

AINRAN

by

Henry J. Wilcoxon-Ash

They lie, we lie.

The following story happened in the fictional universe of Ainran. The events are presented here faithfully according to their occurrences. However, any resemblance with persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended.

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Based on the "Narnia" Series by C.S. Lewis

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*For Us,
The Humans.*

Any city has it, any town, even larger villages. It can be a street corner, a former children's playground, a bridge, or a subway station. But always when a large enough gathering of adolescents with no respect for the larger rules of society takes place, this place is created: A place where parents forbid their children to go, or even to look at.

In the town our story starts, this place was an abandoned railway block behind a speedway. You had to cross the street to reach it, which kept anyone under ten out, and you had to fit in with the boys, who kept an informal age limit of about sixteen.

Why his sister was allowed there, he didn't know. He watched her carefully crossing the street, not that easy since there were not traffic lights. She was welcomed by the crowd of boys hanging around there. She was fourteen, he thought, only two years older than him, but nevertheless they accepted her. She knew most of the boys. He watched her talk to them, declining again and again an offered cigarette, moving easily between them. He didn't dare to cross the speedway, not that he was scared by it, they were only cars, but he didn't want to incur the wrath of the boys. They surely didn't like him, he thought, nobody did, even his sister seemed to have found more interesting people than him. He watched her for a while, moving around, talking, having fun, until she went around a corner and along a long wall to do pull out a small pocket mirror. He hated it. It symbolised for him that she was fixated on her appearance, too fixated, and only to please other people. He still hoped that this trait wouldn't stick to her. He watched her checking her face as she leaned against the wall.

Then she slipped from his view.

He blinked, confused. Several times he looked at the

place she had leaned against the wall, but she wasn't there. First he thought he missed her, somehow. As if he was still watching an after image while she went away. But it was a long wall, and she was near the center. There was no door, no window. How could she vanish?

He scanned the other boys, who seemed to catch on that she was missing. A few of them seem to look over the station too, but none of them looked concerned. They know she's not there anymore, but they do as they please. No wonder that they are not concerned. Without thinking he stood up, leaving his hiding place, and tried to cross the street. He had to wait some endless minutes, until the cars left an opening he could use. As he arrived on the other side, the boys had already noticed him.

"Back off!", one of them shouted.

"What the fuck do you want.", another growled.

Without thinking he went straight past them to the wall.

"Hey, fucker. Are you suicidal?"

He ignored them, still scanning the wall. He touched it, while the other boys looked at him like he was crazy.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

It was solid, cold stone. While he was walking along the wall, more and more boys gathered around. For the moment, he ignored them. He was sure, so sure that she had been standing here. How could she vanish?

"What's this fucker want?"

"Don't know, seems crazy to me."

Unconscious that all the boys of the station were now looking at him he searched for his sister. Suddenly he stopped something on the ground. It was her mir-

ror. No doubt, her name was written on the back. The glass was cracked.

Angrily and frightened, he picked it up and showed it to the nearest boy. "Where is my sister?"

"You're her brother?"

"Where is my sister!" he repeated.

"Hey, how the hell should I know?"

"She was standing right here, where is she?"

"Calm down."

"I WANT TO KNOW WHERE MY SISTER IS!"

Suddenly enraged, he grabbed the boy, pushing him against the wall. For a second the boy seemed to be frightened, but then he calmly broke free. Even in his rage, the other boy was too strong. At least five years older and more than a head larger, he had the upper hand in a second. The mirror still in his hand, it was his turn to be pushed against the wall.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU?!" the other boy shouted.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO MY SISTER?!?" he cried in response.

Still holding him with both hands, the other boy turned around. "You've seen her?"

"No, Roy."

"Nope."

"I thought she might be here, but she probably crossed the street again."

"SHE DIDN'T! I WOULD HAVE SEEN HER."

"You fucker watching us?"

"SHE IS MY SISTER! I WAS WATCHING *HER!*"

Despite their reputation, despite his fear of them, he noticed a flicker of concern on their faces.

They liked her, he thought. But why don't they DO anything? He was still boiling with rage and fear, but at the same time, quite detached from his emotions,

and he watched them, gazing around, looking at each other, looking for clues who they should react as a group. They claim to be bad boys, he thought, they have a bad reputation, doing only as they please, but yet, they are frightened to act alone, they are afraid to ... make mistakes, say something stupid, loose face, look silly ... or crazy.

Suddenly one of the boys shrugged his shoulders.

"Probably went home.", he said.

"Yeah, only way.", another fell in.

"Yup."

As they supported their opinions, they began to move away, one after the other. Only Roy still stood before him, still holding him.

When the other boys were gone, he still hadn't released his grip.

"Look, kid, I'm going to let you go."

He said nothing, still looking around.

"You understand me? Don't even think about grabbing me again."

"I wont."

"You're calm?"

He looked around, trying to force himself to be calm.

"My sister isn't here."

"No, she is not."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know."

"I don't think she went home."

Roy looked over his shoulder, nobody else was around.

"I don't think that either."

"Then where is she?"

"She vanished."

"I know ..."

"No, I mean I watched her checking her face, then,

suddenly, she was gone."

"You saw it too?"

"Yes, it was like she did fall into the wall."

"It's solid."

"I'm sure it is."

"But how?"

He released him, trying to calm himself, again looking around.

"I don't know." He shivered. "It was the strangest thing I've ever seen."

He looked at Roy for a second, than he turned around, checking the wall again.

"It's solid, we used to spray the damn thing."

"I don't believe it."

"Hey, why don't you check at home."

"You said you didn't think she was there."

"I don't, but I'd do it anyway. Everything else is just, crazy, you know."

"Roy ... you are sure none of you did anything to her?"

"Are you crazy? We'd never hurt her!"

* * *

She was not home – and she never came home. When his parents became concerned they started to listen to him, but they did not believe him. The police came, interrogated him and the boys. None of them claimed to have seen her disappear and no one believed him. His parents hung posters throughout the city, even appeared on TV and radio, but his sister was not found. His stubborn adherence to the incident at the old train station began to poison his relationship with his parents. Already concerned out of their minds, the story of their daughter just vanishing through a

wall was too much for them to bear. After a while, he stopped talking to them about it, seeing that they were no longer listening.

But while he stopped talking with others about it, he still clung to his memory. He was sure that he was right. He started to hang out at the railway station, fighting for his right to be there, sometimes with fists, sometimes with words. He began to realise that the other boys might be scared to lose their face, but they were even more scared to get hurt. Being someone who had his reason to stay there, who was determined to stay and willing to hurt, even accepting getting hurt for it, he had an advantage the others did not have. Mostly they were scared to get hurt, he was not. Even while being much younger than they were, they let him in peace after a few days, tolerated and maybe even respected him.

But he remained an outsider, not interested in their silly games. And being an outsider in the first place, hanging around at the station did not become him. He was not trying to become friends with the boys nor did he try or had the time to join a clique in school. Some of his behaviour at the wall even transferred to his behaviour in school. From being a quiet but intelligent pupil, he became a loner with no regard for authority and rules. Authorities had bitterly disappointed him for failing to believe his story, they had condescendingly treated him like a traumatised child, and he had never forgiven them for it. His teachers hated him for pointing out their inconsistencies, his fellow students avoided him for his blunt, cut to the point remarks that washed away any self-righteous rationalisations they gave for their actions. He got into a few school fights shortly thereafter, but even those stopped when the other children realised

that probably the only way to win against him was to knock him unconscious. Otherwise he would just fight on and on, no matter the pain, until they had to give in. And they quickly realised that they *had* to give in.

But all the time he was becoming this, he never stopped searching for his sister. However, after he had finished school he convinced himself to focus on his life for a while. He left his hometown, began to study, made a career. But all the while something was in the back of his mind, a tiny voice that said in no uncertain terms: "Go back to the wall. Be ready." For a while he tried to ignore it, but then, one day, in his early thirties, he returned.

* * *

It was a strange feeling to return to his hometown after all these years. It was familiar and strange enough to make him queazy. He recognised the old train station readily enough, but found it deserted. The delinquents seemed to have found another place to gather. He reached the spot at the wall and looked around. The place was familiar like nothing else in his life, having spend the better part of his adolescence there. He knew every stone, every part of the wall. And he still remembered how his sister had vanished here, passing through the wall, but it was still as solid as the day he first touched it.

He sat down, leaning against it like he had always done, and pulled out a book he was reading at the moment. He was thinking about studying physics and spend the last year getting to know the domain. After flying through the basis material he was currently reading "Dynamic Physics" by R. Green. Half-

way through the book he had an idea he wanted to jot down and bend forwards to reach into his backpack for a pen. As his back left the wall he felt it – a slight breeze of air that was touching his neck. All his neck hairs suddenly rose up. Quickly he stood up, forgetting the pen and his book, and turned around. With trembling fingers he reached for the wall. Instead of touching cold stone, his hand passed right through it. Remembering how quickly the wall turned solid the day his sister vanished he did not even try to reach for his backpack but immediately stepped through the wall.

The world turned grey, than black, but he ignored it and went on. Suddenly, like passing through a curtain, he felt a chill breeze and could see again. Tall trees were raising in front of him while he felt a sting in his lungs. Growing up in a city, he was used to smells of cars, chimneys and people. The pure air in this forest hit him like a blow. He paused for a few minutes and started to get used to his surroundings. It was cold, but he did not freeze. The forest in front of him seemed to be deep. Behind him was a hill with a stone base that had a large crack in it, through which he had come.

He continued to look around, began to make out all kinds of animals in the trees and on the ground. The sun seemed to raise and despite being late afternoon in his world it seemed to be morning here. He looked at the ground, saw the soft forest soil that were bare of any path or impression of human footprints. He wondered if his sister had come here too, whether she stood on the same spot he was standing now, and where she had gone from here.

He gathered some stones and marked the entrance to the cave before he began to explore the forest.

While wandering through the forest it did not take him long to realise that this world was not like his own. It was not only the pure air, but also the abundance of animals that he found curious. After seeing the carcass of a large deer he searched for a large stick. Whatever killed that majestic beast and ate most of its flesh might also be interested in him. He doubted that he would have any real chance against a real threat, but his experience with the boys at the station had taught him that it did not matter whether one really was more powerful than ones opponent. Most of the time it was enough to demonstrate that you were able to seriously hurt the other person, no matter who would win in the end. He hoped that the predators of this forest would be similar minded.

The ground became less solid and more like slick. More and more insects swirled around, becoming a nuisance. He was just thinking about turning around when he saw a path between the trees. His face lighted up – the path was build with a purpose not simply the track of a lot of animals running around. This meant a lot of things, mostly that there were intelligent beings around, a civilisation. Looking at both directions he decided to move away from the swampy ground. But after a few steps he suddenly stopped.

Something moved further along the path. Quickly he went to the side of the path, hiding in the bushes, peering though the leaves. It was a large creature, walking on all fourth, crossing the path and then turning around, again and again, like it was waiting for something. When it stopped to turn he recognised it as a lion and the grip around his walking stick became weak. 'A lion', he thought, 'Fuck, fuck, fuck!'

He waited until the lion was turning around and looking at the opposite direction, and then slowly and silently backed away from it. He had just made a few steps when his foot came down on a twig. Even on the wet ground it made a loud crack as it snapped in two. He held his breath and looked at the lion. It had heard the sound and was looking right at him. For a second both looked at each other when suddenly the lion roared. The roar still echoed in his ears, but his feet had already begun running along the path, away from the wild animal.

His footsteps became louder and louder on the wet ground, creating a sucking noise and he sunk deeper and deeper with each additional step, but he did not care. He tried to listen for the sounds of the lion, but could not hear him. Not willing the chance his luck, he blindly pressed forwards, along the path that led deeper and deeper into the swamp. When his sinking feet warned him to stop, it was already too late. While his last few steps had been particularly deep and only manageable to his fast pace and wide footsteps, he became aware that the ground beneath his feet was not a path anymore, nor the soft ground of the forest, but pure and unrelenting quicksand-like swamp. He tried to stop, to change directions, but it was already too late. Like trying to walk on water he fell into the swamp. He clawed to reach a root nearby but could not reach it. On impulse, he stuck his stick into it. It locked with the roots and held him, but by that time he had already sunken to his shoulders.

For a few minutes he remained there, hanging onto his stick, conscious that a single movement might free it from the root and his life. Insects were cruising around him and it was hot. He was wondering how to escape from this swamp when a voice sounded

nearby.

“Give me your hand.”

He looked to find the source of the voice and nearly let go of his stick. The lion was standing just a few feet away from him on a solid piece of ground.

“Give me your hand, before you drown.”

He looked at the lion, saw the mouth moving and heard the words, but could not believe it.

“Are you talking?” he asked.

“I’m trying to help you, give me your hand.”

“Why, so that you can eat me.”

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

“No, not until you’ve dragged me out of this swamp.”

“You’re going to die if I don’t pull you out. I promise you, I will not hurt you, not now, not later, I promise.”

He hesitated, took a final glance at the root he was hanging on. Carefully he moved closer to it, then, when he had reached and firmly grabbed it he freed his stick. The ground was out of his reach, but holding the stick to the lion it would be enough. The lion seemed confused for a moment, having – without doubt – expected his hand. But then he closed his mighty jaw firmly on the stick and pulled him out of the swamp.

Fear overcame him as he sat in front of the lion, but he focussed on the task at hand. Carefully he tried to clean himself from the dirt and everything that might have attached to himself while he was in the swamp. He found two leeches that had already begun sucking his blood. He detached them carefully, using his Swiss army knife he carried on his belt. If the lion wanted to eat him, he could do nothing against it, he thought, while he was putting his knife away. Finally he rose, brushed over his hair and turned to face the lion.

"Thank you.", he said.

"You should have continued walking other direction. I was trying to help you back then."

"Trying to help me? How? When I saw you on the path, you didn't speak, you just growled."

"You had to have faith and come to me."

"Come to a lion?"

"Yes."

"On a path in the woods."

"Yes."

"Out of pure faith?"

"Yes, you had to do this act of faith yourself."

"I had to ... just a second. I was walking in the right direction, away from the swamp. When I saw you, you growled and scared me to run in the other way."

"Yes."

He touched the base of his nose, trying to calm his anger.

"Hrrmm, ok, when you growled, I got scared that you were going to eat me and I ran as fast as I could, directly into the swamp. If you hadn't blocked the path and growled, I would have avoided the swamp altogether. Even if I was walking the other direction, I would have seen the swamp before I was in it. Instead, you force me into it. I was thinking that I owe you one, but now I think you owe me."

The lion faced him like he was just hit.

"Owe you? I saved your life, ungrateful child."

"After first endangering it – and besides, I'm no child."

"I should punish you for this ungratefulness."

He looked at the lion, suddenly the promise dawned upon him. The both realised it in the others eyes. While the lion was still thinking about it he said "Yes, maybe you should, but on the other hand, you gave

me your word. Is it worth anything?"

"I promised I will not hurt you, I stay by my word." Brushing once again over his wet hair and without saying another word, he started walking, away from the lion and the swamp. The insects were still swarming around and he had enough. Silently, as if muttering to himself but conscious that the lion could hear him, he said: "We'll see, Lion, we'll see."

* * *

The ground to the sides of the road became dryer and dryer with each step he walked. Soon he thought he had reached the spot where the lion had waited and he looked around. No doubt, he had waited here, for quite some time. He looked closer, saw the grass that was stamped down by his multiple turns and walks. As he was bending down to examine the footsteps, he thought he smelled something. He closed his eyes and concentrated. His nose still needed some time to accommodate to the fresh air, devoid of the things that usually filled the air, but then he found the smell again. It stung in his nose. It took him only a moment to find the source, behind a large tree. He had a good hypothesis what it could be. The lion had to wait for a long time indeed.

The road continued through the wood for some kilometres. After a while he began to hear the soft sound of running water. A few steps later the road made a sharp turn to the left and led to the small river, about fifteen or twenty feet across. Eagerly he crouched down at the water, using his hands to shift some of the water to his mouth. After he had stilled his thirst, he looked around. It seemed peaceful, but he was cautious. If a wood like this would host a lion, who

knew what else might live in its depths. Nevertheless he stripped down and took a short bath, cleaning his clothes and himself from the muck of the swamp. After he had cleaned his clothes, he laid them on a large stone to dry, while he enjoyed the running water. He had just closed his eyes to relax when he heard a faint, shrill voice, quickly growing louder.

“Help ... help”

He looked around, at his clothing – still in place – at the road – nobody there – at the area around him – also empty. As the voice grew louder he rapidly turned around, looking upstream. Something small was spilled down the river, desperately clawing at anything that it could reach. It was a mouse, tiny, grey-brown, and not in her element. A few feet away it had finally caught a stone, but its paw would not hold for long on the rugged surface while the water was pulling at her. Panicked, the mouse looked around and saw him. She seemed surprised, but as she swallowed some water she shrieked: “Hey, you ... uh, son of Adam ... please ...”

He stood up and walked to the stone. Looking at the mouse, he could clearly see her talking. If a lion can talk, then why not a mouse.

“Hey, please, help me.”

“Talking ... little ... mouse ...” he said, still quite perplexed.

“HEY ... PLEASE!!!!”

He breathed out, fast, like he always did when something occurred to him as funny and strange at the same time. “Ok, if I’ve might gone mad, but I still feel empathy, and pain.” he thought, and reached down. Just in time, as the paw was loosing its grip and the mouse was tugged away by the water.

“HEELP” she screamed.

He caught her, pulling her out of the water. "Hey, you, hold still, I've got you."

The mouse, still panicked, grabbed his hand.

"Easy, easy ... hmmm ... I hope I'm not standing in an Asylum next to the locus." he said, shielding the mouse with his other hand, that she could not fall down again.

"Thank you ..." the mouse finally said. Her tiny feet tickled his hand.

"You're welcome."

"Would you let me down, please."

He walked to the river bank where his clothes were drying.

"Sure. Here ok?"

"Anywhere but in the water."

Once on solid ground, the mouse found her nerve again. She carefully cleaned her fur. After looking at her for a moment, he did the same with his skin, trying to get as much water off before he slipped into his clothes.

"So, who are you?" he finally asked the mouse.

* * *

They talked for over an hour, telling each other about their world. He found out that he was in Narnia, a world that was governed by Aslan, a giant lion. He bit his lips upon hearing this, but did not say anything about the incident in the swamp. The mouse was originally on the way to a meeting of all the animals, but while drinking from the water a snake appeared behind her. With no way to run she blindly plunged into the water. "Anything," she said, "was better than becoming paralysed and devoured by a snake. My grandfather was once bitten, the snake had

already began swallowing him when an eagle caught the snake. He came loose, and after a while the poison wore off." She looked sadly at the river. "My grandfather was a mighty hero until that day. Afterwards ... he was a broken mouse."

He said nothing, looking down at the mouse. Finally he cleared his throat and said "So, have you seen other humans like me?"

"A son of Adam?"

"If you want to call me that, I'd prefer human."

"Human?"

"Yes."

"Well, if you prefer ..."

"I really do. So, have you seen a woman, a female human about my age?"

"There are not many humans left in this part of the world, and for humans, well, there is one human looking creature, but she is old, very old and very, very evil."

"Hmm, I'm not sure about the way time passes here, but I do not think that she is my sister. Anyone else?"

"You must understand, there is someone here that could be your sister, but ..."

"But?"

"I hope she is not."

"Why?"

"My, look at the time. The meeting will start soon, we have to hurry. Aslan will be there. He will surely know what to do."

"Look, mouse, I think I have met him before."

The mouse, scurrying to the path, stopped and turned around. "Aslan?"

"Yes, if he is a great lion, a talking lion."

"Yes, the only one in this world."

"Then I suppose I have met him."

“Did he help you?”

“In a way, but not in a way I would prefer. Look, I really appreciate your help, but I am not sure about this Aslan. I might have to decline his help ...”

The mouse looked confused. “But nobody ever declines Aslan’s help. He is strong, he is wise, he is the master of this world. He knows everything and everyone and there is no one better to help you find your sister.”

“Perhaps, but I prefer to do it my way.”

“Your way?”

“Yes. I want to find my sister on my own terms, with open eyes, instead of being manipulated. Look, I know that you like this Aslan, I am not trying to put him down. I am just saying here and now, before we meet him, that I might have to decline his offer. If you would rather not walk with me to the meeting, I understand.”

“What are you saying?”

“I am saying that – given that the lion is such a big honcho here – my declining his offer could have repercussions for you.”

“You think so?”

“I don’t know, but I would not rule it out.”

“Hmm,” the mouse brought her paw to her mouth, “if this is so, then I will lead you to the meeting place. We can part there, before someone sees us.”

* * *

They arrived at the meeting place in a short time. Many animals were already there, deers, cats, warthogs, horses and wildcats. Aslan however, was nowhere in sight. They parted when they reached the clearing, the mouse quickly running in a large bow

to her family, already waiting among the animals. He looked ahead and saw that the forest continued at the other end of the clearing. It seemed to become darker there and he remembered that the mouse had told him that this place is the border between the light wood where the animals are safe ("Well, relatively safe", she said, remembering the snake) and the dark forest where more than normal enemies lurked. He paused for a moment, then strode ahead.

His appearance led to considerable activity. Humans were not seen in Narnia for hundreds of years. He greeted the animals and began asking for his sister, but he did not receive any straight answer. They all seemed to know something, but whatever it was, nobody wanted to tell him. After a while, he gave up asking and sat on a large stone. A horse was standing besides him.

"So, what are you all waiting for?", he asked the horse.

"For Aslan."

"Ah, ok, and what then?"

"Then he will decide."

"Decide about what?"

"If and when we will fight against the Witch."

"The Witch? She's the old one, isn't she?"

"Yes, she has been a curse upon this land for centuries."

"And you did not get rid of her in that time?"

"She is powerful. Many have tried, no one came back."

"They tried to fight her alone?"

"Yes."

"Not as an army?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you not face her as an army?"

"We have no leader."

"No leader? Are there no animals clever and courageous enough to lead an army?"

"No, only Aslan can do this."

"Ok. Say, do you happen to know a female human of about my age?"

The horse looked at him, making a long face.

"Look, I have asked about every animal here. All seem to know something but no one wants to tell me what happened to my sister. I am pretty sure that she came here, probably ... about the lifetime of a horse ago. Would you please tell me what happened to her?"

"Someone came here, years ago. But she was found by the Witch ... and ..."

"And?"

"She joined her!" the horse spat, accompanied by an angry stroke of its tail.

"She joined the Witch?"

Ignoring the angry and frightened looks of the other animals the horse went on. "Yes, the first human in ages, and she swore loyalty to our worst enemy."

"I don't understand. Why would my sister do something like this?"

"We don't know either, but ever since the Witch has become more treacherous, more deadly. And now she has amassed an army and plans a war against us."

"A war ..."

"Yes, but do not worry. If you are a friend of Aslan, he will protect you."

"Protect me?"

"Yes."

"And what about my sister?"

"Your sister? She is no friend of Aslan, that much is clear. She has brought doom upon herself and must die."

He bit his lips. He could feel the anger of the horse, he could see that he was getting nowhere arguing with him about his sister. The only question that remained for him was the course he would take now. He wanted his sister back, he had wanted nothing much else in the past years, and nothing would stop him from attaining this goal, now that he was here. But what about the lion? He did not like that self-righteous furball with a holier than you attitude. He did not like that he had made the animals depended on him, or that he manipulated people. He closed his eyes for a moment to steel himself for the confrontation with the lion. He was in good condition, he felt good, he wasn't even hungry. 'All in all,' he thought, 'I rather do it my way.'

He sensed something in front of him and opened his eyes. It was a rabbit. "I ... I think I know where you sister is." the rabbit said, looking cautiously at the horse, which seemed to ignore him.

"You do? Why, what happened to her and where is she."

"She is not with the Witch anymore, but she is not far from her. I can help you find her."

"Thank you, Mr. Rabbit, thank you indeed, where is she?"

But before the rabbit could answer, there was a great uproar among the animals. They flustered to each other, shifted around, and stared at the end of the field. He saw what they were looking at. A large yellow-brown animal that grew continuously larger – the lion has arrived. 'I wonder if there are elephants in this world', he thought, having heard that the lion

might be regarded as the king of the animals but it was the elephant that was the more powerful. With that thought in mind, he stood up while all the animals knelt down. A short laugh forced the air out of his lungs. He had never seen animals kneel – or trying to. Some seem to be better suited for this than other, but nevertheless, they all tried. He looked around, curiously, at the odd movements the animals did, when the horse nudged him in the side. “Are you a friend of Aslan? Then kneel.”

“Why?” he asked.

“What?”

“Why? Why do you ask me to kneel?”

“To honour the land and pay respect to its Lord.”

“By kneeling? You spoke of Aslan as a friend. Since when do you kneel before friends.”

The horse nudged him again. “Kneel.”

The lion came nearer and something ... he could feel it, something was telling him that kneeling was the only thing he could do now. But in the back of his mind, a voice cried ‘No!’. And he was not willing to give in this quickly. The harder the feeling became to endure, the louder the voice resisted. His knees began trembling and his body felt like it was shouldering iron, but still he stood. Something was insisting that he knelt, but the voice cried ‘No!’. “No!”, “No!”, “No!” – again and again.

Then the lion was standing directly in front of the animals and the feeling passed. He became used to it, in a way. Like carrying a massive load that he could counterbalance, he stood his ground. Mentally and emotionally exhausted, but still he stood.

The lion looked at the gathered animals, seemingly not noticing the single human in the horde of animals, the single being that still stood. Finally he threw

a critical eye on the human and walked to him. Four dogs were following, like an escort. He faced the human, who was returning his gaze. A horse was standing besides him, which he addressed. "Why isn't he kneeling?"

"I don't know, Master." the horse said, eyes to the ground. The lion faced the human again, looked him straight in the eye. "You know who I am."

"Yes, I know."

"Then why aren't you on your knees ... I know the craving is in all good beings in my vicinity."

"Yes, ... yes, it is there ...", he admitted, "I don't know if that makes me a good being or not. But I'm more comfortable on my feet than on my knees."

"Show reverence, child. Kneel.", the lion said.

"... No.", he said, voice trembling.

"KNEEL!" It was a loud growl now. The other animals were looking at him, while trying to keep their eyes to the ground. It took him a moment, but like a weight lifter that had just burdened a large weight and that he could throw away now, he felt the feeling pass. "No, thank you." he simply said.

"You are insolent. Why? Am I not the force of good in this world. Look around you, all the beings here acknowledge it."

"No, thank you, but no.", he became angry now, and with this emotion came a certain self-confidence that made him cocky and hard to impress, "I believe in mutual respect, not mindless submission. And I'm going to kneel to an other being exactly one time, and, no, you're not pretty enough to become my wife."

"I can force you down." the lion said.

"Yes, yes you can. You can brake me down with your claws, but you cannot make me kneel of my own ...", he felt the weights again, trembling he forced the

words out, "... free ... will. STOP IT! STOP FORCING ME!"

"So be it.", the lion snapped and turned around. He spoke louder now, not only for him to hear but for all the animals that were gathered here, "If you want to be on your own ... be on your own. I won't help you." The lion walked away, flanked by his dogs who were occasionally glancing at him. Although he preferred cats, he liked dogs, but he doubted that they liked him. Aslan was joined by a hawk and a fox and he saw them walking to a quiet area. "Probably planing their attack plan," he thought. He looked for the rabbit that had come to him earlier and found it a few feet away.

"Mr. Rabbit, you were saying you've seen my sister?"

"Oh, ... uh ...", the rabbit said, "if Lord Aslan won't help you, I ... possibly ... can't ..." It trailed off.

He looked around, realising what just happened.

"None of us will help you, if you're not a friend of Aslan." the horse said.

"So, this is how it works ..."

The horse nodded, "You see, child, you're only hurting yourself. Go to him and ask him for forgiveness."

"Yes, bow down. Hurry to him and kneel before him. Show reverence, show respect. We want to help you, but you have to help yourself first." a sheep said.

"A strange way to help oneself ... if you won't help me ... then don't. I ... will ... help myself."

An owl, looking out of place the bright daylight, had joined the animals. "You're a fool. You won't find her on yourself."

"No, perhaps not, but I can try."

"Fool. FOOL. FOOOOOL." the owl said. He said nothing, but came quietly to terms with the situation.

"Why do you smile.", the horse asked.

"No offence, but this behaviour I expected from rabbits and sheep. But I'm surprised that there is not one being here with the capacity to think for him- or herself."

"You've insulted our benevolent lord." the rabbit said.

"Yes, we won't help you. That's OUR decision." the sheep fell in. He said nothing but left the animals. They let him through, while looking angrily at him.

"Where are you going?", asked the rabbit.

"You told me my sister is near the evil Witch ... as hard as I find this to believe. If she is, there is only one place that I can see where she can be."

"Where?"

"There's a dark forest ahead."

"The forest is forbidden! It's home of hags!" the rabbit cried.

"Perhaps they can tell me where my sister is."

"They'll kill you and have you for supper!" the horse warned.

"You're misled, child, your sister is not there." said the owl, knowingly.

"Fine, but I've got no interest in your games and that's where I start."

"Fool. Fooool." cried the owl.

"Fool.", "Fool.", "Fooool" the sheep fell in.

* * *

He was surprised to see the lion after he had entered the dark forest, but he was not surprised that he could not see the other animals when he looked back. Listening to himself for a moment he was relieved that there were no feelings of submission anymore. He had won against it in front of the animals, he would

do so again alone in this forest if he had to.

"You should have kneeled." the lion said.

"Why?"

"Because I am the master of this world."

"And what does that suppose to mean?"

"My father created this world, I am its steward. I am the most powerful being here, all other beings are my subjects. I see everything and know everything, but there have been kings here in my place and there could be kings again," he said, looking closely at him, "but even when they are kings, I am the highest king of them all."

"The highest king'?" he echoed.

"Yes."

For a moment he seemed unsure what to say, then he rubbed the base of his nose. "Look – I don't know what you expect from me. I mean, I come into this world for one reason alone, to find my sister. I am not interested in anything else. If I have to strike a bargain, I will most certainly do so, but I don't like hypocrisy and I will not prostitute myself."

"Watch your tongue!"

"No, you watch it." he snapped back. "'The highest king'? What kind of king is that? Either I am a king and govern myself or I am not. How can I be a king and there is still another king on top of me? Look, I am not even a fan of monarchy, or absolutism. What you say is that you are the master of this world, commanding everything and manipulating everyone just because your father created this world and gave you command over it?"

"Yes, this is true."

"No, this is insane! You treat sentient beings like slaves!"

The lion snapped, but quickly controlled himself. He

hoped that the lion your keep his promise, but was wondering at the same time if he had gotten to far. But his anger swept forward.

"You have no right whatsoever to control other beings, to demand loyalty based on your heritage! No being should be forced submit itself unto others like you are demanding, not even if you had created the world yourself. And for what? What have you ever done for these animals besides making them depended on you."

"I was martyred for them."

"Martyred? You are undead?"

"Don't mock me! I was killed on the altar of the Witch."

"And why are you alive again?"

"There was deep magic written in the stone. It brought me back to life."

"Lucky for you ... wait, did you know this beforehand?"

"I had heard about it, but I was not sure."

"Not sure? Not sure like whether it is head or tails when you flip a coin or not sure whether the sun goes up tomorrow?"

"It was uncertain."

"Uncertain? You said you are the master of this world, 'seeing and knowing everything'. You knew it, admit it! Every last bastard who stood up for something he believed in, knowing he would die for it, did something you'd never did."

"And what was it?"

"He did do it without a safety net! You stink, lion, you were never tested, not truly, you knew to much for it. Facing death when resurrection is likely has nothing to do with courage, with sacrifice. It's just a game, just a motion to go through to feel good, feel superior

about oneself!"

"Watch your tongue. I guided a lot of children on their quests and I was trying to guide you too. I can help you own your quest."

"And how did they get here? Did you call them to this world?"

"Some of them came with tools made from this world, others I called. But still, they came when I wanted them to come. And I guided them all without fail."

"Did you call my sister here?"

"No, the Witch had found a way to open portals to other worlds. Otherwise I would have reached your sister first."

"And me, did you get me here?"

"No, but I know much about your sister ... and I can help you."

"Wait a second, you know what will happen, don't you? I mean, why give these specific signs if you don't know how it will all turn out."

The lion still looked at him, "What are you doing?"

"Asking questions. So, why all this quest crap if there is no real adventure?"

The lion just growled.

"And what's that supposed to mean? Are you trying to threaten me? I know you can kill me easily. I know you can send me away on a whim if you like it. But is that's all this is? Threaten us to do what you want us to do? Moving, manipulating us like puppets? I'm no puppet, I don't like to be used as one. You may be a big shot and represent all that is good around here, but there is nothing that gives you the right to use other people like that. Your father might have created this world and gave you command over it, that's nice, but I'm not a monarchist. You can keep all this hierarchy crap and shove it, because I'm not gonna fall

for it. If you want my help, be candid about it. If you want me to do something, don't try to threaten me. I don't like bullies, no matter how holier than me they are. And don't label me as immoral, just because I'm not the slave of a god, or a man, or a lion. This doesn't mean that I'm not good, just that I make my own decisions. If what I do turns out to be wrong, so be it, it is still my decision to listen or not to listen to others, and I'll do so on my account, not because someone expects me or doesn't expect me to do so. I bow to no one. This may make me lonely and despair more often than if I were the subject of some strong power, but at least I accept the responsibility for myself."

"Child, I will leave you now ... we will see how you will fare in this world without my benevolent help."

"Is that a threat?"

"Call it a vision of the future. This is my world and without my help you will receive no help, no help at all."

The lion turned around and sprang back to the clearing. He saw after him, concerned. 'Maybe it wasn't such a great idea to piss him off.', he thought, 'on the other hand I do not like him, and I will not feign submission. I will not become a hypocrite.'

He had just made a few steps, when a high voice shouted above him.

"I've seen what you did in this land."

He looked up and saw a white dove, peering down at him.

"So?"

"So? You're meddling in the affairs of beings far more powerful than you. Be careful, you know not what you do." the dove said, from her high point.

"Why should I?"

The dove began to flutter erratically.

"I mean, when I was a child I thought 'Oh, what will the others think of me.' I found out on one day that I don't care about that anymore. I learned to trust myself. I'm doing what I think is right."

"Heed my warning, be careful."

"Why should I? So that I can tiptoe through life directly to my death without waking anyone? Is that it?"

"I will not warn you again. You begin to offend the master of this land."

"I've never seen him, just his steward. And even if this master exists, even if he takes interest in me, why should I care. Nobody has any right over another person. Nobody. I am free and not a slave. Why can't you? Can't anyone of you think for themselves?"

"This is his land."

"But that no reason to forgo thinking for oneself, deciding for oneself!"

The feathers of the dove suddenly became a bright white, as if it would burst into flames.

"I have warned you, more than once," the dove's voice echoed through the wood. "Be cursed for your arrogance!"

He looked calmly at the dove, seemingly amused.

"And how shall I be cursed, oh mighty bird?" he asked mockingly.

It took him an hour to regain his eyesight again. The dove had suddenly flared up in a light even brighter than before. In that flash she was gone and he could not see anything. He touched his way across the ground to a tree stump he had seen earlier, and waited, calmly. If his eyes had survived it, they would come back. No sense in blindly running through the forest. Finally he regained it. His eyesight was still somewhat dizzy, but he could see again. Then he no-

ticed the mouse sitting in front of him.

"They're right, you know." said the mouse.

"Hmmm ... oh, you." he said.

"Yes, me. Only me ..."

"Hey, I'm glad there is still someone who talks to me."

"I shouldn't."

"This is your decision, but I'm glad if you do."

"Yes, you said so. ... I hear much, I'm only a mouse and no one ever takes me seriously."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a mouse?"

"Yes, and?"

"What do you mean?", the mouse shrieked, offended that someone would not understand that simple fact.

"Sorry, I've had a strange day, so far. I mean, why should they value you any less than the voices of the other animals?"

"Hmmm, because I'm small."

"So are other animals."

"And because I'm young."

"Doesn't mean you don't have something to say."

"And because I'm usually frightened."

"Hmmm, you know, most people who really think about something and make up their own mind are frightened."

"They are?"

"Yes. Especially when they speak before an audience."

"Hmmm ... you didn't seem to be afraid."

"Hmmm, yes, for one thing, I've done this a couple of times before, so speaking before other people is not new, and the other thing ... I mean I'm still trying to decide if I've gone mad or not ... this whole world is strange ..."

"Yes, but you're not mad."

"I'm not?"

"No, would you see a mouse if you were mad?"

"Hmmm ... would I be talking to a mouse if I were mad ... well, at least you're not white."

"What's my fur colour got to do with it?"

"Uhhh ... there is a saying in my world that you see white mice if you are mad."

"Oh, ... but I'm grey-brown ..."

"Yes, thankfully ..."

"You really are strange, you know."

"Yes, I imagine I appear strange to you."

"I mean, none of us would even dare to do anything that Aslan does not want. He is a God, you know, or the son of a God."

"Yes, so I have heard."

"But how can you resist a god?"

"Hmmm, let me tell you something. In my world, religion is pretty much dead. There are faiths, there are prayers and people say that a god exists, several actually, but nobody has ever seen a god, no one credible, I mean. Our gods appear only in ancient histories and the reports of lunatics."

"This sounds like a terrible world."

"No, not really. But the whole religion business is very much screwed up. Different faiths, all claiming they are the one true thing, and a lot of hypocrisy, like we laugh about faiths that are no longer adhered to, like Greek and Roman gods ... the gods of people that lived a long time ago, but a lot of people are fanatical believers of similar faiths that are not much younger."

"So, you don't believe in gods?"

"No, well, yes. In my world, I don't think that there are gods. But I can't prove it so I'm agnostic. I don't know if a god or gods exist, so I am not praying to anything, since all possible gods have equal probabil-

ity that they are true.”

“But is there no sign of a god in your world? Who made you?”

“Well, no. There are stories of a mystical creation, but I think it is more likely that I am the product of random mutation and natural selection ... it’s difficult to explain in a few minutes, but imagine that you have an animal that gets children. Some children are better suited to the environment than others. The ones that are better suited survive and pass along ... uh, how do you explain it without explaining genes ... children look similar to their parents but there are variations. Variations that survive better in this world have children that differ from their grandparents more than in the parent generation. There is a drift toward better suited animals. Humans are one possible form of this adaptation.”

“I am not sure I understand.”

“I doubt it, I can’t explain it in a few sentences, I’m sorry.”

“But ... in our world a God exists, and we know Aslan, his son. Are things not different here?”

“Regarding the existence of god, yes, I agree, given that Aslan really is the son of a god. But there is something else. I always wondered what would happen, in my world, if – let’s say the Christian god would exist and show himself. I thought about it and realised that it is not only lack of believe, which makes me an Agnostic, that defines my relation to gods. I read about the deeds this god had supposedly done and came to the conclusion that even if this god would exist, I would not serve him out of my free will. God or no god, such a being, such a terrible manipulator, murderer, sadist ... I could never, never follow or even bow to such a thing.”

"But what does this has to do with Aslan."

"I am sure that he is a fine being, if you let him soak up the spotlight."

"Hmmm?"

"He is very ... proud ... he has an holier-than-you attitude."

"But he is holier than we are."

"Hmmm, ok, I'm sorry if this shocks you or hurts your feelings, but when I first met him, he was manipulating me and wanted me to thank him for it."

"This does not sound like him."

"Which means that either I don't know him, or we got off on the wrong foot, or that he is a very clever manipulator ... I don't know, but I don't think that we will have seen the last of him."

"So you think that he is like your Christian god? You don't like him?"

"I don't know. He is similar. Look, I used to play role playing games in my world ... games where you pretend to be a being in a different world, quite like this one. I am used to thinking of gods not more than mortal men with more power. I value them accordingly. Perhaps I am wrong, perhaps not, we will see. I am glad that you are still talking to me even if I am not friends with your god."

"Well, I like you. You helped me ... and I want to help you."

"Thank you ... so, do you know where my sister is?"

"Yes ..."

* * *

She was in the south, the mouse said, not in the east where he was heading. She made a crude map on the ground and pointed him to the right direction. It was

already late afternoon, but he decided to surround the clearing where the animals were still gathering and continue to walk south. The mouse had to stay with the other animals, or she would be missed, so he thanked her and started off. He came only a few kilometres when the sun slowly sank and the night fell.

It was a cold night. The animals collected wood and the great lion breathed fire in it. Soon it was warm and cosy around the fireplace. The lion told them stories while they snuggled together.

Outside of the fire, a few kilometres away, he collected some wood of his own. He shivered as he reached into his pocket and took his lighter. For a moment he seemed unsure of himself, before he flicked it.

A small flame appeared.

"At least you let physics alone.", he said, and carefully lighted the fire. A few minutes later he sat before it, trying to capture as much warmth as possible, while eating an energy bar he found in his pocket.

Something stirred in the grass behind him. He turned around, one hand reaching for a heavy piece of wood, burning at one end.

"Come out, no need to hide yourself."

"Don't hit me with that log, please."

"I won't. But show yourself."

From between the high grass, a snake did show her head.

He let out a short laugh. "I didn't expect a snake in these temperatures."

"Normally I'd be deep underground in a cave, resting. But the entrance collapsed and I'm trapped on the outside."

"And since you can't control your body temperature you're slowly freezing."

"Yessss. May I please warm myself?"

"Yes, come besides the fire."

"You don't fear me?"

"Hmmm ... I don't know you. I don't know if you hunt with poison or if you kill your prey by strangling it. But no matter which tactic you use, I'm not your prey, you are not large enough to swallow me whole. If you were malicious and poisonous, you'd killed me without making a sound."

"Perhaps it's just too cold for me to be silent and use my poison."

"Perhaps."

"And you don't fear that I betray you when I get warmer?"

"Hmm, let's get this over with. Do you give me your word that you won't attack anything until tomorrow at noon."

"You trust the word of snakes?"

"No, I trust your word. It's cold, I could use some company, I wouldn't want any man or animal to die on a night like this. At the moment, nature with its deep temperatures is our enemy. So, do you give me your word."

"Yes."

"And what is your name?"

"Sessis."

"Then, Sessis, warm yourself."

They sat for an hour or so, trying to get warm. He kept himself awake by continuously working on the fire. Sessis rolled herself in a circle and soon felt warm again.

A second time this night something stirred behind him. It was the mouse.

"Why are you sitting here besides this small fire? We have a large one a few kilometres away."

"Hey, mouse. Hmmm ... thank you, but I'd feel like a

hypocrite if I'd take a place by the fire with the lion."
"But you could die here. This wood is no safe place."
"Yes, I know, but I can handle myself at the moment. I have no need for the lion."
"Well, but there is company at our fire."
"Yes, if it were only the other animals, I'd probably come. But I don't like the lion and won't search his help."
"Hmmm, I can't convince you, can I?"
"No, I'm afraid not. But ..."
Suddenly he ripped a burning log out of the fire and brought it down a few centimetres to the right of the mouse. Sessis, who silently had coiled back like a spring hissed loudly. The mouse, seeing the snake behind the wall of fire, let out a loud shriek. For a few seconds both seemed frozen, only the flames moving, throwing dancing shadows on their frightened faces.
"Sessis. Keep your word."
"I will ... but this was just too good."
"A snake!", the mouse shrieked, "Don't you know how dangerous these creatures are?"
"I know."
"How can you tolerate them beside your fire?"
"She was cold. She was alone. She gave me her word. That was enough."
"But ... but ..."
"Mouse, I thank you for running all this way through the cold forest. I sincerely do. I'm sorry that I can't accompany you back to your fire. I can go with you for most of the way, make sure you reach your fire alive. If you want to."
"But ... can't you go all the way?"
"No, I can't."
"But ..."
"Come."

"But ... you're dealing with snakes."

"Yes, I'm dealing with snakes. But I won't let any harm befall on you."

"But ..."

"Come."

He took the shivering mouse and put her in his breast pocket. The mouse rolled into a ball, still shivering, but glad that she wouldn't have to run all the way through the wood.

Sessis coiled herself again, stared at the fire, and waited for him to return. It took him only a short time.

He watched the snake for a few minutes, while Sessis shifted uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry."

"You should be."

"She was prey."

"Not tonight, not here."

"You can't fight nature."

"You can. We're doing it all the time."

"How?"

"Sitting beside a blazing fire on a night that would kill us if we didn't have it. What else is this than fighting nature?"

"I would have killed her."

"No."

"You reacted very fast, otherwise she'd be dead now."

"No, I saw what you did long before you decided to strike."

"You watched me?"

"All the time."

"You don't trust me, then?"

"How could I?"

"I thought, I was your guest, here."

"You are, and I don't think that you'd attack me. But the second the mouse came to the fire ... you gave me

your word when we were alone. I don't think you could have given it with a mouse present. Not after you got warm."

"I was ... I was just so ... tempted."

"Yes, yes you were."

"Are you always in control of yourself?"

He laughed for a second. "No, no I'm not. But I have my moments."

"Why didn't you go to the other animals?"

"Hmmm ... I don't like their master. Why don't you?"

"They wouldn't want me."

"Have you tried?"

"Yes. They say that I am not to be trusted. That I corrupt them. That I use stealth and poison. I can't help what I am."

"No, I suppose not."

"You think so, too?"

"It doesn't matter what I think about it. You've decided for yourself that you can't be helped, so you can't."

"But if I decided differently ..."

"Then things would be differently."

"Hmmm ..."

"It's late ... I'm trying to catch some sleep. Regarding that cave of yours ..."

"Yes?"

"I can try to make an entrance for you, tomorrow."

"Thanks ... are you trying to find a reason for me not to kill you?"

"I think I've found a pretty good one already. Goodnight, Sessis."

"Goodnight."

* * *

He spend the next morning digging an entrance to the snake's cave. By midday a small passageway was cleared. He was surprised that her cave was this large. But then, who would want to share a home with a poisonous snake? She looked at him when she saw that she could go into her home, but said nothing, just looking at him. Finally she turned, entered the cave and vanished from sight.

"No thanks needed." he said to himself and continued his way to the castle of the Witch. His hunger grew stronger during the afternoon and he eagerly picked wild berries when he saw them. He was thinking about hunting but could not bear the thought that he might accidently kill an animal that could talk. If he would kill anything at all.

He marched all the evening and when the moon rose, continued walking. It was nearly full moon and the light was bright enough to easily find his footing. It must have been around midnight, when he reached a small pond. Curiously, he peered in it.

In the water, a thousand stars were visible. While he was wondering about the crystal clear water, the stars suddenly vanished.

Carefully, yet curious, he bowed down. As his face was a few centimetres above the water, visible with a clarity that even the best mirror could not reach, it suddenly vanished too. But from deep below, something slowly came to the surface. Where his mirror image had been a second before, a distorted face appeared. He was appalled. It was gruesome, full of distrust, fierce with anger hardly controlled but saturated with a deep fear and an even deeper sadness, like a man who lost most of his precious chances when he was young and scared and now, when he was willing to take them, none presented themselves.

While he was staring at it, familiar footsteps fell behind him.

"Yes, this is you."

"I know."

"Most people seek my guidance after they come face to face with themselves."

He stared at his mirror image for a long time, then, slowly, painfully, stood up.

"No, thank you, lion. But this is something between me ... and myself."

"But ..."

"I know who I am, lion, I know it better than anyone else. I've lived in my skin for a long time now. I know exactly what I have done, the choices I've made, the mistakes, the fear that had been a constant in my life, the anger. I know who I am ..."

"But I can take it away."

"This is who I am. This is what I have to work with. If you take it away, what will be left of me?"

"You'd become a better person."

"I'd become a completely different person."

"But ..."

"No, lion, no. Not this way. I'm doing whatever I can to be better than I was before. I try to improve myself, every day. I fail, I make mistakes, but I try. And sometimes, sometimes I have moments that make it worth it. Sometimes I'm doing the right thing.", he straightened, being sure of himself, "sometimes I prove to myself that I can be as good as I want to be."

"That trouble can stop. You'll reach your goal."

"Then it wouldn't be my achievement. It wouldn't be something that I was responsible for. And without this dream to become better than I am, than I was, what would be left to motivate me? No, lion,", he smiled, "that image has stared at me from every mir-

ror I ever looked into, from ever water surface, from every polished glass. You just showed me what I do not want to be. You just showed me my motivation ... the reason why I am standing here instead of kneeling before you."

"I could take away your pain, yet, you decide to keep it."

"I'm not asking for your understanding, nor for your approval."

"So be it, if you want to deny yourself happiness, so be it.", the lion muttered, turning away.

He took a long look at the lion, then faced the pond again. The stars were visible in it again.

Slowly he kneeled down until he could see his face again. It was he normal face, gone were the emotions so visible on the face of the deep. He looked at it, seeing the deep face somewhere in it. "Someday,", he said silently, "someday I'll reach happiness myself."

* * *

He woke up into a cold morning. His bones ached and his hunger had returned in the night. While he was shaking the sleep off he saw that the mouse was with him again.

"Hello."

"Hello mouse. How did you get here?"

"I wanted to talk to you and I found a way."

"Yes, yes you did. Why did you want to talk to me?"

"I heard you saw the Mirror of Stars last night."

"The pond?"

"Yes, it is located inside of a pond."

"Yes, why?"

"What did you see?"

"Myself."

"Did it scare you?"

"No, mouse, no. I told the lion last night, I know who I am. I have no illusions about myself. This mirror only confirmed what I always took as the basis for my dealing with myself, it was nothing new."

"Hmmm ..."

"Why are you asking?"

"I always wanted to look at the mirror myself, to find out who I am."

"Look, mouse. It's a pond ..."

"It's a magical mirror with all-seeing properties."

"No. No, it's just a mirror that shows you how you see yourself. That pond will tell you nothing new about yourself, it will only confirm what you think about yourself in the first place."

"You think so? But it is supposed to show the truth."

"Hmmm, to be honest, I doubt it."

"But what you saw ... you said yourself ..."

"I said that the mirror showed me nothing new but confirmed what I always suspected. But while talking with you I got a strange feeling. I am not as bad as the mirror depicts me."

"No?"

He laughed. "No, mouse, thank you for the question, but no, I am not. I am a loner, I know that, I like very few people and trust even fewer. And yes, my view on the world is sometimes pessimistic and cynical, but I am not a bad man. I help people, I am a good friend to those I like as friends, and I don't lie or steal ... but I see myself much more negative than I have any reason to do so, and the mirror showed me this."

"Why do you see yourself more negative?"

"I don't know. It is something I always did. So, I think whatever you feed the mirror with, it will show you."

"But I don't even know what I would feed it with. I

want to know who I am.”

“This is something you have to find out for yourself. No mirror can give you an easy answer.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you already know who you are.”

“Yes, but it took me a long time to actually create me. If you want to find out, who you are, explore what you like and don’t like, what is important for you, what you can do without. But forego an easy answer. Hmmm ... but if you are so eager, why don’t you have a look yourself?”

“I can’t ... the mirror appears only to selected individuals.”

“Selected individuals ... hmm, why?”

“I don’t know, but with everything in this land, there is a reason behind it.”

“And this reason undoubtedly walks on four paws.”

“Huh?”

“No, not you mouse, the big cat.”

“Aslan, what has he to do with it?”

“A lot, I suppose. Being the manipulator he is.”

“Why don’t you trust him?”

“When I first saw him, I was scared. A lion on the path, waiting. He scared me and I ran into a swamp. I did not die, but it was close. At the clearing, I don’t know – I felt a force that was almost more powerful over myself than me. It nearly broke me. It was ... like a weight falling on my shoulders, but at the same time, I felt ... I don’t know, at peace. For a moment I really wanted to trust this lion.”

“But ...”

“It was too strange ... it felt like it wasn’t my decision anymore. Like someone controlling me. I fought against it in the end. He tried to control me. Not only at the gathering but from the moment I entered this

world. The more I thought about it, the more angry I got. He manipulated me when I first met him, he made me run in the wrong direction – I'll never forgive him for that."

* * *

They continued to talk for a little while, but soon the mouse had to return. She would be missed, she said. He continued his journey, but while he spend the day marching, his hunger became almost unbearable. He searched for all kinds of berries, but they got scarce. During the afternoon he spend a precious hour searching for food, but found none. He was just starting to move again, when he saw something beside the path. It was a rabbit, dead, but freshly bleeding. He picked up his stick and walked carefully to it, suspecting a trap. The rabbit was just too good a bait. When he reached it he paused for a moment, mustering the surroundings. Nothing stirred. He could see no string or any other kind of trap so he carefully picked it up. It had a broken neck and an open wound at her throat. Bitten to dead by a large animal. He dropped it back to the ground and stood up.

"Lion. Come and show yourself, I know you are watching!"

Sure enough something slowly walked out of the bushes. He barely concealed his surprise. It was nearer than he thought and better concealed than he would have thought possible.

"Don't you like my gift?"

"I am not sure if I want to accept a gift from you."

"Look at you, you're weak. You can't even sustain yourself. How long can you exist without food? How long can you keep on going?"

"I will find a way to keep myself alive."

"Don't be ridiculous. Accept what I have to give you. Let me nourish you like I nourish all that live in my domain."

He looked at the lion – touching again the base of his nose. "You do what?" he finally asked, controlling his anger.

"I am the flesh and lifeblood of all that live here. I am your salvation. Follow my counsel and everything will be all right."

"You bloody hypocrite.", he said, barely concealing his anger, "You're not Jesus, if he ever existed, he came as a mere mortal to our world, weak in body but not in mind. He could be injured, and hurt, and if he existed he died on the cross. Now, look at you. You come in the form of a lion, the mightiest beast there is, so much for understatement and humility, and you say for yourself that you are all-knowing and immortal in this world, so where is the risk for you? An nourish me? What did you do to others to accomplish this?", he pointed at the dead rabbit.

"It was only a rabbit – how dare you to ..." the lion started.

"I do dare.", his voice a mere growl, "I dare because I came here myself. I found my strength in my world over many years of making mistakes, or choosing the wrong way, the easy way. I did a lot of things I'm not proud of, I can't change them. But I can make better decisions in the future and I'm doing it now."

"You cannot do better decisions than I. All beings follow me. Even now the animals are gathering for a final battle to cast the Witch off this world. They follow me and I lead them, they couldn't do otherwise. They know that some of them will get hurt and may die, but still they follow. Everyone but evil beasts acknowl-

edge that I am the master of this world.”

“No, if anything you say is true, you’re just the steward, your father is the so called master of this land. You’re just a spoiled brat. But I’m curious, if you claim to be a master, then why don’t you make everything all right on your own? Why do the people have to suffer?”

“I’m giving them free choice.”

“Free choice? No, you’re not giving them free choice. You’re still here, you still say what the right decision would be without giving them a chance to find the decision on their own. If you’d really want to give them free choice, you’d leave this world and let them deal on their own.”

“They’re not ready for this.”

“Ah, but you can’t have both. Either you’re giving them free will, or you manipulate them and take it away. I wonder, are you really man enough to let them chose a different path ... let them find happiness their way?”

“There is no other path to happiness besides me.”

“How arrogant, how deeply arrogant. There are countless ways to find personal meaning and happiness, ways that do not include submission to you.”

“Perhaps this is true for the time you live, but what happens after they die? Shall they be cast into the void? I won’t take them to my fathers place if they defy me in life.”

“And which place would that be? A place of eternal happiness?”

“Aye, paradise beyond your wildest dreams.”

“I doubt it, I doubt that it is paradise and happiness.”

“But it is true, once you enter my fathers garden you feel at peace, you are happy, life is eternal beauty there.”

"Is it? So, no matter how I felt before, no matter what happens, I'm happy once I enter this garden."

"I just said so, do you doubt my word?"

"No, but I doubt your interpretation. Happiness once you enter a place. My own self become completely overruled by the mystical powers of that place. Do you honestly think I'd enter it?"

"What do you mean?"

"What you're describing a typical effect of *drugs*. Happiness in a second, just forget everything that was important to you, everything that motivated you in life, motivated you to do something. Your past, your life, your friends, your family. Controlling one's actions by pulling strings is bad enough, but controlling my emotions? Making me feel happiness even if there are a lot of things in this world that make me feel sad. Even if people I know suffer? How dare you!"

"Some people deny happiness, paradise, for themselves. I pity you, you don't seek happiness.", the lion said, and there was true pity in his voice.

But he was on a go, talking faster than he could think: "Oh, I do seek it, but not this way. Not this easy way. I want to achieve happiness on my own. I don't need a mystical garden, I don't need a master that pushes a button and makes me feel serene and happy. I find that in myself. I find it in the world, at times. And the other times, when the world is bad enough, it is all the motivation I need to change the world, this world, the world we are living in while we are living it. Instead of accepting and enduring it like a stupid mule hoping for a better life after we die!"

"But this is only a temporary place. This world, will not last. Only paradise is eternal."

"This place is the place I am at the moment. This place is everything I know, I surely know until now.

This place contains people I like, even love. It is my world, my actions influence it. Even if it will not last, I can make it better, help others, punish wrongdoers, in the here and now. Don't tell me that this is not important."

"You're not seeing the whole story. You're bound in the here and now, you're like a frog in a deep well, thinking this well is everything there is."

"Perhaps this analogy is true. But perhaps I feel commitment to the world I am in. Perhaps even a fleeting moment is important enough to use it well. Yes, I think that's the difference between us. I appreciate this world, I see it's importance. I'm not too aloof to using this time as best as possible, instead of degrading it as a testing ground for faith."

"You're alone with this view here.", the lion said, "All the others follow me."

"So be it, I don't care. I'm not the average of other people's opinions, I don't care what they want, what they believe in. If they are blinded by your might, blinded by your form as a lion, the perfect good for all creatures meek and small, so be it."

"You are arrogant!"

"Am I? I'm not telling them what to do, I'm not criticising them, for what they believe in. It's their life, I want no part in their faith, I don't want to change it. I only want, and I only will, have control over my faith. To decide what I believe in, and that, lion, is not you."

"Then be alone, man. Keep the rabbit, let it be your last meal. You will find nothing else here." the lion said, before he walked away.

He looked at him disappearing, looked at the rabbit to his feet. He wondered if it could speak, what it felt when the lion killed it. He couldn't remember if it looked like the rabbit at the clearing or not, but it did

not matter. He carefully carried it to a small tree. The ground was soft, but it took him a while to dig a small hole. He put the rabbit inside, tried to close its eyes but failed. Then, with a sad smile, he filled the whole. He paused for a moment, muttering more to himself than the grave 'In the end, we all are alone.'

* * *

He wandered for a few kilometres, still growing more and more hungry as the day went on. He heard a river and went down to it to drink and look for fish. But he did not even saw one of them and without equipment it would take too long to build a fishing pole and even longer to catch something, so he went on. The road met with the river again after a few hundred feet and went alongside it for a while. The sun began to set and he searched for a place to spend the night. He was just beginning to collect wood when, some way in front of him, a light flared up. He stared in the beginning darkness. If he was right, the light came from the middle of the river. Carefully he went nearer and saw that the light was indeed in the middle of the river. It was a beaver dam. He was surprised to see other lights lit up near the bench. A large beaver with a lantern spotted him and shouted alarm. He dropped his stick and raised his hands a little, showing no harm. The beaver did not wait for him but ran back over the dam to his castle and vanished behind a wall of sticks and branches.

"Hello?", she shouted, still keeping his arms raised.

"Who are you?"

"I mean you no harm. I am looking for a place to spend the night."

"It is not our way to be unfriendly to strangers, but

this is a bad night to spend at our castle.”

“Why?”

“The wolves will attack our dam this night, trying to break it.”

“Wolves?”

“Yes, the servants of the Witch. A battle is coming and Aslan needs our dam to cross the river here. The Witch knows this and wants to hinder his approach.”

“Hmmm, and what will you do?”

“Defend it, of course.”

He looked around. “With what army?”

The beaver seemed to talk to somebody else. A high voice, female possibly, shouted back this time. “Why do you want to know this? Are you a spy?”

“If I were one I wouldn’t say it, would I? But no, I am not a spy. I am just searching for a place to spend the night. Look, I am not involved with any side of this conflict, but if you get attacked I promise I will do my best to defend you – if you like.”

“How do we know if we can trust you?”

“I don’t know. I can’t give you more than my word, I am afraid. I am in this world looking for my sister and hold neither allegiance to Aslan nor to the Witch.”

A great tumult started in the castle, eager discussion and heated words. He listened for a while, picking out phrases like “not a friend of Aslan” and “if he’s not on our side”. He made a wry grin and called out again: “Look, I see that I am causing more trouble than I wanted. I’m leaving you in peace.”

He started to walk but after a few feet he was called back. “Wait! We are not sure to trust you, but we might need your help.”

He walked back to the entrance of the castle. “I will do what I can. What is your plan?”

A beaver appeared at the dam from below the water.

"Our plan?"

"How do you intend to defend this dam, this castle."

"We will stay barricaded behind our walls of sticks and twigs and we have lighted fires to scare them away."

"Hmmm, if the Witch orders the wolves to attack, who do you think will win, the fire or the Witch?"

The beaver looked lost.

"How long does your fortress hold when the wolves start tearing it apart?"

"There is nothing else we can do!" the beaver said with despair in his voice.

He looked around, measuring the width and breadth of the dam, barely enough for one man to stand on it. Thirty feet of a small corridor above the water, then the castle, then another fourteen feet. He looked down at the beaver. "Ok, is this the only way across the water? This dam, I mean?"

"Yes.", said the beaver.

"Can you make me a long pole?"

"A pole?"

"Yes, a very sturdy piece of wood, about ten feet long, not thicker than this," he made a circle with his thumb and index finger, "and sharpened at one end."

"Sure we can do this."

"Now? Before the wolves arrive?"

"Yes." the beaver said, puzzled.

"Then please do it."

"What is your plan?"

"If they want to reach you, they have to cross this dam. If I have that pole, I think I can keep them at bay. There can't be more than one crossing it at a time. If two try it at the same time, they'll just hinder each other."

"You seem pretty sure, but these are wolves. What if

they try to swim?"

"They may, but in the water you have superiority. Keep well below the surface, watch for them and bite them in their balls or feet when they try to reach you, but keep clear of their fangs."

"We can't fight wolves!"

"No, not on land, but in the water you might win."

"I do not know."

"Hmmm, are you free to leave? Can you abandon this castle?"

"No! We must not do it. Aslan would not like it."

He touched the base of his nose for a moment, caught himself and looked straight at the beaver. "Then, Mr. Beaver, you have only two choices. Either you wait in your castle that the wolves come crashing through your wall, or you try to fight them off. I agree that you would not stand a chance on the ground. But in the water you are quicker, you can dive for longer periods of time and anything that can get through solid wood will be devastating when it comes to private parts. The choice is yours."

The beaver vanished beneath the water. As expected, a loud discussion started shortly in the castle. Presently he returned.

"We will make you a pole."

It did not take them long to find a branch that was suitable for him. The first wolves began to howl in the distance when they cut it down. 'So much for a surprise attack,' he thought, 'but why would they want to surprise them. They know they are coming. The best they can hope for is to scare them ... if this is even tactic. Who knows,' he thought, 'they might even do it for the fun.'

When he received the pole it was sharpened as good as he could hope it to be. Briefly he considers hard-

ening it in the fire, but he did not have time for this. Then he thought about poisoning the point, but the only things he could think of would take days to show any effect. And he did not know if the wolves were as susceptible to infection as humans were.

So he stood on the dam, while he saw the beavers in the water, waiting for any wolf that would enter it. "Don't forget," he said, "stay in the water. Do not try to leave it."

"We wont, human," said one of the beavers. "We are not stupid, you know?"

He said nothing, looking ahead. He had never fought against wolves, not even dogs, and he was not sure if his plan would work. 'But keeping them at bay is the only thing I can think of', he thought, 'and nothing is better suited for this than a long pole.'

Presently the wolves arrived under great howling. They looked at the fire, unable to see beyond. They seemed fearful, but after a few seconds they all turned their heads like one beast. What they heard must have been convincing, because they were slowly advancing at the castle.

He waited for the first one to come on. When the wolf saw him it merely growled, like it was laughing. Then it charged at him with a speed that surprised him, given the slow approach to the fire. Before he could think about it the wolf leaped at him, but with a reflex he brought the pointy end of pole up in front of him and set his foot on the other end, fixing it in the dam. The wolf, in mid-jump, could not react and impaled itself deep.

The impact nearly tore pole out of his hands, but while it bend, it held. Using the force of the impact he raised the pole further and until it made a half circle. The wolf, still attached to it, went with it before it slid

off. He did not look at the animal, having felt no reaction after the impact, he was pretty sure that it was dead.

Two large wolves were facing him from the solid ground behind the fires. They stared at him. If wolves faces mirrored their emotions they would look confused, afraid and very angry. But they were cautious, having seen what happened to one of their own. 'And clever,' he thought, 'I wonder when the first will start swimming to surround me.'

Faintly he could hear a silenced splashing, signaling that the first wolf must have entered the water. While still keeping the two wolves in his eyes and bringing up the bloody pole in front of him, he could hear a sharp, gut-tearing yelp to his left. The cries continued in the midst of wild splashing when the wolf hurried to the ground. He did not look at it but could not suppress a grin, imagining what had just happened to it. The two wolves on the dam did not smile, they did not even grin. They just got closer and closer, carefully keeping their eyes fixed on him.

He alternated the point of the pole between them as they got nearer, making carefully calculated short stabs at them. He did not want to imagine what would happen if one of them would underun his pole.

The wolves seemed to try to tire him out, making short attacks themselves, but always keeping their distance. Their little room for movement did hinder them, but not as much as he had hoped. He would have expected them to shove each other for better footing, but as fierce as they were to their prey, as organised they were when attacking it. They were perfectly used to attack as a team, making them 'a double headed beast' he just thought when one half of it suddenly charged further then before. He tried

to stab at it when the other jumped forward and underran his pole. He felt the other wolf grab the end of the pole when he tried to step back, stopping him in his tracks. The wolf charging at him had nearly reached him when – without thinking, or having an other choice – he jumped to the right, pulling the pole with him. The long pole caught the running wolf and effectively pushed him into the water, but he was falling in it as well, when the other wolf loosened his grip on the pole.

Splashing in the water near to the wolf, he let go of the pole and brought both of his arms in front of his throat to protect it. He need not worry. Something caught him at his jacket from behind and pulled him away from the wolf, who was under serious attack from underwater, scurrying to the bench in blind panic.

He swallowed some water, but managed to get a view on the dam. The other wolf, satisfied that he was gone, walked back to the ground and called the rest of his pack from beyond the fire. Suddenly three small creatures left the water and climbed on the dam.

“No.”, he said.

The beaver behind him heard him and peered past him.

“What are they doing?”

The three beavers on the dam grabbed the long pole. It was a collective effort to raise it out of the water. By the time the wolf came back with the rest of his pack, they stood ready, pole risen.

“Let me go. I can swim. I have to get to them!” he said to the beaver.

The beaver let go and started to swim to the dam himself, but it was already too late. Like before, one wolf feigned a charge while the other pushed through,

and the three beavers were neither quick nor strong enough to shove him into the water. He wolf simply crashed into them. The pole fell down and the other wolves fell upon them.

He saw it from the water, trying to reach the dam, but suddenly something held him. It was the beaver.

"Let me go."

"No."

"Let me go, damn it!"

"No. You told them. I could not do it, they could not do it, yet they tried."

"I have to get back on the dam."

"No. It's finished. Now we can only hope that the castle holds them off long enough."

Frustrated he watched from the water as the wolves left their bloody prey and tried to tear the castle apart. But the twigs and branches were deeply intertwined and difficult to break. After half an hour of pointless pulling and sharpening their teeth on the wood, the wolves retreated to the middle of the dam. It was then when one of them saw the pole. It was the same wolf that he pushed into the water, who was now pulling the pole back on the dam. He realised that it was too late to recover it.

Within second the wolf had signalled to the others what they should do. With remarkable skill they turned the pole around that the point was now directed the the castle itself. Grabbing it with their teeth they ran at it and buried it deep into the bowls of the castle wall. He tried to warn the beavers, to signal them to pull the pole the whole way in or cut it of, but it was too late. The wolves already used their collective muscle at the far end of the pole. The wall bulged when six muscle packed wolves buried their paws on the dam and threw they weight sideways against

the pole. He hoped that the pole would break but the wood was too strong. Suddenly under a lot of crashing and twiggling the wall of the castle broke open.

Both he and the beaver watched from the distance as the first wolves disappeared into the castle, as the first screams tore through the night. As the quickest beavers left the castle via the underwater tunnel, leaving behind the not so fortunate that were torn apart by the wolves, they were already swimming to it.

It was then, the lion chose to make his appearance.

A mighty roar crashed through the air, trembled the wood and the water. Both he and the beaver stopped swimming as they saw Aslan striding over from the other side of the dam. Within a second, the wolves strobe out of the castle with their tails dragging behind them.

While the beaver swam to greet Aslan, he climbed the dam and entered the castle. In the carnage he could not even guess how many beavers were killed, but the blood and amount of fur said to him that the family of the beaver had paid too high a price for the night. He returned to the surface and heard Aslan consoling the beaver.

"They did not die in vain, Beaver, they died in my name. They are in a better place now."

The beaver, having heard about the number of death from his wife standing behind him, cried openly. "Oh, if we just had the faith in you. If we had just waited in the castle without the human and his cursed pole, nothing would have happened. My family would have been alive!"

"There, there ..." the lion said, while throwing a hard look at him, "it is all right. They are with my father now. They are happy now."

He watched them for a moment, the lion, consol-

ing the loss of the beaver, the beaver and the rest of his family, the precious rest, crying. Then he quietly walked to the shore and sat down on a large tree trunk that they beaver must have brought down days ago. From the distance, he saw the beavers returning to the castle. He steeled himself as the lion came walking to him.

"So many dead!" the lion said without emotion.

"Yes, I know."

"They trusted you, you know. They would have been secure in their castle, but your voice inspired false confidence. And now their castle is destroyed and most of them are dead."

"Yes, I know."

"And what do you have to say for yourself?" the lion said, with raising anger.

"I thought ..."

"YOU THOUGHT WHAT?" growled the lion.

"I thought that we could stop the wolves."

"Well, aren't you sorry now? Won't you seek forgiveness for your overconfidence!"

He looked ahead at the broken castle wall, at the beavers that were slowly collecting what they could find of their brothers and sisters. He looked at the lion, closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. It strangely ached in his lungs.

"Yes, I seek forgiveness ...", he said, opening his eyes, "but not from you, from them. I have made an error, a grave error in judgement ... and I have to face the consequences. For now, I'm going back to the castle, helping them with the burial of the dead."

"They do not want you anymore!"

"Perhaps. But perhaps I can make amends. There has been enough dead."

"Another of your arrogant errors."

"Perhaps, but even this is my decision."

"Why don't you seek my help." the lion asked.

He turned around, eyes blazing, "Like they did?"

"What?" asked the lion.

"They also were convinced that they had to hold the castle for you, the dam."

"That was my wish."

"And did they not ask you for help?"

"I told them to hold it without me."

"Yes, you told them to face their enemies without the means to defend themselves. They were alone, they were scared, and they used anything they could to defend themselves. I took a risk when I stood on the dam to fight of the wolves, they did so too when they tried it. And we failed. I do not want you to help me but they did want your help – so where were you when they died?"

"Child, stop it this instant!"

"Stop what? Asking why you do not take the credit for all the things you let happen in this world? Come on, you give them an impossible task and you do not feel responsible for their dead also?"

"If they had stayed in the castle, everything would have been fine!"

"Would it? With wolves tearing at their walls and everything hanging on a few twigs?"

"If they had faith they would have survived!"

"Faith? It that what you want? Scaring them by forcing them to stay in a castle that is under attack without allowing them to leave or to do anything to defend themselves? Can't they help themselves? Or do you wish to keep them helpless? Is it that? Keep them in a position where they have no choice but to have faith in you?"

"Get out of my eyes."

“Hit a spot, didn’t I?”

“Only the promise I gave you in the swamp keeps my fangs off your throat.”, he licked his lips while saying this, “But be wary, there are other things that can end your life here. And I will not hold them back.”

With this, the lion turned away and vanished into the woods.

He did not think that the beavers would allow him to help, but they did. Perhaps they were too sad to be angry at him yet, perhaps they were simply devoid of any emotion for now, but they did not object when he helped them recover the dead. He had no idea what the beavers did with their dead, but after they collected everything they could find on the ground, he saw that they were digging at a spot where new trees were growing. He helped them to dig the graves and put the bodies in – or the rest of what they could find. Parts of it were carried to the castle of the Witch at the moment, on the strong feet of the wolves, in many bellies.

When they were finished the beavers gathered before the young trees and cried. He chose that moment to quietly leave the group and walk away.

* * *

It was early morning when he stopped to rest, having walked the rest of the night. He was cold, he was coughing. His clothes had already dried on his body, but he did not feel warm. He was reminded what the lion said to him “there are other things that can end your life here”. He remembered the time when he nearly died of a blood infection a few years ago. He felt his temperature, but was unsure if he had a fever. He coughed. ‘Hell, even pneumonia would be

deadly here.' He was hungry and could not remember when he had eaten for the last time. He felt weak and wanted to sleep – and as hard as he found it to admit, he needed help fast or the lion would be right. Instead of waiting around, he stood up and continued his way. A few hours later the road split. A small path went off the main road, but he could not see where it led. But he saw a apple core lying on the path. 'Somebody lives here', he thought, 'perhaps I can find some shelter here.'

He had walked the path for a few minutes when he saw that the path ended at a small house, still some distance away. In front of it he saw an old woman, feeding some chickens that were running around. He did not move but watched as she walked to some rabbit stalls. She seemed to talk to two rabbits before she returned to the house.

'Strange', he thought, but he had seen worse on the streets of his hometown. He whistled a tune and walked to the house, giving the old woman enough opportunity to see him, less he surprised and frightened her. When he reached the door, he was surprised when a young woman opened it.

She was ... 'Beautiful', he thought, feeling dazed.

"Hello.", she said, her voice ringing like crystal water in his mind.

"Hello." he tried to say, but he could not concentrate. Her red-black hair seemed to have a life of its own, falling down like a waterfall of lava. Her eyes ... he could not catch them, it was like they slipped from his mind, but yet so beautiful. And she smelled like wild flowers and the honey of the forest. But how could she be so beautiful in a forest like this?

"Oh, cat got your tongue?", she said, leaning to him, nearly touching him. "Perhaps you want to come in,

have some tea and keep me some company. I am so terribly lonely here with no-one to keep me company." She licked her lips, turned around and left the door open for him to follow.

Lonely. Alone. Something deep in his mind began to raise, something did not fit. Once she vanished from his view, her odour slowly fading, his mind started to work again. Triggered by ... an image of an old woman feeding the chicken and talking to the rabbits. Alone? He breathed hard, took a few steps away from the door. He heard someone working with china inside as he grabbed onto a large rain barrel to hold himself. Without thinking he stuck his head deep into the water.

For a few seconds the cold rainwater engulfed him. When he rose his head, it felt clearer. He heard crystal singing from inside and bit on his tongue. The pain cut through the singing and he felt clear again.

'Pain', he thought. He looked at the ground and found a small, pointy stone that he put in his shoes. If he concentrated how he put his foot down he could avoid threading on it. But if his concentration would be gone again, 'the pain should bring me back', he thought. He thought of the way she looked and smelled and felt a longing that would be difficult to control. He stepped out of sight of the windows and masturbated fast and hard. When he was exhausted and his member was sore, he felt better. 'But the smell', he thought. He looked around and found the excrement of some kind of carnivore, a dog or a cat. He touched it with his fingers and rubbed it on the inside of his nose. The foul stench killed any thought about the perfume in a instant.

He cleaned his hands in the rain barrel and entered the house.

"Oh, there you are. Sometimes I am astonished myself how my mere presence can bring someone under my spell." she said as he entered, finishing making the tea.

Her enchantment assaulted him, but did not get a hold. Still no odour came through and no woman in the world could have an effect on him in this depleted state he was in. 'And now, let's make her angry to see who she really is.' he thought.

"Yeah, you look nice, but I think your hag-form was more honest." he said in a bored voice.

She nearly dropped the kettle.

"Look, you look nice and everything, but I don't like to be fooled."

She looked at him, aghast. "Who are you?"

"Just a wanderer. I need some place to rest and some medical help."

"But, how do you know ... how can you resist?" she asked.

"One thing after the other. But first let's see who you really are. Drop the mask, please."

"How can you be so sure that this is not my real face?"

"I think I could bear the irony if it would not insult my intelligence. Drop it, please."

She looked at him, then gave a cocky smile. "If you wish," she said. In the blink of an eye, her face and her beautiful clothes that he had not even noticed before, a dream of black and red silk, got a life of their own, becoming old and dark. He was relieved to see the old hag before him.

"Pleased?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you."

"Don't tell me I dressed up for nothing. With a body like this," the hag pointed at her face, "you have to dress up a little to make an impression."

"No, it looked fine ..." he started.

"FINE?" the hag screamed and suddenly started laughing. "This is the first time anybody found my glamour just 'fine'. What are you, a monk?"

He smiled. "No."

"Just gay?"

"No."

"Tell me, young man, why do you insist on seeing me this way? Why do you insist on the cold, hard truth?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you understand me, understand me well. I am old, I am ugly. Why do you prevent me from appearing in a better light? You are only hurting yourself, and you are hurting me, making me face myself this way."

"I am sorry, but I don't like to be lied to."

"You are lied to, young man, every day of your life. Everybody lies. Everybody dresses up, tries to look nice, impress others. Nobody is even honest to himself or would show this honest face to the world. The others would get together and tear him apart."

"I know that I am lied to, I really do. But whenever I can, I try to see as much truth as I can."

"You are making it too hard for yourself."

"No, I don't think so, but if I do, well, I have to live with it."

"Tell me, what are you doing here?"

He told her, at least most of it. What he was doing in this world, how he was trying to find his sisters. She listened, quietly, her ancient face fixed on him in thought. Finally she said: "Well, isn't that heroic?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, I don't want to mock you, young man. But you should know that I take no interest in the affairs of others for quite some time."

"She is my family."

"Ah, but have you seen what she has done in this world? What she is planning to do?"

"She was apprentice to the Witch, I know that."

"And you don't find it ... shocking that your own sister is in league with the most evil force of this world?"

"Aren't you too?"

She laughed, a high, shrill laughing that could cut through a forest and fell some trees. He waited, patiently, looking at her.

"That's it? Your idea of evil? One large evil force? All of us scrambling around the Witch?"

"Aren't you?"

"Young man, you have to learn a lot about the motives that drive us ... even with something as 'easy' as 'evil'. I follow my own path, always have. I have had alliances, and I have ended some." she looked at a human skull that was resting on a table. "Oh, yes, I have." Suddenly she fixated him again. "You should know that 'we' does not exist. Oh, I followed her, one time when I was young, to gain knowledge and therefore power. Many did. But once we reach a certain amount of power, we follow our own way. Always have, always will. Nothing could unite us for long, we are too independent for this," she looked at him for a moment longer and turned away, "like you are, young man."

"I am not evil."

"You think so? You do not follow the uniting force of good in this world, you go your own path and all you want to do is find your sister."

"That is not all I want to do." he said, looking angry.

"If this was everything I wanted to do, I'd probably accepted the lions offer."

"You would have?"

"Perhaps, but I also want to follow the things I believe in and I will never, ever, follow a single course."

"Why not?"

"Because you become blind ... if you have only one goal, you will do everything to reach this one goal without looking out for consequences for anything else but your goal. This is evil and I am not it."

They talked for some time, the Hag always watching, always scheming. She saw the young man getting more tired, coughing more often. And she formed a plan.

"You are ill," she finally said.

"I fell in the water and I think I've got a cold."

"More than that, I wager." she said and rose. "I have some herbal tea here that will help you."

"Thank you, that is very nice of you."

"But I want something in return."

"What is it?"

"Spend the night with me."

He looked at her, coughed, half from the cold, half from shock.

"Don't worry, I let you pick my shape, I can only hope that I can hold it when things get ... passionate."

"I'm afraid I have to reject that offer."

"What?"

"I will not spend the night here."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Honestly? That you try that spell on me again." He put the foot down hard, feeling the reassuring pain rushing through him. "And all you need is one victory."

"Is that so?"

She walked to him, leaning closely in front of his face. He didn't know when his face became beautiful again, perhaps it always was. Without thinking some

other part of his brain reached for his walking stick, leaning next to him.

“And you say that my spell could really overcome you?”

The air exploded in a wild frenzy of roses and honey, assaulting his scent. Red and golden colour flooded his field of view. He could feel his resistance breaking down in a series of quick drops. With a surge of final strength he stood up, stumbled backwards until his back was against the wall. But the whole room was full of her perfume and it became unbearably warm. While he could not avoid the scent, his foot had caught the stone again, flooding his consciousness with a fresh wave of pain. For a moment, he could think more clearly. He saw her walking to him, three steps away, two steps away, with a final thought he rose his walking stick and smashed it down on her head.

With a loud thud it hit her beautiful face. She struggled, her knees gave way, she fell on the ground. With a flash the air became clear. She looked at him, betrayed and hurt. “What did you do?”

He rose his stick again. With a blur she lost her glamour, looking again like an old woman, ancient, fragile, defenseless. “Don’t hurt an old woman!” she cried.

Without hesitating he brought the stick down again. She collapsed on the ground.

He quickly checked her pulse. She was still alive, even breathing. He smiled to himself and stabilised her. No need for unnecessary enemies if she got friends.

“What are you doing?” a voice suddenly creaked.

He looked around, saw for the first time a parrot sitting in the corner.

“Who are you?”

“One who wasn’t as fortunate as you were.”

"You fell for her spell?"

"And she turned me into an Ara."

"Is there a way to turn you back into a human?"

"I wasn't a human, I was a Fewn."

"A Fewn?"

"Yes."

"And is there?"

"No. Not that I know of. I know that the tea she was offering you would have turned you into an animal, be it rabbit, or bird, or something else, but I have never seen her make the antidote."

"Hmmm, is there something else I can do for you?"

"There is a key in her pocket. If you take it an open my chains, I am at least free."

He took the key and opened the chain.

"Thank you. I am sorry that I could not warn you, but she cast a spell on me that made me fade into the background and forbade me to speak."

"It's ok. If you flee, wouldn't that mean that it becomes harder to get back in your true form?"

"Actually," the ara said, and looked at his wings, "I kinda like the way I am now."

"What?", he coughed.

"Do you know how much fun flying is? Rising through the air, free of worries?"

"But your former life?"

"Was good, but it has been over twenty years that I was a fewn. Nobody will remember me, and I am happier this way."

He smiled. "Whatever you say. Good luck."

"Thanks.", the ara cried and flew away.

He looked around for things he could take with him, but found nothing that he could trust. For a moment he held an apple in his hand, which reminded himself how he got here in the first place. But then he

put it down without eating it. 'I know better to eat an apple from a woman like that.'

He left the hut and walked quickly to the rabbit stables. He planned to be far away when the hag woke up, and his time was running short.

"Hello, rabbits," he said, crouching down in front of the narrow stables. "Can you speak or make yourself understood?"

"Yes, of course we can," said one of the two rabbits, sitting inside.

"The hag is unconscious for a while, do you want to stay here or shall I open your doors."

"Open them, please."

"Ok." He swiftly opened them.

"Thank you."

"Are you real rabbits or were you transformed into this shape?" he asked.

"Oh, we are real rabbits. The hag caught us some time ago. She wanted to breed rabbits."

"Breed rabbits?"

"Yes, so that she could sell or eat us in the winter."

"Sounds sensible."

"Hey!"

"I mean, from an evil, egoistical point of view."

"I say so!"

"So, you spend your time eating and enjoying yourselves?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because we are only friends.", the female rabbit spoke for the first time.

"What?"

"You all think that we rabbits fuck the whole long day with everyone that comes our way. But we have partnerships and friends just like all other animals.

We are friends, nothing more."

"Besides, I can't do it when someone is watching.", the male rabbit said, slightly embarrassed.

"Yes, and breeding in captivity, worse than marriage. Besides, I would not want my children to grow up in space like this."

"Being watched, being eaten."

"Or what our children would see, when we outlived our usefulness."

"Us being killed, our furs made into clothing."

"That is no life, not even for a rabbit."

"We enjoy our days, but we also see the future and this is no future we want to participate in."

"And we think that we should scramble now. The hag will be awake soon."

He looked around, to the way past the entrance to the hut. When he looked back to the rabbits he faintly heard a "Thanks." and some noises from the forest. The rabbits were gone.

He took one final look around and ran past the hut, back to the main path. His foot limping from the pain that stone was inflicting on him.

* * *

He walked for some time until he dared to stop and put the stone from his shoe. His foot was bloody. The stone did its work, but now, even without it, he could not walk without pain.

He tried to get as far as he could, until he saw some squirrels on the trees.

"Hello." he said.

The squirrels looked down.

"Can you help me? I need something to eat and something against a cold."

"You are no friend of this world. We know what you did on the meeting place."

"Yes, we will not help you." an other squirrel chipped in. "And we do not see how we could. Our food is our own and the winter will be here before tomorrow."

"There is nothing we can or will do for you."

"No, nothing." other squirrels chipped in.

Suddenly something fell down. He thought it was a nut, but when it hit him he realised that it was a small stone.

"Get lost!" the squirrel shouted.

"Yes! Get lost." others fell in. More stones rained down as he hastily ran along the path. They followed him for quite some time. When they grew tired of hitting him with stones, his head had some small wounds and his arms hurt.

He went along until he arrived at a tree that was felled by lightning a long time ago. He sat down, coughing and tired. He felt hot, but cold at the same time.

Suddenly something bright white fell from the sky. Then another, and another. He tried to focus his eyes, but felt it first before he saw it clearly. It was snow.

He cursed his luck, looking at his clothes that were made for spring or summer, but not for the winter.

He got up and forced himself further down along the path. The snowfall got heavier and heavier. Finally he found a small clearing with a large tree that offered some protection against the snow. Winter seemed to have come without an autumn, the tree was still with all leaves. He quickly collected as much wood he could find that was still reasonably dry and started a fire. Crouching in front of it he watched the snowfall getting heavier and heavier, the air getting colder and colder, and himself getting weaker and weaker.

He nearly fell asleep when a voice shook him up.

“We did meet on bad terms. But there is still a second chance.”

The lion was standing behind the fire, looking at him. “No, you’re wrong. I see that now. There is no second chance.”

“But I’m offering it to you, here and now. I can help you. Do not think that your past in this world is beyond redemption.”

“No, it’s not my behaviour that was unacceptable ... it was yours. You’re behaving like an absolute dictator here ... and have your followers persecuting me, regardless of what I do. I’ve declined the first time, I’ll do so on all other times.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing. Where this path will lead. Come with me and you will heal, you will be warm, and fed, and I will help you find your sister.” The light of the fire played in the eyes of the lion.

“The other animals will accept you with open arms. Nobody will mention your past ... transgressions. As I will forgive and forget, so will they.”

He coughed in his hand, looked at it and saw traces of blood on it. For the first time he was sure that he would die if he rejected the offer. He stared at the blood, touched it with his thumb. ‘I’m dying’, he thought, ‘but I will so no matter what will happen today. I could even accept his help and die tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow. And what would I have died for?’ A snowflake driven under the tree by stray winds landed on his hand, mixing with the blood. The lion was still watching him. ‘If I die I’ll make sure it is for something I believe in. If I take the easy way now, I will probably take it the next time and the time after that. I will make decisions not based on what I want, but what is easiest.’ ‘But it is your life that is at stake here.’ an other voice in his mind said. He closed

his hand and looked up at the lion.
"I know ... and I stand to my decision."

* * *

The lion was gone. With an angry scowl he had vanished into the darkness without saying another word. For a long time he was alone again. He felt dizzy but tried to stay awake, to keep the fire alive. He would try to find some better shelter tomorrow. His foot throbbed and he began coughing more and more. Suddenly he saw a small shadow appearing beside him.

"Hello." the mouse said.

"Hello mouse."

"I've heard what happened. You disappointed Aslan, but he has not given up on you yet. He probably never will."

"He is wasting his time."

"He said this about you, too."

He looked into the fire. Found a dry twig and put it in.

"How could you resist him?"

"Hmmm?"

"Aslan, I mean. He is a force of nature – he is nature. He is all that is good and yet you resist him." the mouse sounded troubled.

"To be honest, I do not like to be manipulated by anyone, even if it is the source of everything that is good in this world ... not that I believe that. If I were a child, an easy to manipulate nine year old, he would win – but without sounding arrogant, I am too experienced for this. I went through life with open eyes and I have made my own identity, formed my own opinions. And ... I can't take him seriously."

"Why not?"

"I laughed about it ... out loud and in silence, but I laughed."

"But why?"

"Because he is a cat. He claims to be the lord of this world and he comes as a cat ..."

He started to laugh, uncontrolled and tiring for himself.

The mouse continued to look at his feverish face, deeply troubled.

* * *

The next morning came but he could hardly rise. He put the mouse in his pocket and walked slowly along the path. After a short time he reached a large rock formation, the first sign of the nearing mountains. He scanned the wall as it rose, walking dizzily through the snow. He was cold, yet he burned inside. After a while his hand touched air. He stopped and saw a cave entrance looming next to him. He had nearly missed it despite its size. Without thinking of anything that could occupy it, he went inside. The cave shielded him from the wind, but it was still cold. But it was also large enough for him to lay down. It was so dark and he was so feverish that he couldn't even see how large the cave was.

A tiny, whispering voice in his mind warned him not to lay down, he would probably never get up. But he could see no other option besides collapsing in the snow outside. Carefully he lay down in the cave.

He coughed, spat blood, his lungs were on fire.

Over the pain the small voice of the mouse forced itself into his consciousness.

"What will happen when you die?"

Resting, he found a little bit of strength.

"Hmmm? Then I'll be gone." he said, tasting blood.

"No, I mean, where will you go?"

"I don't know."

"You don't? I always thought, all good beings will live forever in a place without pain and suffering."

"Hmmm ... I don't think it would be wise to talk about this." 'The stone is cold', he thought.

"But you're dying."

"Perhaps, but you remember when, ", he coughed,

"remember when we talked about believe last time?"

The mouse nodded, he could see her anguish.

"I know, but this is important. I want to see you again, someday."

"I'm not sure this is possible." 'And fading into darkness, without feeling, without thinking, without existing, does not sound to bad now', he thought

"But it has to. Everyone sees each other in the masters garden."

"Perhaps I don't want to spend eternity there."

"But eternal life ..."

"I don't want ...", he coughed, "don't want eternal life. Mouse, I'm old. I've lived for over thirty years ... which isn't long by most people's standards ... but it was sufficient. And it took me a long time to figure out who I'd want to be. To find the strength to make my own decisions. I've lived a happy life, I do not crave for eternity."

"But everybody wants to live."

"Yes, no,", he coughed, "some do, some don't. I want to live, here ... be alive in this world, or any other, but not in ... not in a world where there is no reason to do anything. And not forever."

"But ..."

"Listen, death ...", he coughed while a hand covered

his mouth, bright red spots appeared on the palm, "death my seem like a terrible thing ... and perhaps it is. But ...", he coughed, more spots appeared, "after a long life ... after a life worth living ...", he coughed, "death, even vanishing into nothing, just ceasing to exist, doesn't seem so bad."

"But some things should be eternal ... love ... friendship ..."

"But they're not, at least not in this world. And they can't, perhaps they should be, but they are not."

"Some things should be eternal.", the mouse repeated.

"Our deeds are ... mouse ..." he coughed, "our actions will leave their traces from here on forward into all eternity. They influence what happens to this world, and what happens after us. This legacy doesn't need us ... to continue living ... somewhere else."

"But ... without us ... without an afterlife ... I can't believe it. There has to be something ... the masters garden for us faithful, the void for everyone else."

"If this is your believe, mouse, then I'll end up in the void with all the other heretics and unbelievers."

"The void is vast, so large that you can float forever without ever seeing another being.", the mouse shuddered, "You'll be alone. After you're dead, you'll be alone in the void." The mouse strained to keep a tear from falling. "But at least," she concluded, "you won't die alone. I will tell you about Aslan, about this world, and perhaps it will help."

He was too tired to resist and he liked the company of the mouse. So he listened as the mouse started talking about her world.

* * *

He passed in and out of consciousness for some time. When he was conscious again he heard a familiar voice.

"You're dying."

"Yes ... I know."

"I can help you."

"I know."

"Do you want me to help you?" the lion asked.

"No."

"What!?"

"I'm sorry, but even now I will not beg for your help.", he turned to his side facing the lion and coughed in his hand, blood covering the inside of it.

"Are you willing to die, just to defy me?"

"I'm willing to die for what I believe in."

"But why don't you ask me for help?"

"Because you want faith. You wouldn't help me otherwise. And I won't give you that. I can't."

"It doesn't matter, just say the word, just say 'please'."

"You would want it this way? You'd want outer submission without inner belief?"

"You're dying, and yet you mock me."

"I think I know what you are trying to achieve. This isn't about me. This is about the other animals that would know that I asked you to help me. This is about show.", he coughed, harder, his hand now coloured in deep red.

"You are beyond help."

"Actually, I'm not ... if it were for someone else, ... for someone I loved dearly, I probably would ask you to help. ... You're a force in this world and I'd do anything I could to save the life of someone else. ...

"You do not love yourself?"

"I do, but I also love my life ... and I can be hard to myself anytime I want to ...", his voice became harder

despite the pain, "and I will not ask you for help ... I don't like what you stand for ... I don't like your way ... I don't like how you control the other animals ... you're not a nice person ... on the outside, yes ... but not on the inside. You think that you're better than other life forms."

"I am better. I'm a god. I'm the son of the master of this world."

"This gives you more power, yes, but it doesn't make you a better being. You're actions ... they're the acts of a spoiled child. ... And ... I heard about the people you took to this world ... children, easily to influence ... that is low, even for you ... a servant once ... used to submission whom you made king ... typical of you ... you introduced a hierarchy with kings, made them feel important, but then you put High Kings above them, and then you place yourself on top. ... this is ridiculous and nothing I can follow." He coughed, it was a rattling sort of cough, no new blood was coughed out, but it was a sign of finality. "I think I rather die."

"Then you'll die.", the lion snarled. As he left the cave, he turned around once more. "If I can't get you in this world, I'll make you pay in the afterworld. You won't escape me."

He didn't say anything, he couldn't. His chest was in flames, his breathing was laboured. It cost him much willpower just to take a new breath, to face the pain. The lion had left the cave. He was alone.

* * *

He had laid still for a while, thought where the mouse may be, when, above the pain, he felt a sudden sting in his leg. Mist began to decent over his eyes, but he

could dimly see a snake entering his field of view.

“So, do you remember me? A few days ago you saved my life giving me a place at your fire. You saved it again by giving me access to my cave. This is my cave, it is vaster than you thought, isn’t it?”, her tongue flickered over his nose. “You saved my life, twice, and I’m paying you back now.”

He stared at the snake. Unable to say anything. Warmth spread from his leg, reached his chest and battled with the pain. He felt tired. So tired.

“Poison and disease, a matter of strength. My poison can be used to heal. The amount I gave you will help you.”

He tried to nod, but he had trouble enough keeping his eyes open.

“Rest ... if you want to live, let my poison work on your disease.”

He eyes slowly closed. The warmth spread over his body as he fell asleep.

* * *

It was a beautiful but crisp day when he left the cave. The pain in his chest was gone, but he still felt weak. He looked at the small plain before the cave and stretched himself. In the distance a family of squirrels descended their tree and walked to ... he blinked. It was a large sleight ... nine reindeers were in front of it and a large man, in red and white with a large beard, was beginning to distribute presents to the squirrels. He sat down and watched from the distance as the squirrels took their presents back up the trees. A few more squirrels appeared and collected their presents. A few minutes later the man closed the large sack on the back of his slight and started to leave.

He was hungry and tired, but he didn't approach this man. It was something belonging to this world, and he wasn't desperate enough, nor did he expect any help. The sleight started to move. It glided slowly over the snow, passing twenty meters in front of him, when – with a sudden crack – it stopped dead. The sleight gave a small turn to the right, the reindeer lost their footing and fell down, unable to pull the sleight another centimetre, while, with a loud crash, the old man fell between the sleight and the reindeers.

Immediately, he was on his feet and reached the sleight with hurried steps. He untangled the old man from the reigns and helped him to his feet.

"Ohm, thank you. Now how did that happen?"

They looked back at the sleight and while the old man removed the snow from his clothes he examined the sleight.

"Your sleight caught a crack in the ground.", he said, "You're lucky that it didn't break or turn over."

"How will I ever get it out of it?"

"We can heave."

"The sleight is too heavy."

"Yes, but it's not impossible." He looked at the crack in the ground, touched it.

"It's stone, so we can use a lever."

"A lever?"

"Yes, a long ..." he hesitated as an image flashed before his eyes, "pole." he finished, 'this man is no beaver', he thought. "We put one end beneath the ski of the sleight and push the other end down. Then the reindeer can pull the sleight forward. We have to make it as light as possible."

"Yes. If we find a lever it could work."

They started to unload the large sack from the sleight. It took a long time. The sack was huge and couldn't

be lifted as one, so they unloaded the presents in the snow. A lot of things passed his hands, he could feel clothes and food, even weapons. But always he put the presents down. Even with the dumb hunger he felt and his need for protection from the snow, he wouldn't steal.

Finally the sleight, still heavy by itself, was unloaded. "Now, we need a lever. I'll try to find a branch."

He went to the wood. The old man followed him. There were a lot of sturdy branches, but they were still attached to even mightier trees. The wood on the ground was neither long nor hard enough to lift the sleight.

After half an hour, he turned to the old man.

"It's hopeless. We can't find a branch hard enough and I don't have the tools to cut one. Can you ask the squirrels to cut us a branch we can use?"

The old man shouted for the squirrels, but the wood was deserted and quiet.

"Probably enjoying their presents.", the old man said after a while.

"Probably", he concurred. "Hmm, what about the presents you still have, isn't there something we can use?"

"But they are for other animals."

"And they won't get it unless you get the sleight freed."

"Perhaps we can use your present."

"Trust me, there won't be a present for me."

The old man looked at him, as if he was seeing him for the first time.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just passing this world and I'm not on good terms with its master."

The old man laughed, a curious mixture of bitterness

and humour, "And what has this to do with me?"

"Hmmm, I'm sorry, but I thought that you served the master of this world."

"Me? It's true that I can enter a world only with the permission of its master, but I don't serve him."

"You don't?"

He laughed again. "I'm old ... *really old* ... there was always a need to reward the good and punish the bad. Even before the lion was born, I came to the worlds, giving presents to the good, mostly to children and simple minded who had a need to believe in me. In one form or the other, I'm in all cultures, all religions, all worlds."

"Hmmm ... I didn't know that."

"Let me have a look at my list."

He walked back to the sleight and unrolled a long list. There were many names in many worlds on it, and it took him a while to find the right name.

"Ah, here you are ... hmmm ... yes, there is something for you."

He shifted uncomfortably as the old man found a long package. He instantly knew what it was.

"It's a staff."

"Yes, I think so.", the old man said, "won't you take it?"

"Hmmm ... Let's use it first to get the sleight out of the crack."

With a mighty heave they lifted the sleight high enough that the reindeers could pull the sleight forward. It was free.

After they had refilled the sack, he handed the staff, still unpacked, to the old man.

"What is this?"

"Don't get me wrong, but I'd be glad if you'd take it back."

"What? You refuse a present for your good deeds?"

"The things I did ... the 'good deeds' that made me get this ..."

"Yes?"

"I didn't do them to be rewarded."

The old man looked at him.

"When I do something, I do it because it feels right. Because I would like the same thing done to me and because it makes the world the place I want to live in. I ask whether the other person wants my help or not, before I help. These are the reasons why I do something, not for reward, especially not to be rewarded on a 'special day' during the year."

The old man got a tear in his eye.

"Look, I'm sorry, I mean, this is your life, your day and everything. You live to give presents, to reward people. I'm sorry if this comes off as unfriendly, but, please, I can't take it."

More tears were coming, the old man was crying, openly.

He shifted, looked down, feeling extremely unhappy. It wasn't his world, but bringing this man to tears, bringing Santa Claus to tears, was beyond what he could bear. He had decided to follow his principles in this world, but he never regretted it more than now.

Without further words, he quietly leaned the staff against the sleight and turned around.

He had done five steps when the old old man cried out.

"Wait."

He turned.

"I didn't cry because I'm sad, I'm glad that you give it back."

"You are?"

"Do you know how often this has happened?"

"No."

"A precious few times."

"And you're not sad that I give it back."

"No. No, you would never taken hold it if you didn't think that it was the only way to get the sleight of the crack. I suppose that was difficult enough."

"Yes."

"And while you were helping me, you had the chance to get food, or weapons, or clothing, but you didn't, although you need all of that."

"Yes."

"Most people want something for their good deeds. They expect rewards. Either from the person himself or from the world, that is from me or from a god. Some even take things for themselves, they steal to reward themselves. You don't ... you don't expect anything."

"No."

"You're not a bad man."

He looked down, uncomfortable.

The old man brushed away his tears, frozen like diamonds on this cheeks. He turned to his sleight and began searching something beneath his seat. It seemed to be a large space, since it took him some time to pull out three things.

"You've helped me, and I'd like to help you now. This is nothing for your past deeds for someone else, nor for the help you gave me with the sleight. It it something from me to you, because I see that you can need them and I like you. Can you accept my help for that?"

He nodded, slowly.

The first package contained a suit of clothing, complete from boots to hood.

"This is a special kind of clothing. It will change ac-

ording to your liking, well, mostly to the circumstances. In the winter, it will be thick and warm, in the summer it will be thin and keep you cold. But you can actually force it to show the qualities of any clothing you want to."

The next package contained a small bag.

"This bag will always contain enough food and water to keep you alive and healthy."

His eyes lighted up, he was hungry and very thankful for the present.

The last package was not larger than an envelope. He carefully unwrapped it.

It was a map.

"Yes, this map shows the world as it is. It will help you find your sister, and find a way out of this world."

He looked over the map, found a red dot on it, marking his own position, and spotted entries like 'Castle of the Witch' and 'Door to other Worlds'.

"Thank you.", he said. "I appreciate it very much."

"I've got to thank you. It's rare that I find someone who doesn't expect a general reward for his deeds or only from the person he has helped. And now, I've got to hurry, there are a lot of animals, who expect reward for things that should be natural to them."

While his gaze followed the old man leaving, two other beings watched him. In the wood, high on a tree, a squirrel had followed the events from the beginning, unsure what to make of it. It made a puzzled look after the old man left and vanished in the tree, eager to tell the other squirrels about it. The human, the dealer in snakes, who denied Aslan even if it meant his death, did something that formed a personal bond between *The Old Man* and himself. It was unbelievable and would spread in the wood faster than the mist on a cold autumn day.

As he walked back to the cave to change his clothes and eat and drink and plan his journey, another pair of eyes followed his every move. From a distance, where only the best eyes could see anything, the lion watched with an angry frown.

* * *

The food the bag provided was basic, but the first real meal he had in this world. For him it was a feast. He ate, carefully, not to eat too much too soon, which cost him almost more willpower than facing the lion. After a while he was satiated and closed the bag. While he was enjoying himself in the warm clothing and took another look at the map, someone sat beside him.

"You're really strange, you know that?", the mouse suddenly peeped.

"Mouse? I didn't see you coming. Where have you been?"

"I had to leave when you fell unconscious and I sensed danger around me."

"Hmmm, it's the cave of a snake. She is probably still around here. Let's go outside, I've finished here anyway."

"The squirrels told me what happened here."

"Hmmm? What did you hear?"

"You helped the old man."

"Oh, that ... yes."

"You're surprised that I know about it?"

"I didn't know that the squirrels were watching. And I thought you meant what had happened while I was sick."

"No, I know nothing about that."

They left the cave. Outside, running over the snow, the mouse felt secure again. Taking no chances, he

took her in his breast pocket.

"I thought the snake told you about it."

"The snake? She wouldn't talk to me ... oh, she would open her mouth, all right, but not to talk."

"I'm sorry, I've forgot."

"Forgotten that I am a mouse?"

"I'm sorry, I had a hard time that just changed to good."

"Because you helped the old man?"

"Yes, and the snake, I helped both and they helped me in return."

"The snake helped you?"

"Yes, while I was sick, she bit me."

"SHE BIT YOU?"

"Yes, her venom can heal, in the right measure."

"Hmm ... I wasn't sure how it happened anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"How you got well, after you denied him."

"He wanted submission, I couldn't give it to him."

"No, you couldn't, could you?"

"Not this way, anyhow."

"I don't understand you. On the one hand you deny our lord, you deal with snakes, you reject help. On the other hand you helped a lot of people, you helped me, you helped the snake, you helped *The Old Man*." He thought about the beavers and felt a pang in his heart. "I try to make up my own mind, but I err sometimes."

"I see ... and what are you doing now?"

"I'm gonna find my sister."

"Hmmm ... I'd like to come with you. At least until you've found her."

"I'll be glad to have some company, but I could get dangerous."

"I don't mind ... anymore."

They walked for several days. At night he would start a fire, at day they would follow the map to the castle of the Witch. One day, long after the road had risen and became a mountain path, they saw a large amount of animals in a valley far below them. As they walked further, they saw an equal large force of other beings on the other side of the valley.

It was the day of the battle between Aslan's army and the forces of the Witch. The mouse urged him to stop and he sat down on a large rock, with a spectacular view on the whole valley. Only the ravens and crows, circling over it all, had a better view.

"There is goes, the great battle of our times." the mouse said sadly, when the armies began to attack.

"And we're stuck here, so close and yet so far ..."
Even despite the distance he could make out individual animals, saw dogs fighting against wolves, saw a bright yellow lion running across the field, leaving utter destruction in his wake, while from somewhere, white lightning turned animals to stone.

"But it sure is impressive." he finally remarked.

"Impressive? We're fighting for our freedom."

"Hmmm ..."

"You're a strange being ... you save me from drowning, but you mock my believes."

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to be rude."

"These are my friends, down there. I just wish ..." the voice of the mouse trailed off when a wing of several eagles shot down, striking swiftly and deadly.

"That you could fight with them?"

A rhino – 'how did that get here' he thought – ran full speed into the forces of the Witch, breaking their lines until it was turned to stone. 'Well, Hannibal brought

elephants.'

"Isn't that preposterous."

"No, I think it's courageous and honourable."

"Don't mock me." the mouse spat.

"I don't."

"There was a time when mice were fighting alongside the others in these battles. But today, we are no longer welcomed."

"Why?"

"The others say they would have to watch their step ... we would distract them."

The horses used the gap in the lines and trampled down anything that was trying to fill it.

"Hrrm."

"You don't believe it either?"

"I think they're trying to protect you."

"And you think this is the right way?"

"No, I think that is a decision you should make for yourself. If you want to fight, you should, but at your own risk. Even if this would mean that you could be stamped down by the hooves of your allies."

"And do you think we could do more good than harm?"

He could make out a woman on the field, deep inside the Witch's forces. A cougar nearly got her, but was turned to stone in mid-jump.

"This doesn't matter." he said.

"It doesn't?"

"Look, I don't know whether you would change the outcome if you fight, or if you would bring your friends to fall. And it doesn't matter. Not the result of the fight, of course, but what I or anyone thinks about it. This is your decision to make and the outcome could easily be the one way as the other. You should decide, for yourself, whether you can do any good or

whether you would do harm. Then, you should act accordingly, and face the consequences.”

“But if I’m wrong, if I hurt them ...”

“Then you’re wrong, and you have to live with the consequences. Look, I’m sorry, I was wrong to tell you what you should do. It doesn’t matter what I would do. The thing is, you should do what you can live with. If it is following the opinions of others, then do so.”

“I don’t know if I can think for myself.”

“I know.”

“I mean, it’s hard ... they could curse me and my family if I do something wrong.”

“I know.”

“If I do what they say ... then they can’t be angry with me.”

“Probably not ...”

“I ... I’m just a mouse.”

“You’re a mouse, nothing can change that ... but strike the ‘just’. Say, that spellcaster, the woman, is this my sister?”

“No, it’s the Witch.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes ... this one is an old force ... she was here long before your sister came into this world.”

“So, my sister is alone in the Castle of the Witch?”

“Urgm ...” the mouse began, “no ...”

He looked at the mouse, surprised. “You told me she was with the Witch.”

“Yes ... she was her proxy ...”, the mouse hesitated.

“I’m sorry, I have only heard this a few days ago. Your sister ... she left. I wanted to find out where she is now before telling you this, but no one knows.”

His gaze became steel. “Vanished from this world?”

“No. No, I don’t think so. I heard that she has left the

Witch months ago, but she is still in this world."

He relaxed. "Good, then we will find her." He looked closely at the mouse. "Although it might have been helpful to hear this sooner. Why did she leave?"

His gaze fell onto the valley below.

"I don't know. No one had left her before ..."

"Looks like she has to get used to it." He pointed to the valley.

"Yes ... YES, they're fleeing! Aslan has again turned the tide. We're saved!"

Down below, in the midst of the fleeing force, they saw the lion jumping at the Witch. A white lightning missed him by a few millimetres while his mighty claws and fangs hit the Witch dead on. The Witch was buried beneath his mighty body. There was no further lightning.

He looked at the mouse, deliriously happy. He bit his lips for a second, then gave in, and said, "Yes, he has turned the tide, good for this world."

The mouse's happiness vanished in an instant. "Don't you dare ..."

"Have you ever thought that this is nothing for him?"

"What?"

"He is nearly omnipotent in this world ... he could walk down there and take the whole battle force on his own."

"Why, yes ... he is powerful, but ..."

"But me no buts ... he said it himself ... he knows everything in this world ... they would never have a chance. But instead, he comes with an army ... a mortal army. Why is that?"

"He wants us to fight for our land."

"If that was his wish, why didn't he teach you to defend it without him? No, he has to come down and lead his army ... 'save the day', knowing full well that

he can't loose."

"Stop it ... stop it ..."

"I'm sorry, these are my opinions ... I shouldn't force them on you."

"You told me to stand up for what one believes ... this should include ones opinions ... but you're talking about Aslan here ..."

"And he is 'tabu'?"

"He is ... more than us."

"So I imagine."

"You don't sound like you believe it."

"No, I don't."

"Why?"

"Because I think no one should be superior to an other being ... he may have more knowledge, yes, he may be stronger, faster, you name it. He might even think in causal nets or grok the universe. But this doesn't mean that one being is worth more than an other. Especially if this being scares people into helpless, life-threatening situations only to appear as their saviour. Playing cheap puppet tricks like that he deserves to be avoided, or put down, not ..."

The mouse shrieked.

He stopped himself. "I'm sorry, I scared you."

"You cannot talk about him that way, you cannot."

"No, I cannot, at least, not to you anyhow, can I?"

"You must never ..."

"I know ... come, the battle is over ... you won ... or your friends ... let's visit the castle of this Witch, perhaps we can find some clues about my sister there."

* * *

They moved on, soon seeing the castle of the Witch rising in front of them. He looked down at the valley

and saw that the lion was gathering his troops, also marching to the castle. Given the distance they had at least a day and a half until they would reach it.

When he climbed the last stairs to the castle the mouse sensed his eagerness to find out what happened to his sister.

"Are you sure she'll still behave like your sister?"

"Yes, why?"

"It has been a long time, she being here, influenced by the Witch."

"I know, but she is still my sister – nothing can change that."

"So, you were heart and soul all the way to the core?"

"No, we pretty much hated each other to the core."

The mouse looked surprised. "Then why do you try to help her?"

"Because she is my sister - no matter what, she's family."

"This is a strong bond."

"Yes, it is. Nothing as strong as family ... and friendship." He smiled at the mouse and entered the castle.

* * *

The Palace was vast – made of crystal clear ice over ancient stone. While he was wandering through the endless halls he sensed something else too: it screamed of the character of the Witch. The mouse had told him about her, a royalty as ancient as these walls, immortal, nearly as powerful as the lion ('without the benefit of being in her own world', he thought, 'how would a battle between them end in her world before its destruction'). He pitied her and he wondered just what was meant with immortal now that the lion had obviously killed her.

Being immortal seemed like a good idea, but he was existentialist enough to know that there is little pleasure in watching friends and family die, getting used to each and every direction the world moved, with the slight consolation that every 'new' fad ends soon. He thought about his grandmother who was born in the times of the Kaiser, how she survived two World Wars, witnessed the rise of computers. He often wondered why she spend most of her time in the garden until he realised that this was the tiny piece of the world that did not really change, where everything was circular and came back again, where she could control what happened around her. He wondered if the Witch tried the same here. Trying to freeze time, trying to hold change.

If so, she succeeded. There was nothing in this castle that could rot, everything was covered under deep ice, conserved for all eternity.

They saw more and more animals who were turned to stone. He thought about returning them to their normal form but could not see how.

The began exploring the castle and soon found a room with a large book. Curious he opened it and began to read.

It was a magic book, which surprised him. He had thought that a Witch might use other ways to use magic than by using a book. But then he realised that the book was not written by her. It was the book of a wizard and he wondered if he had fallen victim to the Witch or simply lost his book. As he turned to the first page he was surprised to see a spell that would give him immortality. He did not expect such a spell, and certainly not on the first page. But then a tiny voice in the back of his head said 'But isn't this what magic would want? This book wants to be used.'

He smiled, looked at the page and saw how easy it would be to cast the spell right here and now. In a few seconds he could become untouchable, even by the lion. But then he remembered the long, empty halls, the deep covers of ice, and made a sad smile. Without further reading he opened the last page of the book and began skimming backwards. His hunch was correct, who ever wrote this book made an index on the last pages to quickly find the spells in it. He was amazed by the different kinds of spells that existed. He could become all knowing, find true love, walk into the bedrooms of beautiful ladies, be invisible, find enlightenment and even punish wrongdoers ... and he was tempted by some. Charisma, beauty, health – all seemed to good to be true. But then he thought about the things he had done here, about *why* he did things his own way. 'It is tempting to become all I wanted with a spell,' he thought, 'but it would not be me. I would become someone else. This is not my way.'

With a deep sight he opened a specific page and found the spell to return transformed beings to their original form.

The spell looked easy enough and reminded him of a computer command. You had some variables like the range and the kinds of beings it should work on, but in the end it was only necessary to say a few words, *a few very specific words*. He looked at the mouse, took a deep breath and began casting the spell.

It was a curious emotion. He felt his hair rising up, some kind of energy surrounding him, surging through his body, enflaming every cell with a painful force. And then, for a second, he felt connected to every being on this planet, in the universe, like tiny strands of liquid silver running from him to every

atom, a vast net of power. His voice rose higher and higher and he felt that he could not stop even if he wanted to. While one side of him continued to read the words, the other side desperately tried to regain control over the sensation that swiped his body, and consequently his mind, away.

Finally, with the last words spoken, he collapsed on the ground, utterly out of breath, but with glowing eyes. It was a rush of power that was ebbing in his body, that rang his inner being. He had never felt anything like this before, it felt like one long orgasm, better than that. He began looking at the book with new eyes. The power that was stored in it, that could accessed by it. The spells. He considered casting another spell, no matter which one, just to feel the power again, when suddenly he stopped himself.

He was shaking and had an urge to vomit. He was sweating wildly when he turned to the mouse: "Look in the hall, are the animals back in their real form?"

She looked at him strangely, almost fearful, but ran off to return shortly thereafter. He was standing in front of the book, still fighting for control.

"Yes," the mouse said, "they are all becoming alive again."

"Go to them, go to the large room where most of the were stored, they will need someone who explains what happened to them."

"But ..."

"Go! ... Please ... go."

He could hear the mouse running away when, with a shaking hand, he closed his eyes and began to rip the book apart. It was a sickening sound – like the book itself was screaming as he tore page after page. With half-closed eyes he put them all in the old fireplace. The shaking and sweating was unbearable, but

he pulled out his lighter and ignited the pages. He saw the fire leap from page to page, ancient paper burning in bright green and blue, strange smoke rising through the chimney. For a second he considered saving some pages, any pages, but the heat became unbearable and singed the hairs on his hand before he gotten even close to a page.

The fire became a blazing rage, burning itself deep into the fireplace. Stone began to melt and red hot lava sipped out of the fireplace.

He backed away and his shaking calmed down as he realised that the spells were beyond reach. He left the room without looking back.

On the table, the ancient book, a skeleton without pages remained. He was already down the hall when the smoke surged back through the chimney and stopped over the book. After a few seconds the book slowly began to heal itself.

* * *

The crystal ball looked like it was made from pure ice. It radiated a coldness that was painful to the skin. Even his magical clothing had trouble keeping him warm. Like a fire of cold, it raged in front of him. Yet, he was curious. Looking into the crystal ball, he saw schemes that formed into beings, became clearer until he could see ...

It was the mouse, surrounded by the animals he had returned to their true form.

"So, who is this human?" a large horse asked, bending down to the mouse, his mane still covered with tiny ice crystals.

"He's from another world.", the mouse said.

"Like Aslan.", a cat asked, staring hungrily at the

mouse.

"NO, no, not like him."

"Like the Witch then?", a Raven croaked.

"No, he is neither like Aslan, nor like the Witch, he's in between. He's ... he's more neutral."

"Neutral? You mean he doesn't care what happens to the world.", the Raven croaked again.

"No, no, no ... look, he's ... different."

"I want to know," a sheep said, "do you trust him?"

"I ... I do, I think."

"You think?", a dog barked. "You merely think that you trust him? What kind of loyalty is that? You either are loyal or you are not, there is not in between."

There was a great snickering among the animals. Finally the dog barked: "I have enough of this human-person. He might be as bad as the Witch. Let's go and find Aslan, he will know what to do."

With these words and without giving the mouse a second look, the dog left the chamber. The animals followed him.

Sadly, the mouse watched them leave. He would like to have them as help in searching the castle. But they were leaving. As he saw that one animal turned back, his heart made a jump. Until he saw that it was the cat which was now running at him with full speed. A split-second later the mouse vanished in a crack of the wall.

The scene changed rapidly now. Like a spotlight shining on all parts of the large castle, he got an intimate knowledge of the vast rooms, the storage chambers and hidden pathways. But while he saw some interesting things he would try to find later, his sister was not among them.

Suddenly the scene changed. It was a cavern, free from ice and Spartanly equipped. In the middle of it,

a woman he immediately recognised as his sister, was talking to a dwarf.

"He's searching for me, all right."

"What shall we do, if he finds us?"

"My brother is a weakling. I doubt that he will find us here."

"But he has already found the Witch's castle."

"As a slave of the lion, I suppose."

"No, milady. According to our sources he has defied the lion."

"He has? My brother? Who is afraid of his own shadow? Who can't stand crowds because people make him nervous? He wouldn't even speak at school because he was afraid to make mistakes."

"Well ..." the dwarf stumbled.

"I know my brother. He will not last in this world, he is of no consequence."

"Yes, milady." The dwarf hesitated for a moment and continued carefully, "If, by any miracle, he would find us, shall I bring him to you or kill him?"

"By all means, you can kill him then."

The dwarf grinned savagely and seemed to check something on this right arm. It looked like a small crossbow.

He concentrated on the crystal ball. Slowly it changed perspective and moved through the vast cavern system. At last, it reached the outside and he could see the entrance. Straining his mind, he could force the ball to show the whole mountain range. He easily recognised it from the map. It was only a few days from here.

Finally he backed away from the crystal ball, his face was cold, even his eyebrows were covered with ice. It hurt, but he considered it well worth it.

"Doesn't it bother you?"

He turned around. The lion was standing at the entrance of the chamber.

"You are fast."

"Yes. I've come to claim what is mine."

"This castle?"

"You can keep it. I came for the animals."

"They're already freed."

"I've seen. Hoping to get some followers?"

"No, that's not my style."

"I see. They wouldn't follow you anyway. They came straight to me."

"Yes, you've trained them well."

"Didn't I." He nodded at the crystal ball. "Tell me, why do you try so hard to rescue your sister, when she considers you a coward and orders you to be killed if you find her?"

"I'm surprised that you don't understand it."

"Perhaps I do."

"Hmmm ... no, thinking about it, I don't think so. I think, you've got a pretty low opinion of humans and other animals. I think that's why you took the form of a lion. You consider yourself as better. Be careful, lion, one day we might surpass you."

The lion gave an angry snarl. "Be careful yourself. Your sister is right, you're weak, you can't defend yourself. You have only my word that protects you from me. And one day I might kill you for slights like this."

He gave a look at the crystal ball, then looked at the lion. "It will be an interesting day when our animosity will escalate in an open battle. But if you don't mind," he bowed his head, slightly, "I'd rather find my sister first."

The lion grinned openly, radiating in his power. He looked at the ball and gave it a long breath. Cracks

started to form on its surface. Within a few seconds it began to sink in itself, then became indistinguishable from the table it was standing on. Before he left he turned back: "You can keep the castle. Give it to your sister if you want to. As the remaining dark power of this land, she has every right to it. I suppose she'll still find some power in it."

With that, he left.

'If there was no devil, god would have to create him.' he vaguely remembered a quote when he left the chamber, smiling involuntarily, 'but I wont simply be your antagonist, I follow my own path.' The words of his sister didn't hurt him. He knew her, and he knew what she could say when she was talking to others. Besides, he had seen something in the ball, that was meaningless for the lion but of great worth to him.

* * *

A few minutes later he had found the mouse – or it had found him. He described what he was searching for and together they explored the castle, until they were both standing in a storage room that had been carefully hidden. He opened a few long boxes, stepped back and admired the sight.

"What are these things?" the mouse finally asked.

"Oh, these ... these are guns."

"Guns?"

"Weapons, much more advanced than anything you have here, perhaps except magic."

"If they are so powerful, why didn't the Witch use them?"

"She has her magic, which is more natural to her ... and, I suspect, she didn't want to trust anyone else with them."

"Why?"

"Look around you. This place is covered with dust. She hid these guns from her followers."

"No, I mean ..."

"Yes, let me show you ... this here looks right ... it's a Kalashnikov ..."

"A what?"

"Imagine a bow that shoots arrows with the force of an avalanche, six thousand a minute."

"Impossible."

"Come outside, I show you impossible. Poor thing ... she had in her possession a power to kill the lion, but she couldn't use it, because some of her followers would use it against her as well."

"You pity her?"

"I see the irony ... and yes, I pity her."

"Why don't you fear these weapons?"

"I fear them, but I don't think anyone would use them against me."

"Why not?"

"I'm not a ruler, dominating others is strange to me. And since I am not a king, I fear no revolution, nor assassin, nor claimants of my throne."

"You don't fear that someone might kill you?"

"If someone here wants to kill me ... he would succeed, whether they have modern firepower or not. But having them myself actually balances the chances ... even against the mightiest of beasts."

"That makes you happy? That you can kill other beings?"

"No, but that I'm not entirely helpless in defending myself ... and ..."

"And?"

"These weapons proof that there is a way back to my world, independent of Aslan ... he would never

let them past his way in. He told me that the Witch opened a pathway and got my sister, but I was not sure if he was telling the truth. But this ... this means we ... my sister and I ... may leave even without his blessings.”

“But he wouldn’t object ...”

“No, but I would be at his mercy ... and I like to keep my options open. Come, let’s see what else is here, and then I show you the magic of my home world.”

He walked around, opening all boxes before he made his selection – an AK-47, two pistols and a submachine gun that used the same ammunition as the pistols, a few knives and a large amount of ammunition. He attached the guns in holders on his belt, slung the submachine gun around his body and stored the spare ammunition in his pockets and in a backpack he found. He kept the AK-47 over his shoulder. It was large and heavy but the lion had made him nervous. He saw an elephant gun when his gaze swept over the room one last time, but it had no appeal to him. In some earlier times, these weapons were the only things that could kill the strong skull plate of an elephant with one shot, but they were two-shots, had a notoriously strong recoil, and were loud as hell. Even if it had more style, if today’s poachers used AK-47 to hunt down elephants, it would suit his needs much better than the elephant gun. As he left the chamber he felt the weight of his weapons, but he also felt powerful. He had to remind himself that he was not here to wage war, that he couldn’t win each battle by a physical fight. But he was glad that – at least for now – he could fight and win some.

* * *

When they left the castle the lion was waiting with his army. He decided to test the weapons an other time, but the lion immediately remarked upon the gun he had in his hand.

"You carry a mighty weapon with you."

"It's an AK-47 ... I'm surprised that you know it."

"There are none of these weapons here. The humans did rely on swords and spears and bows."

"This is more advanced."

"But more brutal, too."

"That depends on how you define brutal. It is quick, it kills in an instant, not unlike your fangs and claws."

"It shouldn't be here."

"Perhaps, but neither should my sister or I."

"Discard it."

"No."

"I said, discard it."

"No. I'm tired of these games, lion. You are powerful, you could kill me with a stroke of your claws, even now."

"Yes, I could."

"But you gave me your word that you would not hurt me, remember." he said for all the animals to hear.

"Do you want my word, that I won't use use these guns against you?"

"I have no need for your word, nor do I fear your weapons."

"Then it should be of no consequence for you whether I have them or not."

"Grrrmll."

"Thought so ... hmmm – if you know what these weapons can do, why don't you fear them?"

"I know everything that happens in this world, everything. It is my fathers world, but I rule in his stead."

"So, you would know ... when I point it at you, where

the bullet flies ...”

“The bullets are faster than I can jump, but in my world, I would know when you fire at me, before you even could pull the trigger, giving me ample time to move.” He looked at his army, addressing them “With these weapons you are a danger to every animal in this world, but I am still more powerful than you will ever be.”

He looked at his gun and put it over his shoulder, still holding the grip in his hand, finger at the trigger. Also addressing the army, he spoke loud and clear. “Lion, you said I could have this castle. These guns were in it, so they are rightfully mine. But I am not the Witch, I am not evil, I want to find my sister. I will not replace the Witch in becoming the next dark power in this land. Nor will my sister. No, I will not become the next evil you can use to scare the animals in submission. You can have this castle back, find a new enemy who will lead the animals to you in fear. But these guns, this ammunition, I will keep. They do not belong in this world anyway, neither do my sister and me. They will leave this world with me, when and only when, I have found my sister.”

With this he walked past the lion, through the army of animals that were watching this exchange in confusion. He did not even think about whether they would make way for him – they simply did.

They walked in the direction of his sisters caves, but due to the winding path it would take them at least three days. But he was in a good mood. They had faced the army of the lion, he had enough food and good clothing to survive for a very, very long time (he thought about exploring the world a little bit but thought better of it, first things first), he had weapons he was comfortable with, and he had survived his

brush with magical power.

'It was tempting', he thought. 'So very tempting.' He smiled, getting a quizzing look from the mouse. 'Not only could I get everything I ever wanted, but also the rush of getting it, of casting a spell.' He had never tried drugs, but he thought that this was how it would feel. 'But that is not possible, now. The book is destroyed.' the thought consoled him and drove the lust for magic out of his mind but left him with a deep sadness.

* * *

When they made their camp on the second day after they left the castle, he thought about his backpack. It was heavy, full of ammunition for the guns he had taken with him. 'Why carry them? I was good before I got them.' A voice in his mind immediately answered 'You were lucky. Keep them, who knows when you will need them.'

He started a fire and was faster than usual. He sat down and looked for the mouse. She was gone. He called her and when she did not appear, he opened his backpack. He had found something else that he found useful besides the ammunition. Long and powerful, the scope was not attached to the rifle anymore. He had no illusions of using a sniper rifle. The few places where long range fire was an advantage were few and without accurate distance measure he would miss. It would also lead him to focus on long distances, neglecting everything that could sneak up to him. But the scope seemed useful and there was still enough light to use it.

Silently he ran back to a place where he could see the most of the mountain side. In the distance, some way

below him, he could see a blurry yellow spot. Lying down he peered through the scope.

It was the lion. He adjusted the scope and saw what he was talking to. The mouse sat on a stone, talking to him. She seemed afraid and distressed. He focussed on the lion and was surprised that he seemed to look directly at him. With a swift movement the lion put the mouse on his back and began to run up the mountain side.

"Eavesdropper!" the lion said when he reached him.

"Stow it, furbag.", he spat, disgusted.

"I need to talk to you."

"I don't." he said, walking back to his fire.

"You will listen to me. I may not hurt you without breaking my vow, but I can prevent you from reaching your sister nonetheless."

He turned around.

"You know something? If you were smart you'd simply let your slaves to the job. You wouldn't hurt me, they would. But no, you wouldn't even call your enemies to slay me down."

"I would never ..."

"Yeah, but you've got no problems ordering your slaves to spy for you."

"Don't judge the mouse too harshly, she's weak."

"Weak?", he looked at her while she was trying to avoid his gaze, deeply ashamed, "She isn't weak. Who in this world of yours could try to defy you. If she tried, you'd simply overpowered her.", he returned his gaze to the lion, "No, I'm not angry at her - I'm angry at you."

"Me?"

"You are surprised? What kind of omniscient being are you? Has it never occurred to you that some people value freedom? That they don't want to be ma-

nipulated like puppets? That they rather make their own decisions, even if they make mistakes that way, than being led straight to the end on a safe road?"

"I grant freedom."

"No, no you don't. You interfere, and there are only a few who try to resist," he thought about the castle, "and you may have even planned that. If there was a way to make a true random number generator, I'd use it to make my decisions here. I'd rather act randomly even if it kills me than to be controlled by you."

"Chi...", the lion began.

"AND STOP CALLING ME A CHILD. We have nothing to say to each other anymore. Just leave me ALONE!!!" he exploded, then turned his back with fists clenched.

The lion looked at him, snarling angrily, then shook his head and walked down the mountain. The mouse which had fallen out of his hair looked after the lion, then to the fire, and sunk down in despair.

* * *

After some time he noticed that the mouse was still sitting on the ground, while it got darker and colder. He went to her.

"Mouse, may I ask you something?"

She looked up to him with a silent 'Yes.'

"You've come with me a long way, so far. There were times when I've told you things that were only for you to hear."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry to ask you, but did you tell them to someone else?"

"I ... I ..."

"Ok, I thought so. I knew he had his spies. I know

you talked with him. I just hoped you would keep some things private."

"He is the lord of this land."

"Yes, and you are used to praying to him."

"I can't help it."

"I know ..."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

"How long did you know?"

"I first had the suspicion a long time ago. You were frightened to be with me. You were shivering. You didn't want to be with me. Yet, you did it. Not only to pay a debt for your life. No, you were doing some other persons will."

"He wanted to know more about you."

"Yes, imagine this."

"I'm sorry."

"Do you still tell him everything?"

"I tried to keep some things for myself, but you know how he is. I ... I like travelling with you. I'm scared most of the time, but I've seen much. It makes my mind hurt, but ... it's more than I'd ever think possible. Shall I leave?"

"No, it's ok. You didn't really do any harm, but we're nearing the hiding place of my sister, and I don't want to give her a spy as a present."

"I won't say anything to him anymore."

"Don't promise what you can't keep when you're facing him."

"You think I can't?"

"I wouldn't want to bring you in that position, but yes, I don't think so."

"Then I'd better go."

"Hmmm ... mouse, I like you, your company, your views. But you still have not found your voice. You're still timid, still afraid what others would think. One day you'll probably be able to stand up for yourself, even against the lion. But I don't think that it will be today."

"How can you say this?"

"I say it because I have to. You won't be able to stand up for yourself if you expect me to help you do it. I can't. You have to do it yourself."

"I ... I ..."

"It's time for me to go. As much as I'd like to, you can't follow me now. I'm going to see my sister, and she has ordered her minions to kill me."

"But ..."

He pointed to his guns. "Don't worry, mouse. These things are much, much more powerful than her guards. And I've got some surprises nobody knows of. The fire will burn until the morning, use it and take care."

He turned around and started walking, leaving the mouse behind.

"Why do you try to help her?"

"She is my sister."

"That is no answer."

"Yes, it is."

* * *

He reached the caves a few hours later. He thought of sneaking in but thought better of it. This was their terrain, they will see him long before he would, if at all. And it might lead them to a quick and deadly attack if they thought he was a danger.

His fear did not come real. He entered the cave with-

out anyone stopping him. But inside, a dwarf was waiting. He recognised him immediately.

"You! You're human."

"Yes.", he said, one hand on the grip of the rifle.

"What are you doing here. How did you know where to find us?"

"That's none of your concern. I'd like to see my sister."

His eyes glimmered dangerously. His right arm twitched. "You're her brother?"

"Yes, I'd like to see her now."

"She told me to bring you to her, if you should arrive here."

"I'm sure she did."

He pointed to the rear of the cave.

"Please, human, walk this way."

"After you."

"No, please, after you." he said, overly polite.

His hand still on the rifle, carefully clocking back the safety he looked at the dwarf. "So that you can shoot me in the back?"

The dwarf looked surprised for a second, but immediately knew that he couldn't bluff. Both moved quickly at the same second. The dwarf pointed his arm at him, a high sound occurred and a small, dangerous looking bolt hit him in the chest. He looked at the bolt that stuck there, his own rifle half risen, and tumbled back, fell down and lay still.

"Stupid human.", the dwarf snorted and went through the door at the back of the cave.

Lying alone in the cave, his eyes suddenly flickered. A few seconds later he carefully removed the bolt from his clothing. Smiling, he felt the kevlar for holes, but the clothing had quickly healed itself and the trauma plate did not even have a scratch. Without making

a sound he started to follow the dwarf through the door.

The dwarf unwittingly led him deeper and deeper into the caverns. The second he had started to follow him his own clothing became black and silent, the kevlar turned into silk. After a while of walking through empty, shadowy corridors, he reached a bright hall. He could see the dwarf as he reached his sister.

"My lady?"

"Gron."

"Your brother found us, my lady."

"He did?" She seemed surprised, for a second. But then she remembered something and her expression grew concerned. "What did you do?"

"What you asked me to do."

"You killed him."

"That was my order." he said, with a mixture of pride and fear.

"You killed my brother."

"My lady?"

She grew angry, making the dwarf shifting uncomfortably.

"Leave me. Go to your quarters." she said finally, barely controlling herself.

Without a further word the dwarf left the chamber through another door. For a moment, she just stood there. Slowly, she sat down. He watched her for some minutes, but she just continued sitting there. No tear escaped her eyes, no pain was visible. She seemed ... troubled but also detached.

"Sister?" he finally said.

She turned her head in an instant, looking directly at him. He was not disappointed that he did not see any tears in her eyes, but he was surprised to see only

cold calculation, caution, but not shock or surprise. Carefully he walked over to her and sat down. The brightly lit room gave him the opportunity to get a closer look at her. She had become older, but she was younger than him. It confused him, she looked barely twenty-five, while in his own world, she was two years his senior. He thought about a glamour, like the hag had done, but she did not look beautiful enough. She was not ugly, but her skin had all the normal imperfections that a appearance conscious woman would have hidden.

"So, how have you been?" he finally said, watching her cautiously.

She gave him a hard look, focusses her eyes on him for a few seconds. Then she lay back in her chair.

"I'm fine. How did you find me?"

"Long story."

"I have all the time in the world."

He lay back, trying to make himself comfortable. He began to tell her how he had seen her vanishing, how he tried to find her for years, until he had given up. That he could not forget, how a voice in the back of his mind drew him back to the wall, and how the wall opened and he could follow. How he tried to find her in this world and how he finally succeeded. All the while she listened carefully, attentive, but he was sure that she wasn't just listening to him, but also scrutinising him. He realised that while he could recognise this woman as the sister he had, something was different. The carefree, life affirming and enjoying young girl was gone and replaced by something else. Finally she picked up an apple, looking at him as she began to eat it, very slowly. "That's quite a story.", she said as he had finished. "You've come a long way from the scared little brother you were."

"There were times when I thought, I wished I was crazy. But after a while I was sure that I was right, and after loosing you this way, after fighting for my place at the wall, there is not much that scares me anymore. I tried to leave that behind me ... but ... something drew me back that day."

"Yes, yes, I imagine."

"What about you? I saw you vanish, I heard that you were the Witch's apprentice, but what happened to you here?"

She looked straight at him, or through him as she started to speak. "I remember my last day on Earth, how I went to the wall, pulled out my mirror. I was looking at my face when I leaned at the wall. I could see me as I was falling through it, through the stone. The next moment I was lying on my back in a forest." She looked down at her hands, remembering. "I immediately tried to go back, but there was only solid rock. The portal was locked. To be honest, I was pissed. There is one thing you learn when hanging out with those guys, it's how you defend yourself. How you prevent anything from getting to you and hurting them when they crossed your borders."

"Did the lion find you?"

"No, not at first. I was walking around in deep snow when the Witch found me. I was nearly dead and she nursed me back to life."

"She did?"

"Not her character, I know, but I think she was tired of being alone. She was a self-centred evil bitch but she was also in this world for thousands of years, years without change. I think she thought that with another human on her side she could finally go in the offensive."

"She did, go in the offensive. Her army was flattened

a while ago."

"I know. Perhaps things would have turned out differently if I were with her, but I couldn't. Immediately after I got well, she started to train me."

"In magic?"

"Magic, fighting, everything. She made me her top lieutenant, not because I was her favorite, I don't think she knew what that is, but because I earned it. After a few years I commanded wolves on raids, send shock troops against anyone who opposed her."

"Why?"

"Why we did attack them? To bring peace."

"Peace through raids?", he asked, remembering the attack on the beavers' dam and the many victims torn apart.

"Sounds strange, doesn't it. But it made sense. We wanted to unite this world under one rule, with clear laws, with order. Her rule, her laws, and her order ... at first, it did not sound so bad – she was very convincing, even ... elitist ... it made me feel like I was part of something important. She trained me, showed me how to get powerful, how to command ... and she gave me a clear cut goal that I pursued with a single-mindedness that numbed all doubts, all thoughts, all emotions about my own world."

"And you didn't met the lion in your pursuits?"

"After a while I did. I suppose he was away for a while, but one day, when the wolves raided a village of Faun, I was raining magic down on them to prevent them from escaping, he suddenly stood next to me."

"Quite a surprise."

"Yes, indeed. I tried to fight him, I knew who he was, of course. But he was fast, he knew where my spells landed before they could hit him. I drew my blade

but he disarmed me immediately.”

“Not that hard if you are omniscient and omnipotent.”

“Hmm, I thought so too. What was worse, he played with me. I tried to fight for my life and he showed all the features of a cat. He gave me an opening, just to catch my attack there, he feigned, he inflicted only surface wounds. I became furious.”

“And when did he try to convince you of his path?”

“When I was nearly exhausted, I called to my wolves to scramble and walked away.”

“You walked away?”

“I tried to. He was superior by far. He could have killed me a hundred times over and didn’t. I was honest enough to realise it and too tired to be his plaything. If you fight for your very own survival, nothing is worse when you are played with. I had enough. If he wanted to kill me, there was nothing I could do against it, so I simply ignored him.”

“What did he do?”

“Called out to me, told me to stop.”

“But you didn’t.”

“I didn’t want to, but this thing has its powers, I couldn’t resist, I stopped, while he trotted in front of me and tried to persuade me to change my course.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“He was convincing, but while talking to him, being petrified like I was made of stone, I became angry about the way he manipulated me, manipulated people. I couldn’t look around but I could hear the Faun howling in pain, I could hear them lamenting their fallen. He didn’t care. He pursued his goal to convince me with a single mindedness that made *me* sick.”

“Perhaps for a son of god these things are only dust

in the wind.”

“They shouldn’t. They weren’t for us, because even we cared. We choose our target to inflict the necessary amount of damage to restore order and nothing more. We were very methodical about it, never striking from anger but with a clear goal. The Witch was a cool calculator. But when he talked to me ... I could hear our victims calling out for him, I could remember hearing these words before. Every village that we raided had called to him, but he had not responded. He was too holy to get sucked into everyday struggles with his inferior beings.”

“Perhaps he just tried to let nature take its course.”

“If that was his intention, he should retreat, completely. He should make it clear that he will not help. But he does not. It’s not like in our world where public intervention of a god is not seen, here it exists. Beings become used to it, they expect him to arrive and save the day. And he deliberately upholds the faith that he will make things right. But he does not, he is a manipulator. He let the Fauns die, and more beings in the raids before.”

“Hmmm, I think he has conditioned his followers. It is far more effective if the reward does not arrive every time something bad happens ... what happened then?”

“When he asked me to follow him I flatly rejected. He was taken aback. He never expected it. He was so kindly-grandfatherly that he thought he had me swayed. But I was strong in my opinion and asked him to kill me rather than force me to serve him. He didn’t, he just went away, shaking his head in confusion.”

“And you returned to your job as lieutenant of your mistress?”

"No, not with the same intensity. I realised that both sides, the lion and the Witch, were trying to influence people into submission. I couldn't accept that, I couldn't let this happen. I never forgot how powerless I felt when I was standing in that Faun village. And I tried to find ways to give power to the people themselves. But magic has too many risks and they wouldn't prevail for more than a second against archsorcerer like the Witch and the lion ... or even against myself. So I thought about technology, but this was rare here. I found a spell to open portals and used it to import weapons from home."

"I saw your storage in the castle."

"Yes, the ones you carry, I remember them."

"How did you prevent the lion from knowing about it?"

"The castle is the property of the Witch, only she knows what happens inside, and she was busy with preparations for the battle."

"And the weapons, did you distribute them?"

"No, I found out that I first needed an army, one I could trust, so I had to built it first."

"You already build an army?"

"Only a few hundred people."

"And what do you want to do with them?"

"Give them the freedom do think for themselves, to govern themselves."

He looked at her, sadly, before shaking his head.

"I'm sorry, it will not work."

"What? Why not!?"

He remembered the mouse. "You can't make someone to think for himself. Not a person, and certainly not an army. How do you expect them to do this?"

"Once we got rid of the lion they will have no other chance but to think for themselves, take responsibil-

ity for themselves."

"It's not the lion."

"But he is their god."

"Yes, but once he is gone, they will either lament and refuse to let go of their beliefs, just modifying it, ... or they will create a new one."

"A new one? How can you create a god?"

"How do you think our gods came into existence?"

"I never thought you to be a theologian."

"I am not, but I know humans. You learn a lot if you listen, watch, make your own conclusions. If you kill the lion, even show his fur to the people ..." he shook his head "they are used to believing in a god. I am willing to bet that they will immediately create a new one."

She looked at him, smiling. "And if you loose?"

"Then I will help you kill the lion. But if I win, if they create a new god after you disposed the current one, you leave this world with me."

"Deal."

* * *

"So, how do we do it?" he asked after a while. "Just leave and return after a while?"

"No. They would search me, and find me. And if they wont, Aslan would. There is a vacuum in this world, and it drags me to fill it."

"You are not evil."

"No, but I am the remaining force here beside him. He needs an opponent. With the Witch gone I am all that is left."

"You're preaching to the choir here. Hmmm, there was a book at the castle, a magic book."

"Yes, I remember. I learnt my magic from it."

"There was a spell about time travel."

"Hmm, good idea, but I will need the book to cast it. It has been a long time since I last read it."

He looked guiltily.

"What?"

"I destroyed it."

"You did what?"

"I cast a spell to free the animals from stone. The power was overwhelming, I decided to destroy it."

"What did you do?"

"I tore out the pages and burned them."

"What about the book cover and the spine?"

"It's still there, I suppose."

She grinned and called Gron. He was surprised to see his lady talking to the very man he shot, but said nothing. He carefully listened to her orders and left.

"He will get the book."

"But it is destroyed."

"Brother, the first thing you should know about knowledge – you can't get rid of it. If the structure still stands, it will re-grow. In our world things that are destroyed will get invented again, it happened again and again over time, in this world magic re-grows. To really destroy it, you have to change the structure of the world itself, so that it may lead to other developments."

A short time later Gron appeared and humbly put the large book in front of her. "Thank you, Gron. By the way, this is my brother. Contrary to my first orders you will follow his word like it was mine." He nodded, first to her, than to him. For a short moment he wondered what would happen if he ordered Gron to kill his sister, but he decided to forgo this question. She dismissed the dwarf and opened the book.

"How could he be so fast?"

"The dwarves have connected most buildings via underground tunnels, mostly without the knowledge of their owners. They also developed impressive machines similar to our locomotives, but much, much faster."

"Interesting. I never thought machines existed here."

"They do, but deep underground. People on the surface think they are small earthquakes."

She seemed to have found the page she was looking for. She gave him an evil grin and asked: "Do you want to or shall I?"

"I ... could never do it again ... I found the sensation overwhelming."

"I imagine, you destroyed the book, after all."

"Yes."

"Do you know that the book would never intentionally hurt you?"

"No?"

"No. It's full of magic, it's even 'alive' in a sense, but it is not malicious ... it simply wants to be used."

"I thought so when I first read it, but some of these spells ..."

"They would screw with your mind, but to every spell there is an anti spell, a way to end it. The only thing you shouldn't do is try to see reality."

"Why not?"

"One of my lieutenants tried it. When I wanted to find a way to make them rational, I wanted to know what the spell would do."

"Why didn't you try it yourself?"

"I had my ... suspicions."

"So, what happened?"

"He became insane."

"Insane? But ... ah, if the world we see is just an illusion ..."

"... then the man who can see reality would be perceived as a lunatic by the ones who are blinded by those illusions."

"What did he do?"

"First he screamed, then he begged, then he became catatonic."

"Did you understand anything?"

"No, I don't even know which beings he was afraid of."

"Did you try the anti-spell on him?"

"That's the catch, you have to speak it yourself. I tried to show him the book, but it was too late, he was too far gone."

"Hmmm, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, so am I. I lost a good lieutenant when he starved to death a few weeks later."

"Why didn't you feed him?"

"We tried. He ate the food, but his body rejected it. Nothing was absorbed. When we found out about it it was already too late."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, so am I. Well, it made me a bit more careful with magic after all, although I had soon outgrown it anyway. It is nice, but in the end, it's only magic."

"Only magic?"

"I prefer to do things myself." She flexed her shoulders. "Of course, I use it when I must ..."

* * *

They ventured forward in time, not seen by the world around them. He was reminded of an H.G. Wells novel when the world changed faster and faster. They saw Gron returning, looking confused. After a while, more dwarves appeared. In their bubble outside

time, they could see them talking, running around, searching the world for her. Finally convinced that she was gone she thought they would crown a new ruler, Gron, most likely. But they did not. She soon saw that they were forming a priest caste. No single leader but a large group that planned and worked flawlessly together. She was surprised but grinned as she saw her work continuing, troops being trained for a battle against Aslan. She concentrated and moved the bubble higher and higher, passing through solid stone made transparent by the passing of time.

Rising high above the mountain they could see that the world itself had not changed. But then, with a flash, a wide forest vanished to become a barren ground. She slowed time down and reversed it until she came close to the moment everything changed. A large army had gathered in a valley, it was the lion's army. He nodded to his sister, first convinced that they were seeing the battle he had witnessed, but then they noticed that they were still in the future. And then they saw the other army. Or at least parts of it. Large numbers of dwarves, clad in armour from head to toe, were standing in long battle formations. On their flanks were creatures of the forest, hags and wolves. And they were singing and howling. From their point of view high above them, surrounded by eagles, crows and ravens, the horde looked like the ground was leaking. More than three times the amount of Aslan's army build up. The lion paced in front of his troops, trying to inspire courage.

Finally the armies attacked each other. The lion ran ahead and drew a line of destruction behind him as he cut through the dark army, vainly searching for the enemy leader to slay. But there was none ... or rather: too many. The large priesthood had taken com-

mand. Aslan could slay priest after priest, there still were more. The eagles around them made their first dive which would be their last. Greeted by thousands of thin arrows fired straight up, too light-weight to inflict damage on an armoured dwarf, but devastating to feathered skin, most were killed before they reached their own target. The lions trail of destruction was quickly closed, his tempo began to decrease. There were just too many of them, their armour too hard, their fanatical courage unweaving. Finally they closed in on him and he vanished under a mass of swords and lances.

The dwarves did not go for symbolic trophies.

The other animals of Aslan's army seemed to falter, to flee, but before they could retreat a force of equal size, dwarves and wolves, appeared behind them and encircled them. Within minutes the battle became a wild slaughter as Aslan's army was completely eradicated.

He turned to his sister. "Congratulations, sister, you win."

She gave him an angry look. "I wanted a victory, not annihilation. Let's see what happens to the world."

They moved forward through time, saw how the forest was destroyed to make coals. Large chimneys appeared from the ground until finally a large statue of herself was erected from massive metal. She saw a long trail of people bringing sacrifices to her. As the years flew by she watched the statue of herself with growing disgust, as more and more sacrifices were brought. In less than a century she had become a goddess. Soon the first blood began to flow. They had started to kill animals for her.

She slowed down the time until she could hear them talking before her statue. The robed figures talked

about following her and condemning heresy. While she was gone they had freed themselves from the chains of obedience only to use their freedom to forge them again, with much stronger and much more sinister links.

She moved forward through time just to convince herself what she already knew. The whole world followed her now, or what the priests of her religion thought she wanted. Where the lion could only be in one place at a give time, her priests and their vast underground networks allowed them to control everything. The slightest lapse of faith was punished immediately. No world she had ever seen was comparable to the oppression she was witnessing. Finally she understood the kind of faith she had helped to create. In defiance of faith they had created a religion of rationality. They conducted experiments, cultivated logical thought. But any deviation from it was punished by the new priesthood. Under the mask of rational thought a new religion had spread with her as figure, as anchor. They witnessed how children were trained in logical through, how people reacted calmly even to the greatest terrors, but while she was impressed by their calmness and their works – large cities that rose to the sky – she was appalled by the forced nature this thought was inflicted upon them. It was not a matter of choice. They did not chose it because they found this the best way to think, they did it because they knew they would be punished otherwise.

‘They never learnt to think for themselves, they are still only weak minded animals, just replacing one mode of thinking for the other.’ she thought. “This has gone far enough.” With a gesture of her hand, she stopped the flow of time and reversed it. Faster and

faster they tumbled backwards in time until they returned to the brightly lit hall.

"Well, you can lead an animal to water, but you can't make it drink." he finally said.

"Don't mock me!"

"I don't. But I am not surprised. You decided for them, but even with all your power you couldn't make them less gullible, less prone to superstition than they are."

"Perhaps with more time training under my hand ..."

"Do you really think so? You are talking about changing a whole culture. Things aren't that simple."

She thought about it. "I even win," she finally said, "I win against that arrogant bastard."

"Yes, but as you said, it's an empty victory, isn't it?"

* * *

"So what do we do now?"

She looked around. "I cannot continue my work, but if I leave, it will continue anyway. This world has to develop on its own, without our interference. One day they will see the chains they are in, and they will free themselves from it."

"And what about your army?"

"It's here ... my lieutenants, Gron, the dwarf who shot at you, Zikala, a hag who is currently brewing some potions for me, and Rooul, a wolf who recently fathered a litter, and the whole rest ... about four hundred dwarves, hags and wolves."

"Nice amount of power."

"Not enough for a direct assault yet but they are highly trained."

"Why are they all here?"

"I wanted to keep them out of Aslan's or the Witches

way until both armies have disbanded.”

“And what do you want to do with them now?”

She walked to the book. “I am going to disband them.”

“How? I don’t think they will simply leave.”

“No, I am not talking about this kind of disbanding ... there is a spell, that makes the target invincible against attacks. If I cast it, they have nothing to hurt us with, whatever they throw at us, it just goes through our bodies. Hands, claws, swords, spears ...”

“You want to kill them?”

“It was my mistake. I have converted them, I have trained them. They are good, better than they should have become, and I can’t take the training, the knowledge, away from them.”

She concentrated for a moment. “I have closed the entrances and exits to this system. They can not escape. Will you help me clean my house?”

“Are you talking about taking four hundred lives?”

“I am talking about responsibility. I will do it myself but it will be quicker if you help me. So, will you?”

He nodded, thinking about the destruction and oppression her followers would inflict on the future.

“Thank you. This spell will last for twelve hours, it is more than enough.”

When she cast her spell, he felt energy prickling through him. She walked to him with two dangerous looking sabres. “Here. No need to waste bullets.”

“I don’t know how to use them.”

“It’s easier than you think, and don’t worry, you have enough targets to get better with it. Just conserve your strength – and get out of your clothes first, it’s gonna be messy.”

She was right. As she got her own weapons and they started to kill her followers, he realised that they

themselves could not be hurt. The enemy weapons didn't touch them. What he did not deflect passed right through him. A wolf suddenly appeared through his breast, having jumped at him from behind. He quickly dispatched him.

It was a brutal business, while he had no qualms about killing the dwarves it took him a while to get used to killing hags. They might be evil witches but nevertheless it was difficult to slay old women, even if they were all ugly as hell. Some tried to use glamour spells but they soon found out that even naked he was not interested in any of them, not with his body and the two sabres covered in blood. They did not have the time to regret their mistake or use other spells. While they might be talented potion brewers, their skills in close-quarter-combat with magic or steel were nearly non-existent. Strangely, the wolves were the hardest for him to kill. He had not forgotten what their kind had done at the beaver dam, but he still regarded them as useful animals. They were savage, yes, but necessarily, given a normal environment and normal prey. Speaking or non speaking animals, he had the feeling he was punishing them for something they couldn't comprehend. It wasn't until one of them screamed, "Traitors! I should have fought with the Witch!", that he made peace with the slaying of their kind. He was glad that his sister took care of the cubs.

While the army, the dwarves and hags and wolves, first howled in betrayal, he noticed that they quickly organised themselves and attacked in an otherwise extremely effective manner. But when they realised that they could not hurt their former leader and her cursed brother, they tried to flee, then to bargain, then to hide. But in the end, they were all slain.

When the last enemy, a wolf covering in a dark corner met his end, his sister closed her eyes. A few minutes later she said. "They are all dead."

"Are you sure?" he asked, while glancing around. They had quickly gotten into the practice of giving each fallen enemy another stab in a vital point. Some injured feigned death and she had said early on: "I'm doing this one time, and one time only. I'm not going to wade through this blood again, just to kill that one cheater who only plays dead." They had also found out that it was extremely horrifying for their enemies to watch them take their time for a final stab while ignoring the attacks around them. They were glad that they were underground and the exits were closed. If they had not have the advantage that their enemies had no where to run and all ended up in a dead end of a tunnel or before an unrelenting magical barrier, it would have been an endurance contest to catch all of them. This way it was more like a herding and stabbing.

"Yes, there is no one else alive here. This is still my place of power. I know I've slain my lieutenants myself, and this was the last of my troops that was left." He used his sabres to steady himself.

"Thank goodness."

"Tired?" she asked, looking over his bloody and sweaty body.

"Exhausted."

"The spell will wear of in a hour. Let's get a bath. I'm afraid we will have to do everything ourselves since" she looked at the corpses around her, "I have no servants anymore."

* * *

When they reached a wide bath that was carefully designed by the now dead dwarves in Turkish style, she led him to an adjunct room with an improvised shower. "We will do this the Japanese way," she said, activating the water that came pouring down on them, "I want to bath in warm and scented water, not in blood."

After they had thoroughly rinsed themselves they stepped into the hot water. He soon began to relax and think about leaving this world, but then he took a deep breath and dove under water. 'I like it here,' he thought, 'I really do. I haven't felt this alive since I was a little kid.'

When he resurfaced his sister swam past him, in a world of her own.

They spend a few hours just swimming and relaxing, enjoying the peace and quietness deep underground. When the last of the magic left him, he felt it, and suddenly felt vulnerable again. In all this place of blood and death, were they sure that they had forgotten no one? He could only hope so, he reflected, floating on the water. Even if something would kill him now, he did a good deed.

Finally his sister splashed some water at him. "So, what do we do now?", she asked.

"Return to our world?"

"I don't know. I was a child when I left and I am not sure if I like it there."

"After the power you had here I am not surprised."

"Not only that. It's boring. There is no magic. I tried it when I visited it a few years ago."

"To get the weapons?"

"Yes." she said, "I am sorry, I just couldn't visit you. I knew you were probably sick of worry for me, but I had to get the weapons and nothing more."

"So you took them and left?"

"Yes, but once you enter our world, magic won't work. Oh, some artefacts, yes, but not spells."

"Hmmm, so you had to live without the kicks of spell-casting."

"Oh, that, I'm long past that. You get used to it. But if we don't want to be imprisoned in that world, we have to bring some artefacts that allow us to visit other worlds."

"You have such things?"

"Yes." she left the pool. "Meet me at the entrance in half an hour. I'll get the artefacts. We have to go to the standing stone anyway, the next portal to our world is there. And do me a favour and get the magic book. You find a backpack for it in the chamber next to the hall where we met."

* * *

He found the book and the chamber without difficulty. Careful not to open the book he put it into the backpack. Returning to the hall he put his clothes and weapons back on. As he took his own backpack he stopped dead. He heard something. Claws over stone.

With quick movements he checked the submachine gun, switched the safety off, and held the grip firmly in his hand, finger on the trigger.

It was the lion who entered the hall, flanked by four large dogs whose unretractable claws gave them away. The mouse had told him about them. They were the mightiest of their breed, gifted with the best genes and friends since childhood. They had trained long and hard to become the guard of honour, if the lion would ever return. Now, after he presented him-

self at the large meeting, they went with him where ever he did. So far, the lion had ordered them away when he met with him, but he realised that now they would clash with him.

"For a moment I though you'd send your proxies alone."

"They are my guard of honour." the lion said.

"Guard of honour? Do they understand this duty?"

The dogs snarled. Cold Fang, who always marched to the lions right, seemed especially appalled by it. His gaze made clear that he'd kill the man if the lion would only allow it.

"Be careful, my guard doesn't take slights lightly."

"I didn't slight them, but they are loyal dogs who cannot judge their master, I slight you for choosing them."

The dogs grew more agitated and angry by this, fetching their teeth.

"They won't make a difference. And I warn you, they might take matters in their own hand."

"Will they? I thought they were under your command."

"They can decide on their own."

He burst into a long laugh, hard and loud. For a second the dogs seemed to prepare to attack him. He realised that the lion finally had decided to kill him. 'And he uses my idea. He isn't even creative – or was I made creative so that he can steal my ideas?' he thought. He shook his head and asked "Lion, these dogs, these loyal beyond self-respect dogs, can decide for themselves?"

"Yes."

"No. No, sorry, they can't. I've heard about them ... four dogs trained in infancy to do your bidding. They wont, they can't think for themselves. They are loyal

to your bidding, brainwashed from early on. They will do exactly what they think your will is. Nothing more, nothing less."

"You misjudge them."

"No. I don't."

The lion gave a dangerous smile. "I'll show it to you. I'll leave, and let them deal with you as they best seem fit."

She dogs curiously regarded each other as the lion left the hall.

"Did you hear this, brothers. We shall punish him."

"Yes, he wouldn't leave if we shouldn't do it."

"His slights were bad enough."

"He has insulted our master and he did not forgive him!"

"And our master himself has spread blood often enough."

"Yes." "Yes." "Yes." and "Yes.", they snarled.

He watched them talking to themselves and raised his gun. They didn't see or know what was in his hands.

"Any last words?", Cold Fang snarled, as he started advancing, still a few meters away.

"Yes.", he said, pointing the gun at him, "I'll shoot you all if any paw crosses the next floor panel."

The dogs stopped cold and looked at him. Suddenly they did seem to sense what this weapon could do. Perhaps they remembered what the lion had said in front of the Witch's castle. Unsure of themselves, they looked at the next floor panel, then at each others, then at the door, then back to the gun.

"Brothers?"

"We have no choice. He will protect us."

"For ..." Cold Fang began to shout, exploding forward. The rest of his words were lost in an explod-

ing noise, the reign of gunfire sounding in this world for the first time. He had aimed at Cold Fangs head, which was torn to pieces. Without hesitating he aimed at the mass center of the other dogs, pulling the trigger again and again in short bursts. By the time the clip was empty they were all dead. Without wasting a second he dropped the gun to the ground and grabbed the AK-47 that lay beside his backpack, pointing it at the door. He had to breath in and out for a few seconds before he was strong enough to open his backpack with one hand and grab a spare magazine for the submachine gun. Quickly he exchanged weapons and reloaded it. Half a second later he heard a quiet voice.

“What have you done?”

His eyes became unnaturally hard as he watched the lion return. “I killed them, what did you expect I’d do?” With a full clip inside and the chamber reloaded he felt secure as he held the gun trained on the lion.

“How could you? They were my loyal guard!”, the lion said, ignoring the gun with his eyes fixed on the bloody mess on the floor. A few minutes earlier this was one of the few rooms where no blood stained the floor, now this room was indistinguishable from the slaughterhouse floor in the tunnels and caverns.

“How could I? How could I? They attacked me and died screaming your name!”

The lion looked at the shattered skull of one of his former guards.

“They will be rewarded.”

“For what? Letting themselves be slaughtered?”

“They did my will.”

“So, you admit it then? They did your will, not their own?”

“They were mine, mind and flesh. My will was their

will."

"It should have belonged to themselves."

"It was mine."

"It shouldn't have been."

"Mine.", the lion said.

Disgusted, he took the backpacks and the rifle and started to leave. At the door he stopped and turned around. "You know," he said, watching the lion standing before his slaughtered guard, "I can understand that it's nice to be needed, I really do. But this is the wrong way. You're lying. You're cheating. You are causing more harm than good. And next time it might be your blood on the ground." The lion watched him leave, then slowly bend down to the torn remains of Cold Fang. His tongue touched the shattered skull, licking blood. The lion hesitated for a second, savoring the warm blood, then buried his fangs deep into the flesh of his former guard of honour.

* * *

"What happened?"

His sister was waiting for him in front of the still closed exit. She wore clothes made for wilderness and cold, and a large pouch at her belt.

"The lion was here and send his personal guard to attack me."

"That bastard. I didn't know he could come in here. Did you kill him?"

"Not him, only his guards. They attacked me, not him."

"They did his bidding, I suppose."

"Yes, but he promised me not to attack me and while he had no interest of such a vow of my own I try to return the favour as long as I can."

"And what will you do when he attacks me?"

"Then I no longer can, can't I? But why would he?"

"I assembled an army against him, I defied him, I was the servant of the Witch."

"And you're leaving ... which might be worse. We will cross that bridge when we have to."

She took the backpack with the book, opened it and put the pouch inside. "Whatever you say. But I know that lion, it can only end one way."

When she opened the entrance to the cave, they were surprised to see a large army of animals. But while Aslan brought his army with him, he was not with them at the moment, nor, were or would ever be, his former lieutenants.

Without saying a word they simply marched through them, while the animals made way for them, always switching with their gaze between them and the entrance to the cave, unsure whether to attack or to wait. "Don't worry, there will be no battle today.", his sister finally said when she had mercy on the nervous animals.

The horse with the long face looked at her. "Why not?"

"Because this is not a third army, not a new force of darkness. We killed them. All the dwarves, all hags and all wolves that were with me are dead now. Oh, and by the way, that's my way of saying that I quit, I'm leaving. Not because you beat me, or could ever beat me. I've seen a future in which I would rule it all. But I leave because I will no longer be responsible for your happiness."

There was a great rumour around the animals.

"What?" a duck finally said.

"I quit. I leave this world. If there is a way to salvation, you have to find it yourselves. I certainly won't

do it for you." his sister said as they passed the last animals.

The animals, still suspecting a trap, carefully entered that cave. A rabbit disappeared into the dimly lit corridors and returned a short time later. "She's right, it's a freaking bloodbath in here." she shrieked, her fur stained with slightly coagulated blood.

* * *

It took them two weeks to return to the standing stones. They had to tell each other much and walked slowly. She taught him the beginnings to manipulate magic and the artefacts she brought with her, he told her what happened in their world since she disappeared.

They stopped at the hag's hut who had recovered from her injuries. She was overly polite and without malice, having learnt her lesson. That his sister was far beyond her power and could burn down the hut with a gaze might also have been a pacifying influence on her behaviour.

Finally, when the standing stone came in sight, they were surprised to see Aslan's army standing there. Aslan was there too, pacing in front of it.

He checked his weapons and made sure that the AK-47 was in easy reach, while his sister cast the spell that opened the gate to their world.

"The gate will open once we get in reach, and remain so, until I close it."

He nodded and they approached the army. It remained in battle formation but did not attack. Finally they were standing in front of the lion.

"THE WITCH IS MINE!" he suddenly growled.

Some of the animals were shocked by his loud threat

and the lack of his usual courtesy, and took a step back. Even he involuntarily made a step back until he steeled himself and stepped in front of his sister.

"Sorry, but I can't let you get her."

"BE-GONE! She is MY prey!"

"She is nobody's prey, she is my sister. She may have made some bad decisions and she will leave this world with me, with or against your will."

"DO NOT THINK I WONT KILL YOU TOO TO GET HER!"

He pointed the AK-47 at him. "So, the promise will be broken today, but even so, you can only try."

The lion hesitated. He might be fast, but the distance was very close for much lead-way.

"CHILD ... DROP THAT WEAPON."

"Not a chance in hell." He said, feeling a sudden weight by the words, but it passed in an instant.

The other animals got anxious. The mouse appeared and stepped forward. "Would you really try to kill the son of a god?" she asked.

"I would ... and I will if he forces me. She is my sister. If he tries to get her, I'll kill him."

"THIS IS MY WORLD!"

He suddenly realised that the lion had become very careful. The standing stone etched at the border of his field of view, when he suddenly realised that the lion was afraid. 'He was killed here, a long time ago. He came back but only because he was killed on that stone. So, he knows dead, he can be killed. He is very powerful, but he is still a mortal.' He saw the lion again in his inner eye, in a now destroyed future, vanishing beneath a curtain of lances and blades. He took another look at his gun and the lion a few meters in front of him. What first was a threatening gesture without much chance of success now

appeared in another light. 'I could take him out. He is fast but if I know in which direction he will move I can shoot him. He knows it too. He is very angry, but also scared.'

With a grin he trained his weapon on him and put as much scorn in his voice as he could muster: "Yes, a pity you chose to walk it in the form of a lion. Powerful shape, but mortal still. Care to die?"

A loud growl was the only reply he got. The lion was furious, but he still kept his distance.

"You claim to be the son of a god. Yet, you walk as an animal, you even act like an animal. A pity. Nevertheless, you have no claim over her, and you cannot force it otherwise. We are not your subjects, we never were, and now we are leaving this world for good." He looked around at the animals, still keeping the lion in the borders of his field of view. "It was a nice display of power, but it's not enough. This gun can kill. You cannot attack me without risking that. A pity ... a pity you got stuck in your archaic form ... and thinking."

The lion growled and walked around them. He carefully kept his gun on him. The way ahead was free.

He turned to his sister, the finger still on the trigger. "Come, sister, we're leaving this world ..."

"What are you doing?" asked the mouse.

"What I have always done. What I would expect every race to do after a few thousand years conscious existence: to think for oneself, to make one's own decisions, deliberate, and to pay the price, to show up and face the consequences of one's actions. I can't live in this world any longer, I got what I came here for ... and now I'm leaving. It may be his country, but that doesn't mean, you can't make it your own, on your own terms, or that you cannot leave ... the door is al-

ways open.”

“That’s easy to say for you, you’ve got a gun. You’ve got magic. You’ve got power!” an animal cried.

“Where did this gun come from?”, he asked, “I acquired it myself. You can’t just take it and expect to stare down that.” He glanced at the lion. “I mean look at him ... it’s the son of a god, look at the power, look where he gets it from. He can do nearly everything in this land, just not now in his current form. But if he wanted to, he can flicker you out of existence in less than a heartbeat. You have to come to terms with that kind of power staring at you. You have to be able to accept that there is something more powerful than you are, that could, really, really hurt you ... painfully hurt you. And you have to be willing to hurt it back, nonetheless. Perhaps not even being able to wound it, or to inflict much pain, but to be willing to try with every cell of your body, knowing that it may be all for nothing, like a ... a single mouse fighting against a snake to protect its family. No weapon can give you that ... if you want to try, I’ve got an other gun I can lend you. But it would do you no good. You wouldn’t know how to use it, you wouldn’t be able to wield it with confidence, and you wouldn’t be able to live with the consequences. You have to learn to think for yourself. Nobody should make decisions for you. Find your own weapons, forge them, learn to wield them, then, and only then, will you be free.”

“But live without a God? How can we live without his protection and guidance?” a sheep cried.

“Protect yourself. Protect each other. Plan ahead. It’s not that hard once you think about it, and much more secure than to invest one’s faith in a god who acts on a whim.” he said, moving to the portal. “And as for goals,” he looked at the lion, “who is he to make his

goals your own? Who are you, to submit your own agenda under that of another being? Have you no dreams for yourself? No goals of your own? No aspirations for your family ... your children and your loved ones?"

When they reached the standing stone the portal began to open, not the invisible kind that brought them to this world, but a strange one, a circle of burning blue fire. He watched his sister enter, his weapon still trained on the lion. Finally she was gone and he took a last look at the mouse. "Mouse, do you want to come with me?"

She looked at him, at the lion and the other animals that were watching him, some in confusion, some in open disgust. She hesitated, then said: "No, thank you. This is my world, and I have to live in it."

He smiled. "I see. Good-bye then, mouse. You were a good travelling companion, and I consider you as a friend."

"Good-bye, friend." she said, bowing slightly.

He walked backwards, keeping the lion, the animals and the mouse in view, and entered the portal that was still burning behind him.

* * *

When they began to become distorted forms in the corridor between the worlds, the lion turned around. They weren't in his domain any more, neither he nor his father were able to reach to them now.

"Come, my children, let's meet at the old castle for a final gathering and mourn the loss of the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve to this world."

The animals were moving quietly with him. No one dared to speak about what happened just moments

ago. Suddenly the lion flexed his ears and stopped. The other animals looked at him, curiously and with a little fear.

“Why don’t you come with us, mouse?”, he suddenly growled.

From a place hidden beneath the tall grass at the portal, the small mouse climbed upon the large stone. Her voice barely carried over to be heard by the army. “I’d like to be for myself, for a moment, if you please.” The lion’s head turned sharply, his voice an angry growl. “You want, what?”

“I’d like to think about the things he said.” the mouse began, addressing the army as a whole, “At first I stayed with him because I thought I could bring him to accept out Lord, but I was wrong. He was not to be convinced. I hated him for it – why wouldn’t he see the truth? But then, while watching him, I began to see that perhaps he was right. There might be different points of view instead of an absolute truth. And I began to think that ...” Quick as a lightning and much faster than seemingly possible for a creature as large as the lion, he has crossed the distance to the mouse and, with a swift and easy flicker of a mighty paw, killed the mouse in one stroke, severing her in different parts that lay bleeding on the stone.

“Never ...” began the lion, as he turned around. Facing the torn body of the mouse and his army, himself trembling with rage while his followers shivered with naked fear, he shouted: “NEVER ...”

But before he could speak any further, a strange sound rang, like an explosion, loud and short, but strangely distorted.

The animals, both sons and daughters of a mere mortal herd, and the towering son of a god, turned their heads in reflex and glimpsed a streak of blue

fire emerging from the portal at an incredible speed. Faster than the lion could jump something reached his skin and buried itself in his body with merciless force. The lion seemed to be surprised for an instant, as his internal organs were torn apart by the unrelenting, tiny piece of metal and a part of his spine was smashed into million pieces. His hindquarters sacked down onto the grass like a bag of iron, as he stared unbelievably at the form which emerged out of the portal.

The man with the gun carefully kept his distance, pointing it at the mortally wounded lion. As he glanced down at the torn mouse, his face hardened. While the other animals watched in sheer terror, he aimed at the lion, switched a lever and pressed the trigger. The mighty lion seemed to become alive as a swarm of bullets entered his body and danced around inside it. But with muscles torn and sinews cut it was empty, undirected movement. In a matter of seconds the mighty body was reduced to a bloody pulp, covered by large chunks of blood red fur. Soon, the grass around him was deeply soaked in blood. When the magazine was empty he discarded the clip and put in a fresh one. The other animals gasped in terror as he emptied another clip in the lion. And another. And another. When he had no more bullets for the rifle he walked to the bloody mess on the ground and rammed the barrel of the gun in it. For a moment he was still, trying to calm himself. Finally he looked around. He carefully bent down and gently lifting the pieces of the mouse's torn body. His sister watched from the portal entrance as he put the remains into his breast pocket and returned to her.

She nodded sadly, and they began to enter to corridor again.

"But why, why did you kill him?" one of the herd suddenly screamed. "He was the son of a god!" barked another. "He has always protected us." "Haven't you always said that no one should make decisions for others?" "Yes! You said so." "How could you kill our God ...?" "You had no right to intervene in our faith!" "You were almost gone, why did you turn back?" "Oh, how could you do it? Why did you kill him?", the whole herd wailed as one and screamed with tears of loss, hatred and fear.

From the portal, far away but still with great force, a voice carried over, for everyone clear to hear:

"I couldn't care less for the lot of you, or your religion, but that bastard killed my friend."

* * *

The return of his sister to their world raised a lot of questions, but they quickly escaped them. She was restless and soon went to other worlds. At first he went with her, until their ways parted and he travelled alone. After spending years and years in different worlds, he returned to his own, finding that he had not aged in the other worlds as he would have in his own. He suspected his sister did something to him without his knowledge, but he had not seen her in decades and couldn't ask her.

A few years later he moved to another city. Before he left his hometown, however, he had personally watched over the destruction of the wall. He himself had used a sledgehammer to bring the last remains down. Aslan and the Witch might be dead, or alive again, whatever immortality meant in that world, but he wanted the wall gone. His career flourished afterwards and he became well known for his studies in a

lot of different subjects.

When he was yet older, he began to write down what had happened in his 12th and 32nd year. He kept his writing secret, locked away on a storage chip in his safe. Finally he had finished his tale and he read it again. After he was through, he stopped and pondered about it. At last he edited the file one more time and began to write: 'When he comes to those who are not yet sure of themselves, those who are young, those who are weak, those who are in new surroundings, his power is strong. But if you survive without this influence, if you make your own decisions and learn from your own mistakes, you are able to resist him in the future. And nobody will hold dominion over you, you will never have to kneel in front of anyone.'

"Are you coming to bed? I am so waiting for you." a female voice sounded from the bedroom.

"Yes, dear ..." he replied. He quickly wrote one final sentence before he went to the bedroom: 'Unless you want to.'

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