so distracted by his chocolate-brown eyes that any hidden meaning escaped her.

"Corisande," Peter said, "Susan mentioned you'd never shot a bow before. I know you have studying to do—"

He knows my schedule? Of course he does, Ed probably told him—

—but if you'd like to try your hand, we have a very convenient archery range."

Is he trying to make conversation with me? Corisande blinked and recovered herself. "Thank you, Your Majesty, but I must remain focused on my studies." Not to mention the messenger she was supposed to receive that evening.

“Marchioness, please. If you’re going to spend the whole summer calling me ‘Your Majesty,’ it’s going to be very awkward indeed. Call me Peter.”

The High King’s bright-blue gaze lingered on her, and for a second or two of total confusion, she forgot to answer. “Yes, Y— Peter.”

A smile spread across his face then—*Heavens, he actually does smile*—and she broke the gaze to take a drink from her wine goblet.

Lucy and Edmund returned to their amiable argument on her skills with a quarterstaff, while Susan peppered her with questions about her favorite dances and music. All the while, Corisande tried to keep her attention on her plate. Cair Paravel’s position on the coast afforded the castle’s residents a steady stream of fresh seafood, something Telmar rarely experienced. Any other time, she might have eaten with an unseemly appetite, but she was too busy watching Edmund and trying not to, or avoiding Peter’s discomfiting gaze—which, somehow, she knew was still on her.

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She managed to escape that evening for a few minutes to herself. She needed fresh air after coming to the difficult conclusion that she had feelings for another woman’s husband. A man she’d given up of her own free will. A man whose wife she called a friend. *It’s only infatuation*, she told herself. She’d seen it before—women flustered over Telmarine knights who returned to the castle victorious from battles or other great deeds.

She’d seen Edmund fight. Seen him brave pain and danger. Seen him kiss Asha with a passion that rivaled any great romance of legend. And somewhere deep down, she knew she only wanted him because he was the first man to be truly thoughtful to her for no reason—but that good sense seemed to desert her whenever he was in the room with her.

Corisande entered the castle stable and leaned against the stall door where her horse was kept. She crossed her arms on the top of the door and laid her cheek on her arm with a sigh. “I’ve been the greatest of fools, Cayo,” she said (though the horse wasn’t a talking horse, and couldn’t answer).

The stallion, an imposing example of excellent Telmarine breeding, arched his heavy neck over the door and nuzzled at her. She smiled and stroked his glossy brown cheek, trying not to think of how well the stallion’s color matched Ed’s hair.

Silly child! she scolded herself. *Get him out of your head and stop this foolishness!* Firmly resolved not to think of Edmund in that way again, she turned around.

A man stood right behind her.

Corisande let out a little shriek of fright before she realized it was the captain of the guard who had escorted her to Narnia. She resisted the urge to press a hand over her pounding heart.

He bowed. “Marchioness. I have been waiting to speak to you.”

“Of course,” she said, distracted.

The captain looked around the stable. At the end, a young faun carried a bucket of water into a stall. “Outside, my lady?”

Corisande realized then that this must be the messenger Oro had mentioned in his letter. She followed the captain outside, where there were no listeners. “What do you have

to say, captain?"

"You are to seek out the High King and get close to him," the captain said. "Telmar wishes to know his weaknesses."

Corisande felt the blood drain from her face. "Excuse me?"

"King Oro would hate to see his cousin and her family lose their station in Telmar," the captain said evenly. "He would take it as...an insult...if you were to refuse."

Fear for her family sliced through her. *Father. Ines.* So far away that it could be weeks before they even received letters from her. She wondered how fast a griffin could fly, and if one could carry her. Anything, oh, anything. This time, she gave in to the need to press a hand to her chest.

"I am to return to Telmar in the morning, my lady," the captain said. His dark-eyed gaze fixed on her face. "What message am I to bring to our king?"

She felt faint, and braced a hand against the wall of the stable for support. "Tell him —" She had to take another breath. "Tell him I will do as he says."

5

A Way In

Peter left Oreius to his instruction of younger warriors and made his way to the castle stable. They had perhaps an hour or more of daylight left, and he decided a ride through the woods might clear his head.

He never took Onyx on such rides. Even if it didn't seem like an insult to ride a unicorn into anything less serious than a war, he needed company that didn't talk back tonight. Which was also the reason he went alone.

Since their disappearance from Narnia and subsequent return, Peter felt his subjects keeping a nervous eye on him and Edmund and their sisters, for fear they'd be snatched away to England again. To be truthful, it was part of the reason he avoided the Western Wood (though he doubted the doorway to England would still be there, at least in the form of a wardrobe). He had no desire to worry the Narnians that he might not come back. They'd been through two tumultuous years without a monarch, and even though he hadn't intended to desert them, he felt a clench of guilt every time he thought about it.

He even went so far as to be sure at least one of them stayed at the castle when the others went somewhere. Edmund and his sisters said nothing about it, but all of them seemed to agree that to protect Narnia from another disappearance, it was best they didn't put all the country's proverbial eggs in one basket.

Not that such a precaution would have stopped Aslan from calling them back to England if he deemed it necessary...but Peter saw no reason to cause the Narnians undue distress. In any case, he hadn't seen the Lion for a year. Aslan had other countries, other issues to deal with.

Certainly the Lion had more pressing items on his mind than Peter's impending marriage to a woman who didn't want him.

Entering the stable, he went to the stall of his favorite horse, a tall, spirited black stallion. From the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of crimson, and looked up.

Corisande, as if summoned by his thoughts, stood at another stall with her arm around the neck of a splendid Telmarine horse. She wore a simple but elegant red riding skirt. He couldn't see her face, because she'd buried it in the horse's mane. "Is something troubling you, my lady?"

She jumped. The startled horse shied away. When Peter saw how pale she was, he hurried to her side. "What is it, Corisande?"

"Nothing, nothing," she said, brushing her long, dark hair back from her face. "I thought I might take a last ride before dark."

"You shouldn't go alone, my lady. I was about to go myself. Allow me to escort

you.”

She looked like he'd just stood her up in front of an execution squad. “If you like, Your Highness.”

He bit back a reminder that he'd asked her to call him Peter. While they waited in the stable yard for a servant to saddle their mounts, he watched her. He knew her to be three-and-twenty, only seven years younger than he, but at the moment she looked so lost and alone that she might have passed for a child. “Will you not tell me what's upsetting you, Cori?”

Her cheeks colored, no doubt at the way he'd called her so familiar. That bothered him. Lucy did it. Susan did it. Edmund did it.

“I'm quite well, Your Highness. The journey here must have caught up with me.”

They were distracted then by the arrival of their saddled horses. He started to offer to help her onto her stallion, but she surprised him by swinging astride it on her own.

He mounted his horse and they rode at a brisk walk. He allowed her the lead, since she seemed to need the privacy. She hadn't been precisely talkative since her arrival in Narnia—not with him, not unless addressed—but now she was quite withdrawn. *You're supposed to be courting her*, his conscience prodded him. Great Aslan's mane, how and why had he talked himself into marrying her? How was he supposed to court and wed and have children with this near-stranger? How had Edmund even begun to entertain the idea?

He almost preferred another face-off with the White Witch to this, but he gamely urged his horse up alongside hers. He indicated her stallion. “He's an exceptional animal. How is he to ride?”

She smiled then. He got the impression he'd startled the reaction out of her. “There is no better stallion than Cayo. Begging your pardon, Your Majesty. Your horse is fine as well—”

“I take your meaning,” he said, unable to hide a triumphant answering smile. Horses. She liked horses. He could work with that. “Would you like to trot?” he added as they crossed into a field bordering the forest.

The faint lines between her brows disappeared. She straightened in her saddle with the air of one who has had enough of hard thinking. “I would like to gallop,” she said, and shot forward on her stallion.

Surprised, Peter grinned and spurred his horse after her. They raced over the ground together. Her unbound hair flew out behind her, and he found himself staring at it so intently that he nearly lost his seat on the horse when his mount misstepped. He righted himself and laughed.

She looked back over her shoulder then, her mouth open as if to say something, but then she pulled her horse up at the edge of the forest. Color rode high in her cheeks, and her eyes were bright. “Thank you, Y— Peter.”

He struggled not to let his astonishment and pleasure show at her use of his name. “For what?”

“For not telling me I couldn't do that.”

“It was my pleasure, my lady.” He decided to press his luck a bit and added, “I'd be pleased to repeat the process on the way back to the stable.”

She patted her stallion's neck. Another smile curved her lips, and though she wasn't

looking at him, Peter felt like he'd just emerged triumphant from a battle.

6

Defend Yourself

“Tell me again why we are doing this, Edmund?” Corisande asked as they stood in the archery field the next day. Morning mist surrounded them and she could barely make out the targets at the end of the field. She couldn’t recall being up this early since childhood. She longed to sit and rest before walking through the orchard with the queens later. Much later. “It can’t be past five o’clock,” she added.

“Because,” Ed said, picking a bow from the cupboard beside the range, “it would be remiss of me in my teaching to ignore defending your province by martial means as well as legal ones. And this is the only time of day the field’s going to be free for a while. Oreius needs it for training soldiers. Try that out.”

She held the bow, completely foreign and unwieldy in her hands, the way she thought she’d seen Susan do it. She nocked an arrow and started to draw back the string, but she could barely pull against the tension.

“Wait, wait. You’re going to get hurt doing that. Stand like this. One foot forward, one directly in line behind it. You don’t face the target full on. You put your shoulder at it, like this, and let your body lead you.” He showed her by example, but she still must have got it wrong, because he came up behind her. “If I might help you...?” he asked. “Susan or Asha ought really to be here for this...”

Cori stiffened when his hands closed around her arms. Every thought she’d tried putting out of her mind about Ed over the past day came rushing back. She thanked her stars that neither Susan nor Asha—especially not Asha—were there to see her.

Ed shifted her arms to the correct position, and she was only too aware of him standing close against her back. “Eyes on the target,” he said. Then he gave her right elbow a gentle tug. “Draw back, almost letting fletching of the arrow touch your ear—”

Oh, please, please, get away from me before I do something foolish, she begged silently.

“—then let go.” He stepped back.

The arrow shot horribly wide of the mark and disappeared into the mist at the end of the field. Ed clamped his mouth shut and she was certain he was trying to avoid a laugh. “Er—okay. Well done...for a first attempt.”

Attempts two, three, and four were no better. In fact, Cori thought, they got worse each time he tried to reset the position of her arms to shoot. “Hmm. Perhaps a bow isn’t your weapon of choice,” Ed said, and this time he gave a grin that set her fluttering all over again. He took the bow and strolled to the cupboard to put it away. Why, oh, why couldn’t she have stayed home in Telmar this summer? Convinced her father that no, she didn’t need further education, that she could have stayed in Tolyndar and...ugh, put up with every would-be Telmarine suitor that visited her for anything but interest in her mind. Narnia

had spoiled her for Telmarine men's backward behavior.

Ed returned with a pair of lightweight swords, and her mouth dropped open. "Rapiers," he said. "They don't require quite the arm strength of a broadsword, so you won't find your arm tiring so quickly. I'm a better teacher at swordplay than I'll ever be with a bow, anyway, and maybe that's the problem." He handed her one of the rapiers. "Go on, lift it. Give it a swing." He stepped back again (well back, she noticed with an insulted frown, but he gave such an apologetic grin that she had to forgive him).

The rapier *did* feel better in her hand. She hefted it and gave it an experimental swish through the air to test the balance.

"Very good," Ed said. "It looks more comfortable on you." He tossed his rapier in the air and caught it in his right hand, then swung it in a circle to loosen his wrist. Cori watched him do that a couple more times, then he bowed. "Shall we try a few blocks?"

"Aren't you worried I'll do something wrong and hurt you?" She gave the rapier a few bolder swings, copying him.

He merely chuckled. "Come on, little lioness. Catch me if you can."

She jumped forward, paying attention to where he put his feet and how. The *clang-clang* of the blades rang through the morning air. She struck; he blocked (lightly, though—she suspected he was going easy on her). Again, again. Watching his feet, his posture, she sprang forward with the blade.

She felt a jolt as the tip of the blade passed over his thigh and heard him gasp. He dodged back a step. At once, she dropped her sword and ran to him. "Oh, Edmund, I am so terribly sorry!"

A bloodstain welled in the torn fabric of his breeches. He looked up then and grinned. "You're better than I thought. I think you might have a gift for the rapier." When she tried to see his injury, he waved her off and took a kerchief from his sleeve to tie around it. "No, no, it's a scratch. I've had worse in spars with Peter and...well, you've seen Lucy and me with quarterstaffs."

"Will Peter come to watch us?" she asked with her mind on Oro's orders.

"I'm not sure Peter would approve of teaching you to swordfight. Anything else, yes—but he's a bit old-fashioned about swords." Ed smiled then. "If you can call us old-fashioned about anything. All right, now. Keep your sword up. Never drop your blade unless the threat is gone or you see something better at hand."

She picked up her sword and advanced again. "What's better than a sword?" she puffed.

He laughed. "Exactly."

They continued to spar until the sun got higher and the mist burned off. By then, instead of feeling tired from the exertion, Cori was energized and looking forward to a fast ride on her horse before breakfast. "Thank you, Edmund. I never realized how much fun that could be."

"Fun?" Smiling, he cleaned the rapiers and put them away. "Well, then, we'll have to make a regular go of it. Same time tomorrow morning?"

She nodded eagerly, looking forward to expanding her skills. And if she was also looking forward to time with Edmund, when she was supposed to be tempting Peter...well, she'd try not to think too hard on that.

I Something Not Quite Right

The next week passed in a rhythm of warm summer days and cool, sweet-aired nights. Peter had no time to enjoy it, because he was (much to his consternation) held up in the state room writing letters or hearing petitions. How was a man expected to woo someone if he couldn't get the time to be with her?

He'd tried to catch Edmund to help fill in his duties that morning, but his brother was nowhere to be found. "Su," he said at last, in a fit of exasperation, "can you take over this dispute between the squirrels and the sparrows? I'm out of ideas."

"Of course," Susan said. "Something important to do?" She smiled, seeming to notice his hurry to leave the castle.

"You might say that," he muttered.

"Cori's in the orchard."

Peter froze. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to me and Lucy. You've been stalking around like an angry bear the past few days." She gave him a little smile and touched his hand. "I didn't realize you cared for her."

"I..." He lowered his voice. "You know the bargain Ed made with Telmar last year."

Susan's eyes went round. "You didn't! *Did* you?"

Peter nodded. "Only I can't get a moment's peace away from those piles of letters and Narnian citizens needing this or that settled..."

"Let me handle it," she said. Peter recognized the gleam in her eye as that of Narnia's unofficial matchmaker. He started to voice his misgivings, but she patted his back and hurried off to the state room.

Peter took the stairway from the great hall down to the orchard. He plucked an apple from one of the trees and polished it absently on his sleeve as he searched the grove.

He found Corisande sitting against the base of an apple tree with her knees drawn up. She'd closed her eyes and rested the back of her head against the tree. The dreamy expression on her face stalled Peter's breath. For a few minutes, he simply stared at her and the way the filtered sun fell on the curve of her cheek.

When he remembered himself and walked forward, his foot landed with a *crunch* on a fallen twig.

Corisande's eyes flew open and she sat bolt upright. "Peter," she said breathlessly.

The way she said his name shot right through him, and it took him a moment to recover. "I am sorry to have startled you," he said. "Am I interrupting something?"

She stood up with a blush in her cheeks that he could only interpret as guilt. "No," she said in a tone that clearly meant *yes*.

He wondered if, with a look like that, she might have been thinking of a beau. He

shrugged, unused to the prickly feeling skipping across his shoulders, and split the apple in two with his fingers. He offered her part of it.

She surprised him by taking it, but then he remembered her fondness for apples. "You must be very busy," she said at last. "I have not seen you much outside the castle for the past few days."

He tried to play down his pleasure that she'd noticed his absence, but he couldn't resist saying, "Had I known it would trouble you so, my lady, be assured that I would have detained all other obligations to see you."

Her cheeks reddened—or was that just the guilty blush from earlier? "I haven't been the most thoughtful of guests, either," she said.

"Lucy and Susan are very fond of you. I know Ed likes you—"

"I meant to you," she said. When he looked at her, her gaze was on the apple in her hand. She finished it off, then picked up a long, straight stick from the ground and swished it through the air. "We haven't spoken much. I'm afraid that's my fault. I haven't wanted to—to bother you."

"Please, bother me," he said before he could censor it.

Her mouth opened then, and her gaze came up to his. Dark, wide eyes a man could get lost in. She gave a soft laugh. "Running a kingdom must be difficult even with three other rulers to share the burden."

He smiled ruefully. "Sometimes I think it might be less trouble if there were only one of us. No one else to answer to, and all that."

"Do you disagree so often, then?"

"Ed and I usually don't, not where protecting the kingdom is concerned. Susan doesn't like conflict, but she's very good with foreign relations. And Lucy... Lucy is Lucy. She's the free spirit among us."

"I like your sisters very much," Cori said. "Susan mentioned your trouble with Calormen. Is it as dire as she made it out?"

"Nothing that can't be settled with a little diplomacy. It's more Archenland's trouble than ours, but King Lune has been a good friend to Narnia, and our aid is his if he needs it." Peter watched her swish her stick a few more times. Something seemed familiar about the way she held it. "Are you doing well in your studies? Looking for an example of law in practice?" he teased.

Instead of a smile to answer his jest, he got an evasive shake of her head. "Ed—He has taught me a great deal. I hope to make use of it when I return home."

Peter saw an opening to discuss his contract with Telmar, but he couldn't make himself tell her she was obligated to marry him. Not after they'd just warmed up to talking to one another.

"*There you are,*" came Lucy's voice. She hurried through the trees toward them, beaming. "Susan sent me to find you."

"What's wrong?" Peter asked, wondering whether the squirrels had decided to walk out on talks over their dispute with the sparrows after all.

"Not a thing," Lucy said. "Su's arranged a ball, and it's to be held tomorrow night."

Corisande froze in midstep. Peter tried to look delighted at Lucy's news, but all he could think was that if this were Su's idea of "handling" things, he probably should have

stayed in the state room for the rest of the summer.

8

Jug Of War

A ball. In her honor. Corisande would be expected to dance with both the man she was trying to entice, and the man who was the object of her infatuation. She wondered if she could feign a turned ankle early on in the evening and thus sit out the torture to come.

Groaning, she tossed a pair of shoes on the bed. She'd have liked nothing better than to escape the ball and take her horse on a long ride far, far away from Cair Paravel.

She picked up the hand-held looking glass from her dressing table, an ornate bronze piece with a lion on the back and a highly polished surface on the front. She fussed with the hairstyle her maidservant had arranged for her, decided she didn't like it, and unpinned it until her hair fell loose down her back again. She had no wish to look elegant. Looking elegant would merely attract attention. She didn't want to attract Peter's attention. It merely brought to mind the reason she was trying in the first place. And she could ill afford attention from Edmund, when too many pairs of eyes would be on her this evening.

Here in her room, where no one was watching, she could give way to the fantasies in her head—the mental images of Edmund teaching her to swordfight, laughing with her and praising her increasing skill. The way he brushed his hair back out of his eyes.

But as she was daydreaming of him, she was struck by the image of a completely different pair of eyes. Blue eyes. Teasing eyes. All the more startling because the man they belonged to smiled so seldom.

She shook off the unsettling image and dabbed a bit of rouge on each cheek, brushed imaginary fluff off her pale blue gown, then forced herself to leave her room. It would do no good to cower in her bedchamber all evening. Susan would just seek her out and drag her into the open with assurances of how much fun she'd have.

She clasped her hands together to hide how they shook. When she entered the candlelit great hall, it was almost as awkward as the day she'd arrived as Edmund's intended bride. Every eye turned to her. Desperately she sought out a familiar face. Smoke from the torches and candles tickled her nose.

Lucy hurried over, looking effortless in gold brocade. "Cori, you look wonderful! Come and meet the naiads from the Western Wood!"

Relieved—for now—to have a purpose, Cori followed Lucy across the hall. She spent several minutes learning about each of the naiads who had come to the ball, and telling them about her own country. She found herself relaxing a bit under the influences of spiced wine and the naiads' easygoing repartee.

Then someone began to play a psaltery. A tambourine joined in, then other strings, then drums. Cori barely had time to let the sinking feeling settle in before the guests began to part for the first dance.

As a pair of naiads drifted away, she caught sight of Edmund. He turned, and when he saw her, his eyebrows shot up. He smiled and bowed to her. “Good evening, Marchioness,” he said. “I wouldn’t presume to steal away the guest of honor for the first dance—”

“If you don’t, I’ll scream,” she hissed, taking his hand. “I’m so nervous I could crawl under that table over there and hide for the rest of the night. Everyone’s *watching* me.”

Smiling, he took her hands and led her through the slow, measured dance. “Far be it from me to deny a lady in distress,” he said. He leaned closer to her ear with laughter in his voice. “Think of it as a swordfight. But without slashing me in the leg this time.”

His joke did the trick. She found her stiff spine loosening. Edmund was easy to be with, when she didn’t focus too much on her attraction to him...which was hard to do when he held her hands. He made polite conversation that distracted her from the stares of other guests (Should she have put her hair up after all?). But then he took her by the waist and swung her around—part of the dance. The unfamiliar touch sent another burst of fluttering through her midsection. There were at least four more of that motion in this dance, and she anticipated them with equal parts excitement and trepidation. Stiff before, her bones went soft as churned butter as he led her across the floor. All around them, other couples had paired off. She noticed the whirling colors of dresses and tunics and hides from the corner of her eye, blurred and dreamlike in the flickering candlelight.

When he swung her around the second time, a fine tremor ran through her. She knew she ought to get away, to clear her head, but the haunting music filled her ears and held her spellbound. On the third swing, she lost her breath and found it hard to look him in the eye. Could he not see what he was doing to her? What *this* was doing to her? Her heartbeat thumped against her ribs and her cheeks burned.

Then, over his shoulder, she caught sight of Peter staring at her. His gaze held hers as though she were the only other person in the room. When Edmund turned her, she found herself still looking at Peter, a hare caught under the predatory stare of an eagle.

She hadn’t even noticed he moved closer until he tapped Ed’s shoulder. “A moment with the lady,” Peter said, half a growl.

Ed stepped back at Peter’s harsh tone, his mouth open on a question he clearly thought better of asking. Ed nodded to her and backed away.

Peter slid into the space Ed left and closed his warm hands around hers. “Good evening,” he said, with a hint of that growl in his voice.

“H-Hello,” she said uncertainly. They moved smoothly along in the dance once more. She studied his face, wondering if he’d had too much wine, but his eyes were clear and dark blue in the light of the candelabras and torches positioned around the hall. “I-I’m sorry. Have I...done something wrong?”

His grip tightened a fraction on her hands. “How do you like the ball?”

“It’s lovely,” she said, still wondering at the unreadable expression in his eyes. “Susan has created a masterpiece.”

His thumb stroked across her palm and she gasped. “Merely shown off one that was already there,” he said. And then he put his hands on her waist and swung her around.

Her head spun with confusion and wine. She’d had too much, and eaten barely anything that evening. Peter led her across the floor without effort. When his hands left

hers to complete a turn, she felt chilled, but then he came back. “Your Majesty...”

His fingers tightened around hers as he drew close—another part of the dance. “Peter.”

She couldn’t get herself to say his name. That frozen-hare feeling came back. She didn’t even know if she was still dancing. She summoned up her voice from some other, more distant part of her. “What have I—”

She broke off when his hands settled on her waist again, almost large enough to circle it. The heat of his hands reached her skin even through five layers of cloth. Her mouth dropped open just as her heartbeat slammed into her throat.

Peter swung her around again, the last of the dance. He set her on her feet and steadied her when she stumbled a bit. The song ended, the final rattle of the drum faded away. Other partners were bowing to their ladies. Polite applause filled the room. With that hunting-eagle stare locked on her, Peter stroked his thumb across her knuckles and nodded. “Enjoy the ball, my lady.” And then he disappeared into the crowd.

9

Green-Eyed Instead Of Blue

Three mornings later, Peter stalked toward the archery field, swinging Rhindon through the air. He'd have liked a brace of boggles about then—something on which to vent his anger. He was up early today, mostly because he couldn't sleep for fuming. He'd watched Ed dance or laugh with Corisande off and on the rest of the ball. Watched *her* with *him*. And there was no question of her feelings for him. No matter how many men offered to dance with her that evening, she always came back to Edmund. Peter stood by, unwilling to cause the scene he knew would follow if he approached them again, but each time she gave Ed that shining smile, Peter's blood boiled. He'd avoided them both since, trying to get control of his unreasonable anger.

His brother had no right to Corisande—*should* have no right to her. Had given up the damned right. Never mind that when Peter had cut in on his first dance with her, Ed had looked at him as if Peter had drawn a sword on him.

He'd been tempted.

Mist cloaked the field as he stepped onto it. He noticed once he'd reached it that the weapons cupboard was open. Peter raised his sword and squinted through the mist.

A shape stood several meters away, impossible to recognize in the drifting mist. Peter crept toward it. When he neared the person, he made out a blue dress and long, wavy black hair. A fist of eagerness and frustration punched through him. Cori stood with her back to him, her head down. Beside her, a rapier stuck point-first in the turf.

Not wanting to frighten her, he cleared his throat.

She turned and folded the paper in her hands. The smile on her face faded when she saw him, and he wondered who she'd been expecting. "My lady," he said.

"Good morning, sire. Early practice?"

"After a fashion," he said, swinging Rhindon. "Why are you here?"

"I suppose I must need time to myself as well," she said, studying him.

"If my presence bothers you—"

"No. Your Majesty may come and go on his grounds as he pleases."

"That's not what I meant," he said. He swung his sword a little harder, wishing Ed were there to spar. He needed to drive himself hard today, to get all this pent-up energy out. And Ed needed to bear the brunt of it.

"Would you like to take a turn at swords?" she asked, surprising him.

"Have you learned swordplay?" Peter wondered if her father had taught her, whether it was a Telmarine custom. He knew full well that women could and did swordfight, but Cori didn't seem the sort.

She stuffed her parchment into a pouch and pulled the rapier from the soil. "I

have,” she said with a smile.

“Very well.” He smiled back, interested in seeing her skill. He raised his sword. “*En garde*, my lady.”

She struck fast. Wide-eyed, Peter blocked it and dodged. He began with a simple crosswise sweep aimed at scaring her into retreat. When she blocked it and struck back, he found himself using stronger tactics. Cori came at him fast and efficient, holding nothing back. Soon the clash of their swords rang through the misty air. Peter broke a sweat. She kept him moving, much to his surprise. He noticed her skirt was slightly shorter than court length, enough to see her feet. Step-dodge-step, she pressed him into circling back. Soon, she had him at such a disadvantage that he leaned into his attack and brought his weight to bear on every strike. “You’re very good,” he said.

“I’ve studied hard,” she answered. Her dark gaze fixed on him. She paced a little, waiting. When her intensity of her stare distracted him, she gave a forward leap and thrust at his chest.

He blocked at the last second, and suspicion began pricking at his memory. The move was familiar, but he couldn’t think on it because in the next moment they were sparring hard and fast. Step-dodge-step. Pieces began falling into place.

Only when she paused to windmill her sword, loosening her wrist, did the stone drop in his belly.

Edmund.

Gritting his teeth, furious now, he lunged harder, fighting her the way he fought his brother. Every step, every strike, every block—signature Edmund. He threw his growing anger into the attack, and instead of recoiling, she increased her speed.

“What’s this?” came a voice through the thinning mist.

Edmund approached, carrying his own sword and the other rapier. Cori stopped then, but Peter didn’t lower his sword. Instead, he snarled and charged toward his brother.

Edmund’s mouth fell open. He raised his swords to block a second before Peter struck, but Peter was too angry to fall back. *Clang-clang-clang*. Blinded by rage, Peter lunged again and again, only missing because of the speed of Edmund’s feet.

Alarm filled Ed’s features. He leaped out of the way of a vicious lunge. Block. Block. Desperate block. “Peter,” he cried. “*Peter*. For the love of Aslan, Peter, what’s the matter with you?” Backing swiftly, Ed tripped over a stone and fell to the ground. He crossed his swords over his chest.

“Stop, stop!” Cori shrieked, sounding far away through the blood roaring in Peter’s ears.

A moment before Rhindon came down, Cori’s rapier swept over Edmund and knocked it away. Gasping with effort, Peter looked up to find Cori staring at him with fearful reproach on her face.

Peter shuddered, realizing only then what he’d been about to do. Injure his brother, certainly. Maybe even more. He dropped his sword, shaking. “Forgive me,” he whispered, though he wasn’t sure whether he was speaking to Edmund, Cori, or Aslan. He stalked away.

A few seconds later, he heard the thump of running feet in the grass. “Peter,” came Ed’s breathless voice, “what in hell is wrong?”

He didn't speak until they reached the weapons cupboard. "How long has it been?" Peter snarled. "How long have you been teaching her to spar?"

"How long...?" Ed pushed his hair back out of his eyes. "A couple of weeks, maybe?"

"Clever of you to arrange it," said Peter. "Did you also arrange interludes with her, out here where you won't be seen?"

"What?"

Ed sounded so outraged that Peter turned to look. His brother's eyes blazed and he looked very much like he wanted to raise his sword and attack Peter. "Don't tell me you haven't," Peter snapped. "Not the way she looks at you! You can't have everything, Edmund. *Swordfighting*." He said the word as if it were a curse.

"Bloody hell, Peter, she should learn to defend herself. Who cares with what?"

Rounding on him, Peter said, "It's not the swords I'm worried about. What have you been doing while you *were*'t sparring?"

The color drained from Ed's face. He jammed the tip of his sword into the ground. "Have you lost your mind? Peter, I'm soulbound to a dryad. If I had the least feeling for Corisande, don't you think Asha could sense it?"

"Maybe she's too far away for it to work," Peter said, eyeing the weapons in the open cupboard.

Edmund stalked forward and slammed the door shut. "It works. Wherever, whenever, whatever. Right now she's worried because she can sense I want to strangle you for being stupid."

Peter held his brother's furious glare. Edmund squared off with him, fists clenched, looking murderous. For several moments, they stared at each other. Finally, Peter remembered the look on Ed's face just before he brought Rhindon down, and the fight drained out of him. "Tell me you're not in love with her."

Ed's jaw clenched and he shot a look at his sword. His hard eyes locked on Peter's again. "I love. My wife. And were you not my brother, I'd bloody your nose for even thinking I'd play her false."

Peter drew a long breath and the last of his resentment slipped away. He broke Ed's gaze. "I'm sorry. I was out of line. I've...had a lot going on lately," he added, thinking of his deal with Telmar.

Ed scoffed, but the corner of his mouth twitched. "Until you've been soulbound to a woman who's been pregnant and borne a child, I don't want to hear about *your* problems." He passed Peter's shoulder and pulled his sword from the turf. "Why didn't you tell me you care for her?"

"I don't even know *what* it is," Peter spat, "aside from picking up where you left off last summer."

Ed met his gaze again. His mouth opened, but it was a moment before he said, "And you've said nothing to her about this? Are you mad?"

"Apparently." Peter swept a hand through his hair, slicking back the perspiration, then said bitterly, "I must be looking for the right moment to tell her she's been traded to me like chattel."

Staring at Peter's boots, Ed pointed to the archery field with his sword. "Go. Now. Before I kick your arse."

Disillusioned, Re-Enchanted

Cori ran into the woods, dodging the trees she could barely see through her tears. *If I had the least feeling...the least feeling...* That one statement had run her through like the rapier with which he'd taught her. Unable to hear more, she had bolted away.

He didn't care. Not in the least.

It didn't matter that she couldn't have him. The hurt of his rejection still tore at her. She fled deeper into the trees, wishing she'd never returned to Narnia. Never met Edmund. Never—

She rammed into a solid body. "Marchioness?"

She looked up to see one of the soldiers who had escorted her from Tolyndar. With her breath hitching, she wiped away tears. "Sir Elian."

"Is something wrong, Marchioness?" the soldier asked.

"No. No." She tried to step around him.

He grasped her elbow. "Allow me to escort you back to the castle."

"No, thank you." She lifted her chin. "I prefer to be alone."

"I must insist," the soldier added, firmer this time.

"Let go of me, please," she said. He didn't. Something in his eyes made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. "Sir, kindly release me."

His fingers dug into her sleeve, bruising her. "You forget your duties, Marchioness."

"I've forgotten nothing. Let go." She wrestled against his grip, wishing for her rapier. The rapier she'd used to learn swordfighting with Edmund. Edmund, who didn't want her. A fresh batch of tears threatened, and she tugged harder. "Remove your hand!"

"Release your hold on the lady, sir, or regret it."

Peter's voice.

Sir Elian looked up. His expression went blank, and his hand dropped away from Cori's arm. She resisted the urge to rub her elbow. The soldier gave her a bow completely lacking in respect, and strode away.

Peter moved closer once the soldier was gone. "Are you hurt?"

Her throat closed and tears brimmed in her eyes once more. She shook her head furiously and turned away.

His hand came down on her shoulder, feather-light compared to Elian's grip. "My lady."

She froze. Tears burned a path down her cheeks. She couldn't—wouldn't—look at him. Her pride was in shreds.

Peter stepped around her and bent his head to meet her gaze. "Forgive me. I behaved like the worst of mongrels."

“You—he—oh, saints, just go away,” she said. She longed to be left alone to have her cry and be done with it. *The least feeling...*

“You heard him,” Peter said softly. It wasn’t a question.

She swallowed and lifted her chin. “It does not matter. *Should* not matter.”

Peter brushed a tear from her face with his thumb. The corner of his mouth curved up a little. “What can I say, my lady? Edmund is an insensitive lout.”

She gave a short, bitter laugh. “Your Majesty...”

He sighed, still watching her with those searching eyes. “Will you never call me Peter?”

She stepped back, gathering what remained of her pride. “Why should I? You hardly ever call me by my name. We barely speak. You only ever call me ‘my lady,’ and—”

“That’s true,” he said, catching her hand in his. His eyes went soft. He brought her hand to his lips and gave it a lingering kiss. His breath puffed across the back of her hand. “My. Lady.”

Cori’s mouth fell open. She remembered the look he’d given her across the great hall the night of the ball. The looks while they danced, and when they rode their horses through the forest. The one he’d given her the first moment he saw her when she returned to Narnia.

A touch of regret crossed his face. “Part of the problem with being the High King of anything is having to allow that, even then, it’s possible to envy your little brother for something.” He touched her cheek. “I am sorry, Cori.”

She melted. She forgot all about Edmund, all about King Oro, all about anything except the way the apology in Peter’s eyes tugged at her heart. And Cori, who had never so much as accepted a token from an admiring Telmarine knight, tipped her chin up and accepted her first kiss.

11

Brother To Brother

Clangclangclang. Cori's rapier whooshed through the air, parrying, almost missing, parrying again. "You're going lightly on me," she complained.

Peter smiled at the ferocious way she glared at him. "I have you at a disadvantage," he said. "You forget, my lady. I know all your tricks."

"I have learned a few new ones," she said. She feinted one way, did an amazing little spin-step, and almost caught him in the belly.

He grinned. "Nicely done. A little faster, then?" He advanced, laying on more of his strength.

They'd been sparring for a good hour. When they returned from the forest, Edmund was gone from the archery field. Cori plainly didn't want to see him, so Peter had offered to resume their abbreviated match.

This time, though, he found himself enjoying it. Since Oreius had first taught him the proper use of a blade, Peter developed a keen interest in swordfighting. And while Cori employed many of Edmund's moves, she showed signs of becoming a remarkable swordswoman in her own right. When he blocked a move the way he would with Edmund, she changed tactics and delivered him an unexpected blow. "Are you certain you haven't been secretly training for this at home?" he teased.

"The sharpest thing I used regularly was a needle." She got into an opening and rapped him with the flat of the blade. "Your Majesty."

He laughed, liking this side of her. Certainly not the shy flower who'd come to his court a year ago. She'd gained in confidence—and beauty.

When they paused for a rest, he asked, "Are you hungry? My sisters must be wondering where you are by now."

Nodding, she lowered the borrowed rapier, and he sheathed Rhindon. He offered his arm and she took it without hesitation. They left the field. "Would you care to do this tomorrow?"

"I have been practicing every morning," she said. "I came out here first thing to meet—" She frowned, but it cleared when she looked at him. "I would like that very much...Peter."

He laid his hand over hers. When she smiled at him, he felt like he'd been crowned King of Narnia all over again.

When they returned to the castle, Peter left Corisande to get ready for breakfast. She arrived in the dining hall and saw that he and his sisters were there, but Edmund was not. Temporary relief washed through her. She would have to face him eventually.

She ate with more eagerness than she had in days, looking not once at the empty

chair across the table. Instead, she laughed with Lucy and traded fashion anecdotes with Susan, who, she discovered, was already planning another ball.

“Su, can’t you give her feet a rest? We’ve barely finished with the last one,” Peter said, but Cori noticed him smiling this time. It pleased her to see him smiling so much more today. She wondered if this side of him had always been there and she’d just been too blinded by Edmund to see it.

“I missed Narnian parties,” Lucy shot back. “Su, go ahead and plan thousands of them.” She lowered her voice and leaned across the table. “Peter’s just a stick in the mud.”

Cori laughed. From the corner of her eye, she saw Peter trying to look stern, but he failed completely. His answering laughter filled the hall.

- # -

Peter finished sealing the last of the correspondence for the day and locked it away in a chest on the state room desk. A knock came at the door a moment before it opened.

Edmund stood in the doorway looking windblown.

Peter’s brows shot up. “Where’ve you been all day?”

“Out riding with Barton and Leina.” Ed shut the door and tied his hair back into the short ponytail he’d taken to wearing last year. “I thought it best if I made myself scarce.”

“You thought correctly.” Peter tapped the brass lion’s-head seal of Narnia against the desk, then dropped it beside the inkwell. “You’ve hurt her, Ed. She overheard you saying how little you cared for her.” When Ed opened his mouth on what was sure to be an objection, Peter said, “I *know* you didn’t mean it like that. She’s in love with you.”

If telling his brother that hadn’t cost Peter so dear, the look on Ed’s face might have been comical. Ed shoved a book aside and sat on the edge of the desk. “You can’t be serious. What about Telmar? Didn’t you tell her?”

“I was a bit busy drying her tears.” Peter allowed himself a wry smirk at the look of guilt on Ed’s face. “For my part, I’d still like to punch your lights out, if that makes you feel better.”

“You might want to get in line behind her. I think she deserves it more.” Ed rubbed his chin. “What did I do? I never made any overtures—”

“You’re you,” Peter said, and the familiar twist of envy settled into his belly.

Ed stood up. “I’d better go talk to her.”

“What’s the hurry? I rather like her wanting you drawn and quartered.” Peter grinned. “Makes me look better.”

“You? Every woman in Narnia’s allied countries is begging for the chance to be with you. I’m surprised that crown fits on your ‘Magnificent’ head anymore.”

“Hard to care when your kid brother’s already got everything you actually *do* want,” Peter said.

Ed’s gaze snapped to his.

Peter stood up. He held Ed’s gaze for a second before smiling again. “A High King’s got to aspire to *something*.”

Ed grinned back. “Lots of luck trying.”

Any remaining resentment swept away. Peter went to the door. “Come on. There’s

some cold chicken left from dinner. And if I ever raise my sword to you again, you have my permission to try and deprive me of vital parts.”

“I can barely wait.”

“Didn’t say you’d succeed,” Peter said.

Games Of Politics And Sport

Captain Beltran entered the great hall of Telmar's sprawling castle with relief. He had worried that Corisande would balk at the king's demand, and Beltran would have to return to their king with unpleasant news.

Oro was not one to bear unpleasant news kindly.

How the king thought the inexperienced girl could manage a subterfuge, Beltran neither knew nor cared, as long as it wasn't his neck on the block. He approached the throne and bowed. "Your Highness."

The man on the throne turned a deceptively casual stare on him. "What news, captain?"

"The lady has accepted your charge."

"As I thought she might," the king said. He waved his hand toward a page, who disappeared from the great hall. "Go back to Narnia. Make certain she keeps her word."

"Y-Your Highness?" Beltran blurted in surprise before he could catch himself. The journey from Narnia had taken more than a week, and that only because he'd exhausted himself and three horses with rushing. The king waited on no one.

Oro fixed him with a stern look that brought Beltran sharply aware of the many armed guards standing on the perimeter of the hall. "I believe we speak the same language."

"Yes, sire." Beltran gave a hasty bow. Some devilry (or his own lack of rest) drove him to ask, "Forgive me, sire, but is she not to marry the High King? Will this be necessary?" He swallowed in fear as soon as the words left his mouth.

Oro reached toward a stand beside the throne, where servants had placed a platter of grapes. He plucked one from the bunch. "Why should I be content allying with Narnia when I can own it?"

"Your Majesty is cunning," Beltran said, relieved to have escaped the noose for his impertinence. "But...sire...can you be sure the girl is up to the task? She is young. Inexperienced..."

"And beautiful. A man of intelligence knows his advantages, and when and how to press them."

Beltran nodded. Half the men under his command desired the Marchioness for their own after seeing her. Beltran himself thought her exquisite, though he had more than enough to occupy him with a wife and three children that he rarely saw anyway. "What am I to do if she fails or refuses to complete her task?"

Oro smiled, and it wasn't at all pleasant. "I am not so fond of my cousin that I will mourn her death. Captain."

Beltran swallowed his shock and bowed again. "I am Your Majesty's servant." He

turned and left the great hall, aware with every step of the king's sharp eyes on the back of his neck.

- # -

Cori stood in a large, green courtyard with Lucy and Susan, holding a long wooden, paddle-like object. "And what do you call this game?"

"Cricket," Lucy said. "It's British."

"And you strike the ball with this? What is the object of it?"

"Fun," Lucy said, as if that explained everything. "Not as fun as dancing with the fauns, of course."

"I think I prefer my horse," said Cori.

"He's lovely," Susan said. "Are there many Telmarine horses like him?"

"Not a one," said Cori, "though my father does his best. He is—" *Or was, before he got sick*, she thought with a pang. "—the finest horseman in Telmar."

"Peter's fond of horses as well," Susan added. The gleam in her eye told Cori that it was more than casual observation.

Cori blushed. "He has admired Cayo."

"I think he admires Cayo's owner, as well." Lucy giggled.

"What do you think of him?" Susan asked.

With her cheeks flaming (she was certain her face was as red as the ball in Lucy's hands), Cori set the cricket bat aside and sat on the blanket spread under some shade trees. "He's...very..."

Lucy squealed. "I knew it! I knew he wasn't storming around like a rhinoceros with a sore foot for nothing!"

Susan smiled and sat down beside Cori to open the picnic basket on the edge of the blanket. "Lucy, dear, don't embarrass her."

It was too late for that. Cori stared at a leaf that had fallen into her lap, letting her hair slide forward to hide her face.

"Are you fond of him?" Susan asked (less exuberant than Lucy, thought Cori, but just as embarrassing).

"King Peter is—" Kind. Handsome. Unexpected. "—very nice."

She felt Susan's smile even without looking.

"Where's Ed been? I haven't seen him for two days now," Lucy said. "He likes cricket. We should have invited them both, actually."

"Gone," Susan said.

Cori looked up then. "Where?"

"He said he was going to the Western Wood for a few days, and to see the dwarves on his way."

He'd left without a word, without even apologizing. Cori frowned. She'd thought him a much different man. "Did he say anything of my studies before he left?" she asked, gratified to hear the coolness in her voice.

"I'll help you with that," came Peter's voice. "I know as much as Ed, anyway. I'm just not as captivated by the library."

Cori smiled as Peter approached. "Good afternoon, Your Majesty."

He grinned as he bowed to her. "My lady."

Susan couldn't have looked more delighted if she tried. Cori wondered how much of her own pleasure showed on her face.

13

Spy

Over the next several days, Cori trained at swords, learned law, and rode in the afternoons—most of these activities with Peter. Peter enjoyed them perhaps more than Cori did, even the hours in the library. She was a diligent learner, and soon they were as often discussing law with the books closed as not.

Cori examined the cover of a volume bearing stars around its border. A faint frown tugged at her lips. “What do you do when you aren’t governing Narnia?” she asked. “What do you do in your leisure time?”

“When I’m not riding or hunting or suffering one of Susan’s functions?” he joked. “I suppose I haven’t much time left for anything else.”

“Is that what a king worries about, then?” she asked. “Having no time to himself?” Her voice was light, but she made no eye contact.

Curious, he watched her, but she didn’t look up from the book. “Now that the Ettin War’s over, there isn’t much but the odd dispute,” he said. “My most pressing obligations are paperwork and keeping Lucy out of trouble.”

“How do you mean?”

“As I’ve said, Lucy is very much the free spirit of us four. Visitors to Narnia fall in love with her right off, and—” He stopped, uncomfortable with speaking of betrothals or attempted wooings when he was trying to do just that with Cori.

“What is wrong, Peter?” Cori frowned. “Is it Lucy?”

“No, no. Lucy minds me well enough about the men who ask for her hand,” he said, more to distract her from guessing about Peter’s attraction to Cori...or his need to marry her. “Some of *them* downright agonize me. You can see I worry about my family.”

“Except Edmund,” Cori said with a wry twist of her lips. “The way you went after him—”

“*Especially* Edmund,” Peter said. Cori’s eyebrows shot up, and Peter added, “After the White Witch, I nearly choked with worry about him. I thought she’d kill him. He’s more than capable now, but I guess I never got out of that need to watch over him. Over them all. They’re all I’ve got that’s really mine.” He smiled without humor. “That doesn’t mean I can’t get angry with him. He’s lucky he’s faster than me.”

“Susan said you fight angry,” Cori said.

Peter sighed. “Hard not to be, if someone’s trying to separate you from your head and you’re trying to keep it.”

“You overreach,” she said. “You did it today when we sparred. Twice.” She blushed and pursed her lips.

“You *would* have developed some of Ed’s criticisms, wouldn’t you?” Peter groaned in

dry amusement. "He's forever telling me that. 'Peter, don't lunge so far. Peter, keep your blades closer to your body.'" He smiled. "Please tell me I'm not going to get it from the both of you now." In spite of his scolding, he found himself enjoying discussing swordfighting with a woman...and particularly with her.

She laughed then, and whatever troubled her disappeared from her face. "Well...you are tall. I suppose it must be hard not to use your reach when it is such an obvious advantage."

Impulsiveness prodded him. He caught her hand and kissed it, then gave her a flirting grin. "I have other advantages, my lady, if you care to discuss those."

- # -

It was almost too easy. Cori wondered when Peter would grow suspicious of her questions, but he was willing to allow her almost anything she wanted to know.

What had she done to earn such honesty?

She spurred her horse on through the woods. She knew she ought to have an escort, but to be truthful, she was never alone anymore. Not with every waking moment filled with too-fond thoughts of Peter, worries for her father's health, and the growing trepidation of what retribution awaited her if she didn't follow Oro's command. Her family's safety depended on her, just as that of Peter's family depended on him. A fine paradox. One to which she had no answers. She wished she could just go home and return to her quiet life in Tolyndar.

Not long ago, that thought would have brought to mind an aching picture of brown eyes and dark, unruly hair. Now, the image of blue eyes and a broad smile replaced it. Did that make her fickle? Or had she discovered something in Peter that she never had in Edmund?

Another horse sprang onto the path. Cayo shied, but Cori kept a firm hold on him.

Sir Elian drew his snorting grey gelding to a halt across the trail, blocking her way. "My lady," he greeted.

She hated the way the term of respect sounded on his tongue. When Peter used it, it was so much softer. "Please move your horse aside, sir."

"I would like a ride in the open with you," he said pleasantly. "I have not gotten used to the trees in this country."

He meant the dryads. Cori barely had time for a glance at the trees around them before Sir Elian drew his horse so close his leg brushed hers.

"Come with me," he said, in that same pleasant tone, but his gaze flicked to his saddle where she spied an open crossbow holster. The bolts rested in a sheath beside it, easy to grab and fire.

An unpleasant sensation trickled down her back. "Of course."

They cantered their horses into a field. After a while, he took her horse's rein and slowed them both. "You have been spending a lot of time with the High King."

Still that light tone, as if he were observing a dance or enjoying a stroll in Telmar's famous royal gardens. "I have," she said. There was no point denying it.

"And what have you learned of him?"

For a moment, she wondered why one of the higher officers in her guard had not come to her. With Beltran gone, there were at least two others who might have assumed leadership of the Telmarine guard. Elian was barely knighted compared to them. Then she recalled the revolting way he had taken her arm and pulled her along as if she were property. Neither Peter nor Edmund had ever come close to such reprehensible behavior.

“Marchioness, time is growing short.”

Insulted, she said, “What do you stand to gain from this interrogation, Sir Elian?”

The way he stared at her made her so uncomfortable that Cayo snorted and balked. “I will return to the castle now,” she said.

Elian jerked Cayo’s rein. The stallion tossed his head, but Elian held fast. “Oh, no, you won’t. Answers, my lady, if you please. I am not a patient man.”

Her skin crawled with revulsion and the beginnings of fear. She opened her mouth to do as she was told, just as she’d always done, but Peter’s face flashed in her mind and her gut began screaming *don’t-don’t-don’t-don’t* in an endless, panicky litany. “No,” she whispered. Her fear allowed no more than that small protest.

“You won’t miss your family, I take it,” Elian hissed. He jerked her horse’s head even closer and pierced her with his murderous stare. “What will you have to go back to, Corisande, if they are dead?”

Trembling, she glanced across the field, wondering if she could dismount and run—but she knew he’d catch her before she got more than a few steps. “H-He overreaches in battle,” she said weakly.

“Any fool who’s watched him spar has seen that,” Elian snarled. “What else?”

“He worries for his family’s safety.”

“As should you, if you don’t come up with something better.”

“His brother, King Edmund,” she whispered, feeling her heart tear open, right through her fledgling affection for Peter. “He’s...jealous.”

A slow, beatific smile crossed Elian’s face, frighteningly angelic in the golden sunlight. He released her horse. “Have a pleasant day...my lady.” He nodded and galloped away, leaving her unable to breathe for terror.

14

Weaving The Twine

Susan hurried through the castle with a book tucked under her arm. She arrived in the great hall and swept it with a quick gaze. No Barton. No Leina.

She found Nalis outside on his way to the archery field. He bowed when she approached. “Good evening, Your Majesty.”

“King Edmund hasn’t returned from the Western Wood, has he?”

“No, my queen. Is something wrong?” The centaur stood taller and looked around.

“Nothing, nothing. Please send him to me if you find him.”

Lucy spotted Susan from her seat at the edge of the field. “What’s the matter? You look worried.”

“Ed’s not back from the Western Wood yet. I sent a raven to Wemblenik. He said Ed left the dwarves four days ago.”

“Have you checked with Mister Tumnus?”

Susan nodded. “The sparrow who returned said the faun hasn’t seen Ed.” Susan tried to maintain her composure, but she knew she’d failed when her sister’s face went ashen. “Don’t worry, Lucy. I’m sure we’ll find him. He’s probably hunting.” She left Lucy at a brisk walk, but as soon as she was out of sight of the archery field, she ran to the castle state room. Why, oh why hadn’t she sent Ed with her horn? Never mind his pride and whether he’d be insulted if she felt the need to protect him from trouble. He’d needed it once before. What if he’d fallen into trouble again?

Peter sat at the desk. A line of Narnian creatures was filing out as she entered—bears, leopards, owls—all murmuring amongst themselves. They bowed when they saw her. She nodded and went to her brother. “Have you seen Ed yet?”

Peter shook his head. “I think he’s decided to be absent for a while.”

“Why?”

“He and I had...an altercation...over Corisande.”

Susan glared at him and dropped her book on the desk. “What sort of ‘altercation?’”

Peter cleared his throat. “It’s been forgiven. Don’t worry about it.”

“Peter. *What* did you do?”

“We had a go at each other on the archery field. I had a go at *him*.”

“What, with your *sword*? Are you completely out of your head?”

Her elder brother gave a long sigh. “Yes. Thank you. Ed and I already established that, and he’s forgiven me my lack of reason.”

“What *about* Corisande?”

Peter ran a hand through his hair and straightened a stack of letters on the desk. “I thought he was having an affair with her.” Before Susan could voice her outrage, Peter

added, "And I was wrong, yes. But he's obviously chosen to be elsewhere for a while until he's certain I don't relapse. Moving on?" he prompted.

"Peter, how could you be so..." Susan frowned.

He gave an irritable shrug, as if his shirt didn't fit quite right. "I'm king, Su. Not perfect."

"Where's Cori?"

"I imagine she's riding or in her room," he answered with just a bit too much unconcern. Susan stared at him until he did the shrugging thing again. "What?"

"Have you told her she's betrothed to you?"

Angling his head, Peter snapped, "Should I have told her before or after I attacked the man she was in love with? Might still be?"

Susan felt her jaw drop. "Oh, dear."

- # -

Any time Corisande spent riding was time away from the eyes of her guard. Since her meeting with Sir Elian the week before, Cori felt their gaze on her at all times. She would rather have gone on riding Cayo through the forest than return to the castle for supper, but she knew it would only raise questions. Or worse, her guard would come looking for her.

How could she betray Peter's trust like that? How could she even think of doing him or his family harm after they'd shown her such thoughtfulness? She rubbed her arms. Would it be better if she simply went home? She had learned enough to govern her province with some authority.

But the notion of leaving, of never seeing Peter again, brought a pang of disappointment. Peter, who had been continually generous. Who surprised her into a smile during quiet moments in the library. Who she had somehow thought unfeeling. How had she ever believed he was anything but kind?

Moreover, what did she feel for *him*? Part of her dreaded putting any sort of name to it after what had happened with Edmund. And a small, still-heartsore part of her regretted that she'd fallen for the younger king a year too late.

A pale flash between the trees distracted her from her thoughts. She drew Cayo to a halt and listened. The thump of hoofbeats reached her ears. "Hello?"

When no one answered, curiosity got the better of her. She reined her horse along a trail that skirted the newcomer, a safe distance away but close enough to discover who it might be. Cayo could outrun anything, as long as she gave him his head and a clear path.

She neared the mysterious rider. The pale shape turned out to be a dappled stallion; she glimpsed its head through a gap in a stand of laurels. She emerged without warning into a wider expanse and jerked Cayo to a halt, reluctant to lose her cover.

Then the stallion appeared on the path ahead and she saw its rider. Edmund.

He put a finger to his lips before she could speak his name and beckoned her.

She trotted Cayo toward him. He glanced around and tilted his head toward the trail beyond, still not speaking. Mystified, she followed, aware as she did so that twilight had deepened the shadows in the woods.

When they emerged onto a path descending toward the northern seashore, he drew his horse close alongside hers. “What’s wrong?” she whispered. Her eyes fell to his horse, prancing restlessly under his hand, and she noticed it was not Narnian, but Telmarine.

Wind rushed around them, carrying a flurry of leaves that took on a human silhouette. Ed’s gaze shot toward the approaching dryad, then back to Corisande. “My lady, no!” the dryad called. “Ru—”

Ed swept an arm around Cori’s back, pulled her close, and kissed her.

Before the shock and foreboding washed completely away, Cori realized that the dryad’s last word must have been *run*.

15

Tying The Noose

Next morning, Corisande did not appear for her sparring match with Peter. Nor did she come to ride with him and his sisters, but while they were readying their mounts, a faun rushed into the stable. “Your Majesties, I have terrible news.”

“What is it?” Susan asked.

“Someone has cut down several of the dryads’ trees in the forest.”

Lucy gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. Susan gave a little cry of distress.

Peter laid steadying hands on his sisters’ shoulders. He urged them toward their horses. “Take us there,” he said.

Three more fauns joined them, and they went swiftly to the site of the damage. On the seaward edge of the forest, several of the tallest trees had been hacked down to jagged stumps, splintered and pale like broken bones. The downed trees had crashed into their nearby fellows, wiping out a large swath of forest. Leaves fluttered in the sea breeze and fell back to the ground. None resolved into the form of a dryad. Peter grimaced at the death and despair that hung over the scene.

Lucy began sobbing. “Who could have done this?” Susan asked.

Peter saw ax marks in the stumps. Whoever had cut them down hadn’t bothered to take away the wood. Purely an act of malice against the dryads. He searched the ground and saw several hoofprints beaten into the earth, such a confused jumble that it would be hopeless to track any one set of them. “Are any left alive?” he asked quietly.

“No, sire,” said the faun.

“Susan,” Peter said, “have the fauns escort you to Oreius and Nalis. They should be on the archery field. I want a regiment of centaurs to search the forest and see if they can flush out the villains who did this. Then return to the castle—and be sure to stay guarded.”

Nodding, Susan galloped away with the fauns running beside her horse. He never had to justify the practical things to Susan.

Lucy turned her tearful face to him. Peter recalled the many times she’d done that—looked to her big brother to fix it—but this time, he feared he might not have the answers. “I think it’s time we made a foray, Lu.”

- # -

Not-Edmund-not-Edmund-not-Edmund-not-Edmund. Cori screamed the words inside her head, just as she wanted to scream for help. She should have known as soon as she saw the Telmarine horse. As soon as she saw that neither Barton nor Leina was with him.

The impostor held Cayo's reins in a firm grip as her horse galloped along behind his. She could neither stop him nor protest. Whatever he'd done to her held her immobile and silent on her horse, though every last shred of her wanted to flee whenever he looked at her with those malevolent eyes. Even Cayo seemed bound by the spell. She was weaponless. Defenseless. She'd had to watch helplessly as a brace of Telmarines—some of them her own guard—wiped out the dryads who had tried to save her.

What a foolish child she'd been.

Tears trickled down her cheeks, and it seemed the spell even begrudged her those. She'd never been spellbound, never even seen magic until she came to Narnia. She closed her eyes and yelled the words with her heart that she couldn't speak with her lips. *Peter. Help me.* When she opened her eyes, the impostor's gaze turned on her as if he could hear her thoughts. Her chest tightened with the thwarted urge to run.

The magic had tried to rob her of her thoughts as well as action and words. For a few seconds after the impostor kissed her, she forgot everything—but during their breakneck ride, she found herself able to think freely again. The way the impostor looked at her, she feared he knew it and would try to reinforce his spell.

They rode northwest through the night—where, she didn't know, and she couldn't have asked in any case. Cayo's neck was covered in lather. She wanted to ask to stop, to give the poor stallion a rest, but she knew the man wouldn't allow it. And though he hadn't yet spoken to her, she dreaded that too.

When morning arrived, they passed through a stand of trees and arrived at a lake. At its center stood a castle almost overgrown with vines and shrubbery. They paused at a dock, where Cori saw a small barge manned by—something—in dark, ragtag robes.

The impostor slid down from his horse and let it loose. He walked to Cayo and reached up to take her by the waist—*Don't touch me*, Cori thought with an inward cringe—and pulled her roughly down. She couldn't so much as close her eyes to avoid that dark stare that was so *not* Peter's brother.

The moment she slipped from Cayo's saddle, the stallion bolted. The man made a motion as if to chase the horse, but his gaze came back to Cori and he gave a wicked smile. He pulled her to the barge. When she stumbled, he merely jerked her upright and kept walking.

They boarded the vessel, and its pilot paddled them across the lake to the overgrown castle. The moment she set foot on the island, a sense of horror assailed her. Cori struggled against the spell forcing her to go where the impostor led her, but it was no use. The castle's broken, unlit windows stared out at her like hollow eyes. *I don't like this, I don't like this*, she cried silently.

If the impostor heard her thoughts, he didn't care enough to respond. He dragged her to the drawbridge, and though no one seemed to see his approach, the bridge lowered to admit them.

The castle was cold, dank, fearful in its air of abandonment. The impostor pulled her along without regard to her footing until they reached a wide room with a high ceiling. If she'd been able to move of her own accord, she would have shivered at the way the cold air pressed on her skin. The floor was scattered with puddles. Staring about, Cori realized this must once have been the great hall. They approached the throne, and only then did she

realize a man sat there.

Sir Elian.

“About time,” Elian said.

The impostor released her. Cori watched in horror as the man who had stolen Edmund’s face flickered. His shape blurred and stretched, dissolved into bluish smoke, then resolved into a floating, man-shaped creature with blue skin and a bare chest. “It takes time to weave a spell of this strength.” The creature’s deep voice clawed at Cori’s nerves. “What else do you desire?”

Elian smiled at her, and if she’d been able, she would have cowered at the flash of teeth in his handsome face. “I think I have everything I need for now. Feel free to assume that Narnian rat’s shape again and wreak whatever havoc you may, Jinn Saris. I’ll call when I want you.”

The creature floated past her to the doorway of the great hall. His yellow eyes drifted over her and she felt her insides curdle with terror. Would she be free of the spell once he left?

Apparently not, for even when the creature had gone, she was still immobile and unable to speak.

Elian slid off the throne and stalked toward her. He made a full circle around her, studying her like a prize horse. “Hello, Corisande.” His voice was pleasant.

That frightened her most of all.

16

Setting The Snare

Peter could not find Corisande anywhere in the castle or on the grounds. He hated to leave without finding her—especially since Ed had not yet turned up either—but the situation with the dryads demanded his attention. Her horse was not to be found, so Peter assumed that—at first—her leave must have been voluntary. It was the *afterward* that bothered him. He left instructions for three griffins to look for her and find him the minute they located her.

He couldn't shake the sense of trouble that followed him as he and Lucy prepared for their journey. What if something had happened to Cori? His stomach dropped into his boots whenever he thought too hard on it. She had come to Narnia under *his* protection—but more than that, the idea of anything harming her made him want to reach for his sword and charge the first foe he saw. If anyone laid a hand on her, they'd pay the price. The only thing that kept him from staying home and mounting a full search was the hope that he and Lucy might find her themselves while out riding.

He and Lucy rode through most of the day. They brought with them a guard of fauns, leopards, and satyrs, and when Onyx had heard that Peter was riding forth (and might encounter trouble), he insisted he go with them. "Your horse is a nice enough mount, I'm sure, but there's nothing like a unicorn for speed," the unicorn had said with a haughty sniff.

At the Shuddering Wood, they met a family of badgers whose home had been dug out and burned. "What happened here?" Peter asked.

"Soldiers," grunted Mr. Badger. "Telmarine, by the look of them."

Telmarines? After the treaty he'd signed to ally with them through his union with Cori? Peter had no time to process this news, because the youngest badger ran toward them. "Your Majesty, Your Majesty!" she cried. "It was horrible! They took our whole store of roots and dried berries and burned them! And then King Ed—"

"Hush!" interrupted Mrs. Badger.

"What about King Edmund?" Peter demanded.

"He was with them!"

"Lily!" the mother snapped. "Be silent!"

A sickening sensation slithered down the back of Peter's neck. Impossible. He wouldn't. "Explain," Peter said.

Mrs. Badger rubbed her cheeks. "I'm sure she was mistaken, Your Majesty. She's young, she's just a foolish little—"

"What did you see?" Peter asked the young badger.

The little badger shuffled a foot, shy now that Peter and Lucy's attention was on her.

“He stood by on his horse. He didn’t talk, sir, he—he just pointed at our home, and they burned that too.”

Peter and Lucy exchanged a glance. The staunch disbelief was clear in Lucy’s face. “Which way did they ride?” he asked the badgers.

“Due north, sire,” said Mr. Badger.

“Thank you. We’ll catch these men, I promise,” Peter said, and they were off again.

Just past Frozen Lake (called that even though it was no longer frozen year-round, and hadn’t been since the Pevensies first arrived in Narnia), a hawk found them. He landed on a spreading oak with his feathers ruffled and sticking out in all directions, as if he’d been attacked. “Your Highnesses, Queen Susan has been abducted!”

Pure terror shot through Peter. First Ed, now Susan. And Cori, still missing. Everything that meant anything to him was slowly being picked apart. He spat out a swear word, and from the look on Lucy’s face, she might have been considering one herself.

- # -

Cori couldn’t move except when Elian commanded it. He did not invite her to sit, nor to drink or eat. He left her standing before the throne as if she were no more than a palace ornament to be admired by passersby—though no one came after the Jinn left. She felt her knees weakening with exhaustion and glanced longingly at the puddled floor.

“Tired, my sweet?” asked Elian. He watched her from the throne, where he sat askew with his legs hanging over one of the armrests. “This is nice. Talking with you.” He shot up from the throne and sauntered to her. “No doubt, you’re wondering where I fit into Oro’s grand plan for Narnia. The truth is, I had no designs on it until you came along and I heard about Oro’s intentions. I’ve never even been out of Telmar. Much like yourself, my dear.” He lifted a lock of her hair and stroked it between his fingers with a chilling smile that he must have meant to look affectionate. “My family was poor—just on the edge of being noble enough for me to rise to a knighthood. The one thing I did possess was a cunning mind. And now I shall have a kingdom too. We are so alike, darling.” He raised the lock of her hair to his nose and inhaled.

Oh, no, we are not. Cori’s insides squirmed, and she thought *Peter-Peter-Peter* as if she could somehow communicate her silent cry for help to him by force of will. Good saints, a rapier, a dagger, even a pin and the ability to move to use it! Anything was preferable to this imprisonment in her own body.

When Elian gave her that horrific smile again, Cori closed her eyes and thought of a much different smile—much softer, more...everything. She remembered the sound of Peter’s laugh, the way he teased her during their studies in the library. The way he helped her with her swordfighting skills, encouraged her far beyond the training Edmund had merely begun. Praised her. Kissed her hand. Kissed her lips.

“What are you thinking?” Elian’s plaintive voice cut into her thoughts. His hands clamped onto her shoulders, surprising her into opening her eyes again.

“Weren’t you listening?” Elian’s voice rose, and his fingers dug into her shoulders. For a terrifying minute, she thought he would strike her—but he relaxed into that sweetly vicious smile again. “But of course, you’re tired. I’ve prepared you a couch. You can lie

there, if you like. I'll bring you something to eat." He hurried off to some other room in the castle, now an eager pup compared to his shudder-inducing madman a moment before.

She absolutely did *not* want to lie down, but the spell commanded her to follow Elian's wishes. The "couch" he'd brought was a musty-smelling thing draped with old hides. Off her feet, she felt more vulnerable than she had during the whole ordeal so far. *If I get out of this alive, she swore silently, tears streaming down her face, I promise you, you will not.*

17

Secret

“Peter, please—wait up!” Lucy cried.

He and Onyx slowed their headlong gallop to let Lucy’s horse catch up. Everywhere they went were signs of damage. The Telmarines had swept a path of terror across the countryside. Peter’s ears rang with the Narnians’ cries for help and for the perpetrators to be punished. And though he was sickened with his selfishness, the only things he truly cared about right now were Cori and his family.

Onyx sensed his agitation. The unicorn bolted whenever Peter asked him for the slightest increase in speed. Now they paused at the Great River.

“We won’t be able to cross it here, I’m afraid,” Lucy said. “We’ll have to go downriver.”

Peter spied what looked like an enormous boulder upriver on the other bank. He squinted at it until it shifted. He brightened. “Hello, there!” he shouted.

The boulder unfolded itself (for it was no boulder, but a giant) and put down what looked like a large fishing net. The giant stood up, and in a few strides, he’d reached them. “King Peter, as I live and breathe,” the giant said.

“Humrubble! It’s good to see you again,” Peter said. “I need your help, sir.”

“O’ course, o’course,” the giant boomed. “I was just on our way back from Ettinsmoor—visitin’ the family cousins, as ye might think—and I stopped for a bit o’ fishing. A blasted lot o’ men showed up and stole my catch.”

“Were they Telmarine?” Peter asked.

“I think as they might’ve been. What’s the problem, then?”

“Edmund and Susan are missing, and so is my intended wife,” Peter admitted.

Humrubble gave a frightening scowl. “Which way do we start lookin’?”

Peter smiled. Humrubble had been staunchly loyal to Edmund ever since they met in Ettinsmoor several years ago. “I think we ought to follow the Telmarines.”

In spite of his calm words, Peter’s stomach twisted. Even now, worry gouged holes in his reason. It was his job to take care of them, had always been his job. And he’d failed miserably. *Aslan, are you sure you chose right when you made me the High King of a whole country?*

- # -

Cori’s skin crawled when Elian returned with a tray and that eager-pup look on his face, mostly because there was no telling when his vicious side would spring to the fore again. He set the tray on a small table beside the couch. “You can sit up and eat, dearest,” he said.

Even if she weren't hungry, she had to obey. She shook inside at the notion that her every move was now dependent on this volatile man. How ever could she escape?

The soup was watered-down at best, but she ate with ravenous abandon. Who knew when her next meal would be offered? When she finished, Elian wiped her mouth with a kerchief and smiled. "I'm sorry, my sweet, you must have been terribly hungry. I'm unused to caring for a lady. You may go, er—attend to your necessities in the room down that hall, whenever the need arises," he said, and pointed. The eager-to-please look on his face terrified her. "The third door on the left," he added.

She stood and went where he pointed. For one hopeful minute, she thought she could make a run for it, but the spell held her to Elian's instructions. She entered the water closet, a dimly-lit apartment with one candle, no windows, and crumbling mortar. Curious, and not expecting any results, she tried to move toward the crumbling wall...and found she could.

Her heart jumped into her throat. *Necessities*, Elian had said. Well, escape was a necessity. She picked at the mortar concealed behind the toilet's high back and found several of the stones were loose. They came away with surprising ease. Cori wondered with a shiver whose tumbledown castle this had been, and whether it had seen much better repair in the days of its owner.

She revealed a passage just large enough for her to walk upright without hitting her head on the ceiling. Castles in Telmar were full of such secrets, constructed to help occupants escape a siege or conceal valuables. She took the candle and pulled the toilet back against the wall to conceal the hole, then hurried downward along the passage. She hoped she'd get far enough without Elian suspecting her and coming to seek her out.

Presently the passage stopped at an intersection. One fork remained level, while the other led steeply down. *Which way?* Then she recalled that many of Telmar's castles had passages that led underground and thus, to a number of options for escaping. Hoping the same followed in Narnia, she rushed down the downward passage.

The air got colder and colder as she went. A chilling wetness clung to her skin. *What a terrible castle*, she thought with a shiver.

At last, the passage ended at an open doorway. She crept cautiously through it and found she had arrived at the dungeon. Never had Cori seen a more depressing place. She stared at the puddles on the floor, at the open shackles bolted to the stones of each cell and the crumbling stones on the floor. Despair lingered in the very air. She wondered what pitiful creatures had been forced to reside here.

But there was no time for such delays. She turned to go back to the other passage and found herself eye-to-chest with a figure.

She looked up and her eyes widened. Edmund? The Jinn? The candlestick clattered to the floor, plunging the room into a dimness lit only by some luminescence from the wet walls.

He reached for her. She opened her mouth to scream, but he clapped a hand over her face. "It's me, it's me!"

18

Stranglehold

Peter, Lucy, and Humrubble journeyed north. A few hours along past the river they ran into a party of Telmarines. “We can’t stop,” Peter said. “We’ll have to try to skirt them.”

Their plan was working, until the men happened on a camp of fauns and attacked. Screams erupted from the surprised fauns, who were unarmed and no match for the soldiers. “Lucy!” Peter shouted. He turned Onyx around, and he, Lucy, and Humrubble charged into the camp.

Peter slashed at the nearest soldier, who was intent on looting what little food and supplies the fauns carried. The soldier staggered back and recovered himself, then drove toward Onyx sword-first. The unicorn snorted and parried the soldier’s attack with his horn while Peter turned his attention to two other Telmarines who had rushed the unicorn.

Lucy fought with her staff. The *crack-crack* of the wood against Telmarine armor filled the air. Humrubble roared and flung two of the soldiers against the trees at the camp’s edge. The Telmarines in the raiding party must never have seen unicorns or giants, because even outnumbered, Peter, Lucy and Humrubble almost drove them off. It began to look like a rout in Peter’s favor, but then he spied a man on a grey horse galloping toward them.

Edmund.

Relief swept through Peter. He shouted to his brother, but Edmund kept going, straight toward Lucy. “Ed, look out!” Peter shouted. His brother didn’t even glance Peter’s way. Peter caught one frightening glimpse of Ed’s malevolent eyes.

Slam. Edmund’s horse smashed into Lucy’s mount. Peter heard a sickening *crack* and Lucy’s horse tumbled over with a squeal of pain. Lucy shrieked. Ed yanked her over his saddle and kept right on galloping. Lucy shouted Ed’s name, frantically trying to get off his horse, but he didn’t stop once. “Peter! Help!” she screamed.

Frozen with shock, Peter almost didn’t see the sword coming at him until it was too late. Onyx reared, kicking at the soldier, and startled him out of his amazement. Swinging his sword, Peter cleared a path and shot a horrified look at the Telmarines, who were still attacking the fauns. Screams of pain rang through the little clearing. Looking back to Ed’s retreating horse—running flat-out due north—Peter choked. *Ed, you can’t be doing this! Tell me this isn’t you.*

Oh, Lucy. All of them gone now. Peter’s world shredded apart. *Aslan, help me.* “Humrubble!” he screamed, and urged Onyx after Edmund.

“Your Majesty, please!” cried the fauns.

Squeezing his eyes shut, hating himself for leaving them, Peter leaned low over the unicorn’s neck and let him run.

- # -

Cori trembled, afraid to hope that the man standing before her really was Edmund and not that awful creature that terrified her with a look.

He took his hand slowly away, and only then did she notice the blood in his hair and the way he favored his left arm. He winced and held it close to his body. She wanted to ask what had happened, but he was already turning away to look up the passage.

He turned back, and she saw that he was also stepping gingerly on his right leg. "Listen," he whispered. "I need you to do something for me, Cori. Susan is missing. She's somewhere in the castle, that's all I know. But if they realize you're gone before I find her..." He took a deep breath and gave her a pleading look that could never have been in the eyes of the Jinn. "I need you to go back so they don't suspect anyone else is in the castle."

She panicked. Back to that—that beast? *No! No! Don't ask me to do that!*

She opened her mouth to object, but again he covered it with his hand. "Please. I swear—" He winced and almost buckled to his knees, and she wondered just how badly he was hurt. Even in the ghastly gloom of the dungeon, he was as white as bleached bone. How could he expect to find Susan in this condition?

"Cori," he ground out, "I wouldn't ask you if I knew any other way. Please. I need you to buy me the time to find my sister."

Even though her heart thundered in her chest, Cori knew she couldn't refuse. Susan, who had always been kind to her. Susan, who might even now be enduring a worse fate than Cori's. All at the whim of a madman whom Cori had brought into Narnia.

Oh, saints, she had let the serpent into the nursery herself.

She raised her chin and nodded.

The relief on his face tore at her heartstrings. He kissed her cheek. "I swear on Aslan's mane, Cori, I'll get you out as soon as I can."

Aslan. Cori had never met the Lion, though she knew he'd come to Narnia briefly last summer. She knew little of him except that the Pevensies held him in the highest regard. Even his name seemed to lend her courage, and she clung to that. She would do this. She nodded again, resolute.

"All right," Ed said. "You go first, and I'll follow."

She led him back up the dark passage, feeling her way bit by breath-holding bit. Just after they passed the intersection, she heard Edmund groan behind her.

She turned to find him sagging against the wall, clutching his shoulder and panting. Some light fell behind him—A remnant of that luminous glow from the dungeon? No, too yellow—and she saw an expression of agony on his face.

Then the light got brighter, closer, and she saw the thing behind him. Something huge and menacing, with yellow eyes that drove a spear of terror right to her soul. The eyes radiated that light, that shocking light that burned at her courage. She had never in her life seen such a creature except in books her father would never have let her read, had he known.

A werewolf.

Edmund! she screamed—except no sound left her lips. She couldn't speak. The spell

still robbed her of her voice. Ed must have seen her fear, because his eyes widened and he started to turn—but too late.

The werewolf snarled and sprang on Edmund. The two grappled for a moment, and then the werewolf opened his jaws.

She sprang forward with her fists raised—her only weapon—aiming for the monster's eyes. The bite meant for Edmund closed on her wrist, and she gave a silent shriek of pain. The monster's lunge carried her backward and she fell, reeling with dizziness and the torture of her bitten arm. Her head slammed against the wall of the passage and everything went black.

19

Catch Me If You Can

Peter and Onyx raced after Edmund as if the White Witch herself were on their tail. Onyx made good on his promise. As fast as Ed's horse was, a unicorn was faster. They closed rapidly, and Peter heard the *boom-boom-boom* of the giant running after them. "Edmund! Stop!" Peter shouted. His brother kept going. "Edmund! What's wrong with you? I said stop!"

Instead of obeying, Edmund veered into the forest. Onyx leaped over a fallen tree and kept running. They pulled abreast of Edmund's horse, several meters apart with trees whipping past between them. Lucy lay across his brother's saddle, her body slack. "What are you doing?" Peter called. "Let her go!"

Humrubble crashed through the forest behind them. "I smell dark magic, sire," Onyx said.

Peter didn't know if that was because of Edmund's strange behavior or their nearness to the Witch's castle, but he didn't have time to ask. An impassable stand of trees loomed before them. Onyx swerved right and leaped over a thicket of shrubbery. Edmund's horse veered too, around the trees and out of the woods onto flat plain again.

Big mistake, Ed, Peter thought. He bent low over the unicorn's neck and Onyx burst into a sprint that could overtake any horse. Between Onyx's speed and Humrubble's long stride, they were able to circle around Edmund and cut off his escape. Ed's horse skidded to a halt, leaving gouges in the turf, and it whinnied with alarm when it saw Humrubble. "What is this about?" Peter shouted.

Ed gave him a wicked grin and reined his horse around. He shot a look at the giant—just a look—and Humrubble toppled over with a groan of pain and crashed to the ground. Ed's horse bolted through the gap, heading north again.

Onyx snorted. "Oh, no, you don't." He sprinted after Edmund's horse again.

Fields rushed past them in a breathtaking blur. Every sound but that of Onyx's hoofbeats faded to insignificance. *He's gone mad*, Peter thought with a chill. *Oh, Aslan—what's he done to Cori and Susan?* Peter shot a look back over his shoulder at the giant lying spread-eagled on the ground, and pain twisted in his belly at the wake of destruction behind him. He couldn't afford to let anyone else come to harm over this insanity. He'd have to do this alone.

On and on they galloped. Onyx never tired—but it seemed Edmund's horse had the same everlasting stamina, for they never slowed, staying just out of reach. They passed through a forest, and then the Witch's castle rose up before them. He and Onyx hesitated, expecting to corner Ed, but his horse never paused. The animal galloped over the dock and leaped off its edge. Peter watched in amazement as Ed's mount landed on the surface of the

lake and kept right on galloping toward the castle. Sprays of water splashed up from under its feet, and Peter saw blue smoke curling on the lake's surface along the horse's path.

Snarling through gritted teeth, Peter urged the unicorn on. Onyx sprinted along the dock and soared into the air, landing several meters out onto the lake's surface. "Go!" Peter shouted, seeing the smoke begin to dissipate in Ed's wake. He shot an anxious look at Rhindon, still sheathed in its scabbard. He'd promised never to draw his sword on his brother again. But Lucy—oh, Aslan, Lucy—lay limp across Ed's saddle and Peter didn't even know if she were dead. "Faster, Onyx!"

The unicorn stretched ahead, his ears flat to his skull, every muscle straining. "No one outruns me!" he growled. They charged on into the middle of the lake.

Edmund looked back at them—still that awful grin—and the blue smoke evaporated from underneath Onyx's feet. The unicorn gave a whinny of shock and plunged downward.

Peter lurched off the unicorn's back with no more than a bare instant for breath before they splashed into the lake and water closed over his head.

- # -

Cori woke in the musty darkness of the tunnel, her body burning with pain.

She was alone.

She took a deep breath as another wave of that burning sensation flowed through her body. The musty air sharpened. She caught a musky wolf-pelt scent (that horrid creature, but he was no longer present) and then a smoother, more pleasant smell that somehow brought Edmund to mind. She looked around and found she could see clearly in the near-darkness. Where had they gone? Was Ed all right?

Elian must be looking for her by now.

Her arm ached fiercely. She struggled to her feet, then made her way back up the tunnel and crept out into the water closet. After she pushed the toilet back against the tunnel entrance, she returned to the great hall.

Elian was sitting on the throne, laughing—and the Jinn had returned. Cori recognized him because his clothes were in better repair and his hair unmatted by blood.

And he was carrying Lucy.

Cori tried calling the youngest queen's name, but she still couldn't speak.

"Put her with the other one," Elian said.

The Jinn left the hall. Cori made a note of which doorway he used, hoping to learn where they'd put Susan.

Then Elian noticed Cori. "Ah, dearest, come here."

Once again bound by the spell, she moved forward.

Elian's eyes widened when he looked at her. He rose from the throne and stalked toward her, then took her arm. "What's happened to you?"

Please don't make me tell you, she thought frantically. She had no idea if the spell would force her to speak, to tell Elian the truth when he commanded it. Any secrets she had—everything Peter had told her about Cair Paravel and about his own battle tactics—could be Elian's if only he thought to ask.

But he looked more concerned about her arm. "Who did this?"

When she didn't speak—couldn't speak—he shook her. “Tell me what happened to your arm!”

“It was bitten,” she said, surprised at the sound of her own voice and despairing that he had now learned he could make her talk.

But he seemed more outraged that she'd been damaged than concerned with her speaking. His fingers dug into her arm, the pain almost as sharp as that of the bite and the feverish ache running through her body. “What bit you?” When she didn't answer, he roared, “Tell me what bit you!”

“A werewolf,” she said, then closed her eyes. *Please don't ask any more, please, please*, she prayed. Was Ed even alive after that attack, in his condition? She strained to remember if he'd carried any weapons and couldn't. And Susan and Lucy, both captives now of this man—certain to be without weapons as well. Cori felt sick. None of this would have happened if she'd just stayed in Telmar.

But she wouldn't have gotten to know Peter, either. Tears formed at the backs of her eyes. *What have I done to your home, your family? Where are you, Peter?* She couldn't bear to think that he, too, might be dead by now.

She had singlehandedly destroyed Narnia by letting Elian in. How naive she'd been, how blind, to have missed the evil radiating from the man in front of her. Cori shook inside, with guilt as much as with the pain of the bite-fever. Hadn't Peter taught her to recognize an enemy, to anticipate his tactics, over and over during their sparring matches and their talks in the library?

“Saris!” roared Elian.

She opened her eyes as the Jinn reappeared in the doorway from which he'd left, now without Lucy. Wherever she and Susan were held, then, it couldn't be far. She drew a deep breath and found a faint thread of scent, something like a sunny Narnian meadow, lingered in the air. Lucy's scent—she knew it without question because the young queen's image popped into her memory the moment she smelled it.

“Find that damned werewolf and kill it the instant you set eyes on it,” Elian snapped.

When the Jinn left, Elian ordered her to sit on the couch, and for once, she was glad to obey him. The bite-fever had spread to her every extremity, and she remained mute even though the growing pain made her want to scream. Her only relief was that the werewolf might be killed before it had the chance to tell someone that Edmund had found his way into the castle.

And if Edmund had, maybe others might come too. Maybe Peter was even now coming to stop Elian. If he was alive at all.

She closed her eyes once more, as much to blot out Elian as to remember the face of the High King whose unaffected kindness had meant so much more to her than the infatuation she'd held for Edmund. So little time together. And maybe that would be all she'd ever get.

20

Deception

Beltran stopped his party of soldiers at a burned-out camp. Cooking pots were scattered over the ground, which was littered with hoofprints—horses and fauns, from the look of the dead half-goat creature lying beside one of the fallen tents. A Telmarine helmet lay askew beside it.

The damage was one more example of the havoc he'd seen since returning to Narnia. Havoc that he hadn't ordered. The king would have told him if he planned to invade the country before the Marchioness fulfilled her task of finding the High King's weaknesses. And if the raids were not commanded by the king, then the punishment would fall on Beltran's head.

He reined his horse north, the direction the raiders had gone. "We follow!" he shouted.

"What about the Marchioness, captain?" asked one of the soldiers.

"We have bigger problems." Beltran jabbed his horse's sides with his heels, and the party galloped north.

- # -

Elian stroked Cori's hair, his expression once more serene. He stood up. "I'll fetch something to clean that, darling, don't worry. Stay here and rest." He left the great hall.

Gasping with pain, Cori waited until he was out of sight, then tested the spell by trying to stand. The burning of the fever-bite raged worst in her arm, and if she'd been allowed by the spell, she'd have cried out with the pain of it. Her skin seemed to want to stretch beyond itself, but she could only sit there in helpless agony.

And then her arm twitched. Eyes wide, she tried to move it again. And again it moved. Not much—but voluntarily. Before she could absorb the meaning of this, the pain became too much and she had to close her eyes and concentrate on breathing through it.

Elian returned; she knew it by the sound of his footsteps and the sharp, unpleasant odor that accompanied him.

Sound and scent had become so much stronger now. Was it the anxiety of her situation...or was she turning into one of those snarling, wicked monsters that had bitten her? *Saints, no!* How could she go home to her father and sister if she were one of those brutish things? How could she ever look anyone decent in the eye again? Would she have the choice, or would she resort to a vicious attack the way the one in the tunnel had when it saw Edmund?

Would she attack her own family?

Despairing, she opened her eyes. Elian sat beside her again and cleaned her wound. Did he even know what was happening—would happen—to her?

The way he looked at her as he wiped the blood from her arm sickened her. “My lady—”

Don't call me that, she thought. Her chest ached with more than the pain of the bite-fever.

“—I do hope you understand I mean you no harm,” said Elian. He stroked a hand along her arm with an eager look that gave her an inward shudder. “I only wish you to realize how much this was meant to be. You and I will rule Narnia, and—”

What!

“—Oro will keep Telmar, and there will be no more fighting amongst the two countries. Don't worry about Narnia's so-called kings and queens, dearest. They'll soon be no threat to us. I've taken care of it.” He patted her hand as if he thought that would make her happy.

Nausea overwhelmed her. *Madman! How can you think I approve of this?* She dared not let her thoughts show in her eyes. Instead she closed them in feigned weariness while the bite-fever burned through her.

“Look at me, Corisande.”

She was forced to open her eyes again and meet Elian's sharp stare.

His lips curled back in a frightening smile. He stroked her arm again, then her face, and then ran the back of his hand slowly down her arm. “Everything will be all right, sweetest. The High King will fall.”

Spell or no, Cori thought at that moment that she might be sick after all.

- # -

Peter thrashed underwater, weighted down by his boots and sword. *Up, up!* he thought, his sense of direction hopelessly lost. Water swirled near his head. Onyx's leg swept close alongside him, and Peter surged away with his heartbeat pounding.

He held what little breath he had left in his burning lungs and went still, searching the murky water for some shred of sunlight.

There.

He stretched for the surface, fighting Rhindon's dragging weight at his belt. A few meters away. An arm's length. Just a little more...

And then something grabbed his leg and pulled downward. With despair, Peter watched the surface fall away again. *No, he thought fiercely. I won't die like this. Not knowing... Edmund. Lucy. Susan. Cori.*

His lungs went from burning to screaming. Folding his body, he scabbled for the knife in his boot, but the thing holding him grabbed his hand instead. In his surprise, he forgot to hold his breath, and water surged into his nose and throat.

Then the something kissed him.

21

Breathe

Blessed air filled Peter's lungs. His head reeled with disorientation.

A naiad. Here, in the Witch's lake?

"Come," she said, her voice warbled by the water. "There's little time, Your Highness."

Peter started back anyway. Onyx still thrashed in the water.

"He will make it to the castle. Hurry." The naiad tugged him deeper.

For a few seconds, Peter worried that this naiad might still be loyal to the Witch's cause, but then he wondered why she wouldn't simply have let him drown. An instant more, and then he was kicking against the lake currents and letting the naiad pull him with her.

She drew him toward the castle with almost as much speed as he and Onyx had galloped toward it minutes before. Her long, reddish hair flowed along her back as she went. Fish darted out of the way, and the surface of the lake receded as they dove still deeper. She paused to blow more air into his lungs. The pressure of the water began to crush in on him. Seconds before it became too much, they arrived at a rocky wall. The naiad swam (if you could call it as mundane a thing as swimming) into an opening half-hidden by long strands of seaweed and pulled him after.

Up they went, past sunken statues that he only glimpsed. He shuddered, wanting to turn back to see if any of them were Cori or his siblings. The broken halves of the Witch's wand had never been found after the Battle of Beruna. Who knew if they could be fused together again?

His head burst through the water's surface and he sucked in as much air as he could hold, then choked on the last of the lake water in his throat. Shaking, he struck out for the bank, a gloomy underwater cavern shore. The bank sloped upward into darkness. Peter slicked back his hair and took several welcome breaths. Musty air was still air.

The naiad's head and shoulders broke the surface beside him. "Your brother and sisters are in the castle, sire. You will find them if you take that path." She pointed to the darkness beyond the bank.

"What about Corisande? The Telmarine woman?" Peter's heartbeat thudded, worse than it had when he'd been drowning. "Have you seen her?"

"I have not, sire."

His heart crashed into his boots. What if she were already dead? It was his job to protect her. His responsibility. And more than that—he *needed* to protect her. The thought of anything happening to her, to his Cori... She had become much more than a marriage contract and a way to protect his country. She was a sly attack with a rapier. She was a laugh

into the wind while galloping along at full speed on horseback. She was that inviting blush when he kissed her hand.

He closed his eyes, fighting the shaking in his muscles. When he opened his eyes again, he managed to sound normal, though he was nowhere near calm. "Thank you..."

"Cyrenaea," said the naiad. "I cannot go any farther, Your Majesty. The water ends here, and there are many foes along that path. It is lucky that any naiads were able to return to this lake at all." Sorrow filled her eyes, even in the gloom of the cavern.

"Thank you again, Cyrenaea. Please, if you can, rally the Narnians. Tell them to find Oreius and come to the Witch's castle." He stared up the darkened bank. "I fear there's going to be a lot more trouble before this is over."

- # -

Cori spent the bulk of the afternoon sitting in that very same spot on the musty couch, ignoring her feverish pain as best she could. She squeezed her eyes shut, the only thing she could do to vent her fear and growing frustration. She couldn't test her ability to move, because Elian watched her every moment from his perch on the throne. Now and then he would tell her to stand and approach him, and he'd stare at her as if he were admiring a highly-coveted horse. Then, she had to command herself *not* to test her restraints and lurch backward.

He had her standing before the throne now, a plaything to be studied. A new toy. The possessiveness in his eyes made her sick as much as it scared her.

Soldiers came and went and murmured in Elian's ear. Then the Jinn appeared (still disguised as Edmund, but now Cori would have known him on sight by his arrogant posture). He transformed into the bluish creature that must have been his natural shape, then spoke to Elian in a hushed voice that even Cori's newly-sensitive ears couldn't hear.

Elian began to laugh. "You've earned your keep many times over, Jinn Saris. My last wish—"

The Jinn leaned forward with an expectant look.

"—is that you remain obedient to me for the rest of my life. And my first command under that wish, is that you are to protect me at all costs."

The Jinn's mouth dropped open. Had Cori been able, she might have gasped, herself. Elian had taken away the Jinn's freedom and bought himself a powerful bodyguard with a few simple words. Cori found no satisfaction in the Jinn's sudden enslavement.

The Jinn's voice reached her ears, calm but seething with an undercurrent of hatred. "As you wish, Sir Elian."

He floated from the room. As he passed Cori, his yellow eyes seemed to lose some of their lamplight glow, and now she thought she saw a touch of empathy.

Mercy Kill, Fury Kill

Peter crept along the passage sloping ever upward. He shivered with cold, Rhindon drawn and ready. He was wet through and it seemed that the Witch's castle would do its best to freeze him solid even in the Witch's absence.

Some bluish light lingered here, seeping from the very walls. Instead of encouraging him because he could see, it lent a coldness to the passage that might have sapped resolve from the most courageous of men. He steeled himself against his dread and hurried on, listening for enemies.

A few meters on, he smelled the musky odor of animal pelt. Overlaid with that was the sharp scent of blood. At once he went on his guard, and as he approached a bend in the passage he heard low snarling.

Peter crept around the bend to a sickening sight—a werewolf, half-transformed, lying in the passage with a gaping wound in its belly. Blood was everywhere. The creature's snarl was feeble now, and Peter recognized great pain in the creature's still-inhuman face.

As he approached, the werewolf growled at him and snapped its teeth. Peter grimaced. Even a beast of evil didn't deserve such suffering, and it was clear that this werewolf would die a slow death without someone's mercy. Peter poised his sword over the werewolf's body to strike the killing blow. As his sword fell, he almost thought he saw a look of gratitude in the creature's eyes.

He stared at the dead werewolf with a grim frown. "Go with Aslan," he murmured.

Someone coughed. At once alert, Peter squinted into the darkness beyond the werewolf's body. Rasping, painful-sounding breaths reached his ears. "Peter," the voice scraped.

Edmund.

Peter leaped over the werewolf's body and charged forward with his sword in a white-knuckled fist. A few running steps, and he reached a wider space with horizontal niches in the walls, filled with bones—a catacomb. "Peter," came his brother's voice again.

Peter skidded to a halt, looking around, seeing nothing in the gloom.

Something clinked and shifted. Bones clattered from one of the lower niches onto the floor of the passage. Edmund lay gasping in the back of the niche. His brother rolled forward and reached out.

Peter caught him just before he fell and helped him out of the crevice. Edmund stifled a moan and sagged in Peter's arms. "How did you manage to get in there...like this?" Peter asked, staring at his brother and then at the bones on the floor.

"My other option was getting killed," Ed ground out. "That...*thing* that looks like me...showed up. It savaged the werewolf with its bare hands." Ed hung in Peter's grasp for a

moment, then struggled upright, leaning against him. His gaze came up. “The werewolf bit Cori.”

Peter’s first thought was relief that the man he’d been chasing wasn’t Ed. Then, *Thank Aslan Cori’s alive.* His next was regret that he’d killed the werewolf so mercifully. “Where is she?”

Ed shook his head. Peter took that to mean his brother didn’t know. He slipped an arm around Ed’s shoulders. “What happened to you?”

“Attacked by Telmarines,” Edmund said. “Barton was hurt. Leina ran to the dwarves for help. They caught me...tortured...stretched between their horses...”

Ed swayed and Peter leaned into him, helping him stay on his feet as they went back up the passage. Peter didn’t say it aloud, but Edmund looked awful. “We’ve got to get you help, Ed. Your doppelganger took Lucy, and we’ll have to hope he hasn’t stolen her cordial.”

Ed’s gaze came up again, sharper. “He has Susan too.”

“I know. The Narnians will think we’ve disappeared if I can’t get word to them. I’ve sent a naiad.”

“The dryads will come. Asha knows—I’m in pain—” Ed bit back a groan and hung unto Peter. “She’ll have told the dryads to find me.”

“Then they’ll tell others,” Peter said with relief. “It’s just a matter of time.” *Time we don’t have,* he thought, but as he looked at his brother’s white, agony-stricken face, he didn’t dare say it aloud.

- # -

“Eat, dearest,” purred Elian. He raised a grape to Cori’s lips.

The spell prevented her disobeying a direct command. She opened her mouth and ate the fruit.

“Why do you look so unhappy?” Elian smiled. “Everything we could want is within reach.”

Everything you want, you twisted creature, she thought.

Men had come and gone all afternoon, so Elian did not look up when the doors of the hall banged open, until a voice yelled, “Elian!”

Beltran.

Elian shot up from the couch and faced the captain. Cori couldn’t see what was going on, because Beltran was behind her. “How nice, you’ve arrived,” Elian said. “We can prepare for the march.”

“What under the stars are you talking about? What was that *thing* that ferried us over?”

“An assistant,” Elian said, “nothing more. We march on Cair Paravel tomorrow. Without their sovereigns, Narnia is all but ours.”

“Who ordered this?” Beltran demanded. Cori heard stomping boots, and he rounded the couch to glare at Elian. Beltran carried his sword in his fist.

“I did.” Elian smiled, a show of teeth that gave Cori a terrible chill.

“Oro will hear of this mutiny,” Beltran hissed, “and you’re out of line.”

“Am I? I have Queen Susan. I have Queen Lucy. King Edmund is surely dead by now, and as for High King Peter...I’ve had him drowned.” Cori’s heart shuddered to a halt, but Elian went on. “Unpleasant accident, that. Simply terrible. With no one to rule Narnia, I’m humbly stepping in to stop the certain chaos that would follow.”

Beltran’s gaze fell to Cori, and his eyes widened. He stepped toward her with surprise on his face, even when she gave him a look begging him not to. “My lady—”

“Come no closer to her!” Elian snapped. He shot forward with his sword drawn, shaking and white-faced.

No, no, no, Cori begged silently. Leave, leave now!

Beltran met Elian’s wild stare with a livid one of his own. His gaze flicked to Cori, still motionless, and back to Elian. “What have you done to her?”

“No more than what is my right as the conqueror of this cursed country.” Elian’s eyes narrowed and he raised his sword. “I’m taking my prize.”

And then Cori realized what Elian meant to do with her. If he forced her into a union with him—as he surely could, when she was powerless to disobey him—he would be allied with royal blood and certain contention for King Oro.

But Peter was dead...and she couldn’t bring herself to care what happened to her now. *Oh, saints, help me. If you ever loved me...* She choked off that last thought in a rush of pain. No. She would never think of love again.

“Traitor!” Beltran howled. “Narnia is not yours to take!”

Cori stared hard at Elian’s back. All of the heartache surging up inside her turned to stony rage. She poured herself into it and willed her body to let her rise.

She got no further than raising her fever-bitten arm before Elian lashed out with his blade. There was a horrifying sound, as if a butcher had sliced through a side of beef, and Beltran’s body toppled to the floor. Cori squeezed her eyes shut, but she knew that image would haunt her regardless, for the rest of her life.

23

Under Pressure

“Help me, Lu. I’ve almost got this bottom hinge scraped out,” said Susan, gamely digging at the joinery between the heavy door and the stone wall with the edge of a silver brooch.

Lucy came forward. “Can you pull on it yet?”

“No. I think we need to get that top hinge first.” Susan stared upward. The door of their prison (a smallish, empty room) was twice her height—blast the White Witch. They were lucky to make progress at all, but it seemed that the stone and mortar holding the hinges in had fallen into disrepair in the years since the castle’s occupation. “You’ll need to stand on my shoulders to get at it, I think.” She handed Lucy the brooch, now worn dull on one edge, then crouched beside the door.

Lucy took Susan’s hand and stepped on her shoulders. Susan lifted her with a surprised *uff*. She held onto her sister’s ankles until Lucy was balanced against the wall. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think I was trying to carry an elephant.”

Lucy glared down at her, but shifted so that her slippers rested in a better spot on Susan’s shoulders. “We can’t all float like feathers, O Graceful One.”

Susan recognized the epithet as one of the many once used on her by Rabadash, a prince of Calormen, who had tried to court her before she discovered his wickedness (and the main reason she no longer cared to curry favor with any man). She glared right back at Lucy. “Just see if you can dig at that hinge.”

Lucy dug. And dug. And dug, until Susan’s shoulders ached. “Almost there,” Lucy said.

“Hurry,” said Susan. “It’s been a while, and they might come back with our supper if they plan on feeding us at all.”

Lucy paused long enough to give her a worried look. “I’m not sure that creature masquerading as Edmund has any thought for our welfare.” Her eyes filled with tears. “What if Ed’s been killed, Su? And Peter, too? I remember Peter chasing us, but then I passed out.”

“Let’s don’t think about that,” Susan said, purposely keeping her own worry out of her voice for Lucy’s sake. “Keep scraping.”

Lucy worked at the hinge until she’d scraped a crevice all round it, then got down. Susan rubbed her shoulders and scanned the room for a weapon. No good. The only thing besides her brooch and the bare stone floor was a pile of mortar dust and pebbles from their scraping. “We’ll have to hope for finding something to defend ourselves with when we get outside.”

They pulled at the door, terrified that removing it would make a sound that alerted

any guards. They didn't know if one was outside the door even now (it was too thick to hear any noise from within).

With a frighteningly loud grinding noise, the hinges pulled free and they were able to use their own weight to lever the door open. Then there was a metallic *crack* as the lock broke, and the door fell inward. Susan and Lucy caught it on their shoulders and lowered it to the ground. If someone hadn't come running already, they certainly would if they heard the door bang onto the floor.

"Quickly," Susan whispered. "Let's get below if it's possible. We're less likely to run into anyone in the lower parts of the castle."

There was no way they wouldn't be recognized if they were seen, so it wasn't much use to disguise themselves. Susan had seen no females among the Telmarine soldiers. The best Susan hoped for was a kitchen knife. She felt naked without her bow and arrows.

"Oh, I wish Aslan would come," Lucy said. "Which way do you think they took our things?"

"No telling," Susan said, "but we're without doubt using the first pointed objects we find."

- # -

Peter made his way up the musty passage, hanging onto Edmund and worrying about him every step. He was so used to his brother's silent, ready presence at his side during a battle. No unnecessary words, just a patient waiting for the right moment to flash in and deliver a swift attack or defense when Peter needed it. Seeing Ed this way scared him worse than he'd been scared at any time during Ed's run-in with the White Witch years ago. Then, he'd been hard-pressed to keep from yelling at Ed when they got him back, just for how scared he'd been. Now, he could barely keep his mind on his own footsteps.

Ed coughed and groaned. His weight sank against Peter's frame and his sword dragged at his side. When Peter looked, he saw blood on his brother's lips. "What in hell did they try to torture out of you?" Peter asked, trying to sound angry to cover his fear.

"Information about...me," Ed said. "I can only assume...for that...thing."

Peter kept up his bravado. "Well, whatever they planned to do with it, they're flat out of luck. That thing couldn't have been you even if it knew all your tricks. Too good-looking."

Ed gave him the ghost of a smile, but stifled it quickly in another hiss of pain. "You ought to leave me...find the girls faster," he whispered.

"Not likely."

A clanking sound echoed from farther up the passage. Both of them halted at once. Ed winced. "I can't fight, Peter."

A low, angry grumbling reached them. Firelight and shadows flickered across the wall of the passage. Voices raised in alarm; they'd been detected. Peter raised his sword. "If they get within reach of Rhindon, trust me. You won't have to."

24

Courage

Boggles.

Peter gave an inward groan, but he gritted his teeth. “Get behind me,” he whispered. “Can you lift your sword?”

“Bluffing’s about all I’ve got,” Edmund said. His brother braced a foot beside the wall and stood upright.

The first boggle gave a roar of outrage and rushed toward them with his axe raised. Peter ducked his swing and went right for the creature’s belly. The boggle toppled as soon as Peter stabbed it. He jerked his sword free and swung at the next. Rhindon nearly sliced it in two and it fell against its dead fellow.

The space filled with the loud snorts of the boggles’ battle cries. If one got away to warn the rest of the castle, he and Edmund would be as good as dead—but there was no time to worry about that. He lunged at the next boggle and almost took an axe swing at his head. He dropped to one knee to kill it with a belly-stab.

The narrow passage afforded him some benefit; the creatures couldn’t come at them more than two at a time. Peter kept moving, using the closed-in space and the piled bodies as a barrier. Another boggle charged at him, but this time it dodged his strike and got past him. It went for Ed, whose face was a mask of pained resolution. Peter stretched after the creature and stabbed it in the back.

Ed gave a shout of alarm and Peter turned around to find two more boggles running toward them. Worried now—how many more were there?—he swung at the first. He ducked as the creature’s axe swept over his head and slammed into the wall. Peter got in underneath and thrust Rhindon into its gut, but the second boggle came for him while he was busy with the first. The creature struck at him. Peter dodged in time to avoid losing his head, but the edge of the axe sliced across his shoulder and he gave a snarl as pain burst through him. He slashed the boggle’s side and struck again before it could recover.

It collapsed on top of the pile only to reveal the last boggle fleeing up the passage.

Something whizzed past Peter and the second boggle crumpled. The torch in its hand dropped to the tunnel floor. In the guttering light, Peter saw the silver, fan-shaped hilt of Ed’s dagger sticking out from the boggle’s back.

He turned around with words of approval on his lips, but Edmund dropped to his knees. Blood dripped down his chin from his lips. “Lucy,” he whispered, agony in his eyes.

Peter snatched his own dagger from his boot and pressed it into his brother’s hand. “Twenty minutes,” he said, and then he bolted up the passage. As he raced past the last dead boggle, he pulled Ed’s dagger from its back. He had no idea where they would have kept Lucy, if she had her cordial—if she were alive. *Help me, Aslan. Give me speed. Something.*

Anything. Don't let them die.

- # -

The light in the great hall never changed. Always that same, dismal blue. Cori longed for the sun as she longed for oblivion—anything to escape the ache in her heart and her body. Pain rushed through her like her own blood now, pounding against the prison of her skin. She couldn't even scream. Did this madman even sense the torture she was going through?

Elian sat on the throne again, lazily flicking a knife in his hand while he stared at her on her couch. *Oh, look away, look away, so I can move!* she thought. She yearned to stand up, to pace, to get her mind off the horrible feverish pain.

Elian got up then and stalked toward her, shoving the knife into his sleeve where he must have had a sheath for it. His eyes, when he neared, glowed with something much more disturbing than anything he'd shown that day. "I tire of this waiting, don't you, my sweet?"

She concentrated on sitting very still while her heartbeat pummeled against her ribs.

Elian sat beside her and stroked her cheek. "We could pass the time another way," he murmured. His fingertips trailed over her jaw and down the side of her neck.

His touch, the way his fingers passed over her skin, the soft look in his eyes—it all sickened her. She closed her eyes.

"Open your eyes," Elian barked.

Her eyes sprang open against her will. She tried to avert her gaze, but he snapped, "Look at me! Why won't you look at me?"

She was forced to return her gaze to his face. He went on drawing his fingers across her skin. His eyes softened again. "That's better, darling. We'll be happy in this country—you'll see. A whole world we can make into whatever we want—ours, all ours." He traced the edge of her bodice and his gaze fixed on its lace border.

Oh, no, no, please no, she begged silently. The pain rolling through her body intensified, and something hot-cold-hot-cold-hot-cold began shuddering through her blood. *Don't do this, don't do this.*

But he could not hear her and she doubted he'd have released her.

"My lord Elian," came a slithering voice. Jinn Saris.

Looking peevish, Elian rocked back and snarled over his shoulder. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Your captives—your *other* captives—are missing, my lord," the Jinn said smoothly.

"What!" The Jinn had his full attention now.

"The queens have broken free," said the Jinn. "What are your orders?"

Cori reeled with relief. Free! Free! Narnia could not fall while at least one of its monarchs remained. Then her stomach twisted again. But Edmund...and Peter, who would never call her *my lady* again....

"Get those filthy gutter rats and drag them back here by their hair if you have to," Elian snapped.

"Yes, my lord."

Elian shot up from the couch. His voice went sweet again. "Stay there, my dearest.

I'm going to make plans for the march with my men. I won't be but a moment."

As he left, Cori felt a faint flutter in her throat and she realized with a shock that it was a growl.

All That G'sitters

Susan vaguely remembered the direction her captors had taken her when she was brought to this foul castle. She recalled that the men had taken her bow and horn and gone down a hall hung with moth-eaten red tapestries, and it was that hall she hoped to find.

With no weapons, she feared they would run into the Telmarines at any moment. Lucy mentioned again her hope that Aslan would know of their predicament and arrive to help them. The Telmarines would scatter the moment they laid eyes on him, a great roaring Lion ready to pounce on them with claws and teeth bared...if he came.

Unlike Lucy, Susan held out no unshakeable hope that the Lion would come to their last-minute rescue as he had in the past. Aslan had other obligations, for one thing, and he couldn't run to their aid every time they wanted him like a faithful dog. Ever practical, Susan believed in making her own good luck.

Thus, when she found an iron floor candelabra, she snatched it up and shook the candles off it. "It's a bit heavy," she said to Lucy. "Can you manage it?"

Lucy took it and gave it an experimental swing, much like she did when testing a new quarterstaff. "It will to have to do," said Lucy. "But what about you?"

"I'll make do with whatever we find." They continued along the passage.

Presently they heard voices. "Quick—get behind me," Lucy whispered.

Susan stepped back against the wall, fumbling with her belt. She slipped it off just as a pair of soldiers tromped into view, complaining about marching leagues and leagues for some sort of battle.

Lucy pounced on the first one, *whack-whack-whack*, and before he had a chance even to give a start of surprise, he was on the floor. The second had drawn his sword by then and gotten behind Lucy to strike.

Susan rushed forward and slipped her belt over the man's head. She jerked it back against his throat with all her strength. The soldier gagged and struggled.

Lucy spun around and smashed her makeshift quarterstaff in his face. Susan loosened her grip and the soldier collapsed.

"Quickly," Susan whispered. "Search them for their weapons." They took the soldiers' swords and knives. "That's better. Not quite what I'd want, but in a pinch..."

Lucy found a set of brass keys on the first soldier and pocketed them. "Who knows? They might be useful if we run into a locked gate." They hurried down the hallway again.

They turned down another hallway. Another. Another. Up a flight of stairs. Down another one. Susan marked the turns on a mental map in case they were forced to go back.

The sound of many marching feet reached them. Susan pulled Lucy into a side room with her heart pounding. They stared fearfully at each other while they listened to the

endless marching feet going past the door. When the sound faded out, Susan moved to exit the room.

“Going so soon?” hissed a voice.

She and Lucy spun around. The Jinn floated in the room’s corner. He folded his arms. “You may as well drop your weapons. They won’t work on me.”

- # -

Peter ran upward along the passage. He knew the direction only by its slope and the way the air grew less musty as he rushed along. He pushed through a half-rotted door hidden behind a sickly growth of some foul-smelling plant, and found himself in a chamber lit with more of that eerie blue light.

The objects in the room were shrouded in dust and cobwebs. Peter stared at the dusty shapes—shields and suits of armor and piles of precious metals and jewels—what he could see of them under all the years of disuse.

The Witch’s treasure room.

He squinted into the gloom, far back until the objects were lost in darkness. The room went on for several meters, much larger than the treasure room at Cair Paravel. Awestruck, he lowered his sword and paced forward into the space.

So this was how the Witch had funded her hundred years of terror on Narnia.

He knew he ought to go, but he couldn’t believe the vast amounts of treasure and armor and weapons. What an army this could support! He stepped toward the first piece, a solid gold statue of a satyr whose jeweled eyes alone must have been worth a fortune.

From there, he turned to examine a silver-plated shield which bore the dusty outlines of running bears around its perimeter. The emblem on the shield’s center was a hideous-looking orc with rubies for eyes.

Next, he went to a gold-covered book embossed with runes he couldn’t read even after he blew the dust off it. He glanced up again at the mind-boggling amount of treasure. *Use it*, whispered a voice in the back of his mind. *Take it. Use it to defend your family and keep them safe. It’s just sitting here, waiting for someone to use it.* His fingers itched to touch the book.

Something nagged at his memory. He shook his head. No. He needed to go. Something desperately needed his attention. He shivered. Had the room gotten colder? He let Rhindon’s tip drag against the floor and started to reach out to the book....

A faint growl carried across the room on the still, dust-laden air.

Peter jerked upright, holding Rhindon aloft again. He saw his own breath steaming in the air in front of him.

The growl came again, low and full of warning.

Warmth flooded Peter’s chest, spilling down through his arms and legs. He could no longer see his breath, but suddenly he feared this room more than anything he’d ever feared in his life. He took a careful step away from the treasure. Then another. And he knew without a doubt that if he touched a single object in this room, he would waste away the rest of his life sitting beside it, caressing it and jealously guarding it from the eyes of others. Even starvation wouldn’t pull him away.

Edmund. Susan. Lucy. Cori.

Shaking now, Peter backed further away, each step placed carefully in the print he'd left on the dusty floor when coming in. When he felt the rotted door behind him, he let out his breath. "Thank you, Aslan," he whispered. He spun and left the room without once looking back.

What Remains

“It’s nearly time to go, my love,” Elian said brightly. “The Jinn will have found the queens by now, I’m certain.” He stroked a lock of her hair. “I think our first stop ought to be that stone table the Narnians hold in such high regard. A fitting place to usher in a new monarchy by dispatching the old, don’t you think? What *remains* of the old.” He chuckled.

Cori’s heart sank. The pain in her body had become commonplace now, a dull background noise compared to the fierce stab-wound of Peter’s death. In her mind, she saw Cair Paravel, unoccupied, falling easily to the Telmarine soldiers. Narnians fleeing before their cruel attacks. The whole country sinking into despair.

Narnia’s Golden Age was over.

A tear trickled down her cheek. Then her hands curled into fists.

Before she could react to this startling show of her own willpower, Elian pulled her to her feet. “What troubles you, my dear? Don’t worry. Nothing will stand in the way of our happiness.” He kissed her hand, and she wanted to yank it away. “Follow me, dearest. I’ve prepared you a comfortable ride in one of our wagons.”

With the rest of your plunder, no doubt, she thought darkly.

One hand under her elbow, he brought her to the door of the great hall. They strode down a hallway and a contingent of soldiers joined them. Elian barked orders to them, but she barely heard what he said. Nothing mattered anymore.

When the castle’s doors opened, the sunset blinded her. After the glacial blue of the castle interior, the sun was a fiery gold that cauterized her sorrow into firm resolve. If she died avenging Peter and his family, maybe Aslan would make a place for her in his country too.

Even if she was a Telmarine.

- # -

“How can you follow that—that—*person*?” Susan demanded of the Jinn. “Even the Witch, for all her faults, wasn’t a madwoman.” She had already lowered her sword and dagger. No hand-forged weapon was any sort of match for a Jinn. Only another being of magic had a chance against their spells.

The Jinn floated closer. “You speak boldly for one who is about to die,” he said. He narrowed his sulfur-yellow eyes. “It is not yours to know why and whom I serve.”

She raised her chin. “I’d rather die with the truth on my lips than live in servitude to a man like Elian,” she snapped. “To *any* man. Nor to a Jinn.” She narrowed her own eyes, daring him to try a spell on her. Anything to draw his attention from Lucy and maybe

help her escape while the Jinn was distracted.

The Jinn crossed his arms and chuckled. "Brave words, Gentle Susan."

She raised the sword again, knowing it was futile. She fumed at the way he regarded her anger with amusement. "Come any closer and you'll find out how gentle I am."

The Jinn laughed louder. "Elian wanted me to bring you to him. By your hair, if need be." He angled his head. "I believe he called you a gutter rat."

"Better a gutter rat than a servant of that vile beast," she snapped.

To her surprise, the Jinn tilted his head as if conceding her words. He started forward again.

Susan struck with the sword. The Jinn dodged her easily. His hand closed around the blade. He jerked her closer by her grip on the weapon until they stood face to face. Heat surged up the blade and seared her palm. With a cry, Susan dropped the sword and it fell with a clang on the stone floor. "You were saying?" he asked pleasantly.

"You are nothing more than a loathsome hired brute," she said, staying right in his face even though her belly quivered with fear. *Run, Lucy, run, please run!* "Any creature that won't face someone in a fair battle—"

"Who said anything about battling you? My job is simply to bring you back to the great hall."

Susan glared at him with all the fury she could summon. "Are you afraid to face me on even ground? Transform yourself into some other shape and arm us both. Then we'll see if I go where you order me."

"Your tongue could prove a weapon by itself, shrew." All traces of amusement left the Jinn's face. He gripped her arm, and the knife Susan had been sneaking back up to strike him dropped to the floor. He looked over her shoulder. "You, girl," he said to Lucy. "Drop your blades. I'd hate to have to follow Elian's wishes *quite* so closely."

With a sinking heart, Susan watched as Lucy lowered her weapons to the floor. She turned back to the Jinn. "I hope you're proud to be Elian's faithful dog."

The Jinn led them from the room, still with that firm grip on Susan's arm. His eyes met hers for a brief moment, and the expression there surprised her. "I never said anything about faith, either."

27

Salvia

Peter raced up the passage toward a light at its end. He pushed aside an obstruction and found himself in a water closet.

It had taken so long to get here. How could he get back to his brother in time to save him? The way blood trickled from Ed's lips, and by the account of what they'd done to him, he had to have internal injuries. And Peter still had no idea where the Telmarines would have put Lucy's cordial.

He left the water closet with his sword ready and his ears straining for the sound of enemies. Then he heard a voice which made him shudder in relief.

Susan. Protesting. Loudly.

Peter almost dropped to his knees in gratitude. He gripped Rhindon tighter and ducked into an alcove.

Susan and Lucy came into view, pushed along by a sinister-looking Jinn. Susan spied Peter and her eyes flew wide. Her mouth dropped open and with a frantic look she gave him a barely-discernible shake of her head.

Peter remembered then that a Jinn could be defeated with nothing less than magic.

His sisters were right there—within reach—and he was helpless to save them.

He backed into the alcove and watched them pass by with painful frustration. His gaze darted to Lucy's belt, but the pouch in which she kept her cordial was missing. Where had they taken it? Peter stared at his sisters as the Jinn led them away, out of sight around a corner. *Aslan, what do I do?*

He received no reply, so he followed, flattening himself along the wall or behind statues. He caught up to them again with his heartbeat thundering in his ears. They turned down another hall that branched off to his left. A faded red tapestry that might once have depicted giants hung along its length.

Susan's head snapped up and she looked back over her shoulder, just far enough to catch Peter's eye. Her gaze flicked to the tapestried hall and back to him. He nodded and soundlessly slipped down the new hallway after whatever his sister wanted him to find.

Halfway down the hall, he heard muffled laughter. High-pitched shrieks punctuated the sound. Peter followed the noise to a door that someone had left partly open. He peered through the crack.

This door led out to a courtyard, where a group of three Telmarines stood laughing. A fourth stood at their center with a large golden hawk on his arm. "Regretting yourself, are you?" the soldier shouted. He flicked his wrist. The bird launched upward, only to be jerked back down by the tether attached to the soldier's gauntlet. Shrieking again (for it was this sound Peter had heard), the bird flapped its wings in a desperate attempt to get into the

sky.

The soldier pulled it down, hand over hand, until it was forced to land again. It tried to peck its way free, but the soldier cuffed it with his other gauntlet until it swung upside-down and flapping from his arm. "Talk, damn you! I heard you say something, you overgrown feather duster. I want my wager money!"

The other soldiers roared with laughter.

The one holding the hawk rounded on them. "I tell you, it's one of those Narnian birds. Look how big it is! Bigger than any of our own hawks. If we make them ours, they'd bring down a stag!"

"Good luck getting it to hunt for you when you can't even make it talk," said one of the soldiers, and the rest erupted into guffaws again.

"I'll tell you something about food," said a third. "You've got a perfectly good meal right there. Hawk is fine eating."

"Aye," said the others, and they closed in. The bird tried again to get into the air, and the man holding it cuffed it again. The bird shrieked and fell from his arm to dangle helplessly, its wings beating the air more and more slowly.

Peter had had enough. He shoved the door open and burst into the courtyard with Rhindon poised. He dispatched the first of the soldiers before the man had time to react. The second rushed him with his sword raised. Peter spun away from the attack and rounded back for the finishing blow. All the while the thought raced through his mind: *Get them before they sound an alarm.*

The third soldier ran for a pile of items in the corner of the courtyard. On top of the heap of plunder was Susan's horn. *Oh, no.* Sprinting across the courtyard, Peter attacked the soldier just as the soldier grabbed the horn and raised it.

Peter struck at the man's arm. With a scream, the soldier dropped the horn and Peter finished him.

Peter swiveled to see the last soldier, the man holding the hawk, draw breath to shout. Before he could manage it, the hawk sprang up and attacked him with its talons, shrieking with fury. The bird's attack gave Peter time to reach the last soldier and strike him down. The soldier dropped to the ground.

The bird fluttered and righted itself on the courtyard grass. He spread his wings and managed a bow. "High King Peter! I am in your debt."

"Don't mention it," Peter said. With Ed's dagger, he cut the tether from the hawk's leg, then he returned to the plunder in the corner. He shouldered Susan's bow, quiver and horn, then put Lucy's dagger and cordial on his belt.

"My name is Salvia," said the bird.

"Well met." Peter wheeled toward the courtyard door.

The bird blocked his way. "Where are you going, sire?"

"The passage under the castle. King Edmund is gravely injured."

"There is a faster way," said Salvia.

"Show me."

The hawk sprang into the air, then lighted on a torch bracket beside another door further down in the courtyard. When Peter threw open the door, the hawk flew ahead of him and he ran after it.

Lower and lower they went into the depths of the castle. They passed a series of doorways, and then went through a rusting gate into the catacombs. The hawk led him past the body of the werewolf, and finally they reached Edmund. The hawk landed. Peter's heartbeat stumbled.

Edmund lay still on the earthen floor with his arm stretched out toward the body of a hag. The hilt of Peter's dagger protruded from the hag's chest. Neither the hag nor Edmund moved as Peter approached, fumbling with the cork to Lucy's cordial bottle. Shaking, Peter dropped Rhindon and Edmund's dagger, then approached his brother's body and sank to his knees. "Ed?"

Still no response. Dried blood had crusted on Ed's chin and stained the front of his tunic. Peter felt for a pulse, but the way his fingers shook, he couldn't tell if his brother were still alive. He forced open Ed's mouth and let a drop of cordial fall into it.

Still nothing. Peter's heart crashed against his ribs. He stuffed the cordial bottle back into its pouch and snatched Edmund's shirt. Terrified, he shook his brother. "Ed, damn it, don't you dare die. *Edmund!*"

A rattling, watery snarl sounded behind him. Peter turned where he crouched to find the hag had pulled Peter's dagger from her chest and surged toward him with it.

With a screech, the hawk launched itself at the hag. Peter watched in shock as the bird finished the job the dagger had started. The hag collapsed to the floor again, now truly dead.

Then he heard a cough. Behind him came Edmund's voice, hoarse and barely audible. "What did I tell you about dropping your weapons?"

Relief stampeded through Peter. Spinning back around, he found his brother struggling to sit upright. Peter helped him, smiling even though he shook with thankfulness. He grabbed Ed's sword from the floor and pressed it into his brother's hand. "What about not dropping yours?"

Ed wiped the dried blood from his chin. His gaze flicked toward the hawk, then swept the passage. Alarm filled his eyes. "Cori? Susan? Lucy?"

Peter helped Ed to his feet. "Next on my list. Can you fight?"

They traded daggers, so that each had his own again. Ed nodded. "I owe those Telmarines a little retribution."

Thwarted

When the Jinn led Susan and Lucy into the castle's great hall, Cori's relief was short-lived. "Take them to the dock and prepare for their transport to the Stone Table," said Elian. "And see that they do not leave your sight, Jinn Saris."

As the Jinn passed by, Lucy broke away toward Cori with a cry and wrapped her in a hug. "Cori! Are you all right?" When Cori didn't move or respond, Lucy frowned. "What's wrong?" she whispered.

Cori begged the youngest Pevensie with her eyes. *Please, please run! Leave this place! Escape from this evil man before he kills you and destroys everything that is left of goodness in this country!*

But Lucy merely frowned again. "Cori?"

"This way," hissed the Jinn, and Lucy was pulled away from her toward the great hall's soaring door.

Elian took Cori by the arm. "Shall we, my dear?"

As if I had a choice, she thought. Her insides felt hollow.

Elian brought her to the dock. Cori spied a flash of white among the trees in her peripheral vision, but Elian did not pause or lead her in that direction, so she couldn't look closer.

The thing that had ferried her over had returned. Elian lagged well behind Susan and Lucy. He and Cori stepped into the stern of the barge. As they drew away, Cori turned to see the sunset-gilded ruin of the castle growing smaller and smaller, glad to see the last of it no matter what happened next.

Then she saw the white flash again. Just before the barge turned to cross the lake, she realized she'd seen a unicorn.

- # -

"Now what? The damn castle's empty," Edmund growled. "Unless you want to go back to the catacombs and fight our way through some more of the Witch's leftover lackeys."

They stood over the body of Beltran, one of Cori's guard. Peter couldn't believe they'd simply left the man lying there at the end of the great hall...but then again, he would put nothing past the Telmarines now. He clenched his fist on Rhindon's hilt. "Let's get out of here," he said. "Wherever they've taken the women is where we go."

He and Edmund slipped outside to a brilliant sunset. Salvia flew ahead of them and landed on one of the pilings of the dock at the lake's edge. The *deserted* dock. Gnashing his teeth, Peter kicked the nearest piling. "How do we cross the lake without a boat? We can't

bloody well fly.” He nodded to Salvia. “At least, two of us can’t.”

The wind rose then, bringing with it a stream of leaves that swirled around Edmund. “Meleyen,” Edmund said with obvious relief.

The Narnian dryad paused, then took on a human shape. “Your Majesty. It is a great relief to see you well. Asha has been gravely ill, and we feared the worst for you.”

“I’m all right,” Ed said, “though I’d fare better with wings.”

“We need griffins—the strongest pair you can find, and as fast as you can send them to us,” Peter said. “Cori and the queens have been taken. We don’t know which way the Telmarines have gone, but—”

“I will follow them and report back to you, sire,” said Salvia. He sprang into the air and flapped away. Meleyen bowed to Ed and Peter and swirled away with him.

A crunch on gravel brought Peter and Edmund both around with their swords raised.

Onyx cantered toward them. “Your Highness! Thank Aslan you’re alive.”

“Yes, I’m all right. We need to get off this island,” Peter said.

“I can swim it, sire, but not carrying a rider.”

Peter ran a hand through his hair, staring fruitlessly at the opposite bank. Help was coming—he hoped—but not coming fast enough. He could swim it too, if it came to that, but he’d have no strength left for whatever came afterward. He cursed aloud and paced the dock.

“The griffins will come, Peter, and then we’ll catch them up,” Edmund said. “And the dryads and naiads have alerted others by now. The Telmarines can’t go anywhere in Narnia without someone to oppose them.”

Peter wheeled around, full of anguish. “I’m supposed to watch over them. Over all of you. You almost died, Ed.”

“I’ve almost died a number of times, and haven’t managed it yet. That stinking doppelganger isn’t going to be the reason I succeed.” Anger flared in Edmund’s eyes. Peter had told him of the damage his sinister double had done on his way through Narnia, using Ed’s face as his cover. “And as for Susan and Lucy...” Ed trailed off, and a hint of Peter’s own worry showed in his eyes. “They’re brave, Peter.”

Peter swallowed down the choking sensation in his throat. “And Cori?”

There was silence for a moment. Ed studied him. “You’re in love with her, aren’t you?”

Peter didn’t respond. Love of family, love of Narnia, love of Aslan—those things he knew to be fact. Could he have fallen in love with Cori in the scant time they’d had together?

He remembered the smile she gave him just before he kissed her in the wood beside the archery field. Every passing second without action made his chest hurt. What if he never saw her alive again?

29

March And Flight

Cori rode in the back of a supply wagon, between crates of food and casks of ale on a worn horse blanket. The wagon jostled along until her belly ached with nausea. There were no roads to lead them where they went. Roads, at least the way the Telmarines knew them, were nearly absent in Narnia. Cori thought Narnia's rugged wildness beautiful, though it was less so at the moment when her teeth almost chattered out of her head with the wagon's jarring motions.

This was Elian's notion of comfort. She should have expected no less. He thought himself kind when he was cruel, considerate when he was thoughtless. He hadn't allowed her free movement since her disastrous trip into the passage under the castle. She was riddled with the pain of the werewolf bite and the way her muscles screamed for motion her body couldn't provide. She didn't even have the comfort of the queens' company on this awful journey.

Thinking of Susan and Lucy only made Cori think of Edmund and Peter. Oh, Peter. Tears filled Cori's eyes. How could she have brought this upon Narnia? How could she have torn Peter's family asunder? *Father, I'm so sorry. You taught me better.* She pictured her father's face, drawn with disappointment. And her sister, who had always looked to her for guidance. What would she say to Ines now? Cori was no better than Elian for letting herself be swayed for one moment into betraying Peter's trust. *Look what I did with that trust.* She reached without thinking to wipe away the tears, and then started in amazement to find that her hand obeyed her.

Cori froze with her hand in midair. The hand of the bitten arm. Not only did it move, but the pain there lessened as she did so. Something inside her blazed to life, frightening in its strength, and beat against the walls of the spell holding her immobile. The pain in her body increased everywhere but in her bitten arm. She flexed her hand, and the relief of free movement brought her to fresh tears.

The werewolf. Its bite had infected her, and now the—*creature*—awakening inside her wanted out.

By the saints, I'll help it, she thought fiercely. She struggled against the bonds of the spell, but she couldn't move from the seated position Elian had put her in when she got into the wagon.

An eternity later, the wagon lurched to a stop. Cori made one last, desperate effort to get to her feet and found herself standing, staring breathlessly at the canvas doorflap at the back of the wagon.

The creature inside her growled, and she let it.

- # -

No sooner did the griffins arrive than Peter and Edmund took off with them. They sped through the air, following the trail of torn earth the Telmarines had left behind their wagons and horses. So much damage. How had such a force invaded Narnia? One big enough for war. Grimly, Peter flattened himself against his griffin's neck to allow him more speed.

The Telmarines had taken no pains to avoid detection, and why would they? They believed they had the last of Narnia's rulers in their possession. The Telmarines might already have murdered his sisters. Unable to help his bitterness, he thought, *Aslan, where are you? Why haven't you come? I'm begging you—protect them until I can get there.*

On their way past Beruna Ford, Salvia came streaking toward them through the sky. "Sire, they're at the Stone Table with the queens!" He struggled to keep up with Peter's griffin. "Oreius and Nalis and their soldiers are on the march."

The Stone Table. *Oh, no. Please, please, no.*

"Peter," Ed called, pointing. Far off was a moving sea of green, heading westward. "The dryads."

"Fly low and lead them," Peter called. Then he thought of the doppelganger who'd been using Ed's likeness on his destructive path through Narnia. "Wait! Don't. Stay out of sight." Ed shot him a mystified look, and Peter added, "The Telmarines think us dead. We may be able to use that to our advantage."

- # -

"Get out," said Jinn Saris.

Susan gave him a look as full of loathing as she could manage, but she stepped down from the wagon. Lucy stepped down beside her, silent, the only sign of her anxiety the pallor in her cheeks.

Lucy's faith in Aslan's will was unshakeable. Susan wished hers was so strong.

"This way," said the Jinn. He led them toward the Stone Table, where a crowd of Telmarines had already gathered, many wearing looks of disturbing eagerness.

Susan realized then what the Telmarines planned to do, and a shiver sped through her. She glanced at Lucy, but her younger sister must have come to the same conclusion. Lucy was even paler, and though she stood resolutely, she trembled.

An unwanted image of Lucy dying on the Stone Table flashed into Susan's mind, and she recoiled from it. Unable to keep the desperation out of her voice, she turned to the Jinn and whispered, "Take me, and I won't fight, but let my sister go if you have any pity at all."

The Jinn studied her so intently that Susan frowned with confusion. Then a surprising look of regret passed across his face—but when he spoke, his voice was as cool as ever. "How do you propose I let you go and remain alive, myself?"

Susan, who never begged for anything even before she was a queen, clasped her hands. "Please. Anything you ask will be yours."

Saris paused, and then drifted closer to her. "I want my freedom. How are you

going to assure me that?"

"Freedom," Susan repeated. From the corner of her eye she caught sight of the jeering soldiers gathered at the Stone Table. "We're not so different after all."

30
Mob

Peter, Edmund, and Salvia skirted the forest leading up to the Stone Table, making certain to stay out of sight of it. Salvia had already confirmed that Susan and Lucy were alive, but Cori was nowhere to be seen—a fact which lay like a lead ball in Peter’s belly.

They landed in the dryads’ path and discovered Amelan, Meleyen’s sister, leading them. “The centaurs are almost here, Your Majesties,” she said.

“Flank the Stone Table to the south,” Peter told her. “No one is to let on they know Edmund and I are alive.”

The dryads gave one another mystified looks, but Amelan bowed. “It will be as you say, Your Majesty.” And the dryads were off again.

Next, they flew to meet the centaurs. Oreius needed no reasoning behind Peter’s order to act as if the kings were dead. He trusted Peter implicitly (Peter was always grateful and humbled by that, for the centaur was decades older and certainly more experienced than he).

Edmund, on the other hand, had no issue with questioning his tactics. As they left the centaurs and flew over the forest again, Peter scanned the spaces between the trees for the signs of the Telmarines’ destructive march. “What are you doing?” Ed called to him. “We’re flying *away* from the Stone Table!”

Peter squinted through the trees. Torn earth. Oaks hacked to the ground. Wagon ruts.

There. Peter tapped his griffin’s shoulder. “Get us down!”

The griffin swooped. Ed followed. They dove in a sickening drop through what remained of the forest canopy, toward a manmade clearing that held the remains of a dozen dead campfires. Ash lay over everything.

Perfect.

- # -

“Obey him? For the rest of his life?” Susan gaped at Jinn Saris.

Saris nodded. “And I must protect Elian, no matter what. I cannot help you.”

Susan grabbed the Jinn by his wrists. The look of shock on his face almost stopped her, but she turned her back to the jeering Telmarines and gave the Jinn an urgent frown. “Struggle with me,” she whispered.

His sulfur-colored eyes bored into hers. He twisted her grip so that he had hold of her arms instead. “Did I not make myself clear?”

“There’s only one way to end your enslavement,” she hissed, “and that’s to cut his

life short.”

Only the Jinn’s eyes gave away his amazement. “I am bound to protect Elian,” he repeated.

“As I am to protect my family,” she said fiercely. “I will do what I must to spare Lucy. You either work with me, or—” She raised her voice. “—get your hands off me, you vile beast!”

Saris gave a snarl and dug his fingers into her arms, bruising her, but Susan bent into his frame and jammed an elbow into his belly. They fought; whether Saris had taken her at her word, she didn’t know, but he looked stunned when she snaked out of his grip using a move Peter had taught her. Before he could recover, she ran straight toward the Stone Table. “Lucy! Into the forest, quick! Find help!”

- # -

A Telmarine soldier drew back the flap to Cori’s wagon. Obviously one of Elian’s elite henchmen. His breastplate and helmet were gilded, and he moved with authority. “This way,” he ordered her.

She let the growl fizzle and die in her throat. The Telmarines were superstitious, and wary of all things Narnian—part of the reason, no doubt, that they’d had no complaints about rampaging through the country destroying homes and the lives of fauns, satyrs, talking animals, and Heaven knew what else. Cori didn’t want to add herself to the tally—at least until she figured out how to use the werewolf to escape and rescue the queens...if they were still alive.

Elian obviously hadn’t made this guard aware of the spell on Cori. He gave no indication of surprise when she let him take her arm and pull her down from the wagon.

Soldiers were shouting all around the clearing at which the wagons had stopped. The ground sloped up a gentle hill and stopped at a stone arch, through which she could see the broken remnants of a stone platform. Telmarines stood around it, shaking their fists in the air. A mob of them stood on top of the table, wrestling with something unseen.

Then Cori heard a woman’s voice, shouting angrily.

Susan.

Cori’s knees almost buckled in her relief. The werewolf snarled. Cori thrust the startled soldier holding her aside and ran for the platform. Telmarines heard the snarl and scattered left and right out of her way, only closing in again when she’d leaped onto the Stone Table.

Susan had her fists raised as if to throw punches, but when she saw Cori even she backed away. “What happened to you?” she asked in an awestruck, fearful voice.

“Werewolf bite.”

“Oh, Cori—”

“Right now, I would thank it if it were here,” Cori said. “Where is Lucy? Let’s get out of here while I have control of it.”

But the Telmarines moved toward them, some waving torches, others flinging handfuls of dirt and stones at the women. One even lobbed a shield that missed Cori by less than an arm’s length. It clattered face down at her feet. In its mirror-polished inner surface, Cori saw her reflection.

The Guardian - Caleon

Yellow eyes. Her dark hair streaked with silvery grey. And when she opened her mouth on a gasp, she saw in the torchlight a row of teeth even now growing sharp as daggers.
Oh, dear saints. What am I?

31

Identity Crisis

The sunset had dipped below the horizon, leaving only torchlight to cast a grisly glow on the mob scene gathered at the Stone Table. Cori shuddered. *My skin...burning.*

The Telmarines roared and surged toward Susan, leaving Cori a wide berth. Without thought, Cori plunged into the fast-closing gap and gave the werewolf full sway.

A deafening snarl erupted from her own throat. The Telmarines lunged back with looks of horror.

The moon rolled out from behind a cloud.

Cori's skin blazed. She chafed at the dress. The bone stays in her bodice jabbed into her, caging her in. Suffocating, she tore at the clothing only to find her nails long and sharp, shredding through the fabric. *Air! Air!* Frantic now, she clawed at the bodice trapping the breath out of her lungs.

Then everything happened at once.

The soldiers rushed toward her again. Cori's skin went from burning to a painful, searing heat the likes of which she'd never endured in her worst fever. She heard something rip and the suffocating fabric fell away. With a full-bellied snarl, she launched herself at the soldiers. They fell back like leaves in a whirlwind, shouting with terror. Cori swung in a circle around Susan, driving the mob back from the broken platform on which they stood.

For a moment, there was awful silence. Susan's mouth made a round, soundless O, and Cori, scared now, looked down at herself.

Instead of skin, she saw pale grey fur all over her body. Her hands and feet were large, clawed, hideously frightening. Her legs were longer, her torso broader. Oh, saints alive, a tail.

Nothing in the books she'd read had prepared her for this unrecognizable monster that had taken over her body. She felt for her face and found a long, toothy snout. She dared a glance at Susan, who had struck a pose of uncertain guardedness. *Help*, Cori tried to say, but it came out as a fearful lupine whimper. She couldn't make this new mouth form words.

"What's the matter here?" shouted a voice. Elian burst through the crowd. When he saw Cori, his mouth dropped open. "Cori... How...?" The soldiers around him jostled forward again, bumping him, and he seem to come back to himself. He looked at Cori as if she'd somehow betrayed him. His expression went stormy and he raised an accusing finger at Susan. "Leave the werewolf. Kill the queen!"

Shouting again, the Telmarines poured onto the platform from all sides. With a roar of fear and anger, Cori leaped in front of Susan and struck at anything that came near them. Her new body was clumsy but shockingly strong. Soldiers fell back several meters from one

blow. The looks of terror on their faces when they saw her echoed Cori's own horror at her change. They tried to attack Susan at every turn, but Cori drove them away. Susan managed to wrest a pike from one of the men and stood at Cori's back, fending off the soldiers on their other side.

Shaking, Cori saw dozens more Telmarines running from the wagons parked around the Stone Table. The new arrivals gave a bloodthirsty yell. How long could she keep this up? How long would this creature sustain her? *Father, I'm scared. What do I do?*

Cori thought of Aslan, the Lion, king over all Narnia, over Peter and Edmund and Lucy and Susan. *Help us*, she begged him. *Please help us*. Would he even listen to her, a savage hideous monster who wasn't even Narnian?

She saw something flying toward them, silhouetted by the moon—a hawk, she thought, but she couldn't be sure because the Telmarines began rushing them again. Cori swiped at the nearest one, and reeled with shock at her own actions when the man fell back bleeding from a huge gash in his cheek.

Another growl erupted over the noise of shouting Telmarines—not her own. Cori looked again and found Leina racing toward them from the woods. Behind the wolf came a pair of horses—Edmund's companion Barton and her own Cayo. And behind them, a brace of dwarves dressed for battle.

Cori almost burst into tears with relief. Help was coming. Help was coming.

Something slashed along her arm and she roared in pain. The Telmarine who had struck her looked terrified when she turned on him, but she had no time to react. Elian grabbed the man by the throat with one hand and stabbed him in the belly with his sword. He held out his hand to Cori, looking like he thought he'd just saved her life. "Come to me, Cori! I'll get you out of here!"

Every moment spent at his mercy flooded Cori's mind. The werewolf inside her reared up in gleeful fury, and Cori snarled in his face. Driven by instinct, she sprang at him, remembering too late that she'd been guarding Susan. Soldiers poured into the gap she left, and Cori rounded back to stop them.

But Elian had recovered from his shock now. Whatever delusion had held him back from harming her snapped. He raised his sword to strike and she had nothing to block it but her own body.

A shriek tore the air. Another followed it. Elian stopped in mid-swing and searched for the source of the sound.

Telmarines began screaming in terror. Cori looked to the hill past the mob and found a pair of specter-pale griffins landing on the lawn. Two men leaped from their backs with battle cries of their own, stark-white in the moonlight from head to foot. They charged straight into the mob and the Telmarines scattered in fear. "Ghosts! Run for your life!" shrieked one of the younger soldiers.

He could not have created a bigger panic had he started a wildfire in their midst. Even Cori's blood ran cold. Her skin prickled and she realized every hair of her silver fur stood on end.

Elian's furious shout brought her attention back to him. No time to look, no time for anything but the deadly wrath in his eyes. He swung his sword again, and for the first time in her life, Cori realized what it meant to face death.

32

A Two-Way Shock

Peter attacked with as much speed as he could summon. The smell of woodsmoke was pungent in his nose. He, Ed, and the griffins had rolled in the remains of the campfires to cover themselves in white ash. If the superstitious Telmarines meant to take Narnia, they'd have to deal with the "ghosts" they thought Peter and Edmund to be.

Peter knew the camouflage would only spread fear as long as he didn't let the invaders stop to look too closely. Once the ruse was discovered—or the Telmarines landed a blow and found their "ghosts" bleeding—the advantage would be ruined. *Ed, if you were ever fast before, you'd better double it now*, Peter thought.

He slashed at any soldier foolish enough to remain in his way. One look at Peter's face was sufficient to send the Telmarines shrinking back in terror. He gave a full-throated roar to add weight to the scare and plunged toward a pair of the invaders. One hurried out of his way. The other took Rhindon in the throat. The soldier choked and fell, opening a hole to get to Susan. Peter charged ahead.

Edmund advanced beside him, step-dodge-step, countering attacks from the soldiers who stood in their way. They fought through the mob shoulder to shoulder. Peter anticipated his brother's tactics and guarded him in turn. In the thick of the mob, Telmarines surrounded them again for another rally. Back to back, Peter and Edmund gave another battle cry that rang in the air. No words, nothing for the Telmarines to identify as human—just howls of fury that made the soldiers closest to them cower.

The griffins shot through the air overhead and descended on a company of soldiers. Peter heard a familiar shout—Susan—and surged toward the Stone Table after her.

- # -

Elian's sword flashed toward Cori. Her mind went blank with panic. Without thought, without planning it, she dodged. He swung again and she dodged it again, startled at the detached efficiency with which she sidestepped the strike.

Her swordfighting training. Peter and Edmund had drilled the footwork into her so well that now it came by instinct.

Only now, she had claws instead of a rapier. Cori snarled at him and swiped. Her claws raked across Elian's mail shirt. Elian whirled and jabbed behind her instead, just missing Susan, who was busy with a pair of soldiers who'd leaped onto the Stone Table. Cori sprang at him, growling again. Elian drove forward with more speed, *flash-flash-flash*, so that Cori could hardly keep up with him. He feinted to one side and she was too late to realize the bluff. The sword point came right at her abdomen.

Clang. Susan's pike shot between them and blocked Elian's blow. Cori looked at her, and Susan must have read the fear and confusion in her eyes. "You're still my friend, Cori," Susan said fiercely.

Gratitude warred with pain, and lost. How much longer would Susan remain her friend when the queen discovered Cori might be the reason her brothers were dead?

- # -

A howl pierced the air. Peter saw Leina running toward them at full speed. "Edmund!" she cried when she neared them. Her normally sarcastic face was bright with glee.

Ed shot her a look that must have meant *shut up*, because the wolf turned to the nearest Telmarine and ripped him apart instead of speaking further. Salvia soared downward and tore the facemask off a captain, and Peter went for the man's now-vulnerable throat.

Susan shouted again, and Peter heard another snarl—not Leina—but he could see nothing in the chaos around them. He started to look, to see if the creature might be fighting for the Telmarines, but a soldier flew backward toward him, shouting in horror. The man whirled to find Peter standing there and without waiting, Peter cut him down. *Susan, Susan—oh Aslan, where's Lucy? Where's Cori?*

The dwarves were fighting at the bottom of the hill, and surely the dryads and centaurs were on the way, but reinforcements would be useless if Lucy and Susan were killed. Just as Peter began to worry that the crush of Telmarines would never end, a snarl sounded above the shouts and the press of men gave way. Peter wasted no time. *Slash-slash*, Rhindon sliced through the invaders. Edmund wedged himself into the gap beside him, backing toward the Stone Table, cutting a path toward their sister. He shot Peter an urgent look from the corner of his eye. *Go!*

Peter whirled around and leaped up the steps onto the Stone Table. He glimpsed Susan's long, dark hair and rushed toward the image as if it were a battle pennant.

"Get it, get it! Use the ropes!" shouted a soldier.

"Leave her!" yelled another voice. "She's mine!"

A growl cut through the noise and suddenly the mob gave way. Soldiers rushed aside when they saw him. Through the thinning crowd, Peter spied Susan.

Then he saw the werewolf beside her. The creature rounded toward Susan's turned back with its teeth gleaming. "Susan, look out!" Peter shouted. His cry drowned in the bedlam and Peter tensed to fly toward his sister.

But the werewolf smashed its clawed hand into a Telmarine who'd been about to attack Susan. The man reeled back and fell. The Telmarines closed in again.

No! Susan! With renewed fury, Peter drove forward. Telmarines fell before Rhindon's onslaught. Edmund appeared beside him again. With a wild roar, Peter pressed his advantage on every last shred of the Telmarines' superstition, glad after all that no one had heard him speak. Soldiers fled before them. Few withstood their tandem attack.

"Enough!" screamed a voice that rang out into the sky.

Everything stopped, even Peter. Salvia alone moved, landing on the stone arch. His

eyes gleamed in the torchlight. The crowd parted to reveal one of the knights who'd escorted Cori to Cair Paravel.

Elian.

Peter bared his teeth. He must have looked fierce indeed, because the Telmarines drew back around him, leaving only him and Edmund standing on the broken Table. Among the crowd, Peter saw Susan held by two of the Telmarine soldiers. A muffled howl echoed through the air and was cut short.

"Ghosts," Elian jeered. "How very clever." He raised his voice. "You cowardly fools. They're no more ghosts than the queen—a fact which will shortly be remedied on all counts."

Peter felt a dull, hot ache in his leg then and looked down to find his thigh bleeding profusely. He risked a glance at Edmund to find that sweat had washed the ash from his forehead and face. *At least the hoax got us this far.* "Come and see how real I am!" he called, raising his sword again.

"Ah-ah-ah. I have something—some *things*—I'm sure you wouldn't want damaged. Yet," Elian said.

A howl sounded again. Peter saw the werewolf, its silver fur shining in the moonlight and torchlight, racing back up the hill toward Susan and her captors. Behind the werewolf came a Jinn.

Elian glanced toward the creature. Peter took advantage of the distraction. With little more than a warning glance at Edmund, Peter sprang at Elian. Elian parried his strike at the last instant, and they fought with blind fury, *clash-clash-screech*, each trying to overpower the other.

The werewolf growled close by. Peter had no time to spare to see what it was doing, whose side it was on. Elian drew all his attention, too fast, too strong to let him spare an instant for anything else.

Edmund leaped in at his side and together they pushed Elian back. Sweating in the torchlight, Elian ducked and dodged and panted. Edmund put enough pressure on the man to keep him on the defensive and other soldiers too far away to help, but it was clear he knew it was Peter's right to fight the man. "Are you so certain you want to kill me?" Elian cried. "What about my lady Corisande?"

"Mine," Peter snarled. He lunged and sliced Elian across the forearm.

Elian gave a wild-eyed grin, seeming oblivious to the bloody wound. "You may not want her."

Then there was too much noise, too much confusion to think further. The shouting rang in Peter's ears.

Edmund grunted and spun away to face a trio of Telmarines. The werewolf gave another howl. Peter watched it pounce on Susan's captors and fling them away like ragdolls. The creature raced around the Stone Table, dealing furious blows to the soldiers gathered there.

Edmund's adversaries closed in. Peter tore his gaze away from the werewolf to fight them. And Elian started laughing.

Still the werewolf rushed around the Table. A soldier down. Another. Another. It rounded the Table toward Elian, closing fast.

"Saris! I said *hold her!*" Elian roared.

The Jinn appeared out of nowhere and threw his muscular arms around the werewolf from behind. The creature roared with thwarted fury as it fought to free itself, but it could not move.

Then its gaze met Peter's. And it froze. Less than a sword-length away, Peter stared at it, open-mouthed with confusion at the look of shock and pain on the creature's face, and the tears in its eyes.

"Say hello," Elian taunted. "You remember Cori, don't you?"

33

King's Gambit

Cori stared at Peter, waiting for him to vanish again. For one fearful second she'd thought he was a ghost, but she smelled his blood, and under that, a warm, almost spicy scent that she knew was his own. *He's real—oh, saints, he's alive. And he sees me like this.*

"A bit of a change, don't you think?" Elian sneered. "It's almost poetic. She was always such a lady...and now look at her."

Peter *was* looking. He had been looking without interruption since his gaze landed on her.

"You almost deserve each other," Elian went on. "You, the king of this country of freaks, and she the worst of them all, and a backstabbing schemer to boot. Do you know she tried to betray you?"

Oh, no. Cori made a move to stop Elian from speaking, but the Jinn's grip held fast. Peter's attention snapped to Elian now.

"Oh, yes," Elian added. He smiled. "She told me of your weaknesses and your petty jealousy of your brother." He flicked his hand toward the Stone Table.

Cori followed his gesture and found Peter's brother holding a pair of soldiers at bay. *Edmund's alive too?* Hope began filling the hollow spaces inside her.

But Elian merely pointed back at Peter with his sword. "When that didn't work, it seemed I'd have to make do with killing your sisters. Not bad for an alternate plan, I suppose. Time I began to carry it out. *Attack!*"

The melee began again. Peter and Edmund were swallowed by a new wave of Telmarines. Cori saw Susan rushing toward the kings just before Saris dragged her away toward the wagons again. She struggled furiously.

"It's no use," Saris said. "I'm bound to follow his orders."

She snarled and tried to make her voice work. The werewolf's unfamiliar teeth and tongue wouldn't shape the curses she wanted to shower on the Jinn. She couldn't even reach to claw him. She settled for a roar of frustration.

"Leina!" shouted Susan over the crowd. "Attack Elian, now!"

The Jinn's grip went slack and he rushed back to the Stone Table. Of course. *Protect me at all costs*, Elian had said. Even if that meant letting Cori loose.

Freed, she galloped back to the Stone Table and tore apart anything that remotely looked Telmarine. One of the soldiers slashed across her shoulder with his ax. She paused just long enough to bash him in the face with her claws. He fell and she charged on. She didn't care now what happened to her. She'd undo the damage she'd done, or die trying. Nothing else mattered, not as long as Narnia's kings and queens lived. Not even the place in Heaven that she'd abandoned when she gave way to the evil monster she'd become. Peter

was alive. Alive. Alive. The word pounded through her blood.

She leaped over a brace of soldiers. Peter and Leina were fighting Elian. At Peter's back were Edmund and Susan, warding off another company of soldiers. Even with the Narnian reinforcements, it seemed they would be overrun. Cori snarled and charged straight for Elian. *This ends now!*

- # -

Gasping for air, Peter dodged Elian's strike. Leina kept the man busy, but only just. Peter had no time to drink from Lucy's cordial bottle to stop the wound in his leg from bleeding out. Round and round they went, Elian keeping him always on the move, barely allowing him a moment to rest. Salvia soared down from his perch and harried Elian from above, but an arrow zinged through the air and the hawk was forced to fall back.

Elian surged forward across the Stone Table. Peter sidestepped and tripped on the Table's broken surface, slamming onto his back. Elian's sword drove downward. The point rammed through Peter's shoulder above his pauldron. White-hot pain flooded his senses and he screamed. He thrust Rhindon upward and missed.

Cori—the werewolf—lunged into view and smashed Elian broadside. The man fell back with the werewolf slashing at his armor and roaring in his face. Peter staggered to his feet again, unable to lift Rhindon with the agony in his shoulder. He couldn't even move the arm to get to Lucy's cordial. The world tumbled over.

The Jinn sprang at Leina and the wolf turned aside from her attack to face him. Elian barked an order and a wall of soldiers surrounded him, cutting off Peter's view. The werewolf howled, a cry of pain that went straight through him. He forced himself to focus. Susan was surrounded and Edmund nearly so. Lucy was still missing. There was no way through the soldiers, not with his arm like this. *Think, think!*

Firelight swirled across the Table, across the men and Narnians fighting there, across the stone arch beside Elian's guards. The werewolf howled again. *They're killing her.* "Ed!" Peter called.

Edmund fought his way forward. Blood dripped down one side of his face. With a ferocious growl, Edmund swung his sword and cut a path clear, then rushed to him.

"Kneel!" Peter shouted.

Ed dropped to one knee at once.

Peter tossed Rhindon into the air and leaped. One foot landed on Ed's shoulder. Ed shot up, launching him skyward. Peter jammed his other foot against the stone arch and soared over the wall of soldiers guarding Elian. Left-handed, Peter reached for Rhindon as it fell. The moment his fingers closed over the hilt, he turned the sword in the air. For one split second, he saw the amazement and terror on Elian's face before the sword drove home through the man's belly.

The soldiers swung to face him, all of them, ten or fifteen, armed with sword and shield. No way could he defeat them. Peter looked death in the eye and gritted his teeth.

At that instant, a great roar sounded across the hill and a savage hope filled Peter's chest.

Aslan.

34
Untrue

Through a painful haze, Cori heard the Lion roar. Men scattered and she glimpsed blurry starlight overhead. She lay on the ground, struggling for breath. Elian had driven a sword right through her ribcage into her lung. The agony was horrifying and she longed for death. She opened her mouth on a whimper and tasted blood. *Hurry, hurry*, she begged the darkness waiting to swallow her.

The clash of swords sounded far away now. From the corner of her eye she caught a flash of dark hair and dusty blue. Edmund, holding off the last of the soldiers nearby. Then Susan. *Goodbye*, Cori thought. *I'm so sorry*.

A warm hand slid behind her head. Through the metallic blood-scent, Cori smelled spice. "Drink. Please, Cori, drink it." Peter's voice, breaking with hoarseness and a fear that echoed in her bones. She opened her mouth and something hot dripped onto her tongue—something that tasted of sunshine and cloves.

The pain went away. Cori blinked. *Am I dead?* She closed her eyes against the whirling in her head.

An eternity went by. Then she heard a deeper voice, one that raised every hair of the werewolf's hide in terror and awe. Aslan. She knew without looking. The Lion smelled of something wonderful and undefinable, frightening and beautiful at the same time.

Peter's hand slipped out from behind her head. Something soft replaced it and she sensed him standing up. *Now, leave now*. She opened her eyes and struggled into a crouch.

No one was looking at her. The Narnians were recovering from the battle. The last of the Telmarines were surrendering. Peter, Susan, and Edmund knelt before the great Lion. Lucy stood beside Aslan, beaming, with her hand on his mane. Cori envied the young woman the freedom to touch him with a pain she'd never felt before. With a silent whine, she slunk away.

No one paid her any attention now. They were too busy getting on with life, and all Cori wanted was to die. Resentment filled every corner of her unfamiliar body. *Why did he make me better? Why? Why?* She stuck to the shadows at the bottom of the hill.

"My lady?" called a soft male voice, one she didn't recognize.

She paused. The werewolf's eyes made it easy to see in the darkness, and she made out the shape of a horse. The creature stepped into a beam of moonlight, and Cori's mouth fell open.

Cayo.

The horse must have seen the shock on her face, because he snorted. "The Lion granted me speech, my lady."

I'm not a lady, not a lady. Look at me! A howl built in her throat but she choked it off.

“I came to see if you’re all right,” Cayo said.

How could she be? How would anything ever be all right again? She was a betrayer and a monster. She shook her head furiously and sprinted away into the forest.

Trees flashed past her in a wild blur. She turned north and galloped as fast as she could. Ettinsmoor was full of monsters—giants and hags and boggles—and werewolves. She no longer belonged in the world of men, nor could she exist in the world of the good creatures of Narnia.

She hadn’t known werewolves could cry.

“Cori! Cori!”

Peter’s voice. Cori ran faster, leaping over tree roots and hollows. *Away, away*, her muscles cried. *Away, away*, the wind seemed to whisper.

“Damn it, Cori, stop!” Peter shouted.

She flew on, on, on. Then the ground dropped out from under her.

Cori tumbled down a steep bank and landed with a thud in dead leaves. The wind rushed out of her and she sprawled on her face, gasping out the tears opening a hole inside her. She squeezed her eyes shut. *Monster. Traitor. Faithless.*

The sound of galloping hooves neared the gully where she lay. She glanced up. Through her tears she saw the blurred image of Onyx. Peter leaped off the unicorn’s back. He’d picked up a cloak somewhere—it billowed out with the motion. He half-ran, half-slid down the bank to the bottom. He unbuckled the cloak, then swung it off his back and over her. The cloth settled on her and she realized she could feel it clearly—nothing blocked it from her skin.

Her skin. She raised her head and stared at her hand. A hand. Not claws. Oh, saints, she was naked, naked—as if there weren’t enough humiliation. She hid her face in her arms and the tears started afresh.

“Are you hurt?” Peter asked.

Hurt? *Hurt?* She, hurt? She, who’d tried to sell the only friends she’d ever had to that devil Elian? “Go away,” she whispered. Her voice, now that she had one, didn’t even seem the same.

Instead of obliging her, Peter gathered her into his arms. She struggled, but he didn’t seem to notice and she had no strength left to push him away. She avoided his gaze.

Peter folded the cloak carefully around her. “Onyx,” he called.

The unicorn walked down the embankment as easily as if it were level ground. He knelt at the bottom of the gully. Peter sat on his back and pulled Cori up in front of him. The unicorn stood and climbed the bank again.

“It will be all right,” Peter said softly. “Aslan wants to see you.”

She closed her eyes and huddled into the cloak as if she could disappear. *It will never be all right again.*

35

Uncertain Ground

Peter had never questioned Aslan...until now.

Cori huddled in the long cloak all the way back to the Stone Table. He felt her shaking when they arrived. The cloth covered her from neck to foot, but her eyes were wide and glassy as if he'd announced an intent to stand her in front of an execution squad. Torn with worry, he stared at her and tried not to make it look obvious.

When they slid from Onyx's back, she held her head up and marched toward the Lion with a resolve that somehow bothered him. She didn't bow, didn't kneel. Peter got the impression that she was daring the Lion, maybe trying to goad him into attacking her. That she wanted it.

"Corisande of Tolyndar," the Lion said. His face remained serene. "We have more in common than you think."

Cori's mouth dropped open. Clearly, of anything the Lion could have said, she hadn't expected this.

"I, too, have made difficult choices to protect those I love," said Aslan. "Your father and sister are safe. As are Narnia's kings and queens, thanks to your help."

Cori frowned. She drew a breath on what looked like an objection, but Aslan growled. Cori paled and remained silent.

"You have friends here," Aslan said. "One among them knows well what it means to regret his decisions." The Lion nodded toward Edmund, who ducked his head in acknowledgement. "And another—" This time, the Lion's gaze fell on Peter, "—understands the difficulty of defending his family."

The Lion stepped closer to her. "What has been done to you cannot be undone. A werewolf you are, and a werewolf you will remain until the end of your days." He stood face to face with her, and it almost seemed as if the Lion was daring her back. "Nothing that lives and breathes is good or evil because of what it is. Your choices define you...and they can redefine you."

A shudder went through her. Cori bore the Lion's stare until he turned away. Aslan looked at Peter. "King Oro is dead." A murmur went through the Narnians gathered nearby, but Aslan went on. "The new king is anxious to talk of treaties. By next spring, expect ambassadors from Caspian the First."

And that was it. Aslan bade them farewell and walked away into the forest. Peter glanced at Edmund, Susan, Lucy...and then Corisande, who was weeping silently.

“You could have avoided all your angst by coming to me, fool,” Leina said with a sarcastic sneer. “Don’t you humans ever think?”

Cori plucked a flower from the grass beside the blanket where they sat. Susan and Edmund were sparring on the archery field, but Cori hadn’t been watching. “Human,” she murmured. “Am I still human?”

“An unfortunate but intermittent problem,” said the wolf. “I can teach you to talk. We have more or less the same mouth structure when you’re...better-looking.”

Cori’s mouth curled upward. Even smiles seemed foreign lately.

“Am I interrupting?” Peter strode toward them with a basket in his hand.

“Nose out, Your Majesty,” the wolf grumbled. She stood and shook so hard her ears flapped. “I’d better see about helping Edmund. He’s about to get—”

“Ouch! Susan!” Edmund cried.

The wolf’s tongue lolled. “How does he ever win anything?” She trotted away.

Peter sat down. He didn’t speak, simply set the basket down between them. Cori looked inside. Apples.

For a while, she closed her eyes and listened to the wind in the trees. Then a female voice cried, “Edmund!”

Cori opened her eyes again to find Asha racing across the archery field toward the younger king. Ed flung his quarterstaff down and caught his wife up, swinging her around. Their laughter floated across the field and they covered each other with kisses. They didn’t seem to care at all that anyone watched them.

She stole a look at Peter to find him observing his brother and Asha with a strange expression. “She returned just now,” he said. “I don’t see how they spent that long without each other.” His gaze turned to Cori then, blue as the sea and twice as inscrutable. “I don’t see how I could.”

“They seem very happy,” Cori murmured. She took an apple from the basket, more because she needed the distraction than because she was hungry.

Peter put a hand over hers. “I’ve been trying since you got here for the summer, and I guess I’ve been doing a bad job of it...” His fingers tightened briefly on her immobile hand, then loosened again. “There’s nothing for it but to be honest. King Oro and I had agreed that I’d court you this summer, and eventually marry you in Ed’s place. A way to unite our countries without bloodshed. He lied, of course. He wanted Narnia—but it was a good idea.” He studied their linked hands.

The bottom dropped out of Cori’s stomach. Her hand twitched convulsively under his, and the apple rolled onto the blanket.

“The new king hasn’t said anything, but it’s possible that he has the same thought. I don’t want it to be a political contract. I want you to want it.” Peter’s gaze met hers again. “Will you marry me, Corisande?”

Tears filled her eyes. His image blurred. She blinked and felt a tear roll down her cheek. “No.”

He looked like she’d stabbed him in the gut. The hurt in his eyes twisted her on her already-strangling rope of guilt. “You won’t even think about it?” he asked.

She closed her eyes for a moment and took a long breath. “I need to go home, Peter. I need to see my family, my people. I need to know if I can be—*this*—before I marry anyone.

If I marry anyone. Especially you, after what I did.” Opening her eyes again, she stared at the fallen apple. “I did the wrong thing for the right reasons, but it was still wrong.”

Peter’s expression darkened into bitterness. “Did you hear anything Aslan said to you that night?”

“There is a difference between being told something, and knowing it for yourself,” Cori said. She let some of his bitterness echo in her own voice. “I knew...*nothing*...before I came here. Nothing beyond my province. Now, everything I know is...confused.”

His hand tightened on hers again. “Your country doesn’t understand magic. They’re afraid of it. Cori, what if they hurt you?”

“My actions will have to speak for what I am,” she said. She smiled sadly. “Maybe they will fear magic less if someone is there to help them understand it.”

“Cori!” Asha called. The dryad rushed to them, grinning.

Cori struggled for a smile and rose to her feet. She felt Peter’s gaze on her as Asha ran to hug her. She could almost feel the hurt radiating from him, and she was sorry for it. But Aslan was right, and there was difficult work ahead.

36

Redefinition

Spring 1018

Edmund peered over the castle battlements with a telescope. “Is that Jinn Saris?” he asked with alarm in his voice.

“Easy, brother,” Peter said. “He’s visiting from Calormen on an errand regarding magic lore. At least that’s what he says.” Peter watched the Jinn bow to Susan, far below on the green before the castle gates.

Edmund watched them too. “I don’t like it.”

“Of course you don’t.”

“Six months ago, he wanted to kill us,” Ed argued.

“Six months ago, he might have.” Peter stared down at the Jinn. He believed in second chances—for others.

Thunder pealed overhead, and the slate-grey sky gave way to fat drops of rain.

A procession of mounted soldiers appeared on the path below. Their armor gleamed even in the moody light. “The embassy from Telmar is here,” Peter said. He tried to avoid the face that popped into his memory whenever he thought of Telmar, but it was no use.

As he always did when he thought of her, he turned his mind to business. He looked to Salvia, who perched on the battlements beside them. “Fly down and tell them we’re on our way.”

The hawk took off. Peter and Edmund left the battlements and made their way down to the castle green.

The soldiers approached. Finally they stopped on the road leading up to the gate. The man in front bowed. “Your Majesty has been expecting us. King Caspian the First sends his greetings, and to them we add our own.”

“Your company is welcome,” Peter said. “Come in out of the rain.”

The procession followed Peter and Edmund into the castle courtyard. The soldiers dismounted from their horses and followed through the inner gate.

At last, they reached the great hall. Peter, Edmund, Susan, and Lucy took their places on their thrones. Peter saw Jinn Saris lingering at the end of the hall, well out of the way but watching everything—if not precisely effusively, at least without incident.

Wine and food were ordered for the arrivals. “Narnia greets Telmar with warmth and great hopes for friendship,” Peter said to the man who had spoken to him outside. He introduced himself and his siblings. “We beg the pleasure of the name of King Caspian’s emissary.”

Instead of speaking, however, the man bowed aside. The soldiers parted. Puzzled,

Peter watched the last soldier stride forward, a slight figure in a loose mail shirt and masked helmet, who could hardly have been more than a boy. The figure lifted off the helmet.

“Corisande of Tolyndar, Your Majesty. Captain of the Tolyndar guard and sometime advisor to His Highness, King Caspian the First.” She gave Peter and his siblings a bow. “I believe we’ve met.”

All the air rushed out of Peter’s lungs as if he’d been gut-punched.

- # -

Cori had been terrified or nervous or insecure, or some combination of all three, any other time she’d been inside Cair Paravel. Now she was surprised and pleased that, instead of feeling the enormous castle had swallowed her, she stood confidently before the thrones.

The only jarring note was that unsettling look on Peter’s face.

What had she expected? That after six months of no contact at all, he’d welcome her back with open arms? He must feel she’d trodden on his proposal with—well, with bared claws.

The isolation hadn’t been voluntary. Not entirely, anyway. The werewolf proved more powerful than she’d expected, its instincts wilder. For the first three months, she’d had all she could do to control it. She made many days-long forays into the mountains of Tolyndar, far away from anyone who could be harmed while she learned to master the beast. Without any other werewolves to turn to for advice (for she was the only one she’d ever known to side with good folk), she had only Leina’s instruction in wolves’ behavior to guide her.

The people of Telmar reacted with the expected fear and revulsion, a crucible of scathing ridicule and persecution that nearly drove her to run wild. Even her sister had not accepted her—at first. But when a highwayman attacked Ines, Cori’s werewolf side had taken over and she’d saved her sister’s life.

From there, she’d gone on to guarding Tolyndar’s people from such brigands with a will. Word of her deeds spread to King Caspian, who came to rely on her talent for swift, silent scouting and defense of his borders. And if anyone questioned the king’s trust in her, they were ever since silent on the matter.

She was respected now, more by the soldiers of Telmar than among the ladies of its manor houses. Ines saw to Tolyndar’s needs now that their father had passed away—better suited, perhaps, since Cori’s younger sister had grown into every bit the marchioness Cori had once been.

Some part of Cori regretted the brocade-and-lace creature of elegance that she’d left in her past. She wasn’t, and would never be, the woman who’d come to Cair Paravel all that time ago. Did Peter regret that lost lady as well?

She held his gaze, then remembered that wolves considered such an action a challenge. She dropped her gaze to the floor before his throne, not wanting him to think she’d come bearing any sort of aggression. Did he see the animal inside her when he looked at her? Was he as repulsed by the thought now as she had been then?

It was not Peter, but Susan that responded to her greeting. She rose from her throne and approached Cori, taking both her hands. “Welcome back,” Susan said with a smile. She kissed Cori’s cheeks. “You’ve been well overdue.”

Lucy came to her, and then Edmund, each giving her the same kiss Susan had bestowed on her. Both greeted her warmly, and something in Cori's heart thawed at the smiles on their faces.

Then Peter rose and approached her. Something flashed through his eyes, too quick to gauge. A line appeared between his brows. His lips firmed on a word and then he appeared to change his mind. "Captain," he said at last, his voice hoarse. "Welcome back to Narnia."

37

Doubt Me Not

Cori paced through the apple grove at Cayo's side, barefoot to her knees because she'd rolled up her loose breeches and removed her boots. The wolf in her liked the feel of real earth under her feet instead of bulky leather soles. The damp grass threaded between her toes, springy and pleasant. "Was it a mistake to come?" she asked the horse. "Caspian could have sent anyone."

"But he sent you," Cayo said. "You know as well as he that you are the best liaison to Narnia that Telmar could hope to have. You understand magic better than any of the diplomats of the court."

"I don't know everything," she said, not meeting the horse's eye, "and Narnia is more than its magic."

The welcome luncheon had been almost as awkward as the meals Cori remembered on her arrival last summer. Then, she'd been torn between misplaced infatuation with Edmund and a naive confusion at the way Peter watched her.

He was no less confusing now. She'd felt his silent gaze on her from the first course all the way through the last. But now, she bore his stare with the same stoicism that had gotten her through her first months back in Telmar.

"You missed Narnia," Cayo said.

Instead of answering, Cori plucked an apple from a nearby tree and polished it with a kerchief. Eyes on the fruit, she almost didn't see Peter until she was right on top of him. She pulled up short and bowed. "Good afternoon, Your Majesty."

"Excuse us?" Peter said to Cayo.

The stallion nodded and walked away.

Peter stared at her. "Have you read the treaty document Caspian sent to me?"

"It was sealed," she said, holding the stare. Finally she lowered her gaze to the apple and resumed polishing it with slow deliberation.

"He's asked me to consider marrying within your house," Peter said. Cori kept her attention on the fruit. Peter's hand came down on hers and stilled her motions. "But to your sister."

The apple dropped from her hand, but he caught it. That undefinable look passed through his eyes again. His gaze shifted to her armor. A brief, small smile passed over his lips and disappeared. He touched the links on the short sleeve of her mail shirt and drew his hand away as if he thought the contact unwelcome. "It doesn't fit you."

She tucked the kerchief away in a pouch, still stinging with the news of Caspian's proposed treaty. "It fits the werewolf."

His gaze roamed over the rest of her armor—shirt and pauldrons and belt and

breeches—and flew skyward the instant it fell on her bare legs. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

She couldn't keep the tremor from her voice. "I'm sorry to have offended you, Your Majesty, but I've been stabbed once and I don't intend it to happen again." She started to turn away.

An iron grip closed over her arm. She looked back.

He'd opened his eyes, but hadn't lowered his gaze from the cloudy sky overhead. "It's not the armor, Cori."

His grip remained on her arm, and the werewolf inside her gave a faint, threatened growl. "Let go, Your Majesty."

Now he looked at her—bright-blue eyes glaring into her own. "Peter."

"I said *let go*." She pulled her arm away. The memory of every disgusted Telmarine came rushing back to her. The thought that he might share that opinion now slammed through her like the sword-strike that had once nearly killed her. "You needn't force yourself to speak familiar to me," she said. "I am fully aware of your reaction to me when I arrived this morning. You could barely speak to me at all." Her voice shook. "I know what I am, and I don't expect—"

He dropped the apple and grabbed her wrists again, prompting a snarl to bubble in her throat. "And what are you, exactly?" he demanded.

She let go of the mental chain she kept on the beast and transformed, filling out the shirt and rolled-up breeches. Taller now, she met him eye to eye. His mouth fell open, but didn't pull his hands away from her silver-furred arms. She growled in his face. "I'm *this*."

Instead of dropping her arms, he jerked her closer. His eyes blazed. "Do you think you're going to scare me?"

She flattened her ears and growled louder.

"Is that what you were doing for six months? Trying to scare me away? Damn it, Cori, I wanted you before you were bitten, and I wanted you after. And I want you now."

The growl cut short in her throat. Then she recognized the look in his eyes, because she smelled the echo of it on his skin. Pain.

"What did you think I was doing last summer?" he asked. "Proposing out of pity?" His hand came up and his fingers threaded through the fur of her cheek. Cori froze. No one—*no one*—had ever dared to touch her in this form. Not by choice.

His eyes softened. "It's you who ought to pity me," he said. "For months I've done nothing but worry and miss you and worry. Even if you are more than capable of taking care of yourself. Don't think I've forgotten how you saved my life at the Stone Table that night."

She reined in the wolf and shifted back to her human shape. His hand remained warm on her cheek. She fumbled for words, and then asked, "What about Ines?"

"There's only one woman I've ever been interested in. All of her. Everything she is." He took her hands in his. "The question still stands, Cori. I've been asking empty air for six months. Please marry me."

Her chest tightened and something burst inside her. Tears poured down her cheeks. "I missed you too." She threw herself into his arms and hugged him hard. "Ask me again, quick, so I can say yes."

38

Matchmaker

Susan's talent with foreign relations came in handy when Peter responded to Caspian's request that he marry Ines. Peter knew that Caspian would be loath to lose Corisande when she'd become such an important part of his domestic defenses. Peter was no more willing to give up Cori than the Telmarine king. Less so, he was certain.

Susan, with her usual astuteness, had suggested that Caspian might be more receptive to the idea if Peter established trade with Telmar—something that had never been considered before, due to strained relations between the countries and mountains that were difficult to pass along their borders. Both countries would benefit from such a plan. Telmar would receive grain from Narnia's expansive farms and fields. Narnia would obtain some of the steel for which Telmar was noted.

As for Peter... Well, he thought, *I'm definitely getting the better end of the deal. I get her.*

"Time to go in, brother," Edmund said beside him. Ed gave him a knowing grin and pushed open the soaring door to Cair Paravel's great hall. Sunshine poured through the glass roof, lighting the beaming faces of the hundreds of guests gathered there.

At the hall's other end, on the dais, stood Aslan, Peter's sisters, Asha, and Cori. Looking at her in her pale-blue gown, Peter ceased to breathe. He wouldn't have cared if she chose to marry him wearing a grain sack, but she'd wanted to dress for the occasion.

As grand as the ceremony was, he couldn't wait for it to end. When Aslan finished speaking and Peter kissed Cori at last, the roar of applause from the guests thundered in his ears.

The celebration afterward went on for hours. Everyone wanted Cori's ear for discussion, or her arm for a dance. Peter hardly saw his new wife. "Lucy, where's Cori?"

"I don't know," Lucy said. "I last saw her by the buffet with Nalis." Lucy paused in her dance with a young faun to look around the hall, but she shook her head. "Check with Edmund."

Peter approached his brother, who stood at the end of the hall whispering into Asha's ear. Asha giggled, and Ed's eyes gleamed with mischief. "Where's Cori?" Peter asked again.

"Married not five hours, and already lost your wife?" Ed grinned and grabbed Asha around the waist to twirl her in a laughing circle. "You ought to keep a better hold on her, brother, lest someone steal her."

Peter smiled. "You're no help at all." He slipped back into the crowd.

Five minutes. No Cori. Ten minutes. No Cori. Twenty minutes. Still no Cori. Peter groaned. Were weddings like this for every groom?

A hand snatched his. Peter spun around to find Susan smiling at him. She put a finger to her lips and towed him toward the side of the hall, where Peter spied the door leading down to the orchard. "Didn't I tell you before to leave it to me?" she said with a nod toward the door.

Peter kissed Susan's cheek and raced out the door as if the castle were on fire.

He found Cori at last sitting at the far end of the orchard. She stared upward through the branches of the tree under which she sat, the skirts of her gown spread out around her and her bare feet peeking out from under the hem. Peter saw stars blinking into being in the darkening sky. "There you are," he said. "A moment more, and I might have sent out a search party."

She smiled. "I've been waiting for you."

He sat down, intrigued by the playful expression on her face. "Really?"

"M-hm." She leaned toward him for a lingering kiss. "That's much nicer without everyone staring at us."

"Well, far be it from me to hamper your enjoyment," he teased, then stole another kiss.

Peter sat back against the tree. She laid her head against his chest and sighed. "Has King Caspian written to you?"

"He has. I think I've hit him where his heart is. He's positively foaming at the prospect of trading with us." With one arm around her, Peter reached his opposite hand up to a low branch and plucked an apple down. He split it in two and handed half to her. They ate in companionable silence.

"Well, your evening is complete, then," Cori said finally. Amusement laced her voice.

"Not quite," he said.

She arched back to look him in the eye. Her brow furrowed. "What more could you possibly want? You rule Narnia."

"No, I don't, my lady." He caught her hand and kissed it, then placed it over his heart. "You do."

~ The End ~