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The Lion, the Snake, and the Safe Room

Prologue

Harry Potter stared into his goblet of pumpkin juice. He didn't want to look up and see the black drapes hanging around the Great Hall. They'd only remind him of what he was trying so hard not to think about—Cedric, dead on the ground... Voldemort's voice, ordering his murder, and Wormtail's, performing the deed... the ritual, the curses, the screams of people under Cruciatus—

For a second he thought someone had been put under Cruciatus right there in the Great Hall. The noise was certainly appropriate, a high-pitched squealing that seemed to cut right through his bones and pierce into his head. His hands, hastily clapped over his ears, made no difference at all.

“What is it?” he yelled to his friends over the sound of hundreds of other people all asking the same thing.

Ron had his face screwed up and his fingers in his ears and didn't answer, but Hermione looked more frightened than hurt. “It's the school invasion alarm!” she shouted. “It only goes off when the wards have been breached!”

“Come off it, Hermione,” bellowed Ron. “Who'd be invading Hogwarts?”

Hermione glared at him. “Who do you *think?* ”

Her last word rang loudly in a suddenly silent Hall. Professor Dumbledore was standing up.

“My apologies for the disturbance,” he said politely. “Students please proceed in an orderly fashion to the first and second dungeon corridors, where your Heads of Houses will check you into safe rooms. There is no need to panic.”

But Hermione's words had been overheard, and panic was setting in despite anything the Headmaster might say. People were pushing and jostling to get further up in the line, and the prefects and teachers were having a hard time keeping order. Somehow, Harry, Ron, and Hermione found themselves pushed up against a clutch of Slytherins, ranging from second years to their own fourth.

“How's your head feeling, Potter?” Draco Malfoy hissed, grinning all over his face. “Hurting much? Don't worry, it will. You'll see Diggory again soon...”

Fred and George just managed to grab Ron as he dived at Malfoy. Harry eluded their grasp and swung at Malfoy, who ducked. Harry managed to pull his punch upwards just enough to graze the braids of a tiny dark-skinned Slytherin girl, who spun and fixed gray eyes on his face. “Watch it!” she said indignantly.

“Sorry,” Harry muttered. He looked over his shoulder. A blob of orange several rows behind him

was the Weasleys—he waved to Ron and got an answering wave just as his view was cut off. “Well, I guess we’ll see them later,” he said to Hermione as they went down the stairs. “What’re these safe rooms, anyway?”

“Four-person apartments to keep the students out of harm’s way in event of a disaster,” Hermione recited breathlessly, pressing her back to the wall. “We’ll be sealed in, only someone with the correct password can get us out. We’ll have everything we need to survive. They’ll let us out as soon as it’s safe.”

“Should just chuck you in one and Oblivate the password holder,” Malfoy muttered. Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm this time.

They reached the dungeon hallway, and Harry stared. All along the stone wall, doorways had appeared, every four or five paces, on both sides. Teachers were shoos groups of students into them. When the fourth person had passed safely through the doorway, it disappeared with an echoing boom, leaving only the walls Harry knew so well. Most of the doors at the end of the corridor where they were had already been sealed, leaving no signs of their presence.

“Move along, down this way, hurry up!” called Professor Sprout sharply from the end of the hall. The Slytherin second year turned to look at Harry and Hermione as she scurried along.

“Need something?” Hermione asked.

“Sure she does,” said Malfoy in a sing-song tone before the girl could reply. “She needs a father. ‘Cause she doesn’t have one, ‘cause he got sent to Azkaban, ‘cause he’s a murderer...”

“Shut up!” the girl screamed. “Shut up, shut up!”

“Too bad he never broke into our common room last year,” Malfoy sneered. “Then he could have taken you away with him. Wouldn’t you like that?”

The girl shrieked and leapt at Malfoy. He laughed contemptuously and side-stepped.

Straight into Harry.

They fell to the ground, scuffling and rolling around. Harry was vaguely aware that they were moving, but he didn’t care. Malfoy was a stinking bastard, and this was his big chance to punch the little ferret but good. But where had the girl gone? When Malfoy had dodged, she’d gone flying—had she hit the wall?

No, he remembered now—she’d gone straight through one of those doorways. Lucky for her, or she would have cracked her head open. And Hermione had run in after her, to help her up and dust her off...

Malfoy yanked free and got to one knee, and Harry launched himself forward, impacting dead on target with Malfoy’s chest. The blond boy toppled backwards—

But as he did, he clutched Harry's robes, dragging Harry down with him.

Together, they rolled down a shallow incline and came to rest on a carpeted floor, practically on top of two pairs of scuffed school shoes.

"Oh *no*," Hermione said.

The echoing boom was clearly audible.

Everything was rather blurred for a moment, until Harry found himself sitting in a chair in one corner of the small living room. He tried to get up, and discovered that he'd been tied down. Across the room, Malfoy was making a similar discovery. Gulping sobs were coming out of the open door on his right, which was the middle one of a set of three.

Hermione opened the door wider and looked out. "I'll let you up if you promise to stop hurting each other now," she said, giving each of them in turn a stare worthy of Professor McGonagall. "We probably won't be in here very long, and there's no reason to make it any worse than it has to be."

"I'll leave him alone if he keeps his fat mouth shut," Harry said, glaring at Malfoy.

Hermione flicked her wand at Harry's ropes, releasing them. "You?" she said to Malfoy.

Malfoy pretended to be interested in the ceiling light.

"Fine, stay there." Hermione disappeared into the bathroom again.

Harry rubbed his wrists and looked around the room. Apart from the three doors, four chairs (two of which he and Malfoy currently occupied), and a small square table against one wall, the only interesting thing in the room was a very large wardrobe, ornately carved and with a mirror on the door. Harry got up and went over to it, and winced a little at his own appearance. His right eye was really going to hurt tomorrow, he knew.

He pulled the wardrobe open and looked in. "My robes are in here," he called over his shoulder to the bathroom. "And yours, Hermione. And some with Slytherin crests and white dandruff all over the shoulders."

Malfoy bared his teeth in a brief grimace.

"And some little Slytherin ones too." Harry pulled out one robe and looked at the name inside. *Meghan Freeman*. *At least I know her name now*. "The drawers have our other stuff inside," he said, opening and shutting them to look. "I guess they think we'll be here a while."

"They're just making sure," said Hermione, poking her head out again. "Because they don't know. Battles can last a long time. Or there could be something like a siege. Or we could even

lose, and there would be Death Eaters everywhere and nothing would be safe.”

“Your definition of losing,” said Malfoy. “Not mine.”

“Who’s tied up around here anyway?” Harry retorted. “Hermione, is Meghan all right?”

“The girl? Is that her name? She’ll be fine. She was just upset because she realized we’re stuck in here, and she doesn’t like Malfoy.”

Harry snorted. “Who does?”

“Good question.” Hermione looked Malfoy up and down. He returned the favor. “You know, I don’t even think Crabbe and Goyle really like you, do they? Or Pansy Parkinson, or Nott or Zabini, or anyone you hang around with. They just fawn on you because your father has money.”

Malfoy smirked. “That’s not the *only* reason,” he said.

“Oh, right, he’s also a high-ranked Death Eater,” said Harry. “So he gets to kiss a little higher up on Voldemort’s arse.”

He didn’t bother to listen to Malfoy’s reply, instead following Hermione into the bathroom. He had to talk to Meghan. There was something she deserved to know.

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Chapter 1: Entrance

Draco Malfoy turned his head and concentrated on listening to the voices floating out the bathroom door. Information, that was the key. Knowing everything you could, and knowing when to use it. Potter was speaking.

“...father’s name? You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to...”

“No, it’s all right,” said the Freeman girl, sniffing. “His name is Sirius Black. And he never meant to hurt you—but you know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do, but how do you?” Potter sounded dumbfounded. Not surprising, Draco thought—since when had Black not wanted to hurt Potter?

“He came to visit us last summer. Not for very long, just long enough to meet me and apologize to Mum. He’s been writing me letters, though. He talks about you all the time. I almost feel like I know you already.”

A long pause. “I never knew about you,” Potter said almost under his breath. “He never told me anything about you.”

Draco’s surprise had been superseded by the need to remember this, remember everything. Something in the story he knew, of the murderer Sirius Black who wanted Harry Potter dead, was incorrect. Potter had obviously been in contact with Black, and sounded as if he expected to be told what went on in Black’s life. And was there just a note of jealousy in Potter’s voice?

Might be able to make some trouble there. Play them off each other.

Draco snapped back into listening as Granger’s voice sounded from the bathroom. “...didn’t want to worry you, Harry. He thought you had enough to deal with, the Tournament and everything. And when have you really had a chance to just talk with him? Or even write normal letters? I’m sure he wasn’t trying to hide anything from you. He just never thought of it.”

“Yeah, well, funny how he thought of writing about me to her,” Potter said, and now his voice was definitely bitter. “But never the other way around. ‘Scuse me.”

The bathroom door crashed open, and Potter stalked out. He glared at Draco. Draco gave him a smugly superior smile but refrained from saying anything. *Better wait until Granger lets me up...*

Potter’s glare intensified, and he spun on his heel and slammed through one of the other two doors. “*Wingardium Leviosa,*” Draco heard from within, and a cast-iron bed preceded Potter back out the door. “I’ll sleep out here,” the Gryffindor said, dumping the bed in the corner near the wardrobe. “You can have the bedroom. Stay in there all day if you like.”

“I’d love to, but I can’t go anywhere right now.”

Potter aimed his wand at the ropes. “*Diffindo* .”

Draco hissed slightly as his robes were split up the sleeve. “Learn to hit what you’re aiming at, Potty.”

“I did hit what I was aiming at, Malferret.” Potter sat down on the bed, glaring. “Don’t you have anything better to do?”

“Doubt it.” Draco wanted to rub his wrists, but opted for flexing his fingers and shaking out his hands instead. “Unless you’d like to duel?”

“Don’t make me take your wands away,” Granger shouted from the bathroom.

Draco smirked. “Come and try it, Mudblood.”

“No thank you. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You? Hurt *me*?” Draco laughed. “You’re welcome to try.”

“Let me think now,” said Potter. “Who was it slapped you across the face last year?”

“Ancient history. Besides, that’s Muggle stuff. I’d like to see her face me with a wand in her hand.”

“Yeah, I’d like to see that too. Ron and I have a bet going, actually. He thinks you’d only last through two spells. I think you might hold out for three.”

“You have a higher opinion of me than Weasley, Potter? I’m impressed.”

“Yeah, well, he’s never faced you in a duel, and I have. I think you might be able to get one spell off before Hermione whips your arse. Ron just thinks you’d get slaughtered. Though I’m starting to think more like him now that I’ve actually seen you against her.” Potter snickered. “She took us both out pretty well, didn’t she?”

“I was distracted. It wasn’t fair.”

“Since when have you ever cared about fair?”

Draco made a gesture he’d learned from Peeves and swept regally away into the bedroom Potter had taken the bed from. Shutting the door behind him, he surveyed his kingdom. Bed, two desks, two chairs, two bookshelves...

Small. Small, and dreary.

Good thing I’m not claustrophobic. Wonder if any of them are? He smiled. That might be fun. I’m used to being underground —well, so’s Freeman, but Potter and Granger sleep way up high in a tower. Wonder which of them will crack first, without any windows or anything in here?

Deep inside, so deep he could barely admit it, he was wondering if he, too, would crack after a few days in here. He didn't mind the Slytherin common room or dormitories, but only because they were roomy in and of themselves, and because he knew he'd be outside on a regular basis. These rooms were, to put it bluntly, cramped, and they had no idea when they'd get out.

But I'm strong. I'm a Malfoy. I can face anything.

Especially if it means looking better than Potter or Granger. Or both.

He sat down on the bed and Summoned one of the books on the shelf across the room.

Better than nothing.

He opened it to the first page, then dropped it in disgust. "Potter!" he shouted.

"What?" floated in through the door.

"You got the wrong room, idiot! This one was for the girls!"

"How do you know?"

"Because I just picked up one of Granger's books!"

Potter opened the door. "Oops," he said. "Go get yours, then. You know where they'll be. You can take Hermione's over while you're at it."

"I'm not touching that again! It's got Mudblood slime on it!"

"Oh, come off it," said an impatient voice, and Freeman nudged past Potter and climbed onto the chair below the other bookshelf. "You're just like all the stupid Muggle boys I used to go to school with. Always talking about cooties." She started to pull the books efficiently down from the shelf and pile them on the desk at her knee level.

"Do you want some help with that?" Potter offered.

"Thanks." Freeman smiled at him. "Do you want to take Hermione's, though?"

"No, I can take my own," said Granger from behind Potter. "I put yours on your bed, Harry. Move over."

Potter stepped aside. Draco looked askance at Granger as she came into the room, floating a pile of familiar-looking books in midair.

"Here, these are yours," she said, dumping them on Draco's bed. "And no, I didn't touch any of them." She picked up the book from the floor, Summoned the rest from the shelf, and walked out of the room with dignity, followed by Potter with his arms full of books and Freeman carrying one or two extras. She turned back to shut the door, and stuck out her tongue at Draco before she did.

“Glad that’s over,” Draco muttered, swinging his feet onto his bed. He selected his Potions text and flipped to one of the chapters Snape had assigned an essay on for the summer, but his mind lingered for a moment on the book he’d dropped.

What kind of spell uses a chair made out of silver anyway?

“Hermione? Can I call you that?”

“Of course. What is it?”

Meghan pulled Hermione into the girls’ bedroom and shut the door. “Is Harry really angry?” she asked anxiously.

“No, I don’t think so,” Hermione said. “Not with you. But you’re here, so he’s aiming it at you, even though the person he’s actually angry with is Sirius. He’s really your father?”

Meghan nodded. “Mum would never tell me much about him, though,” she said. “Just that I was the only good thing he’d ever done. And sometimes, late at night, she’d tell me stories about funny things he would do in school, or just after it, when they were going out together.” She looked at the floor. “He never knew about me until last summer. I always felt a little strange, knowing that he didn’t know. Because I would wonder, if he had known, would he still have done all those terrible things?”

“But he didn’t.”

“I know, I know *now*, but I didn’t then...” Meghan’s hands clenched on the bedspread. “I get so angry when people talk about him now,” she said. “Because I know he never did anything bad, not like that, and he didn’t deserve what happened to him, and it was *horrible* ...”

“I know.” Feeling awkward, Hermione opened her arms and embraced the younger girl. “I know.”

“I just wish I could make a difference,” Meghan said into Hermione’s shoulder. “I want to help somebody. I want to make a difference to somebody, because I couldn’t for my father.”

“That’s not your fault—did your mother even know about you when everything happened?”

“She had just found out. She was going to tell him that same day. If she had told him even a little bit earlier, maybe nothing would ever have happened...”

Hermione drew her wand and Summoned one of her books. “Have you read these?” she asked, showing Meghan the cover.

Meghan nodded.

“Then you know. No one ever finds out what *would* have happened.”

“I know.” Meghan rubbed her eyes. “I just... never mind. Can I read that?”

“Do you want me to read to you?” Hermione offered tentatively. *She’s going to tell me she’s not a baby, that she can read for herself...*

“Would you? Really?” Meghan’s eyes were bright with eagerness now. “Please?”

“All right.” Hermione climbed onto her bed and leaned her back against the wall. “Chapter One. This is the story of an adventure...”

Harry’d been reading the same paragraph in his Charms text for the last five minutes and still didn’t understand a word of it. His brain was going in circles.

Why didn’t Sirius ever tell me? Why didn’t he tell me he had a daughter? Why did he tell her about me, but not me about her? Doesn’t he trust me? Doesn’t he think I’m important enough to tell things to?

He flipped the book shut in disgust. *And now I’m stuck in here for God-only-knows-how-long, with Malfoy...*

Hermione’s voice caught his ear. She seemed to be reading something. Quietly, he got up to listen.

Oh, right. I know what that is. Probably because the Dursleys were so very against Harry ever seeing or hearing anything that wasn’t strictly real, he’d been fascinated by magic in books, and had read the Narnia books in the school library at least twice each.

It’s not as if I have to do my work right away or anything. Might as well listen.

He leaned on the door.

Which swung inwards, dumping him on the floor.

“Hello, Harry,” said Hermione as Meghan giggled. “Would you like to listen too?”

Harry gave her a brief glare as he sat up. “Yes, please.”

He pushed the door mostly shut with his foot after crawling out of the way.

Draco looked up from his book. *Is it just me, or did it get very quiet in here?*

The only sound in the entire suite seemed to be somebody’s voice. Granger’s voice. It was speaking in slow, measured tones, as if reading aloud.

Probably lecturing out of one of the books.

He got up and peered through his keyhole. Potter was nowhere to be seen. Cautiously, he cracked his door open, then opened it all the way when he saw the main room empty. *He must be in with them.*

Granger's voice was louder out here. Draco stepped into the main room and sat down carefully on the chair he'd used earlier, listening. It wasn't a textbook at all; it was a story, a story about a boy and a talking horse.

Stupid, Draco thought scornfully. Everyone knows horses don't talk. Only centaurs. Maybe that's what it's actually about. I should get back to that essay...

But he didn't move. Shasta and Bree met Aravis and Hwin, and Aravis told her story. The four continued on their way together, and came to Tashbaan. A strange man reached out and seized Shasta—Draco tensed, listening harder—

Granger yawned hugely. "Oh, I can't be tired already," she said unhappily. "What time is it?"

"It's nearly eleven," said Potter.

"Drat, and I wanted to go over my Transfiguration notes one more time, because I had a question for Professor McGonagall and I wrote it down but now I can't remember what it was, and I can't look through all my notes for the year all at once..."

"I'll go over them with you if you want," Potter offered. "It won't take so long with two of us looking. Do you mind, Meghan? We shouldn't be too long. You can take a nap on my bed if you want, we'll wake you when we're done."

"All right. Thank you."

Draco jumped up and ran for his room, just making it as the door of the other room opened.

Damn it, I wanted to know what happened. How is he going to get away? Will he ever find them again?

He peered through the hinges of his door, and was rewarded by seeing Freeman staring at the wardrobe as if she thought it contained a secret. She took one step toward it, then another—

Then, with a rush, she was up and inside it, pulling the door closed behind her, but leaving it ajar—

And a second later, she tumbled out of it again, her eyes sparkling, her breath coming faster, and looking disbelieving and thoroughly happy. "It is," she whispered. "It is, it *is!*"

And before Draco could do anything, she had turned around and climbed back in again.

Well, that's odd. Draco emerged from his room, looked around, and crossed the main room

quickly, opening the door of the wardrobe.

Freeman was nowhere to be seen.

This is very odd. Draco climbed into the wardrobe himself, taking out his wand as he did, and pulled the door shut behind him, until he felt it click shut. He turned the handle to make sure it hadn't locked, then started forward. Even an enchanted wardrobe shouldn't be more than a few feet deep.

Except that this one was...

Meghan ran through the woods, wanting to shout and laugh with joy. It was real, just as she had always known it was—she hadn't been able to stay in the horrid little safe room for an instant longer than she had to, and she knew from her reading that no one would believe her if she tried to tell them about the wardrobe, so she had just come straight back—they would all get in eventually, she was sure, but she'd just *had* to come back and make sure it wasn't a dream...

She passed the lamppost and turned left, blowing a kiss to it as she sped by. A stream at the bottom of the hill, he'd said—a stream where willow trees grew...

“Oren!” she cried as she caught sight of water through the trees. “Oren, I'm back!”

One of the willows lifted its head and turned to face her. “So you are,” said a soft, whispery voice. “All alone, or have you brought someone else with you?”

“I didn't bring anyone, but someone may have come anyway. I'm not sure. I just wanted to see you again, right away, as soon as ever I could...”

“I'm flattered,” said the Dryad, smiling at her. “But you know as well as I do, now, how things stand in Narnia. Our Kings and Queens have only a few drops of human blood each. They can hold the White Wizard at bay, but full-blooded Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve will be needed to defeat him.”

“Bring on your old White Wizard.” Meghan drew her wand. “I'm ready for him.”

“By the Lion and the Knife, I think you are,” said Oren, laughingly holding up his hands. “Don't hurt me, I beg of you, my Princess. That would be an ill omen indeed, for a new Queen of Narnia to be burning her citizens down before she's even been crowned...”

“But do you think we'll be crowned right away?” Meghan put her wand away and sat down on the streambank. “The Pevensies had to do their fighting first, and then they were crowned afterwards.”

“Am I Aslan, that I'd know that?” Oren came to stand beside her, trailing some of his leaves through the water. “But you are right, the High King Peter and his siblings had to fight their war

first. To earn their crowns, you might say. Perhaps you must do the same.”

“Yes, but there’s a problem.” Meghan was pulling off her shoes and socks. “There’s me, and there’s Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, they’re all right. But the other boy is horrid. He’s mean and nasty, and he’s been like that ever since I’ve known him, and everyone says he always was that way.”

“Ah, everyone says.” Oren nodded his leafy head. “And what, did you tell me, did everyone say about your father?”

Meghan felt her face heat. “But this is true,” she said, wetting her hands in the stream and pressing them against her cheeks. “I’ve seen it, I’ve heard him. He doesn’t care about anyone but himself, and he likes making people look stupid and feel bad. He’s done it to me.”

“I see.” Oren stood for a moment and watched Meghan dangle her feet in the water. “People change, my Princess,” he said finally. “People alter their ways. Especially in Narnia.”

“Not him,” Meghan said with certainty. “Not Draco Malfoy. He’ll never change.”

Draco stared around him. He had several questions jostling for space in his mind. For instance, *What is a forest doing in a wardrobe?*

And then, there was *What is a lamppost doing in a forest?*

But the one that trumped them all was, *Who is that standing beside the lamppost?* For he had a feeling he knew this tall, thin, dark-haired man, if only he could remember where he’d seen him before...

“A Daughter of Eve, my spy told me,” said a pleasant, cool voice. “But a Son of Adam will do as well. Tell me, Son of Adam, what is your name?”

“Draco. Draco Malfoy.”

“And why, Draco Malfoy, do you wear a serpent upon your clothing?”

Draco glanced down at his Slytherin crest. “It’s the mark of my House,” he said. “We respect power, and those with the ability to get it and hold onto it.”

“Ahhh.” It was a long, satisfied sigh. “Just such a one I have hoped for these many years. Come, Draco Malfoy. You and I will talk, as one man to another. For I plan to be the King of this land of Narnia, and you could be a great asset to me.”

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Chapter 2: Royalty

Draco leaned against the lamppost, holding onto it with his right hand as the world dipped and swirled around him. His left arm throbbed in time with his heartbeat, but the pain grew less every second, and the spinning slowed and stopped.

When he felt confident enough to let go of the post, he peeled back his left sleeve and looked at the inside of his forearm. The face of a great white snake looked back at him with deep-set red eyes. He stroked it with his right hand, and the marking vanished, leaving only the two red holes, which faded until they looked like old scars.

“A King,” he whispered. “A King of Narnia.”

He didn’t care for some of the things he would have to do, but he could see the necessity behind them. In fact, the plan was so simple that he could see only one place it could snag, and that was up to him to overcome.

Just some acting. A lot of acting, but I should be up to it. And then, once things get going, revolution, revelation, and coronation...

“Revolution, revelation, coronation,” he chanted aloud, under his breath. “Revolution, revelation, coronation...”

“What?”

He looked up, startled. Freeman stood at the other side of the clearing, staring at him. “Nothing,” he said. “I saw you go inside the wardrobe and thought I’d see what was going on.”

Freeman narrowed her eyes. “I bet you don’t even know where we are.”

“Of course I do. We’re in Narnia.”

“Who told you that?”

“No one. I figured it out.”

“Figured it out how? You’d never read those books. They’re *Muggle* things.”

Draco put his hands behind his back and gently squeezed his left forearm. A small jolt of pain shot up his arm and through his shoulder and neck on its way to his brain. “If I never read the books, how do I know we’re in Lantern Waste?” he challenged. “Or that the wardrobe used to belong to a Professor named Digory Kirke?” He had laughed heartily over this piece of irony when the Wizard had made him acquainted with it. “Or that Lucy Pevensie was the first one to come through it, and then her brother Edmund came with her once, and Peter and Susan came with them the third time, to defeat the White Witch and be Kings and Queens of Narnia?”

Freeman's look of suspicion was starting to be replaced by one of dubious belief. "Fine then," she said. "So if you know where we are, you know which way we have to go to get back where we came from."

Draco pointed. "That way."

Freeman lifted her nose in the air and started in the direction he'd indicated, muttering something as she passed that sounded like "Lucky guess." Draco kept his mouth shut. He had a role to play now, and it was going to be probably the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life.

But the reward matches the job. A King, a real King...

One second they were pushing through thick branches of fir and pine, the next they were among robes and shirts and trousers, and Freeman unlatched the wardrobe and leapt lightly out, Draco following her.

The door of the bedroom opened just as Draco closed the wardrobe behind himself. "See, it wasn't that hard," said Potter, coming out. "And now it's where you won't forget it."

"As long as I don't send these robes through the wash," said Granger. She stopped in the doorway, frowning. "What's going on?"

"You're not going to believe it," said Freeman, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet.

"Why not?" Potter asked.

"I think you're not supposed to believe it. I think you have to think it isn't true. But..." Freeman turned to look back at Draco. "You're going to lie, aren't you?" she challenged. "You're going to say I made it up."

Draco shut the door of the wardrobe and leaned against it. "Depends on what you say," he drawled. "And how I feel about it."

"What is it?" Granger asked.

Freeman took a breath. "We found Narnia," she said. "This is *the* wardrobe. It's all true. I've been there twice, and he was there with me the second time."

Granger stared at the wardrobe, then at Freeman, her face lighting up. Draco had seldom seen her so excited. "Just like the book! Harry, it's just like *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* — Lucy was first, then both her and Edmund..."

"And Edmund met the White Witch when he was there alone," said Potter, looking at Draco. "Who'd you meet, Malfoy?"

"Why should I have met anyone? I'm not your brother. Not even close."

“But everything else does seem to fit,” said Granger, moving around to peer behind the wardrobe. “The youngest goes in first, a girl, and meets someone—did you?”

“Yes, he’s a dryad, and his name is Oren. He’s a willow tree. And he told me all about what’s happening in Narnia now. Do you want to hear?”

“Tell us,” said Potter, sitting down on his bed. Granger claimed one of the chairs. Draco stayed where he was.

“It’s been at least a thousand years since the Pevensies left Narnia,” Freeman began, her arms around each other, right hand rubbing her left elbow. “But the tradition is still to have two Kings and two Queens at a time, in their memory. They’re not always brothers and sisters, though, sometimes they’re married. The Kings and Queens now are two married couples, King Ardan and Queen Ilana, and King Gilles and Queen Caelin. Ardan and Ilana are the High King and Queen, but nobody makes a fuss about that except when there are ambassadors and things.”

“But how can they be Kings and Queens?” Potter asked. “I thought only people from our world, Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve, could be Kings and Queens of Narnia.”

“They have some human blood. Not a lot—Queen Caelin is half human and she has the most—but they all have it. But that’s why they need us. They have a White Wizard, like the White Witch, except he’s not in power yet, and they want it to stay that way, and they need strong Kings and Queens to keep him down.”

“Where did he come from?” Granger asked. “I know where the White Witch came from, but a White Wizard?”

“Some people say he’s the White Witch’s son,” said Freeman. “And some people say he came out of the north. But nobody’s sure. He’s the White Wizard because he’s what they call a skin-turner, like an Animagus, and what he turns into is a great white snake.”

Draco kept his smile entirely internal.

“This is sounding awfully familiar,” Potter said wearily. “Why me?”

“Because you’re a hero, Harry,” Granger said. “No matter what world you’re in, you’re still a hero.”

“Well, what if I don’t want to be a hero anymore? What if I just want to be normal?” Potter got to his feet. “Look, Meghan, I don’t think you’re lying. This may well be the wardrobe that leads to Narnia. But I don’t want to get pushed into another destiny. One’s enough.” He looked again at Draco. “And even if I had to do it, I wouldn’t do it with you along.”

“Not like I want you along either,” Draco said, pressing his arm again to hold back panic. Potter had to go along, or else everything would be spoiled. “But don’t you think you should at least have a look in there? See if it’s true or not? Or are you too scared to do what I did?”

Potter hesitated visibly.

“Knew it,” Draco said. “Gryffindor courage isn’t worth a tin Knut. All roar and no claws, that’s what you are...”

He ducked under Potter’s fist and took a quick step forward, running his head into Potter’s stomach and yanking the wardrobe door open at the same time. “Come on, right in here,” he taunted, stepping up backwards into the wardrobe as Granger caught Potter, holding him up to let him recover his breath. “Scaredy-lion.”

Potter launched himself away from Granger and dived into Draco just as he’d done to get them locked into the safe room in the first place. Draco gritted his teeth, suddenly recalling that the wardrobe didn’t always lead to Narnia, and that this little game might end in a bruised skull and aching back for him...

But he fell backwards and landed at full length, Potter on top of him, and then he had no time for anything except keeping Potter’s fists away from his face, and hardly even noticed the change in the light to pale and bluish, or the feeling of leaves underneath them instead of polished wood, except as a vague and distant triumph.

Step one of the plan had been set in motion.

Hermione had tried to grab Harry, but he had brushed her aside and knocked Malfoy backwards into the wardrobe. She had braced for the noise of two bodies colliding with a solid wall –

And it hadn’t come.

“I told you!” Meghan cried. “I told you, I told you!”

“Never mind,” Hermione said sharply, racing across the room. “We have to stop them...”

She leapt into the wardrobe and hurried towards the sounds of fighting. “Harry, don’t!” she shouted. “Let him go, he’s not worth it! He was just trying to make you mad!”

The noise did not abate. Hermione drew her wand. *I’m going to be doing this a lot, I think. Why on earth we had to be sent to Narnia with him...*

Her first spell threw the boys apart, her second was a Body-Bind on Harry, and as she turned to do the same to Malfoy she discovered that Meghan had come in behind her and done it already.

“Mum taught me,” Meghan said, putting her wand away. “She’s very good at it.”

Hermione leaned against a tree and caught her breath. “Well,” she said. “Here we are.”

“Should we let them up?” Meghan asked. “They won’t be very comfortable there.”

“Right now, I don’t care.” Hermione looked around her, breathing deeply. “If we let them go,

they'll just fight again and we don't need that. I want to enjoy this for a minute." The bark under her hand was ridged and sticky with sap, which imparted a spicy smell to the air. Even the moonlight silvering all the leaves and needles looked brighter than it did at home.

"Narnia," she whispered.

She had dreamed, when she was little, of finding the wardrobe, or the picture of the ship, or the green and yellow rings that would take her to Narnia, and had thought when her Hogwarts letter came that maybe now it would happen to her. But although she'd had adventures at Hogwarts, she'd never enjoyed them. Her usual favorite part of an adventure was when it was over.

She sometimes wondered, secretly, if the Sorting Hat hadn't been right in wanting to put her in Ravenclaw. But maybe Narnian adventures would be different. Maybe here she could find the courage to enjoy adventures the way Harry and Ron did.

I just wish Ron was here, instead of him.

She gave Malfoy a poisonous glance, then turned to Harry and lifted the Body-Bind, hearing Meghan doing the same behind her. "I don't like cursing you," she said to Harry. "But we're here, and I don't think we're meant to fight each other."

"What are we meant to do then?" Harry got to his feet, brushing leaves and twigs off himself. "Become Kings and Queens?" He looked disdainfully at Malfoy. "He'd probably run off to this White Wizard before we ever got started. I bet he already has."

"I haven't run off anywhere," said Malfoy, not bothering to stand up. "And I'm not about to. Why should I bother? If the books are right, I'm going to be a King anyway."

"Some King you'll be," said Meghan. "I'm not being your Queen."

"I don't see you have a choice, Freeman. We're here, there's four of us, they need Kings and Queens, looks like we're it. Maybe it would be to everyone's advantage if we called a truce."

"Truce? With you?" Harry looked as skeptical as Hermione felt. "Give me one good reason we should believe you."

"We have to beat this White Wizard before we can get home, right? If we went back the way we came, we wouldn't find any wardrobe there. Just more forest. So we're stuck here until the White Wizard goes down, and it probably takes all four of us," Malfoy put a very sarcastic spin on the word, "to do it. Why not call truce until we get back where we came from?"

Harry looked at Malfoy searchingly, then turned and came over to Hermione. Meghan ran across the clearing to join them. "What do you think?" he asked them quietly.

"He has a point," Hermione said. "The Pevensies would never have got through if they hadn't all been here."

“I don’t trust him,” said Meghan, glancing over her shoulder at Malfoy. “He’s up to something, he always is.”

“You’re right,” said Harry. “But you’re right too, Hermione. If this is Narnia, and I think it must be, then we’re going to need him for something.” He gave a brief grin. “Maybe he’ll have a glorious death protecting the Lion banner on a battlefield.”

“I wish,” said Meghan.

“We should make him swear that he won’t do anything against us,” said Hermione. “On something he wouldn’t break.”

“He’s a Malfoy, Hermione,” said Harry tiredly. “He’d break anything.”

“How about swearing on his face?” Meghan suggested. “He’s always fussing with his hair and his skin. You should see all the lotions and creams he has sitting around.”

“Oh, I like that.” Hermione smiled, thinking of a jinx she’d run across recently. “We can get him to sign a pledge, and tell him that if he doesn’t keep the promise, he’ll break out in terrible spots, and never get rid of them, ever.”

“Can you do that?” Harry asked.

Hermione nodded. “I can make them spell a word, if you want,” she said. “Maybe ‘UGLY.’”

Meghan burst into giggles, and even Harry laughed aloud.

Malfoy looked sour when informed of their terms, but finally agreed, though he insisted on having a say in the way the pledge was worded, and that they all sign as well. By the time four names were affixed to the parchment bearing a jinx for anyone who joined the side of the White Wizard, the moon was closer to setting than rising, and everyone was yawning mightily.

“If we find the lamppost, we’ll be safe,” Meghan said. “It’s almost as old as Narnia, and Aslan blessed it when it grew. We can sleep there.”

“Not too hard to find,” said Harry, pointing at a distant yellowish glow. “Just follow the light.”

Hermione looked about her as she walked, recalling other times she’d been out in a forest at night with Harry. Once Malfoy had even been there, though their other companion then had been Neville and not a little Slytherin girl.

And Malfoy was a berk then too. She glared at Malfoy’s figure, silhouetted against the lamplight ahead. Make one wrong move, ferret boy, I dare you...

But they reached the lamppost in peace, and found places to lie down, and despite the combined light of lamp and moon, Hermione found her eyes closing quickly. The ground seemed to cradle her gently as she sank into sleep.

The last thing she saw was the flicker of light from Harry's glasses as he laid them aside.

Meghan awoke all at once in the gray light of dawn. The lamp had gone out, but the sun was not quite up yet, and despite her late night, she felt strong and eager to rise.

Narnia. Really, truly, Narnia. And I'm to be a Queen.

I only wish Mum could know.

Her good mood evaporated with that thought. Aletha Freeman was a dutiful mother to her child, but the silent specter of Meghan's father had always haunted them, tainting everything they did.

Mum sees him in me. I look like her mostly, but I have his eyes, and that's what she sees.

And now that they knew the truth about Sirius Black, both everything and nothing had changed. Meghan had only met her father once in person, and longed to meet him again, but at the same time she was unwilling, for he was neither the hero-father she had created for herself nor the villain she knew from the newspapers and history books, and he barely seemed able to believe she existed, much less to love her.

And Mum feels like she should have known all along, and hates herself for not knowing, and takes it out on me...

She'd been thankful to escape her mother's moods at Hogwarts, and was secretly and guiltily glad of this extra respite, however long it might last.

The Pevensies were here for years and years, they grew up here, and then they were children again as soon as they went through the wardrobe. But the other adventures took a few weeks, or a few months, and that was all. Though we do seem to be closer to Peter and Susan and Edmund and Lucy than to anything else...

Her feet were moving in the direction of Oren's stream, and she let them. *I can tell him we've all come. He knows the way to the palace. Beautiful Cair Paravel, on the eastern shore by the sea...*

Harry woke all at once, panting, and looked around wildly. The blurry things surrounding him were too tall to be gravestones, and there was no mocking laughter, no taunting voice. He was safe.

And I'm not going back to the Dursleys until we're finished with whatever we have to do here.

That cheered him up considerably.

Voldemort can't find me in Narnia.

That cheered him still more.

But this White Wizard sounds a lot like Voldemort. Doesn't have a proper name, wants to be King, turns into a snake...

But unlike Voldemort, the White Wizard had no reason to hate or fear Harry Potter, except that Harry was a Son of Adam. Theoretically, the Wizard should hate and fear all four of the newcomers equally, for all four of them had the power to become Kings or Queens.

Of course, Malfoy's probably already found a way to go over to him. Harry put on his glasses and regarded his sleeping enemy warily. Jinx or no jinx, we'll have to watch him...

I wonder how they decide which one of us will be High King? If it's just by age we're in trouble, I'm almost the youngest in the year, he must be older than me... but they won't do it like that, will they? He can't be the High King, they won't let him, not after they see what he's like...

His vehemence on the subject surprised him. He hadn't known he cared so much.

Malfoy will not be High King, he vowed silently. Not if I can stop it.

But that means I'd have to be.

He didn't like the idea, but anyone would have to be better than Malfoy. Or would they? Would somebody with no idea how to rule, who didn't want the job, still be better than a tyrant who was nonetheless good at what he did?

Harry was still trying to work this out when he heard footsteps, and Meghan pattered into view, carrying a small parcel done up in brown paper. "Good morning," she called when she saw him sitting up. "Isn't it lovely? I have breakfast."

"Where did you get it?"

"Oren gave it to me. My dryad friend. He has work to do this morning, but he gave me directions for the first part of the walk to Cair Paravel, and he'll meet us at noon by the Silver Spring." Meghan dropped onto the grass beside Harry and started undoing the parcel as Hermione sat up, rubbing her eyes.

Some small peaches and plums, still a bit hard so they would travel better, four fat rolls, and four wooden canteens with leather straps around them were disclosed. "Oren will bring lunch with him to the spring," Meghan said, taking a bite from a roll. "Oh, these are good. Sausage inside them—mm!"

Malfoy picked up a canteen by its strap, looking at it distastefully, then took a roll and two pieces of fruit and returned to the spot where he'd spent the night. Hermione scooted in and helped herself to the final roll. "You're right, they are good," she said after her first bite. "But I thought dryads didn't eat what people eat."

“They don’t. Oren knows a family of Red Dwarves, one of them made these. Their mum works at the palace, and she taught them all how to cook.”

“I like the sound of that,” said Harry with his mouth full of plum.

The canteens held only water, but it was clear and cold, and the food was just as good as Meghan and Hermione had claimed. When everyone had finished, a little water poured over hands solved washing up, and Meghan crumpled the brown paper and stuffed it into a pocket. Everyone shouldered a canteen, and they started for Cair Paravel.

“How long will it take to get there?” Hermione asked.

“It’s a three-day walk...” Meghan began.

“Glorious,” Malfoy muttered. “And we’ll all have blisters the size of Snitches when we’re done.”

“*But*,” Meghan went on loudly, “we should only have to walk this morning, because the Silver Stream joins the Great River where it gets deep enough to have a boat, and a couple of fauns said we could use theirs.” She twirled around and smiled triumphantly at Malfoy. “So they’ll bring it to the Silver Spring sometime this morning, and the naiad of the spring will watch it for us until we get there, and then we’ll go down the river for the rest of the journey, which should only take until tomorrow noon.”

Malfoy grunted.

Harry caught a flash of color out of the corner of his eye and turned to look. A robin had lighted on a branch beside him, and as it saw him noticing it, preened its feathers for a moment, almost as if it were shy... but it couldn’t be...

“Hello?” he said to it tentatively.

“Oh my!” The Robin flew straight up in the air. “Oh my goodness! Your Highness—I beg your pardon, Your Highnesses—I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to bother you, I’ll go, I’ll go straightaway...”

“Don’t be silly,” said Hermione. “You weren’t bothering us.”

“Not bothering you?” The Robin—which hadn’t been trying to fly away very hard for a startled bird, Harry thought—landed neatly on a branch at eye level and folded its wings. “Thank you, Princess, you’re very kind.”

Hermione stared at it. “Princess?” she said.

The Robin cocked its head. “You are a Daughter of Eve?” it asked doubtfully. “Not just a nymph in odd clothing?”

“We’re human,” Harry said over Hermione’s furious mutters that her clothing was not *odd* and

Malfoy's sniggers. "All four of us."

"Ah." The Robin ruffled its feathers in satisfaction. "I knew I couldn't be that far wrong. Your Highness, since I'm not bothering you, might I ask one tiny favor?"

"What kind of favor?"

"Might I... might I possibly... might I know Your Highnesses' names? Only to spread your fame, you understand," the Robin added quickly. "It's already all over Narnia that you've come, but hardly anyone has talked to anyone who's *seen* you, and *no one* knows your names, so if I could..."

"I'm Harry," Harry said before the bird could say anything else. "This is Hermione, and Meghan, and Draco."

"Prince Harry," the Robin repeated to itself. "Prince Draco. Princess Hermione. And Princess Meghan. Thank you, Your Highnesses, thank you very much indeed, and if you ever happen to need an extra set of eyes, my name's Kas and I'm very much at your service... and that goes if you ever have a surplus of worms around, as well..."

And Kas spread his wings and leapt into the air, leaving only a swaying branch behind him.

"Having trouble remembering, Granger?" Malfoy inquired. "Or maybe you never thought you'd get within spitting distance of anyone with a title, let alone have one yourself."

"Come off it, Malfoy," said Harry. "I don't think any of us ever thought we'd be royalty."

Malfoy smirked. "Speak for yourself. Father always told me I'd be a prince someday."

Meghan stuck her finger into her mouth and made a gagging noise.

"It is hard to believe," Hermione said, still looking into the sky where Kas had gone. "Harder than my Hogwarts letter, I suppose. Because I had no idea, before my letter came, that anything like Hogwarts existed. But I have all these ideas about Narnia. Things I think I already know. Things like the end of it—how are we here?" she suddenly demanded, whirling on the other three. "How are we here, when Narnia died forty years ago by our world's time, when Peter shut the Stable Door to Aslan's country?"

Meghan and Malfoy both looked baffled, though Malfoy was also looking warily at the sky, as though expecting it to fall any moment. Harry shrugged. "I guess it's the time thing again," he said, piecing it out as he spoke. "If the Pevensies could live here for years and go back to our world the same second they left it, and then come back a year later by our time and have it be thousands of years later here, then is there really any reason we can't be in the middle of that now?"

"It never went back and forth in the books," said Hermione. "Narnia started when Digory and Polly were children, and in the middle of the history was the Pevensies when Digory was the old Professor, and then came the Telmarines and Caspian and Rilian, and Eustace and Jill from our

world. It always went forward, never back.”

“But Aslan can do anything,” Meghan spoke up. “And we already knew there were lots of pieces of the history of Narnia we only knew a little bit about. Like everyone who came in between King Frank and Queen Helen and the Pevensies. We just know little things about them. And we knew there was lots of history between the Pevensies and the Telmarines, but we hardly knew anything about it, and now we’re part of it.”

“And we’re not getting anywhere, historical or otherwise, just standing here,” said Malfoy, starting forward. “Move.”

Meghan squinted at the sun. “Have a nice time,” she called after him, starting in a slightly different direction. “We’ll send you a postcard. Or maybe Kas will come and find you.”

Harry shared a grin with Hermione as they heard Malfoy crashing through the underbrush to bring up the rear.

Draco rubbed his left arm, feeling pleased. Things were going just as planned. They had arrived, the whole country knew about them, and best of all, they didn’t have to walk the whole breadth of Narnia to get where they were going. Draco was not fond of walking. That was why broomsticks had been invented.

Of course, there were no broomsticks here, and no Floo travel either. He wondered if they would be able to Apparate, but since none of them knew how, it was beside the point.

He reviewed his instructions in his head.

Get them into Narnia. Done.

Start for the palace. Done.

Inasmuch as you can without arousing suspicion, act their friend. Alter your behavior little by little. Make it appear that you are learning the error of your ways. Not done, but in process. It was going to take time, but Draco was confident that he could manage to worm himself into their good graces eventually.

Especially with what he knew was up ahead. Because the next item on his list was, *Do not drink from the Silver Spring.* And the Wizard had explained, in detail, why not...

Kas was only the first. The Talking Animals of the forest lined the path all morning, popping out of holes in ground or trees, flying or running to the edge of the trees, and staring. Several young Talking Mice ran up the side of Meghan’s robes, making her screech, until their mother popped out of the forest scolding in a voice that reminded Harry of Mrs. Weasley, only an octave and a half higher. The Mice tumbled off Meghan and scurried to the side of the path, pausing to bob and

squeak out, “Our apologies, Princess.”

A large Crow flapped ponderously down near Malfoy and watched him pass, bowing deeply to him, and only to him, Harry noticed. The rest of the Animals were bowing to all four of them. Meghan was smiling brightly, and Malfoy was lapping it up, of course, but Hermione seemed uncomfortable, and Harry took a moment when there were very few observers to ask her about it.

“I... I suppose I should get used to it,” Hermione said, spilling a little water from her canteen onto her hand and rubbing it on her forehead. “If I’m going to be a Queen. But... Harry, do you know how strange that sounds? Me, a Queen? I don’t know how to rule things! I’ve never ruled anything in my life!”

“You think I have?” Harry asked, making her laugh. “Look, Hermione, I don’t know what’s coming. But I do know we’re going to be together. You and me.”

Hermione took his offered hand. “And Meghan,” she said, looking ahead at the girl. “You know, in a way I’m almost glad Ron isn’t here.”

“Why?”

“Well...” Hermione looked down at the ground. “I don’t suppose there’s any harm in telling you now,” she said quietly. “Harry, I rather like Ron.”

“Er, yes,” said Harry. “I rather like Ron too.”

Hermione giggled. “No, you don’t understand. I mean, I *like* him.”

“You... oh.” Several events suddenly made themselves much clearer to Harry, especially portions of the Yule Ball. “And... does he...”

“I don’t know. But I hope he does. I think he might. I don’t know why else he would have been so stupid about Viktor. But I just don’t know. And... it would have felt strange, being crowned alongside him. I know the Kings and Queens are sometimes married now, but I feel like it should be all for all, do you see? They should either be all married, or not be at all.” Hermione looked at him coyly. “Now if *Cho* had come with us, instead of Meghan...”

Harry glared at her, but couldn’t hold it for long, as he thought it over. “No,” he said finally. “It wouldn’t work out right. I can’t see Cho here, somehow. She doesn’t seem to fit.”

“So it’s just as well, then,” said Hermione, fastening the top of her canteen again. “I mean, we’ll still be the same age when we go back. It’s not like we’ll lose our chances. But I will miss Ron.”

“I know. So will I.”

“Are you coming?” Malfoy shouted back towards them. “Or should I just tell them at the palace it’ll only be one King and one Queen this time?”

“You know, he sounds almost friendly,” said Harry as they set off again.

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The Lion, the Snake, and the Safe Room

Chapter 3: Arrival

In the great hall of Cair Paravel, a man paced the floor, running his hands through his long, dark hair. “I mislike letting them walk the countryside unguarded and unwatched,” he said. “As though Narnia had no enemy to be found for a hundred leagues, rather than one who sits in her very lap.”

The woman sitting on the dais raised her eyes from the large, clear crystal she held in her hands. “Peace, brother,” she said. “They are hardly unguarded, with all the Birds crying their names and every Animal flocking to their path. And how unwatched, when I see them myself, this very moment?”

“Our enemy is clever, sister,” the man said, coming to her side. “He may have found a way to show you what is not, and we know he has subverted those of our camp before.”

“But not all at once,” the woman replied. “If he had the power needed to subvert or stop every creature which sees them, every Rabbit and Mouse and Tree, and disrupt my crystal-gazing, all at the same time, he would have used it by now to overthrow us, and to greet these our successors at the palace with arrows and steel, and his own wicked venom. Some of his creatures may watch them come—let them. He should know who comes here, and why.”

“He does know. Or have you forgot so soon what your crystal told you yesternight?”

“I have not forgot it.” The woman stroked one of the edges of the crystal. “Rather do I discount it at this moment.”

“Discount it?” It was almost a howl. “Lion and Knife, *why?* ”

The woman winced. “Gilles, please, calm yourself. You are hurting my ears, and Caelin would never forgive me if I allowed her husband to roar himself into Aslan’s country before his time.”

King Gilles of Narnia lowered his voice, but the intensity of it was still present. “My question remains, Ilana. You have seen that one of the Princes who comes this way has spoken with the White Wizard, that the Prince may have taken the Wizard’s marking and be doing his bidding at this very moment —*why*, in the Lion’s name, would you discount it?”

High Queen Ilana smiled. “Because, my dearest and most foolish brother in royalty, that same Lion you name so casually has himself spoken to me, only this morn, and he bade me do as Ardan and I have set in train to do. We will welcome our successors as the royal Princes and Princesses which they are, and make no distinctions among them but those they force us to make. Here they will be judged by their skills and their merits, and by how well and readily they take to training in those skills they have not.”

The King’s face cleared. “I see. I believe that I see. I will train the young Princes in weaponry,

then?”

“It is your finest skill, and the only reason we tolerate you here,” the High Queen teased. “And Caelin has said she will teach the Princesses what they must know of war and fighting. Nor will they be alone in their training, if so be it you agree now as you did last month...”

“Last month? Ah, I have it—when our lady cook petitioned us that her youngest children be trained in all things martial.” The King frowned. “You would have me teach them myself? I do not begrudge the time, but will it not slow the Princes’ training?”

Ilana shook her head. “I believe it will put them on their mettle. As well as giving us a clearer view of those four who will follow us onto these thrones.”

“Indeed. For a man is best judged by how he treats those who seem inferior.”

The High Queen’s smile grew. “My brother has some wisdom after all.”

“I hide it well, do I not?”

The young royalty of Narnia, unaware that they were being watched, reached the Silver Spring shortly after noon and dropped to the grass thankfully, loosening collars and easing off shoes.

Harry caught his breath and looked around. The sun, high overhead, shone down on a grassy clearing in the woods. In its center sat a deep pool of water, rippling gently in the middle where the spring fed it from beneath. The gurgle of the outflowing Silver Stream was audible from where they sat.

“I had no idea I was so out of shape,” Hermione said, holding a hand to her side. “If I can’t walk for even one morning without hurting all over like this...”

“Wait!” Meghan cried as Malfoy started to stick a foot in the water. “We have to ask first.”

“Ask? Ask who?”

Meghan swished her hand through the water. “Naiad,” she called. “Naiad, where are you?”

A small hump developed in the center of the pond’s ripples, as if a fountain had just been turned on there. Like a fountain, the hump grew larger and larger—but there was a form here, it was no longer just an arch of flowing water—

“What would my Princess?” asked the naiad of the Silver Spring, raising her arms to wipe her streaming, silvery hair away from her face.

“May we use your pool?” Meghan asked politely. “To drink, and cool off?”

The naiad glided towards them without any visible means of support. “A gift for a gift is only

fair,” she said, smiling at them. “I am Nata.”

“Meghan. And Harry, and Hermione, and Draco.”

Nata reached the shore and stood up, proving that she had legs and feet, though there was a suggestion of fins on both feet and hands. “My pool is at the Highnesses’ disposal,” she said, curtsying gracefully.

Malfoy rolled his eyes and stuck his feet in the water. Hermione pointedly moved upstream of him and lowered her canteen into the pool, filling it about halfway. “Funny how the water we had lasted us just to here,” she said, and took a sip. A look of faint surprise crossed her face, and her eyes were suddenly far away, as though she were thinking deep thoughts.

“Isn’t it good?” Harry asked.

“What?” said Hermione distractedly.

“The water. Is there something wrong with it?”

“There is nothing amiss with my water,” said Nata, looking down her nose at Harry. “Why would my Prince suggest such a thing?”

“I didn’t... look, I wasn’t... I’m sorry, but Hermione made a face when she tasted it, and I thought maybe she didn’t like it.”

“I’m sure it’s good water,” said Meghan quickly, as Nata’s brows drew in threateningly.

“Hermione, can I have some?”

Hermione held out the canteen absently. Meghan crossed to her side, giving Harry the evil eye as she came. “You never insult a naiad’s water!” she hissed. “She could drown us all—well, maybe not, but she could hold the boat back so that we get to Cair Paravel in a week instead of a day, or get our clothes so wet they never dry out! I’m going to drink some, and I think you should too. As an apology.”

Harry looked around to see Hermione, now stretching and yawning as if she’d just woken up. “All right?” he asked her.

“All right. Should I not be?”

“You were acting odd for a moment there.”

“How is that different than what I usually do?”

“Odder than usual.”

Hermione smiled. “I’m fine, Harry. And it is good water. It just had a taste I didn’t expect. A Narnian taste. I liked it.”

Nata preened herself a little.

Harry heard a faint noise from Malfoy's direction and leaned around Meghan. "Something for you?" he asked the other boy.

Malfoy was reclining by the side of the pool, dangling his feet in the water. "No, nothing at all."

"Want a drink?"

"I'm not thirsty, thanks."

Nata bristled once more.

"Don't worry, we'll drink it," said Meghan hastily. "We're sure it'll be marvelous."

Harry held out his canteen, and Meghan poured some of Hermione's water into it. "Cheers," he said. They toasted Nata and each other, then drank together.

A sense of peace and comfort enveloped Harry. He thought of the Imperius curse and almost panicked, but another second's thought showed him the difference. The comfort of the Imperius was lying and suffocating, locking him away and forcing him to do another's will. Here, another will was touching his, another presence was real within his mind, but it would force him to nothing, though it had clear wishes and desires of its own.

And it was making those desires clear to him. He saw the plan for Narnia, and the part that the presence hoped he would play. He saw himself as he might be if he did well, triumphant and joyful and ready to be a King.

And then the presence looked at him directly, and Harry squirmed. He had never realized how many stupid, ridiculous, mean, and bad thoughts and wishes he harbored. He wanted to hide them, to keep the presence from seeing them, but the presence could see everything, there was nowhere to hide...

Fear not, little brother, murmured a huge, deep voice. There is no judgment yet. You have much time to improve. But I must ask your permission for a change to be made in you, a change which will help you in your quest and your duty here. I will elucidate.

Harry hesitated after the explanation was finished, but he felt in his bones that the presence literally could not harm him, could not do anything to him which was not for good. *All right*, he said finally. *But just while I'm here.*

Of course. Peace to you, young Prince.

The presence vanished, and in that moment Harry felt his mind changing. Some of his memories slid away, not disappearing but going into a box marked "Not Important Now." Faces and names became blurred, as if by long distance and time. Harry had no sense of panic—he'd agreed to this, and he knew he'd have those thoughts and memories again as soon as he needed them. His mind

was still his; it just had a door in it now that he'd agreed not to open until the time was right.

He looked at Meghan and saw the same awareness in her eyes. "I feel... ready," the girl said. "Or, more ready, I guess."

"Ready to do our best," said Hermione, joining them. "Ready to learn what we need to know."

All together, they turned to look at Malfoy, who looked back at them coolly.

"You really should try this water, Malfoy," Harry said aloud.

"I told you, I'm not thirsty."

"Oh, but it's lovely," said Meghan. "You'll like it if you try it."

"Are you deaf? I don't want any."

"I'm sure he doesn't mean it personally, Nata," Hermione said quickly as the naiad began to draw herself up indignantly. "It's only that he doesn't understand how very good your water is. Maybe if he got better acquainted with it."

A smile of pure mischief flashed onto Nata's face. She snapped her fingers—

And the bank under Malfoy was abruptly no longer there.

Harry savored the look of panic on the blond boy's face for the split second he seemed to hang in midair before plunging into the water below him.

"Right where his nasty feet were," said Meghan, grinning. "Serves him right."

Draco tried to keep his mouth shut, but the shock of hitting the bottom of the pool snapped it open, and he had to swallow if he didn't want to choke.

He gritted his teeth as he felt a great *thing* enter his mind. *Get out*, he thought at it harshly. *I don't want you, I don't need you, get out.*

Hear me out first, said a voice which would not be denied. *I will not change your mind for you, nor, at this time, will I attempt to show you a different path. I will merely help you along the way you have chosen.*

Draco frowned. *Help me? You'll help me go the way I'm going?*

In this time and place, yes. I offer you what I offered the others...

Draco considered it. *I can get the memories back anytime?*

Anytime you wish.

And you'll stay out of my head from now on?

If that is what you want.

It is. Most definitely.

Then I take my leave.

Draco waited out the feeling of a small storm inside his head. It wasn't entirely new to him, since the Wizard had seen fit to implant the information about Narnia in Draco's head permanently.

Not a disaster. I still know what I need to do. I haven't really lost anything important...

Once he was sure he was normal again, he surfaced and looked up at the bank, where the three goody-goodies were all staring at him anxiously. Four, now, since the naiad had joined them.

Say what else you will about her, at least she's pretty.

But he was concerned with someone else right now. And a bit of revenge.

He whipped out his wand and pointed it at Granger.

"Accio !"

Granger screeched as she was yanked off her feet. Draco had just time to feel smug before he realized that she was now coming towards him rapidly, and he had no way to stop her.

The resulting splash was quite impressive.

As Draco struggled upright once more, Freeman's cheerful little voice drilled into his ears.

"Where is it deep, Nata?"

"Just there," the naiad said, pointing. *"Or it will be."*

Freeman took a running start. *"BLUDGERRRRR!"* she shouted, and hit the water hard, spraying Draco and Granger yet again.

Granger shook her hair back and laughed. *"Come on, Harry,"* she called. *"The water's great!"*

"Just a second," Potter said. With one smooth motion, he drew his own wand and aimed it at Draco. *"Abigo !"*

The Banishing Charm hit Draco hard in the chest, knocking him over for the third time in five minutes.

If I spend my whole time in Narnia like this, I'll never get dry.

It was his last coherent thought for several minutes, as Potter's entry into the pool immediately precipitated a water fight.

Hermione helped Meghan out of the pool, laughing and dripping, and Harry and Malfoy clambered out on opposite sides.

“Well, that was fun,” Harry said, shaking water off his glasses. “Except now we're all going to be wet for the rest of the day.”

Nata, who had joined in the fight eagerly and changed sides as rapidly as anyone, coughed slightly behind her hand.

“Could you do something?” said Hermione, turning to her. Naiads had magic with water, after all. “Dry us off, maybe?”

Nata raised her hands and made a gathering gesture towards Hermione. Hermione jumped as she felt the water being pulled from her clothes, and stared as it sped into a large, scintillating ball which hung in the air in front of Nata. The naiad repeated her action with each of the other three, and then caught the huge ball of water in both her hands and dived into her pool, with barely a ripple to mark her passing.

“Not even spotted,” Harry said, looking through his glasses. “Excellent.”

“Hello the spring,” called a voice from nearby, and a man appeared between the trees—no, not a man, Hermione realized, a dryad, and carrying a large hamper, which made him Meghan's friend Oren. Dryads near their trees were apt to look like the tree come to life, while dryads away from their trees looked more human. Still, there was always that essence of *tree* about them, in the colors of their skin and hair, and the ways they moved and spoke...

Hermione didn't stop to wonder how she knew all this, as she had just discovered that she was hungry, a discovery shared by her comrades. Food thus took priority over talk, and after an excellent lunch, Nata reemerged from the water with the fauns' boat.

“My magic allows me to travel through water, and to take things along with me,” she said proudly. “The stream is shallow at first, but deepens soon. Shall I meet your Highnesses where it is first deep enough to take a boat of this size?”

“That is after the first ford?” Oren asked.

Nata nodded, and looked towards Harry. “Your Highness?”

“How much of a walk is it?” Harry asked.

“Less than an hour,” Oren said. “And not difficult terrain.”

“That sounds fine. Thank you, Nata.”

The naiad blushed, tinting the whole spring pink, and sank back into the water, pulling the boat down with her.

“More walking,” Malfoy grumbled as they left the Silver Spring behind. “I shouldn’t have had that second slice of pie.”

“Malfoy’s getting fa-at,” Meghan sang, skipping along in front.

Oren reached out a long arm and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Princess,” was all he said, but implicit in his tone was a mild rebuke, and Meghan was immediately quiet.

“Wish we could do that,” Harry said quietly to Hermione.

Hermione nodded, watching the back of Meghan’s head as her blue and yellow beads flashed in and out of the bars of afternoon sunlight coming between the trees. “I like her, but she’s... well, she’s twelve. And she’s probably difficult when she’s in a bad mood.”

“With that and the age difference, you know who’s going to be High Queen, don’t you?”

Hermione stiffened all over for a second. “I hadn’t thought of that,” she said. *As if being Queen wasn’t bad enough...*

“As long as you’re High King, and not Malfoy,” she said finally. “I couldn’t bear it.”

“I intend to be,” Harry said firmly. “There’s no way in hell I’m letting him have the final say. I don’t really want to be in charge, but if it’s him or me...”

“You’ll do well,” Hermione said, pressing his shoulder. “You always do.”

And people look up to you, Harry, and follow you. You just can’t see that yet.

“If there is anything you wish to know about Narnia, ask me,” said Oren, looking over his shoulder. “If I do not know, I shall endeavor to find out.”

“Tell us about the Kings and Queens,” said Hermione. “We know their names, and that they’re all part human, but nothing else about them.”

“How’s the succession work?” Malfoy put in. “Do they abdicate when we get there, or do we have to go through some ritual first?”

“Eager to begin your rule, Prince Draco?” The dryad laughed. “The Kings and Queens are all young, and there is no need for them to step down until all of you are fully ready to take up your crowns. And then there is the matter of earning those crowns... but that will take care of itself. So. The Kings and Queens of Narnia as she stands today.

“High King Ardan is respected for his knowledge, and for his fairness. He is no weakling, but his greatest might is at the negotiating table, not on the battlefield. King Gilles is the fighting King in this generation, and he fights well and nobly. He loves to laugh, and to joke, and he has been King Ardan’s greatest friend for many years, from childhood.

“The Queens, too, have known one another since they were young, although they are very different. High Queen Ilana is often merry, but sometimes mysterious, for she is a Wise Woman and sees things hidden from others. It was she who foresaw your coming into Narnia; Aslan showed you to her in a dream. Queen Caelin has the quickest temper in Narnia, but also the shortest memory, at least if she was wrong in her anger. Anger her justly at your peril.”

“And they’re only part human?” Malfoy asked. “How much?”

“King Ardan and Queen Ilana are both one-eighth human, each with one human great-grandparent. Queen Caelin is half human, and King Gilles...” Oren frowned. “By ancestry, he is one-quarter human, but his is a special case.”

“Special how?” Harry asked.

“Do you have skin-turners in your homeland?”

“You mean people who can change into animals?” Hermione said. “Yes, we do.”

“Is there any particular kind of animal they change into? And do they change by themselves, or is the change forced upon them?”

“There are different kinds,” said Harry. “Some pick when to change, some don’t. The ones who don’t pick change into wolves at every full moon, they’re called werewolves. The ones who do pick are called Animagi, and they can be any kind of animal, but I think it depends a lot on the person.”

“Are either of them widely considered evil?”

“Werewolves,” said Malfoy before anyone else could. “Most people think they’re bloodthirsty and disgusting and wouldn’t have one nearby if you paid them.”

Hermione contemplated for a moment the satisfying sound that would be made by Malfoy’s cheek coming into swift contact with her hand.

“But not all werewolves are bad,” Meghan put in. “They’re just people, and they can be good or bad like everyone else.”

“I never said all werewolves were bad,” Malfoy said priggishly. “I just said what most people think.”

Meghan sniffed.

“Here in Narnia, skin-turners choose when they will change,” said Oren. “The trait runs in families, and the most common form is that of a wolf. Traditionally, werewolves and skin-turners in general are evil creatures, but sometimes one breaks away from his family and chooses to be good. A boy named Gilles was one such.”

Malfoy’s head whipped around so fast, he nearly lost his balance. “*What? Your King ...*”

“If you dislike it so heartily, perhaps you should not proceed to the palace, Prince,” said Oren, meeting Malfoy’s incredulous stare. “I am sure a family could be found in the woods to take you in until Aslan comes, to return you to your own place...”

Malfoy dropped his eyes. “Never said I didn’t want to go on,” he muttered.

Hermione covered her mouth to hide a smile.

“Besides, he’s really more like an Animagus, isn’t he?” Harry asked the dryad. “He changes when he wants to, not when he has to?”

Oren nodded. “King Gilles is a renowned fighter in both his forms,” he said. “I am sure he will want to train you Princes in weaponswork himself.”

“Just the Princes?” said Hermione indignantly. “What about us?”

“Yeah, what about the girls?” Meghan added. “Don’t we get to learn weapons?”

“Of course,” said Oren, smiling at Meghan. “Did you think you would be kept behind an embroidery frame? No, the Princesses of Narnia know how to defend themselves and their country. You will learn archery and swordwork from Queen Caelin, who is nearly as fine a fighter as her husband. She will also tutor all of you in music.”

“Music?” said Malfoy, and to Hermione’s surprise, he sounded interested. “Does she play or sing?”

“Both, and in many different styles. She may even teach you some of the songs of her mother’s people.”

“Who are they?” Meghan asked.

“Queen Caelin is the daughter of a merwoman.” Oren sighed. “Her story is not a happy one, and I tell you only that you may not blunder. I assume you all know of the land of Calormen, Narnia’s great enemy to the south. Reasa, the Queen’s mother, was captured by a Calormene knight. I use the term loosely, for he was surely no knight as we understand the term, a good and gentle man who defends the helpless and the weak.”

Hermione shivered as the import of the story struck home to her. Meghan had her hands pressed to her mouth, and Harry’s were curled into fists. Even Malfoy looked vaguely outraged, but that might just be the effect of a story about cross-breeding.

“Some said it might have been kinder had Reasa died, but I cannot agree. For had she died, we would have no second Queen on the thrones at Cair Paravel, and perhaps no Kings or Queens at all. Queen Caelin’s other great talent is in the arts of healing, and she has saved all their lives at least once.”

“Will she teach us that too?” Meghan asked excitedly.

“If you ask it of her, perhaps she will.”

“Aren’t you going to have enough to do?” Harry asked.

“Learning something more never hurts,” Meghan shot over her shoulder.

“What about the other King and Queen?” Hermione asked. “The High King and Queen?”

“King Ardan has many kinds of blood, human, faun, dryad, and naiad. Queen Ilana, apart from her human ancestry, is all dryad. They will tutor you in other arts, for it is well that a Prince or Princess should know much.”

“What do you do for fun in Narnia?” said Meghan curiously. “Do you ever dance?”

“Oh, Princess...” Oren laughed. “If you like to dance, you will be happy in Narnia.”

Stories of balls at Cair Paravel, of midnight revels in summer, of dances celebrating snow and moonlight, filled the rest of the walk to the place where Nata waited with the boat, and most of the afternoon besides. Two Deer, a Stag and his Doe, brought a dinner in a hamper slung between them, and allowed Meghan and Hermione to stroke them before they galloped off again.

“What is left will serve for breakfast,” said Oren as Harry set the last of the uneaten pasties in the hamper and shut the lid. “And then, luncheon at Cair Paravel, and your new lives begin.”

Meghan could barely eat anything the next morning for excitement. The Kings and Queens had danced through her dreams all night, offering all sorts of faces: kind, stern, laughing, sober, mocking, polite, cruel, loving...

She sat in the bow of the boat, peering forward to see if she could see the castle, and feeling both sun and spray on her face. *Will they like me? What will they think of me? Will I be a proper Princess?*

But what was a proper Princess? What should she look like, who should she be?

A proper Princess, Meghan found herself thinking, is the daughter of a King and his Queen. She is as wise as her father, as serene as her mother, and as beautiful as the dawn.

And she fit none of those categories in the least.

She snuck a look over her shoulder. Harry and Hermione were learning to play Narnian cat's cradle from Oren, and Malfoy was sitting by himself, trailing his fingers in the water. *None of them are any of those things either*, she tried to console herself.

But they all have other things to offer. Harry is a leader, a strong one; Hermione is so smart, everyone knows her; and Malfoy's good at sneaking, and I suppose Kings and Queens have things they need sneaked like everyone else.

I'm just not good at anything. I wasn't even good at being my mother's daughter...

Her mind stopped there, outside the closed door. *Not here, not now*, her thoughts whispered. *Here is pain, pain that needs healing. Healing is near. Do not be afraid.*

But Meghan couldn't help it.

“And here we are!” Oren said as the boat's prow bumped gently against the Cair Paravel river dock. “Thank you, friends,” he added over the side of the boat.

A male and a female head rose from the water. “Not at all,” said the male.

“Our duty to the Princes and Princesses,” added the female.

Both heads bobbed respectfully, and the naiads of the river who had escorted them here were gone, swimming back to the house of their father, the river god.

If they'd been in a boat on the ocean, Meghan thought dizzily, she'd be able to blame the salt on her lips on the spray, but the Great River was still fresh this far from the sea, and the only place the salt could have come from was her own sweat. She was so frightened—what if the Kings and Queens took one look and said, “No”? What if they sent her back through the wardrobe, back to her own world, where she would never be anything more than an inconvenient accident, a reminder of pain, unwanted and useless...

“Get out!” shouted a furious voice.

Meghan's head jerked up. A woman, a dark-skinned woman was chasing a black dog down the steps which led from the palace—she wore an apron, she must be a cook—

“Ruined, absolutely ruined, you filthy nuisance!” The woman hurled a small black object, nearly hitting the fleeing dog. “Out, and don't you dare come back!”

The dog bounded down the final steps to the dock, then turned and looked up at the woman, whining.

“*I said out!*” The woman hurled something else after the dog, something which flashed metallic in the sunlight, and rang as it landed on the timbers of the dock (the dog had dodged it in time). She turned on her heel and marched back up the steps, disappearing with a final-sounding bang through the door at the top.

Meghan ran down the dock to the dog, which was sitting forlornly at the base of the steps. “What a horrible woman!” she said fervently, letting the dog sniff her fingers, then petting it vigorously. “If she works at the palace, they should fire her. She’s mean. What did she throw at him, anyway? It sounded like it would have hurt...”

Harry coughed.

Meghan looked over at him. “What?”

Harry was holding something round and metallic in his hands. But it wasn’t the pot lid or piece of scrap metal Meghan had assumed it was. Instead, it was shining silver, set with faceted green stones, and besides being rather battered at the moment, looked unmistakably regal...

“Your Majesty,” said Oren politely to someone behind Meghan, and bowed. Malfoy’s eyes went very wide, and he too bowed. Hermione dropped an unsteady curtsy, which would probably have been better if she’d got out of the boat first.

Meghan slowly turned around.

A man stood behind her where the dog had sat, a tall and dark-haired man. He was holding out his hand to Harry, who straightened up from his bow and passed over the coronet. “Bent out of shape again,” the man said, shaking his head. “Never mind, it’ll do.” He set it carefully on his head, where, after an initial wobble or two, it stayed. Then he looked down, and smiled.

“So you’re Princess Meghan,” he said, holding out his hand. “I’m King Gilles. Thank you for taking my part, but I hope you don’t insist on firing that lady who threw my crown out after me. I’d rather not lose the best wife I’ve ever had.”

Meghan looked into laughing gray eyes and smiled back, timidly, and laid her hand in his.

Maybe everything could still be all right.

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The Lion, the Snake, and the Safe Room

Chapter 4: Presentation

Draco hung back as the group reached the top of the stairs. He'd thought Kings and Queens would be more... royal. Queen Caelin, in the one glance he'd had of her, had been screaming like a fishwife, and King Gilles was behaving as though he were their much older brother, or perhaps an uncle. After being introduced to them all, he had asked them to accompany him back up to the palace, "so that my beloved may leave my eyes where they lie, and the rest of my body as well." Potter had snickered, while Granger uttered a faint squeak.

"Harry, if you would get the door?" Gilles asked, adjusting Freeman, who was riding piggyback on him.

Potter pulled open the door and held it. "Oh my beloved and oh the delight of my eyes," droned Gilles, walking forward into a billow of steam. "I have returned from my travels, and I bring wondrous tidings—yow!"

"Don't you bring that Calormene nonsense in here!" admonished a testy female voice from inside the steam, as Gilles shook his right hand furiously and made outrageous faces. "It may be *your* palace, but this is *my* kitchen, as long as I can stand on my own two feet and keep it running, and in twenty-seven years I haven't failed once!"

"Abra, that *hurt*," Gilles whined, letting Freeman slide to the floor. "I was only having fun."

"Only having fun indeed. And who might these be?"

"Our new young royalty," said Gilles, waving them forward through the door, which Potter let swing shut behind them. "Prince Harry, Princess Hermione, Prince Draco, Princess Meghan."

Some of the steam cleared away, and Granger and Freeman both gasped. Draco could appreciate the feeling.

The woman facing them was plump and red-haired, with a wooden spoon sticking out of the pocket of her embroidered apron. She was also short. Her head was only a bit higher than Potter's waist, and Potter was nowhere near tall.

A Dwarf, he recalled from the Wizard's lessoning. A Red Dwarf. Oren mentioned a family he knew whose mum worked at the palace, and I'd bet she's it. The dryad had said goodbye to them outside and started back for his own tree near Lantern Waste. He said he'd see us soon, but trees live loads longer than humans, so soon for him could be anything. Wish I knew.

He frowned. Was he actually unhappy that the dryad had left them?

Nah. Can't be. He was just familiar, and everything here is so weird that I stick to anything even a little familiar.

That had to be it.

“Well, you can’t meet Ardan and Ilana looking like that,” the Red Dwarf woman said, shaking her head. “It wouldn’t be proper.”

“Oh, Abra, why worry about proper?” Gilles said pleadingly. “They’ll have all their lives to worry about proper. Don’t you think Ardan and Ilana might like to see them first, and then have them cleaned up?”

“Worry about your own business, Gilles, and I’ll worry about mine. Go and get yourself cleaned up. Afternoon Court is just after luncheon.”

“To Jadis with Afternoon—ouch!”

“You watch your language, Gilles Norois,” Abra said threateningly, waving the wooden spoon as close to his nose as she could manage (the middle of his chest), “or it’s not just your knuckles I’ll be rapping!”

“Yes, Abra,” said Gilles meekly. “Do you know where Caelin might be?”

“In your rooms, I don’t doubt, and I’d tread carefully if I were you. She’s never been a good hand at baking, and this was the first batch of smallcakes she’d managed that weren’t missing something. For you to distract her long enough for the entire batch to burn...” Abra shook her head. “All I can say is, it’s a good thing these four have come when they have, for we may not have a full set of royalty much longer.”

Gilles gulped theatrically. “In that case, I go to face my doom. Farewell, my friends, you have been brave company for a nobleman’s last hours. Farewell, farewell...” He clasped all their hands, kissing the girls’ foreheads and clapping Potter and Draco on the shoulder, and then strode off through an inner door.

Freeman giggled. “He’s silly,” she said. “I like him.”

“Silly he is,” said Abra. “And witless, and scatterbrained. And still a kind man, and a just king, if you can bring his mind to bear on the task at hand long enough. Now, then.” She surveyed them all. “You’d probably be glad of a bath and fresh clothes, would you not?”

“Oh, yes,” said Granger feelingly as Potter nodded.

“Please,” Freeman said.

“Fine by me,” Draco said nonchalantly. In truth, he was itching to get out of his robes. He’d never worn a set two days in a row, let alone three, and he would be willing to swear that he could take quill and parchment and reproduce every place on the inside of the robes where the seams weren’t quite finished or the fabric had frayed. And a bath sounded like heaven. The closest thing they’d had on the trip was the water fight in the Silver Spring, and he didn’t want to think too much about that right now...

Besides, the bath would give him a much-needed chance to fix his hair. He hadn't been able to do much with it on the journey, because Granger and Freeman would start giggling every time he did, and Potter would give him a disdainful look.

Just because yours always looks as if you'd only just escaped a train wreck is no reason mine should.

"I'll have you shown to your rooms, then," Abra said, and turned away. "Kargin!" she shouted towards the inner door. "Garnet!"

"Yes?" reverberated back along the corridor, in two voices, high and low.

"Come here!"

"Coming," came the chorus, and a moment later, a Red Dwarf boy and girl came running into the room. They were dressed alike, in what looked like some kind of livery.

"Kargin, show Prince Harry and Prince Draco their rooms," Abra instructed the boy. "Help them bathe and dress, and fetch them something to eat. Garnet, Princess Hermione and Princess Meghan. They're to be presented at Afternoon Court."

The boy sketched a bow and the girl bobbed a curtsy. "If the Princesses would follow me," she said, starting for the door. "And please, which of you is which?"

"I'm Hermione," Granger said. "This is Meghan."

"Pleased to meet Your Highnesses."

"This way, please," said the Dwarf boy in a rather sullen tone. Abra cleared her throat, and he added grudgingly, "Your Highnesses."

Potter edged up beside their guide as they left the kitchen. "You don't have to bother with the Highness stuff unless we're in front of someone who'll mind," he said. "I'm Harry. That's Draco. You're... Kargin?"

"Yes." The Dwarf was about to say something else, but Draco cut in.

"Actually, Kargin, you're to use my title. Any time you speak to me, public or private. Understand?" *Honestly, Potter, don't you know anything? Look at that Abra person—they gave her some leeway, and now she thinks she runs the place! You have to be hard on the lower sorts, or they get uppity.*

"Yes, Your Highness," Kargin said promptly.

Well, that's more like it.

Three seconds later, the tone the Dwarf had used sank in.

Oh, so that's how it's going to be. Well, you'll learn fast enough, shorty. I don't stand for cheek from servants. Wonder what you're allowed to do around here for punishments?

“What’s this presentation thing?” Harry asked Kargin, leaning down a bit to direct his voice.

“Not much. You dress up, have your name announced, go down on one knee, get the High King’s blessing, and leave. At least that’s how mine went.” The Dwarf’s tone acquired a tinge of envy. “It might be different for you, being a Prince and all.”

“Hold it,” Harry said. “I never asked to be a Prince. It just sort of happened. And if you want to know the truth, if somebody offered me a way home right now, I’d probably take it.”

Kargin looked up at him in amazement. “You mean—you don’t *want* to be a king?”

Harry shrugged. “I never thought about it before. We don’t have kings where I come from—well, we have a queen, but she’s really just a figurehead, she doesn’t do much.”

“How does it work, then?”

Explaining the parliamentary system of government, and the altered form the magical world used, took up the rest of the walk to their rooms, and Harry had to shout answers to Kargin’s bellowed questions over the roar of the water pouring from the palace cisterns to fill the two tubs in the bathroom. Malfoy sat on one of the beds in the bedroom, looking distant and lofty.

Practicing for his coronation, I suppose.

“Soap and towels in the small cabinet,” Kargin said as Harry shut off the water to the second tub. “Do you think His Highness out there will be able to manage bathing himself?”

“I’ll take care of him, don’t worry.”

“I’ll be back with luncheon in a little while, then,” Kargin said, making for the door. “Don’t drown. Mum would never forgive me.”

“Mum?”

“Abra’s my mum. There’s seven of us all together, and Garnet and I are the youngest. She’s a year younger than me.”

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

Harry stopped in the process of pulling off the shirt he’d worn under his robes. “Huh. I’m going on fifteen. And I think Malfoy’s there already.”

“Oh, Great Aslan, no,” Kargin moaned. “If he’s older than you...”

“I know, I know. Don’t worry, if they start talking about making him High King...” Harry stopped. “Why are we worried?” he said. “They’ll realize he’s no good as soon as he opens his ugly mouth. Not that I’ll be much better, but at least I’m not a total git. I hope.”

“Doesn’t seem like it. I’ll be back when you’re finished, *Your Highness*.” Kargin ducked out the door, laughing, as Harry backhanded water towards him.

“There you are,” said Malfoy’s voice from the bedroom. “What kept you?”

“I was talking with Harry, Your Highness.” Harry chuckled at the outright rudeness in Kargin’s voice. “Your Highness’ bath is ready, if it please Your Highness to step into Your Highness’ bathroom.”

“Just a second, there,” Malfoy said lazily. “Don’t you run off.” The sound of someone standing up. “We need to get a few things clear, you hairy little freak. I don’t like your attitude, and I don’t like your tone. I’ll be speaking to whoever’s in charge of the servants about you. I’m a Prince, and I want proper respect for it, understand?”

“Proper respect, Your Highness. Yes, Your Highness.” Harry peered through the crack in the door—Kargin was bowing repeatedly, his forehead nearly touching the ground. “At your service, Your Highness. Enjoy your bath, Your Highness.” He backed out of the room and closed the door.

Harry returned to undressing, grinning to himself. He rather liked Kargin.

True to his word, the Red Dwarf returned with a tray just as Malfoy ventured out of the bathroom, towel wrapped around his waist. “Don’t we get new clothes from somewhere?” the Slytherin demanded. “I am not showing up at court in three-day-old robes.”

Kargin set the tray down on one of the beds. “The Princes’ wardrobes,” he said, nodding to the two pieces of furniture.

“Not for climbing into,” Harry quipped. “Which one is which?”

Kargin tapped the wardrobe made of darker wood. “This one’s yours. The other is for His Highness.”

“Oh, stop calling me that,” Malfoy grumbled, pulling the door of the lighter wardrobe open.

“But Your Highness told me to call Your Highness that.”

Malfoy made an anatomically improbable suggestion. “Just get out,” he finished.

Kargin looked at Harry.

“Your call,” Harry said. “Stay or go.”

“I could stand to get cleaned up a bit before Court,” Kargin admitted. “But my room’s just down the hall if you need anything, Harry. I think you’ll be fine, though. Your clothes don’t look much different from ours.”

“What if I need something?” Malfoy said, pulling a dark green outfit from the wardrobe and looking at it critically.

Kargin snorted. “If Your Highness needs something, Your Highness can...” His suggestion was even more improbable than Malfoy’s, and rather lengthier. “And that’s if Your Highness can even find it, considering its size,” he wound up. “Good afternoon, Your Highness.”

Malfoy snatched a fork off the tray and hurled it at Kargin, who ducked out the door. Harry muffled his laughter in his bath towel.

Hermione sat still, her eyes closed, enjoying the novel feeling of someone else combing her hair. “This may hurt a little,” Garnet warned as the comb struck a knot. “Just hold still.”

“There are hair clips in with the jewelry,” said Meghan from the darkness. “Some of them are really big.”

“High Queen Ilana insisted on large ones,” said Garnet, laughing. “She said they’d be needed. Can you find some that match Hermione’s dress?”

Meghan rooted through the box, jewels clinking gently against each other. “Yes, here’s one. And here’s a match. And—ooh, what are these? Did somebody’s necklace break?”

“No, I don’t think so. I can’t imagine what they’re for.”

Garnet sounded rather too baffled, Hermione thought. She opened her eyes. “Meghan, let me see?”

Meghan trotted across the room, a small, elegant wooden box in one hand. Hermione opened it. Loose, large beads in all sorts of colors sparkled at her from within.

“Turn around,” she told Meghan. “I think I know. And you do too,” she added towards Garnet. “Fibber.”

“As you say, Princess,” said Garnet demurely.

Hermione eased a blue-painted wooden bead off one of Meghan’s braids and slipped a golden bead into its place. “They’re for your hair,” she said. “Just like the large clips are for mine, because there’s so much of it. Do you have those?”

Meghan lifted the clips above her shoulder. Hermione took them and handed them back to Garnet,

then continued replacing Meghan's beads.

"Did the High Queen really tell you to make all these?" Meghan asked, stirring the beads in the box with a finger.

"She asked the Dwarves to make them, certainly. I don't work with metal myself, but some of my brothers do. I think... yes, these clips are my brother's work. My second brother."

"How many brothers do you have?" Hermione asked.

"Six. All older. Miners, craftsmen, builders. And two hopeful warriors. But only one of those is my brother."

"Who's the other one, then?" Meghan asked. "Your sister?"

"No, I have no sisters." Garnet jumped down from the bed, where she'd been standing to do Hermione's hair. "I think that's all, Princess. The mirror is on the back of the door."

Hermione slid on a last bead. "You're done too, Meghan," she said. "Should we go look together?"

"Please."

The girls walked towards the door hand in hand. At Hermione's nod, Garnet swung it closed and stepped back.

Hermione's breath caught a little. The last time she'd looked this elegant, it had been for the Yule Ball, and she remembered vividly the hours she had spent wrestling her hair into shape. It had threatened to come down with every quick move of her head, and her scalp had ached for days afterwards. She'd slimmed for a month to fit into her dress robes, and still been unhappy with the figure she presented in them. No one else seemed able to see the faults, but she was aware of them at every turn.

But the young woman in the mirror wore her hair in a simple and comfortable style, pulled back and twisted over each ear before being secured with a sparkling blue clip. The stones in the clips matched those in her short necklace, and both matched the fabric of the dress she wore, which had a high waist and a long, flowing skirt.

The girl beside her wore a dress of two layers, a sheer skirt and bodice of gold overlying a long robe of white embroidered with green leaves and vines. Her golden necklace was studded with chips of emerald and slivers of moonstone, and white, green, and gold beads adorned her braids.

Meghan let out her breath in wonder. "We look like princesses," she murmured.

"You are Princesses," Garnet reminded her. "And the Princes should be ready as well. I'll check and see if they are."

Hermione and Meghan looked at each other as the door closed behind Garnet. “Are you ready?” Hermione asked.

“No. Are you nervous?”

“Yes. Are you?”

“Yes.”

They both laughed weakly.

The majordomo of the castle was a very large, friendly man whom Harry liked on sight. “Walk straight out there,” he told them in the small antechamber where they were waiting for Afternoon Court to begin. “Princess Meghan, you’re leading, so you’ll have to watch. When you’re even with the last throne, stop and turn to your right, so you’re facing the Kings and Queens. Then you all advance four paces, stop, and go to one knee. When you’re dismissed, Prince Harry, you lead the line straight back here, and Abra and I’ll take care of you.”

Meghan nodded tightly, her hands knotted in the gold fabric.

“Relax,” Harry told her, squeezing her wrist gently. “You’ll wrinkle your dress.”

As she gave him a shaky smile, trumpets blared out. “Pardon me,” the majordomo said, threading his way quickly past them. “Have to open the Court...”

He closed the door behind him, but his voice carried through it perfectly well. “Hear, all ye Creatures of Narnia, and all visitors from distant lands! Today, our Kings and Queens are pleased to sit in Afternoon Court, and hear petitions and thanksgivings from their subjects. But before any business be enacted, the Kings and Queens are pleased to welcome, and to present to Narnia, those who will next take the four thrones. Hear their names and mark them well! Princess Meghan!”

Meghan lifted her head and pushed the door open, stepping through.

“Prince Draco!”

Malfoy cleared the smirk off his face and replaced it with a cool and vaguely snide look.

“Princess Hermione!”

“I’m going to faint,” Hermione whispered.

“No, you’re not,” Harry told her, giving her a little push forward, just enough to get her moving.

“Prince Harry!”

Harry swallowed and stepped out the door. *Here goes nothing.*

He was glad he'd worn red. His flushing cheeks might not be quite so obvious now. Everyone in the room, down to the smallest Animal present, was looking at them. Rather than seem to be gawking, Harry kept his eyes on the back of Hermione's head, which looked smoother than usual. When she stopped, so did he, and turned, as instructed, to the right.

The dais where the Kings and Queens sat was quite close, so that Harry could see all their faces. Queen Caelin, on the far left, was smiling now, her eyes lingering on Meghan, whom Harry realized she resembled somewhat. Beside her, King Gilles dropped an eyelid so fast Harry wasn't sure he'd seen anything. The woman on his other side must be the High Queen, Ilana. She looked a bit like Hermione, but her hair was straighter and her face quieter, sadder, Harry wanted to say. Beside her, directly in front of Harry, sat High King Ardan.

The High King could have been anybody, but he wasn't. It sounded stupid even in Harry's mind, but there seemed to be no other way to describe the man. He was neither old nor young, though his brown hair held a few gray strands. Nothing in his face or bearing shouted out that he was special. And yet people would find themselves deferring to him, asking his opinion and respecting it, pledging themselves to follow him.

Hermione's hiss broke Harry out of his reverie. Belatedly, he dropped to one knee.

The High King stood. "We do recognize these, our brethren from the world of Men, as our successors onto these thrones which Aslan has given us," he said formally. "At such time as they have proved themselves worthy, by tests of body, mind, heart, and soul, the thrones and the rule of Narnia shall be theirs. And to give them help in their struggles, we do now bless them."

He stepped down from the dais and took the two steps which brought him to Harry. "Prince Harry, I bless you with the sign of the Knife," he said, and slid his thumb across Harry's forehead, first vertically, then horizontally, like a small letter T, just over Harry's scar. "May Aslan ever protect and defend you."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said quietly.

"We will speak more after Court," the High King said almost without moving his lips, and moved on. "Princess Hermione, I bless you with the sign of the Knife..."

When the blessings were finished (Malfoy had looked distinctly odd while he was being blessed, and rubbed his hands against his green tunic when it was done), the High King returned to the dais. "Brethren, you are dismissed," he said, looking down at them. "Go forth and learn well, and return to us ready in all ways."

Harry got to his feet, bowed, and started for the antechamber, hearing Hermione's footsteps behind him. The majordomo held the door open for them and winked as Harry looked up. "Good work," he said when Meghan had passed the door. "Just wait in here, Abra'll be along in a minute to take care of you. Well done, all."

Hermione fell into a chair. "My heart's going like you after a Snitch, Harry," she said with a

shaky laugh. “I was sure I was going to scream, or faint, or something.”

“Who goes around blessing people?” Malfoy asked. “And why do we need blessings, anyway?”

“Because we’re taking a big job,” said Meghan. “We’ll need all the help we can get.”

Malfoy sniffed but refused to comment further.

“Come along, now,” said Abra, bustling into the room at the far end, “to the library with you all. The Kings and Queens will come to you there when Court’s finished.”

Draco stared out the window towards the sea, half-listening to the conversations behind him—the Dwarf girl chattering with Freeman and Granger about clothes and hairstyles, Potter trying to explain Quidditch to the boy.

They’re hopeless. I bet the King tells them off first thing he comes in, for fraternizing with the servants. You just can’t do that kind of thing, if you’re going to be an effective ruler. And they obviously are effective. Look at the way everyone watches them...

But his mind didn’t seem to want to focus on the Court presentation, much the same way it wouldn’t focus on the water fight at the Silver Spring. *Not important, it nattered. Not important to a young Prince. A young Prince must be single-minded, not thinking about anything he does not have to...*

Draco frowned. Was the voice in his head back again? This time, he was going to hold it down and figure out what was going on here. He shut his eyes and concentrated. *One thing at a time. So the Spring, and the fight. Why don’t I want to think about it?*

Well, it was fun. He could admit that to himself, at least. *It was fun to splash everyone, and get splashed. I might want to do it again sometime. As long as no one would see, or know about it.*

But the presentation wasn’t fun, not like that. So why don’t I want to think about that either?

He knew, but did not want to admit that he knew. But not admitting it was tantamount to admitting it, so now he *had* admitted it...

And I’ve just confused myself. Bravo, Draco. Masterful.

The blessing by the High King—the unexpected touch on his forehead, sketching the Knife which had killed the great Lion, and the invocation of that same Lion to protect and defend him—it made him feel strange. He knew what he ought to feel; he ought to feel excited that no one had realized who he was really working for; he ought to feel gleeful that he had been placed under the protection of those whom he would someday bring down; he ought to... he ought to...

But I don’t.

A knock on the door startled everyone. Meghan pressed a hand against her heart. *Don't panic, don't panic...*

Harry stood up from his seat at the long table in the middle of the room. "Come in!" he called.

"At last, the next generation arrives," said a woman's voice, and Queen Caelin entered the room, taking off her crown and setting it on the table. "You looked well at Court," she said as Gilles came in behind her.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," said Hermione.

"Time enough for formality in public, little sister. I am Caelin to all of you, and Gilles you already know from our shocking performance of this afternoon." She shook her head. "My abominable temper will be the downfall of our land yet."

"Ah, no, my love," Gilles said, stroking his wife's hair. "Not with such an able negotiator as Ardan able to smooth over any troubles which may arise."

"True enough, true enough. Speaking of Ardan, where is he?"

"He and Ilana were delayed by a last petition. They should be here in a moment. Meanwhile, personal introductions. This is Hermione, and this Harry."

"One at a time, scamp," Caelin said, laughing. "Hermione, is it? A lovely name, to match a lovely face." She embraced the older girl and kissed her forehead. "And Harry." She embraced him as well, then looked him in the eye. "We will speak later, if you wish," she said quietly. "About wounds and healing. If you understand."

"I... think I do." Harry's eyes were fixed on hers. "Yes. I understand."

"And this is Meghan," said Gilles, putting an arm around her. "I think her quite the prettiest of them, though Hermione comes close."

Caelin laughed, turning away from Harry. "You only say that because she looks like me," she teased. "Come here, my dear."

Meghan came, hoping her shaking knees didn't show.

"Are you frightened?"

So much for that. "Yes, ma'am. Caelin."

"Why?"

“I don’t know... I don’t know if I’m good enough,” Meghan said in a rush. “I don’t know if I can be a Queen.”

“How familiar that sounds,” said Caelin, sitting down and pulling out the next chair over for Meghan. “I said the same, some years ago, when Ilana told me that she had seen Aslan, and that he wished us to rule over Narnia. I actually refused to come to Cair Paravel for quite some time. I believe I was hoping that if I held out long enough, it would become untrue.”

“But you were a grown-up. I’m just a kid.”

“I was not quite so grown-up as you think. Adults do not always think logically, or rationally. And your youth gives you some advantages. You will be able to learn much more than I could, and so quickly.” Caelin’s hand traced Meghan’s cheek. “When the time comes, you will be ready, even though you may still think you are not. I say by the Lion that if you are not ready, it will not be through lack of help from me.”

Meghan shot off her chair and into the Queen’s arms, hugging the woman hard.

“And all of you may take the same message,” she heard Caelin say over her head. “If you need help, ask us. We are here to be asked.”

“Or you could merely demand it as does everyone else,” Gilles said, eliciting some chuckles.

Harry said something in answer to this, but Meghan had stopped listening. Just now, she had all she could need or want. Tomorrow, things would be different—they might even be different in an hour or a minute—but at this moment, everything she needed was encompassed in the circle of one woman’s arms.

“But if we just demand it, then we’ll be like everyone else,” Harry said. “We’ll prove we’re royalty by asking politely.”

“You know your definitions well, little brother,” said a merry voice, and High Queen Ilana pushed the door farther open. “Though by the standards of the world at large, you have them reversed.”

Malfoy muttered something Harry didn’t catch.

Gilles turned his head. “I’m sorry, Draco?” he said politely.

Malfoy jerked around and stared at him. “What?”

“You said something I did not catch.”

“Were you meant to hear it, Gilles?” asked High King Ardan, following his wife into the room. “Your ears have led you into trouble on other occasions.”

“Ah, then I withdraw the question, if the remark was not meant to be heard. Aslan knows I say

much that I would not wish repeated.”

“And since that is the case, I may ask Prince Draco to step aside with me, for some private converse,” said Ardan. “The next room, perhaps.”

Malfoy preened visibly. Harry’s heart sank. *I have to say something... maybe they’ll tell me to shut up, but I have to try...*

“Please, you can’t let him be the High King,” he said to the High Queen as soon as the door was closed behind king and prince. “You can’t. I don’t like him, I never have, but it’s not just that. He’s bigoted, he’s sneaky, he’d do anything to get back at someone he hates, and I think he might be in with the White Wizard already, that’s his kind of thing...”

“Peace, Harry,” Ilana said, raising a hand. “We understand this about Draco. For your part, understand that our days are not quite like the days of the High King Peter, who was High King merely because he was the firstborn of the family. You bear no blood relation to any of these who will reign with you. Thus, who will rule as High King and Queen will be determined by your fitness and your wishes.” She looked piercingly at him. “Do you so want to be High King, that you would speak out against Draco?”

“No! I don’t even really want to be a King in the first place... but I’m here, so I have to be, don’t I?”

“Not necessarily,” said Caelin. “If your entire heart and soul were against kingship, I am sure Aslan would intervene. But if you were so set against it, I doubt he would ever have brought you here.”

“One of us wonders if a certain Prince should ever have been brought here,” said Gilles quietly. “I know that I should not question Aslan, but what you say, Harry, and what we know of Draco from his one hour in the palace gives me grave doubt.”

“Your doubts are unfounded, brother,” said Ilana, smiling at him. “Aslan’s plan is sound.”

“It had better be,” said Hermione. “Draco Malfoy could ruin almost anything. If he goes and ruins Narnia...”

Draco couldn’t keep himself from strutting a little as he followed Ardan into the next room. The High King had singled him out!

He saw the greatness in me —I always knew it was there —I’ll be High Prince before you can say “wand” —

Then the look on the High King’s face sank in.

Disappointment.

Er, maybe not.

“This is your only warning, Prince,” the High King said quietly. “Conduct of the sort you showed this noon will not be tolerated. A king should serve his people first and foremost, and that service begins with courtesy.”

Draco stared at the man, feeling his jaw muscles loosen. “But...”

“Your conduct would have been wrong had it been to any of the servants here,” the High King went on. “Towards Kargin, who will be training with you in the knightly arts, it ranges towards inexcusable.”

“What?”

“Kargin and his sister are here, not as servants, but to become accomplished. They may, in time, grace your Court. If you prove yourself worthy to have one.” Twin searchlights of blue pinned Draco as if he were a rabbit. “I will not give up the crown of Narnia to any lesser man than myself. Nor will my lady, nor my brother and sister in royalty. Rather will we reign beyond our years and wait until Aslan again opens a door between the two worlds. If you wish to be crowned, comport yourself as befits a king.”

Draco dropped his eyes to the rug. “Yes, sir.”

This is not going well.

But now I know how to do better. Be a good little boy and follow the rules.

The White Wizard’s instructions suddenly popped into his head again. He could have kicked himself. *He told me! He told me to go along and do what the others did, and I went and forgot all about it!*

I hope I didn’t forget anything else important...

“Yes, sir,” he repeated, looking up at Ardan. “I’ll do better, sir. I promise.”

The High King smiled. “Excellent. Shall we rejoin the others?”

“As you like, sir.”

Yes, as you like, sir. And as you wish, ma’am. Until I know everything about this place, and everything about them. And then it’ll be as I like, and as I wish.

I just have to wait.

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The Lion, the Snake, and the Safe Room

Chapter 5: Beautiful

Harry blinked awake, disoriented. He knew there were several places he ought to be when he woke up, but none of them came to mind, and he was somewhere entirely different in any case. The light was stronger than he was used to, so early in the morning, and only one other person slept nearby, where he ought to hear either four or none at all.

He took a deep breath and sighed happily. Somewhere nearby, a hot breakfast was in the last stages of cooking. Hunger prodded him to get up and find it, but the sheets were smooth and the bed was soft. Harry wondered whimsically where he was, that he was getting such royal treatment.

A finger of memory poked him. Cair Paravel. In Narnia. And you're getting royal treatment because you are royal here...

That brought back the rush of everything that had happened over the last few days, including why a lot of it seemed distant and out of reach. The closed door in Harry's mind beckoned alluringly, but he turned away, reaffirming his trust in the presence he'd experienced at the Silver Spring.

It said—he said—I don't need those memories now. And if I ever do, I know where to find them.

He arched his back and yawned. *Time to get up.*

Harry washed his hands and face in the bathroom, then cleaned his teeth with a finger and the jar of salt sitting on the ledge below the mirror. Another quick wash and some brief, fruitless experimentation with his hair, and he returned to the bedroom to get dressed.

Malfoy still slept in the other bed. Harry hooked his glasses on and regarded the other boy. *He looks a lot younger when he's asleep...*

Then the thought turned inside out in his mind and started him wondering what had happened in Malfoy's life to make him look so much older when he was awake.

Harry finished dressing in silence and slipped out of the room.

A strain of music, wild and piercing, insinuated itself into Draco's dreams and wrapped around him. He shouted and struck at it, and it backed off as if surprised. *I want to be friends*, its whole demeanor proclaimed. *What did I do wrong?*

Draco wavered for an instant, then relented. "Come here," he said, holding out his hand.

The music bounded to him, nuzzled at his hand, and flowed smoothly up his arm and into his ear. Draco shivered but let it happen.

Slowly, within his mind, the sounds unfolded. Dissonances put him in mind of crashing waves and undertows, while sweet harmonies summoned calm sunny days with no ripples on the water. All of it, cacophony and euphony alike, touched something within him that he had thought, hoped, prayed was long dead.

No! I can't let this happen! It's weakness where I need strength—it's softness where I have to be hard...

But it would fool Potter and the others, and the Kings and Queens, he realized suddenly. I can tell them part of the truth—that I've always loved music, always wanted it—and they'll think I'm truly going soft, where I'm just putting it on to fool them.

His physical eyes opened. The music was still echoing in his head, coming in through the open window, he realized, from somewhere close by. He'd get up and go out to see who was playing and singing, and maybe even ask them to teach him something—show off how well-rounded he would become as a prince, and regain favor that way...

He ignored the high, sweet, repeated notes in the strain that sounded very like laughter.

Meghan tiptoed down the steps of the castle still in her white nightdress, her feet and head bare, tasting the salt of the sea on her tongue as she breathed. The merpeople were singing. She had seen them from her window, and seen, too, Queen Caelin standing by the shore and answering their wild song with one of her own, one that seemed to bridge the gap between the wildness of the sea music and the known strains of the land.

Dew chilled the soles of Meghan's feet, but she ignored it, pattering around into the orchard, where fruit was beginning to swell on the trees. The mersong was quieter here, but she could still hear it, and she needed clear space and soft terrain to try the dance that had woven itself into her dreams and woken her with the urgency of its steps.

Her feet were moving almost before she had asked it of them. Back and forth, up and down... sway and bend and up again... a long way out, and back I come, leap up high and fall like so...

She danced the dawn into morning and the mersong into silence, and her dance became slower but no less wild, as another song crept into her mind and ordered the steps of her feet.

The Trees are singing now. Not these trees around me, but the great Forest beyond—the dryads and hamadryads, the Talking Trees, like Oren...

Her feet moved slowly, as though wading through the good earth below, and her arms waved like branches in the sweet summer breeze. She turned her face and hands upward to the sun, the bringer of warmth, and her toes dug into the ground, seeking the water without which no tree could live.

She spun in a great circle, her arms outstretched. *Water and wood, sun and stone, we are all one*

at the heart. We live as we may, and pay honor to Aslan, and thus are we all truly the same.

Hermione awakened with the feeling that she'd just missed something wonderful, but she couldn't think of what.

But I'm in Narnia. Wonderful things will happen every day now.

She sat up, noting Meghan's rumpled bed, the door of the room slightly ajar, the bright sunlight warming the boards of the floor.

I only hope that doesn't mean wonderful things will become everyday to me. I'd hate myself.

It happened a little, back home. She stood up and went into the bathroom, letting her mind run over the blurred images of "home" as she cleaned her teeth. Several places came to mind, and several presences, three vague adults and two or perhaps three her own age, one clear—*Harry*—and the others set aside for the moment.

She rinsed her mouth and spit salty water into the basin, then poured clean water over a cloth to wash her face. *We had to stop being amazed by everything, because then there wouldn't have been time to deal with what was happening to us. Still, I hope we never lose all our wonder, especially not here in Narnia. Imagine not being even a little excited to see a centaur, or a giant, or a dwarf... or Aslan...*

A glint of gold above the bedroom door caught her eye as she came back out. A tiny image of the Lion, done in real gold leaf, hung where Aslan could watch over any who entered or left the room.

Hermione curtsied deeply to the image. *I will meet you someday, she vowed to herself. And you will not find me lacking as a princess, or a queen. I don't know why you chose me, but you did, and you don't make mistakes. I must be worthy, somehow.*

And I will be. I promise.

Harry's feet carried him upwards, and he let them. The halls were deserted, though occasionally he heard the patter of paws on carpet or the rattle of claw against stone as someone passed nearby.

Are they avoiding me? he wondered. *Is it royal orders that no one bothers the heirs to the throne? Or is it just that there's no one living here, so no reason for servants to come up?*

But as he started to climb the spiral stair inside a tower, he knew he wasn't going to be alone at the top.

He'd been half-hearing music for a while, but it had stopped a minute or two before he'd found the door to the tower. This singing was only one voice, following a melody that hinted at holding fast and delving deep. The singing outdoors had been choral, with a mood that changed as often as its

melody.

I think I like this better. I wonder who's singing? It could be a man with a high voice or a woman with a deep one...

He peered cautiously around the corner of the towertop door at the singer.

Woman. Or girl. Or whatever you call it when she's a dwarf.

Garnet, Kargin's younger sister, sat cross-legged on the circular platform, her back to the battlements. In front of her rose a castle in miniature, the reddish-brown of good clay and so detailed that even Harry, who had only seen the place once from the outside, could identify it as Cair Paravel. As he watched, slender-fingered hands stroked patterns of dressed stone into one of the outside walls, moving in time to her singing.

She's good. Though I suppose it's in her blood—dwarves make things, fix things, build things. I wonder if Kargin does anything like this?

Garnet traced one final ripple along the edge of a tower and stopped, voice and fingers releasing together. She rose and stepped carefully around her work, which Harry now saw rested on a small board. Facing the east, she began to sing again.

Sun in its rising,

Moon in its setting,

Join me in praising,

Join me in song;

Honor and bless him,

Aslan who rules us,

And with me beg him,

Come before long.

Harry had been leaning closer and closer to the door as Garnet sang, and only as she finished did he realize that he was resting a significant portion of his weight on it, and that it wasn't even latched, just resting on its hinges—

He pulled back just in time to save his balance as the door squeaked in protest and swung farther open. Garnet whirled, a shining dagger appearing in her clay-covered hand. Harry's reflexes took over, pulling his wand from his trouser pocket before his conscious mind had even registered Garnet's weapon.

They stared at each other for a moment, dagger and wand at the ready. Garnet moved first, relaxing her grip on the dagger and coming out of her fighting stance. “That’s a bit small for a staff,” she said, nodding towards Harry’s wand. “Or do your people use them differently, Your... Harry?”

Harry let his wand come down from casting position. “You’ve talked to Kargin,” he said. “Or you wouldn’t know about that.”

“He is my brother.” Garnet smiled. “One of many.”

Harry nodded. “He told me. You have six brothers, I think he said?”

“Yes, six. I was the oddity.” Garnet sheathed her dagger. “There aren’t many dwarf girls, and almost never in my family.”

A question occurred to Harry, but it seemed too rude to ask bluntly. He cast about for a way to phrase it delicately. Garnet spared him the trouble. “Dwarf women always have many children,” she said. “It’s Aslan’s gift, so that our race never dies. And many of our men are wedded to their work, so they don’t want wives in any case. Others marry outside the race. My eldest brother has his eye on a dryad.”

Harry couldn’t repress a snicker at the thought.

“You needn’t be rude about it,” Garnet said haughtily, but Harry could see a trace of answering laughter in the brown eyes. “But you never did answer me. We have stories about people who use small sticks to do magic, but they may well be just stories.”

“They’re called wands.” Harry sorted through two or three possible explanations but discarded them all. “May I show you some of my magic, instead of telling you?”

“Of course.”

“Hold out your hands.” Harry hoped he’d get this right. He’d never had much practice cleaning things by magical means, but he knew the incantation and the movement, and that ought to be enough. He hoped.

Another worrying thought came crowding in to join the others. *What if magic doesn’t work in Narnia, or doesn’t work right? Could I hurt Garnet with a spell, if it goes wrong?*

But the dwarf girl had her clay-caked hands stretched in front of her, and was watching him with anticipation and a hint of challenge on her strong-boned face.

There’s magic in Narnia, Harry reminded himself. Maybe not the type I’m used to, but it should be close enough.

He aimed the wand tip just below Garnet’s hands, then flicked it up, concentrating on *clean*.

“*Scourgify!*”

The clay on Garnet's hands vanished. Garnet jerked back, and Harry flinched inwardly. *Oh no, something happened—I hurt her, or I hit her too hard, or it sent the clay somewhere I don't want it...*

“Lion and Knife,” Garnet breathed, flexing her clay-free hands. “Not even Mother can clean like that. And your wand can do other things, too—unless you were planning on cleaning me to death with it...”

“I wouldn't do anything to death with you.” Harry realized an instant too late how *that* sounded.

Getting back downstairs will be hard with my foot in my mouth this way.

“I'll remember that,” Garnet said with a wicked smile. “In the meantime, I believe breakfast will soon be served. Will you escort me to the dining hall?”

“If you show me how to get there.”

“Gladly.” Garnet curtsied slightly. “Follow me, Your Highness.”

“Harry. Please.”

“Very well.” Garnet bent to pick up the board holding her work. “Follow me, Harry Please.”

Harry kept his groan strictly internal.

Hermione pushed open a door and squinted into the bright morning sunlight. She'd followed her nose downwards, but a rhythmic thumping noise had distracted her once she'd reached the ground floor.

Hmm. Poles, targets, swords, arrows... I do believe I've found the training ground.

The source of the noise was apparent as soon as Hermione's eyes had adjusted fully. Kargin stood halfway down the field, turned away from Hermione, the quiver slung over one shoulder clearly visible against his back. As she watched, he drew out another arrow, nocked it, aimed, and fired, all in one easy, fluid movement. The straw target at the far end of the field sprouted another set of feathers in the ring closest to the center.

Hermione moved out onto the field, surveying the target critically. Most of Kargin's arrows were clustered near the center, though a few had struck other portions of the target. None had missed entirely, and only two were outside the three innermost rings. *He's good.*

Four arrows later, Kargin's quiver was empty. Hermione waited until he had relaxed from his poised position, then began to applaud.

“Aslan's blood!” Kargin shouted, spinning around. His face was flushed with anger, which melted immediately into surprise and worry. “Your Highness, forgive me—I didn't know...”

“It’s all right,” Hermione reassured him. “I’m sorry I startled you. You’re a good archer.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.” Kargin bowed.

“Do stop it, please. I’m not Draco.”

Kargin cracked a smile, and Hermione laughed aloud. “I wish I could shoot a bow,” she said. “Do you think I could learn?”

“Perhaps. Is your eye any good?”

“Good for what?”

“Seeing where things are, and getting your hand to send them there.”

“I think I’m all right,” Hermione said dubiously. “My spells always seem to get where they’re going.”

“Spells?”

“Do you have any more of those?” Hermione asked, waving at the targets.

“Of course.” Kargin’s face brightened. “Your people have their own way of fighting, don’t they? Harry told me some yesterday, but I can’t see it. How could a little light do so much? It sounds like something from a story.”

Hermione smiled. “If you can help me get a new target out, I can show you.”

Dwarf and princess together dragged the arrow-riddled bale to one side, then set a new one on the blocks in its place. Hermione stepped up to the line Kargin had been toeing and drew her wand.

Color-Changers, I think. They’ll show up nicely. She took a deep breath, conscious of her heart racing. *Easy, Hermione, it’s just like a practical exam. Show what you know.*

But she dearly wanted to impress Kargin, far more than she had ever wanted to impress her professors. Not for any personal reason, of course, but because he was Narnian, and in training to be a knight, and if he thought well of her, so might all the other people of Narnia...

You’re babbling. Relax and cast.

Another deep breath, and Hermione’s hand came up. “*Commuto Coloris,*” she whispered.

The central circle on the target, which had been red, became a brilliant white. Kargin sucked in a breath. Hermione let hers out. *I didn’t even know if it would work.*

Systematically, she changed every ring on the target, turning it alternating white and black, then red and gold, then, whimsically, green and silver.

“I like that one,” chirped a voice from the direction of the palace. “Can I try too?”

Hermione turned, lowering her wand. “I thought Color-Changers were a third year spell,” she said.

“Mum teaches me things at home sometimes. She thought I should know that one so I could fix up my robes if they get stained.” Meghan ran lightly down the practice field. She wore only her white nightdress, and her feet were bare. “Can I use your wand? Mine’s still in our room.”

“If you think it’ll work,” Hermione said, handing it to the younger girl.

“Is that like trying to use another’s bow?” asked Kargin, bowing to Meghan in greeting. “A different grip and pull than you’re used to?”

“Something like that.” Hermione stepped back, letting Meghan take her place at the line. “Different wands are made from different woods, and have different magical cores, but it’s more than that. The man who made mine for me used to say that the wand chooses the witch, not the other way around.”

“I think I understand.” Kargin moved back beside Hermione, watching Meghan intently. “Does she often run abroad with so little clothing?” he murmured.

“I don’t know. We’d only just met. She shouldn’t, should she?”

“She’s a princess. She can do what she wishes.” Kargin’s tone spoke volumes.

“She shouldn’t,” Hermione said certainly. “Shoes, at least.”

“If you say so, Your Highness.” Kargin looked up at her, a wry grin touching his face. “If you speak with that tone, I doubt the little princess will disagree. I doubt *any* would dare disagree.”

Draco sat cross-legged on the sand of the beach, staring out to sea at the sunrise.

It looks so much closer than it does at home. Like I could walk out there and touch it, take it in my hand...

He heard the footsteps behind him a moment before a familiar voice spoke. “What does the young prince think of our Narnian mornings, then?”

The young prince thinks they’d be better alone. But the memory of his scolding the day before was still fresh. Draco held his tongue and instead stood up as he turned to face the naiad Nata. “They’re very pretty,” he said. “I never liked to watch the sun rise at home, but it’s different here.”

Brilliant. So eloquent, I’m floored myself. His self-criticism function was working overtime. *She’ll fall for you any minute now. “It’s different here”? What a fascinating observation...*

“How is it different?” Nata asked, flowing downwards until she sat on the sand with her knees gathered to her chest.

“Well...” Draco sat down himself, and found his thoughts from earlier intruding on his mind. *I don't think she'll laugh... she's a mythical creature herself...*

Tentatively, he told the naiad how much closer the sun looked here, but how it didn't burn his eyes as the sun of his home world might have done. How he'd imagined himself walking out along the paths the sun's rays made on the ocean, walking up to the sun and taking it in his hand, feeling that power radiating through his blood and bones, the light and strength of a whole world under his control...

Nata's eyes were fixed on his, her face raptly attentive. Encouraged, Draco spun the story out longer. “I'd hold onto it and let it carry me across the sky. I'd see everything—Narnia, Archenland, Calormen, the Northlands, the desert, the ocean... and then, when the day was over, I'd find out where the sun goes after it sets. I'd see where it rests, and what its home is like, and how it gets back into the east in the morning when it goes down in the west every night.”

I have never heard such a pack of nonsense in my life, the critical voice in his mind sneered. *Hold onto the sun and let it carry you? See where it rests at night? Ridiculous.*

“How beautiful,” Nata breathed. “Do you always speak in such poetry, my prince?”

“Maybe not always,” Draco said after a moment of silent astonishment. “But I like beautiful things.”

“You must, to speak so.” Nata turned to regard the sun, now almost all the way above the horizon, then lifted her hand. A fine spray of water, a mist really, began to shower from her fingertips. “Behold,” she murmured. “I, too, can create beauty.”

Draco drew in his breath eagerly. Rainbows spun within the mist, forming and reforming as Nata wove patterns with her fingers. She ran her hand through her hair, and her head, too, was haloed about with shifting color. One step at a time, as slow as the first trickle of a stream after winter's freeze, the naiad began to dance.

Draco forgot where he was, forgot to be critical, forgot everything. The fluid motions of arms and feet, the sparkle of colored light in the fine haze about Nata's body, held him mesmerized. His eyes kept pace as she spun and leapt ever faster, bending in ways a human girl could never have managed.

I know who that voice sounds like, he thought absently. *The one that tells me everything I do is wrong. It sounds like my father.*

And I don't need to think about my father right now.

Nata spun faster still, and a fine dew beaded Draco's face. He licked his lips, tasting again the

water of the Silver Spring. *Go away*, he willed the critical voice. *I don't need you.*

The voice tried to argue, but Draco was firm. *I'm not interested in you just now. When you learn to do something like this* —Nata posed with both arms flung above her head, then sank bonelessly to the sand before rising again with fluid grace—*let me know. Until then, leave me alone.*

The door in his mind opened and shut again, and Draco Malfoy was alone with his own thoughts. The silence echoed between his ears, but he filled it quickly with the sight of Nata bent backwards into a perfect arch, then straightening and rising on one leg, her arms extended like a swan in flight.

“Beautiful,” he whispered aloud, and for the first time since he could remember, his mind echoed it truthfully, with no sneering taunt appended.

Beautiful.

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The Lion, the Snake, and the Safe Room

Chapter 6: Legend

The royalty of Narnia gathered for breakfast in the dining hall, which faced east to the sea and the morning light. Fauns and dryads in royal livery carried platters and bowls of food to and from the table, but the kings and queens served themselves and handed the dishes down the table just as any parents would. Harry imitated them, taking a helping of anything that looked good and passing it on to Hermione, sitting beside him.

She looks like she's had a good morning already. Meghan too. The smaller girl, across from Harry, was cheerfully pulling apart a pastry, tasting different pieces of it before taking a bite. *And Malfoy—Draco—*

He looks like someone tripped him, and he's not sure if he's going to fall yet. The image shouldn't have amused Harry as much as it did, but he couldn't help it. As long as he could remember, and these memories were quite clear, the blond boy had been supremely self-confident except in moments when something was actively happening that he couldn't deal with.

A slightly fuzzy memory slipped to the top of Harry's mind, of a time when there'd been a large animal, something he himself had been able to handle correctly. Draco had tried and failed, and got hurt as a result.

He panicked while he was bleeding, but a couple of hours later, he was his usual self again. Playing it for sympathy, trying to make it all my fault.

Is there something happening that's still going on? That would explain why he still looks that way...

Queen Caelin coughed, breaking the silence. "I spoke to Garnet just before breakfast," she said to the table generally. "She mentioned that she had spoken to Harry about some of our legends which deal with folk like our four young heirs. Folk who use a different magic than ours, a magic focused through small wands."

"I admit to curiosity," said Queen Ilana, leaning forward. "What do the wands look like? How are they used?"

Harry dug in his pocket and pulled out his wand, Hermione and Meghan not far behind him. Even Draco produced his without much of a sulky look.

"They're made from all different sorts of wood," Harry said, handing his up the table. "Mine is holly. Hermione's is..."

"Vine wood," Hermione supplied. "Meghan's looks like ebony."

"It is," said Meghan, beaming. "Draco, what's yours?"

“Hazel,” Draco said shortly. “With dragon heartstring.”

“Dragon *what* ?” Queen Caelin nearly dropped the wand, which she happened to be holding.

“The wands have magical objects as cores,” Hermione explained rapidly. “Some part of a magical creature, usually. Unicorn tail hair, phoenix feather, and dragon heartstring are the most common, but I’ve heard of veela hair, even thestral hair...”

“Is there any reason for a certain wood to be paired with a certain type of object?” asked King Ardan, running a finger down the length of Harry’s wand.

“We don’t know,” Meghan said frankly. “We don’t make wands. There are shops where you can buy them, and you don’t get to pick out the wand. It picks you.”

“Ahhh.” Ardan balanced Harry’s wand in his hand, then wrapped his hand around the grip. “May I?” he asked Harry.

“Sure.” Harry nodded, somehow flattered that the High King had known exactly whose wand he was holding.

Ardan turned away from the table and waved the wand in a careful loop. Golden sparks shot from its tip, most of them dying out in midair, though one or two hit the carpet and blinked hopefully for an instant before disappearing. The queens breathed wonder, and King Gilles laughed. “Trust you to have the knack of a new type of magic before the rest of us are fully aware it’s here, Ardan!”

“I suppose I do have an advantage,” Ardan acknowledged, turning back to the table with a smile. “But it goes with the story of our ancient times. If you wish to hear it.”

“Very much,” said Hermione firmly. Harry and Meghan and Draco all nodded.

“Very well.” Ilana stood. “The morning room, perhaps? It is as well placed as this, and more comfortable. The story can be long if it is fully told.”

“That sounds good.” Harry accepted his wand back from Caelin and stood, tucking it into his pocket again without looking. Caelin’s eyes followed his movement, and she nodded and gave him a faint smile.

I guess I did something right... wonder what.

On a whim, he crooked his arm and offered it to Hermione, who laughed and rested her hand on it. Draco gave him a sour look, but stuck out his elbow in Meghan’s general direction. Meghan sniffed and placed the very tips of her fingers on the older boy’s arm, as though she didn’t care to get too close.

Of course, who would?

The four heirs followed the kings and queens down a short corridor into a smaller, cozier room where Kargin and Garnet were sitting, playing chess. They stood and bowed as the royals entered the room, and Kargin set the chessboard aside on a small table built to its exact size, but as the kings and queens found seats, so did the two dwarves. They obviously meant to stay for the tale.

King Gilles sat forward in his armchair and cleared his throat. "You know, I assume, of High King Peter and his brother and sisters," he said in a conversational tone. "Of how they came to our land, and with the help of Aslan defeated the White Witch and broke her winter. You know that they came here, to Cair Paravel, and took the four thrones, and reigned long and well. But the tale of how the four thrones came to be in Cair Paravel is a different one altogether, and far less well-known, which is a great shame. Will you hear it now?"

"We will," Kargin and Garnet said softly.

"We will," Harry echoed them, Hermione and Meghan joining him. Draco nodded his head, but politely.

"Then I will tell it." Gilles lifted his head and gazed into the distance for a moment, and when he looked back at them, his eyes were remote. "Hear now the tale of Gaubert and Regulo, and of Leticia and Beatrix. Kings and Queens of Narnia they became, and the salvation of our land, and it was in their honor that four thrones stood in the hall of Cair Paravel when the little queen, Lucy, first stepped from her world into ours.

"This is their tale."

Long and long ago, when still there ruled in Narnia the line of King Frank and Queen Helen, who were given dominion by Aslan on the first day of all things, a black time came to fair Narnia. The Trees were restless, and claimed they were not given the respect they were due. The snake-people of the northern mountains schemed and plotted war. And due to an illness in her youth, the Queen was barren. Healers and doctors alike tried to help her, but both she and the King were growing older, so that soon even if she were healed there would be no chance for an heir of their bodies.

Such was the way of things in Narnia on one bright morning when, in plain view of many, at the edge of the Forest near Cair Paravel, the miracle occurred. A flash of light brighter than the sun, and a sound as of a thunderclap though no clouds were in the sky, and when both had passed, there stood four young people, with small sticks in their hands and astonishment in their eyes.

Two of these young people were men and two women, and none were more than twenty years of age, and all looked upon the centaurs and the dryads and the Talking Beasts with wonder but no surprise. And when they had been brought to the King and Queen, they did them respectful duty and gave their names.

The elder of the men, his hair the color of the sand on the shore and his eyes bright as the sun, named himself Gaubert. His junior, whose hair was the dark brown of good earth and whose face was a closed book, was called Regulo. The taller of the ladies, she with straight shining auburn

tresses and the bearing of a queen herself, gave the name Leticia. The shorter, with curls of brown and a smile as merry as the morning, laughed and said that she was Beatrix.

“Why has Aslan sent you to us?” the King queried them.

But at this, they all looked puzzled, for it seemed that none of them knew the name of Aslan. By further questions, it was established that they had been attacked by a great enemy of theirs, one who had likely hoped to slay them all at once. Indeed, they had half-thought that they had been slain, but had quickly realized that they had instead been transported far from their home.

“But it will likely have the same result, if we stay away too long,” said Gaubert, speaking for the others. “We have a great undertaking in the works, and we four are the impetus behind it. It will collapse if we are absent for a long period. Can you help us return to our home?”

“I believe that we can,” said the King after a moment to consider, “but there will be a price to pay.”

“There is always a price to pay,” said Regulo, speaking for the first time. “Tell us what it is, and we will see if we can make a deal.”

The King explained the three great troubles attending the land—the possible revolt of the Trees, the imminent invasion of the snake-folk, and the illness of the Queen. “Any man, or any group, who could solve these problems would have our royal gratitude,” he said, “and the pledge of Narnia to devote all its resources to solving their problems in turn.”

“I have been called very fair in decision,” said Beatrix. “I would endeavor to find the trouble with those of your subjects who are unhappy.”

“I am shrewd in bargaining,” said Regulo. “I can accompany my friend and help her to negotiate.”

“I have studied some healing,” said Leticia. “Perhaps I can help you, Your Majesty.” She bowed low to the Queen, who smiled and bowed back.

Gaubert sighed. “I know not what I can do, unless your trouble with the northern tribes comes to open war,” he said. “For my best use is on a battlefield, or in a fight.”

“Peace, child,” the Queen said, smiling. “There will be time enough for battles.”

And so it was that Beatrix and Regulo left Cair Paravel that very day, bearing packs and walking on their own two feet, bound first for the Forests and then for the northern mountains, to see if they could together negotiate peace and safety for Narnia. Their friends embraced them before they left, and wished them a safe journey, and Gaubert in particular watched them out of sight.

Leticia, for her part, was examining the Queen, and what she found made her sigh. “Your Majesty, the damage is beyond my skill to heal fully,” she said, sadly stroking the small stick she carried, which she had called a wand. “In my land, I might be able to help you somewhat, but not with this—I would create a potion, a medicine, with flowers and herbs that I know, and it would give you a

chance at bearing children, but no more. Have you anything which grows here that might do the same?”

“Fireflowers,” the Queen said. “The fireflowers which grow in the valleys of the sun. Their juice cures all ailments and heals all wounds. But...”

“But me no buts,” said Gaubert, who had waited just outside the room and now entered. “If fireflowers shall cure you, Your Majesty, then fireflowers you shall have. If my dear friend will accompany me on a journey to the sun?”

He smiled at Leticia, who rapped him lightly on the head with her wand and laughed. “Rogue! You know I would rather die than be left out of such a fine adventure!”

And so it was that Gaubert and Leticia left Cair Paravel only a few days later, sailing on one of the King’s finest ships, bound for the Eastern edge of the world, to leap onto the sun as it came up in the morning and there pluck the fireflowers which would cure the Queen.

Gilles paused for a sip of the tea he had brought with him from the breakfast room. “It is here that the tale breaks into fragments,” he said. “Two parts, in the main, though one of those parts has a hidden side that is not known. Which would you like to hear first?”

“Tell the one with the hidden part,” Meghan said immediately. “I love mysteries.”

“I think I want to know about the mystery too,” said Hermione. “Harry?”

Harry shrugged. “Either’s fine with me.”

“Draco?” Gilles peered past Harry and the girls. “Which do you prefer?”

“I want to hear the mystery. Please.” The last word came out a bit explosively, and Harry would have bet money on it being an eleventh-hour addition, but at least it was there.

He glanced to one side and bit his tongue—Kargin and Garnet were doing an identical jaw-dropped bug-eyed stare at Draco, until they both shook their heads and settled back into their cross-legged positions to listen again.

I really shouldn’t think that’s funny.

Except that it is...

Harry put away philosophy and morals and listened as Gilles began again.

Beatrix and Regulo walked for days, until they were deep in the Forests where the folk of the Trees are many. The Trees in those days were not as friendly to humans as they are now, for some

of the humans—and indeed some of the beasts, and the other creatures around—had treated them badly, stealing wood and setting fires where they were not wanted. And so it may not have been pure chance that Beatrix caught her foot on a root rising from the ground and fell, laming herself badly.

Regulo caught his friend as she fell, but the damage was done. Beatrix would not be able to travel fast nor far for many days, perhaps weeks. They made a camp, carefully shielding their small fire with stone, and considered what they should do next.

“There is only one way,” said Beatrix finally. “You must leave me here and journey on without me.”

“Leave you?” Regulo shook his head. “We have no way of knowing how the Tree-folk will treat you without me here to help and protect you. You could be kidnapped, treated as a hostage. I will not leave you to such a fate.”

Beatrix laughed. “You think all people are as suspicious and twisty-minded as you,” she chided, shaking a finger at her friend. “Some people respond better to trust, dear friend. I think these Trees may be of that kind. If I remain here, alone and injured, it is a clear sign that I am trusting in them not to harm me—indeed, to help me, for I will not be able to go far to gather firewood or food.”

“And thus you may freeze or starve before I can return,” Regulo countered. “Would you have me condemn you to such a fate?”

“The King told us that only a few years ago, the Trees were the friends of humans,” Beatrix said patiently. “I cannot think they have all become haters of our kind so soon. And if we are to have any chance of gaining the help of Narnia in our return home, we cannot lose any time in accomplishing our goals. You must go on and treat with the snake-people, and I must stay here with the Trees.”

Regulo began to argue again, but Beatrix crossed her arms and shook her head. “If you continue to be obstinate,” she said, “I shall have to hex you, and you will not enjoy that.”

“Well, if that is my only option...” Regulo leapt to his feet and pretended to pack his gear in tearing haste, while Beatrix laughed aloud. Then he crossed to her and embraced her tightly. “Be careful of yourself, dear friend,” he said softly. “I shall miss you.”

“And I you.” Beatrix returned the embrace, then kissed Regulo on the cheek. “Now be off with you, before I decide to hex you in any case.”

Regulo chuckled, but he was on the road again within the hour, leaving Beatrix with a bit more than half of their provisions and almost all their camping gear. She watched and waved until he followed the road around a bend and was lost to her sight, and then returned to her small camp to make it more comfortable.

I would tell you more of Regulo's travels and his meetings with the snake-folk, but it is his part of the tale which is called hidden, for even many years later, he would never speak of it beyond simple generalities. Yes, he found the hidden caverns, and yes, he spoke with the witch-Queens of the snake-people, and yes, he brought them to see that attacking Narnia would benefit them nothing. Many have speculated that he used very personal methods of treating with these strange and magical tribes, and certainly there are two points which make that seem quite likely...

But that is for later in the story. The tale as we know it concerns Beatrix.

As it happened, she had been right to trust the Trees. Regulo had barely vanished down the road before some of the younger dryads sought her camp, their eyes wide as they saw a human for the first time. Beatrix smiled at them, and drew them to sit with her by the embers of her fire, and showed them how she tended it carefully and kept it well leashed. Before long, the dryads were breaking bits from their leafy hair to throw into the flames, and whispering and giggling with Beatrix as young women will do wherever they are, and so the first bond grew between them.

Hamadryad healers tended to Beatrix's injuries, and the Trees brought her fruit to eat, and some of the Talking Beasts of the forest hunted or gathered for her in exchange for the tales she could tell of the strange world from which she had come. A Badger named Singlestripe, in particular, sat for hours at a time listening to her stories, and they grew greatly attached, until one was scarcely to be seen without the other. And then one day Singlestripe brought Beatrix, her leg almost fully healed, to his den, and outside it there sat a man.

He was tall and slender, as were the dryads, and his hair and limbs had some of the look of theirs, but Beatrix had by now seen enough of the tree-folk to know that she looked upon a crossbreed, a child of both their blood and her own. She smiled at him, and held out her hand, and he smiled back with some shyness and took it, and they knew in that moment that they would be great friends. The name that he gave her, as befitting a man of the wood, was Sylvanus, and it was he who began to teach her the ways of the forest and its magics.

"My mother's folk do not think of what they do as magic," he told her one day as they sat together in one of the great oaks. "It is simply part of what and who they are. But my father's people are astounded by what they can do, and have begun to envy them. That is part of the root of the bad blood between human and dryad."

"How can it be healed?" Beatrix asked.

"If a human could learn the magics of the tree-people." Sylvanus spoke with no hesitancy whatsoever, as if this had long been within his mind. "If a human, with no dryad blood whatsoever, could prove that at least some of what the dryad folk do can be learned. That it is not all innate, and therefore forever out of the reach of those who dream."

"And you want me to be that human," said Beatrix, nodding her head. "It is no bad plan. I will do it."

"Of course, I understand—" Sylvanus stopped. "You will what?"

“I will do it, silly boy.” Beatrix laughed aloud at the astonishment on her friend’s face. “Did you think I would refuse? A chance to learn astounding magic, such as no one else in the world knows, magic which could help and heal so much and so many? Of course I will do it!”

And so began the lessoning of Beatrix. It was not difficult lessoning, but it took nearly a year, while the leaves turned red and gold and fell from the trees, while the snow covered the forest and melted, while new leaves sprouted and the trees bloomed. A year of watching, it was in the main, a year of learning the ways of the forest and all its plants, and of the meadows and the fields as well, and of bringing herself into greater harmony with their song.

At last, though, one day in the early summer, Beatrix laid her hand upon a patch of grass and willed it to grow longer, and the green blades rose thick around her fingers. And she pointed at the dead branch of a tree and told the living wood to throw it off, and it cracked from its place and fell at her feet. And she pressed both hands against the bole of a cherry tree and asked it if it would give her fruit, and only a few moments later, a bough dipped in front of her face, filled with cherries as ripe and round as she had ever seen. She plucked one and laughed and threw it to Sylvanus, and plucked another for herself, and they ate and were happy.

“Are there some for us?” called a voice, and Beatrix leapt to her feet with a glad cry, for the voice was the voice of Regulo, and it was indeed her old friend who stood before her, looking at her handiwork with wondering eyes.

“So I am not the only one with a new gift,” he said, accepting the cherry she held out to him.

“What do you mean?” Beatrix asked.

Regulo drew a deep breath and spoke, but the language was none Beatrix had ever heard before. It was filled with hisses and deep breathy sighs, and at her feet a tiny green head lifted attentively.

“The language of the serpent-folk,” Sylvanus breathed from beside the tree. “You have learned to speak it.”

“I have.” Regulo bowed courteously, though his eyes wondered who this strange man might be. “More than that, I have become rather eloquent in it, if I do say so myself.”

“Why not let me say it for you?” said a female voice, and a woman stepped forward to stand beside Regulo. She had the palest skin Beatrix had ever imagined, and eyes as green as the scales of the little snake in the grass as their feet, and hair as black as the inside of a cave, but her red lips smiled and her hand closed around Regulo’s.

“He charmed my mother, the Queen of our people, and won my heart from within my breast,” the woman went on. “We are wed after the fashion of my folk, and I will go with my Regulo wherever he may go, even into the other world from whence he tells me he comes. My name is Therese, and I greet you.” And she bowed.

“I am Sylvanus,” said the owner of that name, returning the bow, “and I am merely another friend

of Beatrix's, not a husband nor likely to be, though I care dearly for her. I am pleased to meet you, Therese, and you, Regulo. Beatrix speaks of you often."

"And I of her, trust me." Regulo seated himself on the ground, Therese beside him. "And of our other friends, Gaubert and Leticia. Have you had any news of them?"

"No!" Beatrix clapped her hands to her mouth. "Dear heavens, it has been a year, and I have barely thought of them..."

"You have been busy," said Therese. "Do not blame yourself. But tomorrow, perhaps, we shall all journey to Cair Paravel and see what we can learn there."

"I will gladly come if you will have me," Sylvanus told Beatrix.

"There is no one I would rather journey with," she answered.

"What of me?" Regulo pouted.

"I would not *rather* journey with you, foolish boy," Beatrix teased. "I would journey with both of you, and with your lady as well, so cease your silly prattling!"

And they all laughed and were so agreed.

Hermione frowned as Gilles paused once more. "There's something about this story," she said slowly. "It's as if I've heard it before... or parts of it, anyway."

"The powers," Draco said, almost too quiet to be heard. "There are stories about people back home, important people, who had powers like that. It's hidden."

"Hidden?" Ilana asked, then shook her head. "I am sorry, I forgot. You agreed to let many of your memories lie shut away for the time being, so that you could live in our Narnia without endless longing for your home."

"Yes, we did." Harry closed his eyes. "But I don't think I've ever heard about anyone with powers like the ones in the story."

"You didn't grow up magical," said Meghan. "Draco and I did. And you don't read as much as Hermione does, so you wouldn't have heard about them that way."

"That makes sense." Harry let the story settle into the back of his mind, then looked up at Gilles. "Is the next part about Gaubert and Leticia?"

"Oh, yes, and their journey to the sun, and the strange places and people they found along the way. Shall I go on?"

"Yes, please," said six voices at once.

Gilles smiled and returned to the story.

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The Lion, the Snake, and the Safe Room

Chapter 7: Reason

Hermione rubbed the fabric of her sleeve between her fingers, idly noting the fineness of the weave, and listened to Gilles' description of how the adventures of Gaubert and Leticia began. She could almost see them now, walking towards the ship which would carry them to the sun. Gaubert had made a joke, a horrible joke, and Leticia was half laughing and half scolding him, wearing an expression Hermione knew she wore quite often, when she was with Harry and...

When I'm with my friends, her mind amended smoothly, and she chuckled a little under her breath without knowing quite why. Kargin, hearing the sound, turned his head to look at her, and she smiled at him, then flicked her gaze towards Gilles. Kargin inclined his head in understanding, then smiled back, and Hermione felt her cheeks warm a little at the regard in his blue eyes.

Story. Listen to the story.

She turned her attention to Gilles and let his deep, smooth voice lull her mind into quiet, almost as though she slept in waking, listening intently to the tale of long ago, of two worlds made one.

And so it was that Gaubert and Leticia left the shores of Narnia and sailed outwards aboard the fine craft *Gryffin* towards the world's edge, hoping to find the fireflowers which grow in the valleys of the sun and thus cure the barrenness of the Queen of Narnia. After three days' sailing, they came within sight of Terebinthia, a Kingdom all its own, which had long been allied to Narnia, and made port there at sunset and were most pleasantly greeted there by the King, a widower, and by his lovely daughter, the Princess Hestia.

Leticia debarked from the ship first, on the arm of the ship's captain, Ignatius, with whom she had become good friends, and made her curtsy to the King and Princess, and they returned the favor graciously, as to any lady of their own land. Gaubert next set foot on the plank, his shoulders square and his head high, but then his eyes fell upon Hestia, and he stood in his place as though struck by lightning.

For Princess Hestia was named by her people the Star of the Evening, and indeed the golden light of sunset was kind to her this night. Her hair glowed like the banked coals upon a hearth, as rich an auburn as Leticia's but framing her face in soft curls, and that slim oval face held two eyes of the same blue as the darkening evening sky, eyes fixed upon Gaubert with much the same awe that he knew must be on his own features at this moment. And his heart despaired within him, for she was born of royal blood and as far above him as the sun above the earth.

But his doubts whispered hope in his ear, for did he not plan to reach the very sun upon this voyage? Surely the man who could do such a great deed would be considered worthy of the hand of a princess. If she were not yet married. Oh, please, great Lion, Gaubert prayed fervently, possibly the first great prayer of his life, let her not yet be married!

Thus was the first meeting of Gaubert the warrior and Hestia, called Evenstar.

In Terebinthia they stayed some days, more than they had intended, for the shipwrights of that land examined the *Gryffin* and proclaimed a round dozen ways in which she could be made better with relatively little work, and Ignatius, after consulting with Gaubert and Leticia, ordered it done. The captain spent his idle time in playing chess and riddling with Leticia, and comparing tales of the two lands from which they came. Gaubert, of course, sought the company of the Princess whenever it could be had.

“There is something you must know about me,” Hestia said one night as they walked in the rose garden.

“I will listen without fear,” Gaubert pledged.

“All we folk of Narnia have magical blood in our veins. We seem human, but we have interbred with many other kinds of creatures, those who began here, whom Aslan did not bring out of other worlds but created in this place, and as a result, we may be...” Hestia blushed. “We may be older than we seem.”

“Ah,” Gaubert said, but did not elaborate for a few moments. “How old then may you be, if you will allow me to inquire, Princess?” he said after that time. “Please, if the question is too forward, do not hesitate to send me away.”

“The question is not too forward. I had hoped you would ask.” Hestia sighed, then lifted her head to meet Gaubert’s eyes. “I am some five-and-thirty years in age, my friend. I know that you are much younger than I, and that even friendships such as ours are laughed at, to say nothing of...”

She broke off, but Gaubert found himself heartened. “Princess—”

“I make you free of my name,” Hestia interrupted, turning away. “Please, use it.”

“Then I must be Gaubert to you, my friend.” Gaubert drew a deep breath, savoring the sweetness of the name, then summoned the courage which served him on the battlefield and found the words he needed. “Hestia. In the world from which I come, there is also magic. Some are born with the ability to use it, while others are not. I come of that first kind. We are no better than those who have not magic, but we are different, and it would be folly to pretend we are not. We see things that those without magic cannot see. We heal more quickly. And... we live longer.”

Hestia turned back sharply, half a question hovering on her lips. Gaubert shook his head. “I am no older than I seem, my lady, Hestia. Twenty years, no more, have passed since my birth. And I am the son of a country knight, a man of limited means and endless wonder at his child’s strange gift. I dare to dream great dreams, but I have no knowledge of whether they shall ever come to pass. Still, I dare. As I have always dared. As I dare now.”

And, suiting action to word, he stepped closer to Hestia and laid his lips lightly against hers, and so the Princess of the Sunset Star first kissed he who sailed upon the *Gryffin*, he who dared.

When the *Gryffin* sailed again a fortnight later, Hestia farewelled it herself. In her ringing voice, she told her people that Aslan smiled upon this expedition, and that fair winds should carry the ship to its destination and bring it home again. Her first husband, as all knew, had died upon this same quest when his ship was overtaken by foul weather, but such would not come to these folk.

“But before they return to Narnia with the fireflowers to heal the queen of that land,” she proclaimed, “they shall come here, to our Terebinthia, for with my father as witness, Gaubert and I have sworn an oath upon the Lion’s Knife. If he shall succeed in his quest, and bring a fireflower here to me with his own hand, then I shall place it in the center of my bridal bouquet, for his wife that very day I shall become.”

It seemed, to Gaubert at least, that the words of his beloved had some power over the world around them, but practical Ignatius said merely that it was the season. Whichever of them was correct, the *Gryffin* fairly sped on her way eastward, finding small islets here and there on which to take on fresh water and provisions, but ever pressing east, towards the sun’s rising each morn.

And then one day Leticia awoke with a look of wonder and glory upon her face, and sang for joy as she stepped out into the sunlight, for Aslan himself had spoken within her dreams that night. “We are very close, my friend,” she said to Gaubert. “But we two alone must go now, and hurry. Tomorrow is the day Aslan has set for our trial, and if we are not in the proper place when the sun rises into the sky, we will not be allowed to try again.”

Gaubert smiled and stretched his arms, which held within them the strength of a man warrior-trained all his life and toughened by the sea over these last weeks and months. “We will not fail,” he said simply.

“We await your triumphant return,” Ignatius told them, and called out orders for the small boat, the *Raven*, to be stocked with two days’ supplies. When it was done, and Gaubert and Leticia safely aboard, the *Raven* took the water off the *Gryffin*’s port bow, and the two friends raised the small sail. All day, they watched their shadows shrinking behind them and growing before, skimming on the surface of the water as though they were their own boats, and as the sun sank beyond the distant forests of far-away Narnia, the wind died down and the *Raven* slowed almost to a halt.

“Aslan would not lead us falsely,” Gaubert said. “We have arrived.”

Leticia dipped her finger into the water and tasted it. “We have,” she said with a soft sigh. “Here.” She held up some for Gaubert to drink, and he did so and sighed in his turn, for the water of the sea here was not salt but sweet, and strong as any wine or mead.

“It is his gift,” the warrior murmured, “to make us strong for what will come.”

“Yes,” Leticia agreed, and then was silent, listening to the song of the night around her. That same moon, she remembered, gazed down upon Beatrix and Regulo. She hoped their quests went well, and that they had found new friends and, perhaps, new loves as she and Gaubert had. Though, to be fair, Ignatius was not her love. A dear friend, yes, and that always, but she found within herself no

spark of passion for him. Of course, marriages had been made of far worse, but she had always hoped...

Between dreaming of an ideal man, thinking fondly of her dear friends, and thinking of what she must do in the coming day, the night passed quickly. At the first sign of light beneath them, Leticia shook Gaubert, and he came awake almost instantly, his breath catching as he recalled where they were and why. Leticia set her hand to the tiller, and Gaubert prepared to raise the sail, but a moment later they discovered that there was no need.

The sun rose from directly beneath them, lifting the *Raven* from the sweet sea in a rush of water.

“The river!” Gaubert cried, pointing to starboard. “Hurry!”

Leticia saw the danger—the water of the sea was flooding away from the sun’s flaming surface, in a moment their boat would be afire—but what river did her friend mean?

And then she saw it, and steered swiftly for it, and the *Raven*’s prow found the fiery water just as the last of the sweet seawater steamed away from around her. She shuddered a little, but held firm.

“Strange,” Gaubert said in a hushed voice, looking around. “Like a tiny world of its own.”

“Not so tiny,” said Leticia. “It must rise very high in the sky, to look so small from where we stand on the earth.”

“Indeed.” Gaubert stiffened. “The fireflowers, Leticia—there, on the banks!”

Leticia followed the line of his finger and smiled. There, indeed, on the banks of this otherworldly stream, blossoms nodded their heads, just as they might on the verges of any brook she had known. But these blossoms had petals in the shape of yellow flames and hearts as red as any coal, and they flickered in the wind passing over them. If any bloom were to be called a fireflower, this would surely be it.

“We must pluck them quickly, so that we can return to the sea before the sun has risen completely,” she said. “Be ready with the sail, for the current may carry us past before we can pick what we need.”

“I shall.” Gaubert busied himself among the lines, and Leticia set her mind to her task. Now, now of all times, she needed every bit of lore Ignatius had taught her, and she let her world narrow to keeping the *Raven* within her control but moving closer to the bank. Closer and closer yet—the flowers were almost within her grasp—she released the tiller with one hand, leaning out to try to pluck one—her fingers brushed its stem—

The *Raven*’s keel struck bottom with a jar, and Leticia lost her balance. With a cry, she tumbled from the boat and landed among the fireflowers.

Her hair and her gown ignited instantly, engulfing her in fire. She screamed and beat at the flames with her one free hand, but succeeded only in setting her skin alight as well, which made her

shriek in earnest. She had never before known what pain was, her whole body was a mass of it—

Her eyes, swelling shut from the heat, fell upon what her right hand still held loosely clenched.

“*Leticia!*” came the roar from nearby, and arms went about her just as her hand rose to her mouth, placing the fireflower between cracked and bleeding lips. She felt herself lifted from the ground, a new wave of pain springing from the places where she was touched, and then blessed darkness fell over her, and she knew no more.

Gaubert laid Leticia gently on the rear seat of the *Raven*, shaking in fear. The flowers, the grass around them, even the surface of the sun itself had burned her. He had seen folk burned over most of their bodies before, when fires raged out of control or houses took flame in the middle of the night. Usually they lost their sight. Often they died. She would need salve, soft bandages, a cool place to lie—

He forced himself to stop and breathe deeply. Panic could kill them both as easily as the fire nearly had. He must think clearly.

And to his clear mind, the first thought that came involved not Leticia, but him.

The fire of the sun had not touched him.

He had turned at the sound of Leticia’s cry and the jar through the *Raven*, turned to see her topple from the boat and land among the flowers. And then her hair, her beautiful hair that looked like flame itself, and the gown, the lovely red satin that Hestia had given to her, ‘for we look like sisters and like sisters we should share,’ flaring up about her, and her screams—

He had thought of nothing but her, and that he must get her safely back to the *Raven*. He had anchored the boat in place with his wand, leapt ashore in one bound, gathered her into his arms, and clambered back aboard, trying to keep from jarring her too greatly.

Through it all, the fire had not hurt him in the least.

Shaking with excitement, he turned back to Leticia. Perhaps, with this newfound power, he could call the fire away from her, keep it from doing new damage—

But he was too late, though not in the usual vein of that phrase. Leticia lay before him, but her skin was as white and clean as though she had just risen from a bath, and her hair grew again as thick as before she had fallen, if not as long. Her chest rose and fell to a regular rhythm, and a faint smile lingered on her lips.

“Praise the Lion,” Gaubert whispered, falling to his knees beside his friend. Her pulse beat beneath his fingers, and he could find no sign of burns on her at all.

A sudden lurch beneath him reminded him of his purpose. “Forgive me, Leticia, but I must hurry,”

he said, and rose. The bow line in one hand, he again leapt to shore, and drew a long breath of wonder when the flaming ground once more felt only pleasantly warm beneath his feet. Swiftly, he gathered as many fireflowers as he could hold in his hand, and his hand was a large one and strong. Then he returned to the *Raven*, laid the flowers gently upon a piece of canvas, and commanded them not to burn it.

And they obeyed.

His hands trembling with joy, Gaubert sailed the *Raven* across the lake of the sun, into the river that fed from it, and down the sun's curving side to where it was just leaving the sweet sea. A wave of a wand, and the boat and its occupants were safely landed in cool waters again, and Gaubert seated himself upon the deck of the *Raven* and watched the sun rise above him. Curious, he lifted his hand and called with his mind.

A tendril of fire lifted from the surface of the sun and streamed down to him, twining about his hand like a curious and friendly snake. Gaubert laughed aloud and held his hand aloft, silently ordering the flames to take a certain shape, though his eyes were blurring so that he could not see it properly.

And so the first thing Leticia saw when she awoke was her dear friend, standing before her, weeping for joy and holding a flower made entirely of flame.

“Yes!” Meghan shouted, jumping up from her seat on the ground. “Yes, yes, yes!”

“Princess, calm yourself,” Garnet reproved gently, but she was smiling. “It is a wonderful story, is it not?”

“How did she heal like that?” Draco asked. “Was it the fireflower?”

Ilana nodded. “The fireflowers of the sun have great powers both to heal and to harm,” she said. “The cordial by which we know them best takes the harm from them, but Leticia was desperate enough to endure the harm so that she might gain the healing. And that gave her a power of her own.”

“What power?” Hermione asked, but even as she spoke, she knew the answer. “She could heal, couldn't she? Because she swallowed a whole fireflower, because she took all of it, everything it was, she got its power. The power to heal things.”

“She did,” Ardan said, smiling. “You have a rare mind, Hermione.”

“Thank you.” Hermione ducked her head and thought very hard about cold things. *Winter, a hundred years of winter and never Christmas, go away you dratted blush go away...*

“When Gaubert jumped out of the boat, what protected him?” Harry asked from outside her range of vision, which currently included several blossoms on the carpet and part of her own gown.

“You said he was only thinking about Leticia. Is that why? That he just didn’t think that the fire should burn him, so it didn’t?”

“In part,” Caelin answered. “If he had been trying to think of other things, to forget that the sun is fire and burns everything it touches, then he would never have succeeded, for he would have been thinking of himself above all. But all his thoughts were for another, for her welfare and her salvation, and thus the flames could not touch him and he passed through them unharmed. And so he ever would, all his life after.”

“Wait,” Draco said skeptically. “Are you trying to say this Gaubert could touch fire? Without doing any kind of magic beforehand, just touch it and not get burned?”

“So he could,” Ardan said. “And so can all his descendants in whom his power lives waking, to this day.”

Draco made a skeptical noise in his throat, but did not comment further.

“Ahh,” Gilles sighed. Hermione, deeming her blush under sufficient control, looked up to see the black-haired king setting down his teacup with an air of satisfaction. “Excellent as always. Now, shall I finish the story?”

“Yes, please!” Meghan said, sitting down again just at Gilles’ feet. “Did Gaubert and Hestia get married? And what about Leticia and Beatrix? Did they ever get married?”

“Patience, little Princess, patience,” Gilles laughed, ruffling Meghan’s braids. “One thing at a time. Yes, Gaubert and Hestia were indeed married, for he carried a fireflower to her with his own hand, as he had promised, and she set it in the center of her bouquet as she had promised, and they were married before the great painting of the Lion in the Hall of the Kings of Terebinthia that same day, ten months from the day they had sailed from that harbor. Hestia wore a gown of red embroidered with thread of gold, and her little son Emrys carried her train behind her, and Gaubert slid a ring of gold upon her finger and kissed her lips before her father and all her people...”

And so the *Gryffin* sailed home to Narnia with two more passengers than she had left, and with the potion which Leticia had made safely in its flagon in Ignatius’ cabin, though she said that she thought the power in her hands could do the work as well or better.

“Keep it in reserve,” Hestia advised, “in case your concoction does not work.”

And four people stood upon the dock at Cair Paravel waving when the *Gryffin* came into view, and Gaubert and Leticia waved back with joy as they saw their old friends, and Hestia as she saw those she hoped to learn to love. But Ignatius stood like a stone, his eyes fixed on one small figure.

“Lovestruck by my darling Beatrix?” Leticia teased him lightly. “She will never wed, not unless a man could be found who would give his life to our great cause as wholly as she has, and what man

would do such a thing?”

“Perhaps,” Ignatius said softly, “perhaps a man very deeply in love, and already used to dedication, would do so.”

And when they stepped ashore at Cair Paravel, Ignatius bowed most deeply to Beatrix, and she, turning from her happy embrace with Gaubert, stood still in wonder at the sight, and then curtsied just as deeply to him in return. Gaubert and Hestia, and Regulo and Therese, smiled at one another, recognizing the signs of the dread illness which had struck them down in their turn.

Rising, Beatrix shook her head. “I beg your pardon, friends, I must be sunstruck,” she said. “I wish you to meet Sylvanus, who has helped me to learn an astounding new sort of magic and who has been the best of friends to me while I have been away from you.”

And Leticia turned her head and met Sylvanus’ eyes, and after a few moments Gaubert coughed lightly. “I could be mistaken,” he said, “but it seems to be growing warmer here...”

The listeners all laughed.

“I like Gaubert the best of the four,” Kargin said. “He had a sense of humor.”

“So Beatrix married Leticia’s friend, and Leticia married Beatrix’s,” Meghan said, nodding. “I like that.”

“I’m glad you approve,” Gilles teased, tweaking one of Meghan’s braids. “Yes, they were married, and Leticia’s potion did indeed cure the Queen, and she and the King left the thrones to raise their children. No one could honestly choose among the four friends, as to which should take the thrones, and so it was decided that they all four should rule, and so they did. It was for them that the four thrones, which still stand in our Hall, were made.”

“How long did they rule for?” Draco asked.

“Twenty years,” Caelin said, “and they ruled wisely and well, though none of them were blessed with children. The former Queen, on the other hand, bore two sets of twins, one year apart, male and female both times. When the youngest of them was grown, the four came to Cair Paravel and there took the thrones.”

“Gaubert and Leticia, Beatrix and Regulo, Kings and Queens no more,” Ilana took up the tale, “then revealed to all why none of their marriages had been fruitful. Aslan himself had come to them in their first year of ruling, when they had been successful in devising a magic which would return them to their own world, and asked them if they would agree to remain in Narnia and bear no children until the offspring of the former King and Queen were fit to rule.”

“What did they get from it?” Harry asked. “I mean, other than ruling Narnia.”

“Because they did not bear children,” Ardan said, “they could be returned to the age at which they had entered Narnia without harm. As could their spouses, and Princess Hestia’s son Emrys, who wished to accompany his mother. Nine went forth from Narnia, where four once had come, and I have no doubt that if the great venture upon which those four had been embarked succeeded, that it did so because of the wisdom and knowledge they had gained in their twenty years with us, and because of the unwavering help of those who gave up their entire world for love.”

“Ohhh!” Hermione breathed suddenly. “Is that—it must be!” She was on her feet, her whole body thrumming with excitement. “That’s it! That’s why we’ve come!”

“What?” Harry asked, Meghan a moment behind him. Draco stared at her, though more in honest confusion than his usual hostile amusement.

“Harry, you have—we have—something that we have to do back home. Something important. Someone who’s hurting people, and has to be stopped. Right?”

Harry nodded slowly. “I don’t remember much,” he said, “but I remember that.”

“So that’s why we’ve come here! Because Narnia has a problem, and so do we!” Hermione bounced on her feet, feeling as though she would fly in the next second. “We’ll train, and learn, and fight the White Wizard and win, and then we’ll go home and win there too!”

“And we will help you,” Ilana said, holding out her slender hand.

Hermione reached out and took it, and felt the strength in those slim fingers. “I know you will,” she said. “I know you will.”

“So,” Draco said, leaning back on his hands and looking, for a moment, almost human. “When do we start?”

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The Lion, the Snake, and the Safe Room

Chapter 8: Lessons

"When do we start?" What a stupid question. Draco leaned against a wall, trying to catch his breath. What I should have asked is, "When do we stop?"

Only problem is, the answer to that is apparently "Never."

Gilles of Narnia might not be the High King, but that didn't stop him from reigning as tyrant, despot, and absolute autocrat over the training ring where he saw to the martial development of Narnia's two young Princes and a squire of the court. Five weeks had passed since Draco had asked the fatal question in the morning room of Cair Paravel, and he wasn't sure he had ever been more exhausted in his life.

To Draco's lasting embarrassment, Kargin routinely outpointed him in their sparring matches with singlestick and quarterstaff, as well as outshooting him in the archery trials, and he had a sneaking suspicion the Red Dwarf was barely trying. Nor was it pleasant to lose to Harry Potter, though at least their similar levels of experience in such matters (practically none) meant that those matches generally ended much more closely, and now and then Draco even scored a win.

But none of that could even begin to compare with the utter and total humiliation of being beaten by the girls.

Who would have believed that Granger— Granger, the messy-haired Muggleborn bookworm— would turn out to be a demon with a quarterstaff? Or that little brat Freeman a dead shot with a bow? She needs the lightest one they have, of course, since she's so tiny herself, but she'll train up a few sizes before she's done. And let's not even get started on the amount of damage that Dwarf girl Garnet can do with a singlestick! He grimaced, shifting the light breastplate he wore so that its straps no longer squeezed the worst of his collection of bruises. *If this is what it's like before we all move on to using the pointy things...*

A staff smacked into the stones an inch from his nose. Draco yelped and spun to face its wielder, bringing his own staff up in automatic response. "What?" he demanded, blocking two strikes in the course of the word. "I needed a break!"

"So you think your enemy will give you a break?" King Gilles, to Draco's chagrin, was barely breathing hard through the words as he struck, high, low, left, right, middle, middle, thrust. "You think you can beg for a moment in the midst of a battle and have it granted?"

Draco backed away from the blizzard of strikes, turning to keep himself from being pressed into a corner, absurdly proud that he was, at last, able to stop every blow from reaching him and keep his staff in his hands, even if those hands were starting to vibrate and sting from the repeated shocks of wood against wood. "No, but—"

"But me no buts, young Prince." The pattern was repeated, with more force this time. "If your

enemy will not give you respite, neither will I. It is my right—more than that, my *duty*—to press you harder than your enemy will, to be sure you survive when you finally face him." Again, the pattern, a drumbeat so precise that one might dance to it. "And I never neglect my duty."

I've noticed. Draco went to block the high strike which would begin the pattern once again—

And Gilles threaded his staff between Draco's legs, twisted, and jerked.

"Your enemy," said the King, leaning on his staff as Draco stared up at him from the ground, trying to regain his breath in earnest this time, "will also not be so kind as to give you a predictable rhythm of attack and defense. He will instead be trying to kill you, by any means at his command." A hand reached down towards him, as though to help him up. "Your duty is to remain alive, to defend and serve our fair Narnia. Will you surrender it to the first half-trained soldier who meets you in the field?"

"No," Draco grunted, and grabbed onto the hand, bracing himself for what was surely coming. A twist and throw over Gilles's shoulder, perhaps, or a yank in close for a simulated stab with a dagger—

But instead the older man simply lifted him to his feet, grinning. "That wasn't half bad," he said cheerily. "We may make a fighter of you yet. Go walk yourself cool, then get cleaned up. Abra would never forgive me if I made you miss a meal, and you have your music lesson with my Caelin after lunch."

Draco almost bit back his smile at the thought of that particular part of his studies, but let it come after recalling his instructions once more. *I'm supposed to let them think they're changing me, give them that satisfaction. When really, I'm the same as I've ever been, on my own side and allied with the person who'll give me the best rewards. Like being King all by myself, no one else to interfere with me.* Idly, he flexed the fingers of his left hand, feeling the slight pull on his forearm where the White Wizard had marked him. *That's how Malfoys do things.*

Still, acting or not, he was enjoying having the mysteries of music unfolded to him. Queen Caelin teased only lightly if he forgot what a notation meant or flubbed a change of chords, and she always made sure he could do it correctly before she moved on. High Queen Ilana, too, was quicker to praise than to scold, making the history and literature of Narnia and its surrounding lands interesting rather than stultifying, and High King Ardan, despite the rebuke he'd delivered Draco on the day of his arrival at the palace, treated all four of the young royals precisely the same when it was his turn to train them in the fine art of properly reigning over such a varied land as Narnia.

I like his lessons best, because they never get boring. Draco arched his back, stretching and twisting as he walked the prescribed laps around the training yard, feeling his muscles loosen as he moved. *And because I'll need to know how best to handle all my subjects, when I finally do take the throne. Red Dwarves and Black Dwarves, for instance—they look a lot alike, but they're so different in what they believe and what they want most. And the need to respect the instincts of the Animals, how a Stag can't always think clearly at a certain season of the year and a Wolf should*

be judged first by his own Pack before coming to us...and the sovereignty of the nature spirits in their own domains, how only the High King or Queen can even question a naiad about what she did in the land watered by her spring or a dryad in the area shaded by his tree...

King Gilles, in the middle of his own cooling-down exercises, found a moment to smile to himself at the thoughtful look on the face of the young Prince. His sister, as so often proved to be the case, had been right about the potential in this one.

Though I still do not like trusting him with our every secret, as though we were as sure of him as we are of the other three. He may have begun to change, but who is to say it will continue along the same lines?

I will keep watching, and keep listening. And if, in the end, it was unnecessary for me to do so, no one will be more delighted than I.

But if the boy proved, as he darkly suspected, to be already sworn to the side of their enemy...

You fight the man who trained you at your own risk, little Prince. Gilles laid a hand on his side, where the silver dagger he had forged himself in the caverns of the Dwarves always rode, ever ready in case a member of his birth family should come calling. *He knows all your weaknesses already, and knows where to strike.*

And in defense of his land, his wife and the friends he considered siblings, even his children—for surely if I am King, I may think of the Prince and the pair of Princesses who will someday reign after me as my children —Gilles Norois of Narnia would kill without mercy. Not without regret, for he never enjoyed ending a life, even one dedicated to darkness, but certainly without a moment's hesitation.

I know, from my dreams, what hesitation costs.

For a moment, the darkness loomed up, threatened to overtake him. Darkness, and hopelessness all around him, and the dull knowledge of horrors weighing him down. His friends thought him a heartless monster, worth not even a second thought as they went on with their lives; his every joy and pleasure, all the memories he treasured of laughter and love and hope for a life different from his family's, had been stripped away from him; even by turning his skin to hide within his animal's mind, he could find only a pale semblance of escape from this place, and more and more he found himself tempted to abandon his humanity altogether—

Enough. He closed his hand tightly around his dagger's hilt, using the ridges which kept it in his grasp during battle, the slickness of the pommel stone at its top, to draw himself back to reality. *Dreams, Gilles, nothing but dreams. They have only the power you give them.*

His dreams had been reality once, but for less than twelve months in total, not for the interminable procession of year upon year they often tried to make him believe as he slept. As for his closest friend and his beloved, they had abandoned him only because there seemed no other conclusion to

draw but that he was, in truth, the vicious killer he had been made to seem.

Ilana never did, but then, she has certain advantages.

The same dreams which had showed his sister in royalty the young Princes and Princesses had first told her, all those years ago, that the crimes of which Gilles Norois was accused rose from no savagery on his part but from the careful planning of a werewolf clan determined not to let its white sheep make a successful break from the family fold.

And once she had proved, to our friends' satisfaction if not at first to the law of the land, that one of the helpless innocents I'd supposedly slaughtered had instead fled to Calormen with my family's gold to set him up in style, the gold they paid him to butcher a round dozen Animals and make it look like a werewolf's work, then lure me to the scene in wolf form just as he finished...

His family had shouted louder than any in seeming horror at such a heinous crime by one of their own, and had gone directly to the lesser of the Kings who then reigned in Narnia (known for his rigid adherence to the law and his inflexible stance on wrongdoers) to ask for the right to punish their erring child as they saw fit. The request was granted, no doubt, Gilles thought with a flash of dark humor, in the hope that the werewolves might finally have seen the errors of their ways, and be turning towards the light.

Ha. I hope Aslan had something special awaiting that King when he arrived in the country beyond the Eastern Sea—perhaps even a test at the door, through which he'd have to pass before he could enter there—

Such a wish was, he knew, unworthy of one who now sat upon that King's very throne, but he dared anyone who had lived through experiences like his own not to harbor some such thoughts. He could still remember the gloating glee on the bestial faces of his cousins as they manhandled him down the dank tunnel deep within the clan's complex of caves, his mother's triumphant laugh as she followed with a single torch clutched in her gnarled fingers, the choking terror closing off his throat as it came to him belatedly what fate they planned for him—

I was theirs, by the King's own decree, and they could do with me as they liked. And what they liked was to seal me away from the world, imprison me in darkness forever, cut me off from light and love and everything they knew I treasured most. They chose their prison carefully, too—one of the caves that touches on the underground lakes, so I'd have fresh water and fish if I could catch them, even a few plots of dirt seeded with mushrooms so I wouldn't starve, but without any exit I could reach unless I cared to drown. It was, it should have been, the perfect place to break my spirit, to drive me out of my mind or force me to conform to their ways again, as the only escape from that madness.

But his family had reckoned without one slender lady of mixed dryad and human blood, whose peaceful face, like that of the fabled Susan, the Gentle Queen, hid a warrior's determined strength of heart. Fewer than six days after his mother had set the final stone which sealed him into his prison-cave in place with her own two hands, Gilles had looked up in shock as a bit of rock from the ceiling cracked and fell away. Sliding into the cavern like a serpent came the slender filament

of a tree's root, reaching towards him like the hand of a friend.

I didn't know what to think at first. I couldn't believe anyone would have looked for me after what had been said, what everyone thought of me now...but I suppose I should have known. Ilana was never one to accept what everyone said without seeing for herself. He cracked a smile, watching young Draco rack his staff and set his armor carefully on the shelf, then jog off towards the palace to have a bath before luncheon. *Or should that be, Seeing for herself?*

In either case, Ilana had found him, channeling the magic which was hers by blood to locate him through the shielding earth. When he had touched the root she'd sent down to him, she had even been able to speak with him, and her first words had relieved his breathless fear that his friend had sought him out only to condemn him further.

She said, "Tell me what really happened."

And when I did, she told me that she believed me.

Though her time within the werewolves' purview was necessarily limited, lest they spy her and realize what she was doing, Ilana had been able over the course of the next weeks and months to send other filaments of root through rock and soil, widening the few chinks which provided Gilles's cave with air and light. Too, she brought him news each time she returned, news not only of the life of Narnia aboveground but of her own efforts to convince Ardan and Caelin to explore his seeming murders more deeply.

Most of all, she was simply there. She knew I hadn't killed anyone, and reminded me that the truth would eventually be known. More than that, she spoke to me, she made me laugh, she gave me glimpses of a life wider than my walls. I wasn't alone, caged up in the darkness with nothing but my worst thoughts and memories for company. If I had been...

He began to strip off his own armor, letting that run through his thoughts. *If I had been, I think I still would have survived. But I would have been... damaged. I'd have had to find a particular idea to hold onto, to keep the madness at bay. Perhaps my innocence of the crimes I'd been accused of, though that would likely have made me so single-minded on revenge as to be little better than madness itself. Not a pleasant state of mind to contemplate.*

And if I'd had a chance at that revenge? He regarded his reflection in his breastplate. His eyes, usually gleaming with mischief, were as hard and cold as the polished steel he saw them in. *I find it hard to imagine anything or anyone short of the Lion himself which could have turned me from it.*

With a shudder, he broke free of the darkness, shaking his head as he did when coming out of the water in his wolf-form. "It never happened," he reminded himself. "I may see that fate in my dreams, but my waking life was better blessed than that."

And the reasons awaited him in the palace, along with a cool tub of water and his midday meal. After lacing his fingers behind his head and stretching out the last of his stiffness, Gilles followed

Draco towards Cair Paravel, letting his mind rove over those most pleasant of memories.

For nine months later, almost to the day...

"What is this painting about?" Meghan rested her fingers against the corner of the simple silver frame. The murky watercolor it enclosed portrayed a man seated on the shore of a dark lake, his shoulders slumped in weariness or despair but his eyes wide in disbelief as they rested on the woman who stood waist-deep in the water, reaching out her hand to him, her lips parted to speak his name. "It's beautiful. Sad, but beautiful."

"Ah, but when you know the story which goes with it, it will not seem so sad, little Pearl." Queen Caelin set down the pitcher of water with which she had been filling glasses for the informal family luncheon. "Do either of those within it seem familiar to you?"

Meghan felt a quiver of happiness run through her as the Queen used her favorite nickname, one which had always meant that her mother had broken briefly through the darkness which seemed to cover their lives, then looked back at the picture. "This looks like you," she said doubtfully, pointing to the woman. "But she has scales, scales and gills, like—"

"Like my mother's people," Caelin finished, coming to stand beside her. "And yes, I may take on such a form, when I must." She smiled ruefully, rubbing her neck. "It is not pleasant, but it can be done. And in such a cause as this, I was glad to bear the pain."

"Because that's Gilles, there on the shore." It had taken Meghan some time to get used to addressing the Kings and Queens by their first names, but they came almost naturally to her now. "Was he waiting for you? Did he think you weren't coming?"

"He was not sure if I would be able to come." Caelin shivered, and put an arm around Meghan, holding her close. "Neither was I. The caverns of the great underground lake by which he was imprisoned are vast, and no labyrinth designed by any mind could be more twisted. It took me three months to find my way to him—this painting is meant to show the first moment I surfaced by his side, when neither of us had known if it were possible until we saw one another—and even once I had discovered where he was, we had no idea of how he might come back with me." She smiled down at Meghan. "Neither wolves nor humans being noted for their ability to breathe water, you see."

"But you did save him." Meghan restrained her urge to bounce, merely rolling from toes to heels and back again. "You have to have done, because he's here now. How did you do it?"

"We took a chance, and one which still terrifies me to think of how badly it might have gone." Caelin's eyes were half-shut, her voice distant, as though she were reliving the memories in the moment of explaining them. "Gilles allowed me to place him into a trance, the sort I can sometimes invoke when I am healing, in which I have command over the functions of another's body. And I commanded him not to breathe, then took him in tow and swam as quickly as I could for the place where Ardan and Ilana were waiting for us, two minutes distant at my best pace."

Meghan swallowed, connecting this with some of the stories Harry had told her about the school year just past, bits and pieces about being expected to compete in a Tournament designed for students three or four years older than he was. One of the tasks had involved swimming through the huge lake on their school's grounds, trying to retrieve something, or someone, which had been taken from him...

"You made it out," she said rather than think about this any more, leaning back against Caelin. "You made it out, and brought him with you."

"But I thought at first that I had failed." Caelin smiled thinly. "He looked so pale, so limp, in the light of the moon as we lifted him ashore that I thought surely I had lost control of the trance along the way, that he had drowned and I never noticed it. Even when I consciously lifted the trance from him, willing him to breathe, it seemed that he did not, and I was ready to give up hope. But Ardan favored me with a certain look he has—you may know the one—"

"Oh, yes," Meghan said fervently. The High King, she had discovered quickly, had little tolerance for self-pity or whinging of any sort.

"And Ilana took my hand and told me to try one more time. So I laid my own hand upon Gilles's chest and asked the Lion's aid, and then I called to him, to Gilles. I reminded him that I loved him, and that I would take it very ill if he had died in the act of my saving him." Caelin's expression grew tender. "And my heart had time to beat only twice before I felt his chest rise beneath my hand, and he opened his eyes and smiled at me."

A happy sigh slipped from Meghan at the thought of such a romantic moment, though her practical side felt compelled to point out it would likely have been quite chilly, wet, and otherwise uncomfortable on that lake shore. "And you went away together, and were married, and lived happily ever after," she chanted under her breath, rocking on her toes again.

"We went away together, yes." Caelin pressed a gently quelling hand on top of Meghan's braided head. "And we were married. But happily ever after is not a place, little Princess—it is a journey. We must walk that road side by side every day, my Gilles and I." Her brown eyes shone with amusement. "And some days we go farther than others."

Meghan tilted her head innocently. "You mean like days when you throw things and shout?"

Draco stopped in the doorway at the burst of feminine laughter. "What did I miss?" he asked uneasily.

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The Lion, the Snake, and the Safe Room

Chapter 9: Belonging

Harry sat at the top of the tower where he'd talked to Garnet, alone with his thoughts and the Narnian night. The stars and constellations above him were nothing he remembered from his Astronomy classes in his other world, but felt somehow nearer and more personal than those ever had.

Maybe because I didn't learn their names by looking through a telescope and listening to a teacher who was talking to a whole class, but by lying out on a blanket with my friends—well, my friends and Draco, it's going to take more than a couple months of him not being a total prat for us to be friends, but we're not enemies anymore, it's a start—and listening to...

A quiet scuff of boot against stone warned him an instant before a man's voice spoke. "Am I interrupting?"

"No, sir." Harry bowed slightly, in greeting. "Ardan," he corrected himself before the High King could.

"Thank you." Ardan stepped out onto the tower's top, ensconcing himself between a pair of merlons across from Harry. He wore a simple tunic and trousers of dark red similar to Harry's blue ones, his crown was nowhere to be seen, but Harry could still feel the sense of presence he recalled from his first sight of the High King.

They called High King Peter the Magnificent, and for all it sounds silly just to say it, if he was anything like Ardan, it must have been true. But at the same time, I feel good around Ardan. Safe. Respectful, but not in a standoffish way. It's almost like...

Another memory, blurred but clear enough to serve, slipped to the top of Harry's mind. He'd been sitting in his bedroom, wherever it was that he lived when he wasn't at school, and worrying about something which had happened, something about which he wanted advice. It had seemed almost shameful at the time, but made perfect sense now, that he'd been trying to think of a person who was neither friend nor teacher but a combination of both, and so much more besides—

"I never knew my parents," he said, leaning back against the side of the crenellation in which he sat. "They died when I was a baby."

"So Ilana has told me, but not much besides." Ardan was regarding the full moon which hung halfway up the sky, smiling crookedly as though it amused him for reasons of his own. "Was there anyone in your life who took their place?"

"Not until last year." Harry traced a pattern in the stone with his forefinger. "And I had myself convinced I didn't need that, didn't need anyone's help. Not like I sat down and worked it all out, but in the back of my mind, that's how I was thinking."

"Because if you had never had that sort of adult attention, you would naturally regard it as unnecessary. An enjoyable addition to life, but not a central point." Ardan glanced down at Harry, raising one eyebrow. "Has something changed your mind, then?"

"I was having nightmares about...something that happened to me," said Harry rather than answering this directly. "Back in my world, and still here, sometimes."

"A very strong set of memories, to so affect you even after having been set aside." Ardan nodded. "But you placed them in the past tense. Have they gone from you?"

"They're starting to." Harry flattened his palm against the stone. "They still come every now and again, but they're nowhere near as strong as they were. And I'm learning what I can do to fight them, while they're happening and before they happen." He turned to smile at the High King. "Caelin's teaching me, and Ilana. And Gilles—I think he can see, or maybe smell, when I've had a bad night, because he'll change my training schedule to give me something to beat up right away, so I can get the worst of it out."

Ardan laughed. "That does sound like Gilles. Violence is always the answer for him, though he takes care to apply it only in the proper quarters. But you had mentioned my Queen, and my royal sister—what, if I may ask, do they teach you about your dreams? Not that I should need to ask about my beloved, for dreams are her purview, and have been for many years."

Harry nodded. "She taught me how to get control of them," he said. "How to recognize that they're happening, and that they're just dreams, that the things aren't really happening all over again." He found his hand on the way up to his scar, and consciously lowered it into his lap. "Caelin...well, she told me one of her rules for healing wounds. Not to poke at it too much, because then you make it worse instead of better. But not to leave it completely alone, either, because that's how things go sour."

"Which leaves you with something of a dilemma." Ardan held out his hands, palms up, like the pans of a scale. "How do you balance the two extremes?"

"I was hoping..." Harry swallowed his nerves and reminded himself of another rule Caelin had quoted him, that assistance was less than likely to be forthcoming to one who did not ask for it. "I was hoping you might be able to help me with that. Sir. Ardan."

Because if they're the Kings and Queens, and we're the Princes and Princesses, then they're pretty much our parents.

And this is the sort of thing parents do.

"Perhaps I can." Ardan nodded slowly. "Certainly I can try. Will you share with me some of what you may recall about the source of the nightmares, and allow me to offer what little advice I may from the experiences of my own life?" He smiled. "And when we have finished with that, which I believe covers the second half of my sister-Queen's advice to you, we shall adjourn to the courtyard, for I have a feeling such a beautiful night as this will surely bring some of our subjects

calling on us, and that should provide ample distraction to fulfill the first half..."

"Come, little sister! Tonight, we revel!"

Hermione jerked, startled, and looked up from her book to see Ilana standing in the doorway of the Princesses' room, smiling at her. The High Queen of Narnia wore a flowing gown of misty green and silver, highlighting the similarly-colored gleams within her long brown hair.

That's right, she's mostly dryad. Almost all dryad, except for the bit of human blood that means she's allowed to rule...

"Revel?" she asked, her ears catching up with her mind. "Why?"

"Why?" Ilana's smile turned into a puzzled frown, as though this were not the question she had been expecting. Then her expression softened, and she shook her head. "My poor child," she said. "You still have so much to learn."

"Yes, I do." Hermione tried to keep her offense at this form of address out of her voice. By the sudden gleam of amusement in Ilana's expression, she hadn't succeeded. "And I was trying to get some of that learning done right now. So unless there's some kind of special occasion, a birthday or a holiday that I shouldn't miss—"

"There is," Ilana interrupted. "There is a great deal you should not miss, Hermione. And your book will wait." Crossing the room, she picked up a feather Meghan had pulled from one of her arrows, set it in the groove of Hermione's page, and shut the book firmly. "Come with me." She looked Hermione up and down, then nodded approval to the gold tunic and long gray skirt. "Your clothes will do."

Do? Do for what? Hermione was too baffled to resist as the High Queen took her wrist and drew her out of her chair (*she's stronger than she looks, noted a stray corner of her mind, but she would be if she's mostly dryad, they have the strength of their trees*), as Ilana towed her out of the room and down the corridor, around several corners and into a more opulently decorated section of Cair Paravel, into what Hermione realized belatedly must be Ilana and Ardan's own bedchamber, decorated in warm golds and cool greens, to stand in front of—

"A mirror?" Hermione peered at her reflection, but nothing had changed about it. Her own face, no different than usual, gazed back at her out of the silvered glass surrounded by its ornate frame.

"What about it?"

"What do you see?" asked Ilana softly.

"Myself." Hermione looked more closely, wondering if perhaps Ilana meant to tell her that her face was dusty or her clothes somehow disarrayed, but everything appeared to be in order, except her hair, and that was seldom anything but flyaway. "Why?"

"Name that self to me." Ilana smiled, stroking a few strands of Hermione's hair which had strayed over her shoulder. "If you would be so kind."

"Hermione Jean Granger. Student of witchcraft, going into my fifth year of schooling. Member of the House of the Lion." Hermione hoped she was doing a better job of keeping her voice level this time, but suspected from Ilana's slowly elevating eyebrows that she was not. "A friend to Harry Potter, learning to be a friend to Meghan Freeman, and working very hard not to slap Draco Malfoy across the face when he insults me without thinking—"

Ilana laughed aloud. "It might not be such a tragedy if you should do that, one of these fine mornings," she said, still caressing Hermione's hair. "It would do him good to realize that his actions have consequences. But while you name yourself well, little sister, you are naming only a part of yourself. I must ask you for the whole."

The whole? What am I missing? There are the memories I put aside at the Silver Spring, but she can't mean those, we're years yet from going home, we have to become the Kings and Queens first

Hermione stopped, hearing her own thoughts again. "Oh," she said in a small voice. "You mean..."

"I do." Ilana nodded. "Speak it aloud, that you may believe it in your heart of hearts."

"I'm..." Hermione had to swallow hard before she could get the words to come out. "Princess Hermione. A Princess of Narnia, by the right of my blood and the choice of Aslan."

"It still sounds odd to you, does it not?" Ilana slid one arm around her, holding her gently. "But it is truth, and you must learn to live up to it. And a princess does not insult her subjects by refusing to join in the revel they have raised for her enjoyment. As for your question of 'why'..." She paused, her face thoughtful. "I believe I must answer a question with a question, for which my mother often scolded me. But it seems the only way to bring you to understanding." She released Hermione and turned to face her. "Why not?"

"Because there's work to be done. Things to be learned, like you said. I can't waste time..." Hermione trailed off, seeing sadness rising in Ilana's face. "What's the matter?"

"I knew a girl once who was much like you." Ilana's hand rose to her own hair, tangling in it as though her story were hidden in the snarls and needed to be coaxed forth. "So much like you that sometimes it frightens me. She had such life in her, she burned so brightly, and she knew just what she wanted, so she never wasted her time. But her time, Hermione, her time ran out." Brown eyes shone bright with tears. "She was taken from the ones she loved, taken from them too young, and there was still so much she had not shared with them. So many things they had never had the chance to do. Because she had thought of many of our simple, everyday joys as nothing but a waste of time."

"I'm sorry." Timidly, Hermione laid a hand on Ilana's wrist, then reached out and embraced her when the High Queen did not pull away. "I didn't know."

"There was no way you could." Ilana brushed her lips against Hermione's forehead. "And time has brought us all some measure of healing. But for the sake of that girl who was, I have never forgotten that work, no matter how important, can wait. That it is all very well to plan and prepare for joy, but that sometimes joy should also be a surprise to us." She looked down at Hermione, smiling. "All of which is a very long way to say that you are coming to the revels, my young Princess, will you or nill you. And it is even within the bounds of possibility that you will find yourself having fun. Which is also a lesson, and a vastly important one."

"It is?" Hermione blinked. "How can having fun be a lesson?"

Ilana drew her close again. "I will tell you a secret," she whispered. "If you promise to tell no one else. Many of the duties of a Queen..." She paused impressively. "...are terribly, *terribly* boring."

Hermione giggled before she could help it.

"And for those, your strong sense of duty and responsibility will stand you in good stead," Ilana went on in more normal tones, loosening her arms so that she clasped Hermione by the shoulders. "But as the rulers, so the land. If you are absorbed with nothing but duties and necessities, if you never take the time to laugh or play or rejoice, then Narnia herself will lose some of her color, some of her wonder. Do you understand?"

"I...think so." Hermione turned her head back to the mirror, inspecting her reflection. "How long will the revel go on?"

"Likely all night, but we may retire at any point once we have made our appearance and danced a few times—and what have I said to put *that* expression on your face?" Ilana planted her hands on her hips. "Anyone would think I had told you that we planned to fling you into the sea from the palace roof!"

Draco peered around a handy stone pillar at the chaos in the courtyard.

He'd already spotted Kargin, helping a stockier and longer-bearded Red Dwarf unload a wagon filled with more varieties of drum than he'd thought could possibly exist. Garnet was running her fingers appreciatively over the silky wood of a stringed instrument which a dryad with autumn-yellow hair, sharply contrasting her sisters' greens and browns, was holding out for her inspection. He thought he might even have seen Oren, off to one side in the middle of a swirl of fauns, tuning a different type of instrument to the tones of their pipes, but it was difficult to be sure. The mingling of torchlight and moonlight made for imperfect vision at long distances.

But I can see perfectly well that no one's setting up in the middle of the courtyard. They're all lining the edges, finding spots along the wall. Which, if I'm any judge, means there'll be dancing.

Memories rose of dances in his native world, of the heavy, itchy discomfort of his best dress robes and the slow, almost funereal music considered appropriate, whether for the decorous movements of pattern-dances or the forced intimacy of the ballroom styles. Learning to compliment his

partner without losing the rhythm of the dance badly enough to step on her feet had been good practice for firing insults at his sporting opponents without his play suffering by it, which was the only utility he had ever seen for the years of lessons he'd endured.

I suppose it's possible they'll be more use here, but somehow I don't think we're going to be hearing very many slow songs tonight. Draco dodged back into the shadows as a pair of Foxes, gray and red, chased a clutch of smaller Animals across the center of the courtyard, all of them laughing. He could see a couple of palm-sized, stripe-backed, narrow-tailed Squirrels, one gray and one golden Mouse, a brown Rabbit, a small and silken-coated Dog, and smiled at the improbability of it all, at the wonder and the marvel of where he was, what he was doing...

His left forearm twinged once. Absently, he rubbed it. *What would my father think if he could see me now?*

The smile broadened. *Probably that I've gone mad.* The Animals raced back across the courtyard, the mixed bag of smaller Beasts now chasing the Foxes, snapping at their tails. *Barking mad, even.*

A laugh escaped him at the inadvertent pun, but then he frowned. For all it had been a joke, the play on words held a sharp, hidden edge.

Funny is one thing. Facts are another. And I've got to face facts. This is mad, all of it, and I haven't bothered to question anything, not once. I've just let myself get swept away, without ever stopping to think, to ask what might really be going on here...

His mind began to spin faster and faster, and his breathing kept pace with it. *Finding other worlds by climbing through wardrobes, being hailed as a Prince just because I'm human, setting up for some kind of mad midnight orgy with a load of Talking Beasts and weird nature things—it's just not possible. None of it should be happening at all.*

And if it shouldn't be happening...

What if it's not?

The colorful courtyard blurred even as the idea came to him, running together like a watercolor painting left out in the rain. Draco hissed under his breath and squeezed his eyes shut so that he wouldn't have to watch as the world dissolved under the merciless pressure of his thoughts.

Freeman's Muggle-raised. She's read the books. So when she saw the wardrobe, she thought she might as well climb into it and out of it again to mess with my mind. I must have hit my head on one of the shelves when I followed her in. Or maybe she used some kind of Healing spell on me, I know she's always hanging around the hospital wing—

The sounds of cheerful chatter, the discordant plunks of instruments tuning up, rippled into the distance like water running out of a basin. The orange of torchlight against his closed eyelids faded towards purple, then black.

I've hallucinated all of this, dreamed it up from what I heard Granger reading and my own twisted little brain. None of it's real, none of it ever was. He curled his hands into fists, furious at having been caught in such an emotional trap. And now that I've worked that out, I'm due to wake up back in that damned safe room, maybe even still shut into the wardrobe—

He leaned against a flat slab of wood in darkness and silence, as alone as he had ever been.

But I still wish it could have been real.

"Why so pensive, my Prince?"

Draco's eyes flew open. He stood in the shadows of the courtyard at Cair Paravel. The surface against which his shoulder rested was curved stone. The laughter and talk, the snatches of music, the competing lights of torches and moon, were back in their places as though they had never been gone.

And standing before him, smiling at him, reaching out for him, was Nata of the Silver Spring.

Before he could find the presence of mind to deny it, their hands touched, right to left, left to right.

Draco exhaled in relief as his mind cleared in a rush. *What was I thinking? How could this not be real? I've lived it for two bloody months, I'm not quite so stupid as to have been taken in for that long! And nothing's impossible with magic, nothing except raising the dead and a few other bits and bobs, none of which anyone's been doing here in Narnia—*

But I might as well ask. Just to be on the safe side.

"Are you real?" he said, squeezing the naiad's hands gently.

"As real as you are, my Prince." Nata laughed. "And a poet you must be indeed, if you can delve so deeply into your thoughts at a moment's notice that you must ask that question when you return to us!" She turned their joined hands so that Draco's were uppermost and stroked her right thumb along his fingers. "Will you come and meet some of my friends? They live in the woods near my spring, and they would like to meet my poet-Prince and trade some of their marvels for his. And Oren had also asked to be remembered to you—the dryad, you recall, who guided you here to the palace—"

"Of course, I remember him." Draco peered around the pillar again. "There he is, over there with the fauns still. Are they the friends you mean?"

"They are. Will you go ahead of me, and make your own introductions?" Nata released his hands. "There is something I must do. It will take only a moment."

"I'll do that. As long as it is only a moment." Draco drew himself up to give her his best haughty look, the one he'd often practiced on Potter and Granger. "Your Prince commands it."

Nata laughed again and curtsied deeply. "And thus I shall obey."

"Good." Draco held the look for one more moment, then grinned at her and slipped between the pillars into the light. The sooner he could get to Oren and his friends, the better chance he'd have of putting that terrifying moment of darkness behind him.

Wonder what it was, really?

Alone, Nata turned to look into the deeper shadows. Her face hardened, and her voice when she spoke held traces of winter's ice. "You," she said with clear deliberation, "do not belong here. This is not your time, nor your place. You will have your chance. It is not yet." Her hands rose, and she made a flicking motion outward with all her fingers. "Begone."

The presence she could sense in the darkness beyond hovered for a moment, defiantly, then vanished into the night, as though it had never been.

I will have to speak to the High Queen. Nata turned to regard Cair Paravel. If the White Wizard can get so close without being found out, close enough to affect Draco's mind and make him doubt such a fundamental fact as the reality of our fair Narnia...

Her many years of life, and the knowledge she had garnered from other sources, made her well aware that her young Prince had a very long road yet to travel, the longest of any of the four who had come to Narnia from their castle home. Still, if he could only remain strong and determined, he would find what he longed for awaiting him at the other end of the road.

Even if he does not yet know what that may be.

Shaking off her momentary mood of melancholy, Nata pranced out into the courtyard. She had won a victory, small though it might be, and the rest of the night belonged rightfully to celebration.

Now if only our Kings and Queens will come out to us, to begin that celebration as is proper...

Harry paused on the spiral staircase to look out one of the narrow windows at the courtyard below and see if he could spot his friends. Kargin and Garnet were easy to find in a general sense, though he thought he'd have to be closer to pick them specifically out of the cluster of Red Dwarves who were surely their family. Oren was off to one side, demonstrating a dance step to Meghan, who copied his every movement faithfully. Further along that same wall stood Draco among a group of fauns, at their direction wrapping his fingers gingerly around what appeared to be a set of multiple pipes. Nearby, Nata the naiad was whispering with another of the fauns, both of them doing a great deal of gesticulating.

I don't see Hermione anywhere... wonder if she's feeling all right?

He descended the last few rounds of stairs, turned the corner into the ground-floor corridor, and got a partial answer to his question. Hermione might not be physically ill, but her face was the delicate shade of green Harry associated with an exam for which she felt she hadn't sufficiently studied.

"What's wrong?" he asked, coming up to her and inclining his head to the Kings and Queens, who were murmuring to one another near the tall doors which led out to the courtyard. "You don't look well."

"Oh, hello, Harry." Hermione gave him a rather sickly smile. "No, I'm fine. I'm just fine. It's only..." She gulped. "Harry, it's *dancing*," she said in a rush. "And I'm not good at dancing! I never have been!"

"I don't think this is the sort of dancing you have to be good at." Harry frowned, remembering the events of the Christmas just past in their native world. "And what about the Yule Ball? You danced then, didn't you?"

"Yes, but we had weeks to practice, and we haven't had weeks this time! Ilana just told me about it a few minutes ago, and everyone will be looking at us because we're the Princes and Princesses, and they'll expect us to be good at it, and I'm not, Harry, I'm not, and I just know I'm going to trip over my own feet or crash into someone and then—"

"Breathe," Harry interrupted her. "Just breathe. Panicking won't do you any good at all."

"But I—" Hermione began.

Harry held up a hand, halting her, and motioned for her to breathe.

With a shaky little laugh, Hermione did so, inhaling deeply and exhaling on a long sigh. "I'm sorry," she said on the tail end of it. "But I don't like surprises, and I don't like people staring and laughing at me, and I'm sure they will as soon as they see me try to dance."

"Why don't I dance with you, then?" Harry wasn't sure what had prompted the offer, but the half-stunned smile to which Hermione treated him told him it had been the right thing to say. "That way, if we look silly, we look silly together. And they probably won't laugh at both of us."

"No one will be laughed at tonight," said Caelin, turning from her conversation with Gilles and Ardan. "Our people all understand that you come from another land, with different ways, and will be glad to teach you how we dance in Narnia. And you will hardly be the only inexperienced dancers present—many of the Animals are too young to have attended our palace revels before, and some of the Dwarves come seldom to Cair Paravel."

"And then there is the one who is always here, but comes seldom out of his beloved cellars," muttered Gilles. "And why we allow him to stay on..."

"We allow him to stay on because he is a talented alchemist and an excellent scholar, and because

he is entirely loyal to Narnia, no matter his background," said Caelin tartly. "As though you had any right to question based on such a thing."

"His background?" Harry asked, but a moment later recalled Ardan's lessons in the differences between types of Narnian peoples. "Is he a Black Dwarf, then?"

"He is." Ardan nodded. "But although he can be rather cross-grained at times, and I would not recommend invading his territory without a clear reason, Sedem would fight as fiercely as any of us here to protect Narnia. You will meet, I am sure, and soon, as it would be wise for one or another of you four to become proficient in the creation of such brews as he has mastered." He smiled. "But for tonight, I am sure our Black Dwarf friend has gone to bed early, likely with his ears stopped up to keep out what he considers nothing more than noise. And we, for our part, should betake ourselves to the courtyard before our subjects tear down the doors in search of us."

"Indeed we should," said Ilana from her place by those same doors. "Harry, Hermione, perhaps would you care to slip out by the side way? We will draw attention as we enter, and it is customary for the first dance at any palace revel to be an exhibition piece for us alone, so you will have time to find your friends and learn a few basic steps."

"Yes, *please* ," said Hermione fervently as Harry nodded. "Where is it?"

"Behind the tapestry, just beside you there." Ilana pointed, and Harry pulled back the tapestry to reveal a passage beyond. "It will be dark, but the floor is level, and you will find your way easily to the courtyard from its exit."

"Thanks," Harry said, Hermione ducking under his arm into the passage. "See you outside."

Ilana blew him a kiss just before the tapestry dropped back into place, cutting off his vision of the corridor.

"Dark" was an understatement for the inky blackness of the secret passage, Harry found, but as Ilana had promised, the floor was smooth under his feet and there was only one way to go. Just as he located the door at the other end by barking his knuckles on it, a lively drumbeat began beyond, mingled with cheers and clapping as, he assumed, the Kings and Queens emerged from Cair Paravel and descended the broad stairway into the courtyard below, waving to the other Narnians who had come to share this beautiful summer night with them.

"Everyone sounds so happy to see them," Hermione whispered as Harry felt around for the door handle. "Do you think they'll ever cheer like that for us?"

"Hope so." Harry pushed down on the handle, and it turned. "Here we go."

Hand in hand, they slipped out into the shadows of the courtyard as a fiddle started to play a rhythmic pattern in time with the drums.

Oren turned his leaf-crowned head as they approached and beckoned them nearer, smiling. "We

had thought you were lost in the palace," he teased, indicating himself and Meghan, who bounced up from her place to bestow hugs on them both. "If you had not arrived soon, we would have started forming search parties."

"No need," said Harry, returning Meghan's hug, then seating himself beside her, Hermione taking the place on his other side. "So what's this, then? An exhibition, they called it?"

"It's where the Kings and Queens show off how well they dance," Meghan explained rapidly. "To prove to all of Narnia that we'll never need to be ashamed of our royalty on state visits or at formal balls." She wriggled in rapturous glee. "And we won't. Not ever."

In the clear space before them, with the music of fiddles and drums filling the air, now joined by several faun pipers and a chorus of dryads and naiads, Ardan, Ilana, Gilles, and Caelin were proving Meghan's faith to be amply justified. Hermione made a faint noise in her throat, half despair, half envy, as the Queens step-skip-stepped up to one another, snapped their skirts back and forth sharply, then joined hands and spun with perfect precision.

"They've been doing this all their lives, remember," Harry murmured to her. "And we've got... well, maybe not *all* our lives, but a good long time to learn how."

Though I almost wish we would. Have all our lives, I mean.

He paused, surprised, but the thought was there and he couldn't take it back. He might as well explore it.

I'm the only one who didn't leave anybody behind when we came to Narnia. Any family, that is. He could see Meghan from the corner of his eye, sitting with her knees hugged to her chest, enraptured by the dancing. She had her mother all her life, and now she has her father again, even if he can't be around very much. And Hermione's always had her parents. Even Draco. He glanced to one side to see the blond boy, discussing something about the dancing with Nata and one of the fauns. They may not be the best people, but that doesn't necessarily make them bad parents, and I'm sure he'll want to see them again sometime.

But I...well, it's like I was saying to Ardan, up on the tower. I never knew my parents, and I never had anyone who was even like a parent until last year.

In the center of the courtyard, Ardan and Gilles took their turn as the moving partners in the dance, enacting a mock battle of strikes and blocks, done in perfect time with the music.

And now I do. Now I have them.

But it's even more than that—it's to do with Narnia itself, and how I feel every morning when I wake up and remember where I am, when I see the sunlight and smell the sea and hear the merpeople singing...

"You look sad," Hermione whispered. "What are you thinking?"

"It's...complicated." Harry twisted a bit of his tunic's hem between his hands. "Are you sure you want to hear?"

"Please." Hermione shifted her weight until she was sitting on her hip, looking at him intensely. "You've been very quiet the last few weeks. Not like anything's wrong, exactly, but..."

"But." Harry stopped twisting his hem and tugged at it instead, seeing how far the dark azure weave would stretch. "Hermione, have I ever told you about my first flying lesson? Our first flying lesson, I should say, you were there. So was Draco."

"And he stole something from one of our friends, and dared you to follow him into the air to get it back." Hermione chuckled under her breath. "He really was terrible, wasn't he?"

"He was. But that's not what I'm thinking of. We'd been at school for a week or two at that point, and I was starting to think that there'd been a mistake. That I ought to go away from school, stop trying to learn magic, because everything I tried was hard, nothing worked quite right. But then Draco challenged me, and I grabbed up my broomstick, and..." Harry paused, feeling again the rush of joy which had filled him in that first instant of flight, making an inward face at the impossible task of explaining it with such plebeian things as words.

"That was the first time I really felt like I belonged in the wizarding world," he said at last. "Because flying was easy, it was wonderful, and most of all, it was *right*. My body, my mind, my soul, every part of me worked together when I was in the air, and worked the best way they possibly could." He shook his head at the halting words coming from his mouth. "Is this making any sense?"

"A little. It might make more when you tell me what's on your mind now." Hermione brushed a bit of hair back from her face. "Does something feel right, all the way right like that, now?"

"Yes." Harry spread his hands, careful not to hit any of the Narnians sitting around him. "Everything." He saw the incomprehension in Hermione's brown eyes and tried another tack. "How long did it take you to get used to putting your wand in your pocket every morning, when you were first at school? How many times did you get halfway down to breakfast, or halfway down your dorm stairs, or even just to the door of your dorm, and have to go back for it?"

"I didn't," said Hermione frankly. "But some of the others did, and I've watched the younger students these last few years, so I know what you mean. It usually takes the ones who didn't grow up with magic, the ones who haven't been looking forward to a wand of their own since they were babies, at least until Christmas to really get used to having one, and keeping it with them all the time. Sometimes it's as late as Easter before they're sure they always know where it is."

Harry nodded. "Christmas sounds about right for me," he said. "But look what I put on this morning, without ever having to think about it."

He lifted his tunic's hem over his right hip to display a gleaming dagger with a small red pommel stone, of a size to lie in the palm of his hand, belted around the waist of his trousers.

"And we've only been here two months..." Hermione looked up from the dagger to Harry's face. "This place is what feels right to you, isn't it?" she asked. "Cair Paravel, and Narnia itself. Being Prince Harry, in training to be the High King someday. And it scares you, because that's not something you ever thought you wanted before."

"Scares me to death." Harry let his eyes roam about, resting on a yellow-haired dryad, who was laughing as her bow raced across her fiddle's strings; on Kargin, grinning at another Red Dwarf who must be one of his many brothers, keeping pace with the Kings' and Queens' flashing feet on their multitude of drums; on the litter of small Animals who had formed their own miniature dancing square on the courtyard's far side. "And at the same time, it's the best thing that ever happened to me. Because when I wake up every morning, I..." He trailed off, embarrassed by the words he'd been about to speak.

"I won't tell," Hermione said softly.

"Thanks." Harry flattened a hand against his knee, reminding himself that he belonged to the House of the Lion. Surely that should mean he had enough courage to tell a friend the truth.

"I know that I'm somewhere I belong," he said finally. "That no one hates me here, and no one's trying to kill me, and I don't have to leave in a few weeks, or a few months, and go back to a place where people don't understand me, where they're afraid of me. Some of what we're learning here is difficult, but none of it's impossible. It makes sense to me, Hermione, it fits, in a way nothing else ever has. And I can stay here as long as Aslan wills it, as long as Narnia needs me." He lifted his head and tried a smile, and was pleasantly surprised when it worked. "Is it wrong of me to hope Narnia needs me for a good long while yet?"

"I don't think so." Hermione laid her hand atop his. "And maybe you can lend me a little of that belonging while you're at it. I still spend more than half of every day being certain that I'm far too ordinary for a proper Princess."

"I think that's the point of Narnia." Harry turned to watch the end of the dance, the Kings and Queens spinning dizzily in place, then catching hold of each other's hands for brief seconds to spin one another into new spots within the figure. "The most ordinary people from our world make the best Kings and Queens here. And that's looking like they're almost finished, so would you care to dance?" He grinned at her. "Princess Hermione?"

"Well, since you ask me so kindly, Prince Harry." Hermione inclined her head and dipped her shoulders, giving the impression of a seated curtsy. "Yes, I would. As long as you're willing to put up with my stepping on your toes."

"I'll probably do that to you too, so we'll be even."

The music swelled to a triumphant conclusion, and the two Kings gathered their Queens to them for a passionate kiss. Their subjects cheered and applauded, then surged forward as their rulers vacated the dancing space, calling out overlapping suggestions to the musicians for the next piece they should play. As Harry got to his feet, then held down his hand for Hermione, he heard a

familiar voice cutting through the noise of the crowd.

"...understand that you don't want to, but not even once?"

"Is that Garnet?" Hermione asked, turning her head to follow the voice.

"No, not even once! You know what'll happen if I go out there!"

"Garnet and Kargin." Harry peered around the courtyard and caught sight of his friends in the musicians' area, glaring at one another, Garnet with her hands on her hips, Kargin with his arms folded across his chest. "Let's go see what's the matter."

"...gets an idea in her head, she never gets it out!" Kargin was saying as they approached. "So if I give her any encouragement at all—oh, Harry, Hermione, there you are. We were looking for you." He sketched a bow in their direction. "How do you like our Narnian revels so far? Are they anything like yours?"

"We don't really have revels where we come from," said Hermione, watching the tangle of Narnians in the center of the courtyard sorting themselves out into four-person bunches. "But I think I do like it, yes. What were you saying about someone getting an idea in her head?"

"Oh, that." Kargin blushed, his ear tips turning the same fiery red as his hair. "It's just this dryad girl who lives near our home caverns—she's very nice, but she gets ideas, and..."

"And she thinks she's in love with him," said Garnet when her brother trailed off. "So she comes to all the palace functions, and cuts in on his every dance, or worms herself up beside him at the bonfires, or anything else she thinks will bring them together." A wicked smile touched her lips suddenly. "But maybe if he were dancing with someone she didn't dare offend..."

"Someone like a Princess?" Harry suggested, trying not to laugh at the identical looks of panic which flashed across Hermione's and Kargin's faces. "But this dance looks like it's for four people, not just two. And we shouldn't give her the opportunity to get in on the other side of him." He extended a hand to the Red Dwarf girl. "Squire Garnet, may I have this dance?"

"Why, Your Highness." Garnet curtsied, grinning. "I thought you'd never ask."

"I'll get you for this," Kargin muttered to Garnet. "And your little Prince, too." With a sigh, he turned to Hermione. "Shall we?" he said.

"How very gallant." Hermione was trying for a severe tone, but the little twitches at the corners of her mouth were spoiling it. "I suppose we shall, then. But you'll have to teach us how it's done."

"Oh, this one is easy." Garnet took Harry's hand, Harry took Hermione's, and Hermione took Kargin's, and they started forward for the nearest empty space among the dancers, Garnet chattering as they went. "You advance three steps towards your partner and bow, back up three steps and bow, then turn to the other person's partner and repeat the same thing..."

None of them saw, across the courtyard, the small, fond smile on the face of High Queen Ilana.

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The Lion, the Snake, and the Safe Room

Chapter 10: Friends

Hermione lowered her bow for a moment to flex her tired fingers. *It may be traditional for the elder of the Queens of Narnia to be an amazing archer, but that's one tradition I think we're going to be honoring in the breach. I can hit the target most of the time now, but that's as good as I'm going to get without a lot more practice.*

But we will have an archer-Queen. Just...not me.

Meghan, three targets down, was systematically lining its inmost ring with her arrows, her rate of fire steady and crisp. Harry, beside her, was keeping pace with her shots, though his aim was nowhere near as sure as hers. Still, Hermione thought most of his arrows would have crippled, if not killed, the imaginary enemy the target was meant to represent.

And that's as good as we really need to be.

Though that certainly doesn't mean we can stop practicing!

Garnet, beyond Meghan, was almost as quick and sure with her shots as the younger Princess, though Hermione suspected that was less a matter of inborn ability and more one of years of practice. Kargin, at the end of the row, was a bit slower, but all but one of his arrows had embedded themselves within the inner two rings of his target, and his powerful arms had driven them more deeply home than anyone else's had yet gone.

Again, practice, and in his case strength. He's probably been pumping bellows and hefting hammers since he was tiny, so he's going to have more of a pull to his bow than the rest of us. Harry might eventually train up that far, but it's going to take a year or two...

Which brought her to the person standing next to her, whom she'd been avoiding on general principles.

Though he isn't nearly as bad as he once was.

As Hermione watched, Draco Malfoy pulled an arrow from his quiver, nocked it, drew back his bowstring, and loosed. His motions were practiced, as well they should be after the three and a half months the young royals and their training partners had spent doing very little else but this, but somehow Hermione sensed a jerkiness to them, a feeling of discomfort.

And it isn't just that he thinks this is beneath him, that he shouldn't have to learn how to handle these "clumsy Muggle toys"—not after the drubbing Gilles gave him the first week we were here. Hermione swallowed her laugh at the memory. Their trainer-King had armed himself with only a quarterstaff, allowed Draco full use of his wand, and still claimed his victory in less than a minute. No, there's something else happening here. He's trying to do it wrong, or it's wrong for him...

But how can it be? We all learned at the same time, Gilles showed us the proper way to do it, and we were able to mirror him exactly because he's left-handed and we're all right—

She stopped and looked at that thought again.

Or are we?

Draco hissed between his teeth in frustration, lowering his bow. "I'm never going to get this," he grumbled, glaring at his target, which was peppered with apparently random shots, including one arrow hanging drunkenly from the bottommost edge. "Look at that! A five-year-old could do better!"

"Maybe a Narnian five-year-old could." Hermione hung her bow on her shoulder so as to stretch her left hand as well. "I don't think you had lessons in archery when you were five."

"No, no archery." Draco laughed reluctantly. "Lessons in just about everything else, mind you, but not that. Maths, elocution, foreign languages, reading and writing..." He grimaced. "Didn't like those much. My tutors had some very strict ideas about what was and wasn't proper."

"And was part of that what hand to use for your quill?" Hermione asked, her thought recurring to her. "So you wouldn't smear your ink, maybe?"

"I'd ask how you knew that, but I don't think I actually want to know." Draco arched his shoulders, stretching. "Put it down to your usual genius brain, I suppose. Why bring it up?"

"Why not try it the other way around?" Hermione gestured to the bow Draco was gripping loosely in his left hand and the quiver which poked over his right shoulder. "Just for fun, to see if anything changes."

"Couldn't hurt." Draco handed her his bow. "Hold that?" Swiftly, he unslung his quiver and draped the strap across his other shoulder, settling it into place, then reclaimed his weapon and weighed it in his right hand. "Hmm." Taking his stance, he planted his feet, flexed his knees once or twice, and reached for an arrow.

Hermione couldn't keep herself from grinning as the center of Draco's target sprouted first one, then two, then three tufts of feathers.

"Oh." Draco lowered his bow again, looking from it to his tightly clustered arrows with a considering expression. "So *that's* what it's supposed to feel like." He glanced over at her, a smile blossoming on his face which could almost have been described as shy. "Thanks," he said, a trifle awkwardly, as though he were unused to the word. "I don't know that I'd have thought of that for myself."

"You're welcome." Hermione felt a small, wicked urge and promptly submitted to it. "What else are friends for?"

Draco blinked at her, startled. "Yeah," he agreed after a moment. "What else."

Friends.

Draco toyed with the remains of his apple tart and considered the word. It wasn't one which had ever had much bearing on his life, at least in the sense that the other young royals understood it.

Potter and Granger—Harry and Hermione, I suppose I should be thinking of them, don't want to ruin my cover story—Harry and Hermione, then, they're Lions, not Snakes. More than that, they were Muggle-raised, both of them, they didn't know anything about magic until those letters from school showed up. Freeman, Meghan, she may be a Snake like me, and she may have known magic existed, but she still grew up more Muggle than magical in all the ways that count.

Ways like having friends. Like knowing how to have them.

Across the table, Harry and Meghan were discussing some esoteric bit of trivia from a Narnian legend with Caelin and Gilles, while Hermione, next to him, was chattering away with Ardan about the Calormene ambassadors who were expected within the week. Ilana was sipping her tea and gazing into the distance, apparently lost in her own thoughts but occasionally interjecting a remark into one conversation or the other.

I don't know that any of them, even the Kings and Queens, could really understand where I come from. What my world was like before I went off to school, and after it too. Meghan might have more of a clue than the rest, from what she's seen the other Snakes doing and heard us talking about, but that depends on how observant she is...

For the simple fact was that friendship, in the sense Harry and Hermione had it for one another, were learning to have it for Meghan and teaching her to have it for them, was nothing that Draco Malfoy had ever learned to do for himself.

It's not that Snakes can't like each other. Can't want to do each other good turns, or have some fun together. We can, and we do, a lot more often than the Lions or the Eagles or the Badgers would ever think we did. It's just... He crumbled a bit of the tart's crust between his fingers. There's always that little, underlying question of, "what's in it for me?" That running tally of who owes whom what sort of favors. The other Houses don't do that, at least not consciously.

He didn't know if his own House's constant awareness of underlying suppositions about the actions of others was a good thing, a bad thing, or just a Snake thing.

Or possibly all three.

Whichever it might be, though, it was a hard habit to break, and Hermione's actions before lunch had put him very definitely in her debt on his personal score sheet.

And indebted is not a condition in which I like to be. Especially not to Hermione Granger.

But how, without knowing what she valued most, was he supposed to pay her back?

A hand touched the back of his gently. Startled, he looked up.

"You seemed far away," said Ilana, smiling as she sat down beside him. The rest of the motley crew of royalty had left the table, and three dryads in palace livery were beginning to clear the dishes, giggling behind their hands as they did so. "Was it a pleasant place that you were visiting?"

"Inside of my own head?" Draco pursed his lips, as though considering. "More pleasant than some, less than others." *More pleasant now than it once was, since I got rid of that one voice which sounded like Father, back on our first morning here at the palace. Still not a garden spot, but I've dealt with worse.* "Did I miss something I should have heard?"

"Not precisely. But you did, and do, look as though something is troubling you." Ilana pointed to the pile of crust crumbs under his fingers. "Since I doubt the apple tart had offended you in such a way as to deserve death by slow disintegration."

Draco laughed once, acknowledging the joke. "It's nothing really important," he said. "Just thinking about...well, thinking. And how different people do it differently, how they see the world, where they place value."

"And this is 'nothing really important'?" Ilana tipped her head to one side. "I must beg to differ with you there. It seems a most important subject, and one that perhaps we could discuss further. If you can spare me some time, of course."

"I...think I can do that," said Draco, after a moment spent making sure his mouth wasn't hanging open. *If I can spare her some time? She's the bloody High Queen, I'm nothing but a Prince, and one on sufferance at that—she could have just given me an order—*

But she didn't. She doesn't. None of them do. His lips twisted briefly as he recalled, once again, his dressing-down by High King Ardan on his first afternoon in the palace. *Everything here is backwards to everything I ever learned about power and propriety, and there are days I don't think I'll ever be able to get the hang of it...*

"Come, then." Ilana stood, as graceful as the dryad servants, and smiled at them before extending her hand to Draco. "Walk with me, if you will."

Draco accepted the hand, and matched his steps to the High Queen's, out of Cair Paravel proper and down to the seashore, where the noonday sun drew patterns on the dancing water and the seagulls cried overhead, soaring and circling in flocks of dazzling whiteness. Their feet made tiny crunching noises in the sand as they walked, and waves came foaming up the beach towards them but retreated before they so much as threatened the lace on Ilana's skirts, as though they too were Narnians and respected, admired, even loved, their Queen...

"People love you," Draco said, breaking the silence. "You, and Ardan, and Gilles and Caelin, they love all of you, even when you do things that they don't like or don't agree with. I know there are some Narnians who hate Calormen, who think we shouldn't be receiving their ambassadors, but

they haven't run out of the kingdom or started a rebellion or even gone underground to sulk because you're going to have the delegation here next week anyway. They said their piece, and you made your decision, and it went against them, but we're still all one kingdom and they don't even seem to be holding a grudge. I don't understand that."

"It is not always so." Ilana turned her face upward, towards the sun. "But often it is. As for your lack of understanding...whom does a grudge benefit?" She squeezed his hand and released it.

"Who is helped, who is aided, who is given more of what they need, or anything they need at all, by determinedly holding to wrongs, real or imagined? Tell me that."

"If you remember who did you wrong, and make sure to get back at them properly, no one else will do it again," Draco answered promptly. "And the same goes for someone who did right by you—you pay them back in full, give them everything they gave you. Fair's fair."

"So it is, and of that I approve. But you have answered only part of my question." Ilana adjusted the fall of the chain of bronze which was serving her today as a belt over her gown of crystalline blue. "There is merit in the idea of ensuring that wrongdoers do not strike again. But payback, revenge, suffering in return for suffering...is this a philosophy you would advise the whole world to take up? Or is it only for you and yours?"

"It's the philosophy most of the world *does* work on." Draco kicked at a rock moodily. "At least it is where I come from."

"And where you come from is a marvelous place, so rich in delight that you long to return there as quickly as possible?" Ilana's tone was teasing, but Draco could hear the undercurrent of true question underneath it. "Does our Narnia pale in comparison to your homeland, even such recollections of it as you still have?"

Damn it. Damn her. Since when have I been this transparent? "I don't remember enough to really compare," Draco hedged. "Besides, they're so different it's hard to find anything that would be a good starting point."

"Oh, I would not say they are so very different as all that." Ilana's voice had cooled, taking on a distinct note of warning. "I have seen your world, Draco, in the dreams Aslan is pleased to send me, and I have learned much about it from your siblings in royalty as well. There, as here, people have desires, and dreams, and hopes, and fears. And there, as here, people come together to help fulfill the first and withstand the last. So I ask you again. Which of your worlds do you prefer?"

Draco growled under his breath and kicked the rock again as they came up to it. "Here," he said grudgingly. "I like it better here."

Because here, if I make a mistake, I might get whacked for it, but I also get help with it. I don't just get beaten about the head until I fumble across the answer on my own. And here, there's such a thing as fun. Like those midnight revels with the dancing, or learning music and showing it off, or having the occasional afternoon off studying to go on a picnic like we did the other day...

He looked up as a seagull mewed above him. *Or walking on the seashore after lunch and talking, just talking, with a grownup. Hashing things out, learning what we both think and feel and believe, and even some of why. Not my being told what I'd damn well better think and feel and believe, if I know what's good for me.*

A new thought began to form in his mind. He held back, letting it crystallize piece by piece. Ilana seemed to be able to sense that something of the sort was happening, as she was humming softly under her breath, one hand tangled in her skirts, holding them clear of the sand.

Finally, the thought settled into a clear form, and Draco allowed himself to think it.

It was just as unsettling as he had suspected it might be.

These people are willing to let me have a choice. To let me decide for myself.

My parents, and the people they're in with, never wanted me to choose anything, or even to know there was a choice. Just do as you're told, follow the rules. Make yourself strong by trampling weakness. The hell with everyone else, why should we care about them and what they do, or why they do it? They're not as good as we are, not by a long cast, because they're weak and we're strong and the strong should always rule over the weak...

But if he still wanted to choose the side of strength over that of weakness—which I do—what did it say when one side was so confident in its own ways that it did not fear to let its children think new thoughts?

"I don't know how to do what everyone's expecting from me."

The voice was hesitant, quiet, almost timid.

It was also, Draco realized with a mounting sense of dread, his own.

"You do not know how to live, and learn, and grow in knowledge and friendship?" Ilana stepped carefully over a small trench in the sand. "I find that hard to believe."

"The last one is," Draco shot back. "For me, it is, because what do I know about being friends? What do I know about what someone like Harry or Hermione expects from a friend, or even Meghan? How am I supposed to keep things even between us when they're not so much as watching the score?"

"Perhaps you are playing different games." Ilana's smile flickered for a moment, then smoothed out into seriousness once more. "As for friendship, try turning the question about. What, if you had the choice out of all the world, would you want from a friend? What qualities, what characteristics, would you value in one who might be your companion?"

"How should I know?" Draco kicked the rock once again, this time angling it towards the water. It clipped the top of a cresting wave, then sank with a small splash. "I never had friends, not the sort Harry and Hermione are, not the sort they're making with Meghan..."

"And yet I see you in converse with them, sharing your lessons with them, even sometimes a little, foolish, commonplace joke." Ilana bent without breaking stride to pick up a broad, curved shell. "On such foundations are friendships built every day."

"Not for me," Draco muttered. "Not for Draco Malfoy."

"Then why must you continue to be Draco Malfoy?"

Draco laughed once. "Good question. One I ask myself every day..."

He stopped in mid-stride and listened to Ilana's question again in memory.

I don't think she was joking.

Turning his head, he looked at the High Queen. She had halted when he did and was facing him, her brown eyes meeting his gray without a trace of laughter in them.

Apparently not joking. Though I can't see what else she could be getting at...

"If you truly believe Draco Malfoy is a person unable to make or keep friends, then I would say Draco Malfoy has outlived his usefulness," Ilana said softly, her hands cupped in front of her, holding the shell with its pearly interior facing him. "You have partly shed his identity already by stepping through the wardrobe, by accepting the title of Prince of Narnia. But still he holds you fast, or you hold him, or both. So I ask you, my young Prince: is Draco Malfoy, as he has been for these fifteen years, the person you wish to continue being for the rest of your life?"

Two utterly opposed reactions erupted within Draco at the same time. Yes, one of them clamored, *of course I want to be me, I'm not about to abandon everything I am and believe just because of some stupid disagreement about friends! Who needs friends? I'm going to be a King someday, and Kings don't have friends, they have subjects, obedient and loyal subjects, that's all I'll need, all I'll ever need...*

No, whispered the other one, the voice which had begun, tentatively, to emerge in the few months he'd spent in Narnia, living in close quarters with his former enemies, watching the way they treated one another, seeing firsthand what all the tales he'd never understood were really about. *I don't want to keep being the person I've been, the person who never got a choice about what he wanted to think and believe. I'm not sure who I do want to be, not yet, but I'd like to have a chance to find out...*

"I don't know," he said aloud. "I wish I did."

Ilana smiled. "A good answer, and a truthful one," she said. "May I make a suggestion?"

"I'm listening."

"Why not try being someone else, in a small way, for a short while?" Ilana made a motion with the shell in her hand as though she were pouring something onto his head. "A change in, let us say, the

name by which we call you in our everyday doings. You will thus be freed from any prohibitions you feel binding on Draco Malfoy, because, for this little time, you will not *be* Draco Malfoy. If you do not like it after a few days or a week, we can easily return to our original style, and no harm is done. What do you say?"

He eyed the shell warily, but did not move away from it. "What did you have in mind?"

"A simple derivation. A nickname, if you will." Ilana repeated her pouring motion, smiling more broadly this time. "Ray."

The name trickled through his consciousness, setting off the same thought processes he had once expounded to Nata along another patch of this same seashore, when he had told her about his daydream of seeking out the sun. That, he thought hazily, had been more Ray than Draco. It seemed like something Ray would do.

Half-consciously, he turned to face the ocean, bringing up his right hand as though it gripped a bow, his left as though drawing back a string. He had used his left hand more in his childhood, he recalled now, until his tutors broke him of the habit, but his right eye was the stronger of the two, so it only made sense that his aim was truer if he loosed his arrows with that eye on his target.

I'll have to thank Hermione for spotting that. Maybe do a couple of chores for her, or even get her a present. Her birthday's coming, isn't it?

It was like the Silver Spring all over again, only this time he was doing it to himself, almost as a game. This mysterious boy named Ray, who had never existed before—or had he, in the corners and crevices of Draco's mind, and was he only now getting a chance to come forward? Whichever it was, Ray was taking firm hold, settling himself in for the duration, but somehow Draco hadn't been pushed out by it. They were sharing, inhabiting the same skull without crowding one another, the same but yet not the same—he thought it would be nearly impossible to explain to anyone who hadn't experienced it—

Ray's everything I am that I know they'll like to see. Along with all the things I wasn't allowed to be, or supposed to be, back where I came from, but always wanted to be anyway. All the rest of me, the things I've been hiding, the things I don't want them knowing about, I can pack that off with Draco, because I won't be needing him for a while. He folded his hands and flexed his fingers backwards, then gripped his wrists and arched his arms behind his head for a stretch, incidentally putting his hand in the proper place to rub a certain spot on his left forearm which had started to ache. *Not until the time is right. Not until they trust me all the way, and think Ray is all I am anymore.*

He ignored the tiny whisper of thought which wondered what he would do if, when that day came, Ray was all that he wanted to be. Instead he smiled broadly at High Queen Ilana, stepping back a pace to give her his best and most courtly bow.

"Your Majesty," he said. "Allow me to introduce myself. Prince Ray of Narnia, very much at your service."

Until it's time to be of service to myself.

"I am pleased to meet you, your Highness." Ilana curtsied in return, laughing through her words. "Will you escort me back to Cair Paravel, that I may introduce you to my royal siblings, and to your own?"

"I would be delighted, madam." Ray offered the High Queen his arm, and together they walked up the beach, discussing the weather and its effects on the upcoming harvest.

Ilana's shell lay forgotten behind them on the sand, until two hissing waves in quick succession broke over it, the first filling it with water, the second drawing it out to sea, leaving no trace behind.

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The Lion, the Snake, and the Safe Room

Chapter 11: Words

"Where did the summer go?" Meghan wondered aloud, looking out the window of the Princesses' room at the gaudy patchwork of an autumn forest. "It seems like almost yesterday we got here by boat, with Oren, and saw Caelin chasing Gilles out of the kitchen."

"It does, in some ways," said Hermione, turning her page. "But in others, it doesn't. We had the Calormene ambassadors here, and now they've gone again..."

Meghan giggled. "Not before one of their young knights saw you reading in the orchard!" she sing-songed.

Hermione snatched up a spare bit of paper, crumpled it into a ball, and hurled it at Meghan, who dodged adeptly. "And he wrote you poetry!" she caroled, hugging herself around the middle and wriggling in glee. "He wrote you poetry and left it where he thought you'd find it, and the boys found it instead!"

"He wrote me very bad poetry." Hermione spoke with as much dignity as she could muster for the vibrant blush now staining her cheeks. "Which I certainly never asked for. And speaking of the boys..." She waited until her face had cooled somewhat, and until Meghan was calm enough to sit back down on the window seat and look at her curiously. "What do you think of...Ray?"

"I don't like him." Meghan's response was immediate, as was her pout. "I don't like him any more than I did when he was still Draco. I don't like him, I don't trust him, and I don't see why Caelin and Gilles and Ardan and Ilana do." She cocked her head at Hermione. "Do you?"

"I might." Hermione set her book aside and joined Meghan on the window seat, gazing out into the golden Narnian afternoon. "They're giving him a chance, Pearl. The same chance they're giving all of us. He's not doing quite the same thing with it that we are, but we started from a different place. He's got a lot of ground to make up."

"But what if he doesn't want to make it up?" Meghan objected. "What if all he wants is all he ever wanted—to be rude and nasty to people and lord it over them, and someday be King all by himself, without any of us? What if all the Kings and Queens are doing, trusting him, is giving him the chance to make that happen?"

"I think they're smart enough to spot it before he gets very far." Hermione smiled at the girl she was coming to regard as a little sister, with all the dovetailing love and annoyance that entailed. "And you and I and Harry would have a thing or two to say about it as well."

Meghan sighed. "All right," she said, sitting back in the corner and folding her arms. "But I still don't like him."

"I'll make a note of that."

Prince Ray of Narnia sat in the library of Cair Paravel, an elaborately inscribed scroll on the table in front of him, his left hand tapping an unloaded quill against a clean sheet of paper as he skimmed the lines of verse in front of him.

"O Princess, in your sky-blue raiment clad,/ With one fair look, I beg you, favor me /As favor to your book and apple had / You shown when I saw you in yonder tree." Can we tell that Narnian is not this gentleman's native tongue? And that he's read far, far too much really terrible epic poetry?

He and Harry had shared a good laugh over the flowery, stumbling phrases in which the youngest of the knights the Calormenes had brought with them had chosen to address their sister in royalty, but Harry's interest in the so-called poem had ended there. Ray had found it holding onto his mind, and thought he might now understand why.

Hermione may be a bookworm, but that doesn't mean she's not a girl too. She likes to be told she's pretty, and that you want her to think well of you. It's just that this is the wrong way to go about it. He tapped the scroll with his right hand. So I'm going to see if I can't find the right way. Working a bit from this, maybe, just to prove there's a few seeds in even the least promising ground.

"And if I can get that right," he murmured aloud, "why not do one for everybody? Not long, just a few lines apiece, but real. Personal."

Proving that Ray pays attention to who and what people are, where Draco never did...

The double-think entailed by the shift in his personal nomenclature (which, despite what Ilana had originally said on the beach, looked like it was going to stick for the long haul) would, Ray thought, have been difficult for anyone who hadn't grown up in a pureblood household.

But we get used to having more than one face. A different one for every situation, really. And all of them different from the person you are when you get home and you can finally take the mask off...

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. *And I'm not so very sure I know who that was for me, anymore. Or that I ever did. I thought I did, but was I really being me? Or was I just being the perfect son my parents wanted?*

"Because a lot of what I'm finding in Narnia, I like." Ray pushed back from the table and walked over to the window, leaning on the sill and looking out across the sea. "And I want to keep it. Even when I know my parents wouldn't approve, that they'd be screaming in horror at some of it and turning up their noses at the rest..."

But that, as he had to keep reminding himself firmly, was a problem for another day, or possibly another year, if the pattern held true. For this day, this moment, he needed to concentrate on rewriting the young Calormene's doggerel verse into something more closely approximating real poetry.

And then ask Garnet, very nicely, if she'll copy it out for me in that fancy handwriting I know she does, and maybe get Nata to do an illustration or two to go along with it...

He rolled his left wrist absently, easing the ache in his arm, as he returned to the table and picked up the scroll once more.

Princess Hermione's natal day opened with music, as had those of her siblings in royalty over the course of the summer. To her surprise, Ray was among the musicians who came to her chamber to play her awake, concentrating hard on the correct execution of the simple stepwise melody of an ancient Narnian song of joy. "I didn't know you'd come so far already," she said when the song was finished, applauding along with Meghan.

"I practiced a lot." Ray looked like he wanted to duck his head or hide his multiple pipes behind his back, but instead smiled at her, the expression sweet and almost shy. "Thanks."

"No, thank *you* ." Hermione beamed at him, and at Caelin, Ardan, and Garnet. "What else are you going to surprise me with today?"

"And if we told you that, my Princess, it would no longer be a surprise, now would it?" chuckled Ardan, cradling his fiddle in the crook of his arm. "Come, now, up and dress. The day awaits you."

"And you, and our young Prince, will await it elsewhere," said Caelin firmly, opening the door. "Out, the both of you. Mere males are not welcome here."

Ray winked at Hermione before he exited the room.

Meghan's gift to Hermione was a new writing set, with gorgeously colored inks and quills so soft Hermione spent a few moments brushing them against her face to luxuriate in the touch of the feathers. Harry's, given over breakfast, was a bound and intricately illustrated version of the legend Gilles had told them shortly after their arrival in Narnia, that of the first Kings and Queens to reign as a group of four from Cair Paravel. Ardan and Gilles gave her a beautifully wrought silver dagger, its hilt ornamented with a translucent stone of her favorite blue, and Ardan girded her with it ceremoniously, looking into her eyes levelly when the belt was buckled. "Do not be too quick to deal out death and judgment, young Princess," he murmured. "Even the very wise cannot see all ends."

"Yes, sir." Hermione inclined her head, then, obeying impulse, leaned forward and kissed Ardan on the cheek.

The High King blinked, and Hermione felt a small, ignoble rush of glee. She had managed what all the young royals had begun to think was an impossible task—she had, without prompting or help of any kind, surprised Ardan of Narnia.

A moment later, she was startled in her turn, as a man's arms closed tightly around her.

"Such a Queen you will make, my child," Ardan said softly, cradling her against him. "Such a marvelous, unexpected Queen."

Hermione willed away tears of happiness at the compliment and hugged him back fiercely.

The Queens' gift to the elder Princess of Narnia was her wardrobe for the autumn and winter months of the year, "for though clothing should not be our first concern, neither should it be our last," said Ilana, showing Hermione the fabrics she and Caelin had tentatively chosen for day dresses, formal gowns, and riding habits. "Others judge us, and decide how seriously to take our words and our ideas, based on what we do or do not wear, and how we do or do not wear it."

"Clothes convey a sense of the wearer, just as movement and tone of voice speak as much or more than words," Caelin added. "They are languages of their own, as complex and nuanced as any spoken or written words. And we, if I do say so myself, speak them fluently."

"Or we hope we do, in any case!" Ilana added with her merry laugh.

Kargin, the tips of his ears glowing brightly, handed over three elegantly simple sets of jewelry to be worn with the new clothes. "Garnet and I told our brothers about you, and this is what they made," he said as Hermione exclaimed over the interwoven links of rose and yellow gold, the hammered silver circles of differing sizes which formed their own chain, and the griffin-shaped pendant of bronze. "I hope you like them."

"Oh, they're lovely." Hermione blew him a kiss. "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome, Princess," Kargin mumbled, looking at the floor.

Hermione was about to remind him what she preferred to be called, but Ardan tapped a finger against the table until she looked his way, then shook his head very slightly. With a nod, Hermione acknowledged the command. She supposed she had to get used to her title sometime, and here at home, with her friends, seemed like as harmless a way to do it as any.

Oren and Nata, attending both in their own persons as Hermione's friends and as representatives of their respective peoples to the Princess, jointly presented her with an elaborately carved harp, its reddish-brown wood gleaming. "But I've only just begun lessons," Hermione protested, running her hand regretfully along the upper curve. "I can't possibly play as well as an instrument this beautiful deserves!"

"All the more reason for you to keep up your practice," said Caelin firmly. "I tell you now that if you are faithful to it for a year, you *will* in that time become worthy of a harp of this quality." She planted her hands on her hips. "Or do you doubt my expertise in this area?"

Hermione shook her head, momentarily speechless.

"And now, the final gift of the afternoon," said Ilana, waving to Ray, who had remained in the background through most of the gift-giving.

Swallowing her nerves and reminding herself that she, like the rest of the Narnian royalty, had agreed to treat Ray as though he truly were a separate person from Draco Malfoy, Hermione turned to face him.

"Princess," Ray greeted her, dipping an elegant little bow, not in the least off-balanced by the wrapped rectangle in his hands. "Many happy returns."

"Thank you." Hermione received the parcel and surreptitiously felt it as she seated herself. *Something framed—a portrait, or a picture? But whose, or what—*

She stripped off the paper and felt her eyes go wide.

"Calligraphy by Garnet, art by Nata," Ray said from beside her. "Words..." Another little bow, this one with a self-deprecating flourish. "By yours truly."

Hermione let her fingers trail across the glass which protected the items he'd named, taking them in a bit at a time. The picture at the top of the page showed a girl of about fifteen perched in a tree, one bare foot swinging below her branch of choice, brown curls tumbling carelessly over blue-clad shoulders, brown eyes fixed firmly on her page. A half-eaten red apple lay momentarily neglected in her other hand, and a silver diadem set with a blue stone, along with a pair of sensible shoes tied together by their laces, hung on the branch above her, ready to her hand when she needed them.

Beneath the picture, in most elegant handwriting, were the words.

*The Princess sits, in blue of cloudless sky,
Atop her tree; below, the world goes by.
She'll soon return there, make her swift descent;
For now, a book, an apple—she's content.*

"Ray, it's wonderful." Hermione set her gift carefully down on the floor beside her. "And when I think of what you had to start with—"

"No, it wasn't very promising, was it?" Ray grinned, keeping his eyes level on hers this time, though his cheeks were starting to pink up once more. "Took me a while to get it done properly, but once I'd started, I couldn't very well stop. Otherwise I'd have been admitting he was better than I was."

"Which isn't something you've ever known how to do," said Harry. "Even when it's true."

"Oi!"

In the midst of the laughing war of words, only Oren noticed it when Meghan got to her feet and slipped out of the room.

I hate him. Meghan scowled as she stormed her way down the back corridors of Cair Paravel, ignoring the startled looks from satyrs and dryads in livery as she passed them without so much as a nod or a smile. *I hate, hate, hate him. It isn't enough he has to come along to Narnia and ruin everything, now he's got Harry and Hermione liking him too, and trusting him—I can't believe they're this stupid, I thought they were my friends—can't they see what he's doing? Can't they tell he'll never change? He's not a nice person, he never will be—no matter what he calls himself, or what he does, he's always going to be—*

"Your Highness!" gasped a startled faun, leaping backwards from Meghan and dropping his pile of books as they nearly collided in a cross-corridor. "Oh, I do beg pardon!" He looked distractedly at the mess all around him. "Oh dear, and I had them just in the order the High Queen wanted, too..."

"And I made you drop them." Meghan hunched her shoulders momentarily, swallowing against the taste of shame at the back of her mouth. "I'm sorry. Shall I see if I can stack them up for you again? With this?" She drew her wand, careful to keep its tip pointed at the floor. Some of the Narnians who hadn't yet seen their young royals' magic, only heard stories about it, were a bit skittish the first time it was demonstrated to them.

"Oh, if you would..." The faun backed away a pace or two. "Thank you, Your Highness, that will save me some time. If you're not busy, of course."

"No, I was just thinking too hard." Meghan swirled her wand a few times, recalling the feel of the charm Hermione had taught her a few weeks ago. "And you don't have to keep Highnessing me when nobody's here to be bothered. My name is Meghan." She smiled, and saw a tentative smile appearing in return. "And my friends call me Pearl."

"As you say, Your—Meghan." The faun watched her wand's motions in fascination. "Mine is Velyan. Is it true—they say you can do almost anything with your little stick, if you have the proper words for it—"

"Almost anything, yes. Though I don't know very many spells yet, and Harry and Hermione and... Ray don't know a lot more." The name still stuck in her craw, but it was the one by which her Housemate had asked to be known and she wasn't about to be so rude as to ignore that. "We haven't finished our schooling yet, and I suppose we won't, not until after we're done being Kings and Queens. So we must already know what we'll need, at least with our wands." She waved the item she'd named in a large circle, encompassing the area in which the books had been dropped. "*Mobililibris!*"

Velyan's eyes widened even further as the books obediently lifted themselves from the floor and floated together in front of him.

"Which one was first?" Meghan asked, trying not to laugh. It wasn't polite, especially not to so new a friend.

"Er—this one." Velyan tapped a particular green-bound spine tentatively, and blinked in delight when a twitch of Meghan's wand laid it neatly in his hands. "And then these two over here, the

ones bound in blue—and then the fat red one—"

Step by step, they rebuilt the pile of books, and Velyan managed when Meghan had finished to bow without losing any of them. "My thanks, Princess Meghan," he said fervently. "Not that it would have been so terrible to pick them all up again, but—"

"But it would have been work, and work you shouldn't have had to do. Because I'm the one who wasn't looking where she was going and almost ran into you." Meghan curtsied, enjoying the brush of her layered violet skirts against her legs. "Caelin says the Harvest Festival will be held next week. Maybe I'll see you there."

"Of course." Velyan braced the books against his cheek, almost but not completely hiding his smile. "Pearl."

Meghan stepped back, clearing the way, and watched the faun scurry up the corridor and out of sight.

"Kindly done, my Princess," said a voice from behind her.

A little shriek escaped Meghan as she whirled. "Oren!" She pressed a hand to her heart, giggling. "I didn't know you were there."

"I had wanted to see what sent you so quickly out of the room." Oren came forward to stand beside her, his hair, streaked brown and green with traces of leaf-patterns in it, trailing over his shoulders. "Are you well?"

"I don't know." Meghan sighed, the momentary charm of her unceremonious meeting with Velyan fading. "I just don't know. I'm worried, Oren, I'm worried and frightened and a little bit angry—maybe a lot bit angry—and I can't talk about it with anyone else, because they'll only pat me on the head and tell me I'm being silly..."

"Will you walk outside with me, then?" Oren offered her his arm. "I will listen."

"Yes, you will." Meghan accepted. "You always do."

Together, Princess and dryad slipped out one of the many doors of Cair Paravel and meandered down to the bank of the Great River, the afternoon sun sparking brightly on the swift-flowing waters.

"It's Ray," Meghan said after a few moments of silence, sitting down to pull off her shoes and stockings. "Well, it's a little bit everybody, but mostly it's Ray. Why should we believe he's changed, just because he wants to be called something else now? Just because he's behaving a bit differently, and doing a few nice things here and there for people? That doesn't change what he used to do, what he was like back where we came from—"

"And what would change that, my Princess?" Oren inquired mildly.

Meghan paused in the act of taking her first step into the shallows of the river. "What?"

"What act of the Prince's has the power to change what is already done?" Scooping up a stone, Oren weighed it in his hand for a moment, then tossed it into the water. "I had thought not even Aslan himself was capable of such a thing."

"That's not what I meant," Meghan started to object, then wilted. "All right, that's what I *said* . But it isn't what I was *thinking* ."

"Then what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that he's putting on an act!" One small bare foot stamped into the water for emphasis, splashing high enough that even the tied-up hem of its owner's gown developed a damp spot or two. "That he's learned how to *pretend* he cares for people, and he's fooling everybody else with it, but I know him better than anybody else who's here and I know it's not real! Because if it were real, if he really cared about people, then maybe by now he'd have thought to—"

Behind her, someone coughed.

Meghan spun around, shoulders square, fists balled up. "What do you want *now* ?" she snapped at Ray.

Oren made a tactful withdrawal down the riverbank.

"I *was* coming out to see if you were all right. Running out of the room like that, I thought you might be sick or something." Ray had his arms folded across his chest. "But I guess all you wanted was a chance to talk about me behind my back—"

"And what else have you ever done to me?" Meghan shot out an arm, indicating the palace. "What else have you ever done to *them* ? Except you didn't bother to do it behind our backs, you went and said all these horrible things right to our faces, because you thought you were funny, because you liked to watch us get angry, or cry, or get in trouble for hitting back when you were always the one who started it—"

"Oh, like you've never done anything you were sorry for afterwards!" Ray glared at her. "How would you like it if someone kept throwing in your face the stupid things you did when you were too young to know any better?"

"Too young?" Meghan bristled. "You were older than I am now! And you weren't sorry, you were never sorry, you thought it was the most fun you could possibly have—"

"Maybe I wasn't sorry then, but I am now!" Ray had his fists clenched by his sides, matching Meghan's hands on her hips. "And I may not have been all that young, but I *didn't* know any better, because by what I was always taught, what I was doing to you was just fine! Except now I see it wasn't, and I'm sorry, all right? I'm sorry I used to tease you!"

"I don't believe you!" Meghan stamped her foot in the water again. "I don't believe any of this!"

You're lying just like you always lie, and I'm not listening to you!"

"Well, fine!" Ray turned his back on her. "Be that way!"

"Fine!" Meghan wheeled around, facing the center of the river. "I will!"

The silence seemed to stretch into years. Meghan listened to her own breathing, her own heartbeat, and the ripples of the river. *Is he still there? I don't know if he's still there. I'm not going to turn around and look, I'm not going to crack first, he's going to have to be the one to say something if he's still there—*

"Is it just me," Ray said conversationally, "or did we sound a bit ridiculous?"

Meghan fought to stay angry for several seconds, but her giggles got the better of her in the end. "A bit," she managed to say through them, turning around again. "Just a bit."

Ray was smiling at her, the sort of smile she had never seen on his face before Narnia, that reached and warmed his eyes, softening them and making him look surprisingly unlike the boy she'd tried so hard to avoid through her two years of schooling. "I really am sorry," he said, holding out his hand. "For the things I used to say, and do, to you. That's what I hadn't thought to do, isn't it? Apologize to you, and mean it?"

"Mm-hmm." Meghan gathered her courage and met Ray's hand with her own. "I'm sorry too," she said, looking into his eyes over their handclasp. "I wasn't being fair to you. We were supposed to put aside our old world at the Silver Spring, start fresh in Narnia, and instead of that I was still judging you by who you used to be."

"That's only natural. What else would you have to judge by?" Ray gave her hand a little squeeze. "Offsetting penalties, you think? No harm, no foul, and move on from here?"

"I'd like that." Meghan glanced at the palace, then back at Ray. "Are they going to miss us in there, or do you want to stay out here for a little while?"

Ray chuckled. "Why don't we stay out here? See how long it takes them to notice we're gone?"

"That sounds like fun." Meghan tugged on Ray's hand, pulling him a few steps closer to the river. "Do you want to wade with me? Just in the shallows, unless the river naiads want to play. Then we can go in deeper, because they won't let anything happen to us."

"I...think I'd like that." Ray seemed surprised at the words coming out of his mouth. "Yes. I will." Sitting down on a handy rock, he began undoing the laces of his boots.

Meghan stooped to trail her fingers in the water, watching him through her eyelashes. "You never had much fun, did you?" she asked quietly. "Back in the other world, where we grew up. You had a lot of money and a lot of things, but I don't think you ever had friends who'd ask you to go wading in the river with them. Did you?"

"Give that girl a fluffy bunny." Ray pulled off one boot and set it aside. "Nope, never did. Never thought I'd want to. It wasn't *proper* ." He drawled the last word in the tones he'd most often used before Narnia, winning another giggle from Meghan. "Only now..." He paused, his fingers stilling on his other bootlace. "Now, I'm starting to think that being proper isn't so much what you do as how you do it. And it starts..." He touched a hand to his breastbone. "Here. With how you look at other people, and what you see in them, and what you show them of yourself."

"Like the story of the true and false Princesses, that Gilles told us last week on the terrace, when we watched the shooting stars." Meghan tilted her head back, remembering the breathless sense of wonder which had filled her as the half-familiar Narnian constellations were all but hidden by darting streaks of light. "They both treated everyone the same, but the false Princess scolded and shouted at her ladies-in-waiting like they were nothing but scullery maids, and the true Princess was as polite to the scullery maids as she was to her ladies."

"Which was how they told the difference, in the end." Ray finished unlacing his second boot and removed it, setting it with its mate and tucking his socks into their tops, then folding up his trouser legs to the knee. "But that's Princesses. Not Princes. The rules are different for us." He grinned, his pale eyes sparking with mischief. "Especially where little sisters are concerned."

Before Meghan could react, he took two rapid strides forward and hooked a foot around her ankles.

The resulting splash was quite impressive.

"Are you sure you wanted to do that, my Prince?" inquired Oren, drifting back towards the two. "Given where that places the Princess in regards to you?"

"What?" Ray looked down—

Just in time for Meghan to surface, spit out a mouthful of water, and tackle his legs with her whole weight.

Oren dodged nimbly aside from the second, even larger, splash.

"There," Meghan said in satisfaction as Ray came up spluttering. "Now we're both wet."

"Not nearly as wet as you're about to be," Ray growled, shoving his hair out of his eyes. "C'mere."

Meghan shrieked gleefully and bolted down the riverbank with Ray in hot pursuit.

Oren strolled after Prince and Princess, pausing for a moment to look up at a particular window in Cair Paravel. A slender, pale hand waved a greeting to him, then was withdrawn.

The young royals of Narnia were better watched over than they knew.