The Stone Gryphon, Part 1, Oxfordshire 1942

by rthstewart

Summary

In the summer of the Dawn Treader, Aslan tries to get Peter's attention. But, it's all Greek to Peter as he studies with Professor Kirke and meets unusual people, including a polygamous ethnologist, a spy, and a paleontologist with a passion for Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Part 1 of The Stone Gryphon Story Cycle, reposted from fanfiction.net.

Notes

Reposted at A03 after multi-tasking author accidentally hit the wrong button.
Digs

The Stone Gryphon, Part 1, Oxfordshire, 1942
Chapter 1 - Digs

In which Digory receives an Alarming Invitation

With gratitude and admiration to the creator of The Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis. I claim no ownership interest whatsoever in any derivative fiction I write. Any original content in my derivative fiction is in the public domain and may be used freely and without notice to me or attribution.

"Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me."
_The Last Battle, Aslan to Emeth a Calormene_

"Now, Bree," He said, "you poor, proud, frightened Horse, draw near. Nearer still, my son. Do not dare not to dare. Touch me. Smell me. Here are my paws, here is my tail, these are my whiskers. I am a true Beast."
_The Horse and His Boy, Aslan to Bree._

15 June 1942

Digs-

As I know you have heard (yes, there is pique in my writing of that), the Nazis chased me out of the Sahara. You can be sure that Rommel shall hear from me on the subject. Richard is finally back from East Africa. We've not seen you in ages, and we've not been able to tell you anything about our latest.

Imagine then my chagrinn to learn, from Copeland no less, that you are here for the summer and that you are hoarding a research assistant. Curiouser and curiouser say I, when I further learn that your student is none other one of the mysterious Pensieve's about whom you have been going on (and on, and on) about for almost two years! This is unacceptable, D.

As you have not come up to the house to see us, R and I are coming to see you and Master P. For tea. Today.

You needn't do a thing except wait, and warn Pevsnee (which I wish you would not do, but shall do anyway. You know I prefer to catch them unawares). Kwong Lee will pack us a proper Hong Kong tea. And if that prospect is not sufficient to entice you - and I know how fond you are of her buns - then you must live with the guilt that P shall perish without ever having enjoyed L's cooking. Moreover, it shall be all your fault if her excellent efforts are wasted on C and the trilobites.

Sufficiently chastized, yet? Excellent. You shall tear yourself away from the fascinating erudishions of Franciscan theology and Dunce Scotus, force P to do so as well, and spend an hour or two with us.

Yours adoreingly and admonishingly, etc.

MAR
Professor Digory Kirke, distinguished holder of the Barnett Chair in High Medieval Theology, was embarrassed to find his hand shaking slightly as he read the fine, creamy engraved stationery again. A polite throat clearing brought him back to the matter at hand and the impatient man hovering at the threshold of his College office.

"Thank you, Mr. Stevens. Would you mind running over to the library and asking Peter to join me?" He waved the note for emphasis. "Quickly?"

The porter nodded and with a crisp, "Of course, Professor," hurried out.

Digory studied the note again. Mary's scrawl was nearly illegible and completely at odds with the quality of the paper it marred. Glancing at the clock, he figured they probably had an hour, and possibly more if the Russells became distracted by something entombed, crumbling, or pickled and certainly long dead, in the Museum, which they could be counted upon to visit first. Richard and Mary would be late for their own burials, doubly so if there was a natural sciences museum between church and graveyard.

It was his own fault, really, and now this formidable introduction he had vaguely, if unrealistically, hoped to avoid was imminent. If he hadn't fairly gushed to his colleagues about the remarkable children who had stayed with him during the Blitz, he would have never aroused their curiosity. But, the Russells had noted his uncharacteristic enthusiasm and such things could not, in their view of the world, be politely ignored. Inconsistency aroused interest and demanded investigation and explanation.

Well, forewarned, forearmed and all that. Peter Pevensie had grown into a kingship and ruled for over fifteen years in Another Place before being crammed back into his present adolescent incarnation. He could probably manage a Hong Kong tea with the Russells. Nor was Digory under any illusions; for Peter, it would certainly be an interesting diversion from studying and parsing a Franciscan saint's medieval writings.

A hurried tread in the hall signaled the young man himself. Plunging into the room, it looked as if Peter had run all the way, what with blond hair askew, shirttails out, and face quite red with exertion. Between where he stood now and where he had been there were at least four flights of stairs and several hundred yards. Peter had covered the distance at an alarming speed. They would both undoubtedly hear about it tomorrow from the Theology librarian.

"Professor?" came out in a rush of heavy breath. "Stevens said you had a note. Is everything..."

"All is well, Peter. Nothing to be alarmed at." Digory brandished the card, feeling apologetic. "Catch your breath. Do you want some water?"

"No, I'm fine. What's this about?"

"We're having visitors shortly." More softly, he added, "close the door, would you?"

Peter mouthed a wordless "Ah," and did so, then swiftly moved to sit across from him in the office's extra chair, still breathing hard. The massive desk was between them. It was assumed to be oak, but such evidence was no longer visible, buried as it was under mountains of papers, manuscripts, books, lectures, calendars, and other things, important and insignificant, all jumbled together.

"This invitation, well, summons, really, just arrived," Digory explained dryly, proffering the fine card. Peter took it gingerly and then frowned in concentration as he puzzled through the scratchings.
"I'll never complain about a monk's handwriting again," he heard Peter mutter. "This isn't a test, is it?"

"Not of textual interpretation." Digory pulled himself from the chair with a protesting squeak of springs and joints. In its appointed space were the volumes on his bookshelves allotted for the Russells. He withdrew one book and an overstuffed binder.

"Digs!" Behind him he heard Peter laugh. "Professor, if I ever sent you so appalling a letter, you'd rap my knuckles. He? No, she?"

"She," he affirmed, pulling for good measure the A-C's of the Encyclopedia. "Mary Anning Russell and her husband, Richard. Digs is her unfortunate nickname for me." He juggled the three volumes back to the desk.

Peter pushed the detritus of an academic's life from one corner so that Digory could set the books down. He eyed the tomes suspiciously knowing well what they portended, "Research? For tea?"

"For the test to come," Digory corrected, returning to his squeaky chair.

Peter again perused the note. "If I am reading this correctly, Mrs. Russell has been in the Sahara? A war notwithstanding?"

Digory nodded. "And Richard or 'R' is recently returned from British East Africa, the Kenya Colony."

"Copeland?" Peter tapped the card. "He's the curator at the University Museum, isn't he?"

"Natural History Museum, yes. He holds the Lindacre Chair for Zoology."

"Aren't trilobites some sort of extinct...?" Peter's voice trailed off, questioning.

"Marine life. You can see them at the Museum."

"Of course, extinct trilobites aren't drinking 'Hong Kong tea.'"

"In this case, Mary is, I believe, referring rather unflatteringly to Dr. Copeland's research assistants, who for all we know may very well be studying trilobites."

Peter paused, stumbling briefly over the badly written and unfamiliar name. "And, Miss Kwong Lee is their cook?"

"In Chinese the surname is first. She is Mrs. Kwong."

Peter nodded and Digory knew that, having heard this once, Peter would not make the mistake again.

He handed the offending missive back over the piles of paper. "Are these errors deliberate? Mrs. Russell seems to make a point of misspelling my name."

"Mary would say that it is not her job, but that of her editor, to catch errors. The use of abbreviations is scientific convention - you spell something out the first time, and then abbreviate it thereafter. She has the habit of extending it to personal correspondence. As for your name, I'm not sure if that's her idea of humor or true carelessness. If it was Latin or Greek, and expressed in Linnaean taxonomy, I'm sure she'd be more careful." 

Peter sat back, templing his fingers - his chair did not squeal in protest. "What have you told them to
"Nothing about," even with the door closed, he mouthed it, "Narnia, to be sure. But you and your brother and sisters were extraordinary before your experiences and even more so after them." Digory leaned forward, wanting his friend and, in some unsettling way he had yet to resolve, his King, to understand. "You all are very special and I have remarked upon that to a few who are close to me, including the Russells."

"Oh." Peter did not try to deny it. And how could he? Aslan had marked Peter and his siblings and called them to do His will. They had walked with him and known him for many years. Then, he had sent them Back.

"In hindsight, I simply should have anticipated the Russells' raging curiosity." Digory gestured to the books on the desk, "They are scientists and tend to approach anything unknown as a personal challenge."

"I'd guessed something of the sort. So, you are recommending I learn a little background in advance of the delegation's arrival?"

Digory couldn't quite tell if Peter's flat tone was humorous or serious; he took it as the later. "I rather think so, yes. It might help prepare you for some unconventional thinking."

Leaning back in the chair again, he began with a caveat. "Understand that academically, the Russells and I move in different spheres so what I tell you is gleaned mostly from my personal relationship with them. Richard Russell is of the Duke of Bedford's family who are themselves longtime supporters of the British Museum," Digory explained.

"Richard is a zoologist, and after a series of Chinese expeditions, he went to Africa. As he is just back from there, I'm sure he's seen Louis Leakey. You've heard of him?"

"The anthropologist? Early humans, right?"

"Yes. He's known Leakey for years and did some early excavations with him. That binder on top has Richard's scientific papers. Richard is, as it would be said, an old East Africa hand and, before that, Our Man In China."

Peter pulled the thick binder from the stack and began leafing slowly through the abstracts and articles. Digory couldn't help noticing that the articles seemed to capture Peter's attention more intensively than medieval manuscripts. While most were innocuous enough, the possibility of having to explain a few of the illustrations and topics was an uncomfortable one. But then again, and this consideration made Digory even more uneasy, how much would he even need to explain? Peter had already been an adult and, as he continually had to remind himself, still was, school age appearance notwithstanding.

Into the hanging silence of Digory's internal deliberations, Peter finally said, "So, Doctor Richard Russell is a prolific scientist, a world explorer, related to a Peer of the Realm, and close enough to drop by for tea. Yet, he is not on faculty here?"

So much for preserving the innocence of youth. "No," Digory admitted.

Peter raised his eyes, catching Digory's own. With a hint of impatient command, he asked, "What are you hesitating to say?"

Digory needlessly cleared his throat. "Understand I say this only because I don't want you to be surprised and it would simply never occur to either of the Russells to censor their conversation for the
sake of another's sensibilities."

He knew he was only intriguing Peter all the more. Peter, to his credit, waited patiently, returning to his study of the binder in his hands. Digory still had to grope for the words. Finally, he said slowly, "I believe the reason Richard is not still curator here with his own endowed chair is because it is widely reported that he has an African common law wife."

"Really!" Peter looked up suddenly and far too enthusiastically for Digory's own comfort. "And Mrs. Russell..."

"Doesn't care a whit." So much for avoiding that issue.

"Fascinating."

"Goodness, Peter, try to curb your rather obvious curiosity. And please don't tell your parents."

"Well not Mum. Maybe father, though. And Edmund. I'll just have to tell Ed all about it. He's stuck with Eustace for the summer, and I'm having Chinese tea with world traveling evolutionists of dubious moral character."

Digory tried to scold with a severe look, but Peter just waved him off. "Don't worry. Of course I wouldn't say such a thing." He paused, and became rather stern, "Professor, I do know how to conduct myself around those who are quite different from me, and older, with all that necessarily entails. While I appreciate your sensibilities, I am not ignorant of these matters."

"Have I ever mentioned how alarming it is when you swerve from Peter Pevensie to High King in a matter of a few words?"

Peter shrugged. "We are the same person."

"Indeed you are." With a deep breath, Digory continued. "My apologies, but I am bound to flounder occasionally. I agree that thinking more as the King and less as the student will serve you in better stead here."

"As for Mary," and here Digory exchanged the book on his desk for the binder Peter held and seemed reluctant to relinquish.


"It's an account of American paleontological expeditions to the Gobi Desert in Mongolia. I want you to look at the photograph on the inset." He pointed to the page in the book. "It's the excavation team. One of them, anyway. Richard was part of it, given his China experience. He's there, the thin man on the left."

Peter studied the image, his finger marking the page.

"And on the right, do you see the little girl?"

"Yes?"

"That's Mary."

Digory saw Peter glance quickly from one side of the frame to the other, a rather disturbing and sly smile breaking on his face. "She must be…"

"Errrrm, yes," Digory interrupted. "Mary is a great deal closer to your age than to her husband's."
Trying to explain this was really making his head hurt.

"Edmund will be so envious."

"Please leave that bit out in your letter to your mother as well, if you would, Peter."

Peter's casual, knowing gesture was completely inappropriate for someone of his supposed age and background. Worse still, it was then followed up with an extremely disconcerting, "It's not at all uncommon in my experience."

Digory resolved not to learn the particulars of *those* Narnian experiences.

"But seriously, Professor, the more interesting question for me is what she was doing there in the first place. She is younger than Lucy."

With a mental sigh of relief, Digory returned to topics that were less challenging, for him at least. "Mary's father was a diplomat stationed in Hong Kong. He was instrumental in getting them into Mongolia and Mary somehow invited herself along. To explain what happened next requires another reference text."

Digory pulled the Encyclopedia toward him and opened it up to the entry. "To paraphrase, Anning, Mary, 1799 to 1847. Born to poor family, from Dorset, etcetera. One of England's first paleontologists, she excavated fossils from the sea cliffs in and around Lyme Regis. The twister, 'She sells seashells by the seashore' is attributed to Mary Anning."

"So, it's in the family so to speak?"

"Oh no," he replied, shutting the book and managing to push it away without toppling any other pile. "After trekking about the Gobi digging up remains, Mary decided she wanted to be Mary Anning. She changed her name from Wallace and has answered only to that ever since."

Peter snorted softly. "I see. An abundance of personality, then."

"I don't mean to sound censorious. I've known Mary since, goodness, before Mongolia, even. I tutored her throughout most of her school years when the family was in London. She has since excavated all over the Sahara, Arabia, and the Gobi." He gestured to the binder still in Peter's hands. "Not all the papers in there are Richard's. She's a respected paleontologist in her own right."

Peter glanced down again at the binder, looking more thoughtful. "I suppose to do such a things a woman would have to be forceful. In England, anyway," he amended.

"I recommend not mentioning that. Mary has a quite a mania on the subject – it's just one of several. She'd be happy to discourse for hours on Great Englishwomen of Archaeology and the Men Who Hindered Them, if you make the mistake of asking her."

"And then the tea would get cold. Duly noted." Standing, Peter proceeded to fulfill the obligation of every lowly student, and reshelve the books. It was remarkable how easily he could slip from one persona to another. "What do you make of the postscript, Professor?"

Digory shook his head with a frown. "It's very worrisome. Did you recognize the Latin she added?"

"Res loquitur ipsa? The thing speaks for itself?"

"Yes. Whatever is ailing Richard, Mary writes, will be obvious. East Africa is a dangerous place to travel and I can't imagine they had an easy return. They must have..."
A loud, impatient knock interrupted him, followed immediately by an irritated, and more alto then was strictly feminine, voice, "Open the damn door, Digs!"

Chapter 2 – Tetchy

*In which there are Alarming Introductions and Peter mistakenly mentions King Kong*
Digory stood and moved quickly around the desk, calling, "Mary! Do come in!"

The door swung open with such force it smacked against the file cabinet, making the glass window rattle ominously.

Mary Anning Russell swept into the room like the force of nature that she was. Her strong, long gait carried the assertiveness of one still striding across sand rather than threadbare carpet. The next moment, Digory was enveloped in a very warm, rough embrace.

"Digs!" She repeated enthusiastically. He was rewarded with a kiss on each cheek. Tall as she was, he did not have stoop at all.

"You're looking well, Mary. The Sahara agrees with you." And she was, and it did. She had pulled her blond hair back - it was longer and sun bleached almost white. Her very fair skin was a shade or two darker than her usual, although her nose was red and peeling ferociously. "You must have caused quite the stir just now, walking through campus still in your desert khakis and trousers!"

Digory looked over her shoulder. "Where's Richard?"

"Oh, he's coming along. Just getting Copeland caught up on Louis and... I say!"

Now, she was peering over his shoulder. "What is that!"

Digory turned around, catching Peter's eye as he did so. Mary must have seen him when she entered the office. She didn't miss details, and wouldn't have overlooked the adolescent leaning against the bookcase who could only be Master Pensive. For the moment though, her formidable attention was focused wholly on the Wardrobe behind him. All things considered, this small reprieve seemed beneficial. To Digory's eye, Peter looked rattled. Digory had thought Peter had been too casual about the whole thing and a first encounter with the Russells was bound to be unsettling, Narnian experiences notwithstanding.

Digory returned to his guest. "That, Mary, is from my old house." He joined her as she skirted around his desk to stand in front of the Wardrobe. "It was too large for my cottage, so I moved it here. Barely," he amended, for it had been an ordeal to get the huge thing up two flights of stairs and into his office.

"I've not seen it before," she sniffed disapprovingly, as if it was his fault she'd not inspected every Spare Oom of his home. Her reading glasses were dangling from their customary chain around her neck. Mary pulled them on and began inspecting the Wardrobe with the same intensity she afforded a Mesozoic reptile skull. She took a step back, looked over it appraisingly, and then moved closer, running her hand over the carved panels.

"It's not antique," Digory began, but she cut her hand imperiously through the air for silence.

"Obviously not." She turned for a moment back to him, her bright, brown eyes gleaming over her black rimmed glasses. "You got it...?"
"I had it made, from a tree that blew down. It's ..."

"No! Don't tell me! Let me guess..." She returned to the lustered panels, studying the burnished surface. "It's a fruitwood, isn't it? But not cherry, unless..."

"Apple," Digory confirmed. He glanced over at Peter, who remained at his silent vigil holding up the bookshelf and was still looking a bit dazed. Responding to his silent question of concern, Peter responded with a small wave of reassurance. All was well or at least improving.

"Hmmm," she murmured. "Aha! And there it is, the apple tree, right in the middle. And... Let me see. Oh! Look! Here and here!" Her hands moved quickly over the lovingly rendered relief carvings. "There are animals coming out of the ground. Pairs of them!"

She whirled around, exclaiming triumphantly, "It's a creation myth!"

Digory had to laugh. "Indeed, it is. I..."

"Stop it!" she shrieked and turned back to her study. "If it's a creation myth, where is the creator? Hmmm... The tree?" Mary continued muttering to herself. "No, that doesn't seem right." Her voice suddenly turned scornful, "And, Digs, if I find that there's a snake in here offering an apple from the Tree of Knowledge to Eve, I'm going to be very disappointed in you." She intensified her scrutiny of the Wardrobe doors again. "Alright, so no tempting serpents. In fact, no reptiles at all, which is surely a grotesque omission. But, here, a queen and king enthroned."

She paused.

"Aha!" she crowed. There are two of everything, but only one tree, and only one lion!" She spun around, grabbing his shoulder sleeves enthusiastically. "The Lion is the Creator!"

"Indeed, He is."

"So, it's an African creation story." Mary frowned. "I don't know any with lions as the Supreme Being, though. Maybe Richard does."

"Well, actually..."

Mary impatiently silenced him by shaking his arms then released him with cry, "Oh! Africa may not be right."

She turned back to Wardrobe, looking with even greater concentration than before. "I see a Lion. And Cheetahs. Dogs. Horses. Deer. And uncommonly large rabbits... No watches and waistcoats, though. But, Beavers? Yes, those are beavers, the tails of course. And these are centaurs, right? Damn. I don't think there are any centaurs in African myths. Although, perhaps it's a metaphor for North African charioteers."

Digory could see her mind cataloging every myth she'd ever learned, trying to make sense of it. But, the Wardrobe told a story she did not know.

"Hullo! What's this?"

"What?" he asked, stepping up to the panel Mary was tracing with a finger.

"This creature." Her fingers smoothed over the delicate carving. "It has a beak and wings, a tail... I've seen it before, but can't quite place it."

"Stop it!" she shrieked and turned back to her study. "If it's a creation myth, where is the creator? Hmmm... The tree?" Mary continued muttering to herself. "No, that doesn't seem right." Her voice suddenly turned scornful, "And, Digs, if I find that there's a snake in here offering an apple from the Tree of Knowledge to Eve, I'm going to be very disappointed in you."

"Alright, so no tempting serpents. In fact, no reptiles at all, which is surely a grotesque omission. But, here, a queen and king enthroned."

She paused.

"Aha!" she crowed. There are two of everything, but only one tree, and only one lion!" She spun around, grabbing his shoulder sleeves enthusiastically. "The Lion is the Creator!"

"Indeed, He is."

"So, it's an African creation story." Mary frowned. "I don't know any with lions as the Supreme Being, though. Maybe Richard does."

"Well, actually..."

Mary impatiently silenced him by shaking his arms then released him with cry, "Oh! Africa may not be right."

She turned back to Wardrobe, looking with even greater concentration than before. "I see a Lion. And Cheetahs. Dogs. Horses. Deer. And uncommonly large rabbits... No watches and waistcoats, though. But, Beavers? Yes, those are beavers, the tails of course. And these are centaurs, right? Damn. I don't think there are any centaurs in African myths. Although, perhaps it's a metaphor for North African charioteers."

Digory could see her mind cataloging every myth she'd ever learned, trying to make sense of it. But, the Wardrobe told a story she did not know.

"Hullo! What's this?"

"What?" he asked, stepping up to the panel Mary was tracing with a finger.

"This creature." Her fingers smoothed over the delicate carving. "It has a beak and wings, a tail... I've seen it before, but can't quite place it."

"Stop it!" she shrieked and turned back to her study. "If it's a creation myth, where is the creator? Hmmm... The tree?" Mary continued muttering to herself. "No, that doesn't seem right." Her voice suddenly turned scornful, "And, Digs, if I find that there's a snake in here offering an apple from the Tree of Knowledge to Eve, I'm going to be very disappointed in you."

"Alright, so no tempting serpents. In fact, no reptiles at all, which is surely a grotesque omission. But, here, a queen and king enthroned."

She paused.

"Aha!" she crowed. There are two of everything, but only one tree, and only one lion!" She spun around, grabbing his shoulder sleeves enthusiastically. "The Lion is the Creator!"

"Indeed, He is."

"So, it's an African creation story." Mary frowned. "I don't know any with lions as the Supreme Being, though. Maybe Richard does."

"Well, actually..."

Mary impatiently silenced him by shaking his arms then released him with cry, "Oh! Africa may not be right."

She turned back to Wardrobe, looking with even greater concentration than before. "I see a Lion. And Cheetahs. Dogs. Horses. Deer. And uncommonly large rabbits... No watches and waistcoats, though. But, Beavers? Yes, those are beavers, the tails of course. And these are centaurs, right? Damn. I don't think there are any centaurs in African myths. Although, perhaps it's a metaphor for North African charioteers."

Digory could see her mind cataloging every myth she'd ever learned, trying to make sense of it. But, the Wardrobe told a story she did not know.

"Hullo! What's this?"

"What?" he asked, stepping up to the panel Mary was tracing with a finger.
"It's a gryphon," Peter finally piped in from his silent post at the bookcase.

Mary spun around, now acknowledging him when she could no longer pretend to ignore him. "Oh! Hello!" She strode forward, offering her hand. "Mary Anning Russell."

Peter extended his hand, and endured a vigorous shake. "Peter Pevensie. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Russell."

Goodness. He hid it well, but Peter seemed more unnerved than Digory had expected.

"Mrs. Russell is my disapproving mother-in-law. I'm Mary." She shook Peter's hand one last time for emphasis.

"Very well, Mary."

"Gryphon, you say?" She grabbed Peter by the sleeve and pulled him over to the Wardrobe.

Mary pointed at the carving. "That?" she demanded.

Peter made a pretense of studying it, but Digory well knew there was no need.

"Yes, it's a male and female Gryphon. Typically they are shown with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion. Some renderings, like this one," Peter moved his fingers over the carving, "have feathers and talons on the front legs. Others would show a lion's paws, front and back." With the poised explanation, Digory was relieved to see Peter's natural authority asserting itself. Whatever had unsettled him had passed or been duly suppressed.

"A lion and an eagle?" She took a step back, crossing her arms across her front. The reading glasses magnified her eyes enormously, giving her the appearance of a deranged owl. "Two creatures typically associated with a king, aren't they?"

"Indeed, they are," said Digory, injecting himself back into a conversation before it turned uncomfortable. "References to gryphons go back as far as the Babylonians."

"Do they dance the Lobster Quadrille?"

Receiving only open mouthed gapes in response to this bizarre question, Mary snapped, "Don't look at me like that! Alice meets a Gryphon! Down The Rabbit Hole!"

"Oh, of course," Digory conceded. Peter, he saw, was trying valiantly to not laugh. The way Mary could veer from one topic to another was a testament to the speed of her mind and tongue. It was, however, daunting for the uninitiated. Bringing the subject back to more comfortable ground, Digory continued, "Apart from Carroll, gryphons show up most reliably in Greek writings as guardians of gold."

"Really? Gold? Where?"

"I don't know. Do you, Peter?"

Peter shook his head. "I'm not familiar with the mythology of gryphons."

Digory would have to remember to congratulate Peter on his dry dissembling. He wasn't lying, exactly, just leaving a great deal more unsaid – such as his own more personal experience with gryphons Down The Rabbit Hole.

"Do you have an interest in gryphons, Mary?" Digory finally asked into the welling silence as he and
Peter waited for her to complete her earnest contemplation.

"I don't know. Or, I mean, I may have one now. It's the beak, and that it's a tetrapod with wings, making it more accurately a hexapod. Rather like some dragon renderings, but clearly not draconic. It's odd, and it's reminding me of something other than Alice, and I'll just have to think about it some more. Raid the library. Or get a student to do it for me." With that, she broadly winked at Peter.

"Mary..." Digory warned. "No poaching on university assistants."

She sighed with an air of exaggerated resignation. "Oh very well," and began fishing in the satchel slung over her shoulder. "I just want to make a few notes," she announced pulling a notebook and pencil from the bag.

"I can tell you that I got that image from a twelfth century bestiary I found in the classics library here. If I find the reference in my notes, I'll pass that along to you."

"Thanks, Digs," Mary muttered scribbling in her notebook. A few scratches more and she snapped it shut.

"So, how goes the study of the dread Dunce?"

"Well," Digory began, resolved to ignore her usual epithet and stepping away from the Wardrobe, "we..."

"I was asking the question of Peter. He's more likely to give me an untarnished answer."

Peter was in the process of pulling his own chair out to make more space in the room. "Mary? Would you like a seat?"

"Oh, for the moment, but we'll have to sit on the floor for tea."

Digory must have imagined the cloud of sand that seemed to puff out when she plopped down inelegantly into Peter's vacated seat.

Peter retreated to the bookshelf as Digory found his own squeaky office chair again.

"Well?" Mary demanded again, speaking directly at Peter. "And stop with meaningful looks at one another!"

"If you mean the Blessed John Duns Scotus, the work has been a bit frustrating," Peter admitted.

"Aha!" Mary pinned Digory with a fierce glare. "Not that I take particular issue with Scotus' whole reasoning from effect to cause. I also certainly agree that we can come to know God apart from revelation. But, I have serious concerns about his Immaculate Conception argument. I mean really, it's all very fine and well for her, but procreation without sex is a rather difficult trick for other women to emulate, yes?" Here, she had to pause for a breath – thankfully not elaborating further on the last point. "And I really can't follow Dunce's seven part Proof for the Existence of God beyond Step 5D."

Declining the implicit challenge to debate theology, Peter continued calmly. "I meant that we are having difficulty locating some of Scotus' works that should be in the Oxford Franciscan library."

"Have you looked on your own desk, Digory?" Mary asked sweetly.

"Unfortunately, yes," he admitted brusquely, pique rising. Digory did not appreciate this ongoing
criticism of the status of the paperwork on his desk. It was his desk. He knew where everything was
that he needed, and usually could find it when he needed it. He didn't particularly care if others could
not.

Besides, Mary was in no position to condemn him. He looked pointedly at her. "We might have used
the older copies in my personal collection but they, regrettably, are at the bottom of the Amazon."

Mary at least had the good grace to look embarrassed.

"Amazon?" Peter asked. "Why would Duns Scotus' Questions on Metaphysics be in Brazil? In a
river?"

"Now Digs!" Mary huffed. "It was an accident! Ten years ago!"

"This, Peter, is why you must never loan a book to Mary. She has a habit of taking them to the far
flung reaches of the globe and feeding them to piranhas and giant snakes that swallow crocodiles
whole."

"Are you finished, Digs?"

"Are you finished criticising my desk?"

"Yes," Mary muttered meekly.

"Piranhas?" Peter asked. "Could we just return a moment to…"

"No!" Mary said. "It's very embarrassing and always puts Digs in a surly mood."

Digory had to agree. "Peter, you should ask Polly about it, as she was there. And as we shall not
mount an expedition to retrieve what is certainly ruined, we have attempted to locate the manuscripts
missing from the library here."

He suddenly had a dreadful thought. "Mary, did you remove any of Scotus' works from the
Franciscan collection?"

She snorted. "Really, Digs, of course not."

That was a relief. "In any event, it took Peter the better part of two weeks, but we did eventually
learn that some of the Franciscan library, including a number works by Scotus and Ockham, have
been loaned out."

"Ockham! Now that's a loss I do care about," Mary said. "Any idea where they went?"

"To the British Museum," Peter replied gloomily.

"Oh dear," Mary responded. She obviously saw the problem.

"Indeed," Digory echoed the expressed pessimism. "I understand many of the collections have been
hidden until the War ends."

"It's not really secret," Mary supplied helpfully. "Forsdyke put a lot of it in underground storage in
Bradford. Other material is scattered with FOMs."

"FOMs?" Peter asked.

"Friends of the Museum," Mary and Digory both responded at the same time. Mary continued,
"Richard and I have a few things."

"From the British Museum?" Peter asked, wonderment in his tone. "Really?"

"Well, for your sake, I'm sorry but we don't have anything from the Oxford Franciscans. Forsdyke would know better than to give something like that to us."

"If you are as bad about returning historical artifacts as you are about returning library books, I'm surprised Forsdyke gave you anything, Mary."

"How right you are! Possession being nine-tenths, of well, possession." She chortled at her own cleverness. "It's not as if he gave us the Elgin Marbles, either." As a too casual to be unintentional afterthought, Mary added, "Although some of it is nearly as large. We've had a devil of a time fitting it all on our grounds."

Peter looked a bit askance and glanced his way for more reliable confirmation. Digory shrugged and was curious himself.

"What do you have?" Peter finally asked.

"A couple tons of fossilized dinosaurs in plaster jackets," Mary replied nonchalantly.

"Dinosaurs?" Peter echoed. "Like those big skeletons in the museum? And the lizards that are in the film, with the big ape?"

"Do not get me started on King Kong!" Mary spat with such vehemence, Peter took an alarmed step backward into the bookshelf.

"My apologies, Mary," Peter said hurriedly, "I did not mean to give offense and certainly not to a scientist of such stature as yourself. My own understanding of these things is quite limited."

Mary blinked and then smiled sunnily. "Goodness, Digs! Such a well mannered and intelligent student you have!"

"And one who is skilled at smoothing the too easily ruffled feathers of tetchy paleontologists," Digory added.

"He also seems to understand that flattery works very well on egoists such as myself."

"He is standing right here," Peter reminded them with a good natured acerbity. "And would like to hear more about why you have dinosaurs in plaster jackets?"

Pride mollified and humor returned, Mary launched into one of her manias with gusto. "When you find a fossil in the field, you first try to preserve it by wrapping it and the surrounding rock in plaster, and transporting the whole of it back to a lab. It takes years to study, so material tends to accumulate. There are blocks that went straight from the field to museum storage with the sand still on them from the Gobi and Tendaguru. Well, at least I think they're from there, we're not really sure."

"And when the War began," Peter led, trying to steer Mary back to the point.

"Like orphans, the poor things were evacuated to our barn, carriage house, and outbuildings. We couldn't have a dance if we wanted to, what with the ballroom filled with plaster blocks going back to the 20's." Mary sighed with an air of smug satisfaction. "No one knows what's in them and it will take years to find out. Except right now they are mine and they aren't going anywhere, at least until the War ends."
"The first person to describe a new specimen gets the discovery credit, doesn't she?"

"Naming rights, as well, Digs. Which is why..." and here she moved in like a predator, "I think Peter would be put to much better use excavating plaster, rock, and bone with me and Richard, than excavating the manuscripts of the Dread Dunce!"

Peter never did enunciate the polite declination already forming. What happened next, Digory was never able to explain or recall clearly. It happened too quickly. There were footsteps in the hallway and he saw Peter turn toward the sound as Mary, too, twisted in her seat. Then Peter was no longer at the bookshelf but moving, very fast, and not stopping until he had effectively blocked the person at the door from entering the office.

"What on earth," Mary exclaimed, rising at the same time as Digory realized what had happened. Peter had created a barricade, with Mary and Digory behind him, and the intruder in front of him. Except, of course, it was not an intruder.

"Hello, Asim." Digory said quickly, also standing, and hoping to defuse the suddenly very awkward situation. "It's good to see you again. Peter, I'd like to introduce you to Asim bin Kalil, a friend of the Russells."

Peter remained rooted, stiff and wary. Which was reasonable, Digory had to admit. With the full, peppery beard, darkly tanned countenance, and long gray robes, to Oxford English sensibilities, Asim was even more unusual in appearance than Mary.

"God Lord, Asim," Mary snorted in disgust. "Can't you even enter a room without alarming every normal person in it?"

"Normal?" Asim questioned, quiet irony lacing his tone. His accent was nearly unnoticeable, with barely a trace of his native Arabic. "I perceive no such normality here." Fixing upon Peter, he said softly, and very seriously, "You tried to draw on me."

Oh no.

"And you tried to enter a room armed when you know full well that none of us is," Peter responded, promptly and unrepentant.

Mary sputtered, "What?"

Asim was standing very still, his hands away from his sides. Digory immediately understood that it wasn't necessarily Asim's unorthodox appearance that had alarmed Peter. His own eyes saw nothing more unusual than the obvious. But, Peter had a far keener insight. Peter had recognized Asim for the man he was, had expected adherence to some unspoken protocol and, when that had not been followed, had responded instinctively, and as his training dictated.

"Peter," Digory began. "This is just a misunderstanding..."

"Professor, Mary, begging your pardon, but Mr. bin Kalil and I understand each other perfectly well and we will resolve this matter between ourselves."

"You are correct, Mr..." Asim began, speaking directly to Peter.

"Peter Pevensie."

"I congratulate you on your perceptiveness, Mr. Pevensie," Asim said, bowing his head slightly. Digory detected no condescension, which led him to the further very troublesome worry that Asim
undoubtedly understood Peter as well as Peter understood him. "What would you have me do?"

"You know what you must do, sir. Disarm, or give me one of your two knives."

Asim's eyebrows rose even further. But he did not deny it, either.

"Oh for God's sake!" Mary cried. "This is ridiculous with the two of you in a hissing standoff like warring tomcats."

If it were possible, Digory could see Peter's back stiffen even further. Asim did not even deign to respond to her. He was focused entirely upon Peter.

"Very well."

Digory flinched as Asim pulled a long knife from the front of his robe. He set it on the top of the file cabinet at the door. Digory was not quite sure from where the other, shorter knife came. He assumed Peter saw the quick unsheathing.

With Asim's placement of the second knife on the cabinet, the air came back into the room. Peter stepped forward, outstretching his hand to Asim. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. bin Kalil."

Peter did not apologize for his conduct; nor did Asim.

Asim slowly took the offered hand. "I am always glad to meet friends of Professor Kirke, Mr. Pevensie."

"Peter."

"And I am Asim." He turned toward a still scowling Mary. "Richard is on his way from Dr. Copeland. Would you like me to get the tea from the car?"

"Only if you promise not to rearm from some secret stash and subject us to another stupid ordeal."

"That would be futile and dishonest," Asim replied blandly.

"Would you like some assistance?" Peter offered. "I admit to being quite curious about Mrs. Kwong's tea."

"Thank you."

"Not if the two of you are going to get into a brawl on the way downstairs," Mary interrupted sourly.

The quizzical looks on both Asim and Peter's faces were so similar, Digory choked back a laugh. Plainly the thought had occurred to neither of them. Mary saw it too, and covered her face in her hands in mock horror. "Out," she muttered. "Both of you," and turned her back on them.

So blinded, Mary did not see the odd interplay between Asim and Peter as they negotiated the exit through the office door. Digory observed, but did not overhear, the murmured exchange. Whatever was said, it was resolved with Asim preceding Peter out of the office. Interesting.

There were further steps and voices echoing in the hallway. Mary hissed, "You read my P.S.?"

Digory nodded but, even forewarned, he was not prepared for Richard Russell's yellowed and gaunt appearance when he hobbled into the office.

"Richard! It's wonderful to see you again. Welcome!" As his old friend limped through the doorway,
Digory felt his hearty greeting could not have been more out of place. Really, though, what else could be said? I'm sorry to see you've had malarial fever and a cure that is killing you?

"Good to see you!" Richard offered a tremored handshake and Digory fought the urge to glance over to see Mary's reaction. "Just met your mysterious student in the hall now... Now, Digory, that's a splendid piece!"

Richard's attention to introductory niceties lasted no longer than Mary's and as his wife before, he immediately focused on the Wardrobe.

"It's..." but now both Mary and Richard shushed him.

Richard shuffled over and gave the carved doors a thorough once over. "Apple is it?"

"Of course you'd get that on the first go," Mary muttered fondly, coming to her husband's side. Digory did not think the hand she placed on Richard's arm was solely for affection.

"You thought it was African, didn't you?"

When Mary clamped her mouth shut, Digory was compelled to respond for her, "Yes, she did."

"Only at first," Mary huffed.

"The closest is the Fans myth where the tree of creation sows the plants, animals, and fish. But the Fans begin with a Trinity of leopard, elephant and monkey, and you have a Lion." Richard said flatly. "Interesting. I've not seen that before." Richard took another step back, looking at the whole of the Wardrobe over the top of glasses nearly identical to Mary's. "It is your own story, isn't it, Digory?"

Digory did not know how to answer that. Mary and Richard were both looking at him expectantly.

The silence lengthened. And then stretched out still more.

"See, Richard? Digory has that expression, the one that he uses when he tries not to talk about his Secret."

Secret? Oh dear. Digory wished to neither stammer nor lie outright and was finding both very difficult to accomplish. He collected himself. "It's not really my own story..."

"It's the creation of Somewhere Else," came Peter's rescuing injection from the doorway. Asim was next to him. They were both carrying fragrantly promising hampers.

Digory saw Mary's eyes narrow and aim straight for Peter. "Like Wonderland? Or Faerie? With gryphons, mock turtles, and uncommonly large rabbits carrying pocket watches?"

"And Lions and Unicorns," Peter added cheerfully, truthfully, and not at all helpfully. "So how is a Hong Kong tea different from the usual? Apart from the absolutely amazing smells?"

Chapter 3 - Tea and Sympathy
In which Peter starts an argument about camels and there is Inappropriate Conversation
"This is the best use for stockings ever invented," Peter exclaimed, stirring his own glass of milk tea. "Although, if Mrs. Kwong is using actual stockings, my sister will be outraged."

"It's not really a woman's stocking," Richard began, and then corrected himself midway. "Actually, I don't know that for certain in these austere times."

"Lee would beat you over the head with her cleaver for suggesting such a thing," Mary retorted, in defense of her cook.

"You would gladly sacrifice your stocking ration coupons to assure a properly filtered glass of milk tea," Asim observed.

"Are stockings rationed? Goodness, I don't even know. Asim, how is it that you are more knowledgeable about this than I am?"

"Because the matter falls under logistics and procurement?" Peter ventured the query in such a way that Digory thought something more subtle was implied, which Asim evidently understood as he responded with a small nod of assent.

"Digs, Peter, while we have conclusively established my lack of expertise on the subject, I can confidently theorize that this fine filter has been in use far longer than any pair of women's stockings." To emphasize the point, Mary poked with her chopstick the dark soggy dark mass resting in a bowl next to her on the floor.

They were all encamped in the office. Digory declined to join Mary, Peter, and Asim on the floor. Richard had reluctantly taken the other chair, the indignity sweetened by Mary situating herself at his feet and leaning against her husband's legs.

"More fung zao, dear? Mary held up a chicken foot and Richard bent down to pluck it from her chopsticks.

"Thank you."

Peter had been steadily working his way through the assortment of bau, gow and other delicacies of Kwong Lee's cooking with greater gusto than Digory could credit to a 16-year old's appetite alone. The dried fish flavorings and chicken feet were too novel for Digory's own conservative tastes. As he had enjoyed more conventional fare with them in the past, he did wonder if the Russells had brought today's exotic offerings as a challenge to what they had assumed would be the typically bland English palate. If so, they had been disappointed. Presumably due to adventurous Narnian culinary diplomacy, Peter had enthusiastically embraced every dish, pronouncing every oddity better than the last. Digory did concede that Mrs. Kwong worked miracles with the tired old staples of the War Victory Garden.
"Now, how do you say it, again?" Peter asked gesturing to his own glass.

"Well, there are several terms," Richard began, as Mary interrupted "Dai pai dong nai cha."

"That's not right, Mary. Dai pai dong is where it's served, not what it is."

"I'm the one who lived there, Richard, and that's what we called it."

"I did as well and dai pai dong are the foodstalls."

"Alright, call it si wa nai cha."

"I thought it was yuenyeun," Asim injected, confusing it further.

"That has coffee in it," Richard corrected. "I thought it was cha chow."

"No, that's the sweet one," Asim contradicted.

"If I may?" Peter interrupted hurriedly. "I really was just wondering what the word was for tea."

"Cha" answered Mary, Richard, and Asim.

Peter held up his milky glass. "So, if cha is tea, why is this dai pai dong nai cha, si wa nai cha, cha chow or yuenyeun?"

"Oh of course those aren't cha," Mary laughed, "Cha doesn't have milk in it."

"Oh, but of course," Peter mimicked, with good natured sarcasm.

"You seem to have an ear for language, Peter," Asim commented.

"Not really, but thank you for saying so. I try to learn enough of someone else's to be polite. What about you, Asim? I imagine you have picked up several."

Asim nodded. "My Turkish is not especially proficient now and I know only enough Italian to swear convincingly, which has been rather fortunate the last year or two. Unfortunately, my German and French are another matter."

Hearing Mary and Richard grumble, Digory looked over at them. Mary directed him back to Asim, "Ask him. We shouldn't say anything about it."

Peter too looked to Asim with polite interest.

Asim took a delaying sip of tea. "Mary and Richard are complaining because the War Office, well I assume it is the War Office as it has subsumed everything else, but I don't really know. Whoever it is, I have been placed under travel restrictions. They do not wish me to leave England for the time being."

Digory felt a seeping outrage. "That seems uncalled for." What little he knew of Asim's history and service did not warrant such treatment. Peter, who knew even less, appeared equally disturbed.

"It is not quite as you might think," Asim explained in his quiet way. "Suffice to say, persons with my own particular faculties are very useful right now. The Office wishes for me to be available to them."

Oh.
So, not too little trust, but rather too much dependence.

"People who are both talented and trusted are precious in a campaign," Peter finally offered.

"And it's damn inconvenient for the rest of us," Mary griped.

"Well, Mary, what took you to the Sahara this time?" Digory asked, hoping to find less awkward ground. "Any new discoveries?"

"It was Asim who went, doing whatever it is he does. I just invited myself along. I'm still looking for crocodiles."

Silence greeted that extraordinary statement. Discretion permitted no comment whatsoever as to her first sentence. As to the second, Peter could not long tolerate the suspense.

"Crocodiles?" Peter repeated. "In the Sahara? Don't they need water?"

"Extinct ones," Richard explained, nudging Mary with his knee. "Pay her no mind. Mary is just being deliberately obscure to make it all sound more mysterious. As to the water, there have been a number of finds in the Sahara that suggest it once supported aquatic life."

The possibility was quite intriguing. "Could a continent change that much?" Digory asked. "Turn a sea to the largest desert in the world?"

"Over geological time, certainly. The data even now allow us to theorize that much," Richard mused, philosophically shredding the last of his chicken feet. "Look at the east coast of South America sometime and the west coast of Africa and you'll see they fit together like a giant puzzle. You'll find similar fossils in both places as well. There's no good theory yet for what could cause an entire continent to drift and so change."

"I found some large teeth and scales, but didn't have time to do anymore than scout around where we'd been before." Mary cast a scowling look at Asim. "Then, Asim was there with the convoy and I had to go."

"I could not count on Mary finding her own way out. Left on her own, she would still be there. Nor could we leave her with a truck, as she is wholly untrustworthy with anything mechanical."

She shrugged and artfully popped a bit of a roll into her mouth. "I do prefer camels and horses."

"They respond far better to you as well," Asim agreed.

"But surely you don't prefer camels to horses?" Peter asked.

A dispute erupted at once, with Mary, Richard and Asim all jostling to make their points heard. "Of course not, except..." "It depends on the terrain." "Stronger." "Smarter." "Nastier." "Stupid, vile."

Digory really wasn't surprised that the three all had such ardent opinions on the subject. They did not have moderate opinions on anything. But, camels? Were camels really worth such animated debate?

"Clearly, I have blundered into a well-traversed argument," Peter cut in through the raised voices.

"Well then, Peter, since you dared impugn the integrity of one of the most ingeniously adaptive creatures in all of modern creation, what is your opinion?" The words were challenging, but Richard's tone was jesting. Digory hoped Peter took the query in the spirit it was intended.

Peter looked up at Richard from his seat on the floor. "I would not presume to second guess God's
creative vision of any good creature," he paused, "except perhaps on the matter of mosquitoes."

"And fleas," Mary added. "I can't abide fleas."

"Or leeches," Asim included.

With a nod to these amendatory statements, Peter continued, "I will say, however, that while horses have bitten me, kicked me, landed upon me, stomped on me, thrown me from their backs, and viciously swished me with their tails, no horse has ever spit upon me."

"And a camel has?" Asim asked, rather too pointedly for Digory's comfort.

Had there been camels in Narnia? A talking camel. What an appalling thought. Digory was sure he had not experienced any, but had Peter? Digory caught Peter's eye. Carefully.

"I did not say that a camel had ever spit on me. I only said that a horse never has done so." Peter paused for a deliberate bite of a turnip cake. "So why do camels spit? Richard, is there some evolutionary benefit to it? And come to think of it, why don't horses spit?"

All but the crumbs were left. True to his talent for "procurement," Asim produced dried apricots and sugared dates to conclude the tea.

Peter was leaning happily against the bookcase, cradling the sweets in his palm. "I've not had dates in…" Digory saw Peter correct himself quickly. "Well, it's been some time."

Richard, however, seemed to have caught the hesitation and perhaps the incongruity. "Where did you say you are from, Peter?"

"I don't believe I did, Richard. But, in fact, I'm from Finchley."

"Have you traveled?" Digory could see Mary and Asim now redirect their attention as well to Richard's questioning.

Peter made to chew his date rather contemplatively. "My parents have taken one of my sisters to America, so she's the one traveling this summer. For the duration, I am here with the Professor, my exam tutorials, and searching for the Blessed Duns Scotus' 1298 *Ordinatio* lectures, which the British Museum has hidden."

Digory concealed an inward smile as Mary and Richard abandoned their inquiry into Peter's "travels" to pounce upon where Forsdyke might have stored Scotus' missing lecture notes. Peter was allowed to enjoy the last of his sugared dates in peace.

Asim huffed with quiet exasperation at Mary and Richard's bickering. "I believe I have heard Professor Kirke say that you have another brother and sister? Are they traveling?"

"Oh no, they are stuck, quite unhappily too, with my aunt and uncle in Cambridge."

"Cambridge, eh?" Richard said suspiciously, suddenly breaking into the conversation.

"Oh, Richard, I'm sure Peter's relatives are not narrow minded, dull, priggish, mathematicians."

"Actually," Peter began, and the look Digory saw blossoming on his face was pure, adolescent, mischievous glee.

"What Peter means to say," Digory interrupted, "is that his aunt and uncle are…"
"Not mathematicians!" Peter at least had the manners to look slightly embarrassed as the others laughed. "Sorry, Professor."

Digory frowned, but let the matter pass. Harold and Alberta, for all their pretensions of modernity, really were ghastly.

"Speaking of Cambridge, I did see the Leakeys while I was in Africa."

"Mary mentioned that. How are Louis and Mary?"

Richard grunted and settled himself again in his chair. "It was the usual riot. They are eking out an existence with a stipend from a museum in Nairobi. No electricity, no running water."

"This sounds horrible." Digory exclaimed, truly shocked. He didn't necessarily agree with Louis Leakey's way of doing things, but the man was indisputably an extraordinary scientist. "They certainly deserve better than that."

"They manage, and some part of it is certainly self-imposed. Keeping baboons and vipers as pets does not help their situation. They'll be digging at … where will they be this summer, Mary?"

"Rusinga Island."

"That's right. With a good season, they might get some things in Nature again."

Mary stretched her legs out. "We've been trying to think of ways to get Louis back into scientific good graces. They won't have a stable income to continue their work until grants start flowing and that won't happen until this whole Cambridge cloud dissipates."

Digory glanced at Peter, who was avidly following every word. He wondered how much Peter knew of the eminent scientist's professional and personal controversies at Cambridge. Or, perhaps Peter deliberately introduced the subject of Cambridge to steer the conversation in this direction.

"And speaking of immorality, Mary, I didn't tell you what Copeland said. Jomo Kenyatta is still here, in England."

A feeling of alarm began to creep up Digory's spine. He shot a quick look at Peter. There was no reason why he would recognize the name; there was also no way this conversation could be comfortable.

"Oh?" Mary's polite query was forced. Asim shifted his position on the floor, frowning slightly. Digory saw Peter take this all in, undoubtedly sensing the current of tension that began curling through the room.

"Copeland said that he thought Kenyatta is on a farm in Sussex. Rumor is that he volunteered to avoid conscription into the army!"

Mary's cold, stony expression conveyed her thoughts on pursuing the subject.

"How extraordinary," Digory found himself muttering quietly. He set his cup down with a sense of foreboding. "Well, perhaps we should…"

Richard, however, pushed on, now warming to his dislike. "I thought Asim could drive me down there so we could have another go at each other."

"That might be petrol well spent," Asim said with rather uncharacteristic, even if mild, heat.
"Yes, well," Digory began, casting a frantic look Peter's way. He was certain that Peter would not be able to let this pass.

"Who is Mr. Kenyatta?"

"He is a very clever, but…"

Mary interrupted Richard's burgeoning quarrel with a slice of her hand. "Let's answer the simple question first, before beginning the personal epithets."

To Peter, she said tightly, "Jomo Kenyatta is of the Kikuyu peoples of East Africa. He's been living in Europe for about the last ten years. He is a very prominent and articulate activist in the anti-colonialism movement, one which, by the way, Richard, Asim and I all support." She directed a challenging glare at her husband, daring him to contradict her statements.

Asim was not to be quelled entirely. "Despite an abundance of common ground, Richard, Louis Leakey, and Kenyatta also have a long and acrimonious history on certain issues."

Digory could not think of a way to stop what would happen next. Any attempts to interrupt would be thoroughly embarrassing, although he wasn't sure to whom.

Mary swiveled from her seat on the floor toward Richard, and rested her hands on his knees. "Can't you just …"

"What?" Richard asked softly. "Let it go? Ignore it?" He reached down and touched her cheek in a painfully intimate moment. "You know I can't, Mary. Kenyatta defends ritualized, mutilating violence to half of his own people."

Mary humphed with exasperation and turned back around, shrugging off Richard's hand. "And I think you are taking too narrow a view. Kenyatta defends, and very well, their right to pursue their own culture and practice their own rituals without white, European condemnation."

It was Asim who finally spoke what Digory had dreaded.

"Even if part of a culture for a millennium, genital cutting cannot be excused," Asim said firmly. "It is simply wrong."

"And here we are, going over the same ground again," Mary groaned. "Concededly, it's not part of our Western traditions or yours, Asim, but it is part of theirs."

Digory dared a glance at Peter, trying to gauge his reaction. Their eyes met and Digory saw an impassive adult staring back at it him. Digory felt very unsure. Was it the unsettling subject? Or was Peter conveying that he did not welcome any well-meaning but, in his judgment, unnecessary intervention?

Mary resolved the matter. "Oh, and not the two of you as well!" she exclaimed, having noticed the silent exchange. "We know where you stand on the issue, Digs. What about you, Peter?"

Peter looked away, without a hint of apology, and turned to Mary. "I really only have the barest understanding of the particulars."

"When has a lack of facts ever halted expression of an opinion?" Richard asked dryly.

"Perhaps, but I prefer that mine be based upon facts." Peter countered firmly and a bit coolly. He paused, then began again. "So, I really only have general observations that might be broadly
applicable to a conundrum such as this."

"How can you describe cutting as a conundrum?" Asim challenged.

"I don't, and didn't," Peter responded. "I speak of the dilemma its elimination poses. Bear with me, please, I'm having some difficulty finding the right vocabulary." He gathered himself, then carefully spoke again, "As I see it, any sovereign faces a problem when it enters another's land and objects to the particular practices in that place. It becomes even more difficult when that sovereign seeks to change those practices it finds objectionable."

"Narnia. He is obviously speaking of personal experience in Narnia. Which time, Digory wondered. What might have been so objectionable? To whom?"

"You speak of the sovereign objecting, and finding objection," Richard countered. "What if it is objectionable? Evil even? Or are you arguing a relativist position?"

Peter shook his head. "Assume what you wish as to the particular practice. It could be animal sacrifice, polygamy, child marriage, slavery. My concern, the conundrum, is what to do when the sovereign seeks to eliminate it. Criticism and condemnation run the very real risk of strengthening adherence to the objectionable practice, precisely what you don't wish to happen. At worse, the imposition of the sovereign's will becomes a reason, even the reason, for dissent, even rebellion."

Peter let out a sigh of air and slumped against the supporting bookcase. "There, I managed to get it all out. I've now exhausted my knowledge and while I'll defend that general point, I have nothing more to say for the time being on the particulars."

"So, you take Mary's view in this?" Asim asked curiously.

"I don't think so," Richard replied. "Peter has very cleverly stated no opinion on the practice at all. I rather think he comes closer to our view, Asim, since he presupposes undertaking efforts to abolish it."

Peter shrugged. "I don't know the facts or anyone's views well enough to say what I support."

"Curiouser and curiouser say I," Mary mused. "Wouldn't you say, Richard?"

"I say we give Peter the papers so he can master the facts and then find out what he really thinks."

The first thing Digory thought was what Peter's mother would have to say about that. The second thought, even more disconcerting, was that Peter had already seen the papers in the binder of earlier and had understood their context. The last thought was that there was no reason for him to say anything at all; if Peter wished to, he would.

"For the privilege of another tea with you all, I'd happily review and annotate the Encyclopedia. But, the principal of my time must be with the Professor."

"I'm sure we can work something out," Digory assured.

Taking that as a cue, Asim began collecting the plates, bowls, and other detritus of the tea. Peter joined him on the floor, suddenly seeming to be the boy again. Did the others see these peculiar shifts in language and maturity? Digory worried that Mary and Richard did, given their mutual studied looks. Mary rose to her feet, whispering privately with her husband.

Digory stood, intending to join them, and wondering how he could possibly divert them without making it worse. Peter's voice interrupted him. "Actually, Professor, it occurs to me that, as interesting as this all is, I should probably begin at a more basic level. I've not yet even been to the
museum here. Do you suppose one of Dr. Copeland's assistants might show me about?"

The impact could not have been greater if a German bomb had detonated in the room.

Mary spun around, shouting, "WHAT?" then had to spin back to help Richard who under better circumstances, would have leapt to his feet. Today, he settled for slowly and menacingly rising from his chair.

They had discussed creation, women's stockings, gryphons, Franciscan theology, Alice in Wonderland, female circumcision, crocodiles in the Sahara, the sacking of an eminent scholar on moral grounds, avoided discussion of what was certainly espionage, and there had been that matter at the beginning where a trusted, decorated military man of unknown rank was forced to disarm. But it took Peter's disclosure to truly outrage the Russells. Peter jumped up, ignoring the their palpable shock, but perhaps recognizing he and the tea plates were vulnerable to a kick from Mary's boots if he remained on the floor.

Peter's ability to deflect, draw, or redirect the attention of a room was something Digory had never seen anyone do so well. It was superbly timed, utterly sincere, and completely disarming. Digory managed to not laugh at the brilliant dissembling. "I think that would be an excellent idea, Peter. Perhaps, though, you could ask Richard if he might take you? As many of the specimens there are his, it would be far better informed."

Peter's face lit with such genuine enthusiasm, it was impossible to think this was anything but completely earnest and spontaneous. "Would you?" he asked. "I recognize it's an imposition, but…"

"Oh shut up, Peter." Richard said irritably. "I'm very aggravated that you didn't say something sooner. I'd suggest we go now, but…"

"Perhaps later in the week," Mary said, linking her arm in her husband's. "We'll find a time when Copeland and the trils won't be there and have the place to ourselves." She sniffed disapprovingly. "Honestly, Peter, I was just beginning to think better of you."

Peter inclined his head graciously, taking no offense. "I did admit earlier to ignorance in this area after my uninformed reference to King Kong. I'll make every effort to improve upon that this summer."

Mary blew out an aggravated breath, but had to leave off further berating as she relinquished her place at Richard's side to Asim.

"Richard, why don't you and I go to the car and Mary can make arrangements with Digory. Peter, would you mind helping with the rest of the tidying up?"

"Of course. I'll bring the hampers down to the car shortly." They all made their farewells, though the delay was beginning to tell on Mary as she fidgeted about. Richard was moving far more slowly now than when he had arrived and it seemed that the event had genuinely fatigued him. Digory did not like the clammy feel of the weak handshake they exchanged or the pallor that was steadily rising in Richard's face.

"Oh, and Asim, don't forget your knives," Peter said with a grin. "You wouldn't want me near them."

"I'm sure you would have returned them, eventually."

"What's this?" Richard asked, sounding now more querulous than curious. He was leaning heavily on Asim's arm.
"I will explain downstairs," Asim said, rearming as they went out the door.

Into the quiet that followed Asim and Richard's departure, the storm finally broke. "I'm sorry, Digs," Mary whispered. "I know this was sudden, but Richard..." Her breath hitched and she swayed on her feet. "He so wanted to see you. This is the first day I thought he could and I didn't know when else..."

"He really isn't well, is he?" Digory asked quietly.

Mary brought her hands up to cover her reddening face. "No," she choked.

Digory let Mary step into his arms, and held her tightly, just as he'd done when she had been so very much younger. Her shoulders were broader and stronger, his weaker, but the tears she shed on his jacket were much the same.

Peter quietly edged toward the door with the hampers.

"Thank you," she muttered into his shoulder. Mary pulled herself together and away with a shudder and a mighty sniff. "It's alright, Peter. I won't alarm you any further with sniveling. You don't need to flee the scene."

"Not at all, I did not wish to intrude."

Digory reached for a handkerchief as did Peter, but Mary had a larger one of her own. "I'm fine. No, I'm not fine. I'm worried out of my mind."

"Do you know what's wrong?"

Mary shook her head. "Too many things. The jaundice took forever to clear. Now, his tremors are getting worse, and he's forgetting things," She was babbling and Digory let her ramble. The stress had obviously been enormous. "Every treatment seems to make something worse happen. I didn't even realize how bad he'd gotten until we'd been apart for two months. You just don't see it when you live with a person every day."

"Please let me know if there is anything we can do, Mary."

Her eyes darted toward Peter, standing at the threshold. "If you wouldn't mind sparing Peter for an afternoon now and again, and Peter, if you would be willing, I do think that would be good. Richard misses teaching. I think it would help him focus, give him some reason to..."

Her voice hiccuped again and Peter broke in to spare her completing the thought. "I would be glad to, Mary."

"And while you're at it, you could look for that twelfth century beastiary..."

"No," Digory said, poking her firmly in the shoulder. "If you want a research assistant, get your own!"

Mary pouted. "That so unlike you Digs, to not share."

"And it is very like you to monopolize whatever resources you find."

Digory clasped her shoulders and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "You both are in my prayers."

"Thank you." She wiped her face again and shoved the damp handkerchief into her trouser pocket. "Do I look like I've been crying?"
"Not with that peeling nose."

"Alright then. I'll send a note around later about next week."

She turned smartly and strode out, Peter following in her wake with the empty hampers, very like the local workers who would trail behind her on a dig. "I'll be back in a moment, Professor," Peter called over his shoulder.

Digory opened the desk drawer on the right. Pencils, notes, bits of string, two buttons, a dog eared biography of St. Francis. He opened the drawer below it. More notes, a book of Psalms, letters he had started and not finished. He opened the drawer on the left. A bird's nest, some rocks, a book of matches, a tin of very old tea, a slim volume of poetry by Gerard Manley Hopkins. He opened the drawer below it. Clips, ties, pens, thread, pins, and, his goal. He carefully pulled the aspirin powder out. He was mixing the drug with the dregs of his tea when Peter strolled back in, casually munching a handful of dates.

"What a smashing afternoon, Professor!" He settled down into the chair. "Date? Asim gave me a few extra."

"No thank you, Peter." Digory raised the cup, and swallowed the bitter brew down with a grimace.

Peter took in the powder bag as he crumbled it up. "Aspirin? Are you well, Professor?"

"I'm fine. Just a bit of a headache."

Peter tilted dangerously back into his seat, staring at the ceiling. "I have not enjoyed myself so well in a long time."

"Since Narnia. The first visit, even."

"I'm glad then for you Peter. I had thought it might be difficult."

"No, not at all. All three of them certainly test one's mettle, but that is part of what made it so entertaining. And the food!" Peter leaned forward, animated and very happy. "Thank you, really. I did not expect such things, any of it, to even be had here."

"The Russells are quite extraordinary. Asim is very much in a category by himself. I'm pleased you might come to know them better during your stay here. And, as Mary says, spending some time with Richard may be good for him, and will certainly be educational for you."

"I hope he improves."

"As do I, for both their sakes, well, everyone's really. Richard is really an amazing and accomplished person."

"He's a bit like my centaur tutor, actually."

"Really! I would have never made such a connection."

"There's no reason why you would have. It's different, though the feeling is similar, except of course very much here, rather than there, and goodness, I'm not explaining it well at all."

Digory really did not know what Peter meant, but refrained from saying so. "We will have to keep Mary from assigning you tasks."

Peter laughed. "She is single-minded."

"I do want to congratulate you, Peter, on handling it all so well. I knew they would be stimulating; I
didn't expect it to be quite so challenging."

"As I said, Professor, I really enjoyed myself. I only lost my bearings during that digression into camels and parallel evolution of a vicuna, whatever that is."

"And that last conversation," Digory hesitated, suddenly feeling the utter fool for even bothering. Out of a sense of obligation to Peter's parents, he forced himself to ask, "The subject matter, did you understand the context?"

"The cutting? Oh yes, it was in one of the articles. The description of the ritual and its effects was quite clear."

And that was that, Digory supposed. Peter was looking at him levelly, with no question or concern, no desire or need to share a confidence. There was nothing further to say.

"If there's nothing else, Professor, I should go back to the library and let Mrs. Tucker yell at me for running in the stacks earlier today."

"You do that, Peter. I appreciate your sacrifice on behalf of the cause. Also, when you get a moment, could you write down the references we are missing? The Russells might be able to find them."

"I'll do that a bit later, if that's alright." Peter stood and stuck his hands in his pockets. "I need a long walk and a chat with Aslan."

"And then begin a letter to Edmund?"

"A very, very long letter to Edmund."

---

*Chapter 4 - Chain Mail*

*Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity. Book of Psalms 133:1*

When I first drafted this chapter, I considered omitting the discussion of Leakey, Kenyatta, genital mutilation, and questioned whether to insert a fictional character into this "real" history. However, the issue was a shorthand for a number of things I wanted to do with Peter, Digory Kirke, and the OCs and it introduces certain important themes that are revisited again and again. I wavered. Then, as my child was getting a hair cut, I was sifting through a 2009 TIME magazine and there was an article on the persistence of the practice. So, the discussion stayed in.
21 June 1942

Dear Peter,

I was so happy to get your letter. Ed and I have been having a dreadful time with Eustace. There, I've said it. He's dreadful. He heard us talking about N. and that painting in the Spare Oom and simply will not leave off. Edmund wishes to spank him with the flat end of a sword so I am glad he does not have one. Aslan forgive me, but at this point I would gladly help. Edmund that is. Aunt and Uncle are just so very odd, and not at all in a good way. I am simply starving for a rasher of bacon and am sick of boiled carrots and we still have weeks to go.

It's been very difficult for me and Edmund to find any time to ourselves, what with Eustace always hanging about. Edmund has been coming into my room at night after Eustace is asleep so we can talk. This means of course that neither of us has been getting enough sleep and so you can imagine what Ed has been like in the morning! We have hit on running (and I do mean running) to one of the libraries at the College and hiding in the stacks. We both can easily outrun Eustace, and as he has absolutely no imagination or sense of direction, it can take him some time before he finds us.

Here I am complaining and I know I should not. I pray to Aslan that He give me patience – never one of my better traits as you know.

So, into this trying time, your long (long, long) letter was much appreciated and Edmund and I (using the running and library hiding and late night tricks) have had several nice discussions about it. Edmund is working on a response to you that rivals your own letter to us! He has been doing research as well, but I'll let him write about that. He is very impressed about your meetings with the Russells and their driver (Ed suggested I use that term) and even a bit envious, but I suspect you would have guessed that.

At first, when I read your letter about the cutting ritual, I was so horrified, I cried. I don't mean to distress you, but hearing of such violence to Aslan's own daughters was very disturbing for me. I'm afraid I felt it was just more of the same ugliness that seems to surround us here. So, I talked some with Edmund, had an even longer talk with Aslan, and began to think properly about it again.

You know, Peter, even today, I don't feel sure about how we handled the Black Dwarf clans. We knew there were peculiar things. I do not believe it was truly serious, but in fairness, we cannot say for certain. We never saw a Black Dwarfess. Ever. There must have been, of course. I once questioned Fidrian about it, and she told me to never, ever, ask a Black Dwarf about "their" females. She emphasized the word "their" just as I have. It was, she said, beyond rude. So, we did not know, and we did not seek to know. We believed that they had their own rights to live their lives as they wished, so long as they did no harm to any other Good Beast or Being. To that the Clans did abide.

But, brother, what if we did learn of something that involved brutality to their own people, willingly done and willingly accepted? Or, maybe not as disturbing, what if we learned that instead of
commemorating Aslan's Rebirth at the Stone Table, they were acting out his Death, say by the sacrifice of a Dumb Beast? By Aslan, where would our greater duty have been?

While, perhaps, truly awful practices did not exist in our time, what of Caspian? As Trumpkin said, you treat someone as a dumb beast for long enough, and that is what they become. So long apart from Aslan, it will take time and wise leadership for our poor people to find their way back to Him. I fear that as Caspian comes into his own he may learn of some truly appalling practices. He may have to face what we did not, exactly how far the rights of a Beast to be left alone can go.

I was so very happy to see the Dryads reawaken with Aslan's return and to see Bacchus and his very wild girls. It gave me hope that indeed the Narnians would rediscover their own wonderful celebrations and enjoy them as they did when We ruled. But, would you have wanted to explain those rituals to Father Donald? Even to mother and father?

We all came to know very well how the Dryads celebrated Spring. They took human form but they are trees. Trees pollinate, and do so, well, I suppose someone here might say, rather indiscriminately. (Don't laugh, but I try hard not to think about this too much when the trees cover everything with that thick yellow dust in April). I also know that how to handle those rites of Spring was one of the more awkward things you and Susan faced in our first year. I am very glad that you chose to see it as you did even if I did not fully understand it at the time. It would have been very wrong to have tried to force on them the way such things are viewed here.

I see of course the differences. Things like slavery are harmful and degrading and the Dryad rituals are not. I am also certain though that wiser people than I am would be able to make a very good argument that those Spring celebrations really were degrading and harmful, both to our morals and to the Dryads. It could be argued, as Father Donald or Mum might, that the Dryads in doing as they do are not showing proper reverence to the form the Creator gave them, or they are too casual about something sacred to God. I don't agree with that, of course, but good people could be very convincing on that point. I'm sure Father Donald would have no difficulty at all – not that I intend to tell him, of course. (Or our parents).

I find it difficult, in a good way, to know what is really Aslan's will here, sometimes. In N., if I was uncertain, I could just ask him. Here, we have people tell us always what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. For some things, the easy things, seeing the difference isn't too hard to do. I do wonder, how do they know to speak so authoritatively? Does Aslan speak to them as he did, and does, to me? Or, is it their own will that they speak? Or both?

I need to think about this more and speak to Aslan. Do write more, Peter. You sound very happy, and I rejoice in that. I understand completely how you felt it was a breath of N., but here, instead of in N. That makes it even better, doesn't it? For there is only one Aslan, and his creation is very good indeed, both here and there, if we but have eyes to see and hearts to feel. (In writing that, I realized I may have just answered my own question!)

Aslan's blessings upon you, dear brother. Your loving sister,

Lucy

23 June 1942

Dear Peter,

I'm sorry that I haven't written sooner. Plainly though your letter required no small response. I hardly know where to begin. And so, as is my wont, I shall begin at the beginning. Eustace is a pill and a
prat and I dearly wish to spank him. I have prayed very hard to Aslan for understanding and, although Lucy disagrees, I do see some part of myself in our cousin, or, more accurately, what I might have become had I continued as I had. Aslan has told me to persevere and I am ever grateful to him for showing me this uncomfortable mirror. Sadly, I believe that some or perhaps all of Eustace's defects (and there are many) must be attributed in no small way to Harold and Alberta. I do wonder why a couple would have a child in which they take no interest or particular care. They are wholly inattentive and cold. They praise him for all the wrong things and criticize him for any kindness or generosity done. How our father can be related to Harold I do not see or understand at all. I pity our cousin, but feel little love and no affection.

On one issue, H. and A. have been supportive. As I had written before, I've been steadily reading my way through every censored and indecent book I can find. H. and A. have many, although I do not believe they have read any of them. For books they do not own, they are happy to write a note so that I may get anything I wish from the College library. This digression is pertinent. So, I was working my way through Ulysses (impenetrable) and The Canterbury Tales (very amusing and much easier to read once you've spoken something similar for almost 20 years) and The Origin of Species (rather relevant now) when your letter arrived.

Your letter has been the very best thing that has happened all summer.

Beginning very narrowly, it does seem to me that what Harold and Alberta aspire to be, the Russells actually are. H. and A. have been subscribers to *Nature, Proceedings of the Royal Society*, and several other journals in which I could easily find MAR and RR's articles. Yet, as I mentioned, I think that our aunt and uncle have these things not because they are interested in them or even read them, but because they think people as modern and liberal as they are should have them. It's very peculiar.

"Their driver" sounds to be a fascinating man. He must have ridden in the Arab Revolts at a very young age. I imagine he came to the attention of someone in the Arab Bureau in Cairo at around that time, but to speculate about anything beyond this is really not appropriate. When you see him again, ask if he rode in the overland assault upon Aqaba or Wejh? Can he tell you more about where he is from? His tribe? What denomination of Islam? Also, could you ask if he was with …

I am glad that you spoke candidly with him about how you greeted his arrival. He is undoubtedly accustomed to people reacting to his dress and skin colour. Consider carefully brother if we might be negatively influenced here by our experiences with some of the Calormenes. That would be very wrong. I want to believe that when one's soldiers and subjects have feathers, fur, hooves and leaves, one learns quickly to look beyond the merely physical to see the Good "Person" beneath. I will discuss this with Lucy and suggest you reflect upon it as well. I believe that because of our experience, Aslan has very high expectations for us in this regard and we must not disappoint him.

I agree with you also that The Driver is alert to you that something is not as it seems. Once a King, always a King, and I suspect he is not any more deceived by outward appearances than you are. He has lived with secrets and war and during a time when it was not all mechanized, and he may well recognize you for what you are. There is nothing much to be done about that except to trust the honour that you felt and saw in him.

As for MAR, you have left me with much to speculate upon! Your description of the Professor trying to explain her background had me shaking with laughter and crying for his discomfort. Do you remember that terrible gaffe we made with that diplomat from the Seven Isles when he brought the young lady not his granddaughter?…

I found a paper MAR wrote with a Jesuit priest on their possible discovery of enormous ancient
crocodiles in the Sahara. Would you ask her about how she is …

As for RR, he is of a very special and near extinct type. His is one of the last of the great Victorian explorers, very much in the mold of Livingstone, Stanley, and Shackleton. I am sorry to hear of his illness and pray to Aslan for his health.

This is where I come back to my digression about the books. I found, with little difficulty, the whole history of the "cutting" debate that you wrote about. I wondered if something like it might have been practiced in Calormen, but in considering it further, now think it unlikely for several reasons based on my own observations there. Like you and Lu, I immediately thought about some of our N. experiences and really how very often we were faced with morals and ways so very different from what we know here. Knowing what to leave alone was hard enough. Trying to accomplish peaceable change would be, as you argued so well, a far more difficult task.

I recalled that Saint Paul had quite a bit to say on the subject in his Epistles, particularly Galatians. You would not believe the difficulty I had from Harold and Alberta trying to find a Bible! They encouraged me to read D.H. Lawrence, but don't want to me read that "unwholesome book!" I'm kicking myself for not bringing one from home, and I didn't want to take Lucy's, so I borrowed one from the local church. I would like to know if RR has considered this parallel from the early Christian churches. Could you ask him if…

Also, I assume he is very knowledgeable about the practice in China where women used to bind their feet. From what I've read, …

I have much more, but this is quite long enough as it is! My prayers are with you, brother. Aslan walks with you always. Give my love to the Professor as well.

Etc.

Edmund

---

Ch. 5 - Night (and day) at the Museum

*In which Richard instructs Peter on birds, bees, Macrotermes bellicosus and Castor fiber and we learn the reason for Mary's antipathy to King Kong.*

---

Thanks so much for the reviews. You don't start something like this, that is so far outside what people typically enjoy in this fandom, hoping for much in the way of feedback. I mean, who really wants to read about England after the War and at the beginning of what the BBC refers to as "Lost Decade?" I appreciate the kind words very much and the very thoughtful insights.
Night (and day) at the Museum, Part 1

The Stone Gryphon, Part 1: Ch. 5 Night (and day) at the Museum Part 1

In which Richard instructs Peter on birds, bees, Macrotermes bellicosus and Castor fiber and we learn the reason for Mary's antipathy to King Kong

"L'Angleterre est une nation de boutiquiers."
Attributed to Napoleon I, originally from Adam Smith, Wealth of Nations.

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.
"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."
"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.
"You must be," said the Cat, "otherwise you wouldn't have come here."
The Cat, Alice's Adventures In Wonderland, L. Carroll

Richard Russell felt like a sack of elephant dung. However, he simply could not stand the thought that young Peter Pevensie would be mucking about his museum (by all rights, it really was his), for the very first time with someone as inanely dense as one of Copeland's effete-too-in-bred-educated-at-all-the-proper-schools-knows-all-the-right-set trilobites. He knew he'd been waspish with Mary and Asim, but good God, he had to do this. Didn't they see that? A man could die from too much coddling as well as from too little, and it wasn't as if any of their fretting was going to help.

It was well past noon when he finally approached the building. Damn, had there always been that many stairs to the main entrance? He grasped the railing to start up, when he spied Peter sitting on the top step.

"Hello, Richard!" With the appalling energy of youth, Peter came sprinting down and joined him at the bottom step.

"Good afternoon, Peter. Sorry I'm late. I couldn't escape my nannies. Have you been waiting long?"

"Not long, no. I've just been reading letters from my brother and sister."

"They're the ones in Cambridge?" Richard never bothering anymore to censor his scorn for that place.

"Yes and, as you can see, they have quite a lot to say." Peter held out the multiple pages, all tightly filled with a neat, loopy script. "My brother, especially. He has a series of questions for Asim and several things he wanted to share with you."

"Well, out with them!"

Peter looked up at the museum stairs, but Richard was already slowly settling on the stoop, grasping the rail to ease himself down. A little breather after the walk over here wouldn't be amiss, he thought.

Peter sat a step below and Richard was reminded of Greek philosophers and their temple students. It was the setting, he supposed, and Peter's palpable eagerness for anything other than what he probably should have been doing instead.

"I wrote Edmund about our conversation last week, including about the cutting. He's been doing research on the subject and wanted to know if you had thought about..." Peter paused, and referred to the letter. "Here it is. 'Could you ask him if he's thought about the parallels between the African
rituals and the crisis in the early Christian churches?"

"Quite right. Saint Paul of Tarsus had to find a theological basis for allowing Gentiles and other adult men to join the Christians without undergoing circumcision as was required under Jewish law. He's looking at the Letters to the Galatians?"

"Yes, and Philippians. Edmund's point, well, he has several. Here it is," and Peter began reading again from the letter, "The key distinction it would seem, is that it was the men themselves who were very motivated to find a solution that avoided the procedure." Peter paused, evidently skimming through several paragraphs. "This is perhaps one of the reasons they were so successful in accomplishing the change as quickly as they did. Also, it was advocated from within by an authoritative and respected man. Of course, it is the men who were both making the decision and seeking to avoid the procedure. If it had been women, I think it likely it might still be in practice today.' That's Edmund's rather cynical conclusion, anyway."

*What a strange pair.* "So, he is speculating that one way to effect change is to find a personal cost to the men to do it, and a cogent, philosophical voice of opposition from within that develops a culturally relevant justification for abandoning it?"

"Well, you said it in a sentence, and he took a page to work through it but yes, that seems to be his argument. He also mentions," and again Peter referred to the letter, "how the practice of foot binding was eliminated in China and that there may be some useful lessons there in how to work change from within. He gets, hmm, rather enthusiastic about that idea." Peter held up another two more pages.

*Now that's one that warrants a closer look.* Lee and Kun might be helpful; maybe he'd write to Louis about it. "He's got some good ideas. Your brother's a bright man. Anything else?"

"Well, he goes on a bit of a tear that men wouldn't be able to do these things to women and girls at all if there was greater feminine emancipation." With exaggerated weariness, Peter held up another page that even Richard could see had a sloppier, more animated style to it. "He heaps particular outrage on the corset and high heel shoes."

Richard laughed, both at the letter and Peter's undisguised fondness. "You're brother's wasted at Cambridge. He'd better be careful; espousing radical views like that might get him booted." *Not that he'd be any better off here.*

Peter began folding up the letter carefully and tucked into his jacket. Next to the one from his sister, evidently. *I wonder what she's like, Richard mused. More like which brother? Or peculiar in her own way?*

"He's not at Cambridge. He's just staying there, with our aunt and uncle."

"Where's he at, then? London? York?"

"Blackpool Forest Grammar School."

Richard grabbed the railing again with a grunt. Getting up was going to be worse than sitting down.

"Not heard of it. What does he teach?"

"He's a student. Edmund is three years younger than I am."

*Oh good Lord.* That was the impetus he needed, and the laughter gave him the final push to his feet. "You had me going quite well there, Peter."
"I wasn't trying to have one on you, Richard, honestly. I tend to assume that everyone's younger brothers make such forceful points. I'm flattered on his behalf and, when I tell him your observation, he'll be delighted. He's a bit envious of me, I'm afraid."

An unpleasant thought struck him. "You didn't tell me before, did you? How old your brother was?"

"No, I didn't."

"Oh, Good. " Richard eyed the stairs again and now the arm Peter had wordlessly offered. He'd climbed pyramids and temples for God's sake. Yet, the steps of his own museum had become daunting.

He took Peter's arm, grasped the railing with his other hand, and began the slow climb upward.

"Are your parents radical intellectuals as well?"

"No, quite the opposite. My mother works as a secretary when we are away at school. My father is a logician by training."

Now that was amusing. Richard laughed again, feeling his mood and feet lighten with the simple joy of it. "At Cambridge, I assume?"

"Of course."

"So, I've been maligning your father?"

"Not him, only where he trained!"

"What was he doing before the war? Teaching?"

"Some, but he's mostly a writer. He edits math books and journal articles. He worked for a publisher before he was called up." At the landing mid-way, Peter hesitated. "He was granted leave to go to New York and Washington this summer to give lectures."

Richard stopped with him. "That's…unusual."

"You think so as well?" Peter was looking at him carefully and Richard saw the uncertainty and anxiety of a boy who was very worried about his family and trying very hard not to show it. "I've never heard the like."

Another question or two, carefully phrased, would tell him more surely.

"If you can satisfy my curiosity, do you know who extended the invitation?"


"William Stephenson, by any chance?"

"I think so, or some name like that. It all happened suddenly."

It was a name he'd heard once or twice. Richard had done a bit of careful reading thereafter. He did not think Churchill would have just let the Americans sit out the war; the Americans had only entered it six months ago, and then, only because Pearl Harbour had been attacked. Even now, England continued to fight the European war alone and the Americans persisted in their isolationist myopia focused only on the Pacific. Roosevelt probably didn't like this state of affairs much either.
Richard could think of several reasons why England might want talented men in America, more so if they were clever writers. There would be need for a logician or two as well. "Peter, a few more words and then we won't discuss this again."

Richard began the climb again, walking and speaking carefully. "To reassure you, your father is not the first man I've heard of who has been called to America for what seems a peculiar reason. I daresay it fits a certain profile. We can probably guess at what some of the real and very good reasons might be. Do you understand what I mean?"

Peter stared at him, eyes widening just a bit. He nodded.

"Good. Don't share that with anyone else outside your family and don't put anything obvious about it in letters to your brother or sister. Don't write to your parents about your suspicions at all. In fact, the less of consequence said to your parents in your letters to them this summer, the better."

Living with Asim for so long had taught him a thing or two about how much trouble could be avoided if one was cautious about what one said, when, to whom, and, conversely, how easily one could unwittingly draw unwanted attention.

"Thank you, for that advice."

Richard patted the arm that supported him. "They are probably safer than we are." Until they try to cross the Atlantic, but Richard kept silent on that point.

The Oxford Natural History Museum crowned the rise, affording it a beautiful prospect. At the top, Richard drew a deep breath. Every year, he appreciated the place more. "The museum was completed in 1860, within a year after Darwin published The Origin of Species. It's considered to be the finest example of neo-Gothic architecture at the University, and really one of the greatest in the country."

He brought Peter to the front door and pointed above the entrance portico. "Look up, do you see that?"

Peter shaded his hand over his eyes and squinted. "The carvings? They don't look complete."

"They aren't which is quite fitting for a museum built by academics for academics. The whole building is like that, with bits stopped in the middle and unfinished; it's half the charm of the place. The sculptures, can you tell what they are?"

"Owls. And parrots?"

"Yes. Each outer window was supposed to have carvings of animals and plants. The entrance should have had something appropriately imposing. But, being academics, they ran out of money. The sculptors were so angry they carved parrots and owls above the entrance, which at the time was taken as rude commentary on the University Convocation. In the fine tradition of encouraging academic critique, the sculptors were sacked."

"That one looks finished."

Richard looked to where Peter was pointing. "Oh yes. That's the Cat Window. They were supposed to be monkeys, but evolution was still too controversial, so, again in the interest of preserving academic freedom as long as you agree with the prevailing view of the moment, they changed them to cats."

"Real Cats?"
"Well, no, not real cats. They're stone cats, representing Family Felidae of the Order Carnivora, etcetera."

With not another word, Peter strode over to the window. If he had said penguins or cobras, Richard did not think Peter could have been more shocked. But, cats? Would that be the domestic cat, Felis catus, that so absorbed him? Perhaps, the great cats of genus Panthera?

Eventually, Peter returned, looking inexplicably amused. "Sorry. I just have a particular fondness for cats."

Cats.

"Don't apologize, Peter. It annoys me. The fun of this place will be to discover what interests you."

"Oh, I'm sure it will all be interesting."

It was so absurd, Richard really couldn't contain himself. "Don't be ridiculous, boy. It's not all interesting, not even to me. I'm not your tutor, or your parents, so stop pretending to be deferential when you obviously aren't. If something is dull, say so. If you see another cat window, speak up."

It wasn't fair to berate Peter for blundering into this particular peeve of his. Peter wasn't one of Richard's students, and so had never had the opportunity to learn just how much he truly loathed obsequious pandering. Stand like a man! (Or woman! He didn't really much care.) State your views! I already know mine! Don't just repeat them back to me! Plenty of students failed this fundamental lesson and ran away never to return.

Peter, to his credit, didn't flinch, or back down, but merely waited for the outburst to end, barely concealing a look of tolerant forbearance – rather like the one he had for his brother, actually. Maybe I remind him of someone and he thinks I'm amusing. Maybe he thinks I'm just a crotchety curmudgeon. Maybe getting yelled at is at least better than exam tutorials and Duns Scotus. Or, maybe he's almost as smart as that brother of his, already knows I'm pushing him on purpose, and isn't going to be intimidated.

Confirming the last theory, Peter asked, "Are there other cat windows?"

"Not that I know of; I was speaking metaphorically."

Richard pulled the keys from his jacket. "We keep an extra set or, three. They've never bothered to change the locks since I left."

He found himself staring at his own shaking hand then looked at the impossibly small keyhole. It might as well have been a camel through the eye of a needle. "Peter, would you please?" He hated the indignity of asking but hated still more the weakness so obviously displayed. At least this way, Peter wouldn't know that he probably could not have ever even managed to get the right key into the tiny lock.

Peter took the keys, opened the door, and stepped back to let Richard through first.

"So, here we are. We won't get through all of it this afternoon."

Richard stepped into the Court and waited, letting the beauty of the place speak for itself. Peter slowly followed him into the grand space. He was curious to see what would catch the boy's imagination. The dinosaur skeletons were usually what commanded the eye and attention first.

Peter however stood at the threshold, staring straight up, eyes wide. "It's like a church," he said, barely above a whisper. "But a ceiling of glass."
"You are absolutely right. It's a cathedral to science. The glass roof is supported by cast iron and
decorated with wrought iron. It was a fairly common style in the 1840's, but I really think this is the
finest example of the architectural form. There is nothing better than natural light and it really is
humbling to know that God is peering directly in on all His good Creation assembled and displayed
here."

Giving him an odd, sideways look, Peter walked over to the nearest stone column, and looked up to
the carved colonnade, studying it, touching the stone gently. Richard let him take his time. Having so
abused him for professing interests he didn't have, he wasn't going to harass the boy when he
indulged in something that did interest him. That was the point of a place as eclectic as this one was,
to find your passion and pursue it.

Finally, Peter said, "There are trees in the decoration, aren't there?"

"There's much more than that, if you take the time to see them."

Peter again looked up, taking it all in. The afternoon summer sun filtered down, illuminating the
Court and all the bits and bobs, flotsam and jetsam of the Earth's creative process within it.

"There are bigger museums, of course," Richard found himself saying. "Some are very striking and,
frankly have much better collections. But, I don't think any are so beautifully done, where the
purpose of the place is so perfectly matched to its design. It truly unites form and function and
mirrors the Creation it houses."

Into the continuing silence, Richard wondered if Peter had yet come to understand the essential tenet
of Kirke's theorem extrapolating upon the Franciscan world view: it all could be made to fit together.
Whether it be human, animal, or space, any thing doing well what it was intended and created to do
was a glorification of the Divine. Did he see how even a physical structure, whether well built by
human or animal, was praise onto God?

"There are thirty columns surrounding the Court, all made from different decorative British stone.
The one you are looking at is granite, from Cornwall. As you've noticed, each has carvings of
different plants and animals. There are date palms on the top of that column. I admit I've never
understood why palm trees adorn the entrance to the Oxford Museum."

"Anymore cats?"

"In the columns, I really couldn't say. But, you could certainly make a study of it."

Peter shook his head. "Tempting, but no."

"They aren't cats, but most visitors don't want to miss them. Shall we visit the really big lizards?"

Peter stared up at their first stop inside the Court. "They are impressive."

"Dinosaurs are, certainly. They were an incredibly successful species that were around for far longer
than we have been. Most of what's on display here is from England. You'll have to go to London or
my ballroom to see the ones from China and Africa. This fellow here is Megalosaurus bucklandi.
He's a bit of a mess, and is obviously incomplete, but he does have the distinction of being the first
dinosaur identified."

"Buckland's big lizard?"

"I see you've not neglected your classics."
"Between the Professor and my father, neglect was never an option."

There was an uncharacteristically brittle quality to Peter's voice. "Dead languages not an interest for you, Peter?"

He shrugged and dug his hands into his jacket pockets, looking a bit uncomfortable. "Dead languages, dead people, dead places, isn't that what a classics education is?"

Richard filed that away for further reflection. He had taught many young men and an ever increasing number of women over the years. He wasn't sure he saw Peter conforming to the rather tight fitting mold of the traditional classics curriculum.

They went around the Megalosaurus case to the complete skeletons on display. "This one over here is a dinosaur that was native to Oxfordshire, about 150 million years ago, give or take. *Eustreptospondylus oxoniensis*. It amuses me to think of it stomping about, rampaging through the colleges and devouring all the Vice Chancellors but, as the theropods go, it really isn't that large. Still, it's the most complete carnivore found in Europe, which is odd because, we've found the herbivores, and something must have eaten them. Mary would know if there is anything more recent."

"Curved…spine?" Peter puzzled out the name. "From Oxford."

"Close enough." He directed Peter to another mounted skeleton. "This big one is *Iguanodon bernissartensis*. Don't ask Mary about him. She'll rant for hours on how it was Gideon Mantell's wife, Mary Ann, who was the one to first identify it as something other than a really big crocodile."

"The Professor warned me about that."

"Mary's wrath is certainly warranted – science has tended to ignore the contributions women have made or could make. But, she does tend to take it personally. The ichthyosaurs aggravate her especially."

Peter was staring at the skeleton with more attention than before. "Something catch your eye, Peter?"

"Well…"

"Out with it. And none of that nonsense from tea last week. You have opinions, so state them and defend them."

Peter's look sharpened at the prodding. *Good man, you aren't stupid, for all that you have a brilliant tutor and a father and younger brother who probably are as well. *Still, when Peter spoke, it was the verbal equivalent of someone walking on stilts.

"It's how it's standing straight up and resting on its tail. It doesn't look very comfortable." He paused and then amended, "I suppose 'natural' would be a more scientifically appropriate word."

"I've not bothered with the dinosaurs for a few years now; I leave that to Mary." Richard stared at the Iguanodon again, trying to analyze it as something other than what had just always been there, and matching it to what he had seen in the intervening years. "There are a number of animals that do use some type of bi-pedal locomotion, at least some of the time, but I don't think most use their tails that way."

"No, they usually use them for balance or communication. That's a big animal and tails typically aren't large enough or strong enough to support weight like that."
Richard was surprised at the confident and sound observations. *So, you do have interests! Opinions, even?* Besides cats, and glass ceilings, Peter was interested in, what? Comparative zoological anatomy?

He studied the tail more closely. "Damn. Would you look at that? Peter, you are quite right and this is not remotely natural." He pointed. "Look there, do you see it four, no, five back on the vertebral column. They broke the tail bones to get it in that position."

"I'm just trying to think of animals that might stand that way. I'm not coming up with many." Under his breath, Peter was ticking off on his fingers a fairly impressive list for someone who supposedly knew nothing of natural history. Richard heard "horse," "cheetah," "fox" and some mumbled reflections on river otters and weasels.

It did however reflect a rather typically charismatic and mammalian point of view. He injected, "Reptiles will drag their tails, like lizards and crocodilians, but none are bi-pedal. Arboreal animals, like New World monkeys, may have a prehensile tail adaptation, but that's not a good model for a dinosaur." Richard took a step backward, getting a broader view of the Iguanodon as Peter continued to mutter his way through his list. "This specimen is mounted a bit like a kangaroo, actually, and they do use their tails for balance, but it is a very unusual animal."

"Oh! I've got another one, Richard! Beavers! Beavers will prop themselves on their tails when they sit up."

How had Peter come up with beavers? That was just uncanny. "You are right, they do. Where have you seen beavers before?"

And as quickly as it had come, Peter's assurance disappeared. Replacing it was an odd pausing before he spoke and that sense of carefully chosen words. "Not here," he finally answered.

"I shouldn't think so. The Eurasian beaver, *Castor fiber*, has been extinct from England since the 16th century."

Peter nodded, but didn't say anything more, leaving Richard perplexed. *Where did the confidence go? Why would beavers be the trigger? What is he worried about? He said 'not here'? Where is 'here'? What is he concealing in those careful articulations?*

Eventually, Peter offered, "I was so disappointed when I realized there weren't any left in England." Richard had the sense that Peter was very much lost in his own thoughts, staring at the skeleton, as if trying to find a likeness that really wasn't there. "I looked into it, a few years ago, at the Professor's old house. I was hoping we might find one on the grounds."

With wistful regret, Peter concluded, "It's such a shame that they're gone."

Peter spoke with such genuine feeling, it took him by surprise and interrupted his own musing. It was a sadness Richard very much shared and he could but agree.

"They are indeed marvelous, adaptable creatures. I greatly admire them, as does my engineering expert, Mr. Patel."

"One builder to another?"

"Precisely. It would be wonderful to see them reintroduced into England."

He heard a humph of contemptuous disgust. "Wouldn't people just shoot and trap them again?"
"Well, we couldn't just drop them into Yorkshire and hope for the best. It would have to be managed. We've grown wiser about such things and, fortunately, this mistake isn't an irrevocable one. Churchill's bulldog may be the metaphor for getting us through the war, but once it ends, I think the industrious beaver would be the better totem for England."

Peter looked at him curiously. "It sounds as if you've given this a lot of thought."

Richard clapped him on the shoulder, unexpectedly delighted to find someone else who appreciated this peculiar rodent. "You're very perceptive, Peter. I have. Mary thinks it's a bit mad, but beavers are a personal project of mine and Mr. Patel's. I've made a study of their habitats and collected a number of photographs. It's all upstairs, along with actual specimens, both of C. fiber and its Canadian cousin."

"Maybe we could see them later?"

"Certainly. I'd be pleased to show you. Up in the mammal section it's a bit like Darwin's attic, but we'll see if we can find them."

He had intended to next introduce Peter to the ichthyosaurs (Mary would be very irritated if he didn't). However, the beaver discussion was causing Richard to reassess that plan. "Most people who come here fall in love with the giant lizards. I'm not sensing that in you."

"No, it's interesting."

Richard snorted. "There you go again."

"Truly, I am very grateful to be here. I am interested."

"Because anything is more interesting than Duns Scotus?"

"Well, yes, that's certainly part of it," Peter admitted.

Still, Richard could see it plainly. He knew the mad, passionate look of someone who had fallen in love with rock, bone, and really big lizards that had been dead a very long time. Peter has professed no love for dead languages, dead men, and dead places. Whatever he might say to the contrary, fossils didn't make his eyes light up and voice crack with animated wonder. Yet, glass and iron, cats and beavers did.

"They do have a nice little exhibit to Lewis Carroll and Alice's Wonderland. Alice's Dodo is here."

"I'm embarrassed to say I've not read Alice. It's a favorite book of my youngest sister, though."

"Carroll, his real name was Dodgson, was on faculty here. Logician and mathematician like your father. When he was writing the book he incorporated all sorts of specimens from this museum— the Dodo, the eaglet, the lory, the duck, and so on."

"But no gryphon or mock turtle?"

"There are turtle shells, but they are quite real and not imitation at all."

Peter looked around again, taking a wider view of the columns, and the cases between them filled with bits of bone, bugs, and birds. Alice's Dodo squatted in his glass coffin. Such a shame. Not an attractive bird and certainly not an intelligent one. Yet, it was not deserving of such a fate. That little bit of God's good Creation was tragically gone forever.
"Why do people do this?" he heard Peter ask. For a moment, he thought the boy had been divining his thoughts about extinction, but Peter was studying a large case filled with shiny beetles. The brightly coloured carapaces glittered iridescent in the afternoon sun. "My cousin does the same thing, pins bugs on to cards. It seems cruel."

Richard joined him at the case. "It might be cruel, depending on if the insect is alive when you pierce it, and if it feels pain. There's also a voyeuristic quality to it, but that's where the science and learning come in."

"How?" Richard thought he heard something trending toward argumentative in the query.

"Darwin developed his theories of natural selection in part from examining the beaks of finches and realizing that the birds had adapted to different island environments. Looking at these beetles we can study how they are alike and different, and what forces of nature made them adapt to be the way they are. We come to understand them better and why they are important, and perhaps can prevent what happened to the Dodo from happening to them."

"Oh." Peter silently studied the dozens of beetles, large and small, thin and fat, all pinned to the canvas as a strange work of entomological art. "Yes," he finally conceded, "I can see that." Peter pointed to the Dung beetle. "It's hard to believe that that African bug is related to your typical English stag beetle, yet they plainly are when you put them up like this."

"That is rather the point of it," Richard agreed.

"Still, it's what makes me worry about the beaver. Who's to say someone like my cousin wouldn't just stab him with a pin and put him on a board?"

_That seemed rather fierce. Is it dislike of the cousin? Or love of the beaver?_

"Sacrifice is part of the study," Richard had to admit. Some aspects of it made him uncomfortable and what he might have done 30 years ago would be unthinkable now. "There is less of it now than there used to be precisely because we understand better that this good Creation is not limitless and we owe it greater respect than it has been afforded in the past."

Peter was still looking a bit rebellious, even angry, though he hid it well. It wasn't remotely objective, but it was genuine, and Richard very much respected the passion that was behind it. "You see, Peter, I actually find great hope for the remarkable beaver in all this," he waved his hand, encompassing the whole of the Court. "I don't see death as the object of it at all."

Peter looked back toward the poor Dodo. After a moment, he said reluctantly, "I suppose it reminds of the folly of needless killing."

"There is that, but more as well." Richard moved to Peter's side, and pointed. "Here is a monumental collection of beetles, from all over the world, and there, that list? See it?"

Peter squinted a bit, peering through the glare of the glass reflection at the long, long, neatly printed list of names next to the beetles. "Yes."

"Those are the good people who brought home in their pockets the bugs they found on their holidays. And this home grown collection stands next to that one," Richard pointed at the next case. "It contains the crustaceans Charles Darwin collected during his expeditions on the Beagle. And over there," he gestured toward the coffin, "is a bird that found its way into a children's book so extraordinary it stands for all time as a classic in logic, philosophy and satire." He waved more vaguely in the direction of the dinosaurs. "Those fossils come here from country doctors who found
bits of jawbones on roadsides, miners who uncovered whole skeletons in quarries, and gentle ladies who tucked their long skirts up and waded into the Channel to find 300 million year old shells."

"So tell me," Richard said, turning back to Peter, with a gentler challenge. "I'm sure you've been to great museums before. London is full of them. But, can you make any sense of this?"

The boy looked around again, eyes widening as when first he entered the Court. Did he see what Richard saw? Could he? A grin slowly spread across Peter's face and settled there, replacing the combativeness. "It is a bit mad, isn't it?"

"Utterly. It's unique. The Oxford Museum has specimens from all over the world, but the way that they came to be here, and are cataloged and displayed, that is quintessentially English. It's a very easy thing to love, if you can love absurdity. It's not just this place that is extraordinary, but what it holds and the people who put it here."

"And you think that the same people who collected all these oddities could love a beaver?"

"Absolutely. We're not just a nation of shopkeepers and coalminers and fishermen. Or, well, we are, but that stereotype barely scratches the surface of our eccentric soul. Together we're beating back a dreadful tyranny, at a dreadful cost. After our finest hour is over and all that, yes, I do think that the English would want to peaceably coexist with the humble beaver."

Richard let that bit of lesson sink in. It wasn't the traditional one, but Peter wasn't the traditional student either. Instinct told him Peter fit very comfortably among the mad dogs and Englishmen who go out in the midday sun.

"How about we go upstairs to the beehive and the specimen collections and look for the beavers? It isn't part of the usual tour, but bother that."

"Desperately shorthanded, the BSC [British Security Coordination] recruited brains and talent where it could find them, often making only a cursory background check. They brought in friends, family members, and personable colleagues like a club voting in new members, the only qualifications being evidence of a certain confidence and imagination and the assumption of shared values." The Irregulars: Roald Dahl and the British Spy Ring in Wartime Washington, Jennet Conant

Ch. 6 Night (and day) at the Museum Part 2

In which there is further instruction on birds, bees, and Macrotermes bellicosus and not as much about Castor fiber and we learn (finally) the reason for Mary's antipathy to King Kong
As they worked their way to the second floor and beehive, Richard had been trying to determine what about beavers had made Peter seize up. There had to be some trigger.

"If you look through the window here, you have a nice view of the beehive. You should be able to get a glimpse of the queen over there, on the right. She'll be in a bit of a scrum."

Peter put his nose up to the glass, and watched the bees climb about the comb. He was silent for some time. *He really takes joy in simple observation.*

"They are amazing," Peter said in a voice full of admiration. "You look at the shape of the cells and you'd think the bees were all collectively mad. Wouldn't a circle or a triangle be easier? But, that six sided hexagon means that the cells all fit together, and no wasted wax to build them."

"Peter, I thought you said you were ignorant of this sort of thing. You've had good instruction somewhere if you know that much about hive construction."

He'd intended to deliver a compliment and to encourage Peter to share observations that were really quite solid, unexpectedly so. Instead, in that moment, Richard saw Peter's expression turn inward. As with the beaver, the conversation had somehow crossed into an area that signaled caution. He didn't understand. Peter wasn't the least bit deferential; he would share what he knew, would own up to his views. Beavers? Bees? Do cats also fall into this same strange category? It made no sense. Then, it dawned upon him.

Asking *how* Peter knew what he did somehow triggered the wariness. How did he know the way beavers stood? How did he know of bees' building skills? Counter to every instinct as a scientist, which valued the why and the how, for it was the process that would validate the conclusion, Richard vowed to let it go. If he didn't press for the *how's*, maybe he would learn more of the *what's.*

"I understand the cells are all built on a thirteen degree slope to keep the honey from running out, but you've probably heard about that before."

Peter nodded but didn't add anything else.

"Certainly bees put any human builder to shame. We could never build anything so precise without plans, rulers, cost over-runs and a decade's worth of delay."

Peter gave a huff of laughter and Richard saw his shoulders relax a fraction.

"Mr. Patel, the engineer I mentioned earlier, shares your appreciation. He told me that the hexagonal array also gives the comb more mechanical strength. I don't quite know why; I'm sure he could explain it better."

"Is Mr. Patel…" Peter made a full stop. "You know, I was going to ask some inane and polite question, but that seems rather pointless," he said, smiling to take away the bluntness. "Given Mrs.
Kwong and Asim, I'm sure he has some fascinating history as well."

"Everyone has a fascinating history, Peter. But, yes, Mr. Patel, is a part of our household, like Asim, Kwong Lee and her husband, Lin Kun. He is, as they are, very much a byproduct of our colonial imperialism. It's his story of course and so, to hear it, you will have to speak to him."

Peter's look sharpened at that statement, again for no particular reason. Don't ask why, Richard now knew. Just press on. "He entered my story almost twenty years ago. I hired him in Bombay on the Indian subcontinent before Leakey and I went to Tendaguru. There weren't any roads or railways into the site, just five days on foot through the jungle to the nearest port. It was up to him to figure out how to get the tons of bones and plaster we dug up out. He and I have traveled together on and off ever since. So, Mr. Patel is to me, as Asim is to Mary. I'd say each is My Man Friday, but I like neither the servant connotation, nor the ethnic slur behind it."

"My brother Edmund has always been my logistics man. I think I understand exactly what you mean."

Did he even realize what a peculiar turn of phrase that was for a boy of sixteen, referring to a brother of thirteen?

"If it's not too much of telling another's story, how did Asim come into it? I know Edmund would be curious, to the extent you can say."

"The very short answer is that Asim saw Mary in a souq in Marrakech when she was still in grammar school and has followed her ever since. As to the reason, I refer you to them and to the discussion of Angels in the Qur'an."

"Should I have understood that last part, about the 'Qur'an'?” Peter hesitated over the unfamiliar word.

"The Qur'an is the Holy Book of Islam, like our Bible. Belief in Angels is one tenet of Islam. The Angel Gabriel, for instance, appeared to the Prophet Muhammad. However, Angels in Islam are intangible and have no free will, so I don't follow it either when applied to Mary and Asim. Perhaps it's an analogy. But where she goes, he usually follows."

Richard was going to suggest they move on, until Peter's excited exclamation.

"Oh! Richard, look, see that forager!” Peter pointed to a bee at the hive's entrance. "I think she's dancing."

Richard had to work very, very hard to keep his manner neutral. He wasn't sure where this was going, but with his new found understanding, he wanted to tread as carefully as Peter did. He did note that the boy had correctly identified the forager as a "she." "What do you mean?"

"Dancing. That peculiar, oh hang it, I don't remember what it's called. But, she's telling the other bees where to find food."

Richard knew of at least one animal behaviorist who was very interested in bees. Aristotle had even thought they communicated to one another. The idea wasn't that unique. But, dancing?

"Will she lead them to it?"

"I don't think so; I think she's telling them where to go. I don't quite remember how she does it. You don't remember, either?” He looked hopeful, and Richard shook his head.
"I'm not sure I ever knew it. Bee communication is a bit out of my field." Richard leaned in further to watch and, indeed, it did seem that the forager was moving back and forth very deliberately. Could it really be communication? Of directions as he says?

"It has something to do with the length of her dance and the direction of the sun. And, look! There they go!" Peter pointed, and in fact, several foragers launched themselves off the ledge.

"There are some flower gardens across the courtyard and the Botanical Garden isn't far off. Maybe that's where they are going. But, I should think they'd already know how to get there? Or, maybe bees don't have a memory like that?" A dozen more questions instantly popped into his head, about ever-changing flowering food sources, collective purposes in complex insect societies, and a honey bee's short life span.

Shrugging, Peter moved away from the hive to look out the broader view the window afforded. "I don't know." He had already dismissed the astonishing observation, when all Richard really wanted to do was sit down with a notebook, a pencil, take an hour's worth of notes and send them off to somebody for comment. Bee dancing to communicate food sources? It was so bizarre. Whether or not it was true, Peter had believed it. On second thought, this went beyond mere belief. Peter knew it, and knew it as certainly as he knew how beavers stand even though C. fiber had been extinct in Britain for 400 years. Had anyone gotten this far in bee research and he'd just missed it? Testing the hypothesis would be possible, he supposed. Difficult, but not impossible.

With an effort, Richard pushed the questions aside.

"Well, given your interest in the hive, beavers, and the Court downstairs, I've got something else I'd like to show you."

"Termites built this? Termites?"

Peter had repeated the word several times as he stared at the photographs in the entomology lab. He wasn't that interested in the bugs themselves. But, Richard could see that their construction abilities really did capture his imagination.

"Not just any termite. There are many species. This particular one is Macrotermes bellicosus, an African mound building termite."

"It's huge. I've seen swallows and martins build nests before from mud, but never anything like this."

Richard now knew better then to ask where Peter had observed those nests. The birds were native to Europe, after all. If he'd said "flamingo," that would be rather more curious.

"I believe that the mound is the largest ratio between size of creature and size of home in the animal kingdom. They are really fantastic creations and, again, I'll have to refer you to Mr. Patel, who has spent some time investigating them when we are in Africa."

"It must be over ten feet tall! And it's permanent you say?"

"Most are smaller, but some are much larger. And yes, they'll last for years, even when the colony has left, for all that it's made of mud and spit. What's really amazing is the temperature regulation. Through tunnels and chambers, the termites are able to keep the temperature inside constant, to within a degree or two."

"By…" Peter muttered some oath that Richard didn't quite get but sounded a bit like "Byron." "Why can't we do that?"
"Those are swifts, aren't they?" Peter was watching the small birds outside the window dive and dart about. "It looks like they're hunting. Are there nests nearby?"

"Those are the Oxford swifts. They roost here in the tower during the summer, in the ventilation shafts."

They were in the bird "wing" section of the museum. It had a nightmarish quality to it. Stuffed birds were set on shelves floor to ceiling, and smaller perching birds were carefully labeled and nestled in drawers of massive cabinets. There were thousands of birds in the museum's collection. A whole wall displayed nests from around the world. There were a few chairs and a desk for studying specimens, but otherwise it was filled with birds and their detritus. The place smelled faintly of guano. Not the sort of place to be if one were inclined toward ornithophobia.

But Peter wasn't.

"These nests are incredible."

"It's rather different from the insects, but yes, many of them are quite remarkable. I can't help thinking that I wouldn't do half as well if I had to construct something so intricate and important with just my mouth and feet."

Peter snorted. "I had another teacher tell me nearly the same thing. It was an excellent and forceful lesson in humility."

Richard let the intriguing statement pass, without commentary. Perhaps it was the same unnamed tutor who knew so much of hives and bee dancing? Peter was in an expansive mood and he was keen to see it continue.

Searching the shelves, he finally found what he was looking for. "Peter, look at this one. I donated it after a trip to Australia once the birds were done with it."

As Peter joined him, Richard took a pencil from his pocket and gently lifted the stray bits of grasses, feathers, ribbon, and twigs.

"Found of blue, are they?" Peter asked, studying the colorful display.

"Satin bower birds are. It's not actually a nest at all. It's a bower that the males build solely for courtship. He decorates it with bits of blue, anything he can find, like paper, flowers, feathers, and the like. The females come to visit his bower and the male does this elaborate dance. If the female is interested, she'll let him mate with her. Then, off she goes to build a separate nest and lay their eggs."

"I've watched them for hours, supplied bits of blue for them to use – I think for this one I purloined scraps from a tailor. But, after all that time with them I still can't figure out what is a successful strategy for the male. They build these incredible structures, dance, and strut, and maybe she'll stay, and maybe she'll fly off to the next bower. Some bowers have more blue, some have less, and sometimes, the bower doesn't seem to matter as much as the dance. I simply can't accept that it's arbitrary behavior."

"Oh, it's certainly not arbitrary," Peter commented, offhandedly. "I'm sure she knows exactly what she's looking for and he's just trying to meet that expectation."
"Yes, but what does she see that I can't?"

"Lots of things. Remember that her eyesight is a far bit better than ours. So perhaps there's some colour or a nuance to that colour in the bower or in his feathers that shows up in her vision and but that you can't see. Or, maybe there's some proportion that is just right or isn't, or maybe his dancing is just too intense and it puts her off. She can certainly see the difference, even if you can't."

With that extraordinary statement, Peter wandered off to look at the stuffed raptors, leaving Richard dumbfounded. How? How? He fought the urge to hang Peter upside down and shake him until more interesting bits came out. He knows how a bird sees? Perceives? He knows how a bird thinks? How can he speak so authoritatively on this?

Peter voice pierced the exhausting flurry of questions. "What's that?" Richard asked, irritated at the interruption.

"You said the male might have several mates?"

"Yes, he's polygamous."

"What about the female, does she mate with other males, or just the one?"

Odd question, but not a bad one. "I shouldn't think so. Female promiscuity isn't that common. I didn't observe it."

"Oh, I was just wondering if they were more like songbirds."

Wait a damn minute? What? Female songbirds aren't promiscuous. They bond with a single male, like the raptors Peter was looking at. Only the males are polygamous. Aren't they?

Peter hadn't spoken as if this was opinion or theory. Like the bird's eyesight and the bees, he believed it as fact and, even more confounding, spoke as if these extraordinary statements were common knowledge.

Richard's mind, as jumbled as it was becoming, finally mutinied with this casually tossed off information. He had to return to habit. While Peter was still poking around the drawers, Richard eased himself into a chair, pulled out his field notebook to jot down his notes. He'd never had a particularly good hand, but it had always been clear enough that he could understand what he'd written weeks or months later. Now, seeing his hand quiver as it refused to obey what his mind told it to do, he knew his habits would be changing, and likely sooner than he would have wished.


In those notes, he saw a lifetime of work ahead. Several lifetimes. Prizes. Grants. Endowed chairs. Books, royalties, speaking tours. It was overwhelming, and exciting. He didn't think he'd been out of the mainstream of publication for that long. It simply didn't seem possible to have missed developments this significant, but he had to get to the library to confirm it. Then, he wanted to keep shaking this very strange tree and see what else dropped out.

"Peter, Mary and Asim should be catching up with us, so let's conclude for today." He tucked the book back into his pocket, thinking Peter probably shouldn't know about his observations just yet.

"Oh? Already?" The boy turned from the window where he'd been watching the swifts' aerial displays. Peter pulled another chair over and settled into it.
"First, I apologize, we never did make it to the beavers today. If you like, let's start looking for them on our next visit, and from there, I'm sure will find other things, probably with the mammals."

"I would like that. And maybe more of the birds as well?" He said this with a backward glance at a large barn owl perched on a shelf above them.

So understated it almost made him wince to say it, Richard managed calmly, "Certainly. We might want to take this into the field, as well." Feeling he really needed to amend that in light of Peter's enthusiastic nod, he added, "your time permitting, of course."

"I won't assign any additional work." The horrified look in Peter's face showed plainly that the thought had never occurred to him. "But I do want you to talk to Digory about how the bower bird behaviors might be explained both as a matter of natural selection and as a performance of their divinely allotted function."

"I'm not quite sure I follow that."

"Digory will. He's very interested in the parallels between evolution and the Franciscan view that all God's creatures glorify our mutual Creator by performing their natural behaviors. He'll be very interested in your perspective on the bower birds."

"Oh, well, alright. I was worried you'd be referring back to Duns Scotus."

*It's all connected, don't you see that?*

"Last," and he grasped the sleeve of Peter's jacket, wanting his full attention, "I want to congratulate you on some remarkable observations today. You surprised me and you have an excellent eye for this. You've got material for some good papers here. The simplest, just because of the resources available to you, would probably be on animal posture and how they use their tails to mount a critique of that Iguanodon."

For a moment, he saw Peter ignite with curiosity; as quickly it was gone. "Thank you, but I don't think so."

"I admit, it's a daunting task, but I could help you with the anatomical analysis. Mary would be an excellent resource and we'd be glad to work with you on it. It would also merge nicely with the work you're doing for Digory."

The boy blinked in surprise. "How?"

"Peter, really. Your tutor is the world's foremost expert on the Oxford Franciscans and they've been refining the scientific method since the 12th century."

"Oh." A shrug displaced Richard's hand from his arm. "Well, it doesn't really fit, you know."

*Fit? Good Lord, we aren't talking about shoes!*

"Fit what?"

"What I *should* be doing."

"But,"

"Forgive me for interrupting, Richard, but I really can't."

This time, Peter was very firm and Richard caught a bare glimpse of something odd he had observed
before – the stature of a man to whom, as inexplicable as it was, even Digory Kirke deferred. There was a poise that far outstripped Peter's actual age. As quickly, it was gone, replaced by another of those weary, typically adolescent shrugs and sighs Richard knew so well from countless other students. In that single motion, Peter very effectively conveyed ennui, obstinacy, and more than anything else, the burden of very high expectations. That was a sense Richard recognized very well.

"Besides, really, what's the point? You see enough animals and you know they don't usually walk or stand the way that dinosaur is. It's just the way they are. Why would you write about something so obvious?"

The scientist and the holy man within him both rebelled. Are you so accustomed to miracles that you can afford to take them for granted?

However, as a man who had taught, and been taught, and still learned after over 50 years, Richard also saw that pushing Peter at this moment would fracture a blossoming rapport he wanted very much to see grow.

"Well, do think about it. Just remember, Peter, what you said to me about the bower birds. It may be obvious to you, but isn't necessarily obvious to others. That poor broken beast has been sitting like a beaver for decades. There are maybe a handful of people who could analyze it as well as you did; Mary and I are two of them. I've never heard her mention it and I didn't see it until you pointed it out. The comparative analysis could easily occupy you well into university."

"Richard!" he heard Mary shout. "Peter? Where the hell are you!"

"Oh, when Mary asks about the ichthyosaurs, just say, 'They are amazing and it's such a shame Mary Anning has not received the credit she deserves.'"

"You want me to lie?" Peter exclaimed, looking as horrified as when he had thought Richard might assign him a paper.

"To keep Mary from dragging us both down there for a three hour lecture I've heard at least 30 times before? Absolutely!"

It was Asim, though, who first turned the corner. Spying them, he stuck his head back into the hallway. "In the bird wing, Mary."

"It's about time!"

Mary swept past Asim, nearly running into the room, her glasses swinging wildly from her neck. She was carrying a dragon.

Peter scrambled out of his seat, then offered his arm. I am tired, Richard realized, more grateful than annoyed at this point and accepted the assistance. This visit had been unexpectedly taxing – in a good way- but any such exertion now took its toll. He'd pay for it tomorrow and probably the next day as well.

"I found him!" Mary exulted bursting upon them. "Well, at least, I think it's a male, I don't think we know how to sex them yet."

"And so you did," Richard said. His wife was thrilled and he was very happy for her. At least it wasn't a new hat or some frippery. How many other men could enjoy their wife's triumphant location and identification of Varanus komodoensis?
"We'll engage in a bit of sexism, and call him 'he' for convenience. If that ends up bothering you, we'll just say he's capable of sequential hermaphroditism and has turned into a 'she.' Set him down so we can get a good look."

Mary gently placed the stuffed dragon down on the desk. "Isn't he fantastic!" she gushed and, lunging forward, threw her arms around him. Richard received an enthusiastic and sloppy kiss. Their glasses got tangled when she finally let go of his mouth. It would normally have gone on quite a bit longer, but she was too excited about the lizard.

"Hello, Peter. How do you like my dragon? Isn't he just magnificent?"

"He is not your dragon, Mary, and you can't keep him," Richard reminded her.

"Dr. Copeland would hunt you down with a dart gun if you removed that specimen," Asim added.

Peter had not quite found an adequate coping strategy with Mary. He seemed to have learned the bit about just stepping to the side when she had a full head of steam, but hadn't yet mastered how to humour her moods. In fact, well, Richard really couldn't read Peter's peculiar expression at all.

"He is indeed," Peter seemed to choke up a bit, "a splendid specimen." Recovering, he managed, "Is that a … well, it's not a dinosaur. Is it?"

"Of course not. Richard! Really, you've been here with Peter for hours with those outstanding specimens downstairs and you didn't explain the fundamentals of their hips?"

"Hips?" Peter asked, utterly mystified.

No! Not hips! Good Lord, he'd need a double Gin and Tonic to get through that. "We became far too distracted by the ichthyosaurs," Richard injected as quickly as he could.

"Couldn't you wait!" Mary pouted. "Peter, I must tell you that Richard really doesn't give them their due."

"They are amazing," Peter agreed, with great and very sincere feeling. "It is really an outrage that Mary Anning has not received the credit she deserves."

Richard speculated that Peter didn't like lying, and that might be one reason for his own great verbal care. But, he really did lie extraordinarily well. That was actually a point he'd want to make note of in his field diary.

"Mary?" Richard prompted, trying to keep her focused and, God forbid, off the subject of hips or, even worse, a digression on Great Women In Paleontology And The Men Who Hindered Them.

"The dragon?"

"Oh, yes. This big boy is a Komodo dragon from Indonesia. Probably the largest lizard in the world. Isn't he just amazing? Richard, look at his claws! They are the apex predator there, which explains the giganticism, I suppose, at least according to what Burden reported. Although frequently island environments promote miniaturization, so I think that bears further investigation."

Into what would rapidly devolve into an ecstatic monologue (at least it wasn't about the ichthyosaurs), Richard managed to inject for Peter's sake, "Douglas Burden led an American team to Komodo to find and document the lizards. This is one of the dozen or so specimens they brought back. It's the only one in England, and may be the only one in Europe."

"I think they kept the biggest ones," Mary sniffed a little huffily. "They reported some over 10 feet
long. They can swim too, and take down goats, deer, and boar. I do wonder if there isn't some sort of venom involved for prey that large; Burden reported the dragons do drool a lot."

'Humans could be on the menu too, if one was exceptionally unlucky," Richard added, fingering the long toe claws. "There's a lot of power in those legs and jaws, judging from the musculature on this specimen. More speed than a crocodylian as well, I should think."

"Oh yes. Burden's party had a number of encounters. I guess they vomit some sort of foul substance and a really big one managed to claw its way out of a steel cage." She gently pushed her pencil tip into the dragon's open mouth. "Looks like about fifty teeth, maybe more. Sharp. Backward pointing." Mary began mumbling to herself as she peered in the lizard's mouth. She was cooing happily, like a mother over a newborn.

Peter edged carefully away from this alarming behavior. "Good to see you again, Asim."

"And you, Peter. As you can see, I am unarmed today."

"Yes," Peter agreed, "I can."

"Do tell me about that." Richard had heard the whole story from Mary, a more concise version from Asim, and still couldn't quite fathom it. He understood it even less so now, after spending the afternoon with Peter.

"There is nothing to tell," Asim said, infuriatingly mild.

It took more than the man's insufferable opacity to put him off though. "Satisfy my curiosity then. Peter, what would have happened if Asim had not surrendered his knives?"

"Oh, I think Asim knows very well what would have happened."

The lawn tennis back and forth was wearing on his nerves. "Will one of you damned inscrutable sphinxes answer the question?"

"Peter would have disarmed me, of course."

Richard looked to see what Peter's reaction was to this incredible assertion and was expecting to hear a denial. Oddly, it didn't come. Peter just crossed his arms across his chest and looked amused again, which while getting to be irritating, because he never bothered to let anyone in on what was obviously deeply humorous, was at least better than the adolescent shrugs and sighs.

Mary piped in, "Torch?" Richard reached into his pocket, but Asim had one waiting. "Thanks," she said absently, flicking it on and aiming the beam into the lizard's mouth. "Good for slicing and tearing hunks of flesh..."

"How long has she been like this?"

Asim sighed wearily. "Some hours. It's like when she found the flying dragons in the Philippines."

"Flying dragons?" Peter looked a trifle alarmed.

"A small lizard that glides from trees," Asim said before Richard could explain. "I know more of them than any man would wish to. We spent weeks there."

"It was only a few days, so stop whinging."

Mary straightened, flicked off the light and handed it back to Asim. "Thanks. Richard, did you notice
his forked tongue? We'd need a skull to be sure, I suppose, but they probably have a Jacobson's organ."

"What did they report on its sensing ability?"

"Burden speculated they could sense prey from a mile or more away, which if confirmed would be, I think, unprecedented in reptiles. Something else for investigation. It caused all sorts of problems at the camp. Katherine Burden very narrowly escaped an attack."

"And speaking of!" With real vehemence, Mary spun about and poked Peter in the chest with her pencil.

Peter took a startled step backward, "Excuse me?"

Mary stalked forward and stabbed him again. "That," she spat out, flailing her arm in the direction of the lizard, "is the reason why I object so strongly to King Kong. It wasn't supposed to be a primate at all. It was supposed to be a huge Komodo dragon, for which, I'll have you know, there is fossil evidence to support. And all that silly Ann Darrow character did was scream, giving us blondes everywhere an even worse reputation for idiocy than we already have, although I suppose her erotic subtext with the ape was quite enthralling, if you enjoy that sort of activity. But I'll have you know that Katherine Burden is a sensible person and she did not scream when she encountered the real thing. Dragon, that is. There aren't any giant apes in Indonesia. Katherine knew she'd been stupid to forget her gun when she went out into the bush, but she didn't throw a hysterical tantrum, or she certainly would have been eaten."

"Of course," Peter replied, now firmly holding his ground in the face of Mary's advancing onslaught. Another step back would send him into the barn owl looming over his shoulder on the shelf. "I see now. How perfectly reasonable."

Richard really did have to admire Peter's composure. In truth, what more could any man say when confronted by a very animated woman with a magnificent, vomit spewing lizard?

The Burden expedition and Katherine Burden's near lethal encounter are documented in her own notes. Douglas Burden discussed the trip with Meridan Cooper, the producer for the original 1933 King Kong film, who then took the story from giant lizard to giant ape, and cool brunette to screaming blonde. Mary owes her own existence to Katherine Burden, Ann Darrow (with less screaming), and several Great Women of British of science, so this is a bit of a homage to those forebears. From there, the road inexorably led to the magnificent, vomit spewing, drooling lizards.

Chapter 7
Argentum
In which Lucy and Edmund ruminate on the properties of silvery things.
Argentum

The Stone Gryphon, Part 1: Oxfordshire 1942
Chapter 7
Argentum
In which Lucy and Edmund ruminate on the properties of silvery things.

Anglo-Saxon Seolfor or siolfur; meaning 'silver', and Latin argentum meaning 'silver.' Silver is very ductile and malleable, and is exceeded in these properties only by gold and palladium. Excerpted from Silver Facts, Chemical & Physical Properties, A.M. Helmenstine, Ph.D.

The Silver Birch, *Betula pendula*, reaches a height of about 25m, with an age of about 60 - 80 years. The habitat of the Silver Birch is extensive as the tree tolerates a wide range of soils, but is best on dry sandy soils and can be found at higher altitudes than most of the broadleaved species. … The timber of the Silver Birch, is white to a pale fawn in colour and is very easily worked. It is a flexible and tough, but it is not very strong. Excerpted from The Native Trees of the Village of Euxton

"Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

Lucy pulled her nose out of Alice's Adventures (Alice was struggling with her flamingo during the croquet game), and replied to her brother, "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

"The dog did nothing in the night-time," Edmund continued.

"That was the curious incident," Lucy concluded. Through a mighty yawn, she added, "And why, dear brother, are we quoting from Silver Blaze, and are not asleep at this miserable hour? In fact," Lucy rolled over on her side to peer over the edge of her bed, "why is the floor of my bedroom covered with issues of the Journal Nature and Proceedings of the Royal Geography Society going back twenty years?"

Edmund stretched his neck and looked about, assessing the carnage with a campaigner's experienced eye. He had been lying on the hard floor (no carpets in the Scrubb home!) for several hours and would definitely feel it in the morning – which was not all that far away. "I suppose it is starting to look a bit like a library in here."

"No, it is looking rather like a dustbin. In my room, on my floor where I often prefer to walk, and where you are not going to spend another night."

"But Lu..." he started to whine. Heartless sister.

"If you were anything better than absolutely horrid to me on too little sleep, I would let you stay. But you aren't, so I won't."

She had a point. Edmund well knew it would be far worse if sleeping on the floor was compounded by too short a time on it. "Don't you want to know why I'm quoting Conan Doyle?"

"Well, you are likely doing so because you wish to draw my attention to the absence of something. As you are not quoting from the other stories, about the Naval Treaty or the Bruce-Partington plans, it's not about your and Peter's mad idea that our father is really spying on the Americans. I'm not saying you are wrong, understand, only that it is mad, but since the world has gone mad, might very well fit, if you follow me?"
Edmund nodded. He had no difficulty following Lucy's verbal loop de loops.

"So, it could be something about That Rotter Eustace and The Exceedingly Odd Harold and Alberta." He could hear how she capitalized their names. "But, there is nothing the least bit curious about them at all. Their tedium is all quite out and obvious."

Poor Lu. She really was getting the worse of it. Her goodness made such long exposure to banality a true trial.

"So, that leaves Peter and that you have observed something he is leaving out of his letters. Which is notable in itself given how often he is writing, and how very, very, very long those letters are."

"Capital, my dear Holmes! You really are brilliant!"

"No, Ed," she said with a tired smile. "You are brilliant. I am merely your not-quite-as-brilliant-but-more-intuitive younger sister. And those qualities tell me that you have been looking for something in those journals for the last three days, have finally found it, and cannot wait until a civilized hour tomorrow to share it with me." She put a ribbon in the book to mark her page, even though she knew every line by heart, and turned her full, if tired, attention to him.

Edmund rolled over from his stomach into a sitting position. "So, Peter has been writing about, what?"

"Everything. Every remarkable food he has tried, although I am really not too sure about the chicken feet and dried squid. He has complained that Duns Scotus is really boring. He has told us about termite mounds, and beaver dams, and something like an iguana that isn't with a broken tail, and bird nests, songbirds, eagles, hawks, great cats, moles and voles, foxes and hedgehogs and every animal in Oxfordshire. He is writing about British stone, corbels columns, glass ceilings, and bee hives. He is fascinated by owl pellets, which sound absolutely revolting, and colonies of leaf cutter ants that grow some weird fungus. She paused for a breath. "What else am I missing?"

"The Driver."

"Oh yes. Our brother has been going on at great length about the Arab Revolts, the Desert Fox, complaints about Eighth Army leadership, cheetahs and quicksand in the Qattara, how to sabotage a railway in the desert, and that camels have two stomachs and three toes, or is it three stomachs and two toes, and what he has learned about Islam, and about wickedly sharp knives of exquisite workmanship. He has become absorbed with how to accomplish swordplay with The Driver without giving away too much, although he also speculates that insofar as the Driver is concerned, it is rather too late. As of yesterday's letter, he had not yet solved this dilemma." As a final afterthought, Lucy added, "and, he is trying to master chopsticks."

"And what has he not written about?"

"His studying. Or his research for the Professor."

Edmund was abruptly and suddenly taken aback. More intuitive, indeed. "I...oh...you're right. He hasn't, has he?"

His sister frowned. "No. Not since the first week or so. He is enjoying himself so much with the Driver and the Russells..."

Lucy stopped in mid-sentence.

Now, she saw it too. "Oh dear."
Their brother was a master of the intentional omission. What Peter did not say was nearly always as significant, and sometimes more so, as what he did say. The omitted was not bad, necessarily, or even troublesome, but it always portended something of consequence to him.

"It's been bothering me," Edmund admitted. He was in between letters from Susan and all that involved and so had been fretting about Peter instead and spinning out all sorts of unpleasant scenarios. "Peter has been so effusive about everything else. Mrs. Russell must be there, yet he says nothing about her."

"He never even described her, did he? In that first letter?"

"No, and I did notice the absence, the dog that didn't bark, you know."

"But it was such a long letter. It's possible there were other things more interesting to him."

Edmund gave her a long, meaningful look and Lucy sighed resignedly. It was a particular sigh she reserved just for "Peter's doing it again."

"That's not very likely, I admit," she said, scrubbing her face. "Especially since he has not written much of anything else about her since."

"He did say she is researching gryphons."

"Might that be the reason?" Lucy asked hopefully. "Perhaps, he's worried she might deduce something, so he is avoiding her?"

"That is a reasonable conclusion, given how clever they all are. I thought it probable, at first." He worriedly picked at the edge of a 1927 journal. "But, don't you think, given the choice, Peter would rather research gryphon mythology? If he wanted to, he could find a way. That's when I started wondering if perhaps something was off."

"He would normally have said more about it as well," Lucy added thoughtfully. Gesturing expansively about the ruin of her room, she continued, "So, what are you looking for in all this paper? What do you think is going on?"

"I don't know what to think, Lu. But, I think I understand." Edmund pulled the carefully marked "Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Royal Geography Society - 1938" from the top of the closest tottering pile of magazines. He'd found it earlier in the day and had been looking ever since for something that might contradict it.

He leaned forward, offering the magazine to her. "Here, look at this photograph. It's of all the members of the Society who attended the meeting."

Lucy carefully took the article from him, and laid it out flat, smoothing the pages on her bed. "What am I looking for?"

"You will know when you see it."

Her finger began moving slowly across the two page photograph of the fifty-some Chartered Geographer members who had attended the meeting. Her finger stopped and Lucy inhaled sharply. She bent over the picture, studying it. "It can't be," she murmured.

"It's uncanny, isn't it?"

"It's..." Lucy was as lost as he'd been when first he saw the picture of Mrs. Russell. It was a hunch
he had dearly wished to have been wrong about.

"They aren't the same person, are they, Edmund? That's not possible, is it?"

"We are hardly ones to speak of what is possible. But no, I'm sure they are not. If nothing else, Mary Anning Russell is a paleontologist. She writes papers and goes on expeditions to wild places. Reading what Mrs. Russell has written, it is plain that their profound similarities are only in appearance."

"Dinan never did have much interest in books," Lucy commented dryly. "Or writing."

"Could she even read? Dinan also never would have worn that much clothing, certainly not around so many…" Edmund was going to say, "men" but amended that to the more inclusive "people." Dinan had been broad-minded and indiscriminate even by the standards of Trees, which was saying something.

Lucy stifled the giggle. Dinan had had a very limited range of interests, and, save for one particular activity at which she had been extraordinarily skilled and thoroughly relentless, had really been quite dull.

The glee slowly faded from his sister's face. "How was it," Lucy hesitated, bit her lip, and Edmund knew the source of her reluctance. His sister was dancing around some things that were very complex and painful. Carefully she continued, "Between them, I mean, at the end? I never have asked him. They had been together for so many years, longer even then you or I..."

He interrupted her before Lucy could dredge up what was not good for either of them and that this exercise had brought him far too close to. "They were together until the very end. She saw Peter the night before we returned. She told him about the White Stag."

"But it was Mr. Tumnus who told us of the rumor," Lucy injected. "Although…" Her mouth formed a wordless "oh," as she answered her own question. "He probably heard of it from the Western Wood Dryads."

Edmund nodded. "We did not ask about it at the time, but yes, I suspect so."

Lucy studied the picture again and then with finality, closed the magazine. She pulled herself upright on the bed, closed her eyes, and sat very still. Edmund gently withdrew the journal from the bed and returned it to the stack.

He remained on the floor, quietly waiting for her. He'd seen Peter among the Dryads after Caspian's coronation and had known why his brother had gone. Silver birch dryads weren't even especially long lived, but Peter would have checked, just to make sure if she and any of their other subjects were still alive. If Dinan had still been alive, they would have known it. Everyone would have known. She would have made a point of exposing herself in some remarkable and memorable way, like spreading pollen and catkins all over the place.

"Alright," Lucy eventually said. "I'm ready to discuss this a bit more."

"Did Aslan have anything to say to you?"

"He is very concerned that neither of us is sleeping enough and cautions you particularly that it will impair your judgment."

Edmund acted his physical age and stuck his tongue out at his cheeky sister. This was so much better than the alternative. He knew what he would have done if he had seen in a magazine an image of...
He shoved the thought brutally aside. *Not relevant.*

Lucy giggled then schooled herself to a more serious posture. "Edmund, you understand Peter's attachment to Dinan better than I do, how do you think he is reacting to this?"

"First off, I think that attachment is an overstatement. It was not, oh, just shoot me for saying, it. By Aslan, I thought I'd never have to have one of these awkward discussions again. For all that it went on for years, their arrangement was never intended to be permanent. It was committed, at least on Peter's side, but it was never serious."

"I don't have a bow, so I couldn't shoot you, and I will not borrow one of Alberta's knives now to make the point. Besides, I would only do so if you said something really stupid, which you didn't, because, really, how could anyone have ever been serious about Dinan?"

"You couldn't. Peter wasn't. It was practically the only thing about him that wasn't serious. That surety has been the only thing preventing me from hopping a train and haring off to Oxford to find out what is going on." Edmund knew he was projecting what he himself would have done. If there had been the chance, just the slimmest of chances... *Not relevant.*

Lucy reached down and squeezed his clenched hand. "Don't get that ticket yet, brother. We need to think this through." Releasing the reassuring hold, she settled back on her bed. "While I cannot replace the sort of clear assessment that Susan could offer, if it is any consolation, I do agree with you. I think one reason it went on for so long was that it was so uncomplicated. Peter was always wary of the women who came to Cair."

"He had reason to be. How many of them thought she would become *High Queen*? Was there one who comprehended going in that was not going to happen? Having to negotiate those bloody treaties for every damn would be lover of his …"

"Tut tut, brother. Language!" But, Lucy was smiling.

"You may laugh," Edmund grumbled. He couldn't help it. "I had to deal with them. The contractual provisions regarding authority, issue and succession went on for pages. Titles. Allowances. Warranties as to health; grounds for dissolution. Peter's were even worse than Susan's, you know. At least her suitors did not automatically assume entitlement to Narnian authority."

"Well, not additional authority, perhaps. Most of them did think they could assume her place on the dais."

"How did I get back on the subject of Narnian courtship contracts?" Edmund muttered through a yawn. They'd learned early on and painfully the need to manage the situation; and if it involved ink and treaties, it fell to him to do it. He still had nightmares about the weeks of negotiation that preceded the arrival of every princess, empress, dowager, and some queen's charming cousin/daughter/sister/niece who *so* wanted to be a lady at Cair Paravel and "learn the business of governance from the Narnian monarchs."

So maybe they all did not arrive with designs on something, or someone. But, eventually, invariably, Peter, or the thrones, or both, would catch her fancy and inflame her … whatever. He knew far too much about his brother's suitors because he had been the one to approve every single one of them. *In advance.* Preservation of Narnian sovereignty had required it and on that point they *and* their subjects permitted *no* ambiguity.

Ultimately, plainly delineating just what her Narnian authority *could* be (virtually none) had deterred all but the most determined, or brazen. Which, all things considered, hadn't been much of an
improvement, either. At least it had cut down on the sheer numbers of dropped towels, twisted ankles, and plunging necklines. It had been titillating at first, he had to admit. But, then it had become silly, and then really and truly tiresome. Exasperated by the uplifted breasts thrust about at every turn, Edmund had tried to issue an edict banning all corsets in Narnia. At least the termination clauses in the courtship contracts were succinct. *At will, by either party, without cause, no notice required.*

There had only been one instance in which the painful process had ended well and even in that instance, the consequences had not been foreseen ... Edmund again shoved the inconvenient thoughts aside. He did not want Lucy's sympathetic looks when they both had a history of regret and loss. *Not relevant.*

Peter had become so impervious to seduction that he had eventually become almost, but never quite, cynical. He just patiently tolerated the coy requests for dancing/archery/sword/swimming/riding lessons. (By the Lion, could they not come up with anything more original? And why didn't they ever improve?) Their brother endured it long past the point when his three siblings would have just run a sword, arrow, or dagger through the giggles. Peter, though, had persevered through it all, steadfast in his self-imposed duty, in addition to everything else, to assure a stable future for Narnia.

That had been, and would always be, the way of his older brother. Responsibility. Loyalty. Constancy. Selflessness. An all encompassing, unconditional love for his People, his Country, his Family.

"Edmund!" Lucy was snapping fingers at him. "You're nodding off."

He blinked, momentarily awash in parchment, foolishness, and copious female flesh too obviously displayed like wares at a market. "Sorry." He found he was speaking through clenched teeth. He would have a sore jaw tomorrow, too. "It's the subject matter, you know." It led to places he could not go, places filled with regret.

"You were raving about corsets again, weren't you?"

"Honestly, Lucy, a chap couldn't get through breakfast without…"

"Edmund!" Lucy interrupted his burgeoning tirade a bit sharply. "Our brother? Peter? Remember? *His* confounding situation about which he has chosen to keep us ignorant?"

"Right." Edmund took a deep, cleansing breath and let the summer breeze wafting through the always open windows settle upon him and clear his fretting mind.

Flatly, he announced, "I *don't* think Peter will do anything foolish."

Lucy just snorted. "Edmund, *really*. This is our brother of whom we are speaking; the man who is morally *incapable* of a self-interested act. You should be getting more sleep or reading fewer books censored for indecency if you are worried about *that*.*

He shrugged. Maybe he had been overly concerned about that particular angle, but then, he had been the one to negotiate all the damn treaties to avoid those angles in the first place. It had been his *job* to defend Their Sovereignty against any who might try to lay claim to a piece of it. He, better than anyone, understood how Jadis' deception concerning her own origins had legitimized her corrupt rule. He had owed their people that much.

"I am guessing Peter is thinking tactically and has settled on a strategy of suppressive avoidance. This is consistent with his omission of any reference to her in his letters, and a sound move, since he knows he will be leaving at the end of the summer."
Lucy rolled her eyes at the stratagem, but on this, Edmund knew better than she how their brother dealt with an unplanned or inconvenient feminine presence.

"Oh, and he's probably talking to Aslan a lot about it," Edmund added as an afterthought.

"I'm sure he is. But, is Peter listening to what Aslan is trying to tell him?"

Edmund froze, stunned, stranded and drowning in fatigue, longing, stress and paper. He could but marvel, again, at how Lucy so effortlessly confounded and moved. He found his throat suddenly constricting in profound gratitude for what Aslan's Grace had bestowed. Barely, he choked out, "This, Lucy, is the part where you say something so astounding, I am ashamed to have even bothered you with my venal conjectures."

His valiant, irrepressible, marvelous sister slid from her bed to the floor with a smile that would melt the most hardened soul. She took both his hands in hers.

"This is not a trial, or a trick, or temptation. Aslan would never do that. He loves Peter. Aslan wants Peter's full attention. 'Mind me, Son of Adam,' he is saying. 'Listen to me.' When you listen, Edmund, you hear him too."

"You are right, of course." He bent his face over her hands, feeling tears smart in his eyes, that weren't entirely due to the fact that they had been up almost all night. How could he ever deserve to know so well someone so very loved by God? The loss felt very fresh so late at night and Lucy understood and, thankfully, did not point out that he was very much projecting what he would have done had he seen a familiar face staring out from the pages of an academic accounting journal.

"Oh, my dear brother," Lucy whispered. "You have been so worried for Peter. You fret over us so thoroughly, and see trouble and deception in every shadow."

"Not without reason," Edmund murmured.

"I know and I love you for it. You help us avoid some truly spectacular messes." He felt her cool hands on his head, soothing, strengthening, reassuring. "But, Edmund, sometimes, they are just shadows. Sometimes, the very simplest of explanations is the right one."

Edmund couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out, and he sat up, wiping his eyes.

"I did not mean to be humorous," she retorted with a touch of asperity.

"I am sorry, Lu. It's not you. Or well, it is. You have just spouted a version of Occam's Razor which, if Peter had actually been paying attention to his work on Duns Scotus, he should have realized himself."

He let out another deep breath, willing away the tension that had been eating him. "So, I'm venal, you're amazing, and Peter is thick?"

"Well, you are not venal, just suspicious, and Peter is not always so thick, but yes, I am usually quite amazing."

He shifted, feeling a bit uncomfortable under his sister's knowing gaze, realizing he should say what she had certainly already divined. "I admit I have been envious of the fabulous things Peter is experiencing."

She took his hands in hers again. "I am as well, Edmund. It's natural to feel that way."
"I know what I would be getting out of it. But, what of Peter? Is he supposed to be neglecting his studies? Or, is Aslan trying to get him to focus upon them? What is Aslan trying to tell him?"

"He told me that was Peter's story; not mine. Nor yours."

"But…"

Lucy looked at him very firmly and Edmund swallowed the question. He would have to think about it later and, as he was not on the scene, all he had to go on were Peter's carefully written letters. Back to Silver Blaze, he supposed, and the dogs that weren't barking. What could Aslan want? It could not be an accident that Peter had found himself in an amazing building with a window devoted to cats.

"If you have been worried about Peter, I admit, brother, I have been uneasy for Susan."

Aslan, guide me here. "Why?"

"You really believe that Father has gone to America because he is spying?"

"It is hard to know for certain, Lucy. I don't have a network of my own anymore, only hunches and research." With Lucy asking so plainly, he had to say more. "I do believe espionage is a reasonable assumption based upon the facts as we know them."

"Your hunches are usually spot on, Edmund, particularly when you start talking like Sherlock Holmes." Lucy yawned. "I am concerned for Susan because in the past when we dealt with such things, the two of you were always in concert and of one mind. She will sorely miss your counsel if they have, as you are trying very hard not to say, sailed into intrigue."

For a second time that night, Edmund was dumbstruck. He really should know better by now. Lucy patted his cheek. "Close your mouth, brother. We've already established I'm amazing."

"But…"

"Is what you are sitting on. Go to bed, Edmund."

"I shall, my Great Souled sister." He kissed her forehead and she squeezed his hands in return.

"Try not to yell too loudly at Eustace when he wakes you in two hours."

His dreams, predictably, were not at all restful as, trailing parchment, quills, and ink, Edmund chased barely clothed ladies throughout Cair Paravel with demands that they sign Clause 34 and Addendum F before being permitted in the presence of the High King.

Chapter 8 - Lions' Business
In which there is a look back and Susan and Edmund discuss posh frocks and foggy bottoms in the swamp.
Lions' Business

Chapter 8
Lions' Business
In which there is a look back and Susan and Edmund discuss posh frocks and foggy bottoms in the swamp.

They were careening toward total bedlam. A department store had, to all appearances, burst apart in the girls' room. Edmund knew his and Peter's room was no better, but with rather more socks and books, and rather less frippery. At this point, they were going to be forgetting things simply because they would not be able to find them.

"Peter!" They all heard their mother shriek from the bottom of the stair. "Do you have enough…"

A looming bulk leaning in the doorway, Peter didn't even wait. Calling back over his shoulder, he bellowed, "Yes, Mum. I'm packed. I have everything."

"Do you have…"

"Yes!"

"What about…"

"Yes!"

"Edmund! Did you pack you pack enough pants?"

Stark raving mad. Groaning, Edmund tipped backwards onto Susan's bed, with a go ahead wave of his hand toward Peter.

"Yes!" Peter yelled back, pitching his voice a bit higher.

"Edmund! Get off my hat!" Susan hissed.

He rolled over, pulled the thing out, and flipped the boater toward Susan's opened, very neatly packed, steamer trunk. The hat sailed across the room and settled squarely in the trunk.

"Lucy! I need you downstairs now!" A tinge of panic had crept into Mum's voice.

"She'll be down in a moment, Mum. Really! I'll help!" Peter called back down.

There was a loud crunch and a word drifted up the stair that they did not often hear their mother utter.

"It will be fine, Lucy, really," Susan soothed, pulling their youngest sister into a tighter hug. The girls were both huddled on Lucy's bed. "You'll be with Edmund. I'm sure we'll be able to send letters from America. Peter will even write." A fixed glare from Susan to her older brother demanded that letters had better be forthcoming, or, High King or not, he would have to answer to her for his failure.

"No he won't!" Lucy mumbled into Susan's shoulder, still sniffing. "It's going to be horrid."
"I will write," Peter assured her. "And it won't be that bad."

It was horrendous and he could stand it no longer. The heel of one of Susan's evil shoes was poking him in the ear. Edmund yanked it out from under his shoulder and began tossing into the air this female torture device masquerading as footwear. "Lucy! Our brother and sister are lying to us. It's going to be ghastly at Harold and Alberta's. You and I know it's going to be ghastly, and we will just have to make the best of it. Just think, they can come visit us on the first Sunday of every month as you and I grow old together, moulder in prison after we are convicted of murdering our cousin."

"Edmund!"

"Susan!" he mimicked back. Just a bit higher and harder and he might be able to impale the wickedly small heel of the shoe in the ceiling.

Lucy snickered, which was the most encouraging sound they'd heard from her in three days.

Lunging forward with the finesse of the swordsman he still was, Peter snagged the shoe in mid-arc, and sent it with a tip into the trunk to join the boater.

"Come on, Lu." Peter held a hand out. "Let's go help Mum fold laundry before she goes completely round the bend."

Lucy struggled up and moved from Susan's arms to Peter's. "Are you both coming too?"

Edmund pulled himself upright and caught a hand signal from Susan. "No, not yet. We'll be down in a bit."

Peter gave them one his special, severe, Most Royal Frowns; Lucy's frown was more quizzical.

"It's Lions' business," Susan said.

The Most Royal Frown deepened. The MRF, however, tended to forget that his younger brother and sister were Royal as well and had lived with the MRF all their lives, plus an additional fifteen years or so. They were both quite immune to its effects.

Standing, Edmund shooed his brother and sister toward the door. "Go on, Heart and Soul. Scat! This is a Concert of Minds. We will tell you in due time."

The door shut on the glower of the MRF.

Edmund scooped another high heeled shoe off the floor and tossed it into the steamer. "Sorry," he felt obligated to say as Susan winced.

"Lion's business?" he asked.

"Narnia is not the only nation with a Lion as its emblem." Susan would chide so when he spoke with something less than the customary acumen his sister expected. "Lions figure prominently in the official blazon of the United Kingdom as well."

"Right." She shouldn't have to remind me of that. Particularly at this moment.

"Get the notebook, please, would you Edmund? It's right on top in the trunk."

Carefully setting her precious shoes aside, he lifted the plain notebook out and joined her on Lucy's bed. He had not had time to organize his own notes especially, and pulled the scraps from his pocket as he handed the book to his sister.
In the carefully written pages she turned, he saw both her neat script and their personal cipher. "The more I read and overhear, the less I understand it," Susan said, settling on a page of code. "Am I missing something, Edmund? Is there some aspect to this trip that makes even the remotest bit of sense?"

"No. It's a load of rubbish." He unfolded one scrap of paper. "Here, I found this in their bedroom."

"Mum's packing list!" Susan was both appalled and impressed. "No wonder she's gone spare."

"I know. I feel badly, but didn't have time to copy and return it. I'll give it to her as soon as we are done." He tapped the paper. "The point is, if Father is on leave to lecture, why is she packing his uniforms? All of them? And the medals?"

"Plainly, he is not lecturing."

"I have come to doubt he is even on leave," Edmund added.

Susan scowled. There all were, by necessity, fairly skilled at fibbing to others. Lucy tended to be emotional about it, and Peter would erect great verbal constructs to avoid it, which did sometimes give him away when he wasn't careful. While neither he nor Susan had the same difficulty, she took great offense when others lied to her. As she reasoned, if someone kept information from her because of her age or sex, it was not then fair to blame her age and sex for the resulting poor decision.

"You would understand this better than I, but it does seem that Mum is bringing every posh frock she owns."

Looking over the list, Susan said after a moment, "She is bringing everything, regardless of season or style, which truly is nerves, and not reasonable at all. She's been after me to do the same. Her face twisted into a slight wince of dissatisfaction. "Not that I really have that much. With clothing rationed as it is, we're really not in a position to put our best forward."

To attribute Susan's preoccupation with outward appearances to vanity was far too simplistic a characterization of her subtlety. Susan had a public face, and a private one. Like an actress, she would use her clothing, bearing, and style as circumstances dictated, to blend, to distinguish, to dominate, to disappear. Where warranted, she would happily don ill-fitting, rationed, threadbare clothing. However, if their parents were packing in anticipation of wearing their dress uniforms, Susan would deem it necessary to have hers as well and would feel the absence acutely.

"Wouldn't you be better off buying the frocks or whatever was appropriate once you arrive? That's what you would do in Narnia, when you wanted to be sure you were adhering to local custom."

Susan folded the packing list carefully and handed it back to him with a quick hug. "You are absolutely correct, Edmund. Nor is clothing rationed in America as strictly as it is here."

Shuffling the papers in his hands, he said, "To the problem at hand, if he is not lecturing, what is Father doing there?"

"If Father is a spy, he has much to learn. At the very least, he should lock his satchel before bed."

"It would be easy enough to pick, regardless."
They both shared a secret smile. It had been a Dwarf who had taught them that particular skill. Like archery, sword play, knifework, diplomacy and flirtation, lockpicking operated on much the same principles, both Here as well as There.

"Mum doesn't know it yet, but someone has learned she can type and take shorthand. She has been detailed for the summer to the British Embassy in Washington."

Edmund wondered when Father would tell Mum that – if he were wise, not until they had arrived safely in America. "So much for her vacation."

"Vacation!" Susan bit the word out with no small amount of contempt. "It's ridiculous, Edmund. We simply have no business crossing the Atlantic, certainly not for a vacation. German U-boats are attacking merchant ships up and down the East Coast of America. It's no wonder Mum and Father are panicked about the crossing."

"That's what suggested to me that he is not really on leave. I don't think our parents would agree to this journey given the dire circumstances unless there are orders involved of some sort. Do the cables say anything about the arrangements?"

Susan turned to another page of code, reviewing it. He looked over her shoulder, following along as she read. "We are traveling by convoy in a troop transport across what I assume is a northern route into Halifax, Nova Scotia. From there, we take rail to New York. We're to meet with Mr. Stephenson or his deputy at the British Security Coordination. After that, it becomes very vague. Father may be dividing his time between New York and Washington; my impression is that his duties are still evolving. Mum and I will go on to Washington. They've rented a flat for us near the Embassy."

Her bland recitation of the route brought home forcefully how deadly serious this was, for all of them. "Susan?"

She looked up from her notes. "Yes?"

Edmund cleared his throat. "About those U-boats..."

Susan shrugged and corrected an entry in the notebook with her pencil; it looked like she had misspelled "Nova Scotia." "If our convoy is hit, I will be with Aslan again."

His sister was brave. By the Lion, he'd seen her cool resolve a hundred times over. Still, the helplessness of such a death would be horrible. He put a gentle hand on her arm.

"It would be understandable if you were frightened, Susan. Mum and Father obviously are."

"I am not afraid, at least not about the crossing. I simply do not believe Aslan sent me away from Narnia only to burn and drown in the ocean." Her hair had fallen in a curtain hiding her face; her hand paused in her annotations. When she spoke, it was with all the firm gentleness and wisdom for which she had been renowned. "Edmund, I would have stayed, with Caspian if need be, for the good of Narnia. But, Aslan did not so will it; Narnia is closed to me now. Before sending me back, He said there were others tasks for me."

Leaving the pencil to mark the page, Susan flipped her notebook to the inside cover.

The seal of the United Kingdom stared back, the three lions passant guardant in the first and fourth quadrants, and the golden crowned Lion Rampant as the dexter supporter opposite the Unicorn. She had likely cut the image from some book or government pamphlet. Susan ran her fingers over the seal.
"We all bore something very like this Lion Rampant for years, Edmund. Do you think I've gone as daft as Mum because I believe that there must be a connection between what I did There, and what I am intended to do Here?"

He had always thought of the worlds as separate and unrelated. There. Here. Narnia. England. Yet, while inside the Wardrobe they had fought and won wars and innumerable skirmishes, prevailed against brutal tyrants, twice, and rebuilt a land that had been terrorized by an occupying force for one hundred years. Was it really so different? Could he seriously look at the seal of the United Kingdom and believe it a mere coincidence?

He would not presume to know the Lion's great purposes. On the other hand, "Aslan never acted without purpose," he finally said.

"You see it too, then; I knew you would," she said with some smug satisfaction. "And so, as I prepare for this journey, like so many others that have gone before, you can understand why I find my thoughts returning to our favorite Good Beasts." There was a hint of slyness in her tone.

"Rats and Crows."

"Yes," she replied softly, fingertips still tracing the Lions.

Rats and Crows. That had been their catchphrase, both a cipher and, literally, descriptive of the network they had built together in defense of Narnia. Now she was going to America with Father and Mum on the very flimsiest of pretexts. Leave it to Susan to be the first of them to find and embrace a calling on this side of the Wardrobe.

"I find it ironic, I suppose, that if our Father has been drawn into subterfuge or diplomacy, that it is likely you could teach him the craft of it, Susan."

She raised her eyes to his and nodded. "That is how I have begun to see it." Now she clasped his hand tightly. "I don't fear dying in the Atlantic, Edmund. I do fear going into this situation blind, with so little intelligence."

"I've done what I can." He returned her touch, then fished for his remaining notes and unfolded another scrap as she returned to the marked page of her own notebook. "I've not had time to learn much; the papers I have reviewed are in my room and I will give them to you before you go. In a nut, Mr. Stephenson is a wealthy Canadian with all sort of English business interests. He's an inventor, industrialist, World War I hero, that sort of thing. What he is doing in New York hiring writers and logicians like Father is anyone's guess."

Susan tapped her pencil with some small modicum of irritation, never fond of his temporizing. "I'm not interested in anyone's guess, Edmund. I need facts, and I want your opinion."

It did sometimes seem that his elder sister forgot that he did not have a King's access and resources here. There was no network of Rats and Crows throughout the Known Lands to relay intelligence to the spiders, runners, and handlers who held the strings that led back to Cair Paravel. "Susan," he replied, a bit too patiently, "everything I know is gleaned from the heavily censored papers, the same as everyone else."

She just arched an eyebrow in challenge, pencil still tapping.

Oh very well. "The current prevailing view is that while the Pacific is all fine and well, England needs the Americans fully engaged on this side of the Atlantic or we'll all be speaking German in less than two years."
"Or we'll all be dead," Susan added helpfully, returning to her notetaking. "Although if all of Europe, Africa and Asia fall to fascism, I suppose the trains might run on time."

Edmund laughed, in a hollow, gallows sort of way. It might be amusing if it were not so horribly probable. "I did see one opinion paper say that you can count upon the Americans to do the right thing, but only after they have exhausted every other option."

He continued, dutifully reporting so that his sister would be as fully briefed as the circumstances permitted. The quality of the information was really pitiful, but it was all they had. If this was His will at work, they would have to trust to Aslan to guide her. "There are some very ardent and respected voices in the American Congress and elsewhere, going as high as Vice President Wallace, who really believe the world would be better off without the British Empire; if the Germans break us of that, perhaps, it is reasoned, it would be for the best."

"One does wonder how they can criticize our policies in India, yet seemingly not condemn Hitler." She flared with a hint of anger. "That is a view, of course, I shall keep to myself."

"Again though, what role a Canadian millionaire has in this very dodgy business and what contribution he sees someone like Father making, I cannot adequately explain, except with wild conjecture. Do the cables give any clue?"

Susan glanced at her cipher, quickly skimming what she had copied from their father's papers. Her finger was moving too rapidly down the page for Edmund to follow. "Some of their opacity makes a bit more sense actually, in light of what you have just said. It does occur to me that if Americans must be convinced to do the right thing, perhaps the British might be planting propaganda to try to push America into more fully supporting England in the Europe and North Africa."

"Hence, writers and logicians."

Susan shrugged. "It is possible. Also, at first I was very confused by the prospect that England might be spying on her allies, until I considered that we did precisely the same thing. Archenland was our friend and the Lone Islands were part of our kingdom. Yet, we had agents among our allies, as well as among our enemies so that they might direct policy in our favor at need. I would assume Churchill does the same."

There was another possibility as well. "Rats and Crows were also very useful for spreading rumors we wished to circulate in foreign courts. I could see some applicability of a strategy like that in America, as well."

They had learned just how effective that rumormongering had been from Aravis. The runaway Tarkheena had overheard the Tisroc repeat back, nearly verbatim, the rumor they had planted in his Court. The Narnian monarchs, young though they were, had killed the old enchantress and her never-ending winter with aid of strong magic and were supported by a demon of hideous aspect and irresistible maleficence who appeared in the shape of a Lion. A widely circulated report that any attack upon Narnia was truly a dark and doubtful enterprise would, he and Susan had hoped, give their would-be enemies pause. The ploy had, very nearly, succeeded completely. Edmund had later used the Rats and Crows to assure that those who would war with Narnia knew of Rabadash's transformation. There were fates worse than that of an ass and, it was rumored, the wrath and sorcery of the free Northern land would surely be unleashed upon Her enemies in even more terrible ways if Narnia's peace was disturbed again.

Susan sighed a little and closed her notebook. "I want to believe this is why I am going, Edmund. Yet, if it is, it's a tall order. To all appearances, I am only fifteen, and it will be so difficult to accomplish anything with such a handicap."
Edmund snorted in disbelief. "Oh what a lot of rot, Susan. First, if all you do is prevent Father and Mum from doing anything stupid, count it a significant success."

"As for age," he gestured toward her vanity now piled high with cosmetics, scarves, feminine paraphernalia, and the debris of hurried packing. "Surely you are bringing your face? Your lipsticks, stockings and whatnot?"

She nodded, smiling at his near epithet. She knew he did not approve of what women would do to themselves to advance their purposes, although he understood and even appreciated the utility of it. "With the face and high heeled shoes, you can pass for eighteen to twenty with no difficulty at all."

Susan looked more heartened at that. "It is a bit easier, having already been that age once before. In fact, I do prefer it, as I do not always have to check what I say to assure it is ahhhh…"

"Experientially appropriate?" He finished, through a grin. It was a problem they all had, possessing sophistication and understanding that children, even those living through the Blitz, really should not have.

Susan laughed and threw her arms about him for a hug. "I am going to miss you, Edmund. I cannot fathom how I shall do this without you."

He pulled her into a tighter embrace. "You will be brilliant. You cannot help but be brilliant. I'm sure of it. You'll have to write me all about it."

"About that." Susan pulled away and retrieved her notebook. "A cable said that we will be able to write and that our letters will go through the Embassy, back to England, with a diplomatic courier. You all will be able to respond to us the same way, through the War Office. That is the good news."

"And the bad?"

"It will all be cleared through censors first."

"Oh. Yes, I suppose it would be. Which means…" He trailed off, considering the unpleasant prospect.

"Precisely. I am going to have to be very careful in how I describe the situation and ask for your advice, and you will have to exercise similar caution in responding. We plainly cannot use our cipher, either."

He mulled it over. Use of anything peculiar would raise questions best avoided. They needed something that was subtle, personal and idiosyncratic to him and Susan, and that could pass without comment.

It was so blindingly obvious.

"I know, Su! Use Narnia."

Susan lit up as he said it, easily following the scheme. "Oh yes, that would work. If I describe it in Narnian terms, with Narnian names and places, you will understand the reference well enough."

"Put them off further, take it another step!" Edmund exclaimed, feeling very enthusiastic about the plan. "Pretend it is a story that you are telling your younger brother and sister. If you phrase it in terms of talking animals, centaurs and giants, any censor will just assume it is a silly game among children. I'll respond in kind and no one will be the wiser."
"You are brilliant, Edmund. That will work perfectly." She quickly tore out a sheet of paper from her notebook. "Let's just jot down a few names now that we know will come up so we have a common Key." She began quickly writing. "I'll use Lune and Iris for Father and Mum; Archenland will be New York. Mr. Stephenson, his deputies, the BSC, they will all, collectively, be Sallowpad."

That would have pleased the old Raven and the Chief of the Narnian Murder. "Use others from our network as you need," Edmund said, warming to the idea. "I will catch enough to know your meaning. What about Washington, do you want to use Cair Paravel?"

Susan frowned and shook her head. "Certainly not. Washington, by all accounts is a wretched, sweltering, mosquito-filled swamp. Did you know it is considered a tropical posting, like India?"

He grimaced. "Ugh. I had no idea it was like that."

"Summers are horrid and winters are muddy. Their foreign office is in a place called foggy bottom. That simply cannot signify anything good."

Tapping her pencil thoughtfully to her lips, Susan finally announced, "Yes, I have it. Washington shall be Tashbaan, and President Roosevelt shall be the Tisroc."

"Susan!" Edmund was truly horrified. "You cannot go into this thinking in such terms."

Susan awarded him a frosty look. "It is my story, brother, and I shall refer to them as I deem appropriate. Do not tell me what I can and cannot do."

"But,"

Susan was already writing the names into her Key. "My personal history aside, I do not believe we can yet refer to America truly as our ally, Edmund. So, maybe they have a base in Ireland. American pilots are not yet flying in Europe; American soldiers are not yet dying in Africa. Until they really and truly join us, they are against us."

At that extremely tense moment, there was a knock on the door. "Edmund? Susan?" It was His MRF-ness.

"Come in, Peter," Susan called.

Edmund shot her a dirty look. "We are not done with this, Susan."

Peter strolled into the noticeably chilly room. "Is the Concert concluded… yet?" His tone implied that it better well be.

"Yes," Susan said quickly; "No," Edmund contradicted.

Edmund shoved the purloined packing list at Peter. "Give this to Mum. It should keep you all occupied until Susan and I finish this business."

It was really remarkable how Peter could fill a space with his authority. No crown, no sword, only sixteen, and still he managed it. "Lucy and Mum do not need your squabbling now," he barked. "Resolve your differences and then come downstairs and help as you ought."

There was a flash of rebellion in Susan's eyes, but Peter would not deign to argue with her. It was his command, but couched as an appeal to a higher need that made them absolute heels if they did not obey. With that, the High King turned and went back out the door, the room now rather warmer than it had been when he entered.
"I hope he doesn't look at the list," Edmund murmured, rising and shutting the door again. "He'll be really angry then."

"He won't," Susan assured.

Probably not. Peter was both rather high minded, and operated under the assumption that if Susan and Edmund did such things, he did not need to do so. He understood it well enough, and appreciated its effects, but in the division of labour, Rat and Crow was their business.

Susan was already copying her Key into the notebook, using their cipher. "I will finish this up, and then we can go help Mum."

"Susan," he began.

"Don't, Edmund. I know what you would say. You are wrong."

She continued writing in the notebook, ignoring him. Finishing the Key, she closed the notebook, set it on the bed, and wordlessly handed him his copy. He stared at the words. Tashbaan. Tisroc. He sincerely hoped that in another month he would not read the name Rabadash.

Rising, she crossed to the vanity and began picking through the scattered frippery, assembling the elements she would need for the faces she would wear in America. He had no idea what it all was. He did know how very well she could use it. The particulars had been a bit different in Narnia where she had relied upon jewels, ornaments, and gowns. She had worn her faces for the good of Narnia. Now, she would do so for England. Edmund did not want her going into this feeling she had to do so in order to prove her worth.

Divining his thoughts, for certainly she understood his concerns, Susan finally sighed, pausing as she placed slim tubes of lipstick into a small red bag.

"Tashbaan was my failure. Good Beasts and men died because of my folly. I will not make such a mistake ever again."

He crossed the room, joining her at the ridiculously feminine table. She stiffened as he put his hands on her shoulders. "Susan, it wasn't your fault. It…"

"Edmund," she cut in, shrugging off his hands and the consolation he offered, "I will not hear it. Being forgiven does not eliminate the guilt one feels. Surely you of all people understand that?"

He went cold. As cold as Jadis had been. Only Susan ever spoke thus. It enraged him, both because she would mention it at all, and that she would equate her ill judgment with his betrayal. Edmund found he was clenching his fists, digging his fingernails into his palms, willing control. He had to remember this was about Susan, not his own failure, long past and for which he had long since atoned, many times over. To wallow in his own might-have-beens would not aid his sister now.

In the vanity mirror, their eyes met and Susan's countenance twisted in self reproach. "Forgive me, brother." She turned back to face him, and took his hands in hers, prying his fingers apart. His nails had left dark half moon marks in his hands.

"I know you mean well, Edmund, but I do not want to forget my mistake. I must make reparations for it, as you so often did."

She never did fight fair.

"Don't go into this, Susan, believing it is your penance," he pleaded, genuinely fearing for her. "It is
not. You have nothing to atone for."

"Narnia is over for me, Edmund. She does not need me and I can never repay her for what I caused. England calls me now, and I will answer. I will do what I must."

He stared down at their clasped hands, feeling as apprehensive as he ever had. *I must trust her and place my faith in Aslan. He will not lead her astray.*

Susan raised her fingers to his chin, bringing his downcast eyes to her. His sister was so strong, so shrewd, so sensible, it shattered him to think she felt the need to make reparations for what those *bastards* had done to her. They had stripped her of her confidence, and made her doubt her own wisdom and worth.

"Will you bless me, brother? You always do that so beautifully." Edmund swallowed hard, and nodded. She bowed her head; he set his hands gently upon her crown.

"Aslan, King of All, First and Last, Your gentle daughter begins her journey. Do thou guard her that she may reach its end. Grant the light of Your wisdom to her path. Instill in her an abiding awareness of her duty to You, to her country, to her fellows. Guide her in each thought, word and deed, that Your daughter may fulfill Your Will. These things, Your humble servant asks."

Shaking, he dropped his hands. Susan threw her arms around him. "Thank you, Edmund," she whispered in his ear. "Aslan guard your journey and don't murder Eustace, or I shall be very cross with you indeed."

The Gentle Queen darted around him, and out the door.

---

**Chapter 9**

*Cross-pollination*

*In which Richard and Peter discuss tawdry affairs, mighty deeds, and foul-tempered hummingbirds.*

---

I've tried to cut and paste a link to the United Kingdom Royal Coat of Arms but to no avail. If you wish to see it, try googling that term.

A special thanks to Miniver who nudged me to do more with Susan's story than pack her and the parents off to New York and Washington under rather dubious circumstances.
Chapter 9
Cross-pollination Part 1
In which Richard and Peter discuss tawdry affairs, mighty deeds, and (eventually) foul-tempered hummingbirds.

Our England is a garden, and such gardens are not made
By singing: -"Oh, how beautiful!” and sitting in the shade.
Rudyard Kipling, "The Glory of the Garden"

Peter was waiting for him at the Botanical Garden. Asim had insisted on accompanying him there and Richard's temper was wearing very, very thin by the time they made it to the walled garden's entrance.

"For the last time, Asim, NO!" Richard erupted, jerking himself free from the solicitous arm that had been supporting him. "I know that Mary put you up to this, but I'm here, I'm fine, Peter is here, we'll be fine, and now get the Hell out!"

He saw Peter discreetly take a step or two away, and pretend not to hear the argument.

Asim, of course, had weathered tempers far worse than his own. He merely stood, implacable and unmoving as a rock. "You realize, Richard, that your wife will berate me worse than you are now," he responded, annoyingly patient. "You are the lesser evil."

"Don't test me on that. All you'll do is make me even angrier, and won't Mary be furious, then?"

It was to be a very important day. It was so perfect, Richard had rather egotistically assumed that it was no less than God's own Will that had seen to such a lovely, clear afternoon. He'd been planning it, taking notes, and knew that his own anticipation had worked him into a right proper state. He looked rotten, actually felt a quite a bit better than rotten, but at this point, it was all just varying lesser or greater degrees of rotten. There would no better, and it could be much worse.

"Peter?" Asim called. "A word with you please?"

Nursemaids. His friend and his wife had become nursemaids. He wasn't that bad, yet. Why were they so eager to hurry the process?

Peter stepped back into the conversation he'd never really left. "Yes?"

"Richard is not to exert himself. No taking plant or soil samples, no capturing of dragonflies and bees, no climbing trees to look in bird nests or looking under rocks for newts. Richard, of course, may direct you to do those things, and on that, I have no opinion."

The boy smiled, looking nothing but pleased at the prospect of lifting rocks and climbing trees. "I can abide by those requests of course, but it is Richard whose word you need, not mine."

"Traitor. I'll get back at you for this, Peter. Oh yes, I will."

"Consider this. You will both be accountable to Mary. Richard, will you give your word that you
won't undertake anything that would alarm your dear, loving, utterly devoted, and extremely over
protective wife?"

"That's very dishonorable of you, Asim."

"Yes, it is," the soldier agreed.

"I give you my word that I will not attempt any of those things you mentioned, or otherwise
intentionally do something that would alarm Mary."

It was so good, and so rare, when Asim was absolutely gobsmacked. Then, true to form, he turned
immediately wary. He knew a quid pro quo was lurking somewhere. "And in exchange?"

"You leave the garden, go at least one quarter mile away, and give me your word that you will not
eavesdrop."

Peter looked rather more interested at this point. As well he should.

"I'm hurt that you would suggest such a thing."

"Be hurt all you want." In fact, this had been the one point on which Richard was determined to
prevail. He did not want Asim around and would gladly agree to any other condition to obtain that
one.

"Why do you wish me gone?" Asim asked, all insinuating and suspicious, with deliberately narrow
and cunning glances in Peter's direction.

"Because Peter and I are conducting a scandalous and tawdry affair," Richard retorted, smiling in
spite of himself as Peter choked on a guffaw. "You'd tell Mary, and then she'd want to join us, and
the whole thing would be..."

"Enough!" Asim interrupted, purpling up a bit himself. "I would have preferred to go my whole life
and into the next not burdened with that particular horror." He took a breath, and spoke more gently,
and with all the guile he could muster, "Richard, please, it would ease my mind if you could tell me
something remotely credible."

It was, he had to admit, fair. "Because I'm going to be administering an oral exam to Peter and he's
not going to answer as well if you are here. He'll be worried you might report back to Mary, which
she, in turn might be report back to Digory, and which he, in turn, might feel obligated to report back
to Peter's parents."

Peter looked well and truly alarmed by this, perfectly underscoring Richard's argument for being left
alone.

Asim closely inspected Peter, who indeed had now turned ghostly white with apprehension. Peter
added a nicely ambiguous, and very heartfelt, "You wouldn't! Would you?" His voice even cracked
a bit. Splendid.

"I'm afraid he would, Peter," Asim replied with great sympathy. He was quite familiar with Richard's
truly fearsome reputation with students. "Very well," he acceded. To Peter, he said, "I'll be across the
Magdalen Bridge if you need anything. I'll be back in two hours."

Peter looked so deflated, Richard couldn't help but add, "Three hours. It's going to be a long exam."

Struck by a true inspiration, Richard hit upon an alternative far superior to listening in where he
wasn't wanted. "Better yet, Asim, rather than waiting for us, why don't you go find Mary in the
library and glower at Copeland's assistants while she orders them about. That should be fun for you.
Be sure to finger your knives."

This would not be a difficult dilemma for Asim. The soldier's smile was thin and grim. He curtly
nodded to them both, turned, and left the Garden, walking rapidly. Richard held his hand to quiet
Peter's question. They watched Asim's retreating back as he turned onto High Street and
disappeared.

With some relief, Richard thought it might just work. Asim was far too curious about Peter and had
definitely shared his suspicions with Mary. Granted, as far as he knew, he and Asim were intrigued
by different things. Hopefully, the prospect of entertainment and Richard's very firm, logical request
would keep him away for a while. Having someone else around would send this all to Hell.

"Don't look so glum, Peter. It won't be that bad."

Peter added skeptical to the very worried look. "Does there have to be an exam?" The desperate plea
was practically a whine.

Richard silently shook his head, no, still not entirely trusting that Asim was out of earshot.

"Oh," Peter responded miserably, at odds with the relieved grin. "Could't we make it a bit shorter?"

Richard allowed himself a smile. "Perhaps just a bit. Come on. There's only the one entrance. If we
go into the middle of the garden, we'll be able to see anyone approach, and be far enough away from
the walls that he can't overhear us."

"Would Asim really eavesdrop as you say?"

"Of course he would. He tries to blame Mary, but he is a spy. He can't help himself. The only thing
that might get him out of here would be that he really does not want to listen to you drone on about
raptor eyesight, and me berating your incomplete answers. Compared to the prospect of terrorizing
the trils, it's simply no contest. He'll rant and swear at them in Turkish, German, Italian and Arabic
and pick his teeth and nails with long knives. He'll be in a truly terrifying state and can keep it up for
hours."

Richard walked toward the benches that lined the center path. There were songbird feeders, a pond,
and lots of painful rose bushes.

"Is that how Mary got Dr. Copeland to lend his assistants to her?"

"Oh, that was a threat of a different sort," Richard called over his shoulder. "She told him that she
was in the queue to jury his next paper."

"Isn't that process supposed to be anonymous?"

Richard snorted. "Really, Peter. Don't be naïve. There aren't that many of us in England who do this
sort of thing and even if there were a hundred, Mary could identify the author with no effort at all.
The possibility of Mary Anning Russell taking a truly critical eye to one's work is enough to make
even the most obstinate scientist cooperative."

He'd found a bench with the privacy and view he wanted; Peter hadn't kept pace, though. Turning
about, he saw Peter a few feet back, crouched by a thicket of flowering shrubs.

Well, it had to happen. They'd been watching a nest of finches there for the last week or so and
there'd been no way the smallest fledgling was going to survive, out competed and harassed by its larger nestmates.

Peter pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and Richard could see him gently move the tiny body further under the bush. The first time Richard had seen Peter near a dead animal, it had been a mole pup. He'd taken the boy's out of proportion reaction as squeamishness, which even then had seemed thoroughly out of character. Later, observing more closely how Peter related to birds and mammals, both living and dead, Richard had come to a far different conclusion. Profound reverence motivated Peter's actions; not distaste or fear. Peter regarded each of these small garden creatures as dearly as any child or friend.

For all that Peter did not understand the theology of the Franciscans he had been researching for Digory, he lived it more fully than even his tutor. For Peter, animals and the world they occupied were as sacred to God as humans, Brothers and Sisters all.

They had had a rather spirited argument when Richard tried to keep him from burying the mole. Richard had finally prevailed by reasoning that other of God's creatures might need the mole's remains and one way or another, it would be returned to the Earth. That had become their compromise. As they had rambled through the university, the gardens, greens, and streams, when they found some dead bird or animal, Peter would always pause. He would reverently place the body in a secluded place and say some barely audible prayer. Only then would Peter return to whatever they had been exploring or discussing.

"Seen it safely off into God's hands?" Richard asked when Peter joined him at the bench.

"And why must they be hands?" Peter responded, as he carefully folded the handkerchief and returned it to his jacket. It had become an amusing discussion for them, albeit one that Richard had noticed Peter did take quite seriously.

"You know I won't ascribe any such physical limitation to the Divine. If He or She desires hooves, paws, or wings, He or She is omnipotent, and may merely wish them into being."

Peter settled himself on the grass, with a view of the pond and the feeders. "So, no examination, then?"

"No, but I did want Asim well away. You and I are overdue for a long talk and that wasn't going to happen with him hanging about."

The boy turned back to look him more squarely in the eye, but not unduly concerned. Peter was not wary as he had been when they'd first started the summer. Richard had given him no reason to be; he hadn't pushed where Peter had not been willing to go and hadn't demanded explanations that he wasn't willing to give. Richard hoped the friendship they had developed would last the next few minutes.

"You've said that at the end of the summer, you'll go back to that ghastly school, Blackwater?"

"Blackpool."

"Blackpool, with your brother Edward." He knew as soon as he said it, that he had the name wrong. But that was the nature of the disease. Peter didn't correct him.

"And you'll, what, study more? Take your exams, and apply to university, correct?"

"It does sound exciting, doesn't it!"
Peter was really too serious and honest to manage sarcasm especially well.

"To study what? Latin, logic, theology, and philosophy like your father? Like Digory?"

They'd been over this before, but never so bluntly. He saw Peter's face tighten into what presaged his drawing inward on himself. It looked remarkably like a turtle pulling everything into its impervious shell and the effect was very much the same. This time, though, Richard wasn't going to let it go. "You'll read the classics curriculum even though you don't like it?"

Richard waited, but didn't really expect Peter to answer. He prodded further. "You're going to devote years of study to subjects you don't really understand and aren't terribly good at it? To what end?"

"And do what instead?" Peter shot back, justifiably testy. "Follow you into zoology? Become one of 'Copeland's trils'? Because you know…"

"We'll get to the alternatives in a moment," Richard interrupted. "But, they don't matter a damn if you aren't even willing to consider them. All roads do not lead to Rome, Peter."

"You don't…"

"Shut up. Of course I understand. You're the eldest son surrounded by brilliant people. Your sense of responsibility is so wide, it veers perilously close to guilt."

"It's what we've always wanted and expected, it's always been what I would do." In saying it, Peter repeated his mantra and slid from irritable to childishly sullen.

"Don't be so adolescent about it, Peter, because I know you aren't."

The curt acknowledgement of what had thus far been unspoken between them pierced Peter's weary fatalism and the juvenile angst that accompanied it. With it came what Richard had seen even that first day during tea – a sudden, profound shift in Peter's demeanor. The problem was, that Peter, wherever he came from, while a damn bit more interesting to talk to, was even more duty-bound than the adolescent one.

Peter sat a little straighter, pulled his arms around his knees, and spoke with that peculiar formal courtesy. "Richard, I do appreciate your concern and everything you've done for me this summer. But, it's been a holiday. The real work begins soon, and it won't have anything to do with tromping about fields and looking for owl pellets."

Oh he could be so dense. "I told you, I'm not talking about the alternatives. My point is only that God gave you extraordinary talents, but they don't belong here, in a place like Oxford."

It was a low and unfair, to argue the omnipotent point of view. It wasn't really one that could be argued against; not a logician's argument at all. But, Peter was no logician.

"I don't know what God wants." Richard heard the frustration, edging perilously close to bitterness. Like sarcasm, it wasn't something Richard had seen much of in this boy-who-wasn't. He had seen irritation, impatience, occasionally shirty behavior and sometimes a bit of arrogance. Yet, overall, Peter's astonishing self-control simply did not permit him the luxury of any indulgent or negative behavior.

So harsh, it hurt to hear it, Peter bit out, "I don't know what talents you see, because the ones I see don't have much applicability here at all."

It was the closest Peter had ever come to admitting the Differentness. Richard felt himself go very
still, knowing how carefully he had to tread to here. There was a sweet bird call, and Peter tilted his head toward it listening, visibly struggling to master his anger. To say the wrong thing here would be irreparable. Peter would retreat into his shell and no amount of poking would bring him out again.

Richard waited, letting Peter regain that admirable balance.

Into the quiet that eventually came, he was able to say gently, "There are many Gifts, Peter."

He heard a snort of contemptuous disgust. "I know that Letter to the Corinthians very well, Richard. To the one who is given wisdom or knowledge, or faith or the gift of healing, it's all pretty clear. But mighty deeds? That one is a lot harder when you aren't old enough to enlist."

Richard burst out laughing, then laughed even harder at Peter's livid expression. "You'd not make it two months before you'd be up on insubordination for refusing to follow some stupid officer's ridiculous order."

There was a flash of rage, quickly suppressed, and the moment passed. Peter sagged. Bowing his head, he pulled his hands through his hair, and muttered, "I know. You're right about that, of course."

Leaning forward Richard clapped the thoroughly deflated boy on the shoulder. "War's not a growth industry. You can do better than that. If killing things, planning to kill things, and thinking of more novel ways to kill things were the sole measure of mighty deeds, we'd be a sorry place indeed."

Peter's head shot up, a shocked expression on his face, looking far more dumbstruck then he should have been upon hearing that platitude. Good Lord, could Peter really be so blinkered as to think that classics and the military were his only callings?

Richard restrained the urge to berate him further. He'd heard enough of the criticism; Peter was labouring under impossibly high expectations that deep within, and for undoubtedly the first time in his life, he knew he probably couldn't meet. He needed the hope that success in something important to him was achievable. Failing that, a blunt cudgel applied to his skull might be effective, too. For not the first time, Richard wondered if that was normally the younger brother's role, and that part of Peter's intractability lay in the absence of his brother's moderating influence.

"You aren't a destroyer, Peter. Nor, getting back to my original point, are you a scholar. You are a doer, a leader, and a builder. When this blasted war ends, England is going to need people like you, Mr. Patel, and Lin Kun more than the boys with firsts in classics from Oxford, soldiers, and even, although it is to my everlasting sorrow, natural scientists."

Richard faintly heard the finches clamoring for food. The harried female flitted by a moment later, with something in her beak. Peter also tracked her with his eyes, watching as she darted into the shrubs.

"I had wondered about zoology, or something like it," Peter admitted softly. "But, I'm not sure I'm suited to it."

Leaning forward, Richard rested his elbows on his knees, exhaling with a sigh. "I've thought about that a lot given the depth of your understanding of the natural world." Seeing another stunned expression at the praise, Richard couldn't quite quell his mounting annoyance at the boy's obtuseness. "Don't be so thick, Peter. You have profound talents in the area, but there are some problems. You have a singularly un-inquisitive mind and don't have the innate motivation to question even the obvious; you take it on faith. With training, and the right collaborator, you might overcome that obstacle."
"Really?" Richard couldn't tell if Peter was genuinely interested, or merely flattered, but with no real intention of changing his mind. He suspected the latter.

"Yes, but this leads to the second problem and you are the best of judge of just how much of an issue it is. I'm not sure you could ever study animals in a remotely objective way. I saw it again as you knelt over that finch. You almost vomited when I suggested dissection that one time."

"But it was a fox!"

"Exactly my point. Even the thought of it makes you go pale again. I don't know if you could ever look at animals as research subjects, rather than comrades."

Peter looked rather more thoughtful, glancing back at the bush where he had prayed over a fledgling's broken body. "I'd not quite seen it that way, but you may be right."

Making another attempt, Richard added, "If you went into something like veterinary medicine, agriculture, or wildlife management, that sort of empathy would be useful.

"Those aren't in the classics curriculum, Richard." Peter spoke with such finality and authority, Richard knew that was the end of the discussion. To push further would be to no purpose and would only strain their friendship to a break that would be very hard to mend.

With that, Richard felt bitterness of his own creep in. What a waste. He'd hoped for a different outcome.

"Which brings me to the second thing I wanted to discuss." Carefully, he removed the precious field book from his pocket.

"So, you are done berating me over my poor and inexplicable decisions?"

"I'm pretty sure that throttling you would fall under the category of exertions that would alarm Mary."

Peter had the good graces to look apologetic. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for. I appreciate the advice, I do. However, this is where I've been headed for a long time, my father and the Professor have put a lot of effort into my education, and I cannot disappoint them. There's nothing more to be said or done about it that will change my mind."

"Just listening to me would be an improvement." Richard sighed, deeply and heavily, the regret almost overwhelming him. "At least try to remember what I've said. You may not be ready to listen now, but in a few years, maybe you will. When that time comes, try to see it as an opportunity to find your calling, and not a failure of the past. Can you promise me that?"

"I don't think that will happen, but I'll try to remember what you've said."

With that, Peter mentally moved on, returning to look at the pond and the finches with a clarity of vision so unique and an appreciation of God's creation so profound, Richard had never observed it in any other person, and knew he would never again. So many things he could do well, and out of misplaced duty, Peter was going to pursue one of the few things he couldn't.

He had tried to discuss it privately with Kirke, but that too had been to no avail. Kirke's regard for Peter was so impossibly high, it was inconceivable to him to imagine Peter not capable of anything to which he set himself to accomplish. It was, in the scholar's view, a matter only of will and effort, not innate ability. Maybe it was the fault of a too-brilliant mind who had never encountered a proof that could not be unraveled. Maybe the peculiar deference the much older man afforded to Peter
prevented him from questioning Peter's limitations without feeling disloyal. Maybe it was just the blindness that love and respect could induce, that inability to sometimes see things as they are, rather than as you wish and believe them to be.

Richard had to look quickly away, not able to bear the vision coming so clearly into focus. Talented men and women who persisted in denying their own potential were not easy for him; more so when he could see the frustration and disappointment the years ahead would hold. Peter would be miserable trying to meet the expectations of those he loved – expectations that he simply would never be able to satisfy if he persisted on the path long set before him.

"I am sorry I won't be able to help you through it all when the time comes," Richard finally managed to say through a tightening throat. "I would have tried to take you as a student, Peter. Maybe we could have worked through the challenges, or at least found something that suits you better. But I can't. Do you understand why?"

Peter turned slowly back to face him, going very still. "I guess I thought it was just an illness," he replied quietly.

_Just an illness._ Were the young always so naïve? Peter sounded so like Mary in that. Always another doctor to visit, another regimen to try, another procedure to undergo. They had become so very skilled at killing; regrettably, learning more of how to save lives, like so many other things, had lagged as the War dragged on.

"I have advancing dementia, coupled with palsy, which is a particular conjoining of Hells even my father and grandfather didn't have. Both will get worse, not better."

He opened the journal in his lap. He'd kept one since before he could write, and still had every one of them at home. "Within a year or two, I won't remember who you are, and will be thinking that Mary and Asim are conspiring to kill me. I won't be able to write, but will still pretend to read. Within three or four years, I'll be wearing nappies, will think my wife is my dead mother, and assuming I can still walk, will have to be restrained to keep from breaking my back on a flight of stairs or wandering into a pond and drowning. If I'm not dead in five years, it will only be because Mary is providing constant nursing care, thereby extending everyone's misery even longer."

It was so still, the reeds in the pond seemed loud. "Are you sure?" Peter whispered.

"How many times have you not corrected me for getting your brother's name wrong? You won't say, because you don't lie if you can help it, but you couldn't help noticing, and that it's gotten worse." Richard held out his hand, watching it with the objectivity of a scientist. It shook, the pencil clutched clumsily in his fingers; a child's hand. "Do you honestly believe this will improve?" He set his disembodied hand back down in his lap.

Peter would not lie, so he would, as was his wont, simply not answer the question.

"I'm so sorry, Richard. Is there anything I can do?"

And so, we come to it. Richard sent up a tiny prayer. _As You love me, as I love You._

"Actually, yes. You see, Peter, I'm relying upon that mile wide responsibility veering into guilt streak that you have, and have revealed the true state of my health in order to manipulate you into giving me what I want."

Peter tilted his head and laughed, wiping away the tears that had leaked in his eyes. _Excellent. This just might work._
"If it's about that tawdry affair, the answer's no."

Richard laughed too, although he did wonder how intrigued Mary might be. That was just one of many unpleasant discussions the two of them were going to have to endure before his illness progressed too far; it would all be very ugly because she simply wasn't going to want to hear it.

"The truth, Peter. I want the truth."

Cross-Pollination, Part 2 to follow.
*Rude hummingbirds, promiscuous songbirds, formidable bloodhounds, cunning corvids, obnoxious otters, and observer bias.*

It's not really meant to be a cliff-hanger.

Thank you all for the kind reviews. Part 2 of Cross-Pollination ties in with elements in the last chapter of *By Royal Decree*, so there is some overlap and I'll be working on both at the same time.
Rude hummingbirds, promiscuous songbirds, formidable bloodhounds, cunning corvids, obnoxious otters, and observer bias. Rated T for some very naughty words (Otters and Hummingbirds) and some frank observations about Eagle courtship rituals.

"I think the hummingbird vocabulary is a hundred percent swear words." Sheri Williamson, Southeastern Arizona Bird Observatory.

When last we left Peter and Richard in the Botanical Garden at Oxford University, Richard was making a simple request.

"The truth, Peter. I want the truth."

The laughter died.

Peter looked away, toward the pond. At least he wasn't denying it. Nor did Richard sense the withdrawing of the turtle into the shell. Here there was a mustering, a considering.

"I thought I'd been very careful," Peter eventually said, ruefully.

"You are, and if it's any consolation, it might not be quite as you think."

His hands were shaking so violently, it took an unconscionably long time to find the right pages of the field book. Richard began to read. "Understands beaver locomotion, but no beavers observable in England. Knows of bee communication by movement, although papers are still years away from publication – I had to research that one, and I'm sure the Austrian who is looking into it would be quite put out that you've beaten him to it."

"Says songbirds – amended later to include other birds - see color differently, better than humans. I have some notes there about the ultra violet light spectrum. Says female songbirds are promiscuous and can have eggs from multiple mates in the same nest. Says male songbirds know this and will withhold assistance."

"Knows that cheetahs purr, do not roar, and have semi-retractable claws; knows that female cheetahs are solitary and males form bachelor packs. Says female cheetahs may have cubs from multiple sires in same litter. Has exaggerated sense of size of lions; amended later to, 'knows nothing about lions.'"

Knows what a beaver lodge looks like from the inside. Says that barn owls hunt by triangulating distance via sound. Says that dogs can scent on top of water; can detect scents months old, relative status, emotional states, foreign objects in a body, and aren't confounded by any number of things. Thinks very highly of corvids – that's ravens and crows – and rats. Thinks cute otters are nasty and quote, 'unspeakably foul.' Has detailed information on relative abilities of certain animals, where such comparisons are not possible/measurable. I've got a running list here: speed of cheetah vs. deer vs. horse vs. wolf; eyesight/speed of hawk vs. falcon vs. eagle vs. crow; leaping ability of tiger vs. leopard."

He closed the book. "It goes on and on like that. Horses, rabbits, moles, foxes, hedgehogs, boar, bears, wolves, leopards, tigers, vultures, hawks, eagles, owls, and others."
Peter had climbed to his feet, looking simultaneously impressed, angry, and cold. "May I?" he asked, hand extended.

Richard gave him the precious field book, feeling that somehow Peter had made it a command rather than a request, and one that he had to obey.

"I can't read any of this," Peter murmured, leafing through it.

"You shouldn't be able to. Field notes are very personal, almost code. Even Mary wouldn't understand a tenth of it, and wouldn't believe any of it. Why should she? Those observations are so counter to what we know today of animal behavior, they are obviously the reflections of a man with dementia." Richard stared again at his shaking hands. "In another year, I won't be able to read it either."

Closing the book, Peter shook his head, and handed it back. If it had been more legible, Richard rather thought Peter would have chucked it into the pond. "You're right, it's not anything like what I thought. I have been incredibly careless."

"No self criticism, here Peter, if you would. You have not been careless at all. You had the misfortune of confiding in one of a handful of people in the whole world who is actually an expert in these things and, who is open minded enough to listen to someone with some very unusual information. I realized from almost the very first that you wouldn't talk if I told you just how novel your knowledge is. So for that bit of manipulation, I'm sorry, although I certainly don't regret it."

"I'd assumed it was just obvious," Peter said, and Richard heard the temper controlled. More mildly he added, "I suppose that's what you meant about me taking it all on faith."

"Yes, and it is what would probably prevent you from ever being a scientist. Faith or no, I don't doubt the veracity of your statements, or well, most of them. Some of what you know is unknowable and untestable currently. Maybe genetics or chemistry some day might be able to confirm it. Some of your observations are so astounding, I don't doubt that they would be Nobel prize material if they could be explained."

Peter just shook his head. "I had no idea."

This is going better than I'd hoped. That guilt streak, I suppose. Or maybe it's just a relief to not have to worry anymore about hiding the Secret.

"It's a very engaging puzzle, I admit." Richard permitted himself a smile. "It's been the incentive to hold on to my wits for as long as I can. There wasn't any logic to it; you have beyond university-level knowledge about some mammals and birds but know virtually nothing of others, particularly reptiles and amphibians. You know about animals from different habitats and different continents. Some were domesticated, some not. You are incredibly well informed about all the big cats, but are wholly ignorant of the one about which the most is known."

"The Lion," Peter said.

"Yes. One thing that I could draw on was that every animal of which you were knowledgeable, save the Lion, was on the doors of Digory's Wardrobe in his office. There were many more, of course, but the correlation was highly suggestive. I suspect that if asked, you would be able to tell Mary everything she is looking for about Gryphons, including whether they fly faster than eagles, whether they see better than a hawk, and whether the male and female are bonded pairs. You'll notice that I haven't asked about that one."
There was a telling twitch in his cheek, whether humor or irritation, Richard couldn't tell. "Have you mentioned this to her?"

"Of course not; nor Asim which is much the same thing."

"Why not?"

Richard waved his hand about with a sigh. "Because she'd be all interested in the hows and the whys, wheres and whens, and I don't care about the mechanism. However incredible, there is obviously some connection between you, Digory, and that Wardrobe, and it probably dates from when you stayed with him during the Blitz. He never mentioned you before that, and he doesn't obfuscate half as well as you do."

Peter opened his mouth to say something and Richard held up his hand to stop it. "I told you, I don't care about the details. I want to know what you know, some of which you probably only could have learned because the bluebird or the beaver told you. But, that's fine with me, because I do want to hear about how they think, and how they see the world and we can't even begin to measure such things. I've spent my life trying to get inside an animal's head and you're the closest I've ever come to that."

With Peter still standing, and Richard still sitting, he felt a bit like a petitioner. *Which, I suppose I am.*

"And after I tell you, you'll forget it, won't you?" In that, Richard heard prudent shrewdness. Peter wasn't the sort to let emotion sway him unduly; duty and obligation yes, but not attachment.

"Yes. Even better, when I start rambling about how songbirds are promiscuous when everyone knows that isn't true, it will be dismissed as dementia, which, in fact, I have."

For a moment, Richard could not continue so blithely. Staring at the notebook in his hands he knew the pages held lifetimes of astonishing things to be explored and tested. There would be no one to describe them. Peter would not. He could not. *Some day, someone would be able to tell the world how profoundly remarkable all our Brothers and Sisters are.* If he didn't hold to that belief, the despair would engulf him. God was not cruel, but that did not mean that accepting Her Will in this was easy, either.

Richard found tears of his own splashing the pages. For a few hours or days, or whatever God in Her Mercy would give, he wanted to know of the miraculous things to which Peter had been so accustomed he had the gall to take them completely for granted. Richard wanted to hold on to these precious, extraordinary things for as long as he could, until his body and mind slowly faded to nothing.

He found he was staring at a hand, offered, palm outstretched. Richard looked up, blinded by a brilliant, disorienting light and a vision of someone very like Peter, but yet not. Beyond, was a warm breath, green grass, golden eyes in a tawny face, and the feeling that for all his many faults, he was much loved. *It will be well.*

He blinked and the moment passed. Richard took the handkerchief Peter offered. "This damned well better not be the one you used on that fledgling."

"The thing about songbirds," Peter said with great firmness and authority, "is that you could dismiss them as utter flirts and tarts, except that they are so very calculating, and successful because of it. I might feel badly for the males, cuckolded literally as they are, but they've found their own ways of evening things up. They are also hard put to demand loyalty from their females when they give none in return."
"Egalitarian then?"

"Opportunists."

Peter bent over, offered his arm, and a gift to a dying man. "I've long thought that that it should be possible to construct a very convincing proof of the existence of God from the miracle of the nose of a common bloodhound. Would you be willing to help me with that?"

Peter gave a wide berth around an enormous red flowering bush. "It is an old habit," he explained, "to avoid the hummingbirds."

"There aren't any hummingbirds in Oxford," Richard responded with a rueful sigh. "They are such marvelous creatures. Or, are you about to tell me that they are brutes?"

"I'm afraid so. Some of the most colorful and obscene curses I ever learned were from hummingbirds."

"They curse? Those sweet creatures?"

"Now, who is showing observer bias? They are as ill-tempered as river Otters, and you know my opinion on them."

"Lady Bophus, let me speak plainly." Susan took a deep breath, willing calm. "I do not recommend our southern flower garden this time of year."

"But it is so lovely there!"

"Yes," Queen Susan (not feeling especially Gentle) had to concede, "it is lovely. It is also very popular with our Hummingbirds." She was not going to call the hellions "Friend" or "Cousin." They were bullies, to the last, delicate, ruby throated menace.

"But I simply adore hummingbirds!" Lady Bophus cooed.

"I doubt you have met a Narnian Hummingbird, Lady Bophus. Regardless, this is their courtship season, and they do prefer their privacy." The Hummingbirds of course did not care a whit who observed their vocal, aggressive sexual activity; it was the human bystander who was rather more likely to be offended.

"It shall be charming, my dear. I'm sure of it."

The woman had the gall to pat Susan on the cheek. Lady Bophus was a very tall, solid woman. If she fainted from the shock of a curse-spewing Hummingbird, it was going to take a Giant to lift her up.

Susan's He-Wolf Guard, Lambert, had been listening with obvious dissatisfaction, growling faintly at Lady Bophus' condescension. "Lady, I urge you to heed My Gentle Queen's sound advice. This venture is unwise and will not end well for you."

"My dear dog! So concerned! So loyal! They are hummingbirds in the garden! What could possibly go wrong?"

Susan looked to Lambert. The Wolf arched an eyebrow, a mannerism her Guard had borrowed from
his Queen, she believed. Let her try, the Wolf was saying.

One could certainly comprehend the Mischief of Rats, the Murder of Crows, a Sneak of Weasels, and even, in theory, and as foul mouthed as they were, the Romp of Otters. However, never in Susan's mind had any collective noun ever been more ill-fitting than "Charm of Hummingbirds."

They were too fiercely territorial of their nectar sources to ever wish to congregate. The sole exception was mating. There was, in short, nothing remotely charming about them.

Susan and Lambert escorted the misguided Lady down the steps to the southern flower garden. It was lovely, filled with beautiful hibiscus, bee balm, foxgloves and other brilliant flowers. The red blossoms were especially favored by hummingbirds, although any brightly coloured nectar source would attract them. Like the birds themselves, Lady Bophus made a beeline straight to the largest hibiscus bush in the garden. There was shade from a flowering quince tree, a table for her needlework, and two garden chairs that, when the Hummingbirds were not about, made for a very pleasant venue.

"She would select that one, wouldn't she?" Lambert rumbled.

That bush, being as prominent and showy as it was, was also defended by an especially obnoxious Hummingbird Hen.

Susan had thought of bringing some letters to work on while in the garden and then had thought the better of it. She would wager her Crown to a Crow that Lady Bophus would not manage an hour here. It would be significantly less at this particular bush.

Lady Bophus settled into the chair, fetched her cross-stitch project, and gestured to them both to join her. Susan loathed the domestic arts.

"If she whistles and says 'Come,' by Aslan, I shall bite her," Lambert grumbled.

"If she offers you a bone, Friend, I shall bite her myself," Susan whispered to her Guard, knowing that he would hear her, though Lady Bophus would not. Fixing her very kindliest Gentle Queen smile on her face, Susan regally glided to the table. She sat, Lambert next to her. The Wolf, with his more sensitive ear, would hear the Hummingbirds before she would.

"What lovely needlework, Lady Bothus. I have never seen hearts and flowers so artfully done in thread. Such beautiful colours as well!"

"Why thank you, Queen Susan. It is for my daughter's wedding wardrobe. I think your Royal Brothers missed a very special girl when they let her pass them by!"

"Too special for humble Narnia, to be sure, Lady Bophus." The woman's tastes would have bankrupted them within a year; she was also highly allergic to animal hair. "Surely, her marriage to Prince Zwine is a far more advantageous match for both your Houses, sharing borders and commerce as you do."

Susan always had to try very hard to speak seriously when she said "Prince Zwine," for it was uncomfortably close to "Swine," and the Prince did have a startling resemblance to a wild boar.

Lambert's ear twitched toward the bush. Susan turned her head, and indeed, a high pitched, tinny voice could be heard.

"Bog off you bitch! It's mine! Mine! Mine! Get the hell out!"
That was the Hen who claimed the bush as her own, driving another female away.

Susan glanced at Lady Bophus, who continued to placidly stitch her little petals. Her needle was sharp, her mind less so, and her view of the world, nearly as narrow. She was chewing on the inside of her lip in concentration and Susan was reminded of a Cow with her cud.

"If you aren't a cock, piss off!"

The needle stopped. "Queen Susan, did you…"

"Yes, Lady Bophus?"

"Shove off you slut! This is mine!"

"What is that noise?"

"Two female Hummingbirds, Lady Bophus. They are fighting over this bush."

"Oi! You! Make the beast with two backs you. That was the Hen, flirting with a passing male.

"I'll bugger you blind, I will." That would be the Cock, whispering sweet romance to his lady fair.

The bush shook in one corner. Hummingbird mating was, like the Birds themselves, an abrupt event.

"Now sod off, mate. This bush is mine!"

"What? No taste you ho?"

"You got your taste, now piss off."

"You! Bit! Shake those feathers!" That would be another male.

The Hen responding, "Bugger me, bugger me, bugger me!"

Lady Bophus was turning a sickly shade of green.

"Are you well, Lady? Is there something wrong?" Susan asked, putting as much Gentleness as possible into the concerned hand she rested on the woman's arm.

"They are …" Lady Bophus gasped, near choking, then lowered her voice to strangled whisper.

"The birds are copulating!"

"Why, yes they are," Susan replied. "And, like many Good Beasts, they are quite vocal about it."

The bush started shaking again.

"But, they have... there are... they..."

"Hummingbirds are not monogamous, Lady Bophus. Male and female each take multiple partners during the courtship season."

"Do it! Do it! Do it! Now get the hell out of my bush, you effing vulture."

"But that is just wrong! It's scandalous!"

Susan refrained from pointing out that Lord Bophus was certainly not monogamous, given the advances she had been fending off for a week. Lady Bophus herself had not been an especially loyal
wife in her own younger, randier days, according to the gossip.

But, more to the point, "Kind Lady, it is neither wrong nor scandalous. Hummingbirds are what they are, as Aslan created them. Each Talking Beasts is unique, and in Narnia, we respect and cherish them for those qualities, even if we would not permit those same qualities in ourselves."

"Get out, you slut! This is my bush! I'll give you what for, you ho!"

The Hummingbirds were brutish. Yet, this is what Aslan demanded of them when he entrusted all his most beloved and imperfect sons and daughters to the care of his Monarchs. It was easy to love a loyal Hound or regal Great Cat, so where was the merit in that? To love a Narnian Hummingbird, however, required that extra effort and a more tolerant and generous view.

"They are so rude!"

"Yes, they are. To the extent it may be excused, their sole source of nourishment is nectar from flowering plants, that is sugar and water. It obviously affects their temperament. I am certain a diet exclusively of syrup would affect my behavior. They are aggressive by necessity; a Hummingbird must defend his or her nectar source or starve."

"You should teach them manners."

*And teach a turtle to fly? A Great Cat to eat grass?*

Lambert saved her from making such a response. "Lady Bophus, " the Wolf said, "my Gentle Queen would never presume to attempt so profound a correction which is beyond both her ken and that of our Hummingbird cousins." Susan could see his anger in the stiff posture and hair standing up on his back. "However, should you meet Aslan during your stay here in Narnia, I encourage you to discuss with him the shortcomings you perceive in his creation."

They had wandered through Meadow, down toward the rivers. Richard had hoped they might spot an otter, but thought it too busy with the rowing, punters, and boathouses. Peter was not enthusiastic.

"Really, I don't understand your fascination with them at all." Peter was prepared to be stubborn about this one. He had loved all the creatures of Narnia, but the Otters had been quite a challenge. He felt about them the way Ed felt about Eustace, come to think of it – loving a creature in a theologically abstract sense, but not liking them one bit.

"Enlighten me then. You've hinted for weeks about their behavior, so defend that point. Granted they are mustelids, but are otters really so ferocious?"

"There is not a doubt in my mind that a romp of river otters could take down a U-Boat, if you could figure out a way to motivate them to do it. Although, the sheer wanton destructiveness of it might be sufficient. They might like explosions. It would be in their nature."

"*Lutra lutra*? I refuse to believe it."

"I don't know if I was dealing Lut... whatever. The ones I am familiar with were quite small. I've seen them harass crocodiles, cheetahs, hounds, and snakes the thickness of tree trunks. Fish large enough to eat them would be attacked and savaged. You think it looks like play, when they wrestle among themselves? Do not believe it a moment. If you go wading into an otter romp, you'll be bitten."

"Do they swear like hummingbirds do?"
"Much worse," Peter assured. "Unspeakably foul. They are particularly fond of telling you to go perform anatomically impossible acts."

"So, there's no doubt, Master Pliny?"

"No, King Edmund," the Centaur sage said gravely.

Edmund grimly stared this latest foe down. It was thin, black and white striped and hissed back at him angrily, exposing wickedly curved fangs. Fortunately it was at the bottom of a barrel. A basket of small, leathery eggs was on the ground next to the barrel. On hearing reports from the Water Birds and Squirrels that snakes were eating their way through the spring nesting grounds, Edmund had ridden out to investigate. And, lost a most beloved Hound to a horrible paralyzing death before they had realized what they were up against.

"What are they doing in Glasswater?" Edmund asked. "We've not had venomous snakes before, have we?"

"None are recorded in the *Animalia* as native to Narnia. They are usually further South," the Centaur said. "Perhaps someone collected a clutch of eggs away South as a curiosity and released them. Maybe they found their way here on their own, perhaps in a boat or caravan and with two mild winters, have managed to survive through it."

"It could be a form of warfare, too," Edmund said darkly. "Some enemy planting them there."

"King Edmund, sometimes, I do wonder at how your mind works."

"A Hound died in my arms within minutes of being bitten by one of those things, Master," Edmund spit out angrily.

"My sincerest apologies, My King. I know her tragic, painful death profoundly disturbs us all."

The Centaur took one of the long Smithy pokers and dispassionately pointed it at the snake. It hissed again, and struck at the poker, three, four, five times. "They are of a type called Bungarus. They are prolific breeders, laying huge clutches, and their preferred prey is bird eggs and fledglings. They are aggressive, water-loving, hunt at night, and their venom is very powerful."

"You should have seen it, Master Pliny. Glasswater was one of the most fertile nesting places for our Water Fowl in all of Narnia. It has been decimated by these things."

"Judging from the size of this one and the dead specimens you brought back, as well as the eggs, I think we may assume it is well-established there now, King Edmund. There's nothing native to that area to check their population, either."

"No, not as I can see. We could trap and kill some of them, I think, but we need a longer term solution."

The harassed snake, exhausted from its battle with the poker, lay limp at the bottom of the barrel.

"Foxes might eat the eggs," Pliny said, withdrawing the poker. He raised the tip up and studied it, seeing a viscous venom drip off, and back into the barrel.

"The Foxes know to stay well away from those nesting sites to avoid the temptation of Bird eggs. One of the Eagles was with us. She said the snakes tasted ill. She did not think any of the raptors would want to eat them."
"Curious. They are a popular human food source in the South."

Edmund shuddered. Eating snake. He'd rather eat bark before trying to stomach a reptile.

"One animal does occur to me; they control snake populations in southern rivers and have some natural resistance to their venom. Getting rid of them would solve some of our problems here as well."

"Oh?"

I am not going to call them Friend. "You! There! Otters!" Edmund called from edge of the castle's bathing Pond. "Your King wants you to stay well away from him!"

The four Otters all immediately stopped their vicious wrestling in the mud and bounded toward him.

"Oi! It's the Little King!"

"What for, you dickwad."

"Piss off!"

It took them awhile to "not" come near him as the Otters started fighting amongst themselves. Edmund waited and gave the writhing cloth sack at his feet a nudge with the poker.

Deciding to move things along, Edmund shouted again, "I told you I did not want to be disturbed!"

The Otters released each other and came running to him.

"Soddin hell, what's in the bag?"

"I'll give you bag, you effing wanker!"

The bag moved again, and the Otters all lined up alongside it, standing on their hindquarters, chirping excitedly. They were riveted by it, noses all twitching ferociously. One of them dropped to all fours, leaned in, quivering with excitement, and nudged the bag with his paw, then sprang back as an angry hiss came from inside.

"Bugger me! It's a snake!"

Another of the Otters darted forward, teeth bared, grabbed the bag and gave it a vicious shake before Edmund could even mouth the order for them to hold back.

The Otter jumped away again, cackling maniacally.

The Otters all stood again upon their hind legs. In a chorus of foul demands, they squeaked, "Open it you sod!" "We wanna effing play!" Snake!" "Snake!"

The Otters had, in fact, near eaten everything they could in the neighborhood of the Pond. The frogs, newts, and most of the fish were gone. If there had ever been any grass snakes, the voracious Otters had eaten them as well. With less food, they had become even more rude. They harassed the bathers, fought with all the Good Beasts, and if there could be a way to get rid of them, everyone would be far happier for it.

"Otters!" Edmund said, very seriously, holding the bag down with the poker. "This is no ordinary snake. It is venomous and will kill you if you are bitten."
The Otters' demands intensified, chorusing some of the foulest cursing he had yet heard from the little monsters.

"I will release it, as you have asked so graciously. But, I warn you again, do not let it bite you."

Standing on the bag, Edmund used the poker to pry the tie open. The snake slithered out. Faster than his own poor eyes could see, one of the Otters sprang, grabbed the snake by the tail and jerked it across the dell of the Pond. All four went chasing after it.

It was over before Edmund could even catch up to them. One Otter lunged and bit the snake in half. In moments, the snake was in bloody shreds and the Otters were fighting over the remains.

One of the Otters, the biggest of the males, bounded to Edmund, a bit of black and white tail dangling from his mouth.

"So, you like how they taste?" Edmund asked, truly impressed at the Otters' fearless efficiency in spite of how much he disliked them.

"Test lik chikfen…" the Big Otter mouthed around the tail section he was chewing on. He swallowed and belched. "Got anymore?"

"A whole river full of them. They are yours if you want them."

The Otter turned crafty. "How many?" he demanded.

_Ah, so that is the way of it._

Edmund crouched down, so he could look the little brute in the eye. "No more than three a day, for each of you."

"Oi, bugger me you fuckwit. Ten per day, each."

The Just King made to consider this outrageous counter offer very solemnly. "Otter, I cannot permit more than five.

"Nine!" the Otter shrieked. "We effing wants nine!"

"It is an extravagant demand, Otter." Edmund stroked his chin. "Very well. You drive a hard, ruthless bargain. Nine snakes a day it is."

---

Chapter 11, Cross-Pollination part 3 to follow

Long notes follow, mostly references.

Some of these excerpts include references to characters from the companion piece I am also writing, _By Royal Decree_.

A few fun facts for those of you armchair naturalists:

**Hummingbird behavior and promiscuity is well-documented and the quote that their vocabulary is 100% swear words appears frequently.**

**It has only very recently been documented through genetic testing that fledgling songbirds in the same nest and cheetah cubs in the same litter can, in fact, have different sires.**

**In 1947, Karl von Frisch reported on how the runs and turns of the honey bee dance correlate to the distance and direction of the food source from the hive. He performed a series of experiments and in 1973 was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine for the discovery.**
The black snake with white bands is modeled after the multibanded krait of Asia. Whether the Asian Small Clawed Otters (*Aonyx cinerea*) of Spare Oom have a natural resistance to that venom is not something I was able to confirm, although mongooses and another mustelid, honey badgers, do. While it is reported that occasionally, Asian crocodiles and Tigers will eat *A. cinerea*, it is also reported more commonly that even these largest of Asian predators avoid these otters if they can. *A. cinerea* eat pythons for breakfast.
"So, tell me about songbirds," Richard said as they watched a robin pair try to feed a fledgling something far too big and spindly for so delicate a throat. An inexperienced couple, perhaps.

Peter was leaning against the garden wall absolutely entranced by the escapades. To the birds, he said, "I think something softer might go down more easily, Friends." He leaned over and turned some of the garden compost over with his fingers, and then a rock. Finding an earthworm, he pulled it out and set the squirmy thing on a branch near the nest.

Dusting off his hands, Peter said, "Marital advice. That's what they needed. Male and female both."

"High King?"

"Yes, Lady Willa?"

"The Songbirds you wished to speak to are out on the terrace."

"Excellent. Thank you, Good Rat."

"High King?"

"The answer is no, Lady."

"But, Your Majesty…"

"No, Lady Willa, you may not rename the Narnian intelligence services to be 'His Majesty The King Edmund's Royal Murder.'"

There was a bit of cheese left on his plate from luncheon. Peter took it and handed it down to the noble, if bloodthirsty, Rat Doe. "Thank you for your trouble, Lady Willa."

She sighed mightily, whiskers all a drooping. She was not so dejected as to refuse the cheese. "Thwank u Ng Ptr." She had to mumble with the cheese crammed in her mouth, crumbs spilling out the corners. Being Narnian meant, among other things, making allowances for different manners at table. Turning tail, the Rat scampered off.

Lady Willa, the Rat Doe, renewed the same petition at least once a week. She took offense to being merely Head of the Mischief of Rats, while the Crows and Ravens collectively were the Murder. Peter did wonder if perhaps Edmund, in some perverse way he did not wish to understand, was putting her up to it.

High King as marital advisor. Aslan, I never knew scolding Songbirds into being better parents would be part of Your Most Royal Charge.
Peter gestured for his Palace Guard, the Cheetahs, Fooh and Beehn, to precede him onto the terrace. The Cheetahs silently took their positions at the doorway. As informal as Narnia could be, Peter wanted the pomp of this entrance to underscore to the Birds how very serious the matter was to their High King.

The six Songbirds were arrayed on the balcony overlooking the southern gardens, the two Bluebird Hens and one Cardinal Hen on one side, their respective mates on the other.

*Not a promising beginning. This would be an occasion for the Most Royal We and many Frowns.*

The High King, appointed by Aslan, Ruler by Gift, Prescription, and Conquest, King over all who came before and shall come after, looking down from His full, Magnificent height, stood solemnly before His Most Squabbling Little Subjects.

The Songbirds all trilled their nervous greetings.

Peter began at his most stern. "We warn you now, Birds, this is a matter most grave to Us. We most earnestly entreat you to resolve your differences expediently, for you Birds will not wish for Our intervention."

The Songbirds all shifted nervously. Well they should. They knew their Monarchs looked very ill on parents who refused care to their young. Being haled before the High King for a reprimand and reminder of one's parental duty was not something any Good Beast wished.

"We would hear the petition of the Hens first. Thereafter, the Cocks may speak."

One of the Bluebird Hens stepped forward. "High King, sir. We three Hens all have at least three fledglings in the nest."

"Aslan is with you," Peter intoned with great gravity. "You are indeed most blessed among Birds."

The Birds all chirped their subdued thank you's. To Peter's experience eye in these matters, he thought they were starting to feel ashamed of themselves already.

"We can't feed our chicks all by ourselves, High King," the Bluebird Hen chirped, with agitation. "There are too many in the nest, and one or more may die."

"Nor should you feed your young by yourselves, Hens. *That* is why you each share a nest with a Cock." Peter turned to the fidgeting males. "We will hear from you now, Cocks."

It was the brilliant red Cardinal male who spoke on their behalf. "See, it's like this, High King. None of us thinks that all the fledglings in the nest are all his own. We is each feeding nestlings that aren't ours."

*And there is foul language in the Otter Romp, gambling in the Crow Murder, and bullying in the Hummingbird Charm.* Peter managed not to sigh outwardly. Berating the Cock for his obtuse naivété would not get food into these nestlings' mouths.

"Hens," Peter asked them. "During this Season, did you mate with Cocks other than those here with whom you built the nest?"

They would not lie to their High King. Peter was sure of that.

Two of the Hens murmured, "Yes, High King." The third, the other Bluebird, was less apologetic. Impertinently she chirped, "Of course we mated with other Cocks, High King. That's what
And a bit more restraint might prevent this from turning into a wholly preventable tragedy. Sorting out how much was nature and how much was simple whim was quite beyond the skill of even the High King.

Peter silenced the muttering among the Cocks with a Frown. "Cocks, We now ask you this, what were you doing while your Hens were with other males?"

Oh yes, the shifty, beady little eyes. Peter heard one of the females give a little "Tut" and he silenced her with a Frown as well. "One of you will answer Us," he demanded, softly, but most insistently. They would not, dare not, refuse him.

"With chirp… twitter other…"

"Speak clearly Bluebird Cock so that We might hear you."

"We were looking for other females."

Peter let that admission settle on them all. When each Songbird began looking to the mate, he said, "Know this, Cocks. It is likely that some of your young are in other nests, and were those other females to come before Us, complaining of their Cocks withholding aid, Our answer would be the same to all. Whoever is in it, it is now your nest. Cock and Hen built it together, and in so doing undertook a vow before Aslan himself to care for what hatched there. The fledglings came wholly innocent into the World with no fault other than to be born. To not feed the young in that nest, whosoever it is, is most wrong in Our eyes and is most assuredly a grievous injury to the Blessing Aslan has bestowed."

*I'll have to remember that one for next time. Because, next Season, I will be doing this all over again.*

"Tell Us that you understand what We have said."

The birds all fidgeted and fluffed, but bobbed their heads.

"So, now We come to Our decision. We give each of you pairs a choice. First, and what We most heartily entreat of you, return to your nests, together, and care for the fledglings there. If you do not, We will know of it." *Mental note to remember to tell Edmund, no, better, Susan, about that.*

"Second, if you are unwilling to cooperate, We will remove your fledglings and give them to other Birds who will care for them."

This was, Peter well knew, a very serious besmirching of a Bird's reputation. Other Birds would learn of this shame, and would be reluctant to take any of these six as mates next season, deeming them too unreliable.

"Last, We may put you in a cage for the duration of next season, and separated from your Kind, you will not be permitted to bring into this World fledglings for which you will not provide."

That last one was so harsh, he doubted they would have the withal to implement it. The Songbirds did not know that, though. Gossips that they were, word of this risk would become known. Come to think of it, Edmund could have the Crow Murder spread the rumor, thereby reinforcing it. Maybe he would not have to do this next Season and maybe fledglings would not starve while their parents bickered.
"So, Birds, We await your decision. Discuss it with your partner, and tell Us what you would do."

Peter withdrew a few steps, but there was never any doubt. Each pair in turn came before him and seriously announced that they were committed to caring for the fledglings in their nest. The Birds flew off, and Peter sincerely hoped he would not be seeing them again over this.

"So, my good Cheetah Guard, what do you make of that? Did I make a sound decision?"

"Oh yes, King Peter," Fooh said, in between licks of his paw. "You sounded ever so stern. I was ready to go find the nestlings and feed them myself."

"And you Beehn? What say you?"

"That I'm always going to be a bachelor, High King."

"I understand, Friend. I do understand."

"So, as you demolish every cherished misconception we have of animal perception and behavior, will you tell me that even the beaver and the wolf do not form the stable bonds as I have so long assumed and admired?"

"Still clinging to observer bias, Richard?"

"A fool's last romantic hope, I suppose."

"We are ready to leave, King Peter."

Briony had found the High King in his office. When he had seen her, the King had immediately dismissed his Cheetah Guard to the hall and closed the door. Fooh and Beehn would of course be able to hear everything regardless, a fact that humans constantly seemed to forget. In his defence, the High King did have a great deal weighing upon him. Briony would rely upon her bonded Mate, the Wolf Lambert, to threaten the Cheetahs into maintaining their silence. Word of this drama most assuredly should not circulate, for the harm and embarrassment to the humans involved would be most acute.

"Do you have everything you need Briony? Is there anything I can do?"

In this, he was speaking not as the King, but as the very confused and concerned brother and she responded in kind.

"Queen Lucy and I will be fine. She intends to ride very fast, and Trice, the Eagle, accompanies us. King Edmund has checked our way eight times in the last two days and there is nothing on the trail except Deer and other woodland Beasts. If there is any trouble, Trice will summon help."

"I'm still uneasy permitting this with so little Guard, Briony."

She wished King Peter would stop pacing his office. He could make her dizzy. Everyone was on edge, beginning with the Monarchs, and that overlay of stress had infected everyone else, from the Centaurs and Fauns, to the Moles in the gardens and Mice in the fields. King Peter and King Edmund especially were shedding worry and aggravation as a house Cat shed hair.

"Be glad Queen Lucy does not hear you speak of what you will and won't permit her to do, High King. Especially at this moment." Her correction brought him up short.
"You are correct, of course, Friend. Please do not tell Lucy I spoke so. I cannot help but be anxious for her though."

"Aslan rides with our Valiant Queen. He knows what she needs now, and it is not a retinue. If you must, and I suspect King Edmund is already doing so, send a discreet Guard overhead or a few hours behind. Lucy will not notice, so long as they stay out of sight, and I will not mention it."

The High King slumped into his chair and pulled his hands through matted hair. It was an utterly unguarded moment, and very rare for him. In this candid moment of vulnerability, he finally admitted, "I just don't understand."

"May I speak plainly, Sire?"

"Please, Briony. Anything to help Lucy. And me to help her."

"You cannot understand, so I advise you and King Edmund to stop trying to do so. Be supportive, as you have, but neither of you can comprehend what is in your sister's heart at this time. Lucy does not wish to confide in Queen Susan for the same reasons."

Briony and Lambert continued to wonder if Lucy had been so reluctant to discuss these things openly with her sister for fear of reopening very fresh wounds and the specter of the Rabadash fiasco. Regardless, and close though they were, it was not a sister that Lucy needed right now.

"But it's been going so well!" the High King exclaimed with frustration; she smelled even a hint of anger. Briony had to will her hair to stay down on her back. Calm. She needed to remain calm when her Monarchs could not.

His disappointment mounted as he vented his frustration. "We're all happy for her! She seemed happy, in love, even. Aidan is the very sort of man I had always hoped for Lucy. We all wanted to welcome him to our family. So, why the change? Did he do something to hurt her, because if..."

"Of course not," she corrected quickly. "Put the thought out of your mind, High King." She paused, and added with a firm growl, "and kindly put it out of King Edmund's as well."

The look on King Peter's face showed that was precisely the thought they had both been harbouring.

"If anything," Briony said, "I regret to say, but Aidan is the injured party here."

The helpless anger was now more easily sensed, even if outwardly, nothing of the High King had changed. "Why is she acting like this, Briony? What are we supposed to do?"

These were, she knew, the same questions that had been repeated over and over (and over and over) between the Kings and Queen Susan in the last week. They did not understand. Briony and Lambert had seen that easily enough. For all their wisdom and leadership, wit and strength, love and loyalty, neither the High King, nor the Queen Susan, had ever, yet and truly, bonded to another Mate in the manner that Queen Lucy had. Queen Susan was practical and deeply wounded by Rabadash's treachery. The High King loved his whole Land so widely and well, saving that extra to give to one single being was probably not even possible. As for King Edmund, his own relationship, while deep and committed, was very odd and its course not one any would wish to emulate. Of course it was Queen Lucy, who loved so freely and joyously, who would fall so hard, and who now felt such confusion and uncertainty.

"There is nothing you can do, except to let her go. What she needs, she cannot find here."

"What does she need, Briony? Can you tell me that without violating your Guard's loyalty to Lucy?"
She went to her King, and nudged his knotting, wringing hands with her nose. To her it had been so obvious, but the High King, for all his many wonderful qualities, was not a Beast and did not have their sensitivity. "Your sister needs a mother and a wife's advice, now. We go to find the closest she has to that in Narnia."

The Beavers' Lodge was not one of Briony's favorite places. It smelled strongly of musky rodent, willow bark and fish. It was dark, and damp, and reminded one of a ship's cabin, although those aboard the Splendour Hyaline were much nicer. Trice enjoyed it, but then she was an Eagle and liked fish and perching on the backs of arm chairs where her talons would snag in the fabric.

They were into their second pot of tea before Lucy could even mention Aidan's name.

Mrs. Beaver reached across the table and took Lucy's hand in her own paw. "Now, dearie. Tell us what worries you so."

The tears started flowing again, as they had ever since Aidan and Lucy had announced their betrothal and Lucy's immediate and Narnian families had all given their enthusiastic blessings.

"I don't know. I should be happy, but I'm worried, and I don't know what I should be feeling, but I'm sure it isn't this misery. It's just all wrong!" Lucy pulled her hands away and buried her face in them, her shoulders shaking for the crying. Briony, as she had all week, sidled up to Lucy to nuzzle her, lending her distraught friend such warmth and support as she could give.

Mrs. Beaver smartly rapped the table. "Lucy! Mind me now!"

Lucy pulled her head up and wiped her tears away on her sleeve. "Yes, Mrs. Beaver?" the Queen said, meekly. Only to Mrs. Beaver was Lucy ever so deferential, showing a daughter's respectful, adoring love.

*We were right to come.*

"Let's start with the basics. None of this 'what you *should* be feeling' nonsense." Mrs. Beaver was beginning very practically, which Briony approved of heartily. "You feel what you feel, and worrying about what you should or shouldn't be feeling is just going to make it worse."

"But, I'm not even sure what I am feeling! I'm deliriously happy one moment, and can't stop crying the next, and everyone is getting so cross at me."

Mrs. Beaver made another disapproving sound. "Forget about everyone else too. If they get cross because you are feeling unsure about the most important decision you've ever made in your young life, well, that's their concern, not yours."

"And another thing," Mrs. Beaver wagged her paw at Lucy. "You've not said it, but I want you to stop thinking about how you have to do this because everyone loves Aidan so much. The High King is not marrying Aidan; the Army is not marrying Aidan; you *may* be. We'll just assume Aidan is a good and worthy man for now, and that you are deserving of each other, alright?"

"Let me see a nod now, there's a dear." Mrs. Beaver dabbed the tears from Lucy's face with a rough looking checked handkerchief.

"Last, I don't want to hear anything about how if you don't marry him, you'll ruin his life. That's as sure a path to life of misery as any. Mark my words, you and him aren't some flirty songbirds. You two will be a Bonded Pair to the day you enter Aslan's own country, and if it's not right for you, it's not going to be right for him, either."
Mrs. Beaver pushed a plate of biscuits toward Lucy and waited, tapping the plate until Lucy picked one up and began to nibble on it. From the scent, Briony suspected the biscuits were mostly bark.

"Little calmer now, are we?"

Lucy nodded.

"That's a start. Now, let's hear what's going on in your head and heart," Mrs. Beaver said pouring another cup.

"That's the problem, I don't know!" Lucy threw her hands up and the biscuit went sailing through the air. Briony wondered if it had been deliberate. "Aidan is wonderful. I think I love him. And if I don't, I certainly like him better than any man I've ever met." Lucy put her hand over her mouth. "How can I even say such horrible things. I…"

Tears were welling up again, and Mrs. Beaver tutted. "Lucy! Stop worrying over what you should be doing. You've just said a very sensible thing. You like Aidan better than any man you've ever met. Let's hold that thought and forget about the rest for now."

"But liking isn't love!" Lucy wailed.

"Of course it is. It's not all love is, but liking is part of it. Love is … Briony, dear, I need another bonded female here, what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Love is complicated, Lucy. It's many different things. Liking your mate better than any other is an excellent place to start."

Briony felt Lucy's hand on her neck; Her Queen liked this tactile contact with her Guard. While it was a bit "familiar," Briony did not object either. She leaned into the hand and rubbed her head against it.

"That's it, thank you Briony." Mrs. Beaver pushed the plate of bark biscuits again, but Lucy refrained. Too much fiber, Briony thought. "So, you like Aidan better than any other, and you think you might want to marry him. So, what are you worried about?"

"Do I want to be married to one person? Forever? What if I get mad at him? What if he doesn't pick up his socks? What if I meet someone I love more? What if he does?"

"Well that last one is easy enough," Trice said from her perch. Do what I'd do if some tart comes waving her tail feathers at Raffe. You're good with a knife, so just cut her liver out and feed it to the fish."

"Yes, thank you, Trice for that observation," Briony muttered. Honestly, Eagle females could be ruthless. They certainly vigorously defended their mates.

"But what if Raffe strayed?" Lucy asked in a whisper.

Briony heard how fearful she was of this, even thinking it, even asking it. Court intrigues were a fact, and very tiresome they had become. Lucy had for the most part always held herself aloof from those games. She would give herself utterly and devotedly to Aidan. The prospect that he might not do the same would devastate her.

"There's no reason why Raffe would stray," Trice said dismissively. "He has me."

Lucy rolled her eyes at the Eagle and laughed, a little, but without real mirth. "Would that I had your
"It's a nightmare, Lucy," Mrs. Beaver said. "You're right to fear it. But, that's where the trust comes in. And talking through your fears together. And, I won't lie to you, being a bit like Trice there isn't a bad thing if something threatens what you have."

Briony could hear and smell the rising anger in Mrs. Beaver. She and Lucy both knew its source.

"That little young thing, setting up her Lodge so close to ours, combing her fur in front of him like that. I knew she was looking for someone who'd build her a nice dam."

"Oh, but surely not Mr. Beaver." Lucy was appalled. Yet, Briony could sense she also really wanted to know of this horror.

"No, I'm certain of that. I told him she was up to no good, and I think a part of him was sort of flattered that the little bit was interested in him, and that I wasn't going to stand for it. Males are like that, you know. All this fuss of males doing all the courting, but I tell you nothing flatters him more than her that wants him."

That observation was, Briony thought as she considered her own over twelve year bond with Lambert, probably very near a universal invariant that cut across species.

"Sides," Mrs. Beaver continued, "he knew that if he did stray, I would know, and then he'd be lying in a pool of his own blood, and me with the axe, saying, 'Hold still, I'm going to hit you again.'"

Lucy burst out laughing, the first in a week, and reached across the table to hug Mrs. Beaver. Was that the trick of it, Briony wondered? To take the unthinkable, and turn it into the manageable by making it laughable?

"Point is, Lucy, part of it is trust, part of it is talking through it, and part of it is being smart, and knowing when you go to your Queen and ask her to move the little tart to Telmar."

"The mating's great too," Trice interrupted suddenly. "Really, you have nothing to worry about there at all. Those diving cartwheels and death spirals, where we lock talons and plunge down to the ground from the Aerie. Just fantastic. Really. You'll love it. Goes on for weeks."

"Trice," Briony said, none too patiently. The Eagle could be so dense sometimes. "If Aidan and Lucy plunge from a cliff in a mating embrace, they will die."

Lucy did giggle. "Dear Trice, I appreciate your perspective, truly. It is the love that concerns me at the moment."

"Well, I know it's not all about the mating. The Eagle clicked her beak. "It's a lot of hard work and liking him isn't enough to get you through it. I'd be asking if Aidan will help you build the nest and look for nice grass to line it. Will he help you feed the fledglings? Most important, will he help you incubate the eggs? Because that's a bloody chore it is, and if he won't help..."

"Trice," Briony interrupted, "Lucy is a mammal. She must incubate eggs by herself. Aidan could not help with this. She must also provide the feeding for the fledgling herself."

"Well that's not fair!"

"Trice does have the right of it, though, Lucy," Mrs. Beaver said. "Love is hard work too. It won't always be easy, and the question is, do you think it will help to have him with you? Will he make the bad times less bad, and the good times even better?"
"Like when my first fledgling died," Trice said from her perch, very softly.

Lucy's eyes began welling with tears again and Briony was ready to chase the Bird out of the Lodge.

Again, Mrs. Beaver surprised her. "And Raffe helped you, didn't he, dearie?"

"He did. I wanted to follow my little one into Aslan's Country it hurt so much. But, we still had our other, barely out of the shell, and Raffe couldn't take care of him alone. So, Raffe made me stay in the Aerie and day after day, he kept bringing us both food. He would bother me and bother me to make me eat and I hated him for it. But, he kept at it and we both lived."

"And it was worth it, wasn't it Trice?" Mrs. Beaver asked. "You love him even more for it now, don't you?"

Trice hid her head under wing, muttering something unintelligible that sounded like, "Yes, I'll be fine."

"Dear Trice. I thank you," Lucy said, dabbing her eyes again.

"You won't know for sure until something horrible like that happens, Lucy. Pray to Aslan it never does. Again, you have to ask yourself if you'd rather go through that alone and with your family, or whether you want Aidan with you too."

Lucy nodded, biting her lip. "I guess we can't see the tragedy, so that's harder for me to even imagine. What I can see are the little things that annoy me, like leaving his boots where I trip on them, and that he doesn't drink wine, and that his beard gets very scratchy. How do I know that all those little things won't just pile up into a huge thing and I'll just start screaming at him?"

"Well, you are really asking about two things there, Lucy. Most important, don't go into this thinking you are going to change him. We accept our mates as they come to us, and we to them."

"You might change together, though," Briony felt confident enough to add. "Aslan willing, you change in the same direction."

"And as for fighting, well that happens. You do want to pick your fights; decide what you can live with and ignore, and what really bursts your dam."

"The mating afterwards is pretty fantastic too," Trice said.

"Thank you, Trice, again!" Briony growled. She had to remember the She-Eagle had only been bonded to her male for two seasons.

"I do worry that he will want to change me," Lucy said softly, after a time. "That he won't want me on the road, or riding out to battle when I must."

"Lucy, if I may?" Briony injected. On this subject, she felt fairly confident. "You met Aidan in battle. You shot a soldier off his back. He knows you well and loves Aslan and Narnia as you do. I really do not see that changing."

"And if he tries to keep Queen Lucy the Valiant out of battle, well you both can fight about it, then you ride off anyway, and when you get back, have great mating again. It is too bad you can't try one of those flying death spirals of a cliff, though."

During their ramble along the river path, Peter stopped to greet a Labrador who had been launching
herself with great, canine gusto into the water to retrieve a stick. The young woman, Richard thought a student at the University, who was exercising the Labrador was very interested in greeting Peter; Peter was focused on the dog. Richard observed that three-way interaction and non-interaction as the dog thoroughly mouthed on and shook her wet self all over Peter. It was remarkable how Peter could convey total politeness and yet complete indifference to the dog’s owner. He had obviously had a lot of practice at it.

It was just another of those odd things that did not fit. Figuring out who Peter was, for Richard, was a pointless exercise. It was a question that had occupied Asim, and so, by extension, Mary. He’d leave them to it. It was hard, to leave puzzles unfinished, questions unanswered. The scientist demanded proof through hypothesizing, testing and replication. So, where did that leave faith in the equation? Richard had never been especially bothered by the co-existence of faith and science. Both were concerned with truth, it was only a question of how you arrived there.

So, as Peter took his own extraordinary knowledge on faith, Richard had decided to take Peter on faith. He was nearing the end of even being able to approach the whole of it as a scientific theorem to be tested. All that was left to him, at this end of all things, was faith. To that he would hold.

After Peter threw the stick a few times himself for the Labrador to chase, they continued on.

"Have you had dogs in your life, Richard?"

"Oh yes. With the exception of women, there is nothing so agreeable or necessary to the comfort of man as a dog."

"That sounds like both a quote and a truism to live by."

"Concededly I opened that door, but I am now going to firmly shut it. Seeing how you handily managed that sweet young thing back there put me in the mind of it. I do not, under any circumstance, wish to hear from you on the subject of the agreeable and necessary company of women. Trying to reconcile your age with what I am certain you would say is just the sort of thing that would make my head hurt and which I most strenuously am trying to avoid. In comparison to other species of Kingdom Animalia of which you are so knowledgeable, being the old polygamist that I am, there is nothing that I could hear from you on the subject of female homo sapien that I have not already either experienced, or rejected for a very good reason."

Peter’s knowing, wolfish grin answered that question. Richard spared a very sympathetic pang for Kirke; a brilliant, lovely man, but still quite Victorian in outlook.

"Now, dogs are another matter. Peter, don’t you find it odd that you can prove the existence of God from a dog’s nose, but not through the demonstration of the proof of the Reverend John Duns Scotus?"

"I have a letter from Ed," Susan said stirring her coffee with one hand and skimming her afternoon correspondence with the other.

"Is it longer than a line?" Lucy asked.

"The part in cipher is. The part not in cipher reads, ‘Lone Islands are here. Wish you were beautiful. Love, Harold.’"

"Harold?" Pitching her voice a little louder, so that it would carry from the breakfast room, Lucy called, "Jalur?"
Peter craned his neck over Lucy to see what Susan held. It looked to be three to four pages of closely written cipher. He was glad he was not the one translating it. "How long before you can read it, Susan?"

"A few hours, depending on what else you give me to do, and in how much of a rush Edmund was when he wrote."

Jalur, the Tiger, Edmund's personal Palace Guard, came around the corner. "Good morning, Your Majesties. You called me, Queen Lucy?"

"Yes, I have a question. We received a letter from Edmund. He signed it, 'Harold.' Is there some special meaning to that?"

"Yes, Queen Lucy," the Tiger said.

Peter had to stifle a laugh. Jalur elevated the concept of "solitary species" to a not previously observed level of taciturn. How he managed in the relatively social position as a Palace Guard, much less as personal Guard to Edmund, was a great marvel. The Tiger had been at loose ends, waiting for His King's return. He needed to find something to occupy the Tiger lest he become even more irascible.

Lucy was not to be dissuaded. "And what is that special meaning?"

"I cannot say, Queen Lucy."

"Cannot, Jalur? Or, will not?"

Jalur swiveled his head toward the Main Hall; Peter saw the other Beasts of the Guard all attend as well.

"An Eagle comes," Lambert, Susan's Wolf Guard, said.

A moment later, they could all hear the hurried clip of a Faun. Mr. Hoberry trotted in, Raffe, the male Eagle on his arm.

*Finally.* Peter pushed away from his seat and closed the distance in three strides. "Raffe! What news from Ibiza?"

He took the Eagle from Mr. Hoberry. Raffe was breathing hard from his flight. Peter carried the Eagle to the table, giving him a perch on a chair back. Lucy was already pouring water into a bowl. The Eagle drank gratefully.

"Thank you, Your Majesties. King Peter, Ibiza found the Hag's trail, a few hours hard ride from here, Northwest. He thinks she's headed toward Ettinsmoor."

*And we'll never get her if she makes it that far.*

"Are you strong enough, Raffe? Can you lead us there?"

"Yes, and Yes, King Peter. Ibiza says as few as possible; he does not want the scent confused. And,"

"I know, 'no dogs.' Lucy, Susan, decide which of you rides with me. Jalur, you may come. We leave in the hour."
The woods south of the Stone Table had been filled with the rumor of something that stalked the Beasts there. It crept into nests, snatched young from dens, drank blood. Not many of the Witch's foul brood remained, but this had all the hallmarks of one. Eventually, the Hag had been spotted as she moved north, getting uncomfortably close to Cair Paravel, before turning west and disappearing again into the wood. It made sense she would haunt the area about the Stone Table and Beruna, sites of her Mistress' greatest, short-lived, triumph and her death. If the Hag was sniffing about for something, it might be found there.

Ibiza, the Hound, had been on her trail for days, crisscrossing between the rivers.

With all the Powers of His Office, all the efficiencies of their staff, and still, to Peter's aggravation it was something slightly more than an hour before he and Susan were pounding there way northwest, following Raffe. They were traveling light, he and Susan on fast horses, with only Lambert, Jalur, and the Centauress Eirene, a swordsman and minor mage. Overcoming the Hag would not be the problem; he was far more concerned they would lose her again in the Wild. If they flushed her into the open, Peter wanted a bowman, and in Susan, there was none better in all Narnia. Close in fighting, he would handle that well enough, with Wolf and Tiger to get whatever was left, and Eirene as second.

They caught up with Ibiza where the southern edge of the Owlwood met the River.

" Took you long enough," the laconic Hound said, by way of greeting. Ibiza spared a surly glance at Lambert. "I said no dogs."

Lambert was too well-schooled to do more than mimic Susan's eyebrow raise and dry humor. "Then it is a good thing no dog came."

Peter slid off his horse. Herc, his stallion was a bit blown; Susan's light mare as well. He tossed his reins to Susan. "Get everyone watered, if you would, Su. I'll see to the trail."

"Tell me the tale, Ibiza. What of our quarry?" Eirene fell in next to him as Peter joined the Hound at the Wood's edge. The Centauress would water after Jalur or Lambert returned.

"Hag. But we knew that. She's old, even very old from the smell, more clever than fast." With a jerk of his head, Ibiza indicated the River. "I've been following her zig-zagging across the river all day, since the Rush."

The Hound said he was able to see scents lingering on the top of the water; whatever the mechanism, Peter had learned not to question it. Water never fooled Ibiza.

"She finally came out here." Ibiza showed them the fording. It was clear enough, there in the mud; Peter could see the skinny three-toed footprints and nail claws sunk deep in the muck.

Eirene stared at the prints, then back across the river behind them. "But she forded back to the other side."

"No, she didn't. You go across the river here and you'll see her prints plain on the other side, heading south. There's a funny scent with them, but it's not her scent. She went into the wood."

Eirene studied the prints, looking thoughtful. "What's the scent like going back across the River, Ibiza?"

If the Hound could have shrugged, he would have. "Blood, more rabbit than Hag."

Peter put a hand over his eyes and squinted across the river. "The track is very clear on the other
"No buts," Ibiza growled. "Scent don't lie."

The Centauress was studying the track. "Eirene, speak your thought, please," Peter said.

"I've not seen it before, Sire, but I suspect it's Hag blood magic. I think she's summoned something to make tracks for her, and at the end of those tracks we'll find a poor Rabbit, staked to the ground and slowly bleeding to death."

"Can you deal with it?" They were not prepared for an ambush by a full magic user.

"Oh yes. If as Ibiza says, it's a Rabbit…"

"It is."

"What's been summoned will be of a similar ilk. If the Rabbit is already dead, the summoned will have been dispatched regardless."

"What are we walking into in the wood then? Do we need to send Raffe back for more support?"

Eirene shook her head. "Quite the opposite, King Peter. Any summoning takes a fair amount of power, and Ibiza has been chasing this old Hag for hours. She'll need at least a day to recover and feed."

"So desperate and dangerous, but not spell casting?" That, they could manage.

"Yes."

"Ibiza, how long ago do you think she went in?"

"Not long. It's fresh. Couple of hours."

"It will be dark soon," Susan added, coming up with the horses, Jalur and Lambert with her. Raffe was riding on the pommel of Peter's saddle. "What news?"

"She's gone into the wood," Peter told her, "for all that she's used some Hag magic to try to fool us. Eirene and Ibiza think she probably sacrificed a Rabbit to make footprints going back south."

Time was wasting and they were losing light, not that that would matter much in the wood. She'd killed too many and they needed to finish this business.

"Jalur, Lambert, am I right this wood is too dense for the horses?"

"Yes," Lambert responded. If Jalur disagreed, he would say so. Truly, the Tiger and the Hound could together pass a week with nary a word between them.

"Susan, your opinion? You could go with Eirene, take the horses and follow the prints; you'll have little light for shooting in the wood."

The Queen looked back across the river, then to the wood. After a moment, she responded decisively, "Eirene, alone, if you both so will. If we tree the Hag, you'll need me to shoot her down. I trust Aslan, my bow and my aim, even in the dark."

"Eirene, then," Peter ordered, "please take the horses, and follow that track, Raffe with you. If there's death at the end of the trail, please see that our poor Cousin is sent into Aslan's Paws. Deal with the
remains as befitting as may be done. Return here and wait for us until morning. If we aren't back by
dawn, Raffe please return to Cair Paravel for a larger troop; tell Pliny and Queen Lucy we have spell
casting Hag and they'll know what to do."

It would soon be dark but there was nothing for it. Wolf and Tiger would see well enough, and
Hound would not need eyes when his nose told him where to go.

"Ibiza take the point, we follow. Jalur, Lambert flanking, Su, behind if you would, arrow at the
ready."

"I'll try not to shoot you, Peter," she said, with a ghost of a grin.

It was an old joke between them.

"I did remember my mail shirt, Sister. Just don't aim for my head, invitingly large target though it is."

Peter drew his long dagger; in a dark, dense wood, this would be knife work.

They had been going some hours, moving as swiftly and unerringly as the relentless Hound they
followed. Occasionally the moon would peek through the trees. It was unnaturally quiet. No owls,
no mice or fox, or other of the small animals they should have seen. The Trees were silent.

The ruff around Lambert's neck and the hair on his back rose. "She is here," the Wolf murmured.

"Of course she is, you stupid dog," Ibiza muttered nose to the ground. "She knows we're here too. I
can smell the fear in her." To Peter, the Hound said, "She's hungry and tired." The Hound continued
again to the trail.

On one side, Jalur stalked along, his Cat yellow eyes gleaming in the dark; Lambert's eyes glowed
green.

"Phew. Ibiza, what's happened?" Peter asked, as them across a fouling on the path.

"Just her old tricks. Probably the last she's got. She rolled in bear scat; she hopes will follow the bear
instead of her."

"Talking or Dumb?" Susan asked.

"Dumb bear. Been eating a lot of berries and grubs this season. He won't bother us."

"So, it's not fouled the trail?" Jalur asked.

"No," Peter said, answering for the Hound, who would get impatient at these questions. "To Ibiza,
she's still a Hag who smells a little like a bear."

They pressed on, deeper into the wood. The hunter's instinct told him she was close. They all felt it,
Ibiza's slower pace, Susan's cautious tread behind, and in the way Jalur and Lambert both moved in
their predator crouch, head low, eyes straight forward, hindquarters tensed for the spring.

A few paces ahead, almost out of range of his poor sight, Peter saw Ibiza stop. The Hound raised his
head from the trail, the first since they had entered the wood. Ibiza's nose pointed.

_Up._

The whiff of foulness and the hint of a movement in the leaves was all the warning they had, but also
all they needed.

A roar, a howl, and "Ware the tree!" as Peter spun about sweeping his knife upward in a two-handed pull.

A blackness darker than the night around them clouded his vision, but as the cloaked Hag dropped down from the branch above, Peter's cut was true and he felt the jarring as his clean metal met her flesh.

She shrieked. Grappling with her, Peter saw a grotesque, ghoulish head hidden in the folds of her hood. He gave her a shove, giving the others the space to work. The Hag shuddered as Susan's arrow hit home. With a powerful leap, Jalur swatted her down, his massive claws shredding her gown and tearing through flesh as she fell. Lambert darted in and bit down on the claw clutching a wickedly curved knife. Another arrow in, and the Hag was dead.

Ibiza bounded forward, near into Peter's arms, planting both front paws on his chest. "Thank you, Ibiza. I'm fine, I…"

The Hound growled, irritated that Pete might have assumed the display was affectionate. "There was poison on that blade of hers. " He sniffed again, then dropped to all fours, circling around him, still sniffing. "There's no blood on you but hers."

Peter glanced over at the severed claw, still twitching in its death throes on the forest floor, the sickle knife glinting in the moonlight.

"I suppose I'll live then."

They had been walking through one of the popular picnicking areas by the River. A young woman was shrieking near as loud as the triumphant crow who had made off with a piece of chicken in his claw.

"My brother, Edmund, is the one who taught me to appreciate crows. They were his personal totem, you could say, along with rats."

"Interesting fellow, your brother. Does he always keep such low company?"

"Don't ever let him hear you say that. He'll go on at length about the ingenuity of the common crow. The ones we dealt with were…" Peter wondered if he should just say, "Talking Beasts," but Richard just grimaced and waved him on.

"No hows. I don't care. Just tell me what you observed."

"Well, you know how attracted they are to shiny things? Some of it comes from how differently they perceive colour and light. Something that is pretty to us is just brilliant to them. When we look at a crow, we just see a blackish blue bird. They see something completely different. They see, black-black, black-green, black-blue, blue-black, green-black, shiny black, dull black, brilliant black and so on. We don't even have words for all the colours and light they see."

"But if, as you say, so many perching birds perceive colour and light differently, why are crows so exceptional?"

Peter watched the crow hop his way into the higher branches of a tree. He'd be squawking more exuberantly, but he had a chicken wing in his beak.
"I have to say some of it is just their nature. They have decided tastes, love shiny things and are bold enough to take the chance to get them. I've seen them steal silverware off of tables, ornaments off women's hair, and jewelry from dressers. They are very social, clever and just love any dust up."

"Sallowpad!" Edmund shouted, "Chief!"

Edmund stalked around the Roost that also served as the Headquarters for the Murder. He rounded the corner of the outbuilding, following the noise and was brought up short by a veritable riot of Crows across the yard.

The ruckus had been so loud, it was rattling Cook's nerves and she had demanded an investigation. As upset Cook could very easily lead to upset stomachs and indigestion, Susan had thought it best if Edmund dealt with the matter himself. He had thought the Crows might have been racing beetles again, but Cook hadn't said they'd been hanging about the midden looking for bugs, so Edmund doubted that was what the fracas was about.

"Your Majesty!"

Looking up, Edmund saw Sallowpad perched on a shingle. "How may the Murder serve?"

He gave the Raven Cock the two-fingered salute. "Good afternoon, Chief. Could you please tell me what our Friends are doing over there," he said pointing. It looked to be two score Crows, all shrieking and flapping about several dead tree trunks lying on the ground. Except…

"Chief! Am I correct? Are there common dumb crows over there?"

Sallowpad squawked with irritation and snapped his beak. "Not dumb, Your Majesty, if you please. They don't speak as you and I do, but our Cousins are not dumb."

This was very odd. Typically, Talking Beasts looked on their non-talking counterparts with a fair bit of condescension.

"Forgive me then. Not dumb, but very loud. What are they doing?"

Holding out his arm for the Raven, Sallowpad launched himself down. "Come. See, My King, how clever the common crow is."

In all, it was a race, of sorts. The Talking Crows were, of course, gambling, wagering away bits of silvery, glittery things, the Shinys and Pretties they hoarded and traded. Edmund made a point of not looking too closely at the bets being laid down. Some of their best silverware was probably there, as well as ornaments stolen from former guests at Cair Paravel. He also saw a number of King Edmund's Shinys, the trinkets he awarded to Crows who served him in the intelligence services.

In a separate pile were pieces of wire and sticks. The dumb (correction, non-speaking) crows were sifting through this pile, picking things up and then hopping over to the dead tree trunks.

"Chief, what are they doing?" The wild crows were holding the wires and sticks in their beaks and pushing them into holes in the dead trunks.

"Watch!" the Raven cackled excitedly. "That one, with the big splotch of purple on her wing, she knows what she's about. I've got two Shinys on her."

Edmund, of course, could not see the purple splotch on the wild crow's wing. Susan boasted that she could differentiate the crows; Edmund thought she was just having one on him. To human eyes, they
all looked virtually identical.

The crow hen had a piece of wire in her beak and she deftly jammed it into a small hole in the dead wood. Edmund could see her concentration as she carefully manipulated the wire. There was a sudden, quick stab, and the crow withdrew her wire, now with a fat white grub impaled on the end of it. The hen transferred the wire to one claw, neatly plucked the bug off the end as if it were a cooking skewer from a campfire, and gulped her reward down.

"She's a clever one, she is!" Sallowpad chortled happily. "She hides that wire somewhere and whenever we do this, she goes and gets it and uses it."

"Chief!" Edmund whispered, "I've got a tin Shiny in my pocket. Would you bet it for me? In the next heat, I'd like to put it down on the hen with the purple splotch."

"Tools!" Richard was so shocked he was near speechless. He sat down heavily on the bench and began writing frantically in that strange code. "You are saying that you have observed ordinary crows use tools? Peter, that is… remarkable."

"Well, I've seen Beavers use fishing tackle and sewing machines, so it didn't seem that unusual at the time."

Peter supported Richard up the stairs of the Bodleian Library. He must be fatigued. Peter felt he had been wrung dry.

"Don't bother, Peter. I don't feel like climbing any more stairs. Asim and Mary will come out soon enough looking for us. Let's just sit here and enjoy the moment, without them and all their questions."

Peter could not help but wonder if that paranoia Richard had spoken of was already beginning to erode his mind. Or, maybe he was bone tired of the nursemaids when he knew there was simply no point to it.

Richard slowly lowered himself to the step, gripping the railing and Peter's arm. He settled with huff. "I won't be doing that much longer, I think."

Above them, the late sun was slowly sinking beneath the trees. Evening seemed a little cooler even than a week ago; it was getting darker earlier. The summer would end, and for Peter, the long march forward would begin. More War, more rations, more school, more Latin and logic, more history and theology. Perhaps enlistment - a subject to broach again with Asim. Again, he wished that it had been Edmund here in Oxfordshire, in Peter's place.

"I've been thinking about those crows, again."

Peter joined Richard, sitting a step lower. "What about them? The tools?"

"There's a nice patch of lawn right outside my bedroom window. We do get crows there. I'll ask Mr. Patel to set up a platform for them, with some wire, twigs, and food at the bottom of a jug. I'll be able to watch them try to work it out. I'd like to confirm your observations."

Peter felt his chest tighten again, as it had too many times to count that day. Richard was, had been, a window, both to looking back to what Peter had loved, and to what was, to hear Richard tell it, here as well, in every unique person and creature. Richard was as surely a product of Here, as a Centaur was a product of Narnia. He belonged wholly to Spare Oom, had never been to Narnia, and yet
worshiped the diversity of all Aslan's creation as truly as any Narnian.

Aslan loved Richard. Peter was sure of it. How could the Lion not love someone who took such
delight in everything he had made?

_I told him what he wanted to know, Aslan. With this work of mine today, I hope you are pleased and
that I have done as you so willed._

Richard believed that the people of this gray, narrow, colourless place called England could learn to
love the industrious Beaver and Richard loved them for it, just as he loved the Beaver himself, and
every other thing, humble or exalted. _If you but have eyes to see and a heart to feel, Lucy had said._
Peter had not thought he could find here that same love he had felt in Narnia, but the first time, since
his Return, wondered if he should try a harder to do so.

_I'm trying to do your Will, Aslan. I really am. I just don't know what it is._

"What? I'm sorry, Richard, I was a bit lost in my own thoughts there."

Richard was handing him the field book. "Here, Peter. Take it. They're your observations."

"No, Richard. They are yours. It's all yours." Peter closed his friend's hands back over the book and
gently pushed them away. "Hold on to it, for as long as you can."

The old man nodded. "Very well. But when the time comes, Peter, I want you to keep it. I want to
know that someone else will remember these things, even when I cannot."

Chapter 12: Crossroads, to follow

In which we learn what Polly, Peter, Mary and Asim think about all this.

Long notes below, mostly references.

Some of these excerpts of this very long chapter, including Briony, Lambert, Fooh, Beehn, the foul
mouthed Otters, the promiscuous Songbirds, the Rats of the Mischief, His Majesty The King
Edmund's Royal Murder, and that mysterious business in the Lone Islands, are mentioned in the
companion piece, _By Royal Decree._

Please review if you can. I deeply appreciate your interesting insights, and I do write back.

A few more fun facts for those of you armchair naturalists:

***The tool making skills of crows was documented in a 2002 article in the _Journal Nature_.

***Wolves, beavers, and eagles (along with many other raptor species) do mate for life and the
courtship displays of eagles are indeed astounding.

***Recent data show dogs may be able to smell at least 10 billion times better than a human. A
human has 50 million scent receptors per square inch in their nose while a dog has 220 million per
square inch. A scent specific trailing Bloodhound has 2 billion olfactory receptors in their nose, the
most of any other dog.

As with bird eyesight (particularly that in perching birds or _passeriformes_, the order to which crows
and songbirds belong), the scenting ability of a hound is something that we really do not even have
the words to describe. I've come to see it as trying to describe sound to one who is deaf, or color to
one who is blind. I've tried here to give a little glimpse into what that remarkable world might be like.
Unfortunately, until we meet the bird or dog who can tell us, we will never really know except in our own imperfect way.
Polly Plummer did not like hospitals. The only thing that would bring her to the Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford was that it had a patient who liked them even less.

"Excuse me, Ma'am?" A sweet little nurse was trying to stop her. Well, phooey to that.

Polly kept walking down the antiseptic hallway.

The nurse was running after her. "Ma'am! Excuse me!"

The little thing ran up from behind and actually tried to put a restraining hand on Polly's shoulder. Simon did not like that one bit.

"Yes? May I help you?" Polly said, turning around, exasperated.

"Excuse me Ma'am, but dogs are not allowed in the hospital." Petunia, her Shorthair cat, mewed from inside the bag slung over her arm. "Or cats," the nurse added.

Simon disagreed. He did not understand the words. Tone was another matter and he understood the nurse with all the profound sensitivity of his kind. He was too well trained to do more than grumble but, very faintly, Polly heard a thrumming in the spaniel's chest all the same.

"Certainly they are," Polly said briskly. "These animals are certified patient rehabilitative specialists, trained in therapy for convalescent soldiers. You will excuse me, as I have a patient to see."

She continued down the hall, daring the nurse to challenge her. She would not. They never did, not in the face of her devastating presentation of assertive, confident English Maiden (Ha!) aunt. It was all in the delivery. Regiments would part before her, especially if she was wearing a Mac and Wellies, and carrying an umbrella and a large, swinging carpet bag. Polly could not wait until she was able to dye her hair blue.

Peter and Edmund asserted that Otters should be enlisted in the Royal Navy. Polly thought a battalion of bus touring English Maiden (Ha!) aunts could probably clean Berlin of Nazis.

Knocking crisply on the door, she did not wait for a response and just pushed it open.

Regrettably, Polly did not anticipate that the High King would be in the room. Blast. She didn't care what Richard Russell thought of her manners. The High King of Narnia, on the other hand, well, his opinion mattered a great deal to her.

"Excuse me, Peter. I hope I am not intruding," she said with a slow, courteous nod. Peter was sitting on the window sill. Richard was, of course, in the hospital bed.

Peter jumped to his feet. "Aunt Polly!" He crossed the room in two gigantic strides, clasped her about the shoulders, and delivered a most Narnian kiss on both her cheeks.

She had to look around the enormous shoulders blocking her view. "Hello, Richard. You're looking
quite peevish today."

"Don't you ever knock?" Richard boomed out.

"I did knock."

"Then maybe you should wait for a response."

Peter was wearing his patchiest jacket, last year's trousers, and the shirt that never stayed tucked in. His mother and Headmaster must despair of that. Nonetheless, Polly had to resist the urge she always felt to drop to a curtsey, which appallingly, her mind and body still remembered how to do. "It is wonderful to see you, Peter. Should I come back later?"

"No, of course not."

"And here, I thought you were coming to see the man exiled to the hospital bed!"

"Oh, hush, you," Polly scolded Richard. "I'm here now."

The High King bent down to one knee. "Good day, Simon. How are you?" The spaniel wriggled his stub tail as fast as he could, all quivering. "Hello Petunia," Peter said to the bag. The bag meowed back.

Really, Peter could teach something of deportment to King George.

"I could have been indecent and you would still come barging in like a U-boat running a blockade," Richard snarled.

"You weren't, so stop complaining, and if you were, it is nothing I haven't seen before and it would have been a good laugh."

"Don't say such things around Peter!" Richard cried, with real feeling. "He'll start doing it again and give me a headache."

Peter rose, giving her another warm squeeze and a cheerful grimace that only she, and not Richard, could see.

"If?" she repeated. "Don't be ridiculous, Richard. What on earth could Peter do that would give you a headache?"

"He knows well enough. Seeing one of those sly expressions of his is almost enough to make me summon that nurse for an aspirin, except then it would start all over again the moment she walked in the room."

"You are in a state," Polly said, with a glance at Peter. Peter shook his head, smiling. Yes, she supposed there was something very knowing about his expressions. As she knew as well, Polly had not attended to it much.

She opened the bag and Petunia poked her head out. Surveying her surroundings, the tabby immediately spied the prime location, and jumped out, right on to Richard's bed. As the cat daintily made her way up toward his chest, Simon sauntered over and nosed his head under Richard's hand for some ear scratches. Richard's scowling expression softened, one hand now stroking Petunia and the other relenting to the spaniel's demands.
"And now it is time for me to go," Peter said. "Richard, I will try to come by tomorrow."

"Thank you, Peter, as always. I would like to hear more about the barn owls, if you can spare the time."

He spoke as kindly as Polly had ever heard him; Richard had certainly never been so deferential to his students. So what magic had Peter worked here?

"Of course."

"Peter, are you going back to Digory's office?"

The High King nodded.

She didn't wish to impose, but Peter would gladly oblige. "Would you mind terribly letting Digory and Mary know that I'll just meet them at the pub and they shouldn't wait for me?"

"Certainly. I will see you before you go back to Whipsnade?"

"Oh yes. I'll probably stay the night with Mary at the House."

Richard grumbled from the bed; Polly ignored him.

Polly put her bags and umbrella down and went over to Richard. "Budge over, Petunia." She sat on the edge of his bed and gave her old friend the once over. "For all your complaining, you don't look that bad, Luv." She kissed his dry cheek soundly.

"It's a good day today, for all that I'm here. Listening to Peter always helps." Richard squeezed her hand and now she did feel the weakness there and the tremor beneath. "Seeing you is about the best medicine there is, Bird."

"What a lot of tosh that is, you old goat."

Richard squinted, and looked at her closely, his mouth forming a thin, contemplative line.

"What?" Polly asked. "You look like you've swallowed a lemon."

"I've been lying here doing nothing, hoping to see something interesting out the window, and waiting for some idiot to make me urinate in a cup or suck more of my blood in vampiric rituals. But, I can now say it's been worth the bother as I've just confirmed the theory, after seeing you with Peter. You are in on it with him and Digory."

It? Oh dear. There was only one it she, Digory and Peter all shared.

"Except..." Richard trailed off, mulling something over.

This was alarming. She had known Richard for over thirty years, he had known Digory for nearly as long, and Richard was just now noticing the Narnia within them? Peter. It had to be something about Peter that had ignited it.

"What are you talking about, Goat?"

"Don't take that tone with me. Mary's thought Digory's had a Secret for years. She and Asim have
got it all wrong though. Actually, they are just focused on a different part of the Secret."

Good Lord. Polly had always worried about that angle. Digory was a terrible liar, was very close to Mary, and she and Asim were both too curious by half.

He put a finger to her lips to silence the protests. "Don't worry. I told Peter the same thing; I've not discussed it with either of them."

Taking a deep breath, Polly grasped his trembling hand more tightly. For a man with dementia, Richard was uncommonly sharp, though that was part of the nature of the disease. Days like this would simply become less and less common, and then disappear entirely as Richard's intellect and sense eroded to nothing. Through gritted teeth, she muttered, "Could you please speak plainly?"

Grinning fiendishly, for a moment Richard looked far too much like the daredevil, sunburnt explorer she would have followed the length of the Nile if crocodiles hadn't eaten their guide. "You gave yourself away, Bird. You, of all people, deferring to a boy a third your age. Digory does the same thing, you know."

“Well, there is that. Strange way to come at it, though."

"You were looking for it, weren't you?"

"In my moments of lucidity, yes." He pointed at his field book with his free hand. "After spending so much time with Peter, I made a note of it at some point, the curious coincidence of Digory's interest in Saint Francis of Assisi and your life work for the Wildlife Trust and the ZSL. I was reviewing my notes with Peter right before you came and that put me in mind of it."

"That bit about the owls. You tricked Peter, didn't you? Somehow." Polly was wishing Edmund was here with a knife. Or Lucy. She glanced over to the armchair where her umbrella dangled. It was in reach and she could stab him with it.

But, Richard, the old cagey bastard put a shaking hand to her face and tried to smooth away the seething anger. "I manipulated him, yes. I think he's forgiven me for that. But, I'd like to think God granted me a boon, too. I just wanted to see, for a little bit, as Peter does, before I forget it all."

Petunia came up under his arm, insisting on her strokes. Simon rested his head on the clean, white sheet, a bit of spaniel drool leaking from corner of his sagging mouth.

"You put it like that and Peter couldn't refuse you, could he?"

"Oh, he could have. Ask him about it if you want. Point is…” Richard trailed off again, frowning. "Well, I suppose there's only one explanation."

"You're being alternately clever and ambiguous, Goat. Is that the dementia, or to provoke me?"

"The dementia, I think. Sometimes, I see so clearly, it hurts. And then I don't remember what it was that was so clear."

He pulled both hands away from their tangled arms and began petting Simon and Petunia again. "What was confounding me is that you learned what you did the normal way, on the hard road, as an amateur naturalist. I know that, since we traveled some of it together. Peter has the interest as you and Digory do, but also especially incredible, unknowable information. I can only conclude that while yours and his experiences had some similarity, his experience was also very different than yours. Longer perhaps, or more intensive. Yes, there's the whole incongruity of his age, but dwelling on that makes my head hurt, so I just take that on faith."
Her heart could break for it, again and again, over and over, the loss of this amazing man to the world. Yet, Richard was not asking anything, nor even really speaking specifically of Narnia. Peter must have been playing a very interesting game to have managed this compromise. If possible, her opinion, of both men rose even higher.

"Peter is a remarkable young man," Polly felt she could say, should say.

"Not so young," Richard remarked. Again he interrupted her. "As I told him, I don't care. And…" He stared at her closely then snorted, with something akin to disgust, or it might be amazement.

"You've got it too, that same starry eyed, Peter-can-do-anything look as Digory. Have any of you ever thought how the man could possibly bear the weight of all these expectations?"

Polly was so offended, she could barely begin. "Really, Richard, that is uncalled for. You hardly know Peter; Digory and Peter's family love him very much."

"Then why have they all charted this ridiculous education for him? I thought you might see it differently, but you've got the same view as Digory, that Peter can do anything he sets his mind to."

"Of course he can," Polly responded tartly.

"Forget it, Bird. There's no point. I see that. But, please, can you make a promise for me?"

"That rather depends on the promise, Goat."

"When the time comes, try to help Peter, would you?"

"I really don't see…"

"Don't argue, just promise. There may not be anyone else who can help him except you."

"I don't have to promise that. If Peter is ever troubled, which I really doubt, I'll be there, and so will many others."

"I don't care about the others. I want you there. Maybe you could steer him toward work with the Trust, or the ZSL…"

"Peter hates zoos," Polly interrupted. "Even Whipsnade. And I'm not going to be steering him anywhere, Goat. Peter knows his own mind better than any man I've ever met."

The man had the gall to wag his head at her, just the way he always used to, when he was right, she was wrong, and they were stranded in the middle of the Okavango Delta without a canoe and no gin for the quinine. Petunia started kneading the blanket, pulling threads up with her claws, purring madly. Simon on the other side was trying to climb on to the bed, but he couldn't get his back paws on the rungs to clamber up.

"Stop it, you," she scolded. "I'm still sitting here."

"And another thing" Richard said, sliding his hand over Petunia and fondling Simon's ears.

"Yes?"

"Keep Peter away from Copeland, or any other respecting biological scientist. That's important. The more I think on it, the less I like it. Peter's more wary than he was, but they are smarter than he is. They'll suck him dry."

*Like you did?* Polly could not believe she had not foreseen this. She didn't expect Digory to have
anticipated it; but she better understood Richard, his manipulative guile, and his formidable knowledge. Yet, Peter did not need anyone's protection. He was an adult and could make his own choices. He and Richard plainly had come to some sort of understanding. She'd heard Richard's respectful plea as Peter had left the room. Richard was grateful for what Peter chose to give, and was losing his mind.

She let out a breath, mirrored by Simon. "That hadn't occurred to me, but I see your point. Yes, I'll try to be alert for that. I'll discuss it with Digory, too. Any other commandments, Luv? We do have work to do, so can we wrap up your management of other people's lives?"

"Yes. It's about Mary."

She glared at him. Polly hated it when he tried to do this. "Don't you dare. There's nothing I can do there. She is not a child, I won't treat her as one, and I'll smack you if you so much as try to do it yourself."

"I'm the one with dementia, and she's the one who's delusional."

"Luv, what do you expect? She's not yet thirty, she's loved you since she was ten years old, she thinks everyone lives forever, that science can answer every ill, and that any obstacle is merely a personal inconvenience to be overcome with hard work, good planning, intuitive brilliance or some combination of the three."

Richard smiled fondly, and abandoned his ministrations to cat and dog to again take her hands in his shaking ones. He kissed both her knuckles. "That's a superb description of my wife. You forgot brute force application, however. Some obstacles require weaponry or explosives to resolve."

"Asim usually handles that and so I did not mention it."

As Richard sighed, Polly saw some of the colour bleed from his face. "We both were well aware of the risk. I'd have never married her if I didn't think Mary understood what I wanted if something like this happened."

Polly had no doubt of that. There was probably some agreement tucked into a file in Richard's office, with a copy in Mary's and another with their solicitor detailing his expectations in the event of illness and debility. Getting Mary to follow it was another matter. What would Richard do, divorce his wife because she would love him as he became an infant before her eyes? Actually, Polly decided she would not suggest that. Richard would divorce Mary in a heartbeat to avoid that outcome.

"I'll try to watch out for her. But Mary will do what Mary will do, and she's never going to shut you up and run away to the Americas, even if that is what you want her to do."

"She's going to moulder, Bird. I can see it. She'll lock herself in at Russell Hall, me with her, and spend years there, shrinking."

"The War is having that effect on all of us, Luv. There's plenty of personal growing that can still be done here, at home, and you and I both know they'll be even more to do when the War finally ends. And, to be blunt, Mary needs to do some growing up, though it pains me that it will be in this way."

It was strange how when they discussed Mary, she and Richard both would become so sentimental. It would infuriate Mary, Polly well knew. Mary was all about raw passion, wide vistas, grand gestures, and limitless possibilities. She'd yet to come to appreciate the small things and gentle intimacies, the thumb on the cheek, the kiss on the palm, the birdsong at dawn.

"Bird," Richard said heavily, now returning again to caress spaniel and cat. "I really think sometimes
that stealing one of Asim's guns and putting a bullet in my head would be a great service to everyone."

"No, Luv. Don't do that. Promise me? When He calls me Home, I want to know you'll be there too."

Now there were tears, hers and his. Simon was trying to climb into the bed again, Petunia was purring fit to shatter, and Polly had two handkerchiefs out.

Polly finally slid off the bed, blew her nose, and retrieved her satchel. "We were going to talk about Castor fiber, remember?"

With some scrambling, Simon now took Polly's place on the bed. That was for the best, Polly thought firmly. Otherwise there would be more sentiment, tears, hand holding, and caressing of old flesh, and really it wasn't a natural state for either of them.

"Did you steal my notes back from Copeland?" Richard was reaching for another, older notebook at his bedside table. The beaver book.

"Yes, I have everything. I need you to go through it, and tell me what it all means. I'm sorry Mr. Patel isn't here, but I'll meet with him later."

"Asim has him doing something for someone, somewhere that we aren't supposed to know about."

Which could be re-bricking a general's shattered greenhouse or consulting on a factory assembly line at a top secret munitions facility. With Asim and Mr. Patel, one never knew, so it was better to never ask.

"I have no idea what you said, and don't repeat it please." Polly briskly opened her own notebook. "We've got space at Whipsnade. The bombs left some lovely craters that we can turn into ponds."

"It's getting the specimens that will be the problem. I've seen them in Norway and Bavaria."

"Richard, we are not going to try running behind Nazi lines to extract breeding pairs of C. fiber. What about C. canadensis? I'm sure Julian Huxley could help us get some pairs from the Americas."

Polly added for emphasis, "once the War ends."

Really, Richard would have them running blockades for beavers - which made that idea of using otters in the Royal Navy even more amusing.

"I know the arguments; I still insist they are different species. Compare those specimens at the Museum, and you'll see it too. We shouldn't introduce a non-native species here. No beaver is better than the wrong one."

"Goodness, you've become absolutist in your old age."

_____________________

Polly is here because Priscipixie and Miniver have mentioned her. So, let this be a warning to you – when someone writes in a review something like, "Oh, will we see Polly?" I tend to say, "You know, that's a really good idea." Digressions Is Us. I had assumed at the story's inception that Polly was involved in animal conservation, but, as with Susan, hadn't intended on doing anything with it. Now, I'm wondering myself about Polly's trip on the Nile where the crocodiles ate the guide and the Okavango Delta with no gin for quinine. I have assumed that both Polly and Digory have brought their experience at Narnia's creation forward into their adult lives in very significant, but very different, ways. Digory is contemplative, working to construct a philosophy and theology that encompasses respect for all beings and Creation at a level deeper than "aren't they cute animals."
Polly approaches it from a more active, conservationist point of view.

Julian Huxley was the brother of Aldous Huxley and the grandson of Thomas Henry Huxley. Thomas Henry Huxley was "Darwin's Bulldog," and in 1860 he debated Samuel Wilberforce about the theory of evolution by natural selection at the very same Oxford Natural History Museum Richard and Peter have visited. J. Huxley was an important figure in, among other things, the founding of the World Wildlife Fund, African wildlife preservation, and UNESCO; he was also for a time the head of the London Zoo.

Chapter 13 Crossroads Part 2 and 3 to follow
In which we find out what Peter, Mary, and Asim think about all of this.
Crossroads, Part 2

The Stone Gryphon Part 1: Oxfordshire 1942
Chapter 13 Crossroads Part 2
In which we find out what Peter and Mary think about all of this.

"Today there remain but a few small areas on the world's map unmarked by explorers' trails. Human courage and endurance have conquered the Poles; the secrets of the tropical jungles have been revealed. The highest mountains of the earth have heard the voice of man. But this does not mean that the youth of the future has no new worlds to vanquish. It means only that the explorer must change his methods." Roy Chapman Andrews, paleontologist, explorer, administrator, American Museum of Natural History

Nothing for it then.

With a deep, steadying breath, Peter entered the Professor's office.

The Professor looked up from his manuscript. Peter wished heartily that Mary had not located that missing Duns Scotus lecture. Each was more impenetrable than the last. He could not follow the proof of the existence of God beyond step 4, and once he tried to puzzle out how there is no infinite regress in an essentially ordered series of causes, and how essentially ordered causes were distinct from accidentally ordered causes ...

"Hello, Peter. Everything well at the hospital?"

"Good morning, Professor. It was fine, if one doesn't mind yelling and swearing."

"Richard abusing the nurses?"

"And the orderly, technician, secretary, and the engineer who came to fix his window. For someone who is supposed to be resting quietly for tests, Richard was very active. Aunt Polly arrived, so I left. She said she would meet you and Mary at the pub."

Mulling it over on the way back from the hospital, Peter in the end decided not to raise his questions with the Professor. There was obviously some long history between Aunt Polly and Richard, of the same sort that followed both the Russells. Mary and Richard amassed interesting people about them the way others collected charms, beetles, or china dogs. That Peter had himself become part of the collection was both disturbing and flattering when he considered who else occupied space in the Russells' curio cabinet.

In this case, there was no need to gossip with the Professor when he could learn it directly from the source. If he wanted to hear of their shared history, which probably involved mosquito netting and long treks to nowhere with crates of supplies on donkeys, he would ask Aunt Polly or Richard – who would either snap that it was none of his business, or, more likely, tell him because they both loved a good story. Not that many people in England did what they did, and given Aunt Polly's involvement in the Zoological Society of London and African wildlife preservation, he should have figured out sooner that her life would have run along parallel to Richard Russell. Possibly intersecting as well, which led to speculations of a sort that, as Richard would say, made Peter's head hurt and truly weren't his business at all.

More to the point with all these interesting things, people, books, stories, and conversations to be
had, Peter again wondered with the small bit of irritation that he permitted himself, why he was trying to cram Latin, Greek, and theology into the mix as well. Why hadn't he ever taken the time to talk to Polly about something other than Narnia? She had spent but a few days there and a lifetime making its magic relevant and real here. He would have to make up for that neglect. For now, Peter pushed the matter aside; it was time to attend to the Professor and the stack of paper he had (mostly) diligently toiled over the last two weeks.

Peter pulled the chair from his makeshift desk by the window toward the Professor's desk, collecting a notebook and pencil along the way.

"To work then." The Professor put the manuscript down. "Would you like the positive, or the negative first?"

"Negative please, Professor."

"Very well." He handed across the desk a dishearteningly weighty stack of papers. "This translation of the Aeneid needs... hmm quite a bit of work, Peter. I had thought that Book Seven, the War in Latium, might have interested you, but that seems not to be the case."

Peter took the pages. Latin. Dactylic hexameter. Exemplification of pietas, which wasn't pity or even piety, but something more like duty. And, oh By the Lion. Every time the name "Turnus" had appeared, he had written "Tumnus." It didn't matter that they were carrying pikes and swords, and that Aventinus (or was it Hercules?) was wearing a lion skin, or that he fought like a lion, or that there was a lion on his shield, although he had thought it was snakes on the shield, not lions. It was still Latin, in meter.

The Professor handed him a book along with the papers. "This is Douglas' translation. It is probably the best, although he does use a rhyming scheme, which of course isn't a Roman convention."

Of course. It was one of those things that once said, Peter remembered, but if someone had asked, would have been a blind guess. It just did not stick.

He smiled, so kindly, Peter felt a fool. "I won't have you try to redo the translation, Peter." He said it as if conferring an enormous gift, which it was. Translations were nightmares.

"Please compare your own to the Douglas translation and correct the errors. Pay particular attention to your use of the nominative, genitive, and dative noun forms. And, your verb conjugation."

In other words, it was fine, except for the nouns and the verbs, which meant that the adjectives were wrong too.

Matella, matellae, matellae, matellam, matella, matellae, matella
The chamber pot, of the chamber pot, to the chamber pot, the chamber pot, by means of the chamber pot, in the chamber pot (ugh), O chamber pot!

Amare, amavisse, amaturus esse, amari, amatus esse, amans, amaturus, amatus, amandus
To love, to have loved, to be going to be loving (what?), to be loved, to have been loved, to be going to be loved (how could that be sensible?), about to love, loved, to be loved
Plus, imperative mood, subjunctive mood, indicative mood, gerund, and supine

"I will, Professor, thank you."

With the next stack, Peter's spirit sank lower still.

"As to your essay on Scotus' metaphysics, you present Aristotle's principles of form and matter very
neatly, so full marks there. Unfortunately, it seems that you are not quite clear yet on the argument regarding individuation.”

Peter groaned inwardly, while schooling his expression to polite gratitude. *Haecceitas*, translated as "thisness."

This is not that, because it is this.

Follow that?

He made himself attend. He knew this was important to the Professor. It was important, how precisely? Scholarship? Knowledge for knowledge's sake? Peter wasn't sure.

But it was important to someone important to him, and so it was, therefore, important to him. Was that a logical syllogism? Affirming the consequent?

The Professor was constructing an entire philosophy, from Saint Francis, Scotus, and Bonaventure to something having to do with respect for everything in creation. For Peter, however, *haecceitas* and its applicability to anything was worse than the dactylic hexameter, Latin declensions and verb conjugations. Although, the doctrine of primacy was near as dense, and step 5 in the proof of the existence of God was unfathomable.

*Why wasn't the personal experience sufficient there? I have seen Him, therefore I know He exists?* "*Haecceitas*, you will recall…” Peter nodded and hoped he did not appear as much the idiot as he felt.

"Means that which is unique, unrepeatable, and ultimately indefinable 'ness' – it is a thing’s individuality. I am certain from things you have said regarding Narnia that this principle is quite applicable, particularly insofar as some of your more colourful subjects were concerned."

"Yes?" *A hint? Anything to see him through this wasteland of abstraction?*

The Professor almost frowned. Did he understand that this was like water through fingers?

"I made some notes, Peter. I'd like you to review them and we'll discuss them this evening."

Peter nodded and took the essay. The Professor's spidery handwriting covered the whole of it, nearly obliterating Peter's own, strong script.

"On to the good news, your comparison of the Doric and Ionic styles of Greek architecture was a solid piece of work. I can't say there was anything new in it for me, but it was complete."

Faint praise that, but given the way the rest of it had gone, Peter was very happy for it. Still, he had a sense of foreboding as to what was to come next. The Professor seemed to be employing a rhetorical and management strategy he used himself, praise first, critique second.

"Of course, I did also ask that you explain why the Ionic style was complementary to the Hellenistic period, and to the extent it was not adopted by the non-Athenian states, why."

"Well, it was that…"

The Professor held up a silencing hand, although the smile that accompanied it was warm. "Peter, as I said, this is the good news. This is not school or university and we do not have a precise result to achieve other than your intellectual readiness. So, while not following directions can be a problem elsewhere, it is not here where you found something that intrigued you and you chose to follow it. In
this case, you became interested in the use of structural iron in ancient Greek buildings, and from there, well, you know what you did. I was wondering why."

Peter gave himself the moment to collect his thoughts. He could explain this and wished to defend the point as strongly as needed.

"It was a passing reference in a text to the Greek's use of iron in columns and architraves to withstand earthquakes. It put me in the mind of what I had seen at the Oxford Museum, with the iron and glasswork in the roof. I had read that the first design was with wrought iron and that it was too weak to support the roof. There are of course other examples of use of iron leading to disastrous results, such as the Tey Bridge. It led me to consider the extent to which iron was a fickle building material, in design or composition, or both, and I wondered if its use in Greek architecture might have had detrimental effects upon the structures. I could not answer the question, but I did think it was worth asking."

"I see." The Professor was temping his fingers. Peter was never certain what it portended, if anything, other than the obvious contemplative thought.

He had known he was going far afield with this exploration, but it had been interesting, scholarly and yet still practical. Granted, structural iron was not going to save a building from a Luftwaffe explosive bomb or incendiary. He could not look at the rubble of London and throughout England without considering what would have to be rebuilt, and how such massive projects might be undertaken. Given the Professor's reaction, he was glad now that he had not expanded further into Greek mortar-less construction. Fine joinery work had been something he had seen the Dwarfs do in Narnia and it had been marvelous how they fashioned stones so precisely that one block could be made to fit to another.

"As such things are out of my field, I did show your essay to a colleague with a deeper knowledge of the techniques of Greek construction. He was impressed that you pulled that disparate information together and the questions you raise are actually addressed in a well-known paper on the subject."

The Professor handed a folder across the desk. "So, my congratulations. It was a digression, but a worthwhile one. This is a note from Professor Beazley commending you for asking some very good questions, and he has provided a copy of Dr. Dinsmoor's paper which answered some of them."

Peter took the folder, and the small, if digressive, victory it represented. Nonetheless, he would count it in the win column. "Thank you, Professor."

The Professor leaned forward, less the tutor now and more the friend. "Peter, I know some of this is very new to you. You are an astounding young man, and very worthy here of the title you have borne elsewhere. I have every confidence that you will excel, with time and effort."

Peter nodded. The regard was always soothing, even if he felt he had done nothing to deserve it here. "Thank you again. I appreciate your efforts." Standing, he brought the chair and papers back to his own desk.

He could feel the Professor's eyes following him. "I think I'll leave you to it, Peter. I may go see Richard and review some journals at the Library." He paused, musing absently aloud, "On second thought, maybe Library first, then Richard."

Peter let the comment go. It was part of that personal history of intersecting lines that made for private speculation only.

"Mary will probably come by, so send her on to the pub. Polly and I were hoping to meet her at two.
Which means I told Mary to meet us at one and we will expect her at two-thirty."

"I'll see what I can do to keep her to something approximating that schedule, Professor."

"Accomplishing that, Peter, you should then have no difficulty with solving Fermat's Last Theorem, explaining the disappearance of the Mary Celeste crew, and locating Percy Fawcett."

"I'll get right on those, Professor, after Scotus and the Aeneid."

Alone with the paper, and with trepidation, Peter pulled the Ordinatio (2. D.3, qq5-6) from the stack on his own desk. He experienced fresh sympathy for how Edmund and Susan had come to feel about tax codes. Locating the remains of Percy Fawcett in the jungles of Brazil probably would be easier. Stanley found Livingstone, didn't he?

Fifth I ask whether a material substance is 'this' and individual through matter?

Hence, with regard to what Aristotle proposed, I state that in the case of [things] that are not conceived with matter—i. e. not with an individual beingness that contracts the quiddity—the what-it-is is primarily the same as that to which it belongs, since the kind to which it belongs has no account outside the ratio of what is the what-it-is.

Hoping for a map through the metaphysical jungle, Peter began reviewing the Professor's edits to his Scotus essay. Even knowing that the criticism was intended for betterment, it was difficult, even painful, to read. He had been trying very hard (for the most part) to muddle through it, and there was a sense of wasted effort. Though feeling a bit weary for the argument, he reminded himself it was to build intellectual rigor and character, analogous to running up and down stairs in armour, or hours of practice in the lists with the swordmaster beating you about the head with cudgel. It kept one's sense of self-importance in check.

Right?

Ed's reaction would be of a different ilk, something more akin to Bugger That. My character is plenty well developed enough. But then Edmund tended to suffer from an excess of character already and would have the luxury of flippancy as he would have had no difficulty with this material in the first instance.

Oh! Bless him, the Professor gave him an example! Cribbed in tiny scribble in the margins. Peter squinted, turned the paper sideways, and read:

Peter is a human person (H. sapiens), but Peter is also a man (gender male). So Peter is H. sapiens in the gender of Male. Scotus is to the species H. sapiens, in the gender of Male. Peter and Scotus both share fundamentals of genus, species and gender, but both Peter and Scotus possess a defining quality which makes Peter and Scotus uniquely who they are as individual Male Human Persons, a 'Peterness' or 'Scotusness' whereby Peter is not Scotus and Scotus is not Peter but uniquely and unrepeatably and individually Peter or Scotus – their 'thisness.' Peter is THIS Male H. sapiens and not THAT.

Discuss.

It was like a nightmarish hybrid of Richard's vertebrate biology and Mary's Linnean classification, by way of Scotus and the Professor's metaphysics on the nature of being. Peter saw what the Professor was trying to do, and loved the man all the more for it. Truly, though, Peter had no inkling of what the Professor had written at all.

Maybe Book VII of the Aeneid would be better.

Post hos insignem palma per gramina currum
uiictoresque ostentat equos satus Hercule pulchro
pulcher Auentinus, clipeoque insigne paternum
centum anguis cinctamque gerit serpentibus Hydram

ipse pedes, tegimen torquens immane leonis,
terribili impexum saeta cum dentibus albis
indutus capiti, sic regia tecta subibat,
horridus Herculeoque umeros innexus amictu.

With the Latin dictionary and Douglas in hand, Peter began the labour, as surely as had Hercules, Herculeoque or Hercule, depending on whether it was genitive, dative, or nominative, or some other form.

The small part of Peter's brain not devoted to declensions always made a point of listening for Mary's step. Her stride was long and quick. She was always rushing from one thing to the next and did not slow down for anything. He did wonder what would happen in an impact between Mary and a brick wall, and suspected the wall would be the loser. Never did he more miss the advance warning his personal Guard could give. It was always useful to know ahead of time when someone approached. With Mary, he always needed a few moments to prepare for the bizarre, discordant moment when she walked into the room.

Her shocking similarity to the Dryad evaporated the moment Mary opened her mouth, or moved, or did absolutely anything. Still, it was unsettling, to perceive that vague feeling of Narnia, and then have it explode back into Here. It always left him slightly off balance, like a bout of sea sickness, and with the feeling that a headache lurked just around the corner.

At the beginning, he had wondered if Mary, Richard, or Asim might have been Elsewhere. The Professor had rounded on him pretty severely for that; Polly had as well. One did not have to go to Narnia to be interesting, to appreciate Creation, or to find Aslan, they both had insisted. To be sure, it had all just been much easier to find such things in Narnia than in this gray, War-torn place, and Peter had been there far longer than they had. Yet, in the Professor and Polly's broader view, Peter could see better the shortcomings of his own myopia.

Richard, Mary and Asim were all rooted here and it was their unique experiences here that had made them the incredible people that they were. Still, they did all echo in different ways and at different times some of the very best things of Narnia – a reverence for the Creator and respect for all His Creation, the passion for adventure, the regard for others, the love of learning, the abundant diversity, yet tolerance of differences, the skill at arms.

For Peter, Mary's particular echo was unfortunately also associated with a confusing dissonance. He did not understand it, could not reconcile it, and was not going to try to do so. Peter had enough to fret over with what he was supposed to be doing, and worrying about what Su and his parents were in for. Trying to divine the meaning of Mary Anning Russell, assuming there was any special meaning, was a distraction he did not need, and wasn't going to bother with.

centum anguis cinctamque gerit serpentibus Hydram. Serpens, serpentis 3 rd declension, plural, serpensa ? serpentibus, dative of snakes, to the snakes? Hydra to the snakes? Snakes to the hydra?

Edmund suspected something. Peter had seen it in the last letter. It was a mistake he now realized to have not said more about her. Peter had not been able to think of a way to write it that would not have sent Edmund into a panicked state. Which, Edmund probably had ploughed into regardless. Good intentions and all that, with Peter now recalling why he was so disapproving when others tried to conceal things "for his own good." Hopefully, Lucy would be able to talk Edmund out of whatever tree limb their brother had crawled out on to, spinning his worst case conspiracies. He
could be an alarmist and had a very active imagination. Concededly his shadowy concerns were usually justified, but not always.

Really, what did Edmund think? That Peter would do a Rabadash? Go mooning after one of the Professor's oldest friends and students? Make an ass of himself over a woman who was devoted to a man he respected a great deal and who was guarded by a knife-wielding assassin who had ridden with T.E. Lawrence in the Arab Revolts? Act like the Trils who just would not shut up about her? Oh yes, and then there was the fact that he was, to all appearances, sixteen.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

He hated being this age again. As Ed would say, an adolescent human male could look at a kitchen table and think of sex. Peter did think that this time around he was managing to approach it with a fair bit less idiocy. More than the tempers and all the rest, and really those were just something one dealt with and tried not to inflict upon others, the worst of it by far was the company he had to keep. At some point when the Trils were obsessing (again) over Mary with that revolting combination of lust, gossip, and ignorance, Peter had privately made the startling realization that he could envision pretty accurately what she looked like without her clothes on. The Dryad had had a knot on her trunk; he wondered if it would translate into a human birthmark and if so, where. He declined to share his hypothesis with the Trils.

Adj, pulcher, Masculine. beautiful, pulch e r, puchri, pulchro, pulchro, pulcher Hercule pulchro, so masculine beautiful dative, To beautiful Hercules? Of beautiful Hercules? pulcher Auentinus, nominative, Beautiful Auentinus. Beautiful Auentinus to beautiful Hercules?

 Granted, Mary was likely the most attractive female at the entire University this summer, except maybe the maids the Trils kept boasting about. However, given all the talk and the patent inaccuracies in that talk, Peter had concluded that those maids, or at least the Trils' touted experiences with them, were as real as the Loch Ness monster. Why did boys so vocally broadcast their ignorant, venal banality? It was so hard to not just bluntly contradict or correct them, but that would then lead to those questions of how he knew what the Trils didn't even know enough of to dream about. They would really do themselves and their future unfortunate partners a favor if they just found a decent book on the subject and tried to learn the basics of the biology.

That woman on the trail with the Labrador had been good-looking; her skirt was certainly slim enough. But, then how could someone move properly? It was just the sort of fashion that drove Edmund spare. Peter had come to the view that trousers on a woman really were preferable all around – more mobility for the woman, better sense of her legs for him.

The nurse who kept finding reasons to come into Richard's hospital room when Peter visited was very pretty, though that smart attitude was really something Ed appreciated more than he. Peter didn't like all that drama in his personal relationships.

I'm drifting again. What a truly stupid age to be, again. Peter firmly bundled up these disjointed and mostly feminine distractions and tossed them out the open window. Now was not the time. He would divide his attention just enough to listen for the footstep that would give him the warning he needed, and devote the rest that remained to conjugating Latin verbs and noun declensions.

Ipse pedes
Ipse, ipsa, ipsum... Himself!
Pedes... noun, 3d decl. solider? Himself a solider?

Damn doctors, obviously without a clue unless you have a bullet in the chest. Mary could just scream
for the inanity of them. There had to be something for Richard's tremors. A treatment for muscles? Or nerves, perhaps? Richard had never been especially nervous. Goodness, how could he be, given things like that cobra nest under the house and the hippo in the bathing pond? She'd need to go to the medical library and harass the students there for some ideas.

Students. Richard had wanted a copy of one of his C. fiber papers, but the Trils couldn't find the Journal in the Library. Mary suspected the Library's copy might actually be in their library at home. Digs probably had a copy of the article. She'd take a look for it in his office.

Digs. And Polly. She was to meet them at the pub at three. Plenty of time to take a look at Digs' binder and find the paper. She could just borrow it.

The door to Digs' office was open, and she walked right in.

"Oh! Hello, Peter! I was expecting Digs!"

Peter was bent over something moldy but not biological. He had been at it awhile. Mary knew that look well. She saw it in others regularly enough, but never endured it herself. If anything was that tedious, she'd never have the patience to see it through.

He rose to his feet, quite the young gentleman, but did not seem surprised to see her. "Hello Mary. I say, it's near one o'clock. Shouldn't you be meeting the Professor and Aunt Polly?"

The office wasn't usually this cramped. Goodness, the boy did have a way of taking up a lot of space.

"Plenty of time yet," she said dismissively. People who were punctual had too little to do. Mary looked over at the disgusting tome on the desk. "Oh dear God, Dunce Scotus again? Peter, how can you stand it? He is absolutely pedantic, deliberately obscure, and just dull."

Peter put his pencil down, scooting his chair under the desk, to face her, giving them both more room. "So tell me, Mary, how do you really feel about the Subtle Doctor?"

"Loathsome. I really do not know whether to be impressed or appalled that you persevere through it. In fact..." Yes, now would be a good opportunity. Very seriously, clapping hands prayerfully, she intoned, just like Reverend Essex had in Hong Kong, "Peter, I wish to make a full confession."

Peter looked thoroughly alarmed. "Mary, I don't wish to hear your confession for ever so many reasons."

"Sarcasm? Peter, I didn't know you were sarcastic."

Mary went over to the bookcase and pulled Digs' Russell binder from the shelf. She pushed a stack of paper to one side, and hopped on to Digs' desk.

"Only occasionally. It is my brother who has refined it to an art form. Also, my sister Susan can convey an entire conversation laced with irony by raising a single eyebrow."

Mary put her glasses on and peered at the boy, speaking most sternly. "Don't divert me, young man. You do that a lot, and I won't be put off. Stop looming like a crow in the corner there. Sit back down."

He just gave her a bland, I'm sure I couldn't possibly know what you mean look. This bullying worked so well with the Trils. Obviously, Peter had been getting coaching in Mary Management from Asim, Digs, and Richard. Treacherous louts. Peter did at least sit, so following some instruction
was evidently within his grasp.

Mary did want an answer to a question that had been vexing her ever since Peter Pivensee blithely rolled into Digs' life. She wanted to understand and this Enigma was not going avoid it with his typical evasiveness.

"I want to confess that I can't keep Scotus or some of this other drivel in my head at all. I keep notes on these topics that I know are of such importance to Digs. Before I see him, I review my notes so I do not sound the utter idiot when speaking."

So that is what shock looked like on young Peter's face. She made note of it.

"You cram? Before seeing the Professor?"

"Yes. Silly, isn't it, but there it is. It's such an academic's way of doing things. I suppose it's a remnant of when he tutored me and my desire for him to think well of me, a desire I have not had the sense to outgrow."

He did not laugh at her. That was a good decision on Peter's part; she might box his ears if he had.

"This is a confession Mary. I'm afraid though that absolution is quite beyond this humble servant. My understanding, though, you certainly have. I understand very well."

Sympathy. He did do an adequate job of conveying sympathy. Interesting too because Peter was also sympathizing. Which meant that this paragon of virtue understood the importance of having Digs' approval, the insecurity of potentially not having it, and was, despite every outward appearance, striving to maintain it.

She shrugged it off, a little. "Now, I know that Digs does not review the latest Proceedings of the Royal Geography Society before seeing me. And I doubt he would be able to find his way out of the Sahara with nothing but a compass, a camel and a canteen of water. But, his good opinion does matter to me. Enormously."

He gave her an infuriatingly askance look. "Mary, did you really make it out of the Sahara with nothing but a camel, a compass, and a canteen of water, was it Asim who did it, or are you just having one on me?"

Impudent. Mary did not like that at all, or what it suggested. "Peter, just because I am a woman, does not mean I don't know how to read a map or orienteer. Would your sisters let you escape a slight like that unscathed?"

"If I was implying a poor assessment of their abilities, you can be sure they would not. Both my sisters have very firm temperaments, each in her own way, and will use pointed force to carry the day when necessary, including on my poor person."

"So worse still, you question my veracity?" Really, he could be very aggravating. "You should be asking which time, and it's not limited to the Sahara. The time the camels died? The time I was with Father Lapparent? I didn't cross the Sinai in 48 hours, like Lawrence claimed, but I have crossed it."

She jumped off the desk, grabbed The New Conquest of Central Asia from Digs' shelf and dropped it next to Peter's essay on his desk. Ouch. From the immediately recognizable scrawl, she knew from years of painful experience that Digs had had plenty to say on Peter's interpretation of the Dread Dunce, Doctor Scotus. Which would bring her back even more urgently to the question he kept diverting her from asking. Which she would ask just as soon she corrected this deplorable misapprehension of his about her competency.
Opening the book, she pointed to one of the plates. "That's the Gobi Desert of Mongolia. That's me, Roy Chapman Andrews, and 25 Bactrian camels. They have two humps. In the Sahara, those are Dromedary camels, with only one hump. Of course, I was about ten in this picture, but I hope you are getting the appropriate view here, Peter."

Mary was going to snap the book shut on his nose when she spied another photographic plate on a facing page. She caught her breath. Oh My Goodness. She grabbed the book and held it close, looking both with and without her reading glasses. Could that be it? She turned to the pages where she knew the other photographs were. This was uncanny. Absently, she began searching her trousers for a pencil.

"Mary?" She felt a hand brush her arm. Blinking, she refocused on where she was. She was not at the Flaming Cliffs, brushing red dust from white rock and bone. Digs' office. 1942. With Peter Pevsnee.

"Sorry, Peter. I was having a flashback to that expedition. I've just realized something. Something unbelievably important."

Peter handed her his pencil. "Do you want to write it down?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Do you need some paper?"

Mary grabbed her satchel from where she'd left it on the floor and dumped its contents on to Peter's desk. Notebook. She dug through the bag, tossing on to the desk and over Peter's haphazard papers, her compass, pocketknife, torch, a package of nuts, measuring tape, magnifying glass, brush (for specimens, not hair, unless the specimen had hair), and the many other accoutrements to a well-stocked lady's handbag. "No thanks." She found her field book (of course) at the bottom and quickly turned to a blank page.

\[
G = P \text{ andrewsi}\ ? \ Parietal = \text{wing}\ ? \ Beak? \ Tail? \ Credit 2 \ P. \ Pesevsnee
\]

With a breath, she brought herself back from the moment. She needed to go back to the library. This wasn't work for the Trils either; it was more subtle than that. In fact, they were the wrong sort for this altogether. Then, she had to find the right plaster block in the ballroom. She hoped it was in the ballroom. If it was in the cellar or the carriage house, that would entail the assistance of lots of native tribesmen to move it. Mr. Patel would help. She was sure it was there; where was the trick.

But now, I have a theory. An absolutely fabulous, unbelievable, amazing theory. I am so very clever!

She wanted to crow about it from the rooftops, but that wasn't how these things worked. It was a slim hypothesis, and now it needed the hard effort of testing and proving it. I could be doing this until the War ends. But, that's fine, because everything I need is here. It was a brightening, reassuring thought.

"Well, Peter, without that potential slur to my skills and veracity, I would not have looked in Roy's book. I've had a Eureka moment. Lots more work, but maybe a breakthrough and so I thank you for that."

"Always glad to be of service, and I really didn't intend to malign you or your skills at all." He had his hand out.

Pencil. He probably knew she was a criminal mastermind specializing in pencil thievery. She gave it back.
"That's not what it sounded like to me, Peter."

"For that I do apologize. Simply put, anything involving a desert, a camel and a canteen was going to be a good story and I was hoping to goad you into telling one. I'll be sure to couch the request in more agreeable terms next time."

She had to smile, her pique soothed. For one so young, Peter did know how to charm. In fact, all things considered, he was quite charming, particularly when compared to the slightly older but far less mature Trils. It was very odd, and not something she had especially noticed before. Asim had his theories, each more fanciful than the last. Mary, however, just hadn't quite seen what was so very special about Peter Pesenvee and had declined to join the cult of hero worship that seemed to surround him. Maybe this was part of what Asim had perceived and meant.

"I've become quite accustomed to Richard jotting things down," Peter was continuing. "The Professor does the same thing. I might feel motivated to follow the example and keep a notebook and pencil of my own, but I can't say as I have so many of those moments of clear insight that would warrant the bother."

He began handing over the equipment from her bag she had scattered over his work space. Peter did not seem overly fastidious, but Sahara sand was leaking on the Latin translations. Those, like the Scotus essay, bore the very heavy imprint of Professor Kirke's editorial commentary.

"Reeling and Writhing," she said with empathy of her own, gesturing toward the written over papers with her compass.

"So the Mock Turtle replied." A shade of grimness flitted across Peter's countenance then disappeared. "I'm not sure though about the different branches of Arithmetic."

"Perhaps no Ambition and Derision, but certainly Distraction and Uglification."

Peter tapped the notebook in her hand with his pencil. "Speaking of reeling and writhing things in notebooks, Mary, you should check the time you wrote down for meeting Aunt Polly and the Professor. I clearly remember it was one o'clock, and it's passed that already."

"No, it was three." She flipped to the page. "See… oh, I guess it was one." She shrugged, picking up the bag of nuts from the desk that had been in her bag since the Sahara. "Oh my ears and whiskers, how late it's getting!"

"I am getting much better about your random quoting of Alice." He handed her the measuring tape and some string.

"It's not random, Peter. Each quote I use is perfectly matched to the occasion."

"But of course it is, Mary."

"Sarcasm! Twice in one conversation! This must surely be a record for you."

"Say, what's this?" Peter asked, giving her a small, gritty parcel that had spilled out of her satchel.

"Oh! I forgot I had that! Let me show you!" Carefully she unwrapped the cotton wad and oilcloth package to reveal seven inches of bone crushing, conical tooth. She handed it to Peter.

"That is impressive," Peter said, weighing it in his hand. She heartily approved of the awe that crept into his voice.
"It is, isn't it?"

"What is it?"

"One of the really massive, crushing teeth I found in the Sahara. If the scale holds, a tooth that size would have been in the mouth of a 40 foot long crocodile."

He whistled appreciatively. "That's the length of a train car."

"Yes, with over one hundred of Asim's daggers for teeth. Just imagine something that big, stomping about the swamps of the Sahara, tearing into tender dinosaur flesh and gulping it down. Really magnificent," she concluded with a lusty sigh.

Peter winced. That was not the first time she had noted it. "What? You winced. What did I say?"

He was trying to laugh it off, but he was squirming too. "Nothing, Mary. Truly."

"I won't be diverted, Peter." She parked herself squarely on the corner of his desk. He'd have to go out the window or bodily remove her from his path to escape. "You have my full attention and I've already made one confession. Under principles of reciprocity, it's your turn."

He blew out a rueful breath. "It's that you are fond of that particular adjective."

Adjective? He had a problem with an adjective? How peculiar. "Which one? Oh, you mean, 'magnificent'?"

Peter nodded reluctantly.

"I suppose I am fond of it. It's such a terrific word to describe really enormous, magnificent reptiles."

"And owl vomit, fossilized dinosaur dung, drooling Komodo dragons, and boa constrictors swallowing mice. All have qualified for that adjective in your observation."

"You certainly are paying more attention than I thought you were. Why is an adjective a problem for you?"

"Not a problem," Peter corrected quickly.

She pushed her glasses down her nose and peered over them at him. Was that a slight blush? Surely not. Must be a trick of the light. Yet, he did seem effacing and affected by it. It was the most emotion she'd seen out of him all summer. She'd come to assume that Peter had no emotion to speak of and that he was all about being quite properly self-regulated at all times. Again, a rather marked contrast to the Trils.

"So, if not a problem, then what?" Mary was prepared to persevere and camp out at the desk corner until she got her answer. It was a tiny chink in the impervious armour of Peter Penseive, and one she would probe further.

He squirmed again then finally admitted, "My brother and sisters use the term to try to wind me up."

"Oh, they tease you? You permit them to tease you?"

He ignored the second and answered the first.

"Yes. To them, it's a word that is closely associated with me, if you follow. So you associating it with seven inch teeth from an extinct crocodile the size of a lorry would give them no end of
amusement."

"Or owl vomit. Or drooling dragons."

"In one. I am certain that if any of them heard you, I would never hear the end of it from them."

What an interesting dilemma. Peter simply didn't seem to be the sort with much sense of humour. He was very serious for so young a person.

"So, do I persist, in order to please them, or desist, in order to make it less personal for you?"

"You needn't do either, Mary. You asked why I reacted, and I told you."

"True." Still, she expected that Peter permitted his brother and sisters to take liberties that he would not allow others to take. If she persisted in using the term, she might actually get some sort of emotional reaction from him. It would likely be a negative one. It could be an interesting hypothesis to test.

Peter handed the tooth back to her and she began wrapping it up again.

"So, why do you think it's a crocodile and not a dinosaur?" He was changing the subject again, undoubtedly to keep her from using the word "magnificent."

"I think between the scutes I found, those are scales, along with shape of the teeth, it's most likely crocodilian and not a dinosaur, but we'd need a skeleton to be sure." Magnificent didn't really fit in that sentence.

"Are crocodiles that different from dinosaurs? I had always thought they were a sort of living dinosaur."

"Paleontologically speaking, crocodiles are older than dinosaurs, and are totally different animals for all that both are reptiles. They are both ruling archosaurs, but dinosaurs are unique in the structure of their hips ...

"Hips?" Peter echoed, sounding alarmed.

"Yes, as compared to other reptiles like lizards and crocodilians, the hips of the dinosaur are…"

Peter made a hurried, silencing gesture. "Mary, I apologize for inadvertently stumbling into this subject and now interrupting you, but I am under strict instructions to not discuss hips with you under any circumstances."

Mary pushed her glasses down her nose again and stared at this very irritating young man. This was one of her favorite topics and he didn't want to hear about it? Intolerable.

"What in blazes are you talking about?"

Peter slid his chair away, warding her off with his hands. "The Professor said that should you begin discussing that subject in my presence, he shall feel compelled to write my mother and explain that he has failed in his moral duty to protect her beloved, innocent child from the unwholesome influence of a notorious evolutionist. The Professor will also give my mother your name and address so that she may give full vent to her feelings in correspondence to you.

Oh dear God.

Peter pushed his chair back further still. "Richard informed me that should you begin discussing that
subject when he is present, that I am to immediately leave the room for eleven minutes, during which time, well I cannot possibly speculate what would occur being the beloved and innocent child that I am. If he is not present, I am to immediately direct you to wherever he is. So, Mary, your husband is in the hospital, and if you persist in the topic, you are to go see him. Should you chose not to seek your husband, Richard instructed me that I was to immediately leave the room and not return for seven minutes. I'm sure I don't know what he meant, but these were his instructions."

"Oh Richard, I love you so much. Seven minutes. Goodness, would it take that long? Eleven with Richard? I don't think it took that long in the back of that merchant's stall in Cairo. Or in the luggage compartment on the train from Bombay. She'd have to find a stopwatch at home and time it out.

"Last, and most worrisome of all to me, is Asim's caution. He said that it would take a braver man than he to endure more than ten minutes of your discussion on that subject. As he is a soldier, an experienced fighter, and a brave man indeed, I cannot imagine what you might say that could be so concerning to him. However, I shall heed his advice and not attempt to find out."

She laughed and threw up her hands, conceding defeat. Really, what else could she do against the combined might, cleverness, and guile of Asim, Richard, and Digs together? She could overcome it, eventually, but it would be a tedious business.

"As I do not wish to be accused of contributing to your delinquency or truancy any more than I already have, Peter, I shall desist in discussing that subject, alright?"

"Thank you, Mary." She thought she heard a trace of smugness in his tone. Mary Management, indeed.

Peter was dusting the sand from his desk and blowing the fine grains off his wasteland of an essay. "I am certain my mother most especially thanks you for the delicacy you are affording my tender years."

"Oh! Sarcasm! You were sarcastic again!"

She took the tooth and put it back in her bag. That first Sahara expedition with Lapparent had been a good one. One guide, three camels, miles of Sahara, dozens of teeth and scutes. Where was Lapparent now? Dead? Imprisoned? Collaborating? She sighed heavily, the brooding anxiety smothering her, smothering them all, again. Bloody War.

Peter's voice intruded on her thoughts. "Mary?"

"Sorry. Just the Distraction branch of Arithmetic, as the Mock Turtle would say. I was wondering where Lapparent was, is, whatever. I was with him when we found teeth the first time. He's a brilliant archeologist and won the Cuvier Prize. He's also a French Jesuit priest, so it's really hard to know what has happened to him. I've not heard from him in over a year."

"Richard mentioned that's true for a number of your European colleagues."

"Yes." She tucked the notebook in and closed up her bag. "It's not just the fear that they may be dead, either. I dread to think that they are Nazis or sympathizers, or worse still, have thrown in behind Hitler's perverted causes."

Mary picked up Roy's book to return it to its rightful place on Digs' shelf. They had several copies at home, some even that did not belong to university libraries.

"Like everyone, I really want this War over. But, I do worry about what we face afterwards.
Sentence first, verdict afterwards, I suppose, just like in *Alice*. It will be an ugly business.”

Crossing back to Digs’ desk, she sat down on it again and started leafing through the binder, looking for the *C. fiber* paper Richard wanted.

"It would not be right at all to condemn people that way," she heard Peter say. "Even traitors may mend, if given the opportunity to do so."

She looked up from the articles, surprised he said anything, having considered her musings more rhetorical. Peter was tapping his pencil on the desk, staring into the middle distance at a space on the worn carpet.

"So, you take a more compassionate view of this?" she asked.

He looked up and Mary was struck by how very somber Peter was. It was a very serious subject, and she would not have expected someone as young as he was to have given it such contemplative thought.

"I do," he admitted. Peter began moving the scattered, now slightly dusty, papers around on the desk. "Justice has to be done, of course, though not sentence first. Only God knows what is in someone's heart. All we know is what the accused says and does. If those indicate repentance, than yes, I believe compassion is the appropriate response."

"I certainly wish that to be true," Mary agreed. It would be so much more hopeful to believe repentance and redemption were possible. She might fear less what the truths at the end of the War could reveal.

Of course, Mary would prefer most if everyone did the right thing in the first instance, as she would do. "It doesn't bother you that someone might call you naïve for thinking that way?"

"I don't consider justice tempered by compassion and providing the opportunity for repentance and reform to be naïve. Regardless, I don't worry too much about what most people call me," Peter admitted, fiddling with the pencil.

"So long as it isn't a sibling teasing about 'magnificent.'"

"Keep that up and it will be the last thing I ever disclose to you, ever."

He said it lightly, but Mary heard something very firm beneath it as well. It was a promise, even a threat, backed by the conviction to see it through. She actually felt a bit chastened, having not previously considered this undesirable consequence. She grimaced. "Duly noted."

"And speaking of acts of contrition, you are going to owe the Professor and Aunt Polly an apology for being almost an hour late."

"I am so glad you raised it, Peter!"

His look sharpened, but there was no escape now.

"This brings us nicely back to my confession wherein I admitted to trying to relearn Scotus' metaphysics and *haecceitas* every time I meet Digs for a drink at a pub."

Mary again mimicked the prayerful handclasp from her desktop perch. She thought she probably looked like a gargoyle.
"For my contrition, I have decided on an act of works, Peter, and wish to emulate your fine example. So that I might follow in your footsteps, tell me, what did you do to secure Digs' good opinion so that I might do the same?"

With a tilt of her head she indicated the ruinous Scotus essay and sandy, marked up translations on the desk. "Because you certainly have his good opinion and yet it is not due to your acumen at deciphering the Dread Dunce or translating Latin."

Peter's eyes flicked toward the heavily corrected work, then returned to her own, guarded, as if he had revealed something he would have preferred to conceal. He was suddenly and impressively impassive. It was like smacking into a brick wall. Round and round in circles and all she had learned was that he didn't like the adjective "magnificent" and was occasionally sarcastic. He could be very charming, could be empathetic without being sentimental, and was repressively optimistic that people could mend their ways, but wasn't stupid about it either. This was more than she knew at the beginning of the summer, but not much more. The one new, critical piece of information she now possessed was that to her utter surprise Peter Pesenvie was not the Classics prodigy she had assumed him to be based upon Digs' singing praises and accolades.

Squinting, she tried, again, but simply did not see what Asim said was plainly there.

And Richard? Richard loved Peter as he loved his children and most cherished students, but with a regard he reserved for people like Louis Leakey and Digory Kirke – an echelon of esteem so high, Mary wasn't sure if her husband even put his own wives in it.

In this exchange she did finally sense what Asim had described before - the shift when Peter went from adolescent to something else. Again, Asim had his theories, while Mary was reminded of a brick wall.

"Back to that point, again?" Peter asked. "The issue on which you would not be diverted?"

"I was hoping to lull you into complacency."

Peter leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I'm afraid I really can't tell you, Mary."

"Can't?"

"Can't," he repeated, very firmly.

Goodness, Peter possessed a will she would not want to try to cross on a whim.

"I don't know what I've done to deserve here what you describe as the Professor's esteem. To me he does speak with very high regard for your intelligence, energy, and experience. I believe you do have his good opinion, and I think you would continue to have it, mastery of metaphysics, or not."

"Really?" Mary wished she had not sounded so hopeful, but she truly wished to understand. It was neither academic prowess nor life experience that had put Peter where he was in Digs' pantheon of valued people. But if not those qualities, then what was it?

"Yes." Peter paused, and then began speaking even more carefully. "There is one thing on which I am certain the Professor does not respect you, though."

"What's that?" Mary muttered with a growl and a huff. She pretended to return to the binder of articles.

"Your punctuality. It's near two and time for you to go."
"Oh. Well, I suppose I can live with that." Aha! She found it! She slid the C. fiber paper out of the binder under Peter's watchful eye. I'll return it. I'll have to, because Peter will tell Digs I took it.

"Why don't you mull that over on the walk to the pub?"

Chapter 13, Crossroads Part 3 to follow
In which we learn what Asim thinks of all of this and telegrams are received and sent.

Everything I knew about Latin I learned over 25 years ago.

There are lots of real world references. One I will call out is Roy Chapman Andrews, an American paleontologist, explorer, and director of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. He is frequently cited as one of the inspirations for Indiana Jones. Percy Fawcett is also a cited inspiration for Dr. Jones. Fawcett's search for the Lost City of Z and subsequent unsolved disappearance is woven into the most recent Indiana Jones film, Kingdom of the Crystal Skull.

The "hips" discussion, apart from being one of Mary's manias, is in fact an important distinction in tetrapod anatomy, and does make dinosaurs anatomically distinct from a lizard or crocodile.
Crossroads, Part 3

The Stone Gryphon, Part 1: Oxfordshire 1942
Chapter 14 - Crossroads - Part 3

In which we learn what Asim thinks of all this.

"Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me."
_The Last Battle_, Aslan to Emeth a Calormene

_When every morning brought a noble chance,
And every chance brought out a noble knight._
Alfred Tennyson, "Morte d'Arthur" (paraphrased by Winston Churchill, Speech in the House of Commons, June 4, 1940 regarding the evacuation of Dunkirk)

70,000 words and I really should have said this before - while I own a car, a laptop, and lots of books, and my pets, family, and others own me (or at least my time), I don't own any of this.

The night before that remarkable tea party in Professor Kirke's office, Asim saw a dream. Once the sun had fallen below the horizon and the red thread disappeared from the sky, he went to his room in a rambling great house in Oxfordshire and recited the _isha'a_, the _ṣalāt_ he had performed each nightfall since he had become a man.

After performing his evening prayers, he ordered his mind for the following day.

Mary had thought Richard would be well enough, and after so long in Africa and their very difficult journey back, they all desired to see Digory, Dr. Copeland, and the much talked of and mysterious Peter Pevensie. Mary was in a challenging mood and asked Kwong Lee to pack as many _fung zao_ and oddly flavored _bau_ and _gow_ as possible in order that she might see of what stuff Mr. Pevensie was made when confronted with an authentic Hong Kong tea. None of it was strange to any of them, but Asim did advise Mary that Professor Kirke did not have much taste for chicken feet and dried squid. Mary was not to be dissuaded, though.

It was ironic that the foods considered part of (what had at one time been) a normal Hong Kong diet were considered wartime austere by the British. Teas and the food that went with them were likely gone now in a Hong Kong under Japanese occupation. The fate of Hong Kong after the Christmas Day fall to Japan was a horror that weighed on them all most especially because there was so little solid intelligence on the situation and because they had heard virtually nothing from their friends and family still there.

Transporting a tea to Digory's office meant logistics, and Asim had reviewed the needs with Lee. The details of hampers, cutlery, tea, and cups, he left in her skilled, but worried, hands. Colourful, unusual, varied, and peculiar, the denizens of Russell Hall surely were. All were also extraordinarily competent in whatever province he or she occupied.

The car had petrol. He had had to barter for an extra ration with a captain at the local defence office, and would have pulled rank, except that the man was willing to do a side deal involving beans and peas from Lin Kun's garden and one of Mary's stocking rations.

The tedious business of telling anyone who might care where he would be was accomplished. The telegraph office in the village knew where he could be found and would send a runner to the
University if need be. Should there be some unforeseen, as opposed to foreseen, crisis during the day involving the Arabic-speaking world, they would know where to find him.

One wire went to his babysitter, but by the time the man received it in whatever London bunker he was in, Asim would likely be back at Russell Hall. He sent a wire to Bletchley Park in case the codebreakers needed something in Arabic; they didn't need him for German, French, or Italian. The codebreakers anonymously toiled in an accursed position, overhearing dire threats, and then trying to decode and interpret them, and fast enough, to do someone some good. It was terrible, to read of certain death in clinically concise encrypts and know that you had not acted quickly enough to prevent it. The twin disasters of the Atlantic and North Africa were surely occupying them.

The state of the American defence of its own shipping lanes in the Atlantic disgusted him. Asim didn't know how many ships and tonnes of cargo had been lost to Dönitz's U-boats and Operation Paukenschlag. That whole American "loose lips sinking ships" propaganda campaign wasn't to keep German agents in the dark about shipping details; it was to keep the American public from learning the true state of the debacle because their idiotic admiral wouldn't order simple blackouts or convoys. He was reminded again of the saying in the War Department that the Americans could be counted on to do the right thing, but only after they'd exhausted every other option.

The cables he had read on North Africa were worse still. If the 150th Brigade had been able to hold the Cauldron, they might have had a chance and Rommel would not have been able to secure his fuel sources. But, it had fallen and Asim thought they'd lost some 140 tanks in the last two days in the Knightsbridge pocket. All the orders from Auchinleck and Churchill weren't going to help Ritchie hold the Gazala lines. Asim thought it would be only a matter of days before Tobruk fell – which would give Rommel all the fuel, food, and vehicles he would need to chase the Eighth Army into Egypt. From there, it would be on to Cairo and the Suez, and from there, a straight line to all the oil and supplies the Nazis would need to supply their Russian front. The end wouldn't be far off.

He thought Ritchie was incompetent and Auchinleck was worse still. How could the British, who had been roaming that part of the world for so long, still be so foolish?

They needed the Americans. Were there any American generals who understood desert warfare as Rommel did? There were rumors. There were always rumors. Churchill was with Roosevelt now in America. Stalin was hollering for a Second Front to take some of the pressure off the Russians. Stalin wanted the Second Front in Europe. Churchill wanted it in North Africa. And the Americans? Probably still focused on Japan.

Why had they sent that American group all the way to Ireland only to have them sit there? He'd heard the Americans might actually consider flying sorties and bombing runs over Europe. Shocking that.

In his view, and it wasn't just sentiment, it made far more sense to open the Second Front in North Africa first. Secure the Suez and the Mediterranean, as that would benefit the Russians and the British. Move up into the soft underbelly of Europe after that. For North Africa though, they would need an American amphibious force and it would have to cross the Atlantic, from the East Coast of the Americas. Allah would have to be with it to manage that crossing without all sinking to the bottom of the sea by 50 degrees west.

These were his thoughts as he fell asleep. Then he saw the dream. True dreams are a part of Prophethood, though Asim knew he was no Prophet. Dreams come from within, from Shaytaan, or from Allah. The dream he saw had none of the taint of Shaytaan and he did not know from where within himself it might have come. So, Asim attended.

He saw a green ship with a dragon prow and purple sail, sailing on a sea of lilies. On the foredeck,
there was a lamb and with him, a girl. He had seen this girl before in the dreams shown to him and knew her to be important. The brilliant light within her always burned hot, pure, and clear, even though her outward appearance was always changing – younger, older, sad, happy, with a dagger, or with a bow, with a crystal, red-filled bottle, with a wolf or with a beaver, browner, blonder, redder, grubby, Queen enthroned, barefoot and daisy crowned.

Then, it was dawn and time for morning prayer, *fajr*.

"Do you see dreams, Peter?" Asim would ask later.

The King in a boy's ill-fitting clothing said he did not to speak of, at least not the sort of dreams that one knew to be important. God did not speak to him in this way. Asim described the ship, green with a dragon prow and purple sail, but Peter said he had not seen it. Asim did not describe what else he had seen on the ship.

Asim was not sure what to expect when he entered Digory's office that strange day. A regretful part of him always had hoped that Digory or Polly would see the light within him that he saw so clearly in them. Was this not part of the theology of the Saint of Assisi that Digory studied so carefully – that within each being burned the light of God? Asim knew that Digory had not yet understood that in some beings, the blessing of God's light burned more brightly than it did in others. Nor did the eminent scholar comprehend that some, as Asim did, could see so clearly the light that shined within others.

All this light business frustrated Mary to no end, as she reminded him, frequently and wistfully. That tended to happen whenever someone was able to do something she could not.

The light burning in Digory's office that first afternoon was so brilliant, Asim had entered too eagerly and unwary. He had expected to find, as he did, another touched by the loving Hand of God. He had not expected to find what he also did.

It was not an auspicious beginning, but at Oxford, and in England, among all the pale and doughty British, who would have even noticed if he carried knives? Who would have cared for the old protocols of disarming when entering another's man's tent or castle? He wore the knives out of habit, but also for effect, flowing robes and flashing steel to frighten and awe, to make the dull think he was something other than what he really was. His uniforms worn in service to King and Crown with the bars and medals and decorations hung neatly in his closet. Lee would press them periodically so they were crisp and ready. The service revolvers went with that uniform, and they were safely locked away, though he did keep a gun hidden in the car. They were at War and a knife would only get one so far when others fought with bullets.

Peter's challenge was so earnest and old-fashioned, a man more stupid than Asim would have laughed. Mary had been furious. Digory was not surprised, Asim comprehended much later when he was able to reflect upon the whole of it. Digory's lack of reaction was itself notable.

Walking into that room, confronted by the boy-who-wasn't-a-boy, Asim saw something that, until that day, he assumed only he possessed in all this creation. He saw a man shining with the favor of God who would, if necessary, kill. Moreover, Peter knew how to kill, and not in the modern, clinical way of putting a bullet through a man's chest at 20 yards, or dropping a bomb from the air. This was a man who, like Asim, knew what it felt like to drive a knife between ribs, to strike a killing blow with one's own hand.

Richard would be confused later, but there was no doubt in Asim's mind. He saw the latent, coiled danger in Peter as plainly as he saw the light. Peter could have disarmed him, would have done so, and with little effort, if Asim had not saved him the trouble.
So, a killer touched by God, who shined with a light so bright, Asim's own inner eye squinted in the glare of it. God did not grace killers so. Peter, then, was not a killer, but had killed. So, what then was he?

That question would occupy him for some weeks until the range of probable had been eliminated, leaving only the highly improbable.

Their next interaction was the delicate negotiation regarding who should go first out the door of Digory's office.

"After you," Peter had said courteously.

"As a matter of class and race, I should follow you, Peter."

Peter had frowned, as if the thought had never even occurred to him. "Those are not measures of a man."

The boy-who-wasn't-a-boy, in ill-fitting clothes, who had killed, did not even comprehend how completely astonishing this statement was, coming from an Englishman to a dirty Arab of the British Empire. Did Peter not see where he was? Did he really not know that there was no higher testament to the edifices of class, rank, race, and privilege than the Classics department at Oxford?

"Then, it is so you may keep an eye on me," Asim had accused, smiling, but serious still.

The boy-who-wasn't-a-boy, who had killed, and did not think like an Englishman, shook his head. Pitching his voice low so that neither Mary nor Digory could hear, Peter said, "Sir, you have given your word. That is enough."

This peculiar courtesy was the first thing of many things that he discussed with Mr. Patel, Lee, and Kun. They were as shocked as he. They were intrigued by Peter's bold challenge but knew that was really the whole point of how Asim chose to present himself to the English, robes, knives, glower and all. It was intended to deceive and to invite challenge though, until now, in England, the challenges had never come.

After retelling the tale to his rapt audience, Asim detonated the incendiary. "The boy apologized to me."

Lee's cleaver paused; a pea that Kun was shelling dropped into a bowl. The silence was broken by Lee scolding Mr. Patel for allowing his smoldering black cigarette ash to fall to the kitchen floor. Lee brandished her cleaver and Mr. Patel, interpreting the threat correctly, extinguished the butt into his tin cup.

Asim took another sip of his tea.

"Mind you, he did not apologize at all for the challenge. Rather, Peter wished me to understand that he was responding to the threat I posed and not, or at least not for the most part, to my appearance. He admitted my appearance as an Arab may have startled him as it was unexpected, and for that, the fault was his, not mine. He did not wish me to think ill of him for his reaction."

They all digested this to the tune of the clock striking ten.

"He has traveled, then," Mr. Patel said finally, decisively. "There is no other explanation."

"More than travel," Lee said, having to speak more loudly than her normal. She was chopping the
spring onions and had to do this at one end of the long, rough table to keep the rest of them from crying.

"He did not own to it," Asim said, "though I did ask him. My impression is that he is from a very middle class."

"Parent?" Kun asked, gently splitting the peas into the bowl. Kun understood more English than he spoke, and usually said very little at all, but Asim understood the question well enough.

"His mother and father both have employment. I know nothing of his ancestors."

"Not a Tril?" Mr. Patel knew this particular breed of English boy too well, having to deal with them in the field with Richard and serving for more than his share of little sahibs and rajs in India.

"No," Asim replied. A Tril, whose blooded family traced lineages back to the Tudors or Plantagenets and had acquired retainers from postings throughout the Empire, might quickly accept an Arab in desert garb and the knives. But so exalted a heritage was counter to Peter's courtesy, apology, and failure to assert the prerogative of his class. Moreover, there was a cultured patina, the veddy English accent, the intellectually effete quality that was the product of the Very Best Schools, so abundant in the Trils; those qualities were utterly absent in Peter.


Asim had been concerned when he had heard during the remarkable Hong Kong tea of the connections Peter's father had to Cambridge and that he had been called to America at the height of Operation Drumbeat and the war in the Atlantic. It smacked of an unsavoury Special Operations Executive connection to him, and sure enough, Peter eventually confirmed that someone in Intrepid's outfit had extended the invitation. By that point, Asim had done his own checking, though he did so very, very carefully. In such things, his own queries could trigger queries, so he kept them discrete and among those who trusted him more than the command to which they reported.

There was a little Cambridge mob in the SOE that Asim disliked. It would, of course, have been bad for his health if had made such opinions known. Asim was a military man, and not technically part of the SOE, though he had found that its Section V had been expanding uncomfortably close to his own grounds in North Africa.

"When was your father at Cambridge?" Asim had asked Peter.

"He obtained his degree in 1925, I think. It might have been earlier."

"That is well."

The date meant that Peter's father had preceded that uncomfortable crowd. Granted, Peter's middle class father would probably not have chummed with the gentry Rajs and Sahibs even if they had been at the University at the same time. Still, better not to know of them at all. Peter's father had come to the Baker Street Irregulars via some other unusual, but no less shadowy, way.

Peter looked at him with a question, but Asim had shaken his head with a no. Even this early in their friendship, Asim had perceived that spycraft was not Peter's business and it never would be. Killed though he had, Peter was much beloved for the light within him to burn so brightly. God had other plans for the boy-who-wasn't-a-boy who did not think like an Englishman. When the time came, and a spy's instinct told him it surely would, Asim would give the warnings to those close to Peter who would need to hear it.
It had been an interesting discussion the first time they talked of War in a serious way. It had been after Peter's first visit to the Museum with Richard, after Asim had had time to reflect and meditate upon the boy-who-wasn't-a-boy, who had killed, in whom the light of God burned, and who did not think like an Englishman.

The night before, Asim saw again the dream of the green ship with a dragon prow and a purple sail, the girl and the lamb on the foredeck. The girl in this seeing shined as intensely as ever. She was older though, and blonder, with a bow slung over her back, wearing chain mail. In this dream shown to him, he also saw the ship more clearly. The mast of the green ship was a silver sword, beautifully made, with a golden hilt. A great white bird was perched atop the sword masthead.

He and Peter were eating Arabic that day, using bread to scoop up Kwong Lee's version of fūl mudammas, British style, which even Asim had to admit, was almost as satisfying as the real thing. So he and the boy-who-wasn't-a-boy shared an Egyptian dish, made by a Chinese woman, using the bounty of an English wartime Victory Garden, under a tree in Oxford.

On this day, Asim perceived a different aspect of Peter. As he and the others had concluded, Peter did not think like an Englishman. He did, however, think like a soldier. Having seen the silver and golden sword the night before in the dream, it was a connection Asim now easily made. Whether Peter was the sword, or the sword his, Asim was not yet sure. Perhaps they were the same.

"Did you ride in the Arab Revolts?" Peter asked. He was referring to his brother Edmund's long, remarkable letter and had questions of his own.

"I did. I rode with King Faisal, for the most part, and later with King Abdullah. We captured Wejh from the Turks in 1917 and pushed them into Medina and along the Hejaz railway. Later I rode in the raid on al-Aqabah." Because from English schoolboys it was always the same, at this point, Asim expected questions about the great Lawrence. Lawrence was a great man, to be sure. It had been a shame that the other great Arab men of that time did not have a film biographer traveling with them.

However, based upon what he had observed, Asim should have known something different would arise, for Peter was not a boy and did not think as an English boy did. Peter leaned forward and deftly took another scoop of Egyptian food into his bread as if he had done it all his life. "Would you tell me about what happened next, Friend? How the Arab guerrilla fighters broke the back of the Ottoman Empire? Because I would like to hear more about how that was done. And what you believe the Turks should have done differently."

Edmund and Glenstorm had delivered the challenge. Miraz had answered. There was one matter yet to discuss and Peter didn't want all the Old Narnians to hear of it. As their War Council filed out of the conference within the How, Peter passed a hand signal to Edmund, no longer marveling at how easily the old habits and manners had returned.

"Stay a moment," Peter said to Caspian who was making to rise. "You as well, Trufflehunter, Doctor Cornelius."

Edmund held the door until Trumpkin was the last, questioning and reluctant to leave. "In good time, DLF, if you will." It was kindly put, but an order nonetheless. "Please guard the door for us. Let no Good Beast close enough to hear."

A Dwarf would not have the acute hearing to perceive a quiet conversation through the heavy door and stone walls. Edmund shut the door firmly.

"Thank you, Friends," Peter began. "This will be quickly done. We need to discuss what will
happen if I fall to Miraz, whether fairly or by treachery."

There was a gasp, a sharp intake of breath, a growl, and an unheard, but definitely felt, scowl. Peter held up a silencing hand. "Should that happen, I believe our army’s best action is to withdraw and scatter as quickly as possible. There won't be much time, and if we do not retreat quickly, I think we all know what the Telmarines will do. Our numbers are too few to withstand them in earnest combat."

"But, King Peter, we can't just retreat!"

"We can and we will, Caspian," Edmund said from his post at the door.

Peter looked gratefully at Edmund. Edmund would shred him to bits for this foolishness later, in private. Yet, his brother knew as well as he did, there was only one path to victory should single combat fail. Aslan would come; they knew Aslan would come, but Aslan would also expect them to plan for the contingency if he did not.

"Doctor Cornelius, Trufflehunter," Peter said, addressing scholar and Good Beast. "I assume you know of the troubles we had in the first two years of our Rule with remnants of Jadis' followers?"

"The books speak of many months of wearying, scattered skirmishes, Sire," Doctor Cornelius confirmed. "And of the travails the Four endured to finally stamp out the Witch's foul brood."

"The tactics they used are as viable a strategy today as they were then. They are very effective when a much smaller force, such as Old Narnia here, is poised against a stronger and better equipped foe," Peter told him. "As one who remembers, Friend Badger, do the Good Beasts remember these times as well?"

"We do, King Peter," Trufflehunter said with a snuffly growl.

"Then you both must instruct Caspian in how it will be done, how to fight an enemy larger than you and slowly bleed it to death. You must teach him and the Old Narnians how to force your enemy to use ten, or a hundred, for every one you put into it."

Caspian nodded, looking thoughtful, catching the gist. He would do well, Peter judged. Eventually, by Aslan's Grace.

"Yet, ultimately you did prevail, all that time ago, when you were the larger force, against the weaker enemy," Caspian rightly pointed out. "It didn't work for the Witch's survivors. Why do you think such tactics will work for us?"

"That," Edmund said stoutly, "is a long tale that the High King will tell you personally, after he beats Miraz to a bloody pulp."

Asim learned immediately the hazard of any conversation with Peter. The boy-who-wasn't-a-boy had seized upon his every word, memorized it, and then returned three days later with a map, news clippings, and the questions only tacticians and strategists should ask. Over spicy cold noodles and chopsticks, they talked of War, bombs, tanks, and Wüstenfuchs, the Desert Fox, Field Marshal Rommel.

"So, Tobruk is here," Peter said, pointing to an ancient map of North Africa he had probably smuggled from the Library. "And the news reports make it sound as if Rommel has captured enough there to push all the way east to the Suez."
The cables had been exceedingly grim: 32,000 prisoners captured, as well as thousands of tons of fuel and food for the German Afrika Korps.

"That would be a logical goal," Asim replied.

"The Suez under Nazi control would give them control of the Mediterranean, access to oil, and an easier way to replenish their army engaged in Russia?"

Asim suppressed the sigh. This was all he'd heard of in the cables and in War Office yelling over the last week. It was strange to hear this analysis coming from a boy-who-wasn't-a-boy, even if he had killed and was touched by God. Perhaps he had killed in a soldier's cause? Though, no mere dutiful soldier thinks this way.

"Yes," Asim admitted, honestly answering the uncomfortable question.

"And General Auchinleck has taken the command from Lieutenant General Ritchie?"

"Yes," Asim said, confirming what had already been reported. He really did not have a view on that change; both were miserable in his opinion.

"In the middle of a retreat, they change command?"

Asim didn't think the newspapers had been referring to it as a retreat. That was, he thought, Peter's own, though accurate, assessment. They were also burning documents at the British HQ in Cairo and preparing to demolish the port facilities in Alexandria to prevent them from falling under Nazi control.

Peter's fingers moved restlessly over the ancient tourist map spread on the grass. The map would have been useful for British adventurers touring the pyramids of Giza on a holiday fifty years ago. It was less helpful if one wished to understand the geography of the War in North Africa.

"So where do they make the stand, Asim, because make a stand they surely must. Mersa Matruh? El Alamein? Alexandria? I can't tell from this poor excuse for a map which is most defensible."

"Next time, Peter, I shall bring a better map and you shall tell me."

"I don't believe I ever fully appreciated the difficulty of moving an army with herbivores in it," Peter sighed, exasperation warring with fatigue.

Lucy tried to put an arm around his shoulders, but chain mail interfered with familial hugs, making them neither easy to give, nor pleasant to receive. They were watching a team of Dwarfs, Bears, and Centaurs try to push their fodder wagon out of the mud.

"Unfortunately, none of our archers is a Great Cat," Lucy said, with a sigh equal to his own.

Rain was dripping off her helm and down her nose. Peter would have tried to brush it off, but with the heavy gauntlets, so delicate a maneuver was likely to be concussive in impact. Lucy delicately flicked the rain away with her own gloved hand.

"At least the carnivores can fend for themselves," Peter said with glance back at the bloodied muzzles of four Leopards sheltering from the driving rain under an Oak. As they could not help with the hauling and pushing, the Cats had taken the opportunity to hunt. The (dumb) deer of the Northern Wilds, the Cats reported, were thin and stringy, the lack of winter grazing affecting prey and predator. The Cats were now cleaning themselves as best they could. They were fastidious about
such things – something else to consider if they were ever so accursed as to have to repel a raiding Ettin party in the weeks after Christmas.

One of the Red Dwarf Captains, Roblang, slogged over, carrying a plank; he and his brothers worked to wedge it under the mired wagon, to give the wheels some purchase in the sucking mud. Dwarfs did not mind the mud, Peter considered, so long as they could still march through it. They could handle bows as well, and hardy as they were, could do on shorter rations than most with nothing to show for it than a bit of ill temper. What plant matter they ate could, for a time, come from brewed barley and hops alone. But would that mean merely replacing the grains, hay, and greenstuffs in the fodder wagons with beer barrels?

"Steady Friends," Roblang shouted. With another mighty heave from behind, the wheels rolled onto the boards as wagon, Beasts, Dwarfs and Centaurs all groaned with the effort.

"Peter," Lucy whispered. "Did you know how much Centaurs eat?"

"I think we will need to reassess that aspect of our planning with the next winter campaign."

As July ground on, Asim came to understand that Peter's peculiar familiarity with wartime strategies assumed good planning, good intelligence, good training, good leadership, good luck, and the decisive, relatively quick victories that resulted from that virtually unheard of combination of factors. Peter did not have much understanding of the sort of see-saw battles of attrition that typified the North African fighting. Nor, at first, did he understand mechanized warfare with the depth of his other knowledge, although he certainly understood the profound challenges of keeping an Army supplied.

On the grass under a tree, they sat together. Asim unfurled his map of North Africa. "I understand that Mussolini has returned to Rome, as it seems he will not yet be enjoying a victory march through Cairo."

"What a pity. I'm so glad there shall be savings in tickertape and confetti."

They could have thrown the cinders from the burned documents in the British HQ in Cairo; it had been dubbed "Ash Wednesday" the day they were burned.

Peter leaned in eagerly over the map, like a hound on a scent, studying every detail. "El Alamein, is it still holding?"

"So far, yes, as you have read."

"This space here, between El Alamein and the Qattara, it's all been mined, I should think, so that Rommel won't be able to outflank the 8th Army."

Asim wasn't expected to answer that question that wasn't quite a question. Of course it had been mined.

They had found a way of communicating that gave Peter enough and yet did not compromise Asim.

Peter's finger traced the line from the Mediterranean Sea in the North to the great Qattara Depression in the south, with the tiny town of El Alamein wedged between. "So, a place that is good for nothing except Cheetahs, gazelle, salt marsh, and sand still keeps Rommel at bay," Peter murmured.

Asim heard that amusement again, vaguely ironic. There was something about the Qattara Depression that had captured the imagination of this boy-who-wasn't-a-boy, even apart from the fact
that Rommel's tanks could not pass through it.

"The great Desert Fox, outfoxed by Cheetahs and sand."

Asim was with Mary, in the Library, helping her intimidate the Trils into doing her bidding. Peter, while friendly enough with the boys, also held himself slightly aloof from them. He asked Peter of it.

"My sister once told me that while she loved me as a most beloved and dear brother, as a subject of conversation, I was duller than toast."

"And?" Asim prompted.

"I have developed a profound sympathy for that view, having been subjected to the Trils' incessant discussion of Mary at every moment I am in their company."

Asim told Mary this, of course. She was quite offended. "I think it's rather flattering they pine after me so. It's quite endearing, so long as they keep their minds on what I ask them to do. Desire, in whatever form, can be quite motivating."

"Well, Peter is finding it a bit dull."

She snorted. "I am never dull."

Mary was rather missing the point, but Asim did not correct her.

It was the discussion of how North Africa might be wrestled from the Germans that made him reassess, again, the boy-who-wasn't-a-boy, in ill-fitting clothes, within whom burned God's bright light, who had killed, and who did not think like an Englishman, but did think like a soldier.

Asim had never, of course, told Peter anything about the raging discussions of where the Second Front of the War should be opened. The Russians and at least some Americans wanted another assault on Europe; the British, having already been kicked out of Europe by Nazi boots, were looking to North Africa first. Peter knew, as everyone did, that General Eisenhower had been placed in command of American forces in Europe. Sooner or later, there would have to be American forces in Europe for Eisenhower to command.

"I was in London over the weekend," Asim said to Peter one day. "I heard an American accent for the first time."

Peter nodded. "I heard one in town as well." The boy-who-wasn't-a-boy was studying the map. "Asim, I would like to share an observation with you. I understand if you cannot say anything, of course, but it has been troubling me."

"If a response would compromise me, Peter, you can be sure I will not give it, and may even lie, if necessary."

"Of course," Peter acknowledged with a casual shrug. "I know that there has been grumbling in the press about the fact that Eisenhower is here. I have been worried that those grumblings might lead to a stupid decision, made out of misplaced British pride."

"I have read those same things, and yes, I think there is a feeling of British superiority and a desire to maintain it."
Peter's hand spread across the map of Vichy, Nazi-controlled France, Morocco and Algeria. "I consider that as I look at these places under French-control. If they are invaded by Allied forces with the aim of retaking them, who would command? British or American?"

Asim said nothing, letting Peter continue.

"I suppose that is a rhetorical question, but never mind that," Peter said with a knowing smile.

Of course there would be an invasion. Why else would Eisenhower be here? At some point, Europe had to be retaken and someone would have to lead it.

"I ask this because when I look at the map, all the most likely places I see as entry points are controlled by French. And I'd guess the French may dislike the British as much as they dislike the Germans."

It was, in fact, an extremely astute observation. Asim had been called in to give views on that very subject insofar as Morocco and Algeria were concerned.

"The British did kill almost 1,300 French at Mers-el-Kébir two years ago, Peter."

"And sink or capture most of their Navy. Also, there is the historical animosity between the two countries."

"And your suggestion would be?"

Peter gave him a sideways, shrewd look, but knew better than to ask why Asim framed things as he did. He shrugged. "Land somewhere not controlled by French. Or, if they do land in a Vichy-controlled area, which really seems to make the most sense given the strategic goals, have Americans lead the invasion, so the French aren't trying to repel a country with which they have warred for hundreds of years. I know that won't sit well with many here, hence why I raise the question."

Asim said nothing, and into the silence, Peter continued his analysis.

"Good intelligence work on the ground first would let them pick landings where someone is less likely to shot back. Get an internal opposition to stage a coup so the work is mostly done by the time the force arrives. Open up some discrete diplomatic channels with Vichy. The best approach would probably call for deploying several or all of those options, depending on local conditions and the size of the invasion. For something this complex, there would never be a single, quick fix, I should think."

"Yes," Asim felt he could say. Peter had neatly summed up some of the very issues stymieing the planning of a North Africa campaign. That idea about getting some internal force to stage a coup in Morocco or Algeria was one he hadn't heard much about; it warranted further consideration.

"Speaking of command decisions, I wanted to show you this," Asim said, unfolding the slip. "I'm afraid it's making the rounds. Purportedly Auchinleck sent this to his senior commanders asking that they dispel among the rank of the 8th Army the view that Rommel," here he read from the missive, "'represents anything other than the ordinary German general.'" Asim handed the scrap to Peter.

"'PS, I'm not jealous of Rommel.'" Peter read the remainder of the note with a grumble of disgust. "This must be a wicked joke. Nazi propaganda, even. Surely, no commander would ever disseminate such a thing and expect to garner any respect from his soldiers or maintain discipline in his ranks?"

"One would think, but I have it on good authority it is genuine."
Peter handed it back with a severe frown. "He will be gone soon, yes?"

"Already, though the news must catch up to the announcement already made. Bernard Montgomery is replacing Auchinleck." Asim would leave out the fact that his replacement was to have been General Gott, but he had been shot down a few days earlier.

*When was it that we began speaking as equals in these matters? When did I come to value this man's assessments and trust his judgment?*

"And your opinion?" Peter asked, sharp and clear.

"A good decision."

The boy-who-wasn't-a-boy, who shined with God's bright light, who had killed like a soldier, but thought like a General, bent then over the map, smiling.

"Let us write down what we know," Mr. Patel said one night around the kitchen table. Everyone had said prayers: Asim had performed the *isha'a*; Mr. Patel had repeated his prayers to Vishnu on his japa mala; Kun had performed a similar repetitive prayer, but his was on a string of 59 beads rather than 108 beads and was to Mary the mother of Jesus, who Asim knew as the Prophet Isa; Lee would have performed her meditation on the Noble Eightfold Path. Mary and Richard would joke that during morning and evening prayers, there would be a traffic jam of the divine above Russell Hall.

As there was only One God, Asim thought this silly.

The methodical engineer began the list, "Apparent Physical Age 16."

"Eats non English food," Lee said.

"Polite," Kun said, which Mr. Patel interpreted and wrote down as "Courteous to non-whites."

Mr. Patel added as well, "Not a Tril."

"Very proficient with old knives and swords, thinks like a military strategist, can act far older than apparent age," Asim added, wondering if now was the time.

"Likes beavers and termites," Mr. Patel wrote, reading aloud as he did so. Responding to Lee's questing look, he said with a shrug, "Richard told me."

"From what I've overheard, he is very knowledgeable about some animals."

"And this according to Richard?" Mr. Patel asked as he wrote down Asim's observation.

"Yes."

Mr. Patel underlined 'very."

After a rapid fire exchange in Cantonese in which Asim caught "ancestors," Lee interpreted for Kun, "Parents work, and father is a spy."

That was, based on what Asim had learned, not the full story by half, but he said nothing to contradict it. He did say to Mr. Patel, "Don't write down the word 'spy.'"

"No travel, as far as we know," Lee said.
Mr. Patel nodded. "I was just to add that."

The other three all looked up from their tea, waiting for Asim to augment the list. There was a drip of the faucet into the dishpan. The sound of an owl hooting could be heard through the open top of the back kitchen door.

"Will you tell us now what you have withheld?" Mr. Patel asked.

In most instances, in matters of spycraft, security and the War, these were not questions his friends asked. This, however, was a question about a mystery and puzzle.

"He is much loved by God," Asim finally said.

"How much?" It would be Kun who would ask this. While they all were very accepting of divine miracles and providential dreams, it was the Hong Kong Catholic Buddhist who was most comfortable with what Asim could see.

"Very much," Asim said quietly. He did not want to explain further that the light within Peter was so intense at times it made his own inner eye blink.

"Like Professor Kirke and Miss Plummer?" Lee asked.

"Similar, yes. But stronger."

He saw Lee and Mr. Patel exchange a quick look. They evidently had been speculating along this line already based upon Peter's connection to Digory and Polly.

"Based upon this information then, there is one possibility," Mr. Patel said.

Lee nodded her agreement. "Saṃsāra."

Reincarnation, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth with an inheritance of one's karma from the previous life following into the next until enlightenment or salvation is achieved.

Asim was reminded of Sherlock Holmes, popular with everyone in the house, although he truly disliked the "dirty Arabs" of the Baker Street Irregulars. One reason he distrusted the SOE was that it had taken the "Irregulars" name as well.

"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

"Reincarnation?" Mary said, and Asim could hear her effort to not dismiss the conjecture immediately. She did afford the beliefs of others tremendous respect, even if she did not adhere to them herself. "You said a few weeks ago that you believed Peter to be a living saint, like the nun in Kolkata and that Aboriginal Elder."

They were in the waiting room of a specialist's office. Richard was inside with the doctor. Richard's booming voice was carrying through the walls and making the plaster shake from the ceiling fixtures.

"Your characterizations, Mary, not mine. Perhaps the God-light shines so brightly within him because he is so close to enlightenment."

"Peter is not a Buddhist, nor a Hindu, but I suppose you all have an explanation for that?" Mary said.

"There is only one God," Asim reminded her.
"So what karmic inheritance has this incarnation of Peter brought forth?"

She was trying very hard to not be sarcastic. Mary was getting a bit bored of all the discussion of Peter "Pevsnee." He thought of mentioning to her that Peter felt much the same way about all the discussion of Mary among the Trils.

"I'll show you the list Mr. Patel wrote up. I found it does not quite capture the whole of it."

Mary let out a deep, disgruntled sigh. "And what is lacking? T.E. Lawrence reborn? Or King Faisal?"

"Faisal and Lawrence both died after Peter's birth, Mary," he replied with patience. "However..." Asim turned it over in his imagination. Yes, that was the missing element. *Kings among men, Lions in the desert.*

"Thank you, Mary. I see it more clearly, now."

Profound, vigorous swearing erupted from the next room. "Really!" Mary cried, rising. "Stupid doctors. They obviously don't know what they are about!"

It had been the missing piece of his understanding, and so when Asim saw the dream again, it was with the utmost clarity. He saw the green ship with a dragon prow and purple sail, gliding on a sea of fragrant lilies. On the foredeck, there was a lamb and with him, the girl. In this seeing, she was barefoot, browned, and wearing a boy's strange clothes. She was weeping, her arms around the lamb, her light so brilliant and golden it was like staring into the sun.

The sail unfurled from the King's sword, for that was what he knew it now to be. Beautifully made of silver with a golden hilt, it was both Peter and Peter's sword, for surely they were the same. Atop the mast on the sword's hilt, there was a great white bird.

*Hullo! You are new.* He marveled at the small dragon curled peaceably on the ship's deck, coiled at the base of the sword mast.

On the ship's rail, dark against the lily sea, sat a rat and next to him, a glossy crow. A shock of recognition passed amongst them, between he, the crow and the rat.

Then, it was dawn and time for morning prayer, *fajr.*

Asim now saw more clearly the path God wished him to follow.

He walked as quietly as he could down the office hallway, but it never mattered.

"I've told you before, Asim, only one man has ever been able to sneak upon me unawares." The King's voice called from within Digory's office.

"And still you refer to your thirteen year old brother as a man?"

"Friend, did a boy ride with King Faisal and King Abdullah?"

"I was sixteen, not thirteen," Asim corrected.

"But you aren't sure, are you?"

In fact, Asim did not know how old he was.
Peter had swiveled in his seat and moved away from the desk before Asim entered the office. Even knowing a friend entered, still, the King in boy's clothes always retained a modicum of wariness, giving himself space to move if the situation demanded. It did not offend. On the contrary, Asim was impressed with Peter's readiness. He would have been a fine soldier. *Was, had been, still was* a fine soldier, Asim corrected.

The King, guarded and alert, observed as Asim carefully removed his short dagger and sheath. Peter watched as a knifeman would, tracking the would-be assailant's shoulders, chest, and weight. He knew not to look at the hands overly much; a knife could be in either hand. Taking the offered blade, handle first, Peter set it at his own desk, within reach, the sheath with it.

"Will you sit?" Peter asked. "Or shall we walk?"

"Lee and Mr. Patel are cooking again, he to help her through her worries of Hong Kong. She's packed us a few things, but as we know from that one time when it was raining, the cuisine of the India subcontinent had best be enjoyed out of doors."

"The curry did take a week to clear in here," Peter agreed.

There were also things to discuss, things Asim wished to say, and things he wished to, but could not say, and things he was not sure if he should say.

"Which reminds me," Peter sorted through the papers on his desk and proffered a small envelope. He had to blow dust off it. "Would you give this to Mrs. Kwong and Mr. Lin? I wanted to thank them for packing last week's chopsticks exam."

Asim took the slightly gritty card. "Sand. Saharan, I believe. So Mary spilled something from her bag when she came by?"

Peter expression was smug. "She showed off a tooth and I was lectured on several subjects. She did try to raise the subject of hips, so I thank you for the good advice on how to stop, as Richard would say, that rampaging bull elephant."

"You do vex her. I suspect some envy, as well."

"I don't think we need to suspect at all. She very nearly admitted to it."

Alas for Mary. She tried, much and over hard. He had explained how he had come to see it; she did not see things as he did, and probably never would. She would make her own peace with "The Enigma Mr. Pensieve" eventually.

His desk ordered if still dusty, Peter slipped the knife into its sheath and the whole into his jacket pocket with a slight grimace. It was a King's concession to the reality of Oxford that was at odds with the soldier within him. Rising, Peter gestured, as he always did, for Asim to precede him out of the office.

Now, Asim understood why. The Kings Asim had known had done the same, having a trusted guard precede them. It was courtesy for Peter, and wariness, yes. It was also a King's habit.

---

A/N

This chapter heralds a shift, where we begin to move from the natural world to a world of war and espionage. Bridging this gap are the denizens of Russell Hall – Mr. Patel, Kwong Lee, Lin Kun, and Asim bin Kalil, the spy and mystic. I have attempted to portray these characters and their cultures.
with respect and care, but it is a tall order. If I have made errors, it is unintentional and not for lack of effort. So, do let me know if I did get something wrong and I will repair the unintended damage.

Several other call outs are warranted.

"Intrepid" is William Stephenson, referred to in two previous chapters, head of the Americas part of the Special Operations Executive, which will eventually be rolled into MI6 at the end of the War.

The codebreakers at Bletchley Park were the UK decryption specialists of the War. Five weeks before the outbreak of World War II, Marian Adam Rejewski of the Polish Biuro Szfrow (Cipher Bureau) decrypted the German Enigma ciphers and shared the results with British and French intelligence. Relying upon this work, British intelligence would be able to continue throughout the war, in fits and starts, to decode German encrypted messages generated with the Enigma and later Lorenz machines.

"Lawrence" is Lt. Colonel T.E. Lawrence, "Lawrence of Arabia." Among the men who collaborated with him during the Arab Revolts of 1916-1918, are King Faisal bin al-Hussein and his brother, King Abdullah I bin al-Hussein.

The guerrilla warfare Peter discusses with Caspian is also referred to by war historians as "asymmetrical warfare" and its use was critical to the success of the Arab Revolts and probably would have worked for the Old Narnians as well.

North Africa in the summer of 1942 was a very active time in the war, and the events described cursorily here will culminate in the hard fought, hard won and much needed victory to the British in the Second Battle of El Alamein in October, followed by the first joint land assault by British and American forces into North Africa on November 8, 1942, Operation Torch.

A huge thank you to my reviewers, who have given me such amazing things to think about and reflect upon. I am deeply grateful. As always, I greatly appreciate your thoughts and the time you take to share them.

To follow, the Conclusion of The Stone Gryphon - Part 1, Oxfordshire 1942 Chapter 15, Crossroads, Part 4
In which telegrams are sent and received and railway timetables are consulted.

To be followed by The Stone Gryphon Part 2, The Queen Susan In Tashbaan
In which more telegrams are sent and received and railway timetables are consulted.

"No, no! The adventures first," said the Gryphon in an impatient tone: "explanations take such a dreadful time."

L. Carroll, *The Adventures of Alice In Wonderland*

Still not King… oh wait, I mean "Still not mine." But, I'm not a King either.

It was with relief that Mary was able to hand Petunia, Polly's cat, back to her owner as they were leaving the Bird and Baby. Cats had that way of always gravitating to the one person in the room who least preferred their company. Petunia was no exception and in a pub with a dozen people in it, all coaxing, cooing and offering bits from their pasties and pies, still the Shorthair insisted on occupying Mary's lap.

Mary did not hate cats; she didn't hate any creature. She just preferred more than cats virtually every other creature in existence, including sand fleas. The felines sensed her indifference and so made a point of always seeking her out. It was the same anywhere she went. She was followed about by cats like the English Maiden (Ha!) Aunt that Polly pretended to be. Maiden! Ha! No more than I am.

Perhaps she smelled of catnip to them? Catnip was Nepeta cataria, wasn't it? Did other members of family Felidae respond to N. cataria? P. leo? P. tigris? A. jubatus? Or were the psychotropic effects of it limited to F. catus, the domestic cat?

Mary linked arms with Digs on one side; Polly took the other, Simon at her heels. The late day was easing to early evening. Everyone else was hurrying home for supper; the three of them, plus dog and cat were more leisurely, and taking up most of the walk on St. Giles.

"Polly, did you and Richard ever try using catnip in the bush to distract lions?"

Polly looked sideways at her around Digs. "You are wondering why Petunia is always so attracted to you even though you don't like cats?"

"Imagine that," Digs muttered. "Not liking Cats."

He and Polly exchanged one of those Secret looks again. There had been a lot of those this afternoon.

Mary harrumphed over that and shrugged it off. "It's not that I dislike cats," she corrected. "I simply do not appreciate them as others do."

Polly laughed. "Yet they do assuredly love you, Mary."

Petunia meowed her assent from inside the carpet bag.

"In answer to your question, Mary, I have heard hunters' tales of using catnip on lions; the same stories say it does not work on tigers. Richard and I generally did not wish to attract them, so we never tried it. We preferred avoidance, good camp management, and a loaded gun as a last resort."
Digs made an awkward, throat clearing sound. Mary caught Polly's eye and the wisp of a grin. Digs became uncomfortable when the two of them discussed Richard so casually, like a canteen a considerate person shared with friends. Poor Digs. Sometimes he really was the odd man out. In the cosmic allotment, he had received a very different sort of Victorian sensibility than Polly and Richard had.

So *N. cataria* may be effective on *P. leo*, but not *P. tigris*? "We could test that hypothesis at Whipsnade, I suppose," she told Polly.

"Are Gryphons not sufficiently occupying you, Mary?" Digs asked.

"Oh! I forgot to tell you!" she squealed. "Peter maligned my competency this afternoon, but I've heartily forgiven him as it's led to the most amazing idea."

"Peter?" Polly repeated, with that irritating tinge of worshipfulness they all seemed to have. "Maligned you?"

"Perhaps he was distracted having just solved Fermat's Last Theorem," Digs murmured.

It was getting just a bit ridiculous. Living saints, reincarnated Kings, the greatest naturalist mind since Darwin, and now a brilliant mathematician who solved the unsolvable? She was beginning to feel about Peter the way she felt about *F. catus*. He had no better grasp of the *Aeneid* than she had herself. Digs had made her suffer through the War of Latium as well and Mary thought that even ten years later she'd be better able to conjugate a Latin verb than Peter could.

*Speaking of…*

Mary turned on her former tutor with mock ferocity. "I'll have you know that due to your warning, Peter would not permit me to lecture him on the subject of dinosaur hips."

Digs pulled his arms free of their interlocked arms and clapped his hands over his ears.

Polly laughed and with a nudge of her own hips, pushed Digs aside to join arms with Mary. "We are scandalizing him."

"Again," Mary agreed, humour returned. It was such fun with Polly, especially over a glass. She had the best stories about Richard; with Digs there, though, she never told them. She'd have to break out the gin tonight at the house, just the two of them, alone and together.

"You and I think so alike on this, Mary," Polly said with zest. "Nothing quite like a good set of hips."

"Not just the hips," she confided. "It's the shoulder to hips ratio."

Polly pulled her up and they both looked back. With their stop, Simon promptly sat, well-trained as he was.

Digs was standing at a newsstand they had just passed, digging through his pocket for coins.

"Something wrong, Digs?"

"No more than the usual death and mayhem," Digs said, glancing over the headlines and then tucking the paper under his arm.

*Bloody war. Every perfect day always ends with it.*
Asim and Peter were sitting under their tree outside Digs' office. The evening paper and a map were on the grass along with the remains of Mr. Patel and Lee's efforts to recreate Indian cooking from an English Victory Garden.

Simon bounded ahead, leash trailing behind like a streamer, and joyfully barreled into Asim and Peter. Polly was close on his heels.

"Oi! Simon!" Peter called as the spaniel thrust his nose into a tin, obviously deciding that friends could be greeted anytime, but Kwong Lee's samosas, dosas, and pav bhaji were not to be missed. Peter grabbed the spaniel by the collar and playfully wrestled him away from the food as Asim hurriedly put lids back on.

Mary didn't want to think what sambar and green chiles might do to a spaniel's digestion. As Simon would be at the house tonight along with Polly, she appreciated Peter's quick efforts so they wouldn't be dealing with the after effects.

"Peter!" Digs called out heartily. "Do let me congratulate you! So what happened to Percy Fawcett?"

"Cannibals," Peter responded promptly with a grin, as he fondled Simon's ears. Simon rolled over on his back and began chewing on the sleeve of Peter's jacket.

Mary looked at Polly and Asim, but they didn't seem to follow the joke either.

"And the answer to Fermat's Last Theorem is '42,' Professor."

"And the Mary Celeste?" Digs asked.

"A doorway opened up on the deck of the ship and took all the crew Down The Rabbit Hole," Peter supplied, rubbing Simon's belly.

Now that Mary could follow. "So we'll find the Mary Celeste crew in Wonderland with the White Rabbit and the Gryphon!"

"And flying horses!" Polly exclaimed.

"Flying horses?" Mary asked her. "There aren't any flying horses in Alice."

One of those odd fond looks passed between Digs and Polly. "But there should be!" Polly countered cheerfully.'

Bloody Secrets.

Asim was attentive to something behind her. Looking over her shoulder, Mary saw he was tracking a young man on a bicycle peddling in the direction of Digs' College. Asim hurriedly stood, dusting crumbs and grass off to Simon's snuffling delight. "It's Mr. Cartwright from the telegraph office in town."

The whole atmosphere amongst them tensed as Asim strode over the sidewalk, waving to Cartwright. Everyone at the telegraph offices in and around Oxford knew Asim very well.

This was always an ordeal. Asim would receive some anonymous and uncommented upon telegram and there was nothing Mary could or would say to him other than, "Of course." Then, he would disappear. Sometimes, someone would come for him in a jeep or truck, or he would walk to the station, or to a telephone box. Watching the papers or listening to the broadcast on the radio, she might be able to guess what called him away suddenly to somewhere, but she never knew for
certain. He never, ever said, and she never, ever asked.

She saw him take the envelope and hand Cartwright some coins. Asim walked quickly back to them. He did not, however, open the telegram.

"Peter," he called, "it's for you."

Mary did not know that someone could move that fast. One moment Peter was rubbing Simon's ears, and then next he was beside Asim, tearing open the envelope.

Polly and Digs rushed to Peter's side. "Peter!" Digs said with panic in his voice. "Your parents, are they…"

Peter shook his head. "It's from Edmund."

Edmund. He was the younger brother, in Cambridge.

Thrusting the paper at the Professor, Peter was obviously, visibly, shaken. Asim sidled up and stood next to her, putting a foot on Simon's leash to keep him from wandering.

"Is everyone alright?" Mary asked.

There had plainly been some dreadful news. Reading the telegram over Digs' shoulder, Polly looked truly shocked, not a normal expression for her at all. Digs, like Peter, was very troubled, even disturbed.

"No injuries or anything like that, Mary," Digs told her when Peter did not answer.

The statement was not reassuring, given Peter's reactions. He was badly unnerved, fretting, anxious, and pulling hands through his hair.

"Just some truly shocking family news," Polly added. To Peter she said, "Am I reading this right? Is Edmund saying Eustace…"

Eustace? Asim shifted next to her. He recognized of whom they were speaking, though she did not.

"Yes," Peter broke in, very curtly, "as incredible as that may be. And you understand what Ed's written about himself and Lucy?"

Lucy was the youngest sister, Mary remembered.

"Are they well?" Mary asked again, looking for some clue as to what could unsettle the three of them so profoundly yet not be death or injury.

"It's nothing serious…" Digs began, but Peter interrupted him sharply, "No, it is serious, and I should be there with them."

Mary waited for Digs or Polly to say something, to articulate some objection at being spoken to so, but they both simply pulled inward, bowing their heads and deferring to this truly shirty behavior. Digs handed the telegram back to Peter. "Of course, Peter."

"How can we help?" Polly asked, quietly.

Peter acknowledged them with an absent nod, and looked straight passed her to Asim. "I need to get to Cambridge. Tonight. What do you recommend?"
Something profound was happening here, though Mary could not fathom what it was.

Asim looked at his watch. "There's a train on the Varsity Line leaving in thirty minutes. We should just have time to run you by Digory's to pack a bag, and get you to the station. That train runs very, very slow due to all the military and freight traffic this time of day, but it will get you to Cambridge, eventually."

Peter strode forward and clapped Asim on the shoulder. "Excellent. Let's do that."

Mary would have gladly volunteered their services, had he asked. She was annoyed that Asim was doing it without asking her, that Peter was very nearly ordering Asim around, and that he was definitely treating her as though she was invisible. And how did Peter know that Asim kept railway timetables in his head the way other people memorized multiplication tables? She reasserted her prerogative. It was her car and petrol.

"We would be glad to help, Peter."

Her injection brought him and the dictatorial conduct up short. "Thank you, Mary. I appreciate your offer very much."

"Polly, Digs, would you mind cleaning up after Peter and Asim, and then going to see Richard until I get back?"

With a jerk of her head, Mary said, "The car is this way."

She hitched her bag over her shoulder and started walking, Asim falling in step next to her. "Do you understand what is going on here?" she muttered.

"Some," he said ambiguously.

"Perhaps you can explain that 'some' to me then?"

"I shall try."

The explanations had to wait as Peter came striding up behind them just as they reached the car.

Mary climbed into the back of the Standard. Peter sat in front, next to Asim. She was trying to work out if there was any particular meaning to that and decided there probably was not. Digs' cottage wasn't terribly far, but they'd have to back track to make it to the railway station.

Peter was thrumming the dash of the car like it was a set of drums. As when Alice had tried to get to Wonderland through the door, Peter seemed too large and the space in the car too cramped for him in his present state. It was too small for his restive spirit, too small for his body, simply too completely and utterly confining. Mary understood very well what she saw and sensed: the restlessness; the wild need for movement; and the anxiety of being mired by circumstance and desperately longing to be somewhere else other than where you were trapped.

When she couldn't stand the tension any longer, she asked, "You are going to your aunt and uncle's?"

"Oh, didn't I say?" Peter said, the question rousing him from his distraction and thrumming. "Yes, that's where Edmund and Lucy are staying."

"How far is their home from the station?"
"Several miles."

"Do you need a map?" Asim asked, negotiating the winding streets.

"No."

The thrumming resumed. Mary wanted to tie his hands down.

"Should you…" she began as Asim pulled up to Digs' tiny cottage.

"I won't be more than a minute or two," Peter said, interrupting her. Not waiting for the car to come to a stop, Peter shot out of the front seat like a ball from a cannon, cleared the front picket fence in one fluid movement, and without a moment's loss of forward momentum, pushed into the house.

Mary saw two lights go on in the windows. "Who is Eustace?"

Asim looked at her in the rear view mirror then glanced again at the house. "Peter's cousin."

"What do you suppose happened? It didn't sound like physical injury."

"No," Asim agreed. "I suspect it is more emotional, or spiritual, in nature."

There was a tinge of unreality to it all, a feeling as if she was joining Alice and the crew of the *Mary Celeste* down the Rabbit Hole. *So many out-of-the-way things had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible.* Yes, Alice summed it up nicely. Mary did recognize the symptoms and was prepared to give Peter some latitude, overbearing though he was. As the Gryphon said, this was the nature of unexpected adventures – the adventure came first, explanation later.

The lights winked out and Peter plunged out the front door, now carrying a small case. Mary considered its small size disapprovingly. The valise certainly was not sufficient to carry anything he would need on an adventure.

He had to go back twice to make sure the door was shut. Again, eschewing the gate, Peter hurdled the fence ringing the cottage and landed neatly in the front seat of the car.

It took her a moment to register the whole of it. The feat actually required a fair amount of athleticism, and Peter had cleared it without a thought.

At least now he was fiddling with the handle on his case, rather than beating the dash.

"Peter!" she said for the third time, trying to rouse him from his reverie.

He turned around the seat. "Excuse me, Mary. I am a bit distracted. You were asking?"

"Shouldn't you send a wire back to someone saying that you are coming, possibly in the dead of night?"

With a wry snort of disgust, Peter said, "My aunt and uncle might change the locks or pretend no one is home."

"They are the odious non-mathematicians, correct?"

"Indeed."

"Edmund and Lucy would wish to know, wouldn't they?" Asim asked.
"Yes, they would," Peter said slowly.

"Write down the message and the return for your brother, and I'll drop it off at the telegraph office. Asim will take you to the station."

"Yes, thank you."

He was patting down his pockets, but Mary handed him a pencil over the front seat. Peter smoothed the crumbled telegram on the dashboard, scribbled something on the back, folded the paper up, and handed it back to her over the seat.

"Pencil?" she reminded him before he pocketed it. "I'm usually the pencil thief, Peter, so I tend to be protective of my own."

Asim pulled the car up to the telegraph office. Sliding out, she called, "I'll meet you at the station," and hurried in.

Mr. Cartwright was back behind the counter. He knew her almost as well as Asim, and knew they both tipped well. The men and women who manned telegraph offices were truly nothing short of miraculous, doing what they did, and doing what they had done during the Blitz. Cartwright was barely out of school and there must be some reason why he was here, rather in service and dying in North Africa.

He examined Peter's telegram and copied the return down. She waited while he sent the wire.

_It was all right out of the Wonderland. Curiouser and curiouser._

She paid, tipped, and bustled back across the street to the railway station. The car was parked in front. Asim and Peter were leaning against the bonnet, in the light of the overhead lamp.

"Now then," Mary said briskly, stalking toward them. The size of Peter's case was troubling her. It was plainly inadequate for the job. "Do you have everything you need? Are you all equipped for your adventure?"

"Adventure?" Peter echoed. "I'm catching a train to Cambridge."

Asim's snort of disbelief coincided with Mary's own "Nonsense!"

Goodness, Peter did have a formidable frown.

"Come now, Peter. It is _never_ just a train ride. Surely you've set out before but ended up somewhere you didn't expect, taken the road less traveled, or fallen down the Rabbit Hole?"

The frown turned into a sharp, cautious look that gave him all away.

"Ahhh! See, Asim?"

"I do, Mary," Asim replied blandly.

"Peter has had adventures! Someday we shall have to hear of them! I ask again, are you prepared?"

He brandished his little case. "The contents of my packing are not..."

"I'm not talking about a toothbrush and a change of clothes. _Supplies_, Peter. Do you have supplies?"

Peter looked helplessly for support from Asim, but there would be no aid coming to him from that
corner. In this she and Asim were always of one mind and certainly knew better than Peter did.

"Do you have a torch?" Mary asked.

"No, of course not."

Arguing! Peter was arguing with her!

"Matches in a waterproof container?"

"For a train ride?"

Ignorance! You always needed matches!

"Something to carry water in? Rations? Oilcloth for kipping out on?"

"No, no and NO!"

"Don't be tetchy, Peter," Mary scolded. "Asim and I are experts in intending to journey somewhere and ending up somewhere else, and we would have indeed been in the Okavango Delta without a canoe if we hadn't been prepared. For instance, Asim, do you remember the time we were trying to get from Zanzibar to Madagascar?"

"Vividly," Asim said helpfully. "We ended up on the West Coast of Australia."

"With only three packets of nuts and two tins of sardines for the width of the Indian Ocean!" Mary said gleefully.

"No," Asim corrected. "That was when we left Singapore, for Hong Kong and ended up in the Philippines looking for flying lizards."

"Correct me, Mary, if I err," Peter said, not concealing his irritation at all, "but there is no steamer transport involved between here and Cambridge. This is a train ride."

"But, trains are the most exciting, Peter! There are always possibilities! Asim and I once tried to get from Bombay to Kolkata, and we ended up at a base camp in the Himalayas."

"With no blankets," Asim said mournfully.

She nodded her agreement. "That was a very cold side trip."

"I would have thought you both would have a better sense of direction," Peter said with something between a laugh and a snarl.

He was doing it! Again! Maligning her competency! Mary wanted to hit him on the side of the head, all her former sympathy for his predicament evaporating.

Asim hurriedly injected, "Allow us both to advise you on this, Peter. We do keep packs in the car and for just this sort of event."

Pulling a reluctant and protesting Peter by the sleeve (it was still a bit damp from Simon's drool), Mary followed Asim around the back of the car. Keeping a firm grip on Peter's elbow, with her other hand, she found the torch in her bag and lit it. As Asim opened the boot, she shined the light in, illuminating the dark space.

Peter huffed lightly under his breath as he took in the scene. He squinted as she aimed the beam back
in his face. "Admit it. You thought the boot of our car would be a ruin, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said grudgingly, maligning her competency yet again.

The boot was as organized as Kwong Lee's spice cupboard. She and Asim were both old campaigners and they kept their supplies ready. Asim grabbed an extra day pack. "I checked the battery in this one last week," he said, handing it to Peter.

"The rations may be a bit stale, but there will be a tin of something in there and it will do in a pinch," Mary added. "Is that the one with the anchovy paste?"

"No."

"Dreadful stuff, anchovy paste. Good protein source, though. Keeps forever."

Asim shut the boot as a train whistled in the distance. Mary shined the light back in Peter's eyes. "You're welcome."

He rather forcefully pushed the torch down. "Thank you, both. Very much."

"It would sound more sincere, Peter, if you weren't gritting your teeth." She flipped off the torch and put it back in her bag. "You have money? ID card?"

"Enough!" With a deep breath, he mastered himself and Mary felt a small curl of satisfaction of finally achieving some emotional reaction from this Sphinx. She had also managed to do so without using the word magnificent.

"Thank you, again. I very much appreciate your most solicitous assistance, Mary."

Sarcasm! That was sarcasm wasn't it?

"Pocketknife?" she couldn't help adding as they hurried back to the platform.

That brought Peter up short and she ran into him from behind. It was like hitting a wall.

"Sorry," she said rubbing her nose. "You mean you don't have a pocketknife?"

Peter was searching through his jacket now. "Asim, I still have..."

"Keep it, Peter. For now. I would be remiss indeed to see you on your way without one." Asim inclined his head, "Inshallah, may your journey be well."

"Ma'a salama, Friend."

The train was pulling in and would barely stop as there was no one else on the platform. Peter hesitated, looking at her expectantly, but she recognized the feeling well enough in herself, how you were brimming with impatience for the adventure to begin. She understood and felt even a stab of regret for her own lost adventures. It was never just a train ride and there was certainly mystery at the end of this one.

Mary shooed him off. "Go! After all that, you don't want to miss it. Good luck!"

Slinging the pack over his back with one hand, and grabbing his little satchel in the other, Peter jogged along, next to the train, and then jumped aboard.

They stood side by side, in a pool of dim lamplight, waving the train away into the dark.
"Do you suppose I overdid it?" Mary asked, as the train left the station.

"If I did not mention it before, allow me say now that while Peter understands and greatly appreciates the importance of logistics and planning, he does not require mothering."

Mary snorted. "He was certainly treating you like his supply officer."

Asim shrugged. "Yes, he did, but it is an accustomed role for us both. In retrospect, I should have expected it."

"So there is a General in his karmic mix as well?"

"Do you have a better explanation for that extraordinary behavior with Digory and Polly?"

She didn't, really.

"Anything else unusual occur?" Mary asked.

"The clerk in the station disagreed with my recommended route. He thought Peter would be better going into London and then out again, rather than taking the Brain Line given all the delays."

"And this was significant how?"

Asim sighed patiently. "Mary, you are accustomed to taking my advice. I assure you the typical Englishman would defer to the advice of one of his own race in those circumstances, rather than the opinions of a dirty Arab."

"But Peter did not?"

"Peter is no more the typical Englishman than I am. He listened with more patience than he obviously felt, asked my view, and I repeated that while the Varsity Line runs late, it can be counted on to always run given what else runs on it."

"And to that advice he followed?"

"He thanked the clerk with courtesy but said he would rely on his logistics man, and to please give him the ticket he had asked for."

Wordlessly, Asim put out his hand.

"How did you know?" she sputtered, hoping to have kept him in suspense just a bit longer.

"We both wanted to know what was in that telegram, he wrote the response on the back of the one from his brother, and you never returned it to Peter. You either lost it, which I knew could not be the case, or you kept it."

She placed the purloined telegram in his palm. "I can't make sense of it at all."

Unfolding the creased, yellow paper, Asim held it under the light and read aloud the message from the brother:

"Lu, Eust & I been to N. Saw Casp; Saw A. Lu/me no go back"

Asim flipped the message over to read what Peter had scrawled for Mary to deliver to the wire office.

"Am coming 2night. A. is here 2"
"Eust is the cousin, Eustace, I assume. Lu is the sister. So where is 'N'?" Mary asked. "And who is 'A'?

"I think that 'A' is clear enough," Asim said.

"Oh?"

"'Allah.'

She would have laughed, but Asim never joked about his faith. "I said the other day that Peter was not Hindu or Buddhist. He is not Muslim either, Asim."

"There is only one God, though known by many names."

Asim carefully folded the paper up and tucked it into the folds of his robes. He would undoubtedly dissect the day's events with Mr. Patel, Lee and Kun.

"Was Peter still glowing like a bloody torch?"

"Do not refer to miracles in such words, Mary. But yes, of course, the light was perhaps more intense than before, but it was difficult to tell amid all his roiling agitation."

She sensed Asim draw reflectively inward, a pause. "What?"

"It was the first time I had ever seen so many, so favored, in one place. It was humbling, I suppose. A bit disturbing to contemplate."

"I wish I could see it."

Mary knew she sounded petulant making the repeated complaint. She couldn't help it. It was so important to Asim, and so it was important to her, and she just couldn't see it, try though she did. There was no rhyme or reason to it, either. He searched out these rich, light-touched personalities the way she could find venomous snakes. Which really wasn't a good analogy at all, come to think of it. Invariably, as exploration, whim, or science took her on adventures, Asim would join her. While she was looking under rocks and examining specimens, he would find some new milepost marker on his spiritual journey to somewhere.

Asim touched her arm, just for a moment, fleeting and brief. It was a very strong cultural conditioning; he never touched her, unless to protect her from a physical threat. The fact that he traveled with her at all was due solely to his equally firmly held belief that going where she did would lead him to that higher place he sought.

"I pray you might as well, Mary."

She put a hand to her ear. "Do you hear that? It's Richard bellowing."

"Let us follow the shouting, then, all the way to the hospital, and we may report to Polly and Digory that Peter is off on his adventure."

"I should like an explanation of Peter's adventures some day," Mary admitted.

"As would I."

The Eagle and Child is a pub on St Giles, Oxford, England owned by St. John's College, Oxford. It is commonly referred to as the Bird and Baby or the Bird and is one of the places where the Inklings writers group met, whose members included J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis.

Thanks to another RS, Renata, who helped with the Indian snacks and Arabic.

I need to correct an error in the previous chapter. A reader pointed out that it was not the British who cracked the Enigma machines. In fact, it was the Polish cryptographer, Marian Adam Rejewski, and colleagues at the Polish Biuro Szyfrów (Cipher Bureau) who first decrypted the codes the machines generated and then shared their work with British and French intelligence. I’ve corrected my error in the notes in the previous chapter.

There really was a Varsity or "Brain" Train Line, and interestingly it traveled through Bletchley Park and carried a lot of commercial and military traffic at the time.

A very special thanks to my articulate and dedicated reviewers who have given me so very much to think about and consider. You astound and humble me.

*The Stone Gryphon, Part 2: The Queen Susan in Tashbaan*, is to follow. First stop in that story is at the end of the Varsity Line, in Cambridge. Click below for a preview.
Peter followed Edmund quietly into the room his brother had been sharing with Eustace. *Eustace the Prat. Eustace the Ass. Eustace the Un-dragoned. Eustace Narnia Friend and Breaker of Caspian's Second Best Sword. Eustace Who Would Likely Return To Narnia When Her Kings and Queens Would Not.* It would take some getting used to.

Edmund turned away at a desk, blocking Peter's view. He was, Peter suspected, disarming some security measure he employed to alert him if someone tried to access his things. Edmund opened a drawer and handed him a very thick stack of paper.

"And this is…" Peter ended with a questioning note, thumbing through the sheaf. Truth be told, it was significantly weightier than the sum total of everything he had done for the Professor, by several magnitudes.

"That pile is Susan's letters to me this summer while she has been in Washington."

"Her letters to me have been nothing like this," Peter said, skimming the paper. Her letters had been rather dull, actually, short, and about the weather and parties, with the occasional name or location blacked out by some censor. Peter folded back a corner to a random page and saw in Susan's flowing script, "Sallowpad instructed the Queen Susan and Lord Peridan that the Tarkheena was to be their next project…"

He looked back up at Edmund. "She wrote a story? A Narnia story?"

"To the censors, it appeared, or well, it did until last week, to be an amusing and silly children's story an older sister was writing to her younger brother about a fantastical land of a Queen, a dashing knight, talking animals, and a long hot summer in the exotic, magical land of Tashbaan." Edmund sat down heavily on the bed. "In reality, that is an accounting of what our sister has been doing this holiday to further the British war effort in the American Capitol."

"Furthering the war effort?" Peter repeated, incredulous. "Susan? Our fifteen year old sister?"

"Peter, save the Royal Frowns, would you?" Edmund said, a little weary. "She's no more her apparent age than the rest of us."

Skimming more pages, he saw references to Tarkheenas, Tarkans, Tashbaan, Sallowpad, Peridan, the Tisroc, Calormen, Narnia, Ettins, Telmarines, and other familiar names and places. Peter caught a glimmer of the ploy. "So, she's been, as you say, aiding the British, and telling you about it in the form of a Narnian children's story, knowing that you would understand what she was really saying?"

Edmund nodded. "We arranged some of the terms beforehand; she's had to add as she went along. For instance, I know that Narnia is England, Calormen is America, Tashbaan is Washington, and Sallowpad is a security or intelligence chief at the British Embassy. I'm not sure if he is an individual or an amalgam, she obviously couldn't be clear. Father is King Lune, though not in the story at all, and so on."

"And Lord Peridan?" Peter was trying to envision their loyal ambassador and knight in 1942 America and his imagination was faltering.
Peridan was an addition. In the story, don't laugh, he is a young, dashing knight and veteran of the Gryphon Aerial Corps who was wounded in battle when the armies of the Evil Ettin Giant King bombarded the beautiful city of Cair Paravel with catapults.

There was too much bizarre novelty to absorb at once; Peter forced himself to focus on the first. "Gryphon Aerial Corps?" His mind was racing with the implications of this incredible scheme. "By the Lion, it's the RAF!"

His brother nodded, and continued, "And the Ettin King is Hitler..."

"Who has bombed London into the Stone Age with boulders thrown from catapults..."

"The Ettin King of the Northern Giants is in league with the Telmarines who have declared war on both the Calormen Empire and Free Narnia."

"Telmar being the Empire of Japan," Peter finished. What an amazing ruse. It was a classic Rat and Crow maneuver for Edmund and Susan.

"Yes. I assume that when we finally speak with her we will learn that Our Lord Peridan is in reality a combat wounded RAF fighter pilot assigned to the British Embassy."

Edmund scowled briefly and Peter sensed his brother had developed some opinions about RAF Fighter Pilot Peridan – who wasn't Peridan at all, of course.

"It's a very dodgy business, Peter."

"And what happened last week, about the censors?"

Edmund scowled again, fiercely, with something between admiration and disgust warring across his face. "Spies. I really should know better."

A disturbing chill moved through him. "What do you mean?" Peter asked cautiously.

"Asim. The man we've been referring to all summer in letters as 'the Driver' and with whom you have been discussing battle tactics. He visited me last week to tell me the gig was up."

Look for a continuation of The Stone Gryphon, Part 2: The Queen Susan in Tashbaan in July. A special thanks to the readers, including Miniver and priscipixie, for pushing me to think about Susan's story more.

Works inspired by this one: [Vodka and Dreams](https://www.hetaliaarchive.com/works/1434696/vodka-and-dreams) by [Snacky](https://www.hetaliaarchive.com/users/153506-snacky)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://www.hetaliaarchive.com/view/1434696) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!