

SOUTHWARD THE TIGERS: a Tale in the Days of King Frank

By Joseph Ravitts

NOTE: This story is currently just as it is was posted on the Narnia fans forum, 'The Dancing Lawn' between November 6th 2006 and June 18th, 2007. As such, there will be some places where the story's setting will change rather abruptly, due to the way that fan fiction is posted on the forums. With the permission of Mr. Ravitts, and some time, I hope to 'smooth out' these transitions and assign chapters to this wonderful story. In the meantime, enjoy this excellent example of carefully crafted Narnia fan fiction!

Tim Stoffel-- currently writing a story parallel to this one, 'The Lion's Share'.

PROLOGUE:

In the very early spring of a very early year in the history of the Narnian world, four Talking Tigers were conferring privately in a ravine among the foothills of the mountains which bordered the future Kingdom of Archenland. One of the four, a female named Duskrunner, was a daughter of the deceased Patriarch of the Talking Tigers. The others, offspring of first-generation ordinary tigers, had been awakened to intelligence by Aslan when they had grown almost to adulthood. One of these, named Hookpaw, was Duskrunner's husband; the other two were Shatterneck, Hookpaw's closest male confidant, and Shatterneck's wife Tawnydart.

Tawnydart, of the four, was the most ill at ease with the direction their discussion was going. "Are you _certain_ that there's no need to consult _either_ the King or our Matriarch? This is a serious action to be taking independently."

It was Hookpaw to whom she spoke, and he replied, "I already have guidance beyond their knowledge; a being who speaks for Aslan is enlightening me. And was it not Aslan's will for us to have learned the hunting and fighting techniques of the lions? Our knowledge will now be put to use in a way that promotes the safety of our human friends, and other weaker Narnians."

"There's no disputing the fact that the humans will have a cursed hard time raising farm animals if there are great numbers of large unreasoning carnivores all over Narnia," Shatterneck told his wife, supporting Hookpaw.

Duskrunner also supported her mate: "Besides, it's to the benefit of all Talking Predators to have less competition from dumb ones. Hunting is enough of a hard job as it is, what with having to distinguish

fair-game dumb beasts from Talking Herbivores whose lives are sacred to us."

"Which would not be SO hard a job," Hookpaw muttered, "if the Talking Herbivores hadn't started being so recalcitrant about accepting our supervision for their own protection."

"All right," sighed Tawnydart. "I'm with you. Let's make our plans. But it's just ordinary lions we're going to kill, right?"

"For the present," said Hookpaw, exchanging a glance with Shatterneck.

"It's no more than what the Children of Adam, and the Good Giants and Centaurs, would have been forced to do eventually, for the general safety of the kingdom," Duskrunner added.

But the events of the months to follow would prove to be grimmer than anything the first generations of Narnian humans, or their Giant and Centaur friends, had ever expected to see...

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SLIMTALON, the female half of Narnia's first-ever pair of Talking Tigers, lay a short distance to one side of King Frank's field-throne, covering her face with her paws in disgrace and grief. "Oh, Aslan," she sobbed, "this is the first time I have ever been glad that You called my husband Brightburn up to Your country ahead of me...so that he would not have to see this day!" Neither the King, nor any of his attendants, showed any sign of blaming Slimtalon for what had occurred; but she would rather have had all of Narnia hating her, than to learn that her own children hated Narnia.

King Frank, still wearing the light armor he wore when he flew into action on the back of his winged stallion Fledge, gestured with his spear--the same spear with which, not three hours ago, he had slain Slimtalon's eldest son Grovestalker with a skillful thrust from above. The mother tiger knew she had no right to be angry at her liegelord for this, because Grovestalker had been about to murder an innocent half-grown Talking Lioness--whose mother he had killed besides. True, Grovestalker had been led into his crimes by his wife, one of the later Talking Tigers Aslan had raised up to be mates for the children of Brightburn and Slimtalon; but he could have refused to join in evil. Instead, he had now joined many other outlaw tigers in death.

The King was addressing his one current live prisoner, Slimtalon's daughter-in-law Ripplestride. She was being held immobilized by Narnia's first male Talking Elephant, Graniteside, who was keeping a foot directly on top of her head. The faithful pachyderm's flanks had been doctored by a Centaur for wounds inflicted by another feline renegade--a renegade who had quickly met permanent justice on the points of Graniteside's tusks.

"Tigress Ripplestride!" said the King. "You and your fellow criminals were strongly and clearly warned of the wrongness of your ways when it was found that you had killed ordinary lions without valid cause. But instead of dismissing the absurd hostility you had formed against lions, you proceeded to attacking Talking Lions. Not only did you shamelessly take advantage of your greater size--not that you would have had any right on your side even if lions were larger than tigers--but you murdered even cubs! Your guilt is too well-attested to permit any doubt; but when I lived in the world of Adam and Eve, my nation there believed in letting an accused man speak in his defense. Therefore, if you have any justification at all for your actions, tell it now!"

Ripplestride, flat on her belly at the mercy of the elephant standing over her, felt him ease the pressure on her head to make sure she would be able to speak. She might have come up with something plausible to make her guilt seem less; but her hatred, resentment and self-pity overpowered her fear of death. "The Talking Lions themselves ARE my justification!" she snarled. "Just because they superficially look like Aslan, they think they're better than the rest of the felines! In fact, human, if you had any sense you would _thank_ us tigers for what we have done; for the lions _also_ think they're better than YOU!"

Slimtalon groaned. She knew that Graniteside had been personally friends with at least two of the Talking Lions (besides their Patriarch and Matriarch) who had perished before the forces of order in the kingdom were alerted to what was happening; she could tell that it was costing the old bull elephant an enormous effort of self-restraint not to kill Ripplestride then and there. Could it be that--

The mother tigress rose to her feet for the first time since the impromptu gathering had begun. "Daughter-in-law!" she cried out. "You are _daring_ the elephant to kill you, or the King to order it done! Don't give in to this madness! There is nothing heroic about throwing your life away when your cause was unjust in the first place! Only humble yourself, and a measure of mercy might yet be afforded you!" Seeing Graniteside giving her an approving glance, she turned toward King Frank. "Your Majesty, I beg your pardon for speaking out of turn."

"You do no wrong by your wise words, honorable tigress," Frank replied. Then he spoke to Graniteside: "Friend Elephant, please allow the accused to stand up, and move a few paces back from her." Standing up himself, the King laid aside both spear and sword, and began walking toward the surprised Ripplestride. The armed demi-human guards on either side, Satyrs and Fauns, made to accompany him, as did the Gryphon Patriarch who was also witnessing the proceedings; but the King gestured to them to stay where they were. Fledge, standing near, snorted, "Your Majesty! Don't come in reach of her fangs!"--but the former cabbie told his former cab-horse, "The accused has said, or at least implied, that she and the others with her did not intend revolt against the realm, but only a feud against beings who supposedly had offended them." In a moment, standing unarmed within easy grabbing range of Ripplestride, the King looked her fearlessly in the eye. "In Aslan's name, I command you to say truly what grounds you had for supposing that mortal Talking Lions thought themselves superior--and why, if this were so, it should give you cause to slay them!"

Ripplestride's rage subsided a little, though she still failed to speak very respectfully to her sovereign. "Let me say first that, as events have shown, we tigers obviously never had any chance of overthrowing you even if we had wanted to, which we didn't. But we took action against an evil which might have threatened your authority as well as the honor and well-being of tigers. From time to time, various Narnians--not only tigers, either--overheard adult Talking Lions telling their cubs, 'We are the best of all beasts; we are the only true images of Aslan, and the only ones worthy to interpret His will!' Don't you see what that implied?"

King Frank looked over his shoulder at Regulus, a Centaur who stood proudly erect in spite of many bandaged wounds which had been the price he paid for slaying another of the murderous tigers. "Did you hear that, Regulus? It confirms the rest of the evidence we had up to now about their motives."

Regulus fingered his beard. "Sire, I suggest that you ask her if she heard of the dream Hookpaw supposedly had." Hookpaw, the apparent leader of the tigers' aggression, had been the husband of one of Slimtalon's daughters; he was now a widower, and a fugitive.

As soon as Frank turned to face Ripplestride again, she anticipated the question and said, "Yes, I know of the dream. Hookpaw dreamed he was in a deep fog, and saw dimly a creature somewhat resembling a Gryphon. This creature warned him that the Talking Lions were planning to persuade Narnians to worship ALL of them as they worship Aslan." Both Frank and Regulus were intrigued to hear her say "THEY worship Aslan" rather than "WE worship Aslan;" but neither King nor Centaur made any remark about this.

Ripplestride, as if beginning to hope that she actually might not be put to death after all, continued: "You know that we Talking Tigers have been conscientious in obeying the law never to prey upon other Talking Animals, or any reasoning beings. When we hunt, we even risk losing our meal by calling out periodically for any Talking Animals in our path to make themselves known, so we won't kill them by mistake." (In this, at least, the King knew her to be speaking the truth, for it was one of his royal concerns to keep track of the conduct of Talking Animals whose nature forced them to kill for their food.) "Thus it is that even Talking Deer, Talking Goats and so on are unafraid to speak with us; and thus it was that we received independent reports of the arrogant behavior of the Talking Lions. The Lions were hoping to get a great variety of Narnian creatures on their side--potentially, some of every sort except felines, since the very kinship of the feline types made us and the leopards and cheetahs the lions' particular objects of contempt."

King Frank raised an eyebrow. "You tigers have left us with a terribly small number of surviving lions who could be questioned on this point; but speak on. Are you saying that the lions would have sought to overthrow human authority?"

Ripplestride nodded. "At the very least, that was a possibility they would have considered if their bid

for power and influence went well. Their prejudice against all who were not lions like themselves--"

Her words were cut off by a roar: a roar which seemed to fill earth and air with a presence and power beyond comprehension. But Ripplestride was the only being there for whom that sound brought fear; all others present, even the grief-stricken Slimtalon, bowed in adoration as Aslan Himself appeared from nowhere alongside King Frank.

Aslan acknowledged the worship of His creatures with an outgoing breath which was the very air of Heaven touching all present. The healing of every physical wound was accelerated, and Slimtalon somehow found her grief less agonizing. The Great Lion drew closer to Ripplestride, who simultaneously cringed in helplessness and unconsciously bared her teeth in reflexive, powerless defiance.

"Unfortunate stripling," He said to her; "that you and your kindred should be misled into demonstrating a new depth of depravity scarcely known among Narnians until now." Turning to run His gaze across King Frank and the other onlookers, He added, "In these early years of the Narnian world, you who are native to this world have learned by stages about evil, treachery and deception. It is easy enough to grasp the idea of external deception, when one person lies to another person. But here before you crouches a living example of the deeper dishonesty, the same which motivates all the wicked actions of your enemy Jadis as she nurses her schemes far to the northwest from Narnia. It is SELF-deception: a conscious desire to believe a supposed fact which one KNOWS to be false, or which one COULD know to be false if one were willing to pay attention to logic and evidence."

He turned back toward Ripplestride. "I tell you with perfect knowledge that NOT ONE of My Talking Lions EVER said that the Talking Lions deserved to be supreme over other creatures merely because they look like Me. The closest any of them came to saying such a thing was to tell each other that they had a solemn duty never to dishonor My name by wicked conduct, because they enjoyed such a privilege as to bear My likeness. Some creatures who spoke to you tigers about these words of the lions confused the wording--but never so much as to amount to a clear statement that the lions meant to demand worship. In every case, you tigers had to supply part of the confusion yourselves...WILLFUL confusion, because you found there was pleasure in feeling a sense of grievance. This dark pleasure is indulged in by many of the children of Adam and Eve in their world, as King Frank would confirm; now you tigers have cultivated it in Narnia, without even needing sinful humans to help you do it.

"For some--above all, for the one called Hookpaw--it was an entirely conscious decision to want to believe the worst about the lions. Once these tigers had succeeded in making themselves believe the false grievance, they spread it to others; and each of the others was guilty of at least a little complicity, a little willingness to be deceived. It saddens me to say that, of those above the age of moral accountability, ONLY TWO Talking Tigers in all of Narnia remained completely blameless: your mother-in-law here, and the male named Quickspring, who is at Cair Paravel reporting to the Queen."

King Frank moved forward. "My Lord Aslan, I do not understand. Rivalry and friction there has been among Talking Beasts in the time since Digory, Polly and I saw You create them--but never anything like this. Up to now, the only serious evil we have had to fight arose when creatures were corrupted by the distant influence of Jadis. This evil seems, if I may say so, homegrown."

"The source of it," Aslan replied, "is at once closer at hand than Jadis, and farther away. Do not concern yourself at this time about the distant aspect. As for the the near aspect: to speak accurately, these fallen tigers did not commit their crimes because they were angry at the lions for glorying in a bodily resemblance to Me. Whether they realize it or not, they were actually angry at Me for looking like the lions." He looked at Ripplestride. "For wearing the material form of a lion, **RATHER THAN THAT OF A TIGER**. That is your empty grievance!"

Aslan began pacing in an outward spiral, passing by each spectator, His voice remaining perfectly audible to all. "Because your first king remembers his origin on Earth, he has been able to tell all of you such things as he knows about the form in which I am known on Earth, the form of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Later generations of Narnians will mostly forget about My Earthly life; but to you who have heard of it, I can say this and be understood. In My identity as Jesus, I have had millions of children of Adam and Eve conjure up foolish complaints against Me, because in some way I was not what they wanted Me to be. My disciples, while I lived in mortal flesh, wanted me to be a warrior and ruler--while rulers wanted Me to be less involved with politics than I was, lest I upset their convenient routines. And it went on like that after I ascended back to the Father, Whom you know as the Emperor. Rich men wanted Me to side with them against poor men, while poor men wanted Me to give them license to take revenge on rich men. I have been called on to support light-skinned men against dark-skinned men, dark-skinned men against light-skinned men, and the two sexes against each other. So it is no marvel, though it remains a sad thing, that here in the Narnian world someone would choose to be indignant against Me for appearing as a lion instead of a tiger."

Slimtalon at last found the boldness (had she realized it, it was Aslan Himself giving her the boldness) to creep toward her Creator and say, "My Lord Aslan! The King and the Queen have in truth taught us Narnians about such things as You describe--and said that, in that other world, You nonetheless made ways to remedy the folly of invented grudges. Oh please, can You not even now undo in some degree this woeful evil which has befallen us?"

Aslan gazed at Slimtalon with a look of paternal tenderness, telling her, "I was talking with your husband in Heaven just before I came down here; he knew as well as I did what a right heart-attitude you would show. Yes, there will be a remedy--though My Father, the Emperor, will not allow evil acts chosen by free will to pass with no consequences whatsoever." Turning to King Frank, He said, "You can call off the hunt for the remaining outlaw tigers. All of them who remain within the borders of Narnia, and who have not already been killed or captured, are now reduced to ordinary beasts, with no memory of what they were. You may tell the surviving Talking Lions that the loved ones they have lost are alive and well in My country beyond the dawn; and certain mother lionesses, who fought heroically

against unfair odds trying to defend their young, are being accorded especially high honor there. I regret to say that those tigers who brought death on themselves in this mad uprising are not in so pleasant a place."

These words turned the knife of sorrow in Slimtalon's heart, though she knew that Aslan knew that the crimes which had occurred were no fault of hers.

"And what of the prisoner before us?" asked Frank. "I assume that You already see in my mind the sentence I intend for her; does it meet with Your approval?"

"It does, my son; therefore declare it now."

Nodding to Aslan, the King then spoke somberly: "Tigress Ripplestride! Had you perished in the putting down of this conspiracy, the fault would have been your own; but with our Creator's own approval, I grant you mercy-- within conditions which are not unreasonable. Seventeen Talking Tiger cubs have been left parentless by this needless bloodshed. You shall become a foster-mother to them all, and shall teach them both to worship Aslan and to obey His laws of goodwill to ALL reasoning beings of Narnia. Any material assistance needed for this shall be provided to you. Since your wicked pride inclined you to believe that lions thought themselves better than you, when in fact it was YOU who thought yourself better than THEY because of your mere bodily size, you shall be reminded every day for the rest of your mortal life that there are creatures far bigger and stronger than YOU. The Talking Elephants, and the Giants in my service, will keep a close eye on you; and if you are wise, you will be grateful that they do not deal with you for being smaller the way you dealt with lions for being smaller. In fact--it is my royal command that, the first time you meet an elephant or a giant on any given day, you shall say to them, 'Thank you for not slaying me as I deserve.' This order shall stand until your good behavior convinces me that it may be withdrawn; until such a time, any refusal by you to show humility shall be punished by some reasonable disciplinary measure. Regulus! Guards! See that all is put in readiness for Tigress Ripplestride to begin her penance."

Ripplestride looked into the King's eyes, then into Aslan's eyes. It startled her to realize how similar the mortal man's gaze was to that of the omnipotent Lion. For the first time ever, she began dimly to realize what Aslan's human followers on Earth knew: that it is the Spirit of the Lord, living within a person, Who makes all the difference. She spoke with new meekness, at once to her King and to the King of Kings: "I thank You for giving me this grace, and this chance. I submit to all that is commanded."

Terribly though Ripplestride had sinned, Slimtalon still was glad that her life was to be spared. Now she ventured to address Aslan once more:

"My Lord Aslan--did I not hear You speak of tigers within the borders of Narnia? Does that mean that some who turned renegade are now outside this realm, and are neither dead, nor captured, nor

transformed into mindless ordinary animals?"

"That is correct, faithful tigress," Aslan replied. "And it was as much to them as to the matter of Ripplestride and the cubs that I was referring when I spoke to you of a remedy for the evil. One of your sons is both still alive and still a Talking Tiger: your youngest son."

A portion of the stony burden on Slimtalon's heart was taken away. "Bluntmuzzle? Where is he, Aslan?"

"He is with Hookpaw, the worst offender of all the outlaw tigers. Also with them is Elkfinder." Aslan knew that Slimtalon knew who Elkfinder was: a yearling female not of the direct bloodline from herself and Brightburn, thus one who upon maturing would be a suitable mate for Bluntmuzzle. Aslan would not be taking the conversation along this path if there were no hope of redemption, so...

"Are they fleeing toward warmer climates, my Lord? I would suppose that to be natural for any tiger who had cause to leave Narnia."

"Correct again, dear one."

Hope grew so swiftly in the mother tigress' heart that it was almost as painful as her grief had been. "What will You do about them, Aslan?"

The Lion kissed her snout; as He did so, Slimtalon felt renewed strength filling her being. "I shall enable you to do something, dear one," Aslan said. "Now, climb onto My back. Take hold of Me any way you choose; your teeth and claws cannot injure Me, and you will want to hold on tight. Like the migrating birds, we are going to FLY south!"

The pleasant, fertile country which would one day be known as the Kingdom of Archenland had been surveyed by King Frank personally in quieter times, riding on Fledge to observe the terrain from the sky. But there were not yet enough humans in the Narnian world to settle it. The new generation, born of marriages between Frank and Helen's children and assorted sufficiently human-like denizens of Narnia, was only just now being brought up. And if there were any unrelated humans finding their way into the Narnian world by gateways between the universes, none had yet come near enough to Narnia to be detected by Narnians.

Thus, there were no castles or towns for the three southbound fugitive tigers to avoid. Hookpaw led the way, and did most of the killing of animals along the way to provide meat for all of them to eat. (In all the attendant exertions, he never complained of pain in the not-yet-healed wounds on both of his shoulders: wounds inflicted by a Talking Lion who had been gallantly defending his family against Hookpaw.) He even gave fair shares of the good meat to his two companions. Hookpaw prided himself on being loyal and considerate to fellow Talking Tigers; it was only everyone else he viewed with

contempt. At the secret meetings of tigers which had led up to the campaign against the lions, Hookpaw had coined a slogan: "Everything for the Species, nothing for those outside the Species!"

It was on their third morning outside Narnian territory, as they devoured a stag they had surprised, that the half-grown female Elkfinder asked the question Bluntmuzzle had been afraid to ask their leader: "Why did we fail? Why didn't Aslan allow us to kill ALL the Talking Lions, when they were so disrespecting Him as to steal His glory?"

Hookpaw showed no anger toward her, only a pensive look. "I confess I've been thinking that over myself. These last two nights, I hoped that the Great Gryphon who speaks for Aslan would come to me in another dream and explain. He didn't; but I think I have it figured out."

Emboldened by the dominant male's mild speech, Bluntmuzzle asked, "And what is the answer? Is it because we didn't exercise the cunning to make the first victims' deaths look like accidents?"

"No, no, little brother. The answer is profound in its pure simplicity. We lost because we were not powerful enough and swift enough to complete the killing-out before others intervened to rescue the lions. POWER is what makes all the difference. Aslan allowed us to lose in order to teach us that we must above all seek to become STRONGER. Might vanquished us; and only with greater might will we ever be able either to return to Narnia on our own terms, or establish a secure domain for ourselves elsewhere. It is might that makes right."

Elkfinder was only more unsettled, not less, by Hookpaw's answer to Bluntmuzzle. The thought pushed itself upon her that Narnia was NOT ruled by the strongest creatures in it. A human being, without weapons, would be as helpless as a sheep if attacked even by a lion, let alone a tiger; yet the majority of Narnian beings, even huge ones, obeyed King Frank without complaint. Frank, and his wife Helen, commanded the respect of rational beasts and mythical creatures because of their WISDOM. But Elkfinder decided not to push her luck by asking Hookpaw what he thought of that. Still less would she ask why Hookpaw never seemed to express grief over the death of his own mate, whom he had led to her death in the war against the lions.

As for Bluntmuzzle, it occurred to him that, although Hookpaw had been a generous and patient leader so far, if they came to where game was scarce the elder tiger might apply "Might makes right" in that situation--and begin hogging for himself all the good flesh of any animals they did catch. But aloud, he only said, "Have you any idea HOW we will become stronger?"

Hookpaw grunted around a marrowbone. "Two ideas at present. One is that if we find ordinary tigers, and each of us three mates with one of them, we might be able to produce talking offspring--whom, of course, we would teach to follow the right path of tigerly strength. The other is that the Great Gryphon might be authorized by Aslan to furnish help in forms we do not yet anticipate. But for that hope to come true, we surely must prove ourselves worthy with proper determination and ruthlessness."

Elkfinder's private misgivings increased. Something simply did not sound right about Aslan advocating ruthlessness. She knew the story, told by King Frank who had witnessed it, of how Aslan, on the day He created Narnia, had allowed the alien humanoid Jadis to live even though she had vainly tried to kill Him. Besides that, neither Elkfinder nor anyone she knew had ever met any Gryphon who claimed any such title as "the Great Gryphon;" there was only Hookpaw's dream to go by. It seemed rather little to rely on. But, she supposed, there had to be something for them to hope for; they certainly could not hope to return to Narnia as matters now stood.

If Aslan had not been invulnerable to any harm He did not choose to be vulnerable to, Slimtalon's claws and teeth would have drawn blood from Him at His first ascent into the air, she clung to Him so nervously. But with time, the Matriarch of Talking Tigers gained confidence that her Lord would not let her fall, and began to take interest in the panoramic view of her world.

The Narnian world, not exactly a planet as planets are known in the universe of Adam and Eve, had less total mass than Earth; it was only by the Divine will that it had gravity similar to Earth's. But the flatness of its inhabited surface meant that one flying above it could see a breadth of scenery not less than would be seen flying high over mankind's native planet.

"Why does the land grow yellowish far to the south, my Lord?" Slimtalon asked.

"What you see," replied Aslan, "is a hot and waterless region--what King Frank would call a 'desert.' I created it there for a purpose. One day it will serve as a natural barrier, making it difficult for foes from the south to come by land against the descendants of your King and Queen."

"What foes, Aslan? Is not Jadis in the west rather than the south?"

"The openings between the worlds have already begun to let new human arrivals blunder into this world; but I have not allowed any of those arrivals to be so near to King Frank's realm as to be of any concern for him in his lifetime. In a future period, the largest single concentration of non-Narnian humans will found a large and powerful kingdom--but on the far side of the desert, where for a time they will content themselves with imposing tribute upon the disorganized tribes that will form still farther south of them. You, daughter, will not see any of that--unless it be by looking down from the edge of My country, long after you shall have joined your husband there. For now, the desert will also be a barrier to your son and his companions."

Slimtalon felt a fresh worry. "Will they die of thirst?"

"No. The one who is misleading them--I know who it is, but the time has not come to tell you--will derive no use from them if they perish thus. He will prompt them, if they do not have the idea for themselves, to swing far to the west and bypass the desert. In their minds, there is no hurry to get TO

any destination, provided they are quick enough to get AWAY from Narnia."

In the time this much conversation took, they had already passed over Archenland, and were coming to the frontier of the desert, having nullified the head start the fugitives had achieved by fleeing as soon as defeat looked certain. "Are we keeping to this course because those we follow have not yet veered away from the desert?" Slimtalon asked.

Aslan appeared to be looking at some definite point on the ground far below. "No. They are already changing their direction. The reason why we go this way is so that your appearance will have more of an impact on them."

"_MY_ appearance??" The tigress was baffled. "What else but YOUR appearance is needed to bring them low in terrified submissiveness?"

"I rule by truth and love before force and fear," the Great Lion told her. "They must have their chance to listen to reason. I told you I would enable you to do something; you shall be the very voice of reason. But there is no harm in making the bearer of wisdom impressive. Trust me, daughter: when they see you approaching from _south_ of them...when they realize that you have covered more distance in an hour than they could in over two days...they will know that a power is with you, yet without being _quite_ so flattened with fright as they would be at My direct rebuke. Besides, I did not create all of you intelligent beings with minds and wills of your own just to end up doing _everything_ for you Myself." Those last words were spoken in a kindly enough tone that Slimtalon did not feel reprimanded by them.

After cutting across a section of desert, they turned slightly northward again, then descended from the skies to a low hill amid open grasslands: a place near which Hookpaw, Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder presumably would pass. Aslan kissed the tigress again, imparting more of His vigor to her. "Here I will leave you for a time, Slimtalon. The lines of argument which are forming in your brain to use with your son and his companions are valid enough. But mark well these two commands until you see Me again. One is: Expect the unexpected, for more is at work here than you know. The other is: No matter what alarming sights await you, trust in Me, for I will not abandon you to an impossible predicament. I will be closer than you may think."

Then, without waiting for more speech, Aslan disappeared like a forgotten dream. Repeating to herself the substance of His instructions, the tiger matriarch began smelling the air for any scent of her kindred. If Aslan had not been invulnerable to any harm He did not choose to be vulnerable to, Slimtalon's claws and teeth would have drawn blood from Him at His first ascent into the air, she clung to Him so nervously. But with time, the Matriarch of Talking Tigers gained confidence that her Lord would not let her fall, and began to take interest in the panoramic view of her world.

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"What foes, Aslan? Is not Jadis in the west rather than the south?"

"The openings between the worlds have already begun to let new human arrivals blunder into this world; but I have not allowed any of those arrivals to be so near to King Frank's realm as to be of any concern for him in his lifetime. In a future period, the largest single concentration of non-Narnian humans will found a large and powerful kingdom--but on the far side of the desert, where for a time they will content themselves with imposing tribute upon the disorganized tribes that will form still farther south of them. You, daughter, will not see any of that--unless it be by looking down from the edge of My country, long after you shall have joined your husband there. For now, the desert will also be a barrier to your son and his companions."

Slimtalon felt a fresh worry. "Will they die of thirst?"

"No. The one who is misleading them--I know who it is, but the time has not come to tell you--will derive no use from them if they perish thus. He will prompt them, if they do not have the idea for themselves, to swing far to the west and bypass the desert. In their minds, there is no hurry to get TO any destination, provided they are quick enough to get AWAY from Narnia."

In the time this much conversation took, they had already passed over Archenland, and were coming to the frontier of the desert, having nullified the head start the fugitives had achieved by fleeing as soon as defeat looked certain. "Are we keeping to this course because those we follow have not yet veered away from the desert?" Slimtalon asked.

Aslan appeared to be looking at some definite point on the ground far below. "No. They are already changing their direction. The reason why we go this way is so that your appearance will have more of an impact on them."

"_MY_ appearance??" The tigress was baffled. "What else but YOUR appearance is needed to bring them low in terrified submissiveness?"

"I rule by truth and love before force and fear," the Great Lion told her. "They must have their chance

to listen to reason. I told you I would enable you to do something; you shall be the very voice of reason. But there is no harm in making the bearer of wisdom impressive. Trust me, daughter: when they see you approaching from _south_ of them...when they realize that you have covered more distance in an hour than they could in over two days...they will know that a power is with you, yet without being _quite_ so flattened with fright as they would be at My direct rebuke. Besides, I did not create all of you intelligent beings with minds and wills of your own just to end up doing _everything_ for you Myself." Those last words were spoken in a kindly enough tone that Slimtalon did not feel reprimanded by them.

After cutting across a section of desert, they turned slightly northward again, then descended from the skies to a low hill amid open grasslands: a place near which Hookpaw, Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder presumably would pass. Aslan kissed the tigress again, imparting more of His vigor to her. "Here I will leave you for a time, Slimtalon. The lines of argument which are forming in your brain to use with your son and his companions are valid enough. But mark well these two commands until you see Me again. One is: Expect the unexpected, for more is at work here than you know. The other is: No matter what alarming sights await you, trust in Me, for I will not abandon you to an impossible predicament. I will be closer than you may think."

Then, without waiting for more speech, Aslan disappeared like a forgotten dream. Repeating to herself the substance of His instructions, the tiger matriarch began smelling the air for any scent of her kindred.

Distances grow suddenly large again when one is NOT effortlessly flying on Aslan's back. Slimtalon caught no scent or sight that day of those whom she sought; so, before nightfall, she turned her attention to food.

Even this far from Narnia, she took care not to risk violating the covenant of peace among all Talking Animals. From time to time she called out, "All creatures who understand spoken words, make yourselves known to me, so that I will not attack you by mistake!" (There was no language barrier to complicate things; when Aslan had created the Narnian world, in His foreknowledge that its first human arrivals would be from England, He had made all the reasoning beings able to speak English.) Her scrupulous conduct inevitably resulted in many delicious-looking non-intelligent animals escaping from her. In the end, coming upon a stream big enough to contain fish, Slimtalon caught enough of these to relieve her hunger. As far as she knew, Aslan had not created any fish with humanlike intelligence. Then, upon finding a suitable thicket in which to sleep the night, she prayed:

"Aslan, I trust that You see and hear me even when I cannot see or hear You. If I am to be a voice of truth to my son and his companions, I implore You to let me be guided by the Holy Spirit Who mystically joins You with Your Father the Emperor." (Narnians of the first generation had some understanding of the Holy Trinity, though this was to grow less clear with later generations, as Aslan, or Jesus, was the only Person of the Godhead to show Himself in the Narnian world.) "I think I

understand the things You said about self-deception; but how am I to UN-deceive those who have lied to themselves? Should I let them think at first that I agree with them, in order not to anger them? But if I do that, will it only make it harder at last to insist on the truth?" She continued praying in this manner until fatigue made her stop.

Hours later, Slimtalon was harshly awakened by what seemed like a chilly winter wind blowing over her. Peering out of the thicket, she beheld a sight that filled her with uncomprehending dread. Aslan HAD told her to expect the unexpected and still trust in His protection, but this was TOO unexpected...

The moon was not in the sky at this time, but the strange figure she beheld some twenty yards away seemed illuminated by colorless moonlight. It resembled a very large Gryphon, but there was something wrong about it. The first wrongness that was noticeable was that it did not smell like a Gryphon; then, as it began to approach Slimtalon, she could see that it had almost no hair. When it came still closer, she saw that its eyes were cold and reptilian, with none of the noble, openhearted look she had noted in the eyes of real Gryphons. These eyes were unmistakably cruel; and their glance made the tigress tremble. She felt certain that she could neither fight this thing effectively, nor outrun it.

Now it was less than ten yards away. Its beak moved in speech; and for the first time in her life, Slimtalon heard words which certainly were words in a meaningful language—but NOT a language that she could understand. All she could sense was that the words expressed a sneering contempt for her, and for all beings of flesh and blood.

Desperately resisting the paralysis of terror (and wondering in a corner of her mind, even then, if this was how a hunted animal would feel), Slimtalon prayed urgently, if not very eloquently:

"Aslan, I trust You—Aslan, I trust You—Aslan, save me!"

The next instant, the advancing apparition flew straight backwards, as if a gigantic, invisible mallet had struck it. Screeching in rage, the fiend looked all around as if to see what enemy was thwarting it; then it charged headlong at Slimtalon—only to be hit still harder by the unseen force and hurled still farther away.

A third time, then, the creature approached Slimtalon—but slowly this time. No third hammer-blow met it; apparently, Aslan, wherever He was, knew that it was giving up on trying to kill or capture the tigress. Coming as near to Slimtalon as it dared, the apparition spoke again, this time in English: "I see that you are protected. I wish you pleasant dreams, dreaming of what I may do to you if that protection is ever withdrawn. But know this: there are others who do not share your immunity; and at the same time, they have no need for immunity against me, for I lead them to a glorious destiny!" Lifting its beak the way a haughty human might lift his nose, the thing vanished...and the night air became warm again.

While Aslan did not appear visibly, nor offer any explanation for what Slimtalon had seen, she could sense His continued presence--due to the very fact that she could sleep again at all (with no nightmares) after such an encounter with evil.

Amid early morning mists, the three fugitive tigers were hunting for breakfast, with a spacing of ten or twelve leaps between them. Elkfinder, as the youngest, was proceeding in the center, with Hookpaw to her left and Bluntmuzzle to her right.

Bluntmuzzle was abruptly startled when, as the wind increasingly blew from the southwest, he caught a hint of a scent that could not possibly be coming from that direction. It was the scent of his mother, who had tried in vain to talk him and his siblings out of joining in the feud against the lions. It could not be her scent; she was back in Narnia, playing the tame lap-kitten to King Frank. Bluntmuzzle stiffened his neck and his resolve. He would NOT let himself start feeling that he missed his mother; he would NOT let himself start thinking that the tigers' cause was wrong; and he would NOT entertain any more doubts of Hookpaw's trustworthiness as a leader. Hookpaw had the strength of will which was their only hope!

Then he heard a soft snarl from Elkfinder, relaying a signal from Hookpaw that some animal or animals suitable for food had been detected. It crossed Bluntmuzzle's mind that non-intelligent tigers normally hunted alone, and from ambush; this moving hunt, with teamwork, was more like the way _lions_ hunted their meat. But no, he was NOT going to let himself think that lions had anything good to offer. Anyway, one could hardly be good at ambushes if one was always worried about avoiding mistaken attacks on fellow Talking Beasts.

As if in response to this last thought, he heard Hookpaw resorting to his humanlike voice to shout, "You there, grazing animals! If you are Talking Animals, better say so now, lest we sin unwittingly by devouring you!"

The only result of Hookpaw's call was a noise of swiftly-retreating hoofbeats. As he and Elkfinder joined Hookpaw in pursuit, Bluntmuzzle muttered to himself, "Surely we could dispense with that Narnian courtesy by now; there CAN'T be any talking game animals in this wilderness!"

Miles away, Slimtalon, also finding her own conscientious behavior an obstacle to eating, reflected on how hunting had been back in Narnia. The intelligent major predators had sometimes been able to make arrangements with herbivorous Talking Animals, that the latter would avoid certain watering spots on scheduled days, so that the predators could in clear conscience kill and eat herbivores that showed up in those places at those times. Only now did Slimtalon appreciate what a help those arrangements had been in allowing the rational carnivores to reconcile hunger with morality.

A new thought came to her. What if she could create a _written_ warning sign close to some natural ambush location, warning off any sapient herbivores? Talking Beasts of Narnia all at least knew of the

existence of writing...but no, there were too many of them who could not actually read; they might fail to catch the warning.

But, wait—what about a PICTURE??

Finding a spring in open land, Slimtalon carefully smoothed the mud in a wide area adjoining it. Then she used one claw like a stylus, to draw in the mud a fairly recognizable image of a tiger. Next she made a large arrow, pointing from the tiger image directly to the windfall where she planned to wait in hiding. Surely no thinking animal could fail to notice the visual message or fail to grasp its meaning; yet it would have no meaning to dumb animals.

Half an hour later, a large antelope of some sort came to drink...plainly was in a position to see the visual warning sign...showed no comprehension at all...and so became Slimtalon's breakfast.

Since there was plenty of edible flesh left over, the mother tigress decided to wait beside the carcass for awhile. Perhaps the three fugitives would soon come this way, in which case she might be able to make a good start by offering them a free lunch.

Queen Helen came flying out from Cair Paravel to join her husband in the countryside, mounted on one of the winged offspring Fledge had begotten upon "ordinary" Talking Horses. (Horses not being human beings, Aslan had granted a limited dispensation for Fledge to sire his foals on several mares, in order to establish a pegasoid race. No Narnian dared to make any jokes about urging King Frank likewise to increase the human population by taking on a harem of nymphs; he would have whipped anyone who suggested this.) It grieved Helen terribly to learn just how many lives had been lost; but she was relieved to know that, once the tiger-suppressing operations had begun in earnest, no more lives had been lost _except_ guilty ones. There had been no nonsense of insisting on solitary duels. The outlaw tigers, by their treachery and cruelty, had forfeited any such dignity; having shamelessly taken advantage of their greater size against their leonine victims, they in turn had fallen before superior force and coordinated efforts.

As she and King Frank shared a meal in his field pavilion, the Queen remarked, "If there are going to be Narnian renegades running loose in the future Kingdom of Archenland, I wonder if we should speed up the plans to populate Archenland ourselves before hostile elements can reach any troublesome numbers?"

The King gave her a loving smile. "You have done more than your share to contribute to the eventual population of Archenland; but Aslan does not see fit to change the timespan it takes for human children to grow up—even when those children are our young grandchildren with demigod-ish blood mixed into their veins. If we built a stronghold there now, it would have to be garrisoned with nonhumans—which would be contrary to Aslan's plan for Archenland. He wants mankind to be able to make more distinctly human use of that country—organized farming and so forth—which means that it must be

reserved primarily for human settlement, though by no means forbidding sojourns by Narnia's nonhumans."

"Well, do you think that Jadis might seek an alliance with those outlaws, to give herself new proxies operating closer to Narnia than she dares come?"

"I think that if such were a likely possibility, Aslan would have said something about it."

Helen shrugged. "Then I suppose we can leave the fugitives to Aslan. Did He say much to you about His plan before He flew away with Slimtalon as a passenger?"

"Hardly anything," Frank admitted.

The Queen did not think worse of her husband for not having pressed the Almighty Lion to tell more. While Aslan was not a tame lion, Frank and Helen understood that it was right and beneficial for them to be His tame humans.

Upon the brink of the cliffs of Aslan's country, a precipice so impossibly high as to disorient anyone who was not yet immortal, stood one who now was immortal: Brightburn, the first of all male Narnian Talking Tigers. He had died several years ago on the shores of the Eastern Ocean, valiantly defending a family of Talking Sea Otters against a sea-monster that had pursued them up onto the beach. Now he was as close to being sad as a blessed spirit in Heaven could be, contemplating the moral ruin of the sons and daughters he and Slimtalon had raised.

His peace of soul was restored when he heard the voice of the Holy Spirit—that Person of the Godhead least noticed by Narnians, as indeed He is the least noticed by Earthlings as well:

"Faithful creature, do not let your joy be impaired. Each spirit must choose between light and darkness, between truth and falsehood. Rightly though you instructed them, you could not make your offspring's choices for them. But it is not only the children of your physical seed who are your children. As it is on Earth for all humans who inherit the blessing of Abraham, so in the Narnian world ALL Talking Tigers who loyally follow Aslan will be your children. And among them will be most of your physical grandchildren."

Brightburn lowered his head. "I thank You and praise You, Lord God. But what of my one remaining son of bodily begetting?"

"Bluntmuzzle is not irrevocably lost, My child. Watch and pray."

"And Slimtalon? Will this quest she follows be the adventure by which Aslan sends her home, here, to me?"

“Wait and see, Brightburn. Even in eternity, there is no reason why there should not still be sequential time, so that one experience may lead to another in orderly fashion. When the time does come for you and your wife to be reunited, you will at once feel such blazing joy as if you had been apart for a million years, and such contentment as if you had never been apart at all.”

Hookpaw wondered if he was more fatigued than he knew. All these game animals ran so accursedly FAST! He and his companions were feeling hungry enough to resort to eating toads and lizards.

Then Hookpaw noticed ahead of him what seemed a miraculous blessing. A large ram was entangled in some bushes. Calling the others to him with words (which would give the ram his chance to call out if he were a Talking Sheep), the outlaw leader made a striped beeline for the mutton.

At the last instant, though, the ram broke free of the bushes as if they had never been an impediment to him, and ran away. The frustrated tigers gave chase, running flank to flank, but they could not close the gap.

What struck Elkfinder as really odd was that, when they tired and slowed down, the ram also slowed, as if purposely waiting for them. When they got their wind back, the ram fled faster again. After miles of tantalizing pursuit, all three pursuers at once caught the undeniable scent of a fellow tiger directly ahead of them, not far now. And the very instant they became aware of the tiger scent...the ram they were chasing disappeared.

But as if to compensate them for the missed mutton, they could all smell the aroma of ripe antelope. And Bluntmuzzle's nose told him who had brought that antelope down, impossible though it seemed....

"Mother? Is that you?"

Since the wind was blowing from Slimtalon toward the approaching renegades, she caught no scent of them. Her first hint of their proximity was the sound of their movement, heard from just over a slight rise of ground. Then came the voice of her surviving son, who had caught his mother's scent.

"Here, son! I'm here! We must talk--but first, you and those with you may wish to eat."

The three fugitives crossed the rise and came into her view: Bluntmuzzle appearing half glad, half ashamed and all astonished at his mother's unexplained presence; Elkfinder seeming to have no deeper concern but the offered food; and Hookpaw showing a look of cautious calculation, neither friendly nor unfriendly.

Slimtalon could not help doing a little calculation of her own. If Hookpaw were to see the other two leaning toward repentance for their crimes, would he repent also, or leave on his own--or try to use

force to assert his petty leadership? Slimtalon reckoned that neither she nor her son would be able to handle Hookpaw in a fight alone, but both of them together would have a very good chance of besting him.

Or was this the wrong way to be thinking? Slimtalon had heard the King and Queen telling tales of the Christian martyrs on Earth. Did Aslan want her to be willing to die unresisting if she were attacked by Hookpaw? At their parting, Aslan had said that He approved of the arguments she had thought of in favor of repentance; but He had given her no instructions about whether to defend herself if assaulted...

Elkfinder, with only a hasty word of thanks, was first to tear loose a portion of the antelope meat. Slimtalon found it a hopeful sign, at least, that Hookpaw showed no indignation at the youngster going ahead of him. In fact, as Bluntmuzzle received his mother's kiss, Hookpaw hailed her courteously: "Strangely met, but well met, Lady Slimtalon. Can it be that your presence betokens for me some sign of guidance from Aslan?"

This was perhaps the great make-or-break moment. Now Slimtalon must choose if she would be subtle and evasive, or direct. What made up her mind was the realization that the tigers had gotten themselves into this trouble by UNCLEAR, emotion-fogged thinking.

"I know that you were still in Narnia when we crossed the border," Hookpaw continued; "and meaning no offense, I see no way that you could have outrun us and passed us. Did the Great Gryphon bring you through the air to join us?"

Slimtalon suppressed a shudder at the realization that what Hookpaw called "the Great Gryphon" must be the same horrid apparition from which Aslan had protected her the night before. This part, without actually lying, she would hold back for the moment. "I came through the air," she answered, "but it was no less than Aslan Himself Who transported me. He has entrusted to me the task of seeking an end to this tragic strife. But you need not speak with me on empty stomachs. Please eat."

So Hookpaw and Bluntmuzzle joined Elkfinder in doing exactly that--while Slimtalon mentally prayed for wisdom in whatever would be the next step.

Hookpaw ate only enough for his need, stopping while the younger ones were still feeding. Gazing at Slimtalon with a hopeful expression, he said, "So Aslan has involved Himself at last! Has He brought you here to let us know that He rebuked King Frank for thwarting our campaign of cleansing?"

Slimtalon imagined Brightburn welcoming her at the entrance to Aslan's country. Then she addressed her son: "Bluntmuzzle, hear me! Whatever happens next, keep your peace! I alone bear the responsibility for what may ensue upon my answering Hookpaw." She sat back on her haunches: a position which, while not exactly conveying supine submission, was also non-belligerent. To Hookpaw she said:

“Heed me well, younger brother. There is no reason for me to speak lies to the detriment of my own kind. Aslan CONDEMNS your actions, and APPROVES of the King’s actions in stopping you. He brought me here to give you a chance to mend your ways!”

For just a moment, she thought that Hookpaw would assault her. This did not frighten her; if she died, it would only mean she would be reunited that much sooner with her true love Brightburn. But what did unsettle her was that, from what she could see of her son from the corner of an eye, he did NOT look as if he were inclined to defend her in the event of her being attacked. She did not like the idea of dying with her last remaining child _not_ yet redeemed from this depravity.

In any event, no violence occurred. Instead, Hookpaw assumed an intensely thoughtful expression, pondered...and then broke out laughing.

“But of COURSE!” roared the outlaw leader. “That’s IT! Thank you, Lady Slimtalon, at last I see the answer! That’s why the Great Gryphon led us here, so that there would be no distractions when you gave us Aslan’s wisdom... Yes, yes, it’s clear now!”

It was not at all clear to Slimtalon or to Bluntmuzzle. As for Elkfinder, she gave a tigerly shrug. She was accustomed to not always understanding what adults talked about.

Hookpaw turned to Bluntmuzzle. “Here, I want you to strike me—claw my face!”

“Wait!” cried Slimtalon. “I did not come to make you seek punishment in penance for—“

“I know, I know,” Hookpaw interrupted her. “It’s just that he needs to understand. Here, youngling, strike me, I won’t hit back. Do it!”

“But, but there’s no REASON to do that,” Bluntmuzzle protested.

“Exactly! I want you to do it BECAUSE there’s no reason! Now strike HARD!”

Bluntmuzzle reluctantly complied, swatting Hookpaw’s face and drawing a little blood.

This action compelled Elkfinder’s attention more than adult words ever could. “Hookpaw, what is this? Why did you want him to hit you?”

“It’s Aslan’s lesson, to myself as much as any,” the chief renegade replied. “It’s about the true meaning of strength—strength for its own sake, not burdened with rules and customs. Strength not ensnared with causes and reasons. Oh, yes, it’s like the sunrise; I see everything better now! Elkfinder, bite Bluntmuzzle’s tail!” The yearling gave her friend’s tail only a harmless nip, which seemed to satisfy

Hookpaw for the present. "What an epiphany! Of course, of course—Aslan rebuked us because we didn't do things right! But we shall soon learn to do better at the business of raw power, I promise Him!"

Slimtalon found this more alarming than if Hookpaw had simply been enraged at her. Aslan certainly had meant it about the unexpected. "Now what?" was her uppermost thought.

Hookpaw turned back toward Slimtalon, bowing to her as if genuinely reverential and grateful. "Of course we were off the mark by focussing our attention on what we thought was an insult given by the lions. Concern for avenging an insult is a matter of cause and effect, of offense and retribution-- something beneath the notice of anyone who has ascended to the level of truly appreciating POWER!"

Bluntmuzzle had never been the smartest of the children of Brightburn and Slimtalon. Trying to keep up with the sequence of ideas, he asked Hookpaw, "Do you mean that we were WRONG to kill the lions we killed?"

"Not exactly, little brother. We were wrong to feel we needed a MORAL REASON to kill them! Power is ITS OWN justification! Think of it: did Aslan create our world by being kind and sentimental? Without power, He could not have done anything, and none of us would ever have existed."

Slimtalon had to try to get through to him. "But without His nature of love, Aslan would have had no reason to bother creating us."

Hookpaw snorted. "Poor matriarch, you are failing to grasp the depth of your own enlightenment that you shared with us. Aslan created us in order to have beings OVER WHOM HE WOULD WIELD POWER. What use is strength unless there is an object upon which it can act?"

"But Aslan hardly ever discusses plain strength with us when He is visibly present," Slimtalon objected. "He teaches us honor, and kindness, and--"

"Actually, it's KING FRANK who talks about those things," Hookpaw retorted. "Then he tries to convince us that Aslan teaches them. But how could the Almighty ever be bound by a CONSCIENCE? That would restrict Him; it would make Him less than sovereign! If He allowed any action of His to be forced one way or another by thoughts of what this or that creature 'deserves,' He might as well consider Himself dethroned. No, the Creator must be sovereign; and the only way He CAN be sovereign is never to let ANYTHING outside His own will determine His actions. No reasons, no causes, no justice, no love--NOTHING except pure arbitrary WILL!"

Slimtalon stared wide-eyed. "Then you are saying that Aslan's actions cannot be sovereign...unless they are MEANINGLESS??"

"That's a good enough way of putting it. And if we tigers are to honor Him as we should, OUR actions must also be meaningless--but STRONG!"

With that, as all three of the other tigers watched in amazement, Hookpaw began practicing a series of meaningless actions, including standing on his head, rubbing mud into his ears, and flailing at the nearest tree trunk with his tail.

Slimtalon was thrown out of her reckoning. She had been so well prepared to argue against the attack upon the lions...against the arrogance of tigers thinking that bigger was better...against the self-pitying self-deception for which Aslan had rebuked Ripplestride. But now all of that was yesterday's news.

And Slimtalon felt a slight chill in the air.

That thing from the night, the thing that allowed Hookpaw to think of it as a Gryphon--it must be here, though unseen. It must have anticipated what arguments she would use to try to make Hookpaw ashamed of his crimes. And because it knew that Slimtalon's arguments would be valid, because it knew that the action of the renegades was impossible to justify, it had outmaneuvered her by somehow inducing Hookpaw to redefine the very substance of the discussion!

She could only try to keep up, though...

"Hookpaw! What about the elephants, and the giants? You know they're more powerful than you, but they themselves value other things MORE than strength."

Hookpaw cocked his head like a Talking Dog thinking; then: "They have bodily might, but not the understanding of power!" He then scooped up a small piece of dead wood, and began trying awkwardly to juggle it with his forepaws, seeming to address his next words to that piece of wood rather than to Slimtalon. "Given enough practice in absolute randomness of action, we shall excel them in power, excel everyone!"

"Do you think you will be mightier than Aslan??"

The deranged one turned to look at her again. "What, do you think I'm crazy? I know I'm not the Creator; but aided by the Great Gryphon and yourself, I have hit upon the way to honor the Creator by emulating Him! In fact, it might be better to say that He is doing all this through me."

"But WHY would He create Narnia as He did, only to have all of its laws and principles overturned by anarchy?"

"Poor elder sister, to ask 'Why' at all is to miss the point! Aslan MUST NOT have any REASONS for His actions, or the actions would not be sovereign! There is the key to power, I tell you! Randomness!"

And Hookpaw began eating prickly weeds, ignoring the damage done to the inside of his mouth. Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder watched him in wide-eyed bafflement.

Slimtalon prayed hastily: "Lord Aslan, You easily overpowered that evil, alien thing when it was visible; surely You are no less able to stop it when it is invisible!" More loudly, then: "Evil thing who plagues tigerkind! In the name of Aslan the Omnipotent, I rebuke you!"

Hookpaw stood still, the effect of the invocation upon him not immediately evident. But Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder showed a reaction: both simultaneously said something to the effect of "What are we doing here?"--to which Bluntmuzzle added, "Mother, I think I have taken part in murder!"

Slimtalon could not refrain from looking at her son. "I fear you have done exactly that, Bluntmuzzle, though I'm not sure how much your own free will was really--"

She was interrupted by a scream of terror forced out of young Elkfinder's throat. All in a flicker, she took in what seemed to be Hookpaw leaping straight at the yearling with deadly intent; but before she could try to intervene, Hookpaw's attack proved not to be on Elkfinder at all. Instead, Hookpaw shot past her, to strike and overturn a modest-sized tortoise that was passing by.

"It's all your fault!" he shouted at the unfortunate and uncomprehending reptile. "You are to blame for all the violence that was done, because I say you are; and my saying so makes it so, because I say that my saying so makes it so!" Looking at the other three tigers, he snapped, "None of you yet grasps the meaning of the meaningless. I must pursue perfect arbitrariness on my own, and perhaps later you will learn the Great Gryphon's way!"

"Wait!" cried Slimtalon. "Did you not hear yourself? You just said 'the Great Gryphon's way,' not 'Aslan's way.' What can this Gryphon offer that Aslan cannot? In Aslan's name, I beg YOU to call on Aslan's name! Ask Him to show you if this Gryphon really serves Him. For I have seen and heard things which tell me that what you call a Gryphon is neither a Gryphon nor your friend!"

Hookpaw looked down at the dirt. "I did feel something strange when you invoked Aslan against what you called evil; but what evil is there to drive out?" He set the tortoise back on its feet and let it go--a hopeful sign.

"Now or never," thought Slimtalon, and invoked her Maker once more: "Lord Aslan, I cannot rely on my arguments now. Please open Hookpaw's eyes to the light, his nostrils to the scent of truth!"

No human would have set such importance on the sense of smell in spiritual matters, but it was natural enough with Talking Beasts. And the prayer was answered accordingly. All four tigers detected what seemed to them a series of pictures, "painted" entirely in aromas. First there came what seemed the mingled scent of tiger cubs and lion cubs...then the scent of adult tigers and lions as they would smell

when happy...then a stink like thousands of dead fish...then freshly-spilled blood of lions...then a smell that was an uncanny combination of the previous rotting smell with the smell of a Gryphon...then what seemed the scent of Aslan Himself, mixed with a hint of man-smell...then the smell of tigers in fear...then Aslan's scent returning, and the tiger-scent losing the fear-tinge.

"Hookpaw! Are you restored?" asked Slimtalon, drawing closer to him. "Oh, please, tell me that you are back in your right mind! Say that you will submit to the King's law and the Creator's grace!"

Hookpaw looked baffled; but almost anything would have been an improvement over his crazy impulses. "Law and grace," he muttered; "they both require meaning, don't they?"

"So they do," replied Slimtalon. "You said Aslan could do nothing without power; but His power itself could do nothing if it were not guided by the wisdom which ultimately originates with the Emperor-Over-Sea."

"Does pardon await us back in Narnia," her son put in, "or only death in retribution for our crimes?"

"Your cousin Ripplestride was guilty of at least as much bloodshed as you, Bluntmuzzle, but she was given a sentence other than death, one which will permit her to make some amends." Then the feline matriarch turned back toward Hookpaw. "Listen, my kinsbeast. I told you I saw things that contradicted your view of this 'Great Gryphon.' He, or it, actually appeared in the night and threatened me; but once I called upon Aslan, it was powerless to do me any harm. I called on Aslan again just now; and surely you must feel that the thing's influence on you is fading."

Elkfinder now made bold to address the revered matriarch of tigers. "Lady Slimtalon, does this mean that the Great Gryphon lied about the lions being boastful and wanting to rule over us?"

"It not only lied about that; it even lied about being a Gryphon at all." Turning yet again to Hookpaw: "Do you not see now that this evil spirit wanted you to be deluded and misled? It never spoke this nonsense about wanting actions to be meaningless when it roused you against the lions, did it? No, it argued that you had a MORAL RIGHT to attack them--did it not?"

Hookpaw nodded, looking older somehow. "So he did."

"Then come back north with me now! Surrender yourself to the King's justice; for even if he orders your head cut off, that would be better than having your spirit cut off from Aslan for eternity."

Hookpaw drew himself up. "I concede that I have made mistakes." (Hookpaw had no idea, as he said this, how many residents of Earth, over all its tragic history, had tried to excuse their intentional, premeditated sins by reducing them to supposedly accidental "mistakes.") "And I swear to you by Aslan that this is myself talking, not any alien spirit speaking through my mouth. But I do not see that

the importance of self-will is entirely discredited by all that has occurred. I would undo the deaths of those lions now if I could; but as it is, my death would not bring them back. And I must seek my own answers to the real meaning of my life!"

With that, Hookpaw swung around and began running in a south-by-southwesterly direction, faster than any of the others could have followed, not heeding Slimtalon's cries for him to come back.

Slimtalon's prayers that Hookpaw might yet be redeemed were interrupted--or perhaps answered--by her son saying:

"Mother? I, at least, understand now. I see that Jadis is not the only great evil with which our world must contend. For my part, I would now stretch out my neck to the axe if the King should require my death for my sins; but I do believe that Aslan wants ME, now, to carry on your effort to reach Hookpaw's heart with truth." He glanced in the direction his former leader had gone.

"Let us go after him together, son."

"But, Mother, consider: since Aslan does not appear at predictable times, we have no way of knowing if He has informed those in Narnia of your progress. I urge you to start back for home now, and take little Elkfinder with you. I will track Hookpaw, and leave a clear trail which can be seen from the air if winged horses, or _true_ Gryphons, come searching for us."

In the end Slimtalon accepted Bluntmuzzle's suggestion. Laying her forepaws on his head, she prayed for Aslan's cleansing to work within his heart, and Aslan's protection to surround him on his way. Then they parted.

Unknown to Slimtalon, it had not been long after Aslan carried her away that King Frank had begun organizing aerial reconnaissance to follow her. On the afternoon of the day Slimtalon had met her son and the other fugitives, one of the searchers caught sight of her heading back north with Elkfinder.

The searcher was Fear-No-Blast, a second-generation Talking Gander. He had acquired this name only after he took to flying, when he showed great strength and perseverance in flying against heavy winds. Talking Geese older than he were always glad to have him flying point in a V formation, breaking up the wind resistance for those who followed. And now his determination and stamina had put him in the lead of the search, even ahead of two Talking Falcons.

"Lady Slimtalon!" he honked out as he descended. "What news?"

"The news is less good than I hoped, but better than it might have been," the tigress matriarch answered. "The yearling here is ready to submit herself to the King's judgment. I have learned that some kind of evil spirit--possibly an evil even worse than Jadis--is behind the renegades' crimes.

Fortunately, Aslan is also aware of this creature, who of course cannot hope to defy Aslan by force. Hookpaw is in a puzzling state, neither clearly repentant nor clearly unrepentant; he went away claiming that he has to 'find his own answers.' "

Fear-No-Blast came as close to snorting as a waterfowl could. "That sounds to me like he wants to MAKE UP his own answers, and then congratulate himself on his wisdom."

"You may be right. In any event, my son professes true repentance; the only reason why he is not also accompanying me is that he feels a duty to try to persuade Hookpaw to turn himself in. Bluntmuzzle told me he would leave a trail that airborne searchers should be able to see."

"Then my task shall be to find and follow that trail. As for yourself, my lady, other birds will doubtless reach you before sunset; they can render you assistance if you need it."

"Thank you, good sir," said Slimtalon; "and may Aslan's breath speed you on your way."

Without further talk, Fear-No-Blast made his takeoff.

Bluntmuzzle noticed that Hookpaw was making no effort to conceal his tracks or his scent. He also noticed that the chief renegade seemed still to be doing some arbitrary and pointless actions--such as biting a number of sticks into different lengths and leaving them arranged in an artistic expanding spiral. Despite these delays on Hookpaw's part, the younger tiger could not overtake him that first day.

As darkness drew near, Bluntmuzzle did once more what he had already done three times since he began trailing Hookpaw: clawing at the ground, he formed an arrow-shape that pointed in the direction he expected to continue going, and filled the shallow trenching with rocks and fallen branches to make it more visible from the air. Then he went a little farther along Hookpaw's trail before choosing a place to sleep.

Late that night, he dreamed that Aslan met him, saying, "Why, of course I forgive you, child...I forgive you like THIS!"--whereupon, in the dream, Aslan pounced on Bluntmuzzle and bit him in half with one snap of His jaws. In the dream, Bluntmuzzle was still alive after this, and stared in horror at the severed lower half of his body reflexively kicking. The dream-image of Aslan then growled, "You know that it was I Myself Who forced you to commit your crimes; for My glory depends on having someone to be angry at, but if I allowed anyone to have any free will, I would not be sovereign! I controlled every action you ever did from your birth; but all the same, it's all YOUR fault!"

Bluntmuzzle awoke trembling; but from the last words in the dream, he felt fairly sure that he had NOT seen the real Aslan.

Meanwhile, the gander Fear-No-Blast had made a tactical decision to play his strong card: his long-

range endurance as a migratory bird. Instead of stopping for the night as soon as he could no longer see trail sign on the ground, he continued on in the direction pointed by Bluntmuzzle's last arrow marker. Flying on tirelessly for most of the night, he finally sought a safe place to rest only after he estimated he must be ahead of the farthest distance Hookpaw could have reached. In the morning, he would face back the way he had come from, and fly a series of back-and-forth arcs covering the ground he had crossed blindly by night. In this way, Fear-No-Blast hoped to spot Hookpaw before Hookpaw could take any measures to hide from aerial observation--if indeed the renegade was even trying at all to hide.

The choice of shelter was a sticky one. Fear-No-Blast would normally have settled on or near the first pond or calm stream he found; but this far south, he was not entirely sure there would not be large snakes there. At last, though, he found a spot he could use on a rocky hillside, a place where non-intelligent predators could not easily get at him. There he said his prayers and went to sleep--not without muttering to himself: "It's a mighty poor imitation of an eagle I'm doing."

Slimtalon and Elkfinder, for their part, were indeed met by other searchers before darkness fell: a mated pair of Talking Swans, Gladsplash and his wife Lakemist. After hearing all the news the mother tigress could tell, the swans flew away in opposite directions, to notify all the other aerial searchers of where the returning tigers could be found in the morning.

Only after they left did it occur to Slimtalon that perhaps, in view of events over the past few days, the two swans did not quite trust any tigers enough to sleep near them. It was a sad thought.

Not long before first light, Slimtalon found herself in a vivid dream. It seemed to her that she saw the gander Fear-No-Blast sitting uncomfortably among some boulders; and crouched atop one boulder was a Gryphon. This Gryphon looked more genuine than the Gryphon-form projected by the evil spirit...but it gave off that rotten smell which had been part of Aslan's scent-message. Perhaps the apparition was gaining skill at creating the desired visual appearance.

The seeming Gryphon was saying to Fear-No-Blast: "It won't stop with the arrogance of the lions. Have you never noticed the way ordinary swans will chase ordinary geese out of the best feeding places? How long will it take before Talking Swans decide to do the same to Talking Geese? Now, unlike the tigers, you geese are smaller than your natural rivals; thus, you will need allies. I suggest..."

Slimtalon woke up snarling, instinctively wanting to rend and rip the deceiver of her fellow Narnians. Then she remembered that this evil was immune to her teeth and claws--but not to her prayers.

"Lord Aslan, I believe You sent me this dream because You would have Your children pray for each other. Please rescue Fear-No-Blast from any evil that would harm him, or make him a cause of harm to others. Aslan, I trust You!"

One instant later, more than sixty miles away, the Talking Gander shook himself as if he also were just

awakening from a dream. "Aslan shield me!" he honked. "Let Aslan rebuke and thwart every power of evil and falsehood!"

And the thing that seemed like a Gryphon screeched in frustrated rage, then vanished. When the gander had recovered his composure, he gave praise to Aslan, then said to himself, "To think I almost believed that foul thing! It might have made me distrust my own friends Gladsplash and Lakemist. No wonder the tigers were fooled! Lord Aslan, please _don't_ let that evil creature enjoy _any_ more success in deceiving Your people."

In a particularly foul darkness, the spirit hovered, out of the immediate line of fire of these humiliating rebukes. It was not as easy emulating Satan as he had hoped it would be; but he would also emulate Satan's stubbornness, continuing to pursue evil despite countless defeats.

He had followed the former Light-Bearer in the daring rebellion against Yahweh, only to share in the crushing defeat Satan's army suffered. The Almighty had not even needed to bother smiting them Himself; His loyal angels had been more than adequate to the task. Once cast out into darkness, the fallen angels had quarreled bitterly about whose fault it was that they had lost, and what they should do next. Out of the ruckus had emerged the plan to hurt God by estranging His fleshly creatures from Him.

Though significantly successful in this campaign, the fallen ones had endured another humiliation when the Second Aspect of Yahweh's divine nature, though accepting mortal vulnerability as part of the astonishing project of redemption, had not only atoned for human sin by His sacrificial death, but had then escaped from Sheol and returned to life. But the devils could only continue fighting against love and truth; not one of them could bear the thought of admitting defeat and begging for forgiveness--which was the true reason why they could not be forgiven.

Not long ago even as men reckon time, it had come to the attention of Hell that a mortal in Britain, ironically named for one of Jesus Christ's Apostles, was trying to open a path into an alternate dimension. Satan had invited any interested demon to hitch a ride on this mortal's personality. Most had ignored the opportunity, judging that such an expedition would only take them away from the best soul-corrupting action without making them any safer from the wrath of the omnipresent God. But one unclean spirit had seen the adventure as a chance to make a name for himself: a demon who went by the unimpressively monosyllabic name of Tash.

Tash thus had followed Andrew the sorcerer into what was to become the Narnian world--but had played no part in the events which had led up to Narnia receiving its first mortal monarch soon after it came into being. Indeed, the very instant he had seen Aslan, instantly recognizing the Great Lion as none other than Jesus Christ in a new material form, Tash would have fled back to Earth if he could have; but feeling himself now bound to the dimension he had invaded, he settled for hiding in its depths, much deeper than the region which would later be called Bizm. He never even considered joining forces with Jadis. Infatuated with herself though Jadis was, Tash by his demonic intuition

realized that sooner or later she would overreach herself and bring disaster on herself. He was not about to fall with her; he would devise plans of his own.

Tash had done nothing but observe, until the day when he sensed that the Talking Tiger Hookpaw had conceived an unreasoning dislike for the Talking Lions, based on envy of their bearing Aslan's likeness. This had been too delicious to pass up; it reminded Tash of the idiotic resentment Cain had felt against Abel. Even though the murderer Cain had been saved from Hell in the end, it had still been a coup for Satan to introduce murder so early in human history. So, if Tash was to be the lesser Satan of this compact world, it was fitting to sow discord based on envy like that of Cain.

It had been pleasing enough to cause the deaths of numerous honorable Talking Lions, even though he could not touch any of their immortal souls. But it did not matter to him that the renegade tigers had been put down in a span of mere days; his plan was nothing so short-sighted as trying to start a Narnian civil war. He was looking ahead to things he hoped to do long after Jadis had perished--things involving other humans who might find their way into the Narnian dimension.

Failing to incite strife between swans and geese was no great calamity, only a single thrust parried. It was too bad that Bluntmuzzle's heart had returned to its true allegiance; but as long as even one of these tigers remained a rebel against Aslan's rule, Tash's main plan would carry on. He would just have to work further on Hookpaw before Fear-No-Blast, or any other Narnian being in close fellowship with Aslan, could get to the outlaw.

Despite his alarming experience in the night, Fear-No-Blast arose with the sun and proceeded with his search pattern as he had planned. Studying the terrain carefully, he continued in this way for more than two hours before sighting a tiger. It was not Hookpaw, though, but rather Bluntmuzzle. Being as he was a frequent aerial scout and courier for the King, Fear-No-Blast had met every adult Talking Tiger at one time or another, so there was no doubt in his mind as to which individual he was looking at.

"Tiger Bluntmuzzle!" the gander called as he spiralled lower. "What do you scent that we birds do not see?"

"Fear-No-Blast!" Bluntmuzzle called back, recognizing the searcher by scent and voice rather than by sight. "My nose tells me that Hookpaw has maintained a steady course, with only slight meanderings, in the very direction you seem to be coming FROM. But by what you say, am I to understand that you have not spotted him?"

"Not one stripe of his pelt," replied Fear-No-Blast, coming to earth. "And there isn't much cover in this region; I should have seen some sign of him. I can't help wondering if his so-called Great Gryphon has either devoured him or helped him to hide."

"Alas," lamented the young tiger, "I fear that some will say that my repentance is fraudulent--that I

have only pretended to track Hookpaw, actually giving him time to cover his trail while I prepare to slip away in turn."

"I would be likely to suspect that myself," the gander told Bluntmuzzle frankly, "were it not for what I experienced last night. The evil creature tried to deceive me, too, telling me that the swans were my enemies. Aslan's grace protected me from the delusion; but I can appreciate now just how strong the deceiving power is."

Bluntmuzzle cocked his head. "Swans against geese? Then whatever this false Gryphon is up to, it is not only about felines."

Fear-No-Blast frowned. "Beats me what it IS about--apart from the fact that any adversary would be pleased to have Narnians in conflict with each other."

"If Hookpaw is still alive, and if the deceiver had a paw in his disappearance, he may know more now of what is afoot--if only we could catch up to him and question him."

"Well, if he ISN'T alive, he's finding out STILL more, and I'll warrant he isn't enjoying it."

Bluntmuzzle and Fear-No-Blast spent another hour trying together, unsuccessfully, to find a trace of Hookpaw's death or escape. Nest-On-Cloud, a mother Talking Falcon, then found them, asked their progress, and in turn told them that Slimtalon and Elkfinder were now being accompanied back to Narnia by the rest of the winged searchers. Nest-On-Cloud joined the penitent young tiger and the veteran gander in further hunting, still to no avail, until she and Fear-No-Blast agreed that they might as well turn back. "After all," said the falcon, "it's not as if Hookpaw can escape from the eye of Aslan."

As they started north, Bluntmuzzle noticed that the falcon would never come so close that he would have any chance of grabbing her, even though she could see that the much-more-edible gander was unconcerned about coming within his reach. He tried asking her a question: "Is there any word of what fate the King is minded to decree for me?"

"I don't know," said Nest-On-Cloud; "but I'll wager he'll make you join Ripplestride in looking after the tiger cubs left orphaned by the suppression of your despicable insurrection. I assume you will have the brains to be abjectly grateful." Falcons were not given to excessive tact.

"Bluntmuzzle really is sorry for what he did," Fear-No-Blast put in. "And I have cause to know how strong was the power that made him stray from reason."

As the tiger, the gander and the falcon proceeded northward, Nest-On-Cloud seemed abruptly to forget her precaution of not coming within Bluntmuzzle's reach. Dropping to the ground less than an easy

leap ahead of the former fugitive, the falcon spread her wings low, like the skirts of a curtsying woman, and lowered her sharp beak almost into the dirt. Bluntmuzzle and Fear-No-Blast had not even time to question her gesture before they saw the reason for it. Rainbows of light burst like fire through a stand of trees--trees past which Nest-On-Cloud had seen moments earlier--and Omnipotent Aslan strode into view.

Fear-No-Blast emulated the lady falcon's posture of reverence, while Bluntmuzzle went into a more beast-like submissive position, on his back with his throat presented to Aslan's fangs.

"You have served Me well, gander and falcon," said the Creator. "You may now fly home with My blessing, and resume your normal routines. Peace, friend Fear-No-Blast, I already know exactly what occurred between you and the false Gryphon. Leave me now to speak with Bluntmuzzle; when I speak to the truly penitent, My words are for each such one uniquely and privately."

When the two Talking Birds had taken their leave, Aslan extended a forepaw with claws sheathed, and lifted the grovelling Bluntmuzzle up as a man might lift a leaf on the palm of his hand; then He set the young tiger on his feet. "Your crimes are pardoned, child; and I will grant you the grace of being allowed to be useful to Me."

"Small use I've been to You so far, Lord, even after turning from the evil," groaned the last of Slimtalon's sons. "Hookpaw gave me the slip."

"It was no skill of the mutinous one that foiled your searching, but the intervention of that being who called himself the Great Gryphon. Hookpaw is alive still, but in hiding. Some time shall pass before you smell his scent again."

"My Lord, is this false Gryphon one of those who have run off to join Jadis in the wilderness?"

Aslan shook His head. "No, this is a being even worse than Jadis herself. Unlike the White Witch, this demon is entirely invulnerable to any mere physical force; nothing less than the Deepest Magic, which is to say the Divine Power which I share with My Father and the Unseen Third, can destroy him."

Bluntmuzzle's eyes went wide at the thought of an evil worse than Jadis. "But my Lord, why do You not then destroy that being at once, and spare us further woes?"

"In the Emperor's time, Tash--for that is what he is called--will be plunged into the Second Death from which there is no escape. Meanwhile, though, do not fear him, beyond a healthy caution. Precisely because he is a being from a plane beyond the material, I limit his power to act more severely than I limit the power of Jadis. And because Jadis is a being of the material plane, despite her being less in raw power than Tash I am permitting her much more ability to affect events directly than Tash will ever be permitted."

Bluntmuzzle stared at the grass. "These things are too high for me, Lord. Why do You tell them to me, who can understand so little?"

"Because I wish My children to understand ever more and more. Tash wanted you completely deluded, so it is also a rebuke to him that I undeceive you. And this is pertinent for your preparation to play a new role in My design. Although Tash will not be allowed to accomplish very much until after Jadis meets her eventual damnation, My means of keeping Tash in check will include the actions of some of My children as early as the current generation."

The Great Lion spoke solemnly with Bluntmuzzle for another half-hour, which was part of Bluntmuzzle's own private story. Then His voice took on a more casual tone: "Climb onto My back now, son, as your longsuffering mother did, not long past. I shall carry you to where she awaits you. She, the King and Queen, and the elder Centaurs are the only other mortals in Narnia who know the things I have told you about Tash. It will not be necessary within your bodily lifetime for other mortals--apart from your eldest son, when you have one--to know as much as you now know. Are you well settled on My back now? Hold on!"

Then Bluntmuzzle forgot his remorse and sorrow for a time, amid the wonder of riding through the sky on Aslan's back.

On Narnian soil, Slimtalon stood flanked by two Centaurs: Regulus and his wife Lysandra. All three were watching the sky, south by southwest...for Aslan had made it known to them that He would hasten Bluntmuzzle's return. Gryphons--REAL Gryphons--had taken over convoying young Elkfinder to the King's encampment.

"Here He comes!" Lysandra exclaimed, rearing on her hind hoofs with the excitement she always felt when Aslan showed Himself. The God-Lion descended from the sky to deposit Bluntmuzzle on the ground, where Bluntmuzzle prostrated himself before his mother.

"He has been told the things I told you," said Aslan to Slimtalon. "He understands what his responsibility shall be."

"What became of Hookpaw?" asked Regulus.

"Tash dares not kill him, lest My retribution strike him at once. That time he menaced you, Slimtalon, he would not have dared kill you either, even if you had not called on Me; but had you failed to call on My name, Tash would have been allowed to put fear upon you, making you much less useful to your race and to Narnia. Since Hookpaw has consented to listen to him even after knowing he was no Gryphon, Tash is being allowed to transport Hookpaw much farther south. In what he considers to be wisdom, Tash is trying to formulate his own strategy in a slow, patient way, finding as it were a

threshold below which his actions will not provoke Me."

Lysandra could not contain her curiosity. "You have hinted at the demon's strategy, my Lord, but will You not tell us more?"

Aslan gave a mellow growl that was thoughtful, not angry. "No, daughter. Sufficient unto the day is the day's own evil. You Centaurs of this generation will not need to cope with what Tash plans, for he waits to see what becomes of Jadis, and Jadis will not perish until well after your mortal lifetimes. Concern yourselves with fending off the mischief done by those Narnians who will desert the King's service and follow the Witch."

Bluntmuzzle found his tongue again. "What commands now for me, Lord?"

Aslan's paw touched Bluntmuzzle's scalp, remarkably like a man patting his well-loved dog. "Your job shall be to learn wisdom as your sister-in-law Ripplestride is doing...and, a year from now, to take Elkfinder in marriage as your mate. After that, the other things of which we spoke shall be set in motion."

"And what of me, Aslan?" inquired Slimtalon. "I feel as if I have done almost nothing."

Aslan kissed her forehead. "You have done faithfully what was given to you to do. Choose now, by your own preference: would you ascend at once into My country to be reunited with Lord Brightburn, or would you continue in My service here?"

"My Lord and my God," replied the tigress matriarch, "no hour passes in which I do not yearn to smell my husband's dear scent again; but I know that in Your country he will never die, age, or suffer. Therefore he can bear to wait; and I know he would want me to do what I can for our stricken tribe."

Aslan smiled. "When last I spoke with Brightburn Up Yonder, he knew even without My needing to tell him that this would be your choice. As you choose, it shall be, for in your piety your will is in harmony with Mine. You shall live years yet, and shall provide wisdom to your people. We shall speak further of this at another time."

Without ceremony, Aslan then disappeared. Slimtalon, Bluntmuzzle and the Centaur couple turned northward.

On those occasions when Aslan granted non-flying beings the exhilaration of being airborne, He never left any doubt about the fact that it was His power carrying them, not some new power in themselves that they could claim and command.

Tash, on the other hand, had cause to increase Hookpaw's delusional state.

Thus, when Hookpaw had been between Bluntmuzzle and Fear-No-Blast, sure to be detected, the demon had convinced the renegade tiger that he, Hookpaw, could fly by his own will, becoming temporarily invisible and unsmellable in addition. The "Great Gryphon," as far as Hookpaw knew, had only opened his eyes to his own innate potential, and then tagged along as Hookpaw triumphantly escaped right past the oblivious gander. By the time Slimtalon and the Centaurs had their latest conference with Aslan, Hookpaw found himself smoothly landing in a spot farther south than any intelligent mortal being had yet ventured in the brief history of the Narnian world.

The landscape here was a mixture of semi-jungle and rocky outcroppings: excellent hunting and lairing terrain for a tiger. "You will have no trouble feeding yourself here," Tash told his feline puppet; "and I guarantee that no animal you meet here will be a talking one, so you may slay without checking. But the stones and boulders hereabouts are of even more interest than the edible game."

"Why is that, teacher?"

"It shall be made clear with time. For now, my friend, concentrate on cultivating pure will and arbitrariness..."

Several days after all Talking Tigers but Hookpaw had been accounted for, the air scout Fear-No-Blast decided to visit the encampment which had been set up for the tigers in a pleasant forest clearing with a creek. The first thing the gander noticed was that a sturdy log palisade had been constructed; the second thing he noticed was that it had multiple gates, all of them open and none of them seeming to be guarded.

Fear-No-Blast was pleased to see both Slimtalon and her surviving son looking well and at peace. They were talking with a Minotauress named Korovini, whom Fear-No-Blast recognized; she was wearing a belt laden with tools, having apparently been taking a hand in the construction work. Her long-horned husband Praximor was visible at a distance, busy at some task with a team of Dwarfs. When Fear-No-Blast hailed Korovini, she turned and waved to him, saying, "Well met, my far-flying friend! Tiger Bluntmuzzle here was just talking about you, telling me how gracious you were to him when you met him in the wilderness."

Both tigers greeted the veteran gander, who returned their greetings and then spoke further to the Minotauress: "I understood that a dwelling place was allotted for Tigress Ripplestride to nurture the orphan cubs placed in her care; but is this a prison?"

Korovini hunkered down so she could answer her smaller friend in a quiet voice. "Not a prison; all tigers, Ripplestride included, are free to go out--though Ripplestride knows she is watched. It is, rather, a refuge for them."

Fear-No-Blast's eyes narrowed in thought. "Do you mean a refuge against someone wanting revenge on them?"

Korovini sighed. "Even so. The Talking Leopards and Cheetahs, not to mention the Gryphons and many other Narnians besides, are justly indignant at the wicked violence done to the Talking Lions." The Minotaress politely took no notice of how Bluntmuzzle and his mother both winced at her words. "The King has spoken of how people in his native world, the people called Israelites, had cities of refuge, to which an accused man could flee from those who sought blood vengeance upon him. This is something like that. Even the few Talking Tigers who refused to join in Hookpaw's evil may find it healthier for themselves to settle near here until anger fades."

Fear-No-Blast nodded. "I can well understand why you would be a willing helper in creating this refuge against reprisals." Like other Narnians of goodwill, the gander knew how uneasy life was for those Minotaurs who served Aslan and the King. Minotaurs had been among the first creatures upon whom Jadis had begun trying to exert influence from afar--a similar corrupting influence to what had lately targetted the tigers--and a majority of Minotaurs had forsaken the realm to go join the White Witch. Faithful Minotaurs such as Korovini always had to wonder who might be watching them, expecting them also to turn outlaw.

"You understand correctly," said the Minotaress. "I have no idea why the humans of Earth have an expression 'silly goose;' you are certainly no fool."

"Ripplestride, however, IS a fool," observed Slimtalon. "Although she seems reconciled to her penance, and even seems to realize that she was wrong to join Hookpaw, I don't think the seriousness of her situation has fully sunk in, even though she has shed innocent blood."

"Ripplestride thinks this place IS a prison," Bluntmuzzle clarified for the gander's benefit. "Everyone keeps explaining to her, but she still smells of resentment."

"She doesn't realize that she's being protected," the tigress matriarch went on. "She doesn't realize how many Narnians would like to kill her."

Korovini stared at the ground. "It's worrisome enough being of the Minotaurs' race at all, even though Praximor and I as individuals are well known to be loyal to Narnia and its lawful King. In Ripplestride's case, not only is she a Talking Tiger, but she is one who is individually known to have done violence. She would be wise to be less resentful of her guardians, and more afraid of the enemies she has made for herself."

"Hopefully," said Fear-No-Blast, "those enemies will soon come to be satisfied that the King's justice is handling things as Aslan wills it."

Tash left Hookpaw to his own devices--at least, as far as Hookpaw could tell--for many days after their flight to the far south. During this time, the renegade mostly busied himself with such concerns as any non-intelligent tiger would pursue, like studying the movement patterns of the edible animals in the neighborhood. He did so much of this that from time to time he would talk aloud to himself, to make sure he had not had the power of speech taken away from him. As long as he remained a Talking Beast, he could convince himself that he was not offending Aslan by his actions.

When weeks had passed and the "Great Gryphon" still had not returned to explain why the rocky outcroppings were significant, Hookpaw began thinking more and more about how good it had felt to be flying through the air by (as he believed) his own power. And he began to test whether he could will that power to work again when he was NOT in a crisis of being pursued by meddlers. Perhaps in this there was a connection to the upthrust crags. They were of differing heights; perhaps he could regain and master the power of levitation a little at a time, first reaching the lowest rocky tops and later the highest ones....

Songbirds (ordinary non-speaking ones) gave a background as Lady Slimtalon asked one female cub: "Why do the Talking Beasts of Narnia obey a human King, when we also are thinking creatures, and many of us are far bigger and stronger than men?"

"Because, Grandmother, Aslan, who is mightier still than all of us, has ordered it so."

"It is true that He has so ordered it," Slimtalon agreed--thinking somehow of Hookpaw's raving about Aslan doing things for NO reason. She turned to another cub, a male. "And what _reason_ may the Lord Aslan have had for ordering it so?"

"Because humans are a kind far older than any of us in Narnia, Grandmother. They've had time to learn more than we have."

A second young male, not waiting to be spoken to, added, "And Aslan lived as a man on Earth before He ever turned into the Lion we see."

Slimtalon had been working hard to instill into the striped youngsters the knowledge on which they were now being quizzed. Ripplestride had proven reliable in looking after the cubs' physical needs, and settling their quarrels; but Slimtalon's daughter-in-law had shown no enthusiasm for spiritual training of her charges. She had expressed no resentment of Slimtalon taking over this function; but the matriarch wondered if Ripplestride realized that she, Slimtalon, was trying to protect her from incurring the King's displeasure for slackness in duty. Ripplestride had much to learn still about humility and gratitude. Slimtalon felt certain that Ripplestride resented the Good Minotaur Praximor loitering about with a huge battleaxe slung on his back; felt certain that Ripplestride imagined Praximor was treating her as a prisoner, even in this open meadow. In fact, the Minotaur--and a Good Giant who alternated watches with him--were only the most visible of many sentries who were

safeguarding the Talking Tigers against blood-vengeance attacks.

Slimtalon turned her mind back to the immediate business, and her eyes toward another female cub. "Are there Talking Animals in the world of Adam and Eve?"

"Not except for parrots, Grandmother."

"Parrots on Earth don't really think, they just copy the sound of speech!" scoffed the same young male who had previously talked out of turn. Ripplestride gave him a warning glance and growl.

Waiting for the erring cub to settle down, lest she seem to contradict Ripplestride's admonition, Slimtalon gave him a chance to answer a question actually directed to him. "Who is the only Talking Animal in all of our world who was born in the world of Adam and Eve?"

"ASLAN!" the rambunctious youngster exclaimed.

Slimtalon suppressed a smile. "Well, it is true that Aslan was born into His human life in that world. But I meant to speak of Talking Animals who are NOT the Almighty Creator."

"Then you mean Fledge the Winged One, Grandmother."

When enough quizzing had been done for one day, Ripplestride spoke softly to the matriarch: "Did I hear that the Queen is planning to interfere with our cubs' education?"

Slimtalon gave Ripplestride a look just stern enough to hint that the younger tigress was still displaying too much readiness to take offense at things. "Not to interfere, only to try to compose an ordered series of questions about such important facts as we were just discussing. The same series would be made available for use by other beings besides us tigers. Her Majesty Helen calls it a 'catechism.' "

Hookpaw had done it--or so he thought. He had repeated his feat of levitation on at least a modest scale--or so he thought.

Days before, he had ascertained which was the highest point on the rocky outcroppings that he could reach from the ground in an ordinary muscle-driven leap. The next step had been to pick a spot just a few feet higher than that...and try to activate levitation as he sprang, so it would carry him the rest of the way. He had bruised himself more than once in these trials.

But today, he had felt the power flowing through him as he sprang...and it HAD boosted him for those few extra vertical feet of distance, to catch hold of the jutting rock and secure a perch on it. When he came down, he had the good fortune--or so he thought--of being visited again at last by the Great Gryphon, whose real identity as the demon Tash was still hidden from him.

"Well done, Hookpaw! It was necessary for me to let you find your way back to your own greatness; but now that you've progressed this far, I feel at ease about revealing more of Aslan's wisdom to you."

Hookpaw bowed his head. "I am honored to listen."

"Your matriarch was right to say that I am not really a Gryphon. But just as Aslan has taken the form of a man as well as the form of a lion, so I can choose the form that best expresses my purpose. By appearing to you as a Gryphon, I show both my regard for you by the feline shape, and the higher spirituality symbolized by my having wings. Then again, perhaps you are far enough matured that you no longer need to hear that which is best and strongest being described as 'higher.' We can just as well say 'LOWER' spirituality. Tell me, what do you suppose is the real reason why Aslan can appear and disappear at will?"

Hookpaw still was not so far gone as to be unable to give an accurate answer to that question.

"Because, Teacher, Aslan is all-powerful."

"Ah, but what is the nature of His omnipotence? What if I told you that in reality, Aslan does not appear or disappear?"

"Then, Teacher, I would ask you what you mean."

"I mean that the visual image of the Lion is the very least important thing about Aslan. He does not appear or disappear because He does not have to GO to or from places; He is everywhere."

Hookpaw nodded. "To be sure, the King and Queen speak of Him being present everywhere at once."

"But even so, they do not quite grasp the truth. Aslan is not only present in all places...He Himself IS all places, IS all things. Aslan did not CREATE Narnia; rather, He BECAME Narnia. That is why He does not really move about from place to place. He is the ground you walk on, the water you swim in, the scents you smell, the air you breathe, and the light you see. I am Aslan, you are Aslan, and that rock to which you levitated yourself is Aslan. When you flew up to it, you did so because you ARE it, and it is you. You are learning the oneness of the all-ness of the everything-ness."

This was a bit much for Hookpaw to follow. "But, Teacher--if everything is Aslan, and so everything is everything else, why did you lead us tigers to turn against the lions as if we and they weren't one and the same?"

"Merely a part of the process of leading you--and thus leading the whole universe, for you ARE the whole universe as much as anyone is--to enlightenment. I could as well have led you tigers to dance with frogs, or to take up clay sculpting; but this approach was the best."

Hookpaw still was confused. "The approach of killing lions?"

"But you did not kill them, not really. Nothing really dies in the circle of life. Destroying the temporal bodies of some lions was actually for a different purpose than enmity; because they look like Aslan, destroying them physically was a way to plant in your spirit-core the seed of liberation, of being set free from obsession over the lion-shape. You could worship Aslan in any form. You could, for instance, worship ME..." The Great Gryphon's face took on an amazingly hungry look for an instant, then grew calmer. "Or you could just as well worship your own reflection in a pond."

"Well--then--why should I have to leave Narnia?"

The Great Gryphon who was really Tash assumed an especially wise expression. "Because, of all the countless manifestations of Aslan riding the circle of life, the ones holding leadership in Narnia are most especially uneducated in the cosmic balance. They would have you believe that only the visible Aslan is Aslan; they would have you believe that you and I are NOT Aslan!"

"But if they're all Aslan too, how can they say that anyone ISN'T Aslan?"

Tash laughed, managing to make it sound almost affectionate. "You ask so many questions! Don't you realize yet that you have all the answers, because you ARE all the answers? It will take time for your own Aslan-nature to recognize itself completely; but those other manifestations of the everything-ness whom you know as the King and Queen are much farther from full enlightenment than you are. Thus it is for THEIR good as well as for yours if you can pursue your self-realization undisturbed."

"So, how do I pursue it?"

Tash's laugh was even friendlier this time. "When you told Lady Slimtalon that you were still sure there was a role for your self-will, you were right; you just didn't realize then that your self-will was--IS--the self-will of the universe. Every random action you performed that day, especially the most meaningless of them, was a useful part of bringing you to THIS moment and THIS point in your progress. Therefore--decide your own program! Exercise your self-will, and empty yourself of it at the same time! For you must never fear to contradict yourself; the will is greater than mere truth." With that, Tash vanished.

Two hours later, trying his highest assisted leap of the day, Hookpaw reached his goal--only to have the rock break loose and start falling with him. But the next instant, he felt the divine power--or so he thought--emerging from his own center, to LIFT THE ROCK upward through the air, so that he rode upon it back to the top of the crag.

"All is one, all right," he told himself proudly. "But I will be MORE ONE than others."

Where years had passed in the Narnian world since Frank and Helen of London had been crowned rulers of Narnia, only days had passed in the world of Adam and Eve. Digory Kirke's mother was rapidly recovering from her near-fatal illness, which gave Digory such soaring joy that he did not so much mind not being able to visit Narnia again. Little did he suspect that others, others whom he would never meet, WOULD soon be leaving Earth for the Narnian world.

Those others did not yet have any more clue than Digory did of what would befall them. They were nomads of remotely Turkish extraction, roaming the plains of Central Asia and trying to ignore the theoretical authority the Russian Tsar wielded over them.

"Zulika! Wake up!" A rough male voice jarred the darkness inside the nomad couple's tent. The wife dragged herself to consciousness and asked her husband the logical question: "What is it?"

"I have had another of the dreams!"

"That makes four. Couldn't you have waited and told me in the morning?"

"But this time I saw the beast whose tracks I had followed in the other dreams. It was a tiger--not as big as the enormous ones in Siberia, but magnificently graceful in movement, and somehow very intelligent-looking."

Zulika inwardly reflected on the fact that her husband's name was derived from the Turkic word "tis," meaning "tooth." He should have been given a name denoting the whole mouth, she thought--a big mouth. "So," she said aloud, "if these dreams strike you as being important, why haven't you told the shaman about them?"

Her husband snorted. "Because they are MY dreams, not his. Why should HE gain prestige by making up some wild interpretation of them which can't be checked on, when instead they might lead ME to some advantage?"

"If you want advantages, why didn't you take that opportunity to be a foreman of a ground-clearing crew for the Tsar's railroads?"

"Because I think something bigger is waiting for me, somewhere. What if, instead of working for the Tsar, I could be a Tsar somewhere myself?"

"Oh, go to sleep, Tisrukh."

Two months had passed since any Narnian had seen any sight of Hookpaw. Some supposed he had perished in a desert, while others guessed that he had reverted to an unthinking feral tiger. Slimtalon,

however, knew that neither of these conjectures was true.

The first coolness of autumn was blowing through a Narnian evening, hinting at the coming of Narnia's mild winter, and Slimtalon was at her prayers in a secluded grove. She had just finished praying for Hookpaw's redemption--when Aslan appeared in front of her. He materialized already lying down, eye to eye with her.

"My Lord and my God," said Slimtalon, "have You any news of him for whom I was praying?"

"He lives, and there is yet hope for his salvation. But continue praying hard; Hookpaw is going astray in a way not unlike the way of the man called Andrew, the deranged uncle of young Sir Digory. But let us talk now about the future of all other Talking Tigers. You are doing well at instructing the cubs, and I see that Ripplestride's attitude is improving. Barring any new calamities, how soon do you think the whole community of Narnian tigers could be ready to migrate into the southern lands beyond Archenland?"

"Lord Aslan, why ask my opinion, when You already know all things?"

"Because, in the very act of replying to Me, you yourself can form a better understanding of the matters we discuss."

"We could migrate next spring, Lord. But does this mean that there will never be reconciliation? Does it mean that the rest of Narnia will always bear a grudge against tigerkind?"

"No. By the time you move, it will be clear that you go forth as pioneers, not as hated and banished exiles. Wilderness life will be more comfortable for tigers; and the larger population of humans that will exist in the future will worry less about their livestock if there are not so many large carnivores around--even peaceable intelligent ones."

Not until Hookpaw had--so it seemed to him--regained levitation power almost to the point of being able to say he could genuinely fly again, did it occur to him to try something different. Leaping a quarter mile did help in bringing down animals for his meat; but oneness with the earth seemed to call for more exploration. If he had succeeded in lifting himself to the rocky crags, why should he not be able to make rocks come to him?

The "Great Gryphon"--so it seemed to Hookpaw--had left him on his own again; but now that he had a better notion of the all-ness of the everything-ness, this did not bother him. After four days of trying, he managed to make a twenty-pound rock slide along the ground toward him. That was encouragement enough to keep him experimenting for many days to come.

During the rest of that autumn, Aslan visibly showed Himself to no one in Narnia, except once privately to King Frank. This was when the King had only just heard some fresh distressing news.

"Another outbreak of ill-feeling between different kinds, is it?" said the Lion, materializing beside Frank as the latter was reading reports written by a young Centaur scout.

Hastily bowing to Aslan, the King replied, "Two instances of it, Sire. A Faun and a Satyr got into a fistfight over which of their two races was more humanlike--even though neither of them is able to intermarry with humans and produce offspring. Then some Red Dwarfs wrongly accused some Black Dwarfs of cheating in what was supposed to be a friendly skills competition at the Eighth Annual Dwarfish Crafts Festival."

Aslan shook His head. "Remain alert for more such incidents, but do not be overly worried by them. They will not, any time soon, lead again to any such horror as occurred with the tigers. Tash is indeed exerting his influence to cause more strife among Narnians; but even if I were not standing by to limit what more he can do, he himself is no longer primarily interested in fostering civil strife here. He is only trying to make us think that his interest remains focussed on interspecies rivalries."

"Then, Sire, is the demon enjoying success in his real plans?"

"As he perceives success. It will not be long before this world has a new set of human inhabitants, over whom Tash aims to hold sway. But those newcomers will not be allowed to cause Narnia any harm during your lifetime, nor in the lifetime of any of your grandchildren. And Tash will NOT be allowed to claim for himself ALL souls among the newcomers."

Hookpaw had had many days not only to work on developing--as it seemed to him--the wondrous powers derived from his self-actualization, but also to meditate upon what it all meant.

Much on his mind was the idea of being given freedom to contradict himself. Whatever else this might mean, it seemed clear that it permitted him to change at any instant his understanding of the cosmic everything-ness. He could lean to the ultimate extreme of all-is-one monism, denying that ANYTHING had ANY distinct separate existence of its own; or he could choose to believe that things had separate existence, but that an underlying spirit united them as one; or he could tell himself that NOTHING existed at all or ever would (though it was hard to maintain that belief when he was hungry or thirsty); or he could believe that one or another of these conditions was GOING TO become true in the future.

Weeks of dwelling on these reflections led to a change in Hookpaw's telekinetic experiments. If the discrete existence of objects was in doubt, it should be possible for him--as he was "MORE one" than anything else in the oneness--to alter their form. So he began trying to WILL rocks to change their shape.

Eventually a day came when a stone about two feet long and a foot thick STRETCHED as his eyes and mind were fixed upon it...stretched until it was twenty-six inches long and only eleven inches thick. Hookpaw was not sure where this line of self-development would take him; but wherever it was, he wanted very much to get there.

And Tash, hovering unseen and feeding power to his puppet, recalled one of the superstitions of Earth. Where humans believed in vampires, it was often held that a vampire could not enter a home unless one of the dwellers in the home willingly invited the vampire to come in. That superstition was not altogether without a basis in reality; the consent of a rightful dweller in a place for someone from outside to enter had great significance....

The Christmas season had come to Narnia. The first Centaurs created by Aslan, working with information provided by their Creator as well as King Frank's account of Earthly holidays, had devised a Narnian calendar and placed Christmas in the month corresponding to December. And with Christmas almost here, Father Christmas had manifested himself in the Narnian world, bound for Narnia proper.

With a detour, however. Being immortal, Father Christmas decided to pass through the western wilderness where Jadis had made her stronghold and see what she was up to. What with internal unrest caused by the Talking Tigers, it might be well to bring the King of Narnia fresh intelligence on the external enemy, far off and cautious though she was.

When he discovered Jadis in a snowy field with some of the Narnian malcontents who had deserted to her, Father Christmas made himself invisible. This was not because he feared any harm from the evil creatures, but because he had in mind what would later be known as Heisinger's Law: that an observer may affect the thing being observed. He wanted to see what Jadis would do if undisturbed.

What the Witch was doing was an elaborate ritual centering on one of her Talking Wolves. It involved pouring jars of animal blood over the wolf's fur--blood which seemed to soak into his hide, leaving no outward stain. There was chanting by Jadis, in what must be a language of her former world; harsh and heartless it sounded. And she seemed to have taught this language to two Hags who stood beside her, antiphonally responding to her utterances. The sight of the Hags particularly saddened Father Christmas; they had been Nymphs once, Nymphs who for Aslan knew what reason had decided to seek their fortune in the Witch's service. Narnia had not even existed long enough yet for anyone in it other than the most short-lived animals to grow very old; yet these former Nymphs had aged. It did not seem to bother them; perhaps, whatever was the reason for their aging, Jadis was magically preventing them from being aware of it.

Suddenly Jadis addressed the wolf in English: "Fortunate are you, Ranshuk! You are now as the were-beasts who are the terror of more than one other world! You shall in time be able to take on the shape

of a man, to infiltrate Narnia in that disguise; and already the other crucial power is yours. You cannot be injured by ordinary weapons!"

"I am unworthy of your gift, my queen," replied the wolf; "but I shall purchase my worthiness with the blood of your foes! The fear I will inspire shall be to Your Majesty's glory!"

Jadis turned toward four Ogres who stood nearby, all armed with bows. "Guards! Proceed as planned, and show the success of my spells!"

The Ogres nocked arrows, took aim at the confidently waiting Ranshuk, and loosed. Ranshuk's grin of triumph was replaced by a cry of mortal agony, as all four arrows pierced his flesh deeply, their impact sending him sprawling amid the spilling of his blood. A scream from Jadis followed closely upon Ranshuk's yelp; her scream, naturally, had nothing to do with solicitude for the fate of her loyal servant, and everything to do with frustration.

Running up to the fallen beast, Jadis began kicking him in fury, cursing him in four or five alien languages. The Ogres, Hags and other beings present made no move to try to help Ranshuk; they were only too glad to have their leader's rage aimed at him rather than at them.

This was too much for Father Christmas. Becoming visible right next to Jadis, he grabbed her arm and hurled her twenty paces away as if she were a doll from his gift-sack. No one else there dared attack someone so obviously more powerful than Jadis, although it was known that Father Christmas would never kill anyone. The white-bearded holiday saint knelt beside the dying wolf, pulled out the four arrows, and then shouted, "In the name of Omnipotent Aslan--LIVE!" The lethal wounds closed up instantly.

As Ranshuk stared in baffled amazement at being alive, his healer addressed the crouching, powerlessly-raging Jadis: "It will never work, false queen. Of the many myths and legends to which Aslan gives life in this world, what you desire to produce will NOT be allowed. Werewolves there will be one day in Narnia...but they will be as vulnerable to normal weapons as normal beasts are. And THIS fellow, so callously used by you, will not be one of them. For the rest, I urge you all to consider what reward you gain from serving the Witch!" Scooping Ranshuk up in his arms as a man might lift a puppy, Father Christmas vanished with him.

"Curses on you! Death take you!" shrieked Jadis at the empty air. "Even if you cannot die, one day I will achieve a way to keep you OUT of this world, so you can no longer interfere with me!!" Recovering her composure, she remembered the retainers who were watching her. In a more queenly voice, but still a menacing one, she said to them, "Does anyone else wish you were departing with Father Christmas?"

No one admitted to any such wish.

Returning to his concealed sleigh, Father Christmas made speed for the border of Narnia. Beside him, Ranshuk huddled close, like a stray dog brought out of a cold, rainy alley into a loving home. "By Aslan's grace, you have been given a second chance," Father Christmas told him. "You are fortunate that Jadis has not yet been officially granted the concession that will in time be granted to her...concerning traitors. As your first token of gratitude for your salvation, when we reach Cair Paravel, you will report to your rightful King everything you know about the Witch's recent activities."

The wolf looked meekly up at Father Christmas. "What you saw, Sir, was her greatest interest in recent times--the ambition to create warriors as near to indestructible as she could manage. But no doubt, if it had worked out better than it did, she would have made sure that we were still vulnerable to HER powers."

"No doubt," the saint agreed. "Well, my furry friend, you have been given three very great gifts for Christmas--your life, your freedom, and I _hope_ a better understanding of right and wrong."

"As for what is right and wrong," said Ranshuk, "I am ready to be taught."

"Then I think I know the place for it. After our visit with the King and Queen, I shall take you to stay for awhile with some Talking Tigers who have lately learned some hard lessons themselves."

For the duration of the swift ride to Narnia, to lift the rescued wolf's spirits, Father Christmas sang, in his mighty voice, the Christmas songs of numerous Earthly nations. The words might be mostly meaningless to Ranshuk, but their spirit would heal his heart.

The Talking Birds of Narnia loved to watch for the annual coming of Father Christmas to Cair Paravel. Unlike stories told on Earth, he always made his final approach on the ground, and it had taken no more than the first five or six years of Narnia's existence for the Talking Birds to familiarize themselves with the route he usually came by. But as part of the game of awaiting his coming, some birds always checked on less likely approaches.

This Christmas Eve, Lakemist the swan and her husband Gladsplash were scouting the far west, when Gladsplash heard his wife call out: "I see him! I see him! And he has someone else with him in the sleigh!"

"Good catch!" Gladsplash exclaimed in congratulation. "Let's greet them!"

With happy shouts of welcome, the two swans converged on the reindeer-drawn sleigh as it moved effortlessly over the snow. Father Christmas brought his team to a halt and returned their greetings with a broad wave.

"Who is this with--?" Lakemist began to ask, but did not even need to finish her question once she came close enough to see the holiday saint's lupine companion. Narnia's population was still small enough that most intelligent creatures in it knew nearly all the others; and Lakemist knew quite well that here was Ranshuk, one of the several Talking Wolves who had forsaken King Frank and Queen Helen to serve the would-be tyrant Jadis.

Gladspash cut short the awkward silence by saying, "Father Christmas, you never bring anything contrary to the good grace of Aslan; therefore it cannot be at odds with Aslan's will that this one has come home, as larger and worse offenders than he have lately done."

A glance passed from Father Christmas to Gladspash, silently thanking him. Then, speaking aloud: "Yes, faithful swan. Ranshuk is on his way to receive the King's pardon and renew his rightful allegiance."

Ranshuk, heartened by what Gladspash had said, found the nerve to speak for himself. "Blessed be Aslan's mercy! Father Christmas has told me fully the tale that the Witch only knew in part, or at least only told us deserters in part, of how most of Narnia's Talking Tigers went insane and killed many of the Talking Lions before they were forcibly stopped. I expect to be lodged with them for a time, to share with them in learning to follow the trail of righteousness."

"If that is your destination, then Cair Paravel is not your goal," said Lakemist. "The tigers are barred from the royal castle this Christmas."

"Nonetheless," replied Father Christmas, "this wolf shall appear before the King before he goes to the tigers' encampment. Don't be in a sour mood, Lakemist. Remember that the Lord Aslan, in His human form, came at Christmas to give every sinner another chance."

Under the gaze of her husband and Father Christmas, Lakemist nodded and tried earnestly to feel better about Ranshuk's return. The reindeer started moving once more, and the two swans flew ahead to report the saint's arrival.

No one in the Narnian world thought to question why this world's moon went through phases like the moon of Adam's world; it was just one of Aslan's touches when He had designed this world to be a comfortable habitation for transplanted human beings. Thus it was a waning gibbous moon, two days past the full, that rose over Narnia on this Christmas Eve. The same silvery light which had revealed the sleigh's approach to Lakemist also shone upon the palisaded shelter where the Talking Tigers were living on parole. The weather was mild enough that many of the tigers and their protectors were outdoors, enjoying a bonfire built by the Good Giant. (Local Dryads had guided the Giant in his gathering of fuel, so that he collected mostly dead wood and did not harm any tree that belonged to a Dryad.) At the fire, the Good Minotaurs, Praximor and his wife Korovini, were busy roasting the carcasses of a non-intelligent elk and a non-intelligent wild boar, caught respectively by Bluntmuzzle

and Quickspring—the latter being the only adult male Talking Tiger who had NOT been a party to Hookpaw’s crimes. (It was expected that Quickspring, who had joined the penitents of his own accord, would eventually take Ripplestride in marriage, just as Bluntmuzzle was expected to marry Elkfinder when she was old enough.) Some neighborly Talking Badgers who had joined the residents of the stockade were likewise cooking smaller game that they were contributing to the gathering.

Most of the carnivorous Talking Beasts of Narnia were accustomed to eating raw meat exactly as their non-sapient counterparts did; but most Narnian beings who were in any degree humanlike, as well as some animal types like the Talking Badgers, preferred to cook their food. Several female Dwarfs—who, unlike their counterparts in some other worlds, did NOT have any facial hair, except a little on the sides well clear of their mouths—were assisting the Minotaurs in preparing the Christmas feast. The smells filling the air made the tigers present, especially the cubs, willing to make an exception to their preference for uncooked food. Some thought they might even try sampling the fresh bread which the Dwarf-women were baking in an oven in the shelter-house. But three raw goat carcasses were available for those who might choose after all to stick with raw flesh.

No one but a few of the youngest cubs, and their elders when replying to them, had said “Merry Christmas” to anyone else so far this evening; it was impossible to forget entirely that this fort was a place of penitence and reformation for creatures who had sinned gravely indeed. No one wanted to sound frivolous; and yet there WAS an atmosphere of goodwill, albeit a solemn sort of goodwill. Ripplestride had even begun to like the Minotaur couple, who had always treated her well. In fact, it was Praximor who had sent a recommendation to the King three weeks ago that Ripplestride should be released from having to thank Elephants and Giants for not killing her, and the King had accordingly rescinded that requirement.

“Quickspring, are you going to try some roast pork?” Slimtalon was glad to have Quickspring available to talk to. His very presence was a comforting reminder that she was not the only tiger who had stayed true to Aslan’s moral laws; and sincere though she knew her own son’s repentance was, it still was pleasant to speak with someone who had NOT committed murder in the first place.

“I actually had some once before, Grandmother.” (This was a title of respect often used by the tigers toward Slimtalon, though Quickspring was not descended from her and Brightburn.) “It was the first Christmas after I was first awakened into intelligence, only months after I was weaned: the first of two Christmases that I had the pleasure of spending at Cair Paravel.” The younger tiger noticed his matriarch lowering her gaze as if in sadness, and added: “You must miss the old days, when you and Lord Brightburn were frequent visitors to the royal court.”

“I miss my children being alive and not being criminals,” replied Slimtalon, not angrily or sarcastically. “But yes, I also miss going to Cair Paravel, and especially going to Cair Paravel for Christmas. I remember one time when Queen Helen told us the story of a man in Adam’s world who spoke to animals; Francis of Assisi, he was called...”

Slimtalon did so miss the Christmases of her youth—not youth in a cubhood sense, for she and Brightburn had been created as fully-formed adults on the day of Narnia’s birth, but youth in the sense of newness and innocence. She and Quickspring conversed until it was time to eat, joined for awhile by Quickspring's son Tossbone. Tossbone, still young enough to be reckoned among the youngsters, was the last cub of Slimtalon's daughter Lashtail, who had passed away with her innocence not lost, before Hookpaw had first made trouble. Tossbone's elder siblings, tragically, had followed Hookpaw to disaster.

The feast, like the hours leading up to it, was not exactly jolly, but still there was a feeling of mutual kindness, and of gratitude for Aslan’s mercy and blessings. No one spoke openly about regretting that they would not be at Cair Paravel to see Father Christmas arrive there.

The time came at last for sleep, though not without some singing led by the Dwarfs and Badgers. Night passed as quietly as the brief snowfall that came after midnight. The first predawn light came in its turn....

And, apart from Praximor who had kept watch in the last hours of darkness, the tiger cubs were the first ones at the fort to hear a sound none had been expecting: the jingle of the only sleighbells that so far existed anywhere in the Narnian world. “FATHER CHRISTMAS!” rose the cry in many voices. It was indeed he, driving up with the wolf Ranshuk beside him again; and there were other Narnians of many types following his sleigh.

“Happy Boxing Day!” Father Christmas shouted to those coming forth to meet him. “That’s what they call the day _after_ Christmas in the native country of your King and Queen; and for all intents, it’s a continuation of Christmas.”

“Bless you, Father Christmas, oh, _bless_ you!” exclaimed Slimtalon, emerging from the stockade. “And—goodness, you brought a LOT of people with you!”

“All who followed me here came of their own free will,” the saint told her. “They bring the Christmas gospel, the message of grace and pardon—‘God and sinners reconciled,’ as one of the songs puts it.”

One of those following the sleigh now stepped forth ahead of the rest: Zendragund, the eldest surviving male Talking Lion. No lion, save Aslan Himself, had come to see the tigers up to now; but Zendragund had come today, still bearing the terrible scars he had acquired when, in a tremendous struggle, he had managed to hold off none other than Hookpaw until help came, thus preventing Hookpaw from killing Zendragund’s already-wounded mate and their children. One of those scars was all that remained of the lion’s right eye. Father Christmas got out of his sleigh and stood beside Zendragund, resting a hand lovingly on the battle-scarred lion’s mane.

Slimtalon felt the same wave of shame she had felt on the day of Ripplestride's trial, even though she knew that Zendragund knew she herself was innocent. She gazed at the unspeaking lion's face, trying to read his expression. He could scarcely be here in vindictiveness if he came with Father Christmas; but what were his feelings?

The tableau was broken for Slimtalon by a sight and a sound. The sight was that Zendragund's face became less expressionless, as his eyes focussed on something behind Slimtalon. The sound was a sound more humanlike than a non-intelligent tiger could ever make: the faint keening whine of someone beginning to weep.

Slimtalon had scarcely turned to follow the lion's gaze before she saw who was weeping. It was Ripplestride. The once-defiant young tigress was crawling on her belly toward Zendragund, oblivious to the snow she pushed ahead of her. Father Christmas, Ranshuk, and indeed everyone on the scene was riveted by the sight. This included the Crown Prince of Narnia, eldest son of Frank and Helen, who only now stepped into view from behind a young Centaur with whom he was friends. So at least one human had come to pay the tigers a gracious visit; but all of Ripplestride's attention was on Zendragund.

Drawing near to the senior lion, Ripplestride half moaned, half whimpered: "I have thanked Elephants and Giants for not killing me; but their right yields to yours. You have the right to take vengeance upon me for your father, your brother, and all the kinsbeasts you lost. I will not defend myself if you exercise this right." More loudly, she added: "And I ask that NO ONE hinder him or blame him if he does so. I deserve to die!"

All eyes went to Zendragund. Father Christmas was the only onlooker who knew what the lion's reaction would be.

Zendragund stepped back one pace from Ripplestride and said, "Yes, you deserve to die; but I have no authority to gainsay Aslan's pardon of you. Perhaps that evil spirit, of which I hear only cryptic hints, interfered with your mind, so that you are not fully responsible for your actions last summer. If I had been present when you were in the act of murdering my nephew, I would have tried my best to kill you then, and I would have been right to do so. But Aslan's designs are far above our understanding. What I do understand is that He would rather destroy evil by changing it into good. Let Him therefore have His way. Forgiveness is a word; anyone may say it and mean almost anything by it. But I forgive you to the extent I am able to. So, as far as it is for me to say, I bid you live and be cleansed from evil. Perhaps at a future time I will see in you what the King calls 'fruit that befits repentance,' and it will be easier for me to speak with you. For whatever comfort it may be to you now, I will call on all Talking Lions, and other Narnians who sympathize with us, to renounce and reject any thought of a blood feud against you Tigers. If an evil spirit is behind the violence that occurred, let that evil spirit get NO more satisfaction from us. Aslan's will be done."

Having said this, the one-eyed lion turned without waiting for any reply from Ripplestride, and without speaking to anyone he walked away. No one tried to persuade him to remain; and Slimtalon could hear the Crown Prince whispering to his Centaur friend, "I can only imagine what it cost Zendragund to show even that much grace to her." The young Centaur whispered back, "And yet, Your Highness, I suspect that some will say afterward that he was hard on her. This, because Narnia still is young, and many dwellers in it have not yet learned to understand loss and grief, so they will think it should have been easy for him to dismiss his grievance without further concern."

Slimtalon turned her attention back to Ripplestride, who was continuing to weep. The tigress matriarch pressed comfortingly close to the younger tigress, crooning to her as to a cub: "Weep if you must, but then be at peace. Humans in numbers beyond our guessing have been through the same thing you feel now; the King says that the Holy Book of Adam's world calls this 'godly grief,' and it is experienced by those on the road to salvation."

Father Christmas tactfully left Slimtalon to reassure the penitent, while he led Ranshuk into the fort in which he would live beside the tigers for some days to come. Every adult being in this place knew that Ranshuk had broken faith with Narnia and with Aslan; but after witnessing Zendragund's mighty effort to forgive Ripplestride, no one felt entitled to reproach the likewise-repentant wolf. Thus Father Christmas was free to begin tactfully, tastefully nudging everyone else's mood bit by bit closer to holiday cheerfulness.

The Talking Geese of Narnia had not been around for Christmas, as they had migrated as far south as the southern half of what would one day be Archenland. But Father Christmas paid them a visit on New Year's Eve.

As the saint was passing out tasty snacks to geese and goslings alike, he was approached by the veteran scout Fear-No-Blast. "Father Christmas! What news can you tell of the progress of reforming the tigers?"

"You are the only goose to bother asking me so serious a question," replied the white-bearded immortal; "but it merits an answer." So he recounted the significant events of the Christmas just gone by, then added, "I suppose you ask about this because the tigers will eventually be resettled in the south, and you wonder if your people will have to be on guard against them while staying in your wintering grounds?"

"No, Sir. I am confident of the tigers being purified from their evil intent, which in any case was directed at fellow mammals. But for THEIR well-being, I hope that before they move south, Aslan will have helped them to gain a greater spiritual strength for goodness than most of them have possessed up to now. For the demon who called himself the Great Gryphon is still around somewhere; and I know he's up to something."

Father Christmas raised a snowy eyebrow. "And how do you know this?"

"Shortly before Christmas, I took a scouting flight along the same path formerly taken by Hookpaw before he vanished. Working farther southwest in progressive sweeps, I found a region with many upjutting rocky ridges. On one of those ridges, I saw what looked like a stone statue of a tiger."

"Hmmm...I happen to know that Jadis is working to develop a magic which will enable her to turn living things into stone at will; but she doesn't have it ready yet. Nor has she so far ventured as far south as the place you saw."

"But someone has," replied Fear-No-Blast, "and not anyone human. There are no humans in this world except the Narnian ones. Yet what I saw looked too much like a tiger to be a natural formation; our world hasn't existed long enough for erosion to create such a shape. Either Hookpaw was turned into a statue, or someone--coincidentally?--carved a tiger statue in the same region he fled to. In any event, there's something going on, and I don't like it."

"No wonder the King thinks highly of you as a scout. But I can assure you that Aslan will not allow the tigers to be defenseless victims to whatever further mischief that evil spirit intends. Now try to relax and have fun; you don't want the goslings' New Year party to be spoiled by worry."

So it was that, as Lakemist had exerted her will to forgive Ranshuk, and Zendragund had exerted his will to forgive Ripplestride, now Fear-No-Blast exerted his will to stop worrying for one evening.

The New Year came and began adding up its own tally of days; but Hookpaw had long ago lost count of his days in solitude. He preferred to believe that this meant he had gained sophistication, grasping the non-linear fluidity of the Eternal Now. It actually meant he had lost count of the days.

The outlaw tiger had persisted in his efforts to improve what he believed to be his very own mind-over-matter powers. Shaping a statue of himself had been a crowning achievement.

But one rainy morning, late in the equivalent of January, Hookpaw discovered that his statue had changed its shape through no action of his. It now looked like a very vaguely humanoid shape with a long-beaked bird's head. Mystified by this, Hookpaw concentrated his will upon the statue until it melted and resolidified back into its tiger form. Then he went to eat the remainder of an antelope he had cached away.

When he next passed by the crag after eating, the statue had changed itself to the bird-headed form again, this time with an extra pair of arms.

"I must be so much of a one in the oneness that I do things without knowing I do them," Hookpaw concluded. "Now, that is a grand self-contradiction!" The only way he could think of to enhance the

self-contradiction was to try, within himself, simultaneously to be pleased with, AND annoyed by, the unplanned changes in the statue.

Of course, if he could induce OTHERS, that is, other manifestations of the everything-ness, to embrace the same kind of self-contradiction, this would enhance the achievement. Too bad no one in Narnia was likely to listen to his enlightenment any time soon.

Hookpaw's next thought came to him so sharply that he was not quite sure he was not hearing the Great Gryphon's voice: "What if you could bring people from Adam's world here, the way Narnia's first humans were brought? They also would be you, and you would be they, so they would share in your transcending of logic and categories."

"What a splendid idea," Hookpaw half said, half purred. "I wonder if it can be done?"

Early in what Earth residents would have called March, Lady Slimtalon felt sure that three favorable conditions meant the tigers would be ready to migrate whenever it was called for. The spring thaw was on schedule; the cubs had all grown enough to be able to endure travel at a reasonable pace (and, circumstances being what they were, no new ones had been born yet); and everyone, Ripplestride included, now seemed to be in a good spiritual state, fully submitted to Aslan's will. Ripplestride's second marriage had been solemnized by no less than King Frank, who had used the occasion to signify that he also forgave her.

Ripplestride, and her new husband Quickspring, were just now returning to the fort from an excursion, shepherding the orphan cubs as well as the few whose parents were still alive and still Talking Animals. Quickspring was dragging along a slain wild sheep, and some of the cubs appeared to have taken rabbits and groundhogs. Assisting in watching over the youngsters were the local Talking Badgers--and the Wolf Ranshuk. As the party drew near, Slimtalon could hear one tiger-child, the very same young male who had been so boisterous during lessons, talking to Ranshuk:

"How did you know that that first rabbit we saw was a talking one, when he was so scared of us that he forgot to speak up to save himself?"

"Just a wee bit of difference in his scent," the wolf answered. "The one good thing I brought away from my time with Jadis--besides belated wisdom--is training in scent-distinction. She always had us wolves practice detecting ever finer differences between scents. I was one of only three who gained a knack for telling intelligent animals from the ordinary ones by smell."

"I didn't know ANYONE but Aslan could do that," marvelled the young tiger. "But that rabbit sure was lucky that you smelled the difference in time! I wish I could smell as well as you can."

"Why, thank you. Aslan gives a variety of gifts. We wolves are far lesser than you tigers in size and

strength, and we can't climb trees as you can; but Aslan gave us more endurance for distance running, and maybe a smidgen more keenness in our sense of smell."

By the time Ranshuk had finished saying this, the tigress matriarch had come up to the returning group to greet them. Thus she could speak directly in reply to the redeemed Wolf:

"And Aslan gave us a blessing when He ordained it that Father Christmas would bring you to us, friend Ranshuk. I don't think anyone has said this to you, but watching you learn the fruits of repentance along with us has made us feel not so isolated. And seeing that your being smaller does not at all make you useless may have extinguished the very last spark of sinful pride among us tigers."

Ranshuk nodded solemnly. "You honor me, Lady Slimalon; but as a matter of fact, Tigress Ripplestride said more or less the same thing to me an hour or so past."

Hookpaw spent more than a week forming rock into statues of men and women, and then several days trying in vain to make the statues come to life as real humans. Finally, as if conjured forth from the tiger's own mind by the height of his (as he imagined) spirituality, the Great Gryphon appeared before him after (as Hookpaw imagined) so long an absence.

"My congratulations to you for your progress!" exclaimed the seeming Gryphon. "Or, I could say your congratulations to me for my progress, since I am you, you are I, and both of us are that loose piece of rock beside your foot."

"Are you going to help me--or are we going to help ourselves, or whatever?" Hookpaw asked eagerly. "I haven't been able to figure out a way to bring Earth people to this world, so I've begun trying to get enough oneness into these stone figures to make them conscious of the Cosmic All. No luck so far."

"Not to worry! Just as good is evil, darkness is light, and falsehood is truth, so difficulty is ease. What you need to do will not even require changing the shape of any stones. Just levitate some of those dead tree-branches over there out of the tangle and set them before you. You need five long ones."

Hookpaw willed the tree limbs to float through the air and fall in front of him. When he had five long, fairly straight ones, by the Great Gryphon's further direction he set them down forming a pentagonal outline. "Good, now step into the center of the pentagram," said his mentor, and Hookpaw did so.

"What next?" asked the tiger.

"As I have said before, you contain the answers in yourself. You tell me what the universe in the person of Hookpaw should do next."

Feeling flattered, Hookpaw reached inside his own mind for the answer. Then: "I feel the oneness

talking to the oneness! My deep self is talking to my outward self, telling me to address you...as...Tash."

The Great Gryphon nodded. "You are finding the profound within the simple. A one-syllable name, yet it contains the Universal Balance: a percussive consonant sound and a sibilant consonant sound, bracketing a vowel. What symbolism of the union of soft and hard, hot and cold, negative and positive! What a spiritual flight YOU have taken, Hookpaw, to discover such a perfect name to use! Say it proudly, and say it repeatedly!"

"Tash," said Hookpaw. "Tash. Tash, Tash, Tash. Tash! TASH!!"

"Wonderful!" Tash cried exultantly. "Don't stop now!"

What happened next was a blur for Hookpaw. It seemed as if he fell into a deep ravine, or perhaps a ravine opened up in his mind and something fell into him. This must be sublime oneness indeed, as when he had seemingly changed his statues without knowing he did so. In his mental fog he heard his teacher-self talking to some distant other self:

"Dark Master, I have done it! At last I can call you! I have the use of a mortal being who is willing to be the channel!"

The distant other answered in a voice which for some unknown reason was frightening to Hookpaw: "I have been able to sense something of your doings; but now that we can speak to each other, I can tell you that I have made preparations in anticipation of your success. Continue as you are; and when the gateway is open, there shall be Earthly humans ready to come through it and prostrate themselves before you!"

There was more, but all confused and jumbled in Hookpaw's mind. It seemed that Jadis was mentioned, with something about "waiting, and letting her take her shot first." And then the renegade tiger woke, as it seemed, from sleep. The five tree branches that had formed the crude pentagram all seemed to have dry-rotted into dust, but Hookpaw himself was unharmed as far as he could tell.

"Trust in your own oneness-wisdom for what follows," Tash told him, before vanishing. "It will come to you what you have to do. After all, the universe IS you, and how could the universe fail to guide the universe?"

Hookpaw blew out a long breath, telling himself, "I had no idea that being 'MORE ONE' than others would entail SO MUCH more-one-being!"

Tisrukh, the Central Asian nomad in Adam's world who had been dreaming repeatedly about tracking a tiger, was extremely proud of the bolt-action rifle which was his most prized material possession. Most

of the rifles owned by men of his clan were antique muzzle-loaders, dating at least as far back as the Crimean War. Although Tisrukh's rifle was still a single-shot weapon, it could of course be reloaded far faster than a musket. This fact had saved Tisrukh's life once, when a single shot had proven insufficient to bring down a bear that was raiding his flock.

So perhaps it should have been a surprise, not that this rifle finally figured in one of Tisrukh's dreams, but that it had not already been in all of them from the start.

"ZULIKA!"

The nomad's wife by now knew to expect that these interruptions of her sleep would be for the purpose of reporting another dream. "Did you kill the tiger this time?" she asked, stifling a yawn lest her husband think she was purposely expressing boredom.

"No; but the interesting thing is that this time I did dream that my rifle was there in my hands. I thought about shooting him...but although he seemed aware of me, he showed no sign of attacking me. And I got the strangest feeling that he was purposely leading me someplace--that by following him I would discover something fabulous.

"Eventually the tiger stopped, and looked back at me as if to urge me to go forward ahead of him. In front of us was a sort of stone arch. When I went to walk through the arch, I felt what you sometimes feel in dreams--that you're walking or running forward, but you don't go anywhere. For some reason, I don't know why, I raised my rifle to my shoulder and fired a shot straight ahead into empty air. I could see the bullet flying; it also seemed to be moving, yet not arriving anyplace."

Zulika swallowed the remarks that came to her mind about a similarity to her husband's career, and merely said, "Then what did the tiger do?"

"He slipped ahead of me again, and he had no difficulty walking through the arch. When he went through, the scene beyond it changed into a greener landscape than ours, apparently with more water. Then a voice spoke; I don't know if it was supposed to be the tiger talking, or someone else. It said, 'When your desire is hungry enough, you will be able to pass through.' "

The next morning Tisrukh saddled up the better of his two riding horses, took the spare horse on a long tether, and set out for a certain cluster of hills, accompanied by his eleven-year-old son Bulgak on a sturdy pony. The boy was armed with an antiquated but functional flintlock pistol, passed down from Tisrukh's father. They were going to trade places with Tisrukh's brother Murhat, who awaited them with his two smaller sons and several hundred sheep. The two brothers had a routine of taking turns guarding both of their combined flocks; only in the more dangerous regions did they feel a need for both of them to be on watch at once.

Bulgak had been taught by years of occasional beatings not to speak to his father unless spoken to (or unless their livestock was in immediate peril); so Tisrukh had peace to think about what he hoped would happen on this trip. There was a Cossack smuggler and peddler named Dobrinya, who was Tisrukh's most reliable source of cartridges for the bolt-action rifle; with luck, Dobrinya would pass by during Tisrukh's watch. That was an advantage of muskets: the nomads had the means of casting their own bullets for those, needing only to buy gunpowder; but a modern rifle needed factory-made ammunition—and Tisrukh was down to five rounds. He would have had nine, if he had not fired four shots in the air the last time he and his friends had gotten drunk on fermented goat's milk.

After two hours' riding at a moderate pace, they were almost to the hills where they would find Murhat, when booming strains of song in the Ukrainian language reached their ears. "What perfect timing!" Tisrukh exclaimed aloud. "That's Dobrinya and his trail guards. He couldn't have picked a better moment to show up if some unseen spirit had chosen the time for him!"

Bulgak felt he could venture to reply to this. "Are you going to buy cartridges from him, Father?"

Tisrukh was in a good mood. "That's right, son. I should be able to afford at least ten cartridges, and still be able to get some spare parts for the gun if he has any. Here, you ride to your uncle and take my spare mount along. Tell him I'll be up in less than an hour." The boy obediently trotted off.

There was nothing amiss about buying ammunition—the more so since Tisrukh would not want to face a marvelous destiny with empty bandoliers. The only thing he wanted to conceal from Bulgak, and from Bulgak's mother, was what he was going to use to pay for the bullets and rifle parts. Many months ago, before the first of the strange dreams had come, Tisrukh, who considered himself a shrewd, forward-thinking man, had taken action to ensure that he would be able one day to make some necessary special purchase. His action had been to arrange a small accident during a clan migration; no one was hurt in this accident, but it appeared that his wife's only piece of jewelry worth mentioning had been lost in the river they were fording. This was a silver brooch, set with Baltic amber: an heirloom from a great-grandfather of Zulika's who had fought for Tsar Aleksandr against Napoleon.

That brooch now rested in one of Tisrukh's saddlebags as he rode to meet the small caravan of pack donkeys and armed Cossacks.

Not for long.

Dobrinya was so happily surprised to find a local nomad able to offer such a treasure, that not only did he give Tisrukh over a hundred rounds of ammunition as well as a packet of repair parts (Dobrinya and his men used guns of a different caliber for self-defense), he also tossed in a wineskin filled with vodka. Tisrukh would share the vodka with his brother before Murhat headed home. As for the cartridges, he would let no more than twenty be seen by others, lest there be questions about how he had been able to afford the actual quantity he now possessed. No one in the clan would hear about the

brooch from Dobrinya; the Cossack smuggler knew better than to make trouble for one of his best customers.

Just before Tisrukh parted company with Dobrinya and had his last glimpse of Zulika's brooch, Dobrinya said to him in the nomads' Turkic tongue: "If you can bring me loot like this, Tisrukh, I hope you live forever!"

Tisrukh liked the sound of that.

The spring mud was drying out in Narnia; and every Talking Tiger cub was well past weaning, big enough and strong enough to travel. Slimtalon the tigress matriarch brought everyone out in front of their stockade and looked them over, like a general inspecting troops before a long march.

Besides herself, Bluntmuzzle, Quickspring, Ripplestride, and the missing Hookpaw, there were only four fully-adult Talking Tigers left in the Narnian world (not counting those who had been reduced to non-intelligent beasts). There was a married couple, Shatterneck and his wife Tawnydart, parents of three cubs. The other two were both females, named Leapwell and Smoothtail. The King's forces had captured these four before they had personally succeeded in killing any Talking Lions (though they had wounded some, and they had all been part of the preliminary slayings of ordinary lions), which probably explained why neither the King nor Aslan had been so severe with them as with Ripplestride. Leapwell had had a mate, Jasperclaw, the very one who had foolishly attacked Graniteside the Elephant and paid for it with his life, leaving Leapwell with a young son; Smoothtail had never been married.

"More females than males," Bluntmuzzle whispered to his mother. "I don't say this in hope of indulgence for myself, but do you suppose Aslan intends to suspend monogamy for us when we colonize the south?"

"No," replied Slimtalon. "There are more males than females among the youngsters now growing up; they'll be old enough to mate before those two females are too old to bear young. I think the only thing Aslan intends to suspend is the custom of husbands being as old as their wives or older."

The mother-son conference was interrupted by the voice of Korovini the Minotauress. "I see Fledge in the sky! He brings the King to us!"

Sure enough, King Frank was coming in for a landing. Flying escort were four Gryphons and a variety of birds, including the gander Fear-No-Blast and the swans Gladsplash and Lakemist.

"You were right, Grandmother," said Ripplestride. "The King is not sending us away without speaking to us first."

Everyone bowed in homage as the King dismounted, then waited for him to speak. His words were not

slow in coming, but were not what anyone expected.

"Faithful Narnians, and strayed ones restored to allegiance! Most of you know how I earned my livelihood when your Queen and I were a young couple in the world of Adam and Eve. But none of you know what I am about to confess to you.

"You know that Aslan is worshipped in that other world in His human aspect as Jesus Christ. But not all humans follow and serve Him. I did not commit myself to His service until a year or so after I became a hansom-cab driver. During that first year, I cheated a customer, making him think we had gone farther than we actually had, thus extracting more money from him than he rightfully owed me. After I became a Christian, my conscience was troubled about the wrong I had done; but I could never find that man in order to make restitution.

"Thus I have had to live with the knowledge that, although I have Aslan's forgiveness, I can never undo the harm I did. That is a knowledge some of you before me will also have to carry wherever you go. Do not let it cause you to despair; but let it motivate you to do right henceforth."

Tawnydart whispered to her husband, "I wonder if kings in the world of Adam are so honest about their own failings?"

"From what I've heard," Shatterneck whispered back, "they almost never are."

As the King turned his attention to discussing with Slimtalon and Quickspring some of the practicalities of the tigers' impending emigration, Fear-No-Blast sought out Bluntmuzzle for a discussion of his own.

"Before we geese returned from our wintering grounds, I flew another sweep over the region where that seeming statue of a tiger appeared. Now there are more than a dozen statues among those rocky hills. Some of them look like tigers, others look like humans, and some look like disgusting bird-headed creatures."

Bluntmuzzle raised an eyebrow. "You, a bird, find a bird's head disgusting?"

Fear-No-Blast clarified: "They were disgusting from the neck down--had a sort of skeletal aspect about them. They had arms instead of wings; and some of the sculptures had TWO pairs of arms."

"The so-called Great Gryphon must be behind this."

"No doubt. And I believe it also means that Hookpaw is still alive. It remains to be seen whether his being alive will prove to be good news or not."

"That will just be part of the adventure Aslan will send us," a third voice interjected: the voice of the wolf Ranshuk, just then approaching the tiger and the gander. As the other two turned toward him, Ranshuk added, "Sorry, we wolves also have extremely keen hearing."

"Which will be as useful as your sense of smell," Bluntmuzzle replied, then said to Fear-No-Blast, "Ranshuk has no mate or whelps, and no female Talking Wolf or Dog wants any part of him because he deserted to Jadis; therefore he's decided to go pioneering with us tigers."

"I wish you Aslan's guidance," the reconnaissance gander told the wolf. "And it's Aslan you must call upon to protect you if you run across that evil spirit."

In a wooded area of the land which one day would be southern Archenland, three humanoid females sat around a campfire. Two were Nymphs, astonishingly beautiful, named Iskralida and Valamisa. It would be arbitrary to say that they were sisters, or that they were not, since they were of the first generation of Nymphs whom Aslan had created out of nothing on the day of Narnia's birth. The third woman was a female Red Dwarf named Bezbimbry; she was not at all ugly, but she seemed so when next to the Nymphs--at least in her own opinion. Bezbimbry had built the fire, and cooked over it a breakfast of edible roots and mushrooms she had gathered. (There was no danger from the mushrooms; poisonous mushrooms did not exist in the Narnian world.)

These three, like Ranshuk, had deserted to Jadis. The White Witch had not made Hags of Iskralida and Valamisa; but the Witch's cruelty in her experiment upon Ranshuk, and her continued callousness in still trying to produce weapon-resistant monsters despite Father Christmas telling her she would fail, had at last persuaded the three to flee from Jadis when an opportunity came.

The Dwarf-woman looked at her companions, who were taller than she but far less muscular. "What do you think, ladies? Do we keep on trying to find some sort of husbands to start a colony with families? Do we go back to Narnia and beg the King's forgiveness? Or do we just live out our days as fugitives?"

Iskralida scowled. "If there were husbands to be had in Narnia, we wouldn't have left there; so going back to Narnia is out of the question."

Valamisa turned toward her quasi-sister. "You've said that before; but it wasn't that there were NO possible husbands among the humanlike races Aslan made--"

"What, Marshwiggles? Don't make me lose my appetite!"

"You're still resentful that the King and Queen didn't have enough sons for every Nymph to marry one. You wanted your offspring to be part of the royal bloodline."

"And what's wrong with that?" snapped Iskralida.

Using her most reasonable tone, Bezbimbry interjected, "With Frank and Helen being the ONLY Earth-native humans in this world, EVERY human born in Narnia will always be of royal blood, which means that it means less than you think. Marriage isn't about ambition, or it shouldn't be; it's about someone sharing your life." Her own memories choked off her calm pedantry, almost making her weep.

Valamisa gave the Dwarf-woman a sympathetic gaze. "I'm sorry if our talk reminds you of your loss. Quidgubble needed no royal blood to be a fine gentleman." Quidgubble, a Black Dwarf, had been Bezbimbry's husband, and the first Narnian Dwarf to die in a mining accident--indeed, the first Dwarf to die at all. Blaming Aslan for her husband's death had been Bezbimbry's reason for deserting Narnia. The desertion had also perhaps been precipitated somewhat by the fact that theirs had been the only marriage to date between a Black Dwarf and a Red Dwarf, and Bezbimbry had believed, rightly or not, that other Dwarfs were less sympathetic to her bereavement because of the mixed marriage.

The trio continued wrangling over their options while they ate breakfast, as they had done many times in the days since escaping from Jadis. Repeated and rehashed though the subject was, it held their attention so long and so well that they never were certain how long they had failed to notice they were not alone. They only became aware of the observer when he spoke.

"Well met, fellow Narnians. I am pleased to tell you that you have more options than you realize."

The three demi-human women all turned, to see a Talking Tiger lying at ease, watching them. They had weapons: stone-headed axes and spears, made by Bezbimbry; but it crossed all of their minds that this Tiger could have sprung upon them before they even knew he was near. "To whom do we have the honor of speaking?" asked Bezbimbry, trying not to sound afraid.

"You speak to Aslan," the tiger answered. "But then, you who speak also ARE Aslan, as are the other two. Aslan is the food you ate, and the fire you cooked it over, and the logs you sit on, and the sky over your heads. There's just no end of Aslan, which is to say there's no end of the oneness of the everything-ness. And my part of the oneness just may have the solution that your part of the oneness needs, as we bring some more of the oneness from the oneness into the oneness."

None of the women dared to tell Hookpaw--for of course, this was he--just how ridiculous that speech sounded. Instead, Iskralida said, "Would this have to do with, uh, mates for us?"

The tiger nodded. "Human husbands, no less, who will come from Earth. You three will assist me in bringing them here. Not that the concepts of 'here' and 'there' should have any meaning within the Cosmic Everything; but they seem to make some difference for the present moment of the Eternal Now."

"That sounds fascinating," Valamisa responded cautiously; "but perhaps first you should explain more about how all of us are Aslan."

She was rewarded for this by an hour-long lecture from Hookpaw about how the Great Gryphon had led him to monistic enlightenment. It was hard to follow, but at least it left the three female outlaws feeling reassured that the tiger had no intention of devouring them. He was obviously far more interested in them as an audience than as dinner.

It was two days after the King's final visit to the stockade that the tigers and Ranshuk actually set out to leave Narnia. They were escorted to the borders by the Minotaur couple and the Good Giant who had guarded them for so long, as well as Talking Badgers and other creatures who had been kind to them. No Talking Lions came to see them...except Zendragund. The one-eyed senior lion appeared from a stand of trees on the third day of their march, watched them pass, gave a courteous nod to Slimtalon and Quickspring who had NOT been guilty of attacking the lions...and surprised everyone by speaking to Ripplestride, saying, "Tigress Ripplestride! If your change of heart is as sincere as I believe it is, then may Aslan reckon it in your favor, and cause your life hereafter to count for good." This was the last time any Talking Tiger of that generation would ever lay eyes on a mortal Talking Lion; but the parting words of Zendragund were to be passed down to future tigers for centuries to come.

All along the way, Slimtalon, as the natural leader of the tigers and a beast known to be in Aslan's confidence, was barraged with questions by her juniors. A typical exchange, between herself and Elkfinder, occurred only hours before their escort said goodbye and turned back north.

"Grandmother, why aren't there any birds following us?"

"There's no need, child. The scouting they did last year, when seeking you and Bluntmuzzle, provided information about the lands we're heading for, and Fear-No-Blast added more information from his final survey before he returned from the geese's wintering grounds. With that much help, and with Aslan's mercy, it's up to us tigers to make our own way now."

"Well, what about the Gryphons? I know they're all angry at this monster that called himself 'the Great Gryphon' and stirred up the trouble."

"They're angry, all right; and that's exactly WHY the King strictly forbade them to accompany us south. His Majesty fears that, if Narnian Gryphons ever see that evil thing, blind anger will cause them to try to attack it physically, which would be ineffective at best. Only Aslan has the power to crush that thing."

"And is He going to crush him, Grandmother?"

"I don't know. Aslan has protected everyone who called on Him when menaced by the demon, but I

don't know if He plans to destroy him altogether. That's probably what Aslan calls 'someone else's story.' We have our own purpose to fulfill."

"But what IS that purpose, Grandmother?"

"A purpose of several parts. The simplest part is to promote peace in Narnia by not having too many large carnivores inside its borders. Another part is to anticipate a time when _other_ Earth people find a way into the Narnian world; at such a time, if those new humans are evil, we tigers could form a counterforce against the mischief they might attempt."

These answers were true; but there was another purpose, told to Slimtalon by Aslan but known to very few others. A time would come, long after the lifetime of any Narnian now living, when an invasion of evil would make Narnia uninhabitable for human beings in particular. At that time, Narnia's remaining humans would need a place to flee to. A distant territory occupied by Talking Tigers--tigers who would befriend those humans and help them to hide from pursuers--would be a refuge for them, until four new humans freshly come from Earth would be ordained by Aslan to set things right and enable humans to re-enter Narnia.

To this end, it was actually better that the tigers were now leaving Narnia more or less in disgrace...and that no Talking Birds were following them to mark their trek and facilitate future contacts. This way, when that evil time would come to Narnia, the invading enemy would not anticipate that the exiled tigers had really been sent forth to create a future safe haven for humans. (Indeed, only the most trustworthy individuals among the tigers themselves would ever know in advance of this purpose--in order that any future tigers who strayed into evil and forsook the colony would be unable to inform the future invader of the plan to harbor Narnian humans.)

Aslan had a skill to make evil produce a good result in spite of itself.

Not long after the conversation with Elkfinder, Slimtalon was out in front of the party with the wolf Ranshuk, when they heard a petty little screeching and scuffling. Presently they discovered the source of the disturbance, a comical disturbance from the viewpoint of top-of-the-food-chain predators: two young male Talking Squirrels were fighting furiously on the ground, biting and wrestling. Between bites, they seemed to be squeaking: "No, they don't!" "Yes, they do!" "No, they don't!" "Yes, they do!"

Ranshuk ran ahead of Slimtalon, reached the little battlers, and swatted them apart from each other with a sturdy paw, exclaiming, "Stop! It can't be that serious! What are you fighting about?"

One of the squirrels, looking at Ranshuk while gesturing toward the other squirrel, answered, "He says that all of the tigers deserve to be put to death without distinction, while I say only the ones who actually killed...lions...deserve..." His words trailed off when he saw Slimtalon coming up alongside Ranshuk, for he had no way of knowing if this was one of the innocent tigers whose cause he had been

upholding in trivial combat.

"Thank you for trying to be fair," said Slimtalon to the first squirrel. The second squirrel, realizing what a position his adversary's words had put him in, did not wait to speak, but fled headlong up the nearest tree. Ranshuk went to the base of that tree and called up, "Relax, little one! I can tell you for a certainty that all the tigers here who were guilty are too chastened to wish to hurt anyone for speaking ill of them, while the innocent ones are too busy forgiving their fellow tigers to bother with feeling offended by a squirrel."

Ripplestride, joining the others and hearing what the tiny ruckus had been about, sighed, "So we are still a cause of strife in Narnia." To the squirrel who had stayed on the ground she said, "Please make peace with your fellow. Make peace with everyone you can possibly make peace with." Looking up toward where the other squirrel sheltered in high branches, she added more loudly, "There is no need for grudges; the tigers are leaving. Please allow us to remember Narnia as a place of peace and friendship."

"It will be when you're gone!" the more vindictive of the two rodents called back. The other tigers were catching up by this time, so the march resumed. The Minotaur Praximor said to Slimtalon and Ripplestride, "Evil still creates quarrels, and probably will go on doing so. But trust Aslan to look after Narnia, as He will also look after you."

Without more incident, they proceeded to the border, where those seeing them off said their final goodbyes. Then the tigers, with one wolf, were on their own, headed south by southwest.

Hookpaw had come northward from his current hunting (and magic-practicing) grounds, following a premonition that in this way he would find persons useful to him. Having recruited the two Nymphs and the She-Dwarf, he set about to return with them in the same way as he had come.

He was, however, far indeed from being able to fly as smoothly as Aslan could do when Aslan chose to fly.

With Iskralida and Valamisa both mounted astride his back while Bezbimbry hung on to his tail, Hookpaw was able to levitate himself just high enough to keep the dangling Dwarf-woman's feet clear of the treetops, and to move them all through the air at a speed a little faster than the speed he would make on the ground at an easy running pace. This was working until Bezbimbry's arms grew tired; so Hookpaw, reminding himself that all of them were Aslan anyway, strove to levitate Bezbimbry herself simultaneously with maintaining his flight, moving her up to sit on his neck. He succeeded, but at the cost of some wavering in his pitch and yaw control. They spent five minutes flying sideways, with some worrisome swaying, before Iskralida said:

"Excuse me, miraculous tiger...but perhaps we should not be so selfish as to impose on you constantly

for this privilege of magical flight. What if we all walked some of the way, only asking you to take us by air when there were obstacles?"

Hookpaw did not answer her until he had managed to reorient himself and spend at least a minute flying nose-forward. Then he could come to earth and assure himself that he was choosing to take the Nymph's suggestion. It was not all bad walking. The shafts of his new friends' spears, which he had allowed them to bring along, had knocked against his legs and ribs more than once. He almost said to himself, "How does Aslan do it?"--before he remembered that he was not supposed to be thinking of that Lion as being any more Aslan than a rock or a stick was Aslan.

As they began the new phase of the trip, Valamisa asked the tiger, "Is this power by which you fly also the power by which you will bring the new people into this world?"

The answer that came out of Hookpaw's mouth was entirely unpremeditated by him: "You three will answer that question yourselves, or the question will answer itself. All is one, after all, so the questions are their own answers."

From the moment the tigers said farewell to Praximor and their other friends, to the time the sun set and the travelling party sought places to sleep, about seven hours passed. During that time, this group of feline carnivores and one lupine one kept on refining the cooperative routines they had begun developing during their months on probation. Tigers being ambush predators, Ranshuk suggested a hunting strategy which they approved: the wolf went in an arc that took him a mile upwind of his companions--then started howling, to scare any deer in the area between into moving downwind, toward the waiting tigers. But since they were still near the Narnian border, between howls Ranshuk yelled in speech as loudly as he could, "I'm a Talking Wolf! I'm howling to drive prey toward my friends who are downwind of me! If you're also a Talking Beast, make yourself known to us, so we won't eat you by mistake!"

This did in fact reveal one Talking Elk, who had been exploring these parts and was heartily grateful for the warning--so grateful that, before heading for a safer area, he passed to Ranshuk such information as he had about non-intelligent herbivores in the vicinity. Before parting company with the elk, the wolf told him, "Frankly, I'll be glad when we're far enough away from Narnia that we won't have to worry about killing fellow Talking Animals!" Then he started back toward the tigers, his ears already giving him hints that two or more grazing animals had been taken.

When it came time to eat the game caught in this manner, a pleasant surprise awaited Ranshuk: in view of his having done the hardest work, Slimtalon told the other tigers to wait and let him take first pick of the meat before they started feeding. No one disputed this; Ranshuk had already impressed them with his diligence and intelligence while they were living in their temporary fort.

When the time came for sleep, Bluntmuzzle volunteered to stay awake as a sentry. As he explained to

his mother: "After what I went through before, I think I'm readier than most of them to remember to call on Aslan to protect us, if--" (and here he dropped to a whisper) "--Tash turns up and threatens to make trouble."

Slimtalon went to sleep, with two of the orphaned youngsters nestled beside her. Bluntmuzzle began his night watch. Ranshuk arose and joined Bluntmuzzle after sleeping no more than three hours; nighttime is comfortable for wolves, and the two pardoned criminals had much to talk about.

Tash did not manifest himself that night; he was busy elsewhere, manipulating Hookpaw...

When Hookpaw and his companions first came within sight of one of his telekinetically-formed tiger statues, the She-Dwarf Bezbimbry was first to react: "Stonework! Are there Dwarfs hereabouts?"

"None but yourself," replied the outlaw tiger. "I made that. Odd, though, I thought I remembered that as being one of the bird-headed ones...Never mind. Before today is out, even going on foot, we should be at our goal. That is, unless I work out how to dissolve time itself into the oneness, so that we can arrive there before I first met you three."

Altering the time-stream continued to elude Hookpaw. It was another four hours before they came to the place he wanted the demi-humans to see.

Back in the days before he had ever gone bad, Hookpaw had once heard Queen Helen describe a place in England called Stonehenge. The memory of this had recurred to him during his magical experiments; and shortly before he followed his intuition to where he found the Nymphs and the Dwarf, he had set a stone slab across the tops of two others that he had stood up on end, like a segment of the Stonehenge structure. Living as they did in a sylvan and pastoral world, which had not existed long enough for many buildings of any sort to be raised, Iskralida and Valamisa had no words for what Hookpaw had built. Bezbimbry, however, exclaimed, "An arch! Does that represent a gateway to this other world of which you spoke?"

Hookpaw grinned cubbishly. "If you say it does, then it does. When I erected that arch, I didn't know yet what it was for; but I was trusting that one of you ladies would contribute your part to the oneness--and so you have! Excellent! Now, since everything is everything else, the four of us certainly all are each other; so we should have no difficulty figuring out how to use this gate. Once we get it to work, it shouldn't be long before some potential husbands for you ladies begin coming through. I'm told that humans in Adam's world come in a variety of sizes; so you, Bezbimbry, ought to be able to find a man who's short enough."

Something stirred Valamisa to curiosity. "Pardon me, Tiger Hookpaw, but I just thought of something. I saw you two or three times before my sister Nymph and I left Narnia; didn't you have a mate? If you don't mind my asking, what became of her?"

The question had a stopping, almost paralyzing effect on Hookpaw--similar to the sensation he had experienced the day Slimtalon had called on him in Aslan's name to reconsider what he was doing. He took more than a minute to recover and reply. "Duskrunner was her name...but names belong to individuals, not to the Cosmic Everything. She died. You know, I haven't even thought about her for months; but she died because...no, let's not talk about that. It would lead me into those feelings of--no, forget it. She didn't really die, because she passed into the trees and the clouds. Duskrunner is everything, just as we all are."

Iskralida, listening quietly up to now, had for some reason felt a shudder at the same time as Hookpaw seemed stunned by the question about his wife. And when he worked himself back into the pantheistic mood, she also felt better, as if some unwanted outside presence had intruded very briefly but had withdrawn. She now addressed Hookpaw: "Sir, all of us will be very glad to work with you to awaken the magic of your gate. But first, can you tell us if there is anything suitable for us to eat in this rocky terrain?"

Hookpaw looked momentarily like a host at a party suddenly realizing he had omitted something from the dinner menu. "Pardon me, I was forgetting that you Nymphs don't go in much for bloody raw antelope carcasses. Well, there are some sort of monkeys farther south, so there must be fruits which they eat. And I've observed patches of wild grains in this area that you could probably eat." Here he glanced at Bezbimbry. "As a matter of fact, going by what I've heard about your cooking talents, you could probably bake bread from those grains, given some kind of implements. Come to think of it, that would be a good exercise of my mind-over-matter powers, helping you create some sort of oven. I'll wager, if I put my mind to it, I could even thresh and grind grain for you with pure mental energy!"

Bezbimbry did not say this to any of them, but Hookpaw's newly cheerful behavior now reminded her of a phase she had gone through in grieving for Quidgubble. For two or three days, she had behaved with a forced cheerfulness, trying to convince others that she was finished with mourning, although she was really far from finished. This denial had in the end only left her more embittered about her loss, resulting in her eventual defection to Jadis...and now, her acquaintance with a most eccentric Talking Beast, who perhaps was also not past the denial of a loss.

On a day when the migrating exiles were more than halfway across Archenland, they were crossing a hill when the elevation gave them a clear sight of something downwind of them: a mated pair of lions. Almost every tiger in the party felt a momentary shock, somewhere between fear, guilt and embarrassment; this was relieved when Ranshuk said quietly, "Those are ordinary lions." All of the tigers were coming to set great store by Ranshuk's judgments.

The distant lions obviously had caught the scent of the tigers; they made a cautionary withdrawal at right angles to the tigers' line of march. Only one of the emigrants went on thinking for a long time about those lions: the widowed tigress Leapwell, whose husband Jasperclaw had brought death upon

himself in the tigers' uprising. She was not thinking about any further feud with lions; she was thinking about that lioness having a mate while she now had none. This thought nagged at her all the rest of that day.

That night, as she awaited the slow coming of sleep in the crotch of a tree, Leapwell began whispering to Aslan, on what she considered the off chance that He might be listening. "Lord Aslan, I confess I wondered why we got off so easily after what we did. Is it that we were sentenced to a delayed realization of our true punishment? For this loneliness is punishment indeed. Why could I not be a mere dumb beast, like those lions we passed? Then I would have no such sorrow as I have now, and for that matter I would no longer be capable of evil. You changed some of the other offending tigers into dumb animals without their having asked You to; would You change me if I do ask You to?"

She fell asleep at last with this request still in her mind. An unknown length of time later, a stirring and swaying of her perch awoke her. Looking down, she saw that the entire tree she was perched in had been smoothly uprooted. None other than Aslan was carrying the whole tree by gripping one of its main roots in His jaws; He was carrying the tree, and Leapwell in it, far away from the other tigers, apparently unnoticed by them.

She sprang down from the tree to stand beside her Creator. "Lord Aslan, have You come to grant my request for forgetfulness?"

Aslan set the tree down in an upright position. "Actually, child, I have come to forgive you for making such a wrongheaded request. Consider something. Do you think that it was blind, meaningless chance that caused this tree to grow where it did?"

Leapwell had a feeling of where this was leading, and bowed her head. "You know the answer to that better than I do, my Lord."

Aslan swung a forepaw against the tree's trunk, batting it a quarter-mile through the air, directly back to the spot where it had stood. "Now it will be rooted in its place once again, intact. I will tell you that, in the mind of My Father, there was always a reason for that tree to stand there and not elsewhere. And there is a reason why you were made to be a Talking Tiger. It is a responsibility from which you must not ask to be released, especially in view of the fact that you still are a mother."

"Then, Lord, is everything everywhere predetermined to the last detail? If there are no choices--no possibility of things going more than one way--how can we be either praised or blamed for our actions even AS Talking Beasts?"

Aslan shook His head. "In Adam's world, there are men who imagine that they are honoring My sovereignty when they claim that I do dictate every event, including every action of every creature, and yet that I still blame those who do wrong even though it was I Myself Who forced them to do

wrong. But the truth is that the divine plan TAKES IN delegating the power of independent will to reasoning creatures. Suffice it for now to say that your abdicating the gift of personality and free will, sinking into mere animal existence, would rob this world of something it is meant to have. It is indeed predetermined that that tree stands where it is, and that you are a Talking Animal; but the very nature given to you _means_ that you are able to originate your own actions. No action of yours can catch Me by surprise, but all the same your actions _are_ your own."

"Then, Lord Aslan, do You have some particular action for me to choose whether to do or not?"

"Numerous actions; this is known as your life. Accept the adventure I will send you--even if it entails taking a new mate from among males younger than yourself, since that is what is available. One thing I will strictly command you at this time: do not tell any of the others about our conversation--_except_ Ranshuk. He also is not here by accident; it will increasingly become his role, as a detached and impartial person among you, to help you all in seeking and obeying My will. Somewhat like what Adam's children call a priest, or a minister."

"Permit me a question, Lord, the very one that led us to this meeting: is the loneliness I feel a punishment or not?"

"Not so much a punishment, as a consequence--a matter of reaping what you tigers collectively sowed. Cain felt it also, after he was pardoned for murdering his brother Abel. You will survive it; remember that it is a far lighter thing to bear than what could have befallen you eternally--what IS befalling Jasperclaw eternally, for I will not disguise the solemn truth."

Leapwell's voice grew more plaintive. "Then he is lost in darkness? Alas, should I not be where he is?"

"Your going to that place with him would do nothing to relieve the punishment he must face for his willfully-chosen wickedness. In fact, the one thing you can do for him now is to _avoid_ ever being lost in that darkness yourself; for it will make his misery _less_ if he can know that his wrongdoing did _not_ bring his mate to the same ruin."

"Do not be angry at me for thinking this, Aslan, but Your justice is indeed severe."

"The existence of evil is a severe thing, child. But never seek to evade the struggle against it by falling into forgetfulness as a common beast. Mankind has borne the burden of personhood for a longer time than you can comprehend; but with My grace it can be borne. By you, as well."

Without another word, Aslan vanished. Leapwell wept one last time for her lost mate, wept long and hard; then she walked back to the tigers' encampment to find their priestly wolf and speak with him.

Hookpaw was thrilled to have helpers in his blindly-probing project to bring new humans to the

Narnian world...and, in a deep recess of his mind, his actions in seeing to their needs enabled him to feel as if he were not, after all, such a wicked beast.

His telekinetic power proved most helpful to the demi-human women in building a hut for them to live in, close to his crude post-and-lintel arch. And with only one passenger--Bezbimbry--he could fly more smoothly on excursions to find foods more to the liking of Nymphs and Dwarfs than raw antelope. Something else he did was to drive away all non-intelligent major predators from a wide radius around his base of activity; he had not worried about them before, but now it would not do to have other beasts imposing the digestive type of oneness upon Bezbimbry, Valamisa and Iskralida. Where his physical abilities were not enough, he would fling levitated rocks at the carnivores, till they understood that they were not welcome hereabouts.

On each of the first six full days after the small party's arrival at the arch, the four of them spent a part of the day trying to devise a convincing ritual to make the gate serve as an opening to Adam's world. The Nymphs contributed all the imaginative rhyming incantations they could think of, which was almost the only contribution to any sort of work they had made since they and Bezbimbry had fled from Jadis. On the seventh night, then, the four experimenters conferred in the moonlight, where they could see the stone arch standing inert, motionlessly mocking their efforts.

"Do we dare try to repeat any of the magic words we used to hear Jadis utter?" Iskralida asked her sister Nymph.

"No!" Valamisa hastily replied. "Not only do we not know what the words actually do, but if we spoke them, Jadis might hear us!"

"She hasn't shown any interest in hunting us up to now," Bezbimbry pointed out.

"Because we're not important," said Valamisa. "But if she becomes aware that we're trying to imitate her spells, she might get interested enough to come and kill us. I'm not sure, but I think we're far enough away from the Tree of Protection that Jadis would come here without hesitation, given cause."

"She might find herself up against more than she reckoned with," interjected Hookpaw, "especially if the Great Gryphon were to come to our assistance. On the other hand, Jadis might prove to understand the everything-ness better than you imagine; she might have no objection to you copying her magic, since you ARE she and she IS you and all is all."

"Well, Master Hookpaw," said Iskralida, "in case Valamisa's apprehensions are well-founded, can you offer something better for us to try than the White Witch's magic words?"

"Let me think about it awhile longer. After all, what does a little delay matter in the Eternal Now?"

In the castle of Cair Paravel, Queen Helen was entertaining an honorable visitor: the gander Fear-No-Blast, who had brought a report.

"There's been another incident of strife between kinds, Your Majesty. Some Dryads have been accusing Talking Hogs of damaging the roots of the Dryads' favorite trees while digging for truffles, while the Talking Hogs furiously deny it and countercharge that Dryads have been frightening their piglets with sudden scary appearances." Fear-No-Blast went on to list, in chronological order, the exact places where confrontations were known to have occurred.

"Thank you, good sir," said the Queen. "We shall have Regulus the Centaur investigate this further."

"Your Majesty, I understand that there is more involved in the schemes of the false 'Great Gryphon' than simply turning Narnians against Narnians; yet if it were only the conflicts provoked among us, that would be enough that we should wish the trouble ended."

"And what do you counsel, worthy gander?"

"Your Majesty knows that we geese--even the ordinary ones--mate just once, for life. My wife Comb-The-Weeds has been in Aslan's country for two years now, and I have lived to see our grandchildren growing up as good Narnians. There is nothing to keep me within these borders any longer. The King has made clear that we flying Narnians are not to try to maintain contact with the emigrated tigers; but those tigers may need help against whatever new evil the demon is plotting. If I depart to find and join them, AND NEVER COME BACK TO NARNIA, the King's command will not be violated; and Lady Slimtalon will have the services of an air scout. Besides which--I have actually met the demon, and have experienced Aslan's power protecting me from him; thus there is another way that I may be helpful down south. If you approve of what I suggest, I know the King will approve also; and my goodbyes to family and flock are already said."

The Queen's eyes grew moist. "In our native world, it is usually eagles and hawks that are looked on as noble birds. Few of our people remember that geese in that world served as camp sentries for ancient armies. Gallant Fear-No-Blast, you have royal permission to undertake this adventure which Aslan doubtless has placed in your heart to pursue; and..." She went to fetch a Dwarf-made ceremonial sword from where it hung on the wall. "You shall go forth from Narnia, and be remembered IN Narnia, as a knight, so dubbed by your queen." She touched each of the veteran gander's wings with the flat of the blade, then knelt to kiss Sir Fear-No-Blast on the forehead.

The old scout would have taken his leave out the nearest large window right then, had not the Queen said, "Wait! One moment, sir knight, there is something I should send with you, that did not occur to us when the tigers went forth. I shall provide you with a small neck-pouch, such as will not greatly encumber you in flight; and in that pouch will be a compact scroll, containing the Narnian Catechism

which I composed while the tigers were on parole. Most of them know its contents by heart now; but I know that a few of them are able to read, and if they have the Catechism in written form, it will at least remind their descendants that there IS such a thing as writing."

"Then, Your Majesty, do you believe that our world will one day have such a large human population that future tigers are bound to have contact with mankind no matter how far from Narnia they have journeyed?"

"From what Aslan has told the King and myself, I believe this to be true. I do know that I wish my children to have many children, and their children to have many children; and there is no reason why Aslan could not allow other people besides to enter this world from Adam's world."

In choosing each day's direction of march, Slimtalon had in mind avoiding three undesirable destinations. Due south, or east-by-southeast, would lead them straight into barren desert. West-by-southwest would lead them toward the last known haunts of Hookpaw; and although Slimtalon feared for herself neither a physical nor a supernatural threat from Hookpaw, it was not inconceivable that he might try to deceive some of the inexperienced youngsters into joining his madness. Straight west, however, would be the worst of all available directions to take; that was the direction toward the wilderness regions Jadis had settled in. Because Jadis was a flesh-and-blood being, herself capable of being slain by physical violence, Aslan was less likely to intervene and block her every move as He had done to thwart the demon Tash who was manipulating Hookpaw.

The tiger emigrants, therefore, pursued a course that was much more southerly than westerly, only a few degrees west of the probable direction to Hookpaw's territory. Ranshuk, daily demonstrating his superior stamina for cross-country running, was often far out of sight ahead, scouting. Between reports by the wolf, and the catching of game to eat, the tigers had plenty of time to talk among themselves as they went.

"We haven't seen any common-animal tigers yet," observed the young-adult female Smoothtail, walking alongside Slimtalon. "Could it be that we're heading into country that really isn't wholesome for tigers?"

"I grant you, there aren't as many trees as I'd like," Slimtalon replied. "It's more work chasing down grazing beasts when they can spot you at a distance. I'm just glad we've been able to use teamwork in our hunting. Having Ranshuk along, with his wolfpack experience, is a blessing."

"You know who else hunts in cooperative groups?" the younger tigress said in a quieter voice. "Lions do. It's natural for them. If we hadn't caught the lions completely by surprise when Hookpaw led us to attack them, they'd have been able to use group tactics to counter our greater individual size."

The tigress matriarch raised an eyebrow. "Are you sorry that the lions didn't have enough warning to

prepare a defense against you?" (Slimtalon had almost said "against US"--but she had not been one of the wrongdoers.) "Or are you wondering if someday there'll be another confrontation between tigers and lions? Even...WISHING for it?"

Smoothtail hung her head. "More the first than the second, Grandmother. I truly AM sorry for what we did. But you have to think about something when travelling such a long way. And the problems of hunting on the move bring lions to mind, the more so since there are ordinary lions in this country. Whatever you make of it, it IS an irony: we had to leave Narnia because we attacked the lions--and all through this trip, we've been compelled TO USE METHODS LIKE LIONS to catch our meat."

Slimtalon mulled that one over awhile before saying: "Aslan has many ways to humble us."

Fear-No-Blast knew what Slimtalon's logic was in choosing the exiles' line of march, so he saw no need of ground search on the first full day of his unseasonal yet permanent migration. Setting the likeliest course for himself, and finding an altitude where the wind seemed most favorable, he flew for distance. He did the same thing on the second day, not beginning to take any interest in ground signs until he had passed the point where he had met Bluntmuzzle during last year's tiger-hunt. The Queen's gift, hung around his neck on a sturdy cord, caused him no discomfort, and he soon ceased to give it any thought beyond making sure it never fell off and was lost.

It was on the third morning that the old air scout caught a sense of danger. His first clue came from straight below him: small animals were looking up, then scurrying for cover. Surely none of them, plain animals though they were, thought that a goose was a predator...

The thought had scarcely formed itself in Fear-No-Blast's mind when survival instinct took over. Not even waiting to look above him, he made a sharp turn to the left. With precious little to spare! Through the space he had occupied an instant before, an eagle bigger than himself plunged in a falcon-style killing dive, screeching with frustration at missing its prey.

Eagles did not usually hunt other birds on the wing. Such a departure from instinct argued for this being a Talking Eagle, not bound by instinct. "Stop that, I'm a Talking Goose!" he shouted, in case this was indeed a fellow Narnian; but on the chance that it was a dumb eagle who could not be reasoned with, he continued evasive action without waiting for a response.

The only response was another screech...as the eagle turned from its missed attack. It did not follow Fear-No-Blast in a straight line, but climbed to regain altitude for another diving strike. With no substantial cover below, Fear-No-Blast put off going to ground; instead, forcing himself to stay calm (and letting out a mental prayer), he watched the eagle's progress while steering toward the nearest large stand of trees, two miles away.

The dive came; Fear-No-Blast, with disciplined timing, waited to break off until the raptor was too

close to adjust its own direction, then flung himself to the right. Again the eagle soared upward; at least it was some comfort that its instincts made it predictable. But it crossed the gander's mind not to underestimate even a dumb animal.

At the third attack, following a hunch, Fear-No-Blast swerved neither left nor right; instead, he braked hard with his wings, coming as close to flying straight backwards as was physically possible for a goose, and losing some altitude as he did so. He had guessed correctly: the eagle passed to his left. It had been trying to anticipate his next dodge. But the trees were closer now; he made a hard sprint for their shelter, and made it before the eagle could attempt a fourth strike.

Once under the canopy of branches, the gander knight did not stop to rest, but hurried on foot further into the grove. He would not quite put it past his assailant to follow him in on foot.

When it seemed as if the eagle had given up--and not without a careful search of the open sky--he took to the air again on the far side of the grove, staying lower this time. "Lord Aslan," he said aloud, now that he could spare the breath, "was that eagle under the sway of our demon enemy?"

The only answer he received, if this was an answer, was the fact that soon after his alarming encounter he passed within sight of two other eagles...and neither of them showed the slightest interest in him.

Many days had passed in the Narnian world; but in the world of Adam and Eve, it was only the day after Tisrukh, the Central Asian nomad, had resupplied himself with ammunition for his cherished rifle.

Having had the treat of not-often-available Russian vodka to share with his brother Murhat before Murhat returned to the main encampment, Tisrukh failed to awaken the next morning as early as he normally would. This left his young son Bulgak to attend to all the morning business, including making breakfast. While seeking flint and steel to restart the neglected campfire, the boy rummaged in his father's saddlebags--and was startled to discover a far larger quantity of bullets than his father had admitted to buying from Dobrinya the trader. Bulgak knew exactly what to do to avoid a beating: he made sure there was no sign of his having looked into the saddlebags, and said nothing about the bullets when his father awoke with a headache.

That same morning, back at the clan's encampment, Bulgak's mother and little sister arose to perform a dreary but necessary task. Zulika handed her daughter Dilnara a double-handled earthenware jar, while she took up her most valued remaining material possession since the loss of her brooch: a small trowel. Thus equipped, mother and child went forth in search of the only form of campfire fuel to be reliably available and abundant in this region.

Zulika's ancestors had had enough peaceful contact with the Russians to know that the Russians were gradually adopting more of the progressive ways of the exotic "Frantsuskiy" people, who lived far to the west in some city called "Parizh." Despite the Frantsuskiys being responsible for the Napoleonic

invasion, Russians still admired their ways; and one of these ways was a quaint notion called "cleanliness." On the advice of her late mother, Zulika had acquired a trowel some years ago, and made it her means of gathering dried manure for the fires--rather than handle the manure with her bare hands and then go straight to preparing her family's food. Other nomads scoffed at Zulika's fastidiousness; but Zulika's children were sick less frequently than other nomad children.

Zulika made her seven-year-old daughter carry the jar for about the first half of their fuel-hunting excursion, because every nomad child of either sex needed to develop muscular strength for survival; but as the jar grew heavier, Zulika took hold of one handle, and when the jar was full she relieved Dilnara of the burden altogether. They were on their way back to camp when what seemed a stray lamb came walking toward them.

Dilnara noticed it first. "Mother! Look! Whose lamb is that? It doesn't look like any of ours or Uncle Murhat's; could it belong to Orhan?" Orhan, to whom the child referred, was the clan's chief elder and shaman. (When the clan was in contact with other clans that took their vague Islamic tradition more seriously, Orhan insisted on being called an imam—a title he discarded again when he had no more use for it.)

"It isn't Orhan's either, nor anyone's that I can think of," replied Zulika. To herself, she was wondering how this lamb's wool could be so spotlessly, brilliantly white in this dusty landscape. A moment later, however, she and Dilnara were given something much more extraordinary to marvel at...

...as the lamb spoke.

"Zulika and little Dilnara, stay a moment and listen to Me," said the lamb, in a massively deep voice which would have seemed more fitting to come from the mouth of a lion.

The child Dilnara looked around, mumbling in bafflement, "Er-Tostik?" Her mother had told her bedtime stories about that legendary Central Asian hero, whose adventures included meeting talking animals.

The Lamb looked straight at the little girl. "There is a bit of truth in that story, daughter. There is a bit of truth in many stories, that you do not guess. But your mother is going to learn much more. You, Dilnara, must promise not to tell others that you spoke with Me."

With her eyes as wide as poppies in full bloom, Dilnara silently nodded.

Zulika overcame her stupefaction to address the mysterious being, logically enough: "Who ARE you?"

The Lamb exhaled in their direction--an amount of breath which could not possibly have been contained inside that small body. His breath seemed at once like a warm breeze dispelling excessive

cold, and a cool breeze dispelling excessive heat. "The ways your world has taken are such that, if I told you at once Who I am, you would unthinkingly identify Me with foes, oppressors and injustice. The grievances you would list would in some part be genuine--though not by any fault of Mine--and would in some part be self-deceptions, devised to mask your own people's wrongdoing. But it is ordained that you will live long enough to learn exactly Who I am, in a better manner of learning than has been afforded to you or your tribe."

Zulika knelt before the Lamb, just in case He might be some spirit that wanted to be shown deference; also to look more directly into His eyes. There was something about those eyes... "Whoever you are, why do you speak to me? What do you want?"

"I want nothing that is not Mine by right, and nothing whose yielding to Me should be feared," said the Lamb. "But the first thing for you will be to learn what I offer: an escape for you and your loved ones, an escape from such evil as you can barely imagine."

The nomad woman glanced over her shoulder toward the distant camp; there was no sign that anyone there was aware of what she was doing. "What evil threatens us, marvellous beast?"

The Lamb's face assumed a manlike solemnity, still startling even on top of the startlement of His talking. "You know how Aleksandr the Second, the Russian Tsar, was murdered. But you do not realize why. He was not murdered for doing any wrong to the people; he was murdered BECAUSE HE DID GOOD. Those who planned his death do not want the justice they pretend to want; they desire hatred and violence, in the hope that these will form a wave carrying them to power. And they will succeed. They will succeed within your lifetime; and when they do, they will bring unspeakable suffering, not only on the Russians, but also on your people, and the Tatars, and the Yakuts, and the Armenians, everyone in this Empire."

"Then what is the way of escape?"

"Very soon, something like a fairy tale will become reality. Your husband will find a way to enter a place you never heard of. When it happens, you must go with him. There will be dangers in that new place also, but none of them worse than the horror you will be escaping from. Watch for a sign for further guidance in that other place."

"What manner of sign?"

"I said that the tale of Er-Tostik bore a kernel of truth. You will be in a place where many of the animals ARE able to speak, as I speak. They, however, speak a language you do not know."

"So how does that sign help me?"

"There is one beast there who is destined to meet you and help you to know what you must do. The first time you hear _her_ speak, you will find that you CAN understand the language of that place; and from then on you will be able to speak it perfectly."

"What kind of beast will this be?"

"A tigress. Do not be afraid of her. She will call herself 'The Slender Claw.' Also, a time will come when you will hear My voice again. At that time, you must trust and accept whatever I tell you-- although My appearance will be different at that time."

Zulika was accustomed to fairy tales involving riddles; but this all seemed to close to home to allow for guessing games. "Please, WHAT appearance?"

The Lamb actually smiled. "In that place, I use a name for Myself which is actually a word known to _your_ language: a form of your word for 'lion.' "

And with that, the Lamb faded out of sight, like a dream of a dream.

After various practical problems of comfortable housing and food for his demi-human friends had been solved, Hookpaw felt more entitled to insist on more time being spent in universe-bridging experiments. When further days of improvised incantations had yielded no result, the oddly-assorted foursome turned increasingly to symbolic physical objects and actions.

On a morning when Iskralida and Valamisa--though not Bezbimbry--had begun falling into Hookpaw's "Eternal Now" forgetfulness of the passing of time, something seemed to show promise at last. With a little help from the others but mostly by his own telekinesis, Hookpaw had collected every human-looking statue he had made into a group. All these were positioned facing toward the stone arch, as if they might walk through it. The Tiger, the Nymphs and the She-Dwarf stood together on the other side, looking at the statues and repeating spoken phrases of invitation. In wordless glances they exchanged, they told each other, "This might be it!" Hookpaw gradually shifted from speaking with his mouth to concentrating his mind's pure will on the gate. Then he ran around to the statue side, ran through the arch from that side as if leading people through it, and repeated this procedure several times.

After he passed through the arch for the ninth time, he stopped and said to the others, "I _felt_ something that time! It was a coldness, like a winter wind penetrating inside a shelter." He ran around and through a tenth time, and actually shivered on that transit.

Not going through the arch anymore, Hookpaw resumed sheer concentration of will. Before very much more time had passed, all four outlaws beheld the same thing: A SKY, straight ahead of them.

For six or seven thrilled heartbeats, all of them saw a blue sky of a different shade of blue than the one

above them, with clouds moving in a different direction at a different speed than the ones above them. There was no sign yet of Earthly humans, nor of any living thing; but all of them felt certain that they had just glimpsed the sky of Adam's world. The vision faded, but the renewed enthusiasm it inspired did not fade.

Shouting, "Success!" Valamisa reached down to sweep Bezbimbry up in a hug; Iskralida threw her arms around Hookpaw's massive neck with the same exclamation. When the first elation had quieted just a little, Bezbimbry said what they all were thinking: "Now we know it CAN be done; so how do we make it work BETTER, well enough to enable someone to come to us?"

"More statues placed before the arch?" Iskralida speculated.

"All of us going through the way Hookpaw did?" Valamisa pondered.

Hookpaw sat and scratched himself. "Both of those things are worth doing. But I think--that is, the universe thinks through me--that we will also need more force of oneness. Let us all meditate on what unenlightened illusions we may still have to discard in order to perfect our awareness of the Everything."

Inwardly, deep in his feline soul, Hookpaw was really telling himself that he needed to purge out all remaining thoughts of his deceased wife: sadness that she was dead, and guilt for his having led her to her death in their senseless campaign--HIS campaign--against the lions.

"She IS all; she IS everywhere and everything; she IS the circle of life, and so I need only the circle, not the individual tigress!" he growled to himself.

The young tigress Elkfinder was by now virtually an adult; and since she was betrothed to Bluntmuzzle, her former fellow criminal and now her fellow penitent, she felt it only right to join in his present task for the benefit of the tigers' expatriate colony.

Bluntmuzzle was engaged in surveying the uninhabited lands west of where the tigers were currently sojourning: noting where there was cover to ambush prey, where there was water which both prey and predators would need, and so on. Bluntmuzzle welcomed Elkfinder's company--not only because they were to be mates, but also because, lacking hands to write down notes, they needed to memorize the terrain features they saw. Two heads might remember more geography than one.

"How old do you think this scent is?" the girl tiger asked her fiance, as they both were drawing into their nostrils the residual smell from a trail where wildebeests or something similar had passed.

"More than a week, I suspect," replied Bluntmuzzle. "If Ranshuk were here, he could probably narrow the estimate to a quarter-day margin. But it's worth noticing that every distinguishable hoofprint is

pointing in the same direction; so it was probably a unified herd movement, rather than the cumulative tracks of individuals passing at different times." He reminisced for a moment about his departed father Brightburn teaching him how to pay attention to clues of this nature when tracking; then his bride-to-be reclaimed his attention.

"Shall we follow them and see where they were going?"

The two tigers followed the old tracks in a northerly direction--which was not backtracking their own group, since they were farther west. After about a mile, they came to a fair-sized creek. A dead tree was lying across it, seeming to be a chance fall rather than having been put there on purpose by anyone. Tigers having no distaste for water, Bluntmuzzle would have ignored the treetrunk and waded across the creek; but before he stepped in, Elkfinder spoke in a teasing tone:

"What's the matter, sweetheart--afraid you're too fat for the tree to bear your weight?"

Bluntmuzzle snorted good-naturedly. "We'll see about that!" Gracefully springing up onto the fallen tree, he started across with perfect balance. The tree would have supported his weight...if it had not been rotten all through. Right at the middle, it suddenly broke in half like a stick, spilling Bluntmuzzle into the creek with a mighty splash. Elkfinder could not contain her laughter.

Bluntmuzzle could tell that her laughter was not malicious, and he was glad that they could have humorous moments; this was bound to help their marriage relationship through the years to come. Thus, it did not bother him to have taken a fall; but what happened a moment later did embarrass him. He was about to come ashore on the far bank of the creek when a mud-slick limb, formerly fallen away from the dead tree and long lying just under the surface, rolled suddenly out from under his right forepaw, dropping his face directly into the muck.

"Blast!" he snarled, spitting out mud and then dipping his mouth in the water to rinse it.

An instant later, both tigers were startled to hear a familiar but unexpected voice cheerfully exclaiming, "If you're going to call my name so angrily, at least say my whole name!"

"Fear-No-Blast!" Elkfinder cried out, looking around to see the old scout. He had come gliding in for a landing unnoticed.

"That's SIR Fear-No-Blast now, by act of Queen Helen."

Recrossing the creek to greet the gander knight, Bluntmuzzle asked him, "Does this mean that the King's counsel for us tigers to stay out of contact with Narnia has been changed?"

"No, friends, it means that I am now your fellow pioneer. I will never go back to Narnia; I will be with

you until the day I join Comb-The-Weeds up in Aslan's country."

"Well, Narnia's loss is our gain! As long as you're in this country, we could sure use your help with our surveying."

Fear-No-Blast laughed. "Don't worry, poor little helpless tigers, the big strong goose will take care of you!" Then he turned solemn. "Actually, the big strong goose almost got eaten by a bigger, stronger eagle on the way from Narnia. I reckon that the false Great Gryphon is not finished making trouble for us...."

Fear-No-Blast's arrival among the encamped tigers was hailed happily by all. Slimtalon was especially glad that he had brought a copy of the Queen's Catechism; but the compact scroll was left inside its container for the present, pending her judgment of what would be the best way for creatures without hands to try to make use of it.

The wise gander was put to work immediately, scouting out additional prospective hunting grounds. All the adult tigers were agreed that, when enough good land was reconnoitered, they should split apart by families (with the orphaned youngsters divided up among adult guardians), lest one area become completely hunted out. Some good spot would be chosen as a meeting-place, where all Talking Tigers would gather two or three times a year. It was unanimously agreed that Christmas would be one of these times.

Returning from his fourth day of surveying, Fear-No-Blast had intriguing news for his friends: "There is a large wooded area which is unquestionably inhabited by intelligent beings. Many of the larger trees there are connected to each other by something like rope bridges, and there are big platform nests constructed among the branches."

"Other thinking beings!" exclaimed Slimtalon. "This has to be part of Aslan's plan. By having contact with another intelligent species, our descendants will be better fortified against sinful arrogance in the future...and be that much better suited to carry out Aslan's future plan for the role of tigers in a time of distress for our world."

"I take it you didn't see any of the tree-dwellers themselves?" Quickspring asked Fear-No-Blast.

"Not fur nor feather. But they must be of a kind with hands, to have built the structures I saw."

Slimtalon's face lit up with the look of a happy thought. "If they have hands, perhaps they can WRITE...in which case, they would be capable of making new copies of the Queen's Catechism!"

Ripplestride, standing close beside the tigress matriarch, put in her own supporting word: "We should make contact with these beings at once!"

"In whatever way will go most smoothly," said Bluntmuzzle. "If they're something like large Talking Squirrels, we don't want to scare them out of their wits."

"Then we shouldn't all advance upon them at once," urged Leapwell. "We should send only two or three persons--whoever is good at persuasion and tact."

"Then I recommend that we send Fear-No-Blast and Ranshuk, along with just one tiger," said Slimtalon. "Besides our wolf and gander both being fair-spoken souls, it should be a reassuring thing for our new neighbors to see that we practice friendliness between different races." All the adult tigers approved of their matriarch's idea.

"My thanks to you all for your confidence," said Ranshuk. "Permit me, then, to suggest which tiger should accompany us: the very youngest of the yearlings, to show even more clearly that our coming is not an attack."

Slimtalon frowned slightly. "I would say yes to that, if not for the fact that we are not entirely certain that these tree-dwellers are harmless to US."

"We needn't be entirely alone," replied the wolf. "Several grown tigers could follow us at about a quarter-mile's distance, ready to charge in if I howl for help."

"That sounds good," said Slimtalon.

Meditating in search of a deeper understanding of the Everything-ness was not going very well for Hookpaw. The more he sought the mixing and blurring of all distinctions, the more something kept pulling his thoughts toward specific events. He remembered how he had first led the Talking Tigers in assaults upon ordinary non-intelligent lions; when questioned about this by authority figures, he had insisted that he was just concerned to protect future generations of humans from having their farm animals devoured by predators who knew no law. This had been a lie; he had from the start been planning to move on to attack the Talking Lions...and it was getting harder, thinking back on this, to hang on to his enlightenment that lies and truth were equal and interchangeable parts of the Cosmic All.

Hookpaw finally left the meditating to his three demi-human friends, while he turned his attention to tangible deeds. First, as the others were meditating together in front of the stone arch, he constructed a new pentagram like the one Tash had instructed him to make before. Sitting in this, he prayed to himself, since he was Aslan as much as anyone was, that he could make the archway into a real gateway between worlds. After many minutes, this effort had been rewarded by a new vision of Adam's world, with people visible this time. The people wore cruder clothing than the family of King Frank and Queen Helen, and they were somewhat darker of hair and complexion, but there was no

mistaking it--they were human. Hookpaw even thought for a moment that he could smell them.

The vision had faded at last; but Iskralida, Valamisa and Bezbimbry were mightily cheered up by the progress. Hookpaw, for his part, undertook a new step which might help to draw the Earth-people hither: he began telekinetically collecting stones and tree limbs, to build three or four new huts which newly-transplanted Earthlings could use for shelter until they could build something more to their own liking.

This continued into the next day. Hookpaw was still at it an hour after breakfast, when Valamisa approached him with a worried look. "Master Hookpaw, please come and speak with Bezbimbry. She's beginning to say things that I don't think are helping her oneness."

The outlaw tiger followed the Nymph to where the She-Dwarf was talking to the other Nymph. "...made perfect sense once I thought of it," Bezbimbry told Iskralida. "Until Hookpaw opened our eyes, I always imagined that Aslan--I mean the apparent Aslan, of course, not the Everything as we know it--created the first Talking Animals instantly able to speak as a compensation for their shorter life-span. But now I realize the truth. All the Talking Beasts came into being with fully-formed intelligence BECAUSE THEY HAD ALREADY LIVED PAST LIVES as intelligent beings, probably as children of Adam and Eve on Earth. So they were simply continuing their journey through the universe."

Hearing this much, Hookpaw felt at once that Valamisa's worries must be unfounded. He knew nothing about Hinduism and the numerous different interpretations that mankind had given to the notion of reincarnation; but it struck him at once that what Bezbimbry was conjecturing would further confirm the intermingled oneness of all life.

"This is interesting, Bezbimbry," he said, ignoring Valamisa's uneasy glance. "Go on."

Smiling at her mentor's approval, the Dwarf widow continued. "If we can project to the minds of the Earth-dwelling humans the fact that souls from their world have already been reborn here, it will give their spirits an awareness of kinship that will help them cross over to us. Thus, when *I* am reincarnated, I will find my new husband--in fact, the new husband I find may well be Quidgubble, also reincarnated."

"You can SAY that he is in any case," Iskralida told her encouragingly, "since everyone is everyone else."

Valamisa touched Hookpaw on one shoulder. "That's what I'm concerned about. Ask her how she intends to arrive at this reincarnation."

"That's a good question. Bezbimbry, what IS your thought about entering into a new incarnation?"

The She-Dwarf extended a hand toward Hookpaw's face, till the tip of her index finger touched the point of one of his upper fangs. "You have led us to hope that we three will find husbands among the sons of Adam who will come here. But although it IS possible for Dwarfs to intermarry with humans, I seriously doubt that any of them will be attracted to me. The Nymphs were intentionally made by Aslan--the superficial embodiment of Aslan, that is--to have the very qualities of physical beauty that sons of Adam find appealing. But not I! A human male would have to be truly desperate to consider marrying me. Thus it's better if I am reincarnated into the first generation that will be born here from the newcomers; I might well be a daughter of one of my friends here."

Valamisa knelt and hugged Bezbimbry. "Well, if this returning to bodily life is true, it will happen when it happens, regardless of how long you continue in this life. Why be obsessed with it right now?"

"Because of timing. If there is to be a chance that the reincarnation of that part of oneness which I call 'myself' will again be married to the reincarnation of that part of the oneness I know as 'Quidgubble,' then I need to get moving on in the circle of life soon, so as to be reborn reasonably close in time to his rebirth."

Iskralida nodded solemnly. "Clearly, dear friend, you Dwarfs can think as deeply as you can dig."

"Wait a minute!" Valamisa objected. "She's saying she wants to DIE!"

"Of course I am," said Bezbimbry, looking at Valamisa as if the Nymph were a naive child.

"Quidgubble will doubtless come back in a handsome form like the Crown Prince, so why should I not meet him in a beautiful form like yours?"

Valamisa began to weep. "Oh, Bezbimbry, forgive me, forgive Iskralida and me both! We never meant to make you feel inferior for not looking like us! I'm so sorry; I didn't realize till now how much we took you for granted and let you be a servant to us. We Nymphs are so accustomed to being admired for this gift of beauty which we did nothing to earn or deserve...please, forgive us, and PLEASE don't even think of doing violence to yourself!"

"Oh, I won't kill MYSELF, dear sister," Bezbimbry assured her. "I'd probably do a clumsy job of it and be terribly uncomfortable on the way out into the Everything-ness." Valamisa barely had time to feel relieved before Bezbimbry concluded: "So, I'm going to ask one who has the skill to end life quickly to help me make the transition."

This took Hookpaw by surprise. "Wait a minute, you want ME to kill you??" All of his callousness over killing lions, even lion cubs, had not prepared him for the thought of slaying one who had in a sense become his disciple. He backed away from her, as if suddenly afraid that he might touch her by accident with a tooth or a claw.

Bezimbry stepped closer to him, regarding him with an uncommonly affectionate gaze. "Of course! Who but you has enabled me to come so far so quickly in understanding the Cosmic Balance? You will be doing me a huge kindness if you slay me now. Iskralida and Valamisa will manage without me; I have things well ordered in our cottage."

Valamisa lunged between Hookpaw and Bezimbry, facing the former. "No! We can't manage without her! I haven't the faintest clue about cooking, and neither has Iskralida!" She swung around toward her small friend. "You have to stay! The Cosmic Balance can postpone Quidgupples's rebirth to coincide with the rebirth you'll have after a LONG life in your present body!"

Iskralida came and put her hands on her quasi-sister's shoulders. "You know that I would never wish anything upon Bezimbry that was really bad for her; and--" (looking toward the She-Dwarf) "--I freely join in the apology for taking her for granted. But shouldn't she decide for herself what happens to her own temporal body?"

"That's right!" said Bezimbry. "Kill me now, Hookpaw! There's no need for a long goodbye, since I'll be blended into the rocks and the trees all around you until I assume a new flesh-body. Just receive my thanks in advance, and break my neck before I can even feel it!"

Hookpaw turned away from her, shuddering. "No! Don't ask this of me!"

That would have been the end of Bezimbry's plan, at least the end of Hookpaw being the one to execute it...if Tash had not chosen this moment to show himself again, still in Gryphon form, after not being seen for so many days. The demi-human women, unprepared for the sight, froze in place with amazement, while Tash spoke directly to the tiger. "Hail, myself! Myself greets yourself as my other self, as we are one self in the oneness! Do not interrupt the flow of the river of being-ness by thwarting the will of the oneness where that oneness is Bezimbry."

Hookpaw stared even more blankly than the others. "But, but, I don't want to kill her."

"Death is an illusion, so you will not be killing her." Tash drew closer, his eyes clutching like talons at Hookpaw's very personality. "You must not let this illusion of 'conscience' restrict you. If you call it wrong to disincorporate the body of Bezimbry when she ASKS you to do so, how will you be able to avoid the delusion that you were 'sinning' when you disincorporated those lions who did NOT ask you to do so?"

In the muddled and chaotic depths of Hookpaw's mind, one form of self-justification struggled for supremacy with a different form of self-justification. Being a provider and protector for the three women had enabled him to feel that he was not a wicked creature; but now, his very desire to maintain this role by refusing to kill Bezimbry was pulling him toward the realization of guilt for those other

slayings...

Bezimbry came up alongside the tiger, speaking with a voice which now sounded scarcely different from the voice of the so-called Great Gryphon: "Even if I had no concern for the timing of my transition, I would never want to disrupt your own progress in enlightenment. And it is exactly your hesitation to strike that is shackling you. Rise above guilt, friend Hookpaw! I release you from any blame, for you are merely releasing me to find a new and beautiful body for myself. Slay me NOW!"

Clamping his eyes shut, as if dreading to see his own action, Hookpaw whirled toward that voice. Whatever was guiding his right forepaw, it struck perfectly, breaking Bezimbry's neck like a straw. She fell down smiling.

Iskralida spoke in a singsong tone: "Pass into the air and the water, dear friend. Be in us as we drink and breathe." Valamisa attempted nothing poetic, but fell to the ground sobbing. Tash, with an approving nod to Hookpaw and a similar nod to Iskralida, looked sternly at the grieving Nymph.

"Child, it is unenlightened of you to mourn for the fulfillment of your friend's fondest wish. You will need to grow beyond this crudely Narnian way of seeing things if you are to play your rightful part in what is coming."

Tash turned back to Hookpaw. "This is a great leap in your spiritual ascension. Soon you will succeed in what you are trying to do--what *I* am trying to do, since I am you. And Bezimbry, also being you, will be with you. As token of your belief in this truth, eat her body. Now." Then he vanished.

Bezimbry found herself seemingly sitting on the floor of a cave. The only light in the rather featureless chamber came shining directly from the cave's only other occupant--the Great Lion Himself. He was looking at her with an unreadable expression.

"You are thinking that you have not seen Me since before Quidgubble was called away to My country," Aslan said. "You are also wondering where you are, and wondering--now that you see Me again--whether I am quite so empty a superficial appearance amid the Everything-ness as you had begun believing I was. You need, first of all, to realize where you are. You are sitting in a suspended instant, the instant between your next-to-last heartbeat and your very last heartbeat. Since time obeys Me, even this instant is enough for you and Me to have a conversation; but this conversation represents the very last chance you have. Neither the righteous nor the wicked are EVER sent back through mortal existence in a different incarnation. For you, everything depends on THIS instant.

"Just now, I perceived you suppressing the impulse to make a retort about whether I mean a last chance to reclaim the love you think I stole from you. That is a good sign. What you must do next is to hold fast that love for your husband which is the remnant of goodness in your very bitterness, and blend it

with that hesitation to insult Me to My face which is the remnant of intelligence in your very foolishness. What do you find when you combine these two things?"

Aslan's face revealed nothing, but His voice was kind. Thus Bezbimbry found the courage to answer Him. "I find, Lord, that the very ability to feel love, which made me resent You for taking Quidgubble away, was only ever mine in the first place because You gave it to me when You created me. I find further that it would have been far worse never to know love, than to bear the loss of my beloved. This in turn makes it clear that a shapeless, faceless 'oneness' cannot love anyone. Love is given BY particular individual beings TO particular individual beings. Even You Yourself, in loving Your entire creation, are actually loving all the individual creatures in it, knowing each one distinctly."

The Almighty Lion's eyes began to show something like positive approval. "That is very good, Daughter of Earth. Go on."

"The Nymphs and I were eager to believe that Hookpaw and his 'Great Gryphon' offered something of real value, because that way we could confirm our renunciation of Jadis without the humiliation of returning to Narnia and begging for the King's forgiveness."

"Well and accurately said. The same can be said of Hookpaw. Every direction his mind has darted in the months since his great crimes has really been the same direction: that is, away from Me, and away from the contrite confession of guilt which is his only hope for salvation. The evil one who lured him into wrongdoing does not care what direction people's thoughts roam, as long as that direction is away from knowing and obeying My will. I tell you a little of Hookpaw's story because, although you have killed no one, your path has been much like his. It is a path of denial; but no denial of truth can stand forever. Nothing is hidden which will not be revealed. But your heart is about to beat its final beat as your smashed body hits the ground. What is the last thing you need to realize?"

Bezbimbry looked closely into the Lion's eyes...and saw there a hint of the compassionate tears which were said to have gleamed in those eyes the day He heard the boy Digory Kirke pleading for help for his mother. And she knew what was the final piece of the puzzle.

"My Lord, I need to realize that You did not take the trouble to slow down time so You could gloat over my ruin. I need to realize--I do realize--that You take no pleasure in punishing any soul. You would always rather forgive than condemn --yet the sinner has to WANT Your forgiveness. You have met me more than halfway by what You are doing; but *I* have to ask you to save me from whatever awful end awaits the unrepentant. And I do so ask! I do beg forgiveness! You owe me nothing, but You owe it to Your own benevolent nature to make the offer of grace that You are making. And I would owe it to You, even if I did not need salvation, to pay honor to Your grace. No treasure I could possess would be able to buy Your pardon, but as You hold it out to me I grasp it. Forgive me, my Lord and my God, and receive me into Your Kingdom!"

At last Aslan smiled. "Your dead body has just hit the ground; but you are escaping upward from it. Understand that no mortal being in all the Narnian world will know, until they also arrive in My country, that you did find salvation. As far as they will know in earthly life, your soul was thrown away for nothing, and Tash has enjoyed the foul satisfaction of dragging you into the same darkness which is his own inescapable doom. But Tash knows very well, to his frustration, that you have in reality eluded his clutches. There is another who also knows of your escape...and he is as elated as Tash is confounded."

Just then, Bezbimbry discovered that there was a third occupant in this cave. Stepping out from behind Aslan, wearing a shining robe and the most delightful grin she had ever seen, came none other than Quidgubble. "You have NO idea how much I prayed for you while I was waiting up yonder!" he exclaimed, as he started toward his wife with open arms.

Neither the word "joy," nor any other word spoken in the Shadowlands, can sufficiently describe what Bezbimbry felt as she flung herself into her husband's mighty embrace. The cave walls vanished; and even as she clung to Quidgubble and felt his holy kisses, she saw from the corner of an eye that they were now in the midst of a meadow that sparkled with impossibly beautiful flowers. Departed Narnians whom she recognized were converging to welcome her--including Slimtalon's husband Brightburn, Fear-No-Blast's wife Comb-The-Weeds, and every single one of the Talking Lions who had perished in Hookpaw's uprising.

Thus Bezbimbry passed out of our story, into The Great Story which never ends.

It happened sometimes with Narnian Talking Beasts, as with tribal humans in Adam's world, that youngsters would not be given their permanent name until some unusual event happened in their life to suggest a name. (Such had been the case with Fear-No-Blast, who as a gosling had been called Sputter.) The very youngest of the expatriate tigers, a female not quite a year old, was also the last one who did not yet have her adult name. She was called Nippy, so dubbed by her mother--who, for her crimes, was now an unthinking, unremembering ordinary tiger somewhere back in Narnia, liable to be killed someday if she proved a threat to the still-intelligent Narnians. Nippy and the wolf Ranshuk were walking across mostly-open ground which Ranshuk noticed was growing softer and moister; there were several streams of different sizes in this area. Fear-No-Blast had flown ahead in the direction of the tree-dwellers, intending to pass close above the treetops and try to get a reply to his vocal hailing and wing-gestures.

During the first hour of the first day of their march, wolf and gander had both tried to build up the self-confidence of the little tigress (relatively little--growing fast, she already weighed a bit more than Ranshuk) by telling her how important her presence was to prove the friendly nature of this deputation. Nippy, however, had needed very little ego-boosting before she decided that the mission depended entirely on her. The wolf silently envied Fear-No-Blast for being able to fly out of earshot of the cub's longwinded boasting. He realized that this chatter might also be helping the youngster to process

residual grief over losing her parents; but then, she had been too young to remember much about them when they were both reduced to dumb beasts.

"You know, *I* used to be the one who made sure there was fair play when my cousins and I played games between Rippletride's lessons. We had some team games pretending to be lions and leopards." Mentioning lions had no more effect on the cub's emotions than mentioning leopards; last year's horrid events, ignited by the demon Tash, were not viscerally real for her--yet this did not stop her from being quick to condemn her elders. "My stupid mother and father kept me from finding out how it would be to play with lions and leopards for real. Because of what they did, and Hookpaw, all the leopard and lion mothers and fathers told their cubs not to come visit us when we were living in that fort with the Giant and the Minotaurs. Grownups think they're so smart, but they need someone young for this job! Whatever these tree-climbers are, they must have cubs, too, and I'll be good at playing games with them. They won't be scared of ME, not at all! Do you smell them yet? I wonder if they smell good? You'd better not howl, or you'll scare them. If they hear about what the stupid grownup tigers did, they'll probably hide and not even let us see what they look like. Why did my mother and father have to kill that lion they killed? I'm smarter than they were. Anyone's smarter than they are NOW. I bet I'll get my grownup name from this. Maybe they'll call me Friendlyfangs. Hold up, Ranshuk, don't get ahead of me like that; I'm the one they should see first!"

"I'm trying to make sure you will be seen by the tree-dwellers, and seen again by the other tigers," Ranshuk told her. "Fear-No-Blast mentioned after his first flight this way that some of the ground looked as if it might be bog. I don't want you plunging into the muck and sinking to your death; so I'll be testing the ground before you tread on it."

"I'm tired of everyone treating me like a baby!" shouted Nippy. Shouldering past Ranshuk, she went into a dead run straight ahead. "I can take care of MYSELF," she called back at him. "Just let ME check the ground for YOU, Mister Smarty-Wolf, if you're so worried--"

This was as far as Nippy's grand proclamation of autonomy went before it changed into a horrible squashing sound and a screech of cubbish terror. Following as fast as he dared, Ranshuk saw that Nippy had succeeded in doing exactly what he had been trying to warn her against: falling into a bog hole.

Simply diving in headlong after her would only mean suffocating with her. The wolf uttered his loudest possible distress howl to summon the adult tigers who were not far behind; at the same time, he began feeling out the outline of the bog hole with his forepaws. "Nippy! Don't struggle! That'll only make you sink sooner! Spread yourself out, like sunning yourself on a rock!" But the yearling was in hysterics; and he could not catch her eye, because she had plunged into the bog facing away from him.

Ranshuk worked his way along the bog verge. Fortunately, it was like a water inlet from a lake, allowing him to come quickly to a position within the young tigress' field of vision, only a few

tantalizing feet away. Unfortunately, there were no large fallen tree limbs that he might shove in to help her climb out. But paw-probing of the mire at this point suggested an extreme yet hopeful course of action.

"Here, Nippy, look at me! Over here! Stop thrashing; you can stay afloat for a minute or so if you hold still...that's better, now listen carefully. Do you see how close I am to you here? Don't waste breath talking, I know you can see. Listen! It's very shallow here by me; if you have something to step on, you can climb out. There's only one thing I can give you to step on--ME! If I go in right here by you, you can climb on my back and out of the bog. Then it'll be up to YOU to pull ME out. Once I'm in, I won't be able to get myself out, but once you're on land you can grab one of my hind legs in your teeth and haul me back. Don't worry about hurting me, a broken leg's better than drowning. You have to do as I say, and there's no time to argue. You climb up my back to the shore, then pull me out after you. I'm starting now!"

Surging into the miry muck, Ranshuk did not feel at all eager to die; but he gave himself no time to think of excuses not to take this risk. He kept his muzzle in the air as long as possible; then, with his nose hardly an inch from Nippy's nearest paw, he held his breath and ducked his head into the filthy darkness. In the last instant before the bog stopped his ears, he thought he heard Fear-No-Blast calling out to him from far away.

The stabbing pain of tiger claws digging into his neck and then his back, as if his body were a tree-trunk, notified Ranshuk that Nippy was performing the first half of her part of the plan. With a last wounding to his hindquarters, her weight was off of him again. For what seemed like a whole hour in the smothering silence, nothing else happened. Then there was fresh pain, as powerful jaws closed on his right hind leg and pulled hard. The delay must have been because Nippy had to plunge her snout into the muck to get a grip on him. An instant later, what felt like the bill of a goose closed on his tail and pulled less powerfully. His friends were making headway against the bog's grip on him, but not fast enough to get him clear before the air in his lungs gave out. In the final split-second before he lost consciousness, Ranshuk felt certain that a pair of HANDS, roughly like small human hands, had taken hold of his left hind leg and were helping to drag him to safety.

When Fear-No-Blast had flown ahead, he had received a response to his hailing as he swooped over the trees. A thin but intelligible voice had called up to him: "What creatures are with you?"

The gander had replied, "A Talking Wolf and a young Talking Tigress. Other tigers are farther off." To his puzzlement, the voice among the branches had then said, "You must get back to them at once! They may be in trouble!" So Fear-No-Blast had turned to retrace his flight path. As a result, he was in time to see Ranshuk saving Nippy from the bog hole at the potential cost of his own life.

As the scout hastily descended to help in trying to extricate the wolf, he saw something remarkable from the corner of one eye: a thick dead tree not far from the bog hole seemed to open up, as if it were

a clamshell opening, and a gray-furred creature about the size of a Talking Badger emerged, running on two legs. He guessed this to be some kind of sentry for the tree-dwellers, using a camouflaged observation point; but there was no time to think about that now. Fear-No-Blast clamped his bill upon Ranshuk's tail and pulled with all his might. He heard more than saw how the creature that emerged from hiding came up and began helping to pull.

Ranshuk emerged, unconscious and not breathing. Now the upright-walking animal--a mammalian female, it seemed--showed more of her attributes in action. She was built like a small bear, minus dangerous fangs and claws. Her snout was quite small, and her ears were strikingly round, suggestive of the ears of a mouse. On her belly was the opening of some kind of pouch, reminiscent of a description King Frank had once given of kangaroos in the world of Adam and Eve; this made her a "marsupial," who would carry her newborn baby with her in the pouch. Fear-No-Blast had never seen anything like her. With her hands, for hands they were, she turned the limp wolf over on his back, to push hard against his chest. After several hard pushes, Ranshuk vomited up half a gallon of bog, choked, gasped, tried to open his eyes, rolled rightside-up, yelped at the pain this action caused for his wounded right leg, then began trying to get the muck out of his eyes with his paws.

"Our deepest thanks!" Fear-No-Blast said to the new creature with a goosely bow. "Are you one of the dwellers in the trees yonder?"

"That I am," she said. "I am known as Tinkswid."

It being clear now that Ranshuk was not going to die, Nippy turned from anxiously hovering over him long enough to ask Tinkswid, "But what ARE you? You're a Talking Beast like us, but I never saw your kind in Narnia."

"And I never saw Narnia," said the bearlike being. "Not having seen it, I confess I disbelieved in it; but meeting Narnians proves that there is a Narnia after all."

"There sure is!" Nippy affirmed. "So Aslan created your people down here, apart from Narnia?"

"So my parents taught me. I'm in the second generation of our kind; my parents were among the ones directly created by Aslan. I would have disbelieved in HIM, since I never got to meet Him, but I know my parents would never lie to me. As for what we ARE: we are Talking Animals who have no non-talking counterparts in this world. I'm taught that Aslan created us based on animals in Adam's world known as koalas. He didn't make any ordinary koalas here, because he said koalas without intelligence would have too hard a time surviving in this world. I'm also taught that the koalas of Earth can only digest one kind of food, but Aslan made us able to eat many foods. Our treetop settlement allows us to live completely off the ground, as a protection against--" With eyes widening, Tinkswid halted in mid-sentence, as three adult tigers came bounding into view, having started running to catch up as soon as they heard Ranshuk's howl: Quickspring, Ripplestride and Smoothtail. Fear-No-Blast immediately

shouted to his friends, "Slow down! There's bog hereabouts!"

Quickspring, in command of the reserve party, pulled to a halt, seeing at once that the unfamiliar creature standing next to Fear-No-Blast was not hostile. He also saw the bedraggled condition of Ranshuk. "What happened?" he asked.

Quickspring and his bride Ripplestride were Nippy's own guardians. The yearling drew near them with her head and tail drooping in shame. "It's all my fault, Papa. I disobeyed Ranshuk and rushed ahead without checking the ground, so I fell into a mudhole. Ranshuk nearly died saving me from it."

At this point the wolf lifted his head. "But at least, ACK, she deserves credit for following, UGHH, my instructions for getting us both out of the bog." Then he vomited again.

Fear-No-Blast gestured with one wing toward Tinkswid. "This tree-dweller, Tinkswid, also helped us. Her people are the Talking Koalas."

Quickspring gave a deep nod of his impressive head. "We thank you, good creature, for helping strangers of whom you could well have been suspicious. I hope Fear-No-Blast has already been able to assure you that we intend no harm to any of your people. And if your bogs do not make you feel secure enough, I will give you my word--may Aslan punish me if I lie--that none of us carnivores will come any closer to your tree homes than we are now, unless invited."

Tinkswid made a hand gesture of greeting. "Some others of my people will come forth soon to speak with you, if the bird here will fly back over the tree town and call out an all-clear word I will tell him. For the seventeen years or so that we Koalas have existed, we have awaited the coming of Narnian beasts--beasts who would be flesh-eaters, but who would revere and obey a law never to prey upon thinking creatures."

At that, Smoothtail raised an eyebrow. "What, did Aslan tell you that we would come someday?"

"He said so to our first generation. And He gave us a sign to look for. Aslan said that, on the day when these flesh-eaters would approach our land, there would be one carnivore of a different kind with them...and that this different one would risk his life to save a companion."

Every pair of tiger or gander eyes widened at this revelation. (Ranshuk's eyes remained shut, as he coaxed his tear ducts to cleanse out the traces of bog-filth.) Fear-No-Blast exclaimed, "That's why the one who answered me said that my friends might be in trouble! You've been waiting for us all this time!" Ripplestride then addressed the Koala: "This means that Aslan foreknew everything about our--about why we would--your pardon, Tinkswid, but did Aslan foretell WHY we would be coming south?"

If Tinkswid guessed that Ripplestride was holding something back, she betrayed no sign of noticing. "Aslan said there were several reasons. One reason was that He did not want too many large flesh-eaters in lands where humans would eventually have many farms. Another reason was that He intended your kind to protect US against some future peril. Furthermore, Aslan said something we have wondered about ourselves: He said that we were to be your conscience."

Ripplestride looked very solemn. "I understand exactly what Aslan meant. And for my part I say, if any tiger does any unjust injury to your people, may that tiger be stricken by Aslan's frightful vengeance!"

Quickspring nodded. "So say we all!"

When Ranshuk tried to stand up, his right leg would not support him; there were two cracked bones in it. Stifling a yelp of pain, he hissed between his teeth, "I still say it's a fair trade for being alive. And the leg does help me to ignore the wounds all along my back."

The wolf's declining to reproach Nippy beyond this mild indirect rebuke only made her feel worse. "Isn't there anything we can do for him?" she pleaded to everyone present.

"Hands are a blessing," Tinkswid remarked quietly. "Aslan also taught my elders about some of the things humans can do. Among these things is what's called splinting a fracture. Lie still, injured one, I must fetch some things." It did not take the Talking Koala long to collect two straight sticks and some lengths of creeping vines to bind them. Halfway through this activity she paused to tell Fear-No-Blast the signal word she had mentioned before, adding something further in his ear, and he flew again toward the tree town. Coming alongside Ranshuk once more, Tinkswid said, "This will hurt. Please don't bite me by reflex."

"Don't worry, I have better sense than that," the wolf assured her. So Tinkswid proceeded to examine the broken bones, finding the fractures not as severe as she had feared; then she splinted the leg, eliciting only a few soft whimpers from her patient. Looking at the adult tigers, she went on: "Now he will need a drag-litter that he can be carried on to whatever place of refuge you have in mind for his recovery. I asked your bird friend to relay to my people a request for a litter; we keep several stored away for various needs."

During Tinkswid's ministrations to Ranshuk, Ripplestride had been drawing out of Nippy a fuller account of how she and Ranshuk had come to be plunged in the bog hole. When all of the embarrassing tale was told, the foster-mother said to her foster-daughter, "What you said of your blood parents is equally true of me, though NOT true of your Papa Quickspring or Grandmother Slimtalon. I also committed wicked violence, and the King would have been within his rights to have me put to death; but in giving me my life, he gave me a responsibility to bear also. Thus, EVEN THOUGH my sins put me in a position to be told I cannot judge anyone else, yet I still have to try to teach you and the other youngsters to walk in righteousness."

"I won't complain one peep about any punishment," murmured Nippy. "Ranshuk could have left me to die and said he couldn't save me and you would have believed him, but he did save me even though it was all my fault, and now he's crippled because of me."

Ripplestride kissed the young tigress' forehead. "Well, I notice that Ranshuk himself isn't saying one angry word against you. Maybe we can do with you what the King did with me: give you a duty to perform that teaches you to be a better beast than you have been."

It was not long before Fear-No-Blast rejoined them, and presently two more koalas arrived bringing the drag-litter. They introduced themselves as Tinkswid's father Hemshull, and her betrothed Yugdug. Hemshull formally greeted Quickspring on behalf of the tree-dwelling community, grasping one of the tiger's mighty forepaws like a human shaking hands. "Those grasping hands of yours give you in many respects a power that is beyond us," Quickspring told the koala elder. "If my people and yours can establish a cooperative relationship, I daresay that we will benefit by it at least as much as you will."

"I understand from your bird friend that there are more of you giant striped cats farther off," said Hemshull. "Since we trust in Aslan's promise, I will not be alarmed if the rest of them come here. Let one of your number go to bring them; then Yugdug will show you a place nearby where beasts of your sort can probably find comfortable sleeping perches."

"If that is a place where our friend the wolf could be kept safe, perhaps it could be shown to us now?" put in Smoothtail.

"Certainly, once your friend is on the drag-litter and ready to go," said Yugdug. He, Tinkswid and Hemshull all worked together to load Ranshuk onto the litter. Before they had finished this, Ripplestride told them, "If the young tigress here can be harnessed to your litter, she will pull it for you. She will pull Ranshuk wherever he needs to go until he can walk again."

Hemshull gave her a look that suggested he knew exactly why Ripplestride was making the suggestion. "It shall be done," he replied. As Nippy was shouldering her new responsibility, Fear-No-Blast took off to tell the rest of the tigers that they had found new friends.

Valamisa woke up in her cot the morning after Bezbimbry's death, to notice that Iskrallida was still asleep in hers. The grieving Nymph could not bear to glance at the smaller bed Bezbimbry had formerly used in their cottage. Valamisa fingered a lightweight scarf now tied around her neck, a wistful remembrance; it had seemed long when the She-Dwarf wore it.

Hookpaw had taken Bezbimbry's body out of sight before obeying Tash's order to devour it. Actually, though he did not discuss this with the Nymphs, the tiger had eaten only one token mouthful of her flesh, buried the body, and then lain by the grave most of the night, striving to understand why he could

NOT feel delighted at the prospect of Bezbimbry attaining the reincarnation she had longed for--and why, although she herself had begged him to slay her, he still felt like a murderer.

When Iskralida awoke in her turn, it was to see that Valamisa was already working on breakfast. "Oh!" Iskralida softly exclaimed. "I wasn't thinking about that. We will have to do our own cooking from now on, won't we?"

Valamisa said nothing, so Iskralida continued.

"But it's worth it, as long as dear Bezbimbry will have her dream fulfilled. *I* had a dream, showing that she IS going to get her wish! The Great Gryphon was there, and he told me that before tomorrow is past, we will have succeeded in bringing the new humans from Adam's world! Not only that, but there will be more men than women among those who come, so you and I will have no trouble finding husbands among them. What's more, the very first girl baby I will give birth to--will BE our friend reborn, and I am to name her Bezbimbry again! Won't that be fabulous?"

Valamisa kept her eyes on the bread she was slicing: bread baked from flour which Bezbimbry had ground, using a kind of wild grain similar to winter wheat which Hookpaw had helped them collect. "Actually," she answered slowly, "if all is one, everything is equally fabulous, nothing better or worse than anything else. Bezbimbry being simply dead for no reason, eaten like a caught rabbit and her bones discarded for crows to pick at, is every bit as fabulous as Bezbimbry being reborn to be a grand lady in a coming generation of happy and prosperous humans."

Iskralida's perfect eyebrows lifted. "Why, sister, that is wonderfully profound! I see that I shall have to do more meditating; I want to attain as exalted a vision of the Everything-ness as you have!"

Turning toward Iskralida with a forced smile, Valamisa said, "Excuse me a moment, my dear." Then she left the cottage, went out of sight behind one of the other cottages prepared for the expected newcomers, and vomited.

On the steppes of Central Asia in the world of Adam and Eve, Tisrukh the ambitious nomad had cause again to feel that some fate was working in his favor. His male cousin Tarkan, who had married into another clan years ago, came to visit with his immediate household, bringing several sheep to be slaughtered for a family feast. Tarkan had always been on good terms with Tisrukh; so, over fire-cooked mutton, Tisrukh quietly opened his mind to his cousin.

"You know that Orhan makes much of his claim to be descended from the Kalor line." Tisrukh, who had never much liked his clan's chief elder and shaman, was referring to the historic royal family of the ancient kingdom of Chitral, over east on the frontier of China. "But you and I are as likely descended from that blood as he is; and I have been shown things in dreams that give me hope of rising far above Orhan. If I rise high, there is no reason why you should not rise with me."

Tarkan was very quiet about answering. "Are you planning to kill him?"

"Not if I don't have to; why invite blood feuds with his kinsmen? If things go as I believe they will, I'll have Orhan himself consenting to yield place to me." Tisrukh suddenly fell silent, as his sister-in-law Gulshim drew near to offer more bread to the two men. Gulshim was the wife of Tisrukh's brother Murhat. Although Murhat was likely to support Tisrukh in any dispute, Gulshim was the eldest daughter of Orhan as well. After Gulshim passed out of earshot again, Tisrukh had to pause once more as Tarazi, wife to Orhan and mother to Gulshim, also came near.

At last he could continue; so he described to Tarkan the dreams which had convinced him that an enchanted tiger would lead him to a new land where he would become a ruler. "And if I rule, you and Murhat will be my lieutenants," he concluded.

"If we'll be going to another place," Tarkan whispered, "couldn't you just leave Orhan behind?"

"Leaving him behind on purpose would anger some almost the same as if I killed him. Anyway, assuming he does accept my taking leadership, he does have some skills that could prove useful to us all in that place."

"I take it that you figure this tiger being on your side will intimidate Orhan out of opposing you."

"Yes. Now, I believe that very soon, though I'm not sure exactly how, we will find some kind of doorway or passage that leads to the new land. We need to have necessary things close at hand when this happens, just in case the way is open only for a short time."

"Necessary things like weapons, horses and food?"

"Also our women and children. When the chance comes, others may believe that this is a place they can lightly venture into, expecting to return home easily. But I forebode that the way may close behind us all at once; therefore our families must enter there with us. That is, unless you don't like your wives." Tarkan, in accordance with the Muslim customs the nomads loosely followed, had not one but two wives; these two bickered with each other so constantly that rumor had it Tarkan was sick and tired of both of them.

Still, Tarkan's reply showed some practical sense. "I'd better bring them along, regardless. Who knows if the new land will offer any other women?"

"As for that, the last dream I had seemed to show women waiting in the distance." Tisrukh had never borrowed domestic discord for himself by taking on more than one wife; but still, if he were to become a Tsar....

Nippy the young tigress had resigned herself to being given a permanent name immortalizing her stupidity: something like Bogwallower or Blindrusher. But Ranshuk had proposed a much more tactful name for her that met with approval from Quickspring and Ripplestride: Wolfsfriend. Wolfsfriend she therefore became; and as Wolfsfriend she applied herself wholeheartedly to looking out for the welfare of the friend to whom she owed her life. The koalas, judging that Ranshuk would be able to walk again in something like three weeks, hoisted him on a roped litter up to a platform in their tree-town, where he would be safe from wild lions without needing to have a tiger guarding him at all times. Tinkswid and her betrothed Yugdug undertook to bring Ranshuk water in gourds, and to see to his cleanliness; but it was left to Wolfsfriend to provide his food. Hemshull showed her a safe place where she could try her paw at catching fish for the wolf's first meal in the trees; and Ripplestride stood watch over the youngster.

Meanwhile, other tigers, young and old, commenced getting to know the koalas and learning the history of their community--which was the only one of its kind, since all races native to the Narnian world had so far had less than half a human lifetime to increase in numbers. The older tigers, in turn, recounted the history of Narnia proper to fascinated koala audiences, including what was known about the origin and scheming of Jadis (Ranshuk had much to contribute here, for such koalas as visited his temporary quarters). By common agreement among the tigers, it was left to Lady Slimtalon to handle that subject which, to say the least, was an embarrassment for them. The account of Hookpaw's uprising was told at first only to the tree-town's elders, over whom their patriarch Nubkarsh, the very first Talking Koala ever created, presided.

When he had heard out Slimtalon's concise but accurate narrative, Nubkarsh gestured for attention and addressed the elders: "This is the time to be certain that we trust in Aslan's word. I have spoken with the Great Lion more times than any other koala has done, and I do NOT believe that His promise is in any way made void by the sobering facts we have heard about the reason why the tigers came south. Aslan promised that these beasts would be friends and allies to us; and I accept Slimtalon's word that she was not among those who offended against Aslan and came to be so gravely in need of forgiveness."

"I believe in Aslan," said one elder; "and I believe that these newcomers, whatever sins the majority of them fell into before, are NOW submitted in their hearts to His will. I am ready, therefore, to stake my life and those of my wife and children on the trustworthiness of the tigers. But the missing one, the one who consorts with a demon, is quite another matter."

Nubkarsh nodded in the speaker's direction, then turned again toward Slimtalon. "You say that even your bird friend cannot be sure now of Hookpaw's exact whereabouts. Even less, then, can we be sure of the whereabouts of this false Gryphon who can appear and vanish again. Aslan would not permit us to be helpless victims to such a thing; but what course of action, if any, ought we to follow concerning the demon?"

"Of one thing I can assure you absolutely," Slimtalon told him. "If you hold fast your faith in Aslan, that evil being, whatever he really is, will have NO power to harm you directly. As for his acting through flesh-and-blood proxies: I don't believe that whatever Hookpaw is up to has any connection with your people."

Another elder addressed the tigress matriarch. "Not directly, as you would say; but his actions could still result in many things that might affect us. Though you tigers who are present mean us no ill, could it be that your presence will attract the demon's malice toward us?"

"The false Great Gryphon, in the time since we Narnians became aware of his existence, has used his influence more than once to stir up conflict among Narnian inhabitants completely different from tigers. And Hookpaw, though not actually repenting as he should, was so quick to forget his foolish grudge against the lions, that I am convinced that the whole tiger-lion business was only a prelude to whatever the demon really wants to achieve. Thus, Aslan be witness to my honesty in this, I believe that the demon would be just as likely to cause you some trouble if we tigers went elsewhere as if we stay near you."

"In that case," asked Hemshull, father of Tinkswid, "is there or is there not some action our two races can take to head off the evil that may be lurking? Although I agree that no evil spirit can attack us directly while Aslan protects us, I don't like merely waiting in ignorance for the false Gryphon to devise indirect means of troubling us."

"Hookpaw seems to be important in all of this," replied Slimtalon. "It's as if his consent to be manipulated has given Tash--" (this was the first time she had spoken that name; now it had just slipped out, but she supposed the koalas would have had to hear it sometime) "--that is, gives the demon more of an opening to exert an effect on material things. I have intended for a long time to give more thought to Hookpaw once my people were somewhat settled in a new hunting ground."

"You may consider them settled, then," said Nubkarsh. "There are plenty of large grazing animals in the countryside. There are lions, too, not talking ones; it would be no crime, and would benefit both you and us, if you were to, um, encourage them to do their hunting farther away from our woods. Then we koalas would be more free to do things on the ground."

"All of that will work itself out, now that we have reached an understanding between our two kinds. There is much we can do for each other; for instance, do your people have the skill of reading and writing?"

"What do those words mean?" asked the one elder who had not spoken up to now. "Are you talking about following trail signs?"

"Writing is a way of preserving knowledge with meaningful marks upon a surface that can be looked at," Slimtalon explained. "Some of my people are acquainted with it, and can give you at least a rough demonstration with claw-writing in dirt. More will be said of that soon. But let me return to the matter of Hookpaw. Now that the tigers of Narnia have a new homeland, my mission in that respect is finished. With Quickspring ready to assume leadership of the tigers, I am no longer needed--EXCEPT for one more task for which Aslan has fitted me. I hope to find Hookpaw, if indeed he is even still alive, and prevail upon him to reject the influence of the demon Tash. Aslan's arrangements being what they are, I am in LESS danger of being harmed by Tash than of being harmed by, say, an angry elephant. But the persuasion and redemption of Hookpaw is the real battle to be won. I intend very soon to go forth in search of him."

The gander knight, who had kept quiet in the background up to now, stepped forward to say: "Lady Slimtalon, you are not the only one who now can be reckoned expendable for the tigers. I have done my job of surveying for you all; if you never have the use of another winged scout for the next five generations of Talking Tigers, you already have a good idea of the local geography. But a flier may still be uniquely helpful in finding Hookpaw, and you know that I have before now been shielded by Aslan in an encounter with the demon. Finally, though you have not said this, I will say in the hearing of the Koalas that you and I each have a departed spouse up in Heaven, so that even if we die in this adventure, we will only gain by it. Therefore, I am going with you when you set out to find Hookpaw."

Slimtalon gave a nod. "I expected you would, my friend. Queen Helen did right indeed when she dubbed you a knight."

The last thing Hookpaw had expected was the Nymph Iskralida taking command of their mystic enterprise.

"Quit moping, Brother Tiger! It's been two days now since you released Bezbimbry into the Circle of Life. If that shift in the Cosmic All is in any sense a loss, then we must make it count for something! We must carry on the work of oneness! Valamisa seems like she doesn't want to talk with me today, but maybe she'll listen to you. Whether she does or not, you and I still must keep trying to summon those Earthly humans to us!"

"You're right," sighed Hookpaw. "First, let's see if we can get the gateway to open without her. If she sees results beginning to show, perhaps Valamisa then will join in willingly." The outlaw tiger did not want to confront the grieving Nymph; he did not want to take even the slightest chance, unlikely though it was, that some word of reproach by her against him could provoke him to an unthinking violent reaction. He absolutely did NOT want to harm any reasoning being EVER again.

So Hookpaw and Iskralida constructed another wooden pentagram, big enough that they could stand side by side within it, in front of the stone post-and-lintel arch. They spent several minutes in silence, trying to eliminate categories and contrasts from their minds, willing all things to be one, all things to

be interchangeable...willing the gulf of dimensions between Earth and the Narnian world to be no gulf at all. Then they both began uttering spontaneous words of invitation, calling on distant humans to come to them.

A wind rose. The ground softly trembled. And the stone arch once more became like a window, revealing an otherworldly scene. A man in rough, dirty clothes, leading two burden-bearing horses by the reins, was looking toward Hookpaw and Iskralida, though it was not clear if he could see them. Still, he saw something, for he was beckoning to other humans to come alongside him and look also.

Now the ground shook more strongly, though this did not seem to affect the Earth humans. Valamisa emerged from the stone cottage, calling out, "What is it? Are you getting through?"

"Yes!" cried Iskralida. "Join in, quick! Don't break the pentagram, but start calling to the humans from where you're now standing! Do it FOR Bezbimbry!"

Valamisa also wished to believe that Bezbimbry's death was not altogether pointless. She therefore joined in calling to the strangers, refusing to let herself be frightened by the ground tremors.

All at once, the stone arch began to GROW. That is, the three squared-off pillar-like pieces of stone that formed it all grew in a direction away from the three conjurers, becoming walls and roof of a sort of tunnel. It also MOVED; for each yard of length added to the structure, the whole thing moved two or three yards away from the Tiger and the Nymphs. A rumble behind them caused Valamisa to look over her shoulder; she saw that the rocky hills behind them were also moving away as if they had never been attached to the bedrock. The houses, however, were left intact in their places. It seemed that a great space was being cleared.

When the quaking and sliding of rock masses had ended, Iskralida noticed that the branches forming their pentagram had crumbled into dust. But they must have accomplished something...for all of them could hear a noise like excited human voices from within the just-formed tunnel.

The morning after conferring with Tarkan, Tisrukh had sent his son Bulgak riding hard to ask Murhat to bring the flocks back from their current grazing area at once. The nomad felt in his very guts that the crucial time was close at hand. He realized furthermore that, assuming a doorway to the far place was about to open, it would be to his advantage to be known to have predicted it. Thus, as soon as he could contrive an opportunity, he spoke to Orhan the shaman in the hearing of several other men:

"I am sending for my brother because my dreams tell me something amazing is about to happen--something that offers us the chance to prosper more than ever before--and it may be necessary for all of us to move quickly."

"Dreams, you say," Orhan replied noncommittally. "Have you had many dreams to this effect? And if

so, why did you not sooner speak to me about them and ask me to interpret them?"

Not to betray his contempt for the chief elder too soon, Tisrukh explained quietly, "Because the promise of the dreams was SO fantastic, I feared you would think me mad or drunk. But Zulika could confirm that I have had many of them. Now the dreams grow in strength; so I will tell you now--I believe that a friendly tiger will show us the way to better pastures than we have yet seen."

"Friendly tiger? Like the ones the Russians keep in cages in their cities?"

"No, honored Orhan, I mean a tiger that will be friendly to us of its own accord."

The next hour was an anxious time for Tisrukh, wondering if anything really would happen. Routines of the day continued--except that Tisrukh told Zulika and their daughter Dilnara not to leave camp for the present. Tarkan, on horseback, was riding circuits around the camp to scout for anything unusual happening nearby. Eventually he came cantering right between the tents to find his cousin. "Tisrukh! It's happening! Like your dreams! You know where those two slim trees are standing close together near the brook? A branch of one tree cracked loose, fell and was caught in the branches of the other tree; and then it was as if the space between the trees became a door, with that one branch making the top edge of the doorway!"

Tarazi, Orhan's wife, heard this, and she was prestigious enough in the clan that she feared no rebuke for speaking to a man uninvited. "A doorway? Why do you speak of it so?"

"Because when I look into the space between, everything looks changed! You'll have to look for yourself!" Tarkan made a point of adding most emphatically, "It is just as Tisrukh has been foreseeing in his dreams, dreams of good omen!"

To Tisrukh's mind, the best omen was that Murhat came in sight now, riding his best horse alongside Bulgak's horse; and they were bringing the flocks. Tisrukh slyly grinned to himself; he felt certain that no one else would think to bring sheep along, and if they did become isolated he would be the hero of the clan for sharing his mutton with the rest.

Before long, numerous nomads were converging on the place Tarkan had spoken of; Tisrukh made sure to be at the front of the crowd, and brought with him his horses _and_ his bolt-action rifle. Where two trees and a horizontal branch defined a rectangle, the space thus enclosed showed a different view from the landscape otherwise. There was greener, lusher grass, rocky hills, a number of stone cottages suggesting an inhabited place...and yes, there were at least two people visible in the distance.

Moreover...standing near those people, not seeming to offer them any threat...there was a tiger.

Orhan had not risen to petty power without acquiring a sense of when action was needed. It had not

been he who predicted this marvel. He must, at the very least, appear not to be overly astonished at it, and especially he must not seem scared by it. Thus, while others gaped, the shaman strode closer to the mystical gateway than even the exulting Tisrukh had yet gone. Displaying his good-luck amulet to the nomads with one hand, and patting the cap-and-ball revolver stuck in his sash with the other, Orhan exclaimed theatrically, "Let us venture to see what this wonder is! Fear nothing yonder, for I do not fear it! Tisrukh, will you come with me to tread the land you dreamed of?" Orhan reckoned that it would only hurt his cause if he tried to deny credit to Tisrukh for foreseeing this miracle.

"I surely will come, headman," Tisrukh replied, "but ought we not all to fetch our horses first?"

Orhan saw the opportunity to imply lightly that the dreamer was afraid. "Horses and more can follow if this vision proves worth entering. I go to behold it NOW!" And the shaman strode into the gateway. No harm seemed to befall him, but those watching him had an odd sensation that their eyes could not stay focussed on him--as if the change in his distance from them was not what it appeared to be.

"What a marvel! Good spirits are clearly offering us good fortune!" Tisrukh shouted. More quietly he spoke to Murhat, who had been brought up to date on the situation by Tarkan. "Hurry now, make sure the women and children are ready to move; and do what you can to persuade the _other_ men's women and children to gather their things for movement also." Then, to ensure that he would not in fact appear timid, Tisrukh started after the shaman. Unlike Orhan, though, Tisrukh had with him, on his horses or on his person, everything he would have needed for survival if travelling for several days across the steppes.

"This is your moment of triumph," said Iskralida to Hookpaw. "You should be the one to welcome these new humans to our world."

"I don't know if that's best," Valamisa demurred. "No offense, Hookpaw, but we don't want to frighten them as soon as they arrive. We two Nymphs, unarmed, should be a reassuring sight for them, whether or not we prove to be an _attractive_ sight."

Hookpaw leaned against Valamisa tenderly for a moment. "But we don't know yet whether these newcomers have any appreciation for the oneness of all. I hate to be responsible for exposing that portion of the great oneness which I know as my--my surviving friends, to danger. YOU TWO certainly have not asked to die, and I will not ask you to go in front of me. Now, if I had as much command of the oneness as I was hoping to have gained by this time, I could make that treestump over there walk up to the strangers and greet them. As it is..." He started smoothly pacing toward the figures that were only now beginning to emerge from the tunnel between the worlds.

The first two to appear were men, both of whom carried what seemed to be weapons of some sort. The second man was also leading two horses--who whinnied in alarm as they caught the scent of tiger. Understanding this, Hookpaw ceased his advance; but perhaps he could make the humans understand

his friendly intent even before they were within speaking distance. Rearing up on his hind feet, he stretched out his left foreleg and waved--waved like a human being, with as wide and expansive a wave as his anatomy permitted. Then he turned, strode four paces away from the men, turned to face the men again, and repeated his waving, this time with his right foreleg.

Tisrukh had already been expecting that the tiger of his dreams would possess manlike intelligence; and Orhan was not slow to perceive this for himself. The shaman, still anxious to look like the leader of this magical excursion, gathered his boldness and began walking toward the mysterious beast. Tisrukh was hampered by having to pacify his horses.

The next three men came out of the tunnel now; all of them happened to be carrying muskets. As soon as they caught sight of Hookpaw, every one of them hastily brought his weapon to the ready. "Wait, fools, wait!" shouted Tisrukh. "That's the enchanted tiger I dreamed of, and he's FRIENDLY! Look beyond him: see those women watching us? THEY clearly don't fear him. They're perfectly calm. Don't ruin everything by picking a fight with whoever lives in this land when we've only just entered it!" Murhat, coming up from the rear, seconded his brother's call for restraint.

"Bulgak!" Tisrukh suddenly shouted. "BUL-GAK!! You lazy sluggard, get up here and take these horses in hand!" Bulgak, of course, was not lazy at all; he had simply been toward the rear of the crowd with his mother and sister--and with the sheep which Tisrukh himself had commanded the boy to look out for. But one of Murhat's boys relieved his uncle of the reins, freeing Tisrukh to run after Orhan.

Once he came up even with the shaman, Tisrukh fell into step with him. Each man wanted to be the first to speak with this magical beast of good omen; but neither wanted to look foolish by breaking into a headlong sprint in the effort to outrun the other.

Meanwhile, Tisrukh's cousin Tarkan was at the very rear of the swarm of nomads. A sense of destiny filling his heart, he felt certain that this gateway WAS going to close and keep them perforce in the new country; but he knew something of the unrest pervading the Russian Empire these days, and suspected that a magical realm would prove better to live in than what Russia might become in the next ten or twenty years. Thus he did his best to make sure everyone went through, and brought as much of their property, livestock included, as possible.

"Those first two seem ready to trust you," said Iskralda to Hookpaw; "but it might still be better for Valamisa and me to meet them first."

"No," replied Hookpaw, mildly but firmly. "I cannot expose you two to danger. If any trouble arises, you two should run at once, grab your spears from the rack, and keep on running to that emergency shelter-cave I dug out for you."

"It may not even still exist after that heaving of the hills we just saw. Besides, in the oneness of the all, how can we be in any more danger than you?"

"Regardless, this is MY responsibility," Hookpaw insisted. "Stay back for the moment, so you'll have a head start if you have to run from the strangers."

The mystical tiger strode fluidly toward the two Asiatic men. He saw that both were strongly built for humans; one (the one who had been first to begin approaching) was a little older than the other. Both had long daggers in sheaths, as well as unfamiliar objects which probably also were weapons; but both men seemed as anxious to project peaceful intentions as was Hookpaw. When only two tiger springs' worth of distance separated them, Hookpaw decided to add a little flourish, simply to make his greeting more ceremonious.

Calling up the levitation power which was routine for him by now, the tiger lifted himself six feet straight up in the air, tucking his legs under him as if he were lying on a solid surface. Only then did he begin to speak.

"Well met and gladly met, Sons of Adam! You have come far, yet you have not moved at all; for my world and your world and all worlds are only one world. All things are each, and each is all! We three manifestations of the Everything-ness joyfully welcome you other manifestations of the Everything-ness, in the hope that we shall all ride the Circle of Life together! To put it in terms of the fleeting physical reality, there are lodgings prepared for you, and food can easily be provided for you. Enter your new homeland, friends!"

Hookpaw could clearly see that the two men were amazed at his levitation, and that they were listening to him talk. But their faces showed no comprehension of his words...and worse, when they leaned together to speak sidelong to each other, Hookpaw could not understand what they were saying.

It had never even crossed his mind that the newly-summoned humans might not know the English language.

"That must be his magical incantation he's uttering," said Orhan to Tisrukh.

"But he rose into the air before he began speaking!" Tisrukh snapped back.

Other men were coming up with them by now, along with just two women, Zulika and Tarazi. Tisrukh's wife stared at the levitating tiger as if expecting to hear something she wasn't hearing, and looked disappointed. The tiger, for his part, showed a remarkable expressiveness on his feline face; it seemed as if he realized he was not being understood, and anyone listening closely to his speech could tell that he was resorting to fewer words and shorter phrases in the effort to communicate.

Orhan's instinct for petty politics told him he must act boldly again to hang on to his prestige. Making improvised gestures with one hand holding his good-luck amulet, he then addressed every nomad within hearing:

"My shamanic insight has divined what the magical beast is saying! He is proclaiming the will of Allah and of all benign spirits! It is written in the book of destiny, says he, that there is to be a new Tsar for this new land--and the Tsar is to be your faithful headman Orhan!"

"You lie!" Tisrukh screamed, finally beginning to lose his patience with this man who was his one obstacle. "This is MY enchanted tiger, and it is *I* who understand his meaning! He is saying that *I* am to be the Tsar!"

That effectively drew up the sides. Orhan's revolver whipped up to point at his rival, while Tisrukh's rifle was equally quick to level at Orhan's chest. Another moment, and other men choosing sides would have unleashed a mutual massacre; but the enchanted tiger, language barrier notwithstanding, knew anger when he saw it, and intervened. At a manlike gesture of his forepaws, the guns flew up out of the hands of the antagonists and soared some distance away. Orhan's wife Tarazi and Tisrukh's wife Zulika retrieved their husbands' respective weapons; and, each seeing the other's action, they came close to firing at each other--but the tiger's power snatched the guns from their hands as well. Meanwhile, Tisrukh and Orhan drew their daggers for a death-duel, only to have the daggers likewise taken away. Then they would have grappled barehanded, but an unseen force restrained them from clinching.

The tiger came down to earth standing on his hind legs, and with his foreclaws sheathed he gently pushed the two men apart from each other. Whatever he was now saying, his tone was that of one who hates violence and wishes only peace. But it was Tisrukh who first thought of using even this conciliatory gesture as a weapon for his own cause.

"Thank you, Spirit-Beast," he said as if he expected the tiger to understand him. "You have made it unnecessary for me to slay this man, who after all can still be of use to our people. My reign thus need not begin with bloodshed. Friends and kinsfolk, you see how the enchanted tiger favors me! Let us all be in accord as we establish MY kingdom!" His confident tone convinced most of the bystanders that somehow Tisrukh's saying so _made_ it so. His brother Murhat was first to be explicit in reaction: "Long live our Tsar, possessor of the enchanted land!" Orhan, looking for last-minute support, did not see any sign of men willing to kill FOR him now; so he decided, bitterly, that he would have to be grateful that no one seemed inclined to kill HIM either.

Then Tisrukh noticed that the two strange women who seemed to be the tiger's friends were approaching, looking nervous but interested. He further noticed that both of their faces had an elegant beauty, rather like the upper-class Russian women who were objects of lustful fantasy for many Turkic nomad men; and, while by no means naked, they were dressed in more shape-revealing clothes than the

nomad women wore. Determined to risk all and gain all, Tisrukh shouted further, "Now, behold how the Spirit-Beast honors me: he presents me with these two voluptuous brides, that I may have a proper harem!"

Zulika stared slackjawed when she heard these last words. Both by Islamic law, and by the customs of many tribal peoples, her husband could have additional wives; but with all of his gruffness and selfishness, until now she had never imagined that he would want others. Yet one glance at the two otherworldly women assured her that, while she was not ugly, she could never begin to compete with either of them for attractiveness; and if she were to attempt any physical revenge either against her husband or against these women, it most probably would only result in her own death, leaving Bulgak and Dilnara motherless. Therefore she held her peace.

Besides, one ray of hope entered her thoughts: judging from what the divine Lamb had told her, she did not for a minute believe that her husband really knew what the tiger was saying--and it followed that the two strange women had not by any means pledged themselves to marry Tisrukh. If only that other tiger would show up, the one whose speech it was promised Zulika would be able to understand!

Meanwhile, Zulika's son Bulgak saw and seized an opportunity. Everyone else, eyes fixed on the magical tiger, the two would-be Tsars and the two exotic women, had paid no heed to where the rifle and revolver had ended up after the second time they were levitated away. The bolt-action rifle had come to rest close to some thick bushes...and Bulgak hastily shoved it into those bushes. If it were found by another, no one would know that Bulgak had tried to hide it from his father; but if it remained lost until the boy could pick a good moment to come back for it, he could dispose of it as HE saw fit. And what Bulgak chose to do would be done with a mind to his mother's well-being. Now he would have to watch for a chance to swipe at least some of the cartridges his father kept in those saddlebags...

Valamisa was able to gather several facts:

Hookpaw's effort to speak to the first two men had not led to any hostility toward Hookpaw himself, but it had resulted in some kind of struggle for dominance between the two men. The younger of the two had prevailed, for others were bowing to him while the defeated rival glowered ineffectually. Beyond this tableau, more humans of differing ages--including some older than any human being had yet had time to become in the Narnian world--had emerged from the tunnel-gate between worlds. With them were domestic animals. When it looked as if everyone had come who was coming, the entire gateway structure suddenly crumbled into dust.

The winner of the power struggle, although his words proved unintelligible for the two Nymphs as they came within hearing, was casting unmistakably lustful glances in their direction, while also seeming to express kingly benevolence to his well-wishers, generous tolerance to his recent competitor, and cautious deference to Hookpaw.

"Do you understand anything they're saying?" Valamisa asked Hookpaw.

"No," admitted the tiger. "But from what the scent of this newly dominant male tells my nose, along with gestures he's made, you and Iskralda had better not let him get either or both of you alone with him, unless you've made your minds up that you want to be his. Make no mistake, he desires both of you."

"Well, good!" chirped Iskralda. "Isn't that what we brought him here for?" And she moved closer to Tisrukh, speaking sweetly and curtsying to him.

Tisrukh, for his part, acted just like a man who was not over-anxious to offend women who were clearly under the protection of a tiger, the more so when the tiger possessed magical as well as physical powers. He lightly took hold of Iskralda's fingertips for a moment, bowed to her, and uttered words which sounded like an attempt to be gracious and courtly. Other nomad men watched enviously, probably wondering if there were any more women like Iskralda and Valamisa available in the vicinity.

"That scent from him is getting stronger," Hookpaw advised Iskralda. "If you want him for a mate, you shall without question have him; but I cannot yet answer for how he will treat you in that event."

Iskralda shrugged. "How could the Everything-ness treat the Everything-ness except with oneness?"

"He might not be as enlightened as we are," Valamisa cautioned her sister Nymph. "Since it will take time in any case for someone to learn someone else's speech, let's use that time to get a better idea of what this man--all these people--are like at heart."

"I'm not worried," Iskralda persisted. "He spared his enemy, didn't he?"

"So far, with Hookpaw looking right at him," Valamisa replied, keeping her distance from Tisrukh for now.

"Let's get them settled," said Hookpaw. "Those dumb animals of theirs will be afraid to enter the dwelling area we prepared as long as I'm near; I probably should have thought to devise a power that would mask my own scent. We need to make them understand that the stone houses are for them...AND make them understand that, although I move away a bit, I'll be back in a flash if any of them offer you Nymphs any insult." Almost as soon as he said this, Hookpaw realized that a visible demonstration would bypass language barriers. Accordingly, he took to the air, flying a wide circle around the whole area in which the Turkic nomads were milling about, amazing them further and creating some disorder among the livestock. Then he returned to his demi-human friends, doing a feline body-rub of affection against each Nymph and giving Tisrukh a gaze which he hoped would be interpreted as meaning, "You are welcome here, PROVIDED you behave nicely toward my friends."

The short flight had an added result which Hookpaw neither intended nor observed. Tisrukh's horses being among the beasts alarmed by the tiger's flyover, the boy Bulgak had contrived to be the one to catch the horse carrying his father's ammunition supply. With the horse momentarily between him and any onlookers, Bulgak was able to grab up two handfuls of bullets from their saddlebag, eleven in all as it later proved, and conceal them inside his shirt. These, along with the one cartridge currently in the rifle, might be enough to give him and his mother and sister a chance of survival, if they should have cause to leave the others.

Slimtalon had many goodbyes to say, to each and every one of the emigrant tigers individually as well as to Ranshuk and the Talking Koalas. Farewells went more quickly for Fear-No-Blast, for whom only Bluntmuzzle among the tigers required an individual goodbye. The gander knight looked on Bluntmuzzle as a very large nephew. Of course, both Fear-No-Blast and Slimtalon had every intention of coming back, if they lived, to the tigers' new hunting grounds which ranged south and west of the koalas' tree-town. (The koala elders had told them that Aslan had promised there would be lands there with NO talking herbivores, so that the tigers would not be encumbered in hunting with having to call out warnings to any intelligent beast.)

But the old scout and the tigress matriarch both more than half expected to die on this quest. This did not frighten either of them in the least, as each had a true love waiting up in Aslan's country. But it was a gut feeling they both had. Still, the only fear either of them had was a fear of failure in their mission.

"Straight east, now," said Slimtalon, after the koala couple Tinkswid and Yugdug had guided them safely through the boggy areas to land a tiger could more easily travel.

"Shall I scout ahead?" said Fear-No-Blast.

"Not yet, I think," replied Slimtalon. "I have a feeling we should avoid being seen too soon."

Fear-No-Blast laughed a honking goose-laugh. "Not much use for an air scout, then!"

"But every use for a faithful Narnian whose heart is pure, and who knows how to invoke Aslan's protection if the demon tries to interfere with us. Come along; you can swim wherever streams run along our route, and ride on my back if you're tired."

The old gander laughed again. "That would be quite a stunt for me, trying to hold on with webbed feet!"

"No more of a stunt than trying to make that insane Hookpaw see reason."

So east went the first-generation Talking Tigress and the second-generation Talking Gander, past lands

wooded and open, dry and wet, level and hilly...

The number of stone cottages Hookpaw had built telekinetically proved not quite enough to house everyone who had come; so, enhancing still more the awe the nomads felt toward him, he began levitating and shaping more stones to construct the five or six additional houses he estimated would be required. Tisrukh, while having generously given some of his livestock to fellow nomads who had failed to bring any through the now-lost gateway, was less generous about lodging. He laid claim not to one, but to three of the existing structures: one as a stable for his horses, another for Zulika and their children, the third for himself--and by anticipation, for Iskralida and Valamisa too. Not that he dared to act like their husband until he could be sure of their consent; not for anything would he risk angering the enchanted tiger who had so far been his benefactor. But Iskralida, at least, was willing to spend time with the self-appointed monarch, starting to teach him and his lieutenants the language of this new land. Valamisa kept aloof, turning her attention to a similar teaching effort with some of the nomad women.

On the very first night in the new world, as the existing stone huts were being claimed, the demoted Orhan availed himself of his wife Tarazi's prudence in having folded their tent and brought it along on a pack horse. By choosing of his own accord to sleep in his tent, Orhan avoided the potential humiliation of starting to occupy a stone hut and then being ordered to relinquish it.

Orhan's old army revolver, a Crimean War memento passed down from his father, had been confiscated by Tisrukh--who was missing his rifle after the tiger's magical disarming action, and was keeping his son and other boys busy searching for it. What remained to Orhan and Tarazi of weapons consisted of a dagger each, a rusty saber also of Crimean War vintage, a hatchet, and a light-gauge, one-shot fowling shotgun with a total supply of sixteen shells.

"He said I could still be useful," Orhan muttered to Tarazi as they drifted uneasily to sleep that first night. "I always did feel that Tisrukh would rather get use out of a man than kill him to no purpose. We shall hope that I'm right...while we wait to see what better change in our fortune may yet come."

"No doubt," she whispered back, "he has in mind the practical skills that come with being a shaman, like your herbal knowledge for healing illness."

Orhan snorted. "We don't yet know if any of the useful herbs we're familiar with also exist in this land. But you know, something that probably does NOT exist in this land is any readily-available means of making ammunition for firearms, even the simplest musket. If we can't make reloads, we will soon be reduced to using stone-headed spears like the ones those two mystical women possess. In those conditions, the first man to revive the art of making bows and arrows would be, if not able to take the rulership, at least an important man to be respected."

During the next two days, Orhan made it his urgent business to inquire after the best obtainable

material for bowstrings, and the best wood for arrows and bowstaves. He even found a chance to meet with Valamisa, using charcoal to sketch on a flat rock a picture of a bow and arrows and pointing especially to the string. She seemed to understand his intent, and seemed to say to him that she would help. If Orhan showed the good sense not to be defying Tisrukh outright, he should be able to make himself sufficiently valuable that there would be no thought of eliminating him.

This and other efforts at re-establishing social roles were made easier by the fact that food was no problem during the first several days. Hookpaw brought in three freshly-killed animals for meat, some unfamiliar sort of deer, and even helped the nomads collect enough firewood to roast the carcasses. Valamisa showed the women and children where to gather certain plants that were safe and nutritious to eat.

All of this was watched by the unseen Tash, who judged that it was almost time for the next step in the plan.

"Just what IS it that you keep ducking your head for?" Slimtalon asked Fear-No-Blast, as the gander knight swam in the pond beside which they had passed the night just gone by. Only lately had it occurred to the tigress matriarch how little attention she had paid before now to learning all the habits of geese.

"Frogs, occasionally," the old scout replied. "But mostly, just the best morsels of the aquatic vegetation. That's the real reason my wife received the adult name of Comb-The-Weeds; many groundwalkers thought it was about her poking through the weeds on land for a nesting site, but it was really about the uncanny skill she had at finding the best water vegetables for us and our goslings." A few head-plunges later, Fear-No-Blast returned a question of his own: "How about your husband? I of course wasn't hatched yet when Aslan created you and him out of nothing; so whose idea was the name 'Brightburn'?"

"Queen Helen thought of that name. It seems she had some books of poetry back in her home on Earth, and there was one poem about tigers which described them as 'burning bright.' I think she said the poet's name was William Blake. Anyway, the poem was where Her Majesty got the idea for my husband's name."

"Speaking of books," remarked the gander knight, "one thing I feel especially good about is the way that koala-girl Tinkswid showed such an interest in learning to read and write. Ripplestride should be able to explain enough to her. In case you and I don't get back to Koala-Land, we can be fairly sure that the Queen's Catechism will be copied, and learned by future generations."

"Tinkswid the Scribe," Slimtalon mused. "Not a bad way for her to be remembered."

Fear-No-Blast understood the concept of scribes. There were Talking Beasts who were capable of

reading, but had nothing remotely like hands to let them write; already, in the less than twenty years that Narnia had existed, it had become commonplace for Humans, Dwarfs, Centaurs, Nymphs, and other such beings to write letters on behalf of such fellow Narnians as Talking Deer and Talking Hogs.

"Well, I've had enough breakfast," the gander presently told his companion. "What say you finish that goat carcass from last night, and we get on our way again?"

Back at the koalas' tree-town, Ranshuk had caused a stir when he awakened reporting a disturbing dream. Nubkarsh, the koalas' chief elder, was fetched to the wolf's tree platform to hear about it.

"I dreamed that Slimtalon and Fear-No-Blast found Hookpaw," said Ranshuk. "They found him wrapped up in chains. Fear-No-Blast pecked at the chains with his bill, and Slimtalon attacked them with her claws; but suddenly Hookpaw burst into flames as if he were a pile of dry brush lit by a torch. The flames did not consume tigress or gander, but moved past them...coming in THIS direction. I saw flames approaching these very trees as quickly as floodwaters in spring; and what looked like armed men arose out of the flames, threatening us. Nubkarsh, do you koalas have any _other_ wooded places that you could shelter in? Preferably, farther west from here?"

"There are places we could use, though lacking the comforts we have devised for ourselves here. Crossing to those other forests over open ground would put us in danger from the wild lions, though we do know how to make at least simple weapons. But if there IS a menace to our town, then it could be a special mercy from Aslan that we NOW have the Talking Tigers to convoy us west in safety. That is, if there is a menace."

"I realize that my having a dream is not final proof. But perhaps another of our tiger friends could follow Slimtalon's trail and smell out more information." Ranshuk turned to his faithful young tigress nurse Wolfsfriend, the former Nippy. "Could you go down and see if any of the adult tigers are nearby and free to do some scouting?"

Descending to earth, Wolfsfriend soon came upon Shatterneck and his wife Tawnydart, and explained Ranshuk's concern to them. "I'll go," said Shatterneck. "Anyway, I'd like to be in on it if Hookpaw can be recovered by Aslan's grace. He and I used to be close. Go back up and tell Ranshuk that he has his tracker."

"And _I'll_ round up as many of the others as I can," Tawnydart volunteered. "If there's going to be an evacuation, we'll need more than one or two tigers to make sure all these koalas can be securely protected from predators. And we'll need to find out if they have any tools or furnishings they need to bring along. That is, IF there's an evacuation."

Hemshull, father of the she-koala Tinkswid, dropped from a branch as they were talking. "Friend Shatterneck, our patriarch has just told me something of what's afoot. Would it encumber you too much

if I were to ride on your back when you go scouting eastward? I just have a feeling that you might come upon some situation in which someone with hands would be useful."

"I can carry you easily," Shatterneck replied. "And your knowledge of the terrain may help us make better time."

"Too bad Bluntmuzzle's off hunting with Elkfinder," Wolfsfriend observed. "If there's a chance his mother's in danger, he'd want to follow her trail himself."

"We don't know there's any danger yet," said Hemshull. "We just know that Ranshuk had a dream."

"So let's go find out," Shatterneck urged him. "Is there anything you need to bring with you?"

"Oh, a flint knife and a water gourd at least. I'll just be a moment."

As Hemshull climbed back up, Tawnydart said to her husband, "He's an elder. Why do you suppose he isn't sending one of the younger koalas with you, like Yugdug?"

Shatterneck sighed. "For the same reason Lady Slimtalon didn't ask a younger tiger to go searching for Hookpaw. The population of every animal kind in our world is still pretty small, and the elders want the young to be around to beget the next generation."

Years of submitting meekly to his father's bullying were now paying off in an advantage for Bulgak: his father could not even imagine that the boy would ever dare to take action directly contrary to his father's interests. This was the reason why Tisruk had not accused Bulgak of being to blame for the disappearance of his bolt-action rifle--which, ironically, would have been almost the first accusation Tisruk had made against Bulgak in the boy's entire life that would actually have been true.

Still, the boy had to try to keep his father off the track.

On the fifth day of the nomads' presence in the Narnian world, Bulgak was combing some of the rocky ground with two other, unrelated boys, keeping up the search for the rifle--which actually had for some time been in a more secure hiding place than its original concealment in bushes. Only last night, with confidence increasing due to his continued success at not letting the weapon be found, had Bulgak finally risked telling his mother what it was that he had done to give her a bargaining chip or a means of escape. Zulika had silently wept, kissing and hugging her boy in a way that would have embarrassed him terribly in other circumstances. But it was too soon to try to run anywhere; Zulika had intimated to Bulgak that she expected some help to appear soon.

So their secrets had to be kept, and the search had to be kept fruitless.

"Here! Look at this!" Bulgak's excited outcry brought the other boys to his side, to see him pointing to a rifle bullet lying in a crack between two small boulders--a bullet which in fact he himself had only just dropped there. Bulgak had chosen this place to plant the "discovery," because the rocky ground was not conducive to footprints, so he would not need to explain the absence of footprints on the scene. Soon, then--

"Father! Father! Look what I found!" Back at the new town of stone cottages, Tisrukh's attention was riveted to see the single unfired cartridge being brandished by his returning son. "It was dropped up in the rocks, back that way." The other boys confirmed the report, already almost believing that they had seen the whole process of Bulgak honestly finding it.

Accepting the bullet from the boy's extended hand--without a word of thanks, but at least also with no sign of suspicion--the self-proclaimed Tsar looked it over with a thoughtful expression. "I'll wager that no one in this land uses firearms. If some native we haven't seen slipped up in the confusion on the first day, and grabbed my rifle, he might have thought it was only some kind of spear. He could have handled it in curiosity, moved the bolt, and dropped out the bullet that was in the chamber. Hmmm...Iskralida has seemed to indicate that there was an inhabited country to the north, but she hasn't spoken of any populated places near this spot. By the Spirit Beast, I've got to grasp more of this local language!" He turned away and called out, loudly but not angrily, "Iskralida!" As he went looking for the Nymph, he passed his cousin Tarkan and muttered, "My boy found what might be a sign that there are other people around that we don't know about. We'd probably do well to start posting sentries."

Feeling himself dismissed, Bulgak took the soonest opportunity to report his tactic privately to his mother. "That leaves us only eleven bullets to use; but I'm pretty sure it also leaves Father giving up hope of getting his rifle back."

Zulika nodded. "Yes, late last night I heard your father talking with Orhan in a quarrel-mending sort of way. It seems Orhan is confident he'll soon be able to start fashioning bows and arrows for us. Being in command seems to be a great consolation to your father for the loss of his precious rifle. Maybe, with time, we'll even have a chance to lay our hands on more of his cartridges."

After some hesitation, the boy raised a touchy subject. "Mother...what about, what about the tiger-ladies, the mystic women Father wants?"

Glancing around afresh to be sure there was no eavesdropper, Zulika hissed into her son's ear, "Sharia law does permit him to have more wives without having to be rid of the first one. If a really good chance to get away doesn't offer itself, you and I will have to endure the insult, as long as we, with your sister, can at least remain together."

"The one called Iskralida is the only one who seems to like being with Father."

"True. The other one, Valamisa, avoids him AND the other men. If only I could talk with her!"

Valamisa, meanwhile, underwent the latest of several uncomfortable moments she had endured since the nomads, who seemed to have a collective name of "Kalor," had arrived through the short-lived magical gateway. She was trying to conduct an English lesson with some of the nomad women--including the middle-aged one called Tarazi, wife of the one called Orhan who had lost the first day's contest of wills with Tisrukh--when several young men or older boys began crowding closer and closer to her with hungry stares. The eldest and boldest of these nuisances was one whom Valamisa had noted before as apparently a son of Orhan and Tarazi, named Urgut.

The scruffy but sturdy youths were making no secret of their wish that Valamisa had not been claimed as Tisrukh's property; and the ringleader's mother, doubtless privately resenting her husband's setback despite the evident reconciliation afterwards, seemed pointedly unwilling to rebuke her son for his rude conduct. Even when Urgut, after cautiously checking to see that neither Tisrukh nor his close kinsmen were looking, presumptuously began touching and fingering Valamisa's exquisite auburn hair (a few shades darker than Iskralida's), Tarazi pretended smugly what Valamisa was trying to pretend also: that nothing of consequence was going on. A moment later, however, someone more impressive than Tarazi expressed displeasure.

Urgut's first intimation that his advances were not being tolerated came in the form of his shirt lifting itself up from the lower hem, as if with a life of its own; the sleeves ripped themselves apart pulling clear of his arms, and then the whole garment enclosed his dirty-haired head and tied itself in place. The other youths looked frantically around to locate the Spirit Beast, who must be making this happen.

Urgut, his lumpish boldness utterly dispelled, yelped in alarm and tried to free his head; but seconds later he gave a louder yelp, as the unseen power jerked his feet off the ground and raised him into the air, like a caught rabbit being lifted by its hind legs. His mother sprang up and caught hold of the nearest part of him, one of his blindly-flailing arms, trying to pull him back to earth like an unruly kite. By no doing of Tarazi's, Urgut was presently let back down onto the ground...as Hookpaw stalked into view from behind the latest stone cottage he had finished constructing. The other youths fell all over each other shrinking back out of his way, as he came very close to Urgut. As if with intentional timing, Hookpaw positioned his fanged smile inches in front of Urgut's face just before Urgut pulled his ruined shirt free and could see again. When he caught sight of all those teeth, already knowing that it was Hookpaw who had levitated him, the young oaf broke down blubbing and pleading for his life. Hookpaw did him no harm...but, imitating a human gesture as nearly as a forepaw with sheathed claws could manage, he fingered Urgut's greasy hair the same way Urgut had fingered Valamisa's tresses. Lastly, he gently pushed the boy's face down into the grass and forcibly held it there for just a moment, then ceased to pay Urgut any more heed. As Tarazi moved to embrace her son, relieved that he was unhurt, Hookpaw tried saying something to the wide-eyed women within the bounds of the few English words he knew they had learned so far:

"I also teach."

Then, with a motion of his head, he called the Nymph aside so they could talk. "Do you want me to try harder to make them all understand that NO ONE, their dominant male included, is permitted to take you without your consent?"

Valamisa laughed nervously. "They're mighty stupid if they don't realize that by now. But I feel bad about Iskralda's attitude. It's obvious that the woman called Zulika is Tisruk's wife, but Iskralda says that cosmic oneness means it's all right to share a husband with Zulika."

Hookpaw snorted. "Cosmic oneness also should mean that marrying a king is no more desirable than marrying a subordinate. Iskralda could have any single man here--at least, any single man who isn't panting after you at the moment."

"She always did wish that she could bear offspring who would be royalty. Her eagerness for that may damage everyone's harmony before long."

Hookpaw's voice turned softer. "But I don't know if I can tell Iskralda anything now. After all the times I've spoken of self-contradiction as a tool for self-actualization, I'm not sure I can argue along one line of reasoning and stick with it. I need to meditate some more."

"And I suppose I'll have to decide in a hurry which unattached man here seems the most tolerable for me to marry, so you can make Tisruk accept reality before he grows too complacent in thinking I'm his."

"Accept reality? Dear Valamisa, what has become of our making reality as we please?"

When Hookpaw and Valamisa parted company, neither of them noticed what hate, a hate verging on madness, was in the eyes of Tarazi as those eyes followed the enchanted tiger who had first deposed her husband and now humiliated her son. The shaman's wife surrendered herself to an emotional impulse...went to the tent that she and Orhan were still using...and, with Orhan not around to question her, picked up the shotgun and its box of shells.

Hookpaw had gone to the private spot where he had buried Bezbimbry; now he lay alongside the grave, speaking to the She-Dwarf.

"This isn't going as well as I expected," he told the grave. "But then, I'm not entirely sure what I did expect. If everything really is everything else, then every possible outcome should be just as good as every other one. I know I expected that Valamisa and Iskralda would each find an unattached human male to marry, and so would increase the human population of this world without complications. But

now this Tisrukh, who already HAS a mate, clearly wants to have both Nymphs for himself besides, regardless of whether any unmarried men in his clan get any mate at all. I didn't think humans did that. Apart from the special dispensation Aslan gave to Fledge to establish the race of Winged Horses, I didn't think ANY reasoning beings did that. But maybe Iskralida is more enlightened on that score than I am. She isn't trying to get rid of the one called Zulika, just wants to be included in a royal household. I wish these people had arrived already knowing our language. I'd forgotten how King Frank told us that there were hundreds of different languages on Earth. Why am I talking to you? Or should I say, why am I talking to you HERE? If you melted into the Circle of Life, you're everywhere; for that matter, I'm everywhere too, even within this life, or this illusion of life. So why do I still have to walk or fly to go places? Aren't all places really the same place? That's one thought that helped us make the magical gateway work. But the gate's gone. My wife is gone, too. Have you met my Duskrunner, there in the wherever with you? But how could you meet anyone anyway, if you already ARE them and they're you? Tash would know; so would Aslan. But no, I'm Tash, and I'm Aslan, and I still don't have it figured out. I tried killing the lions, and I tried meaningless actions, and I tried self-contradiction, and I tried being a great benefactor. What does this MEAN? Should we try building a second gateway, to bring more Earth people here, so everyone has a bigger choice in mates? I miss Duskrunner. That's focussing on one individual tigress instead of the Cosmic All, but I do miss her. I led her to her death; but the events which followed from our move against the lions led to this great achievement here, so doesn't that prove that I'm really a good beast?"

Vast though the borrowed powers were that Hookpaw imagined he had cultivated by his own greatness, they did not make him omniscient. They did not forewarn him that a proud, spiteful woman had grown so crazed with resentment of him that she was willing to face a likelihood of being killed by him if only she could also hurt him.

A metallic click sounded clearly behind him. He had yet to learn how firearms worked, but he knew that the sound had to be associated with one of the humans. He had not smelled the nomad woman; she had enjoyed the good luck that the wind was in the tiger's face, meaning that approaching from behind him was also approaching from downwind. Hookpaw turned toward the sound, purposely not turning very fast because he did not want to seem threatening. "Hello," he said--one of the English words that he knew had been taught to many of the nomads by now.

There was just time to see that it was Orhan's wife Tarazi glaring at him, and that she was holding one of those metallic tube-like weapons whose manner of use he did not yet understand, pointing it straight at him. This was not the sight he would have chosen as the last thing his eyes would ever see with normal mortal vision. Suddenly, a harsh BANG sounded from the tube. It seemed that thirty or forty wasps, with stingers of fire, crashed into his eyes and muzzle, inflicting the first really serious pain he had felt since the pain dealt to him by Zendragund's claws, when that courageous lion had been defending his mate against Hookpaw.

Not that there was time now to think distinctly about Zendragund. Hookpaw's thought was of not

wanting to die, Everything-ness or no Everything-ness. In much less time than it takes to describe, he realized that this first attack had not done fatal damage; but it might be that the unknown weapon could strike him again until it did kill. Tarazi probably had gone for his eyes on purpose, which meant that SHE knew the first attack was not likely to kill at once, so that blinding him would give her a chance to do again whatever it was she did to make that blasting noise and flame. So he must get at her before she could move clear of the spot where he had seen her....

All of that self-preservation thinking had taken only an instant, and it was merged into the action it called for. Ignoring the impulse to paw at his face and try to get the wasp-like things out of his flesh, he hurled himself straight at Tarazi. Even now, not to kill; any killing that was not absolutely necessary still was abhorrent to him, since he had helped Bezbimbry commit suicide. But one forepaw found the barrel of the shotgun even as Tarazi was breaking it to load a second shell, and swatted it down out of the madwoman's grip. The other forepaw, claws retracted, pushed his enemy down to the ground. By feel, he turned her face-down and held her there, and by feel he made sure that she had not gotten hold of her weapon again. In his blindness, though, he did not see her straining to get her knife drawn.

"Stop! Stop!" he shouted at her--also a word she should know by now. Then he gasped at a second pain, as her knife gashed his chest, not fatally but adding to his agony. Lightly biting Tarazi's wrist, he disarmed her of the knife as well. Now it was time to call for assistance; but he tried to make his voice sound undistressed, in case there were other nomads who had also turned insanely against him.

"Valamisa! Valamisa! Can you hear me? I need to talk to you! Valamisa! Or Iskralida? Are you there? Iskralida! Valamisa!"

Minutes passed, in which Hookpaw managed to claw some of the stinging things out of his flesh. They were like tiny round stones. The tube-weapon must have a power like his own mind-over-matter power, making the little stones fly out fast enough to strike with injuring force. Both of his eyes were affected, and it did not seem as if his eyesight was coming back.

"Valamisa! Iskralida!" It became harder to disguise the urgency in his call. "Why did you DO that?" he snarled at the immobilized woman, though she probably could make no sense of the question. By the fear-smell his bleeding nose caught from her, the crazy daring had faded, and she expected him to finish her off. Maybe he could take the chance of letting go of her, then fly back, though blindly, toward where his friends could hear him.

Suddenly released from being pinned down, Tarazi could be heard scrambling away for her life, not waiting to retrieve her weapon. Then, however...

Hookpaw discovered that he could not fly. Not even a slight levitation.

Hookpaw's calling may not have been heard, but everyone in the new settlement had heard the report of

the shotgun. Knowing what weapon it was he heard, and not seeing Tarazi anywhere near, Orhan guessed that she was trying for some wildfowl for supper. But two in that place had the feeling that the shot ought to be investigated: Valamisa the Nymph, and Murhat the brother of Tisrukh. Starting independently from points less than a quarter-mile apart, Nymph and nomad found themselves converging, not to Valamisa's pleasure, a moment before Tarazi came into view.

The shaman's wife was in such hysterics that she forgot to dislike the brother of her husband's victorious rival, in fact she flung herself at him to cling to him as if he were her mother, babbling something something which clearly horrified Murhat. The brother of Tisrukh turned at once, without bothering to try to make anything understood to Valamisa, and hurried for the cottages, hauling Tarazi in his wake.

Valamisa might have retreated with them, but suddenly Hookpaw's voice did reach her ears at last. It seemed incredible that he could be in any trouble, but that was what his anguished tone conveyed. Although she had no idea what she could do about any threat powerful enough to imperil the sorcerous tiger, loyalty compelled her to go to him.

"Hookpaw! I'm coming! What's happening to you?"

Her protector came in view: a sorry sight, his face disfigured with bleeding puncture wounds, both eyes ruined, his chest also bleeding from a ragged cut. He was making his way toward her on foot, guided by the feel of the ground and his memory of passing over it, along with every sound and scent he could pick up. When he realized she was close, the first thing he said was, "Are any of them near?"

"I'm alone, but one of Tisrukh's kinsmen came with me part of the way--only until we met that panicky woman. She told him something, and they ran back to the others. But what happened to YOU?"

"That woman tried to kill me with one of their strange weapons. That's what hurt my face. I'll be asking you to help me, but first I need to know if we even have time for you to try. Before you came this way, did you see any unusual behavior by the newcomers?"

"No, nothing strange. The most interesting thing going on was Orhan showing Tisrukh the samples of wood we'd helped him get for making bows and arrows." It was still sinking into Valamisa's mind that something could actually hurt Hookpaw despite his magic.

"Then she must have acted alone; that's a mercy. But since I don't know WHY she attacked me, I don't know if whatever story she tells will stir the rest up to hostility. Where's Iskrallida?"

"With Tisrukh as usual. Even if the humans do turn mean, she won't be in any danger; he'll keep her safe for his own desires." Valamisa realized that she was feeling again the same irritation at Iskrallida as she had felt when Iskrallida had tried to make Bezbimbry's pointless death into something poetic. Odd

that she didn't resent Hookpaw for actually striking the death-blow, yet now she irrationally blamed Iskralida for not already knowing of Hookpaw's misfortune and being here to help him.

"Do you have your knife?" the tiger asked, nudging her back into the immediate moment.

"Yes. What should I do?"

"The Earth people's weapons fling out things like little arrowheads with no shafts attached to them. Most of the wounds you see on my face have still got those objects embedded in them. The bleeding won't stop unless those things are dug out. You have to do that for me! I can control myself and not claw at you by reflex; only, tell me when you're about to start, and tell me when you think you've got them all. Don't worry about hurting me; this must be done."

Valamisa stammered, "But--but--the Everything-ness! The magic! Why can't you just make them pop out of your wounds?"

"Because I can't do ANY magic now. I don't know if it's because I'm hurt or for some other reason, but now I can't do anything that a blind Talking Tiger can't do. No more discussion--you have to start probing! Wait, an idea: pick up a thick stick, if you can find one, and let me bite down on it; that may help me control my reaction to the pain."

As Hookpaw clamped his jaws on the provided stick and braced himself, the Nymph--a creature created by Aslan to dance under the stars, to cultivate Narnia's exquisite flowers, and to give birth to a new generation of noble Narnian humans--rallied all her willpower and entered upon the practice of battlefield surgery. Distant sounds reached her ears: there was movement and shouting back in the stone-house village, though no one seemed to be coming this way for the moment. Her hands, repeatedly soaked with tiger blood, had to be wiped on her kirtle and breeches, until the whole front surface of her clothing was red; it seemed impossible that Hookpaw could survive losing so much blood as to do so much staining, but he was holding up. At last, Valamisa was sure she had the last of the shotgun pellets dug out. As Hookpaw had kept command of himself amid his pain, Valamisa now forced herself to stay calm, amid pity for him and revulsion for all the blood.

"You should recover now."

Hookpaw let out a pained breath. "Except for my eyesight. Unless I regain my magic and find a spell to repair my eyes, I'm blind for life. Listen, Valamisa: I don't know if any of the other humans want me dead, but if they--"

"Don't say to abandon you to your fate," Valamisa interrupted. "I won't do that."

"The two of you have one direction to go," interjected a voice which sounded much less human than

Hookpaw's. "That is west, because the tigers led by Lady Slimtalon are in that direction. They will offer pardon to you, Hookpaw, and refuge to you, Valamisa." The speaker came into view, looking like a large but unhealthy Gryphon.

"Tash!" wheezed the tiger, not needing to see the form to know the voice. "Please, you must help me-- or I must help myself--or the oneness must help the everything--oh, I can't go on talking that way, my face hurts too much. Please, it hurts, and I can't see. Help me."

"Your two-legged friend seems to do well at that," said the demon. "If you and she travel straight west, you will meet others who will aid you. When you meet them, tell them how you were spared. I speak most frankly: I am trying NOT to provoke Aslan into smiting me. I merely wish to guide those human wanderers in the way I think best for them. You two should leave, now."

"But, what about Iskralida?" objected Valamisa.

Tash's voice grew more mocking. "She will be safe; she is the very blossom and jewel of my friend Tisrukh's lustful desires. She will be a queen, and she will not even care that she was not granted a farewell with you."

"But it shouldn't be necessary for us to go away," Hookpaw argued. "If you'll just give me back my eyesight and my magic, I won't be caught off guard like this again, and I can settle whatever disorder has arisen without having to kill--"

"Shut your stupid cat-face," rumbled the demon, his voice more unnatural than ever. "Do you think I care about your blindness? Do you think I ever cared about YOU? I will make your departure sufficiently easy, because I do not want to bring Aslan's wrath upon myself needlessly. I am now planting in Valamisa's mind the knowledge of how to use that weapon which Tarazi left behind in her flight; it will help her to provide you with food until you can join the other tigers. But that is mercy enough."

Valamisa did find that she suddenly knew about the concept of guns in general, and the workings of breech-loading shotguns in particular. This was cold comfort for the prospect of losing Iskralida's friendship in a different way from losing Bezbimbry, but a tragic way. She protested, "But we struggled so hard and long to make the magic work; WE brought those children of Adam and Eve into the Narnian world. How can you--"

"I can do as I please, insect!" Tash interrupted her. "It was always I who made Hookpaw's magic work, whether you saw me or not. Your involvement simply made the proceedings more legitimate in a sense--less likely to rouse Aslan to stop me. It is also for fear of Aslan's retribution that I do not strike both of you dead; but if you return to the village, I cannot be responsible for what the humans there may do to you in their present agitated state. You have the means to survive if you leave right now.

Take Tarazi's gun and ammunition, pick up the blankets and waterskins Hookpaw left in the emergency cave he prepared for you before, and lead your idiot friend west to beg Slimtalon's forgiveness. I have no more use for either of you; there will, after all, doubtless be other stupid Nymphs who can be maneuvered into marrying Tisrukh's men. This conversation is ended, mortal imbeciles. I will henceforth do openly what I began doing through Hookpaw: directing the future of those new humans. You two are insects; go away."

And the counterfeit Great Gryphon turned his back on Valamisa and Hookpaw, walking in the direction of the settlement.

"I believe we just heard the truest, most sincere words we have ever heard or ever will hear from Tash," Valamisa told Hookpaw. "My heart confirms that leaving is the only thing we can do."

"You leave," groaned the disfigured tiger. "Leave ME. Tash was right--I am an imbecile, and an imbecile who infects others with harmful stupidity. I can only be a burden to you. Save yourself."

Valamisa burst into tears, even as she was collecting the shotgun and its fifteen remaining shells. "Save myself for what? You are the only friend I have left; if I forsake you at your need, what will be left of me TO save?"

Amid the pristine calm that existed most of the time in the infancy of the Narnian world, the alien sound of a gunshot carried far. It was heard, ever so faintly, by a tigress and gander who were still half a day's march from where Hookpaw and the Nymphs were.

"Was that thunder?" wondered Slimtalon. "I don't see any clouds to the east."

"Air pressure feels wrong for a storm," Fear-No-Blast replied. "That sound makes me think of what the King has told us, about the fearsome weapons men possess in the world of Adam and Eve. But no Narnian has tried to create any of those far-slaying weapons here, have they?"

"Not that I know of! Yet it's possible--goodness, what a stunning thought, be it for good OR ill--that someone has come into our world from the other."

"What a blessing it would be if we found out that Lord Digory and Lady Polly have returned to our world to help us in our perplexity!"

Slimtalon sighed. "I'm afraid that it's more likely to be someone we know nothing about."

"Except that they seem to have those otherworldly weapons. My lady, I think the time has come when an air scout is of use again."

"Be careful, sir knight," said the tigress, echoing her friend's chivalrous manner of address. It crossed her mind that Fear-No-Blast wanted to have enjoyed speaking in this courtly manner, just in case today was his last chance to do so as a mortal goose. "I'll follow you as quickly as I can."

Fear-No-Blast nodded, and took off, pacing himself to make the best time on a flight of probably seven miles or more. Slimtalon did the earthbound equivalent of the same thing.

Iskralida was in the stone-house village, tutoring Tisrukh in English as had become usual, when the gunshot was heard. She followed her self-appointed betrothed as he strode hastily to investigate. As they went, she slipped one more bit of lesson in: "A noise! A loud noise!"

They saw Murhat leading Tarazi solicitously by the arm, both of them casting glances over their shoulders. "Brother!" Murhat exclaimed. "Orhan's wife was shooting at some gamefowl when the Spirit Beast came flying right into the path of her shot! How are we to propitiate him if he is angry at us all?" Murhat simply was not a man of such a temperament that killing Tarazi would quickly occur to him as the best expedient.

Tisrukh drew himself up, as he had at the moment of his very first encounter with the Spirit Beast. "As ruler, it is my duty to intercede and ask him to forgive Tarazi's error. She IS, after all, only a woman."

Iskralida understood nothing of the Turkic words being exchanged; but she was not long left without some clue to the situation. A voice behind her, sounding like Hookpaw, addressed her in good Narnian English. "Iskralida! I now understand their language. There was a little misunderstanding about one of the newcomers' weapons, but no real harm was done."

No one else yet seemed to have noticed Hookpaw's presence; even the horses showed no sign of picking up tiger scent. When the Nymph turned toward the voice, it immediately struck her that Hookpaw must have made some new breakthrough in oneness in just the time since he went to visit Bezimbry's grave. Not only was he saying that the language barrier was overcome...but as Iskralida looked at him, she saw that Hookpaw did not cast any shadow on the ground. He stepped past her, his fur lightly brushing her hip; she vaguely noticed that she did not seem to feel any of his body warmth in that fleeting contact. "Pardon me while I speak to them in their language," Hookpaw told her, "so I can assure them that all is well."

In the nomads' own tongue, then, what seemed to be Hookpaw boomed out words which turned every human head in his direction.

"Friends of the Kalor blood! There is no cause to be alarmed about me, nor cause to be indignant with your sister Tarazi! I know that the firing of the shotgun was only an accident, and you can see that I am unhurt. In fact, she has merely played her part ordained by fate, her accident signalling the start of a new phase in your new life here."

Tisrukh, seeing that there was no need either to grovel on Tarazi's behalf or to hand her over to death, recovered his kingly demeanor as he hurried up to the seeming tiger. "Noble Spirit Beast, your magnanimity is incomparable; and this new mastery of our speech allows me to tell you so. Please tell us more about this new phase in events."

"There is to be a testing of all your people. It has already begun. My own friend Valamisa, sadly, has fared poorly in the test; the minor incident with the shotgun put her in such a panic that she has fled into the wilderness."

Not willing to have his harem reduced before he even had it officially, Tisrukh replied, "Then we must search for her!"

"Not so," said the tiger-shape. "She will survive, having knowledge of this world; but her spirit is unsuitable for your great calling. Neither you nor the young men of your clan will be left without wives enough. With you, Tisrukh, joining in the incantations as Valamisa did formerly, we shall be able to raise a second gate and bring more people to dwell here and be under your authority. I shall so direct the magic that there will be more women than men among the additional persons to come here; we will find a slave market in your world, and send some likely man there such dreams as called you here. He will then bring with him a few sturdy men and many marriageable women."

"All will be glad for the women coming," Tisrukh said, giving no thought to whether Zulika and the other nomad wives would be glad to see competition coming even if those women were not fabulous Nymphs. "But do we not need warriors? With enough warriors, we could seize women in this world!"

The likeness of Hookpaw shook his head. "One reason why I choose now to speak in your language is because you need to be told something about this world. There ARE NOT many people in this world at all yet, for it was created not long ago. Thus it is well to bring you brides from Earth. You are settlers rather than conquerors; there are in fact creatures other than men with whom you will have to fight at times, but your true task is to create a nation."

Repeated use of the word "create" prompted a thought in Tisrukh's head. Slowly he spoke: "Tell me, Spirit Beast... pardon my ignorance, but tell me...was it YOU who CREATED this world we have entered?"

The tiger-shape smiled broadly. "There! That is the realization I was waiting to draw forth out of you! YES, my Tisrukh, wisest of men...I am the god who created this world and everything in it! Now you have proven worthy to be told my true name. I am TASH. No power can thwart my purposes; and, as you behaved rightly toward me even before you knew me to be a god, I will make you in turn a king who cannot be defeated. Though you will not see much of war in your lifetime, Tisrukh, your

achievements in forming an empire will be so glorious that your very name will become the title of royalty, just as the name of Caesar became the title of Tsar that you knew of in your former world."

"Then we worship Tash!" Tisrukh shouted exultantly to his followers. "Let neither Allah nor Christ be remembered or thought of anymore. All that we need is to be found in Tash!"

No one expressed any objection. And so it came to pass that, for the first time, the Narnian world heard human voices raising the cry which would be heard many times more, down almost to Narnia's very end: "Tash! Tash! Inexorable Tash!"

Zulika heard most of what was said between her husband and his new deity. She found her own thought echoed in what her daughter Dilnara said for her ears only:

"Mama, that doesn't sound like what the Lamb told us before we came here."

Zulika had managed to go unnoticed in her failure to join in shouting "Inexorable Tash!" Now she wanted to slip away with Dilnara and confer with her son--who was still skillfully keeping up the pretense of searching for that missing rifle--but that very situation gave her cause for fear. What if this being who now claimed to be a god was omniscient enough to be aware, and inform Tisrukh, that Bulgak had purposely hidden his father's prized weapon? As she did not yet feel ready to flee the encampment, she had to linger, and find out if what she dreaded was going to happen. If Bulgak was denounced, Zulika resolved to say that she had pressured her son into the theft--in which case, Tash and Tisrukh might be satisfied with killing only her, and would spare her son.

But apparently Tisrukh now felt that enjoying the special favor of a god (plus having requisitioned Orhan's cap-and-ball revolver for his own use) was adequate reimbursement for losing a bolt-action rifle; and if Tash knew what Bulgak had done, he seemed uninterested in disclosing it. Approaching Zulika, Tisrukh spoke more words to her than he had yet spoken to her yesterday and today combined:

"Elder wife, go and find my son; tell him that he can leave the search to the lesser boys. And tell the lesser boys that, although I will still reward anyone who finds my rifle, I withdraw the threat to have them whipped if it is not found by tomorrow night. I am growing more convinced that some creature of this new country took it away without knowing its use, as a crow may steal bright coins though it knows nothing of money. In any event, I want Bulgak here, to make reverence to Tash while Tash is pleased to mingle with us visibly...and so that he will begin to realize his own destiny, to become a mighty lord."

"I obey, husband and ruler." Accompanied by Dilnara, Zulika went on her way to find Bulgak; as some degree of protection (though the Spirit Beast, now calling himself Tash, had assured them that they were not in imminent peril of wild-beast attacks here), she carried one of the spears that had been kept on a rack by the Nymphs. She was not sure, but she suspected that the native word for "spear" was

"bezbimbry;" at least, the exotic Iskralida had said that unknown word among other words when giving Zulika the spear. Zulika supposed that this was the impossibly beautiful woman's notion of making friends with her prospective harem companion.

But figuring out Iskralida's attitude toward her mattered less to Zulika now than figuring out her husband's attitude toward Bulgak. Tisrukh had said that his only son would be "a mighty lord"...but he had not said "the next king." Perhaps if Iskralida bore only daughters, Bulgak would yet be promoted to royal heir. Not that Zulika was certain that she wanted her son to be saddled with ruling such a nation as she suspected was a-borning here.

Bulgak recognized the sound of the shaman's fowling shotgun. As that less-powerful firearm would not be the first weapon of choice when repelling large beasts or human bandits, the boy was not particularly alarmed upon hearing it. The lower-status boys whom he was keeping busy in the supposed search for the rifle paid less heed than he did--since they had not yet heard that the threat of punishment for them was revoked. It bothered Bulgak some that these boys might suffer for his deceit; but he felt that he simply had to set his mother's welfare above theirs.

"Bulgak!" It was the voice of the very person on his thoughts. "Your father commands your presence--and has good news for you other boys! Tisrukh, I mean the new Tsar, declares that, although he still desires to regain his rifle, there is no longer any penalty for failing to find it!" This reprieve caused the boys of the searching party to drop their activity instantly and head for camp, since none of them had yet had anything to eat all day.

Bulgak, lingering on the spot, noticed that his little sister was with their mother. Before complying with the order to present himself to his father, he asked, "Has anything changed besides this dismissal of the threat?"

Zulika looked back over her shoulder. The other boys were out of earshot. "Yes, a great change, which I can't say I like. The Spirit Beast has just announced himself to be a god, and promised to make your father the founder of a dynasty; but it is NOT clear whether your father means to guarantee your right of succession in any such dynasty.

"Listen quickly, son. I did not tell you this before, lest your knowing it might somehow endanger you. But I must say it now. Before we passed through the gateway into this world, your sister and I met a Lamb Who spoke to us, as the tiger speaks. This Lamb, Who said He knew about this world, seemed to be concealing much untold knowledge, and perhaps also a power far mightier than His form suggested. In fact, He said He would be in a different form when I next saw Him. Everything about Him gave me a far different feeling than the Spirit Beast gives me, a better feeling."

Bulgak's eyebrows rose. "I hope I am the only one to whom you have spoken your doubts, Mother."

"You are. But it bears telling that the Spirit Beast, god though he claims to be, shows no sign so far of being able to look into my heart and know that I have misgivings about him."

"That's a hopeful sign, Mother. But let me hasten to Father, so he won't think I'm slow to obey. I will repeat to no one what you have told me."

All three began heading for the stone houses, but Zulika had a further word for her son. "I managed to swipe six more of the rifle cartridges in your father's saddlebag. He has more in there than he ever said, and certainly more than I thought he had money to buy. Even if he does have other things to ease his mood over losing the rifle, it must irritate him that he can't use those bullets now. Anyway, I'll deliver them to your hiding spot when I safely can."

The boy nodded with manlike seriousness. "That will give us seventeen shots. Almost as many as the number of warrior-age men in the clan."

"Oh, and yet another thing, Bulgak. You will be forced to bow down in homage to the Spirit Beast, who now calls himself Tash. I don't know what the Lamb would say about this, but at least keep within your heart the realization that Tash may NOT be so good as he claims to be."

Hemshull, the Talking Koala elder, had met Aslan three times, none of them recently; but he had never had the privilege of riding on Aslan's back. Finally, in old age, he was being given a reasonable idea of what a thrill that would have been, as he rode across the countryside on the back of the Talking Tiger Shatterneck. Certainly this was by far the swiftest movement the koala had ever experienced; and as they hurried along following Slimtalon and Fear-No-Blast, they were seeing terrain which Hemshull had never visited.

As for Shatterneck, he was soon to see another type of animal completely new to him.

The oddly-matched comrades had been on the move for several hours, with Shatterneck saying almost nothing, saving all his breath for the unaccustomed labor of protracted long-distance running. Hemshull, with the tiger's highly interested consent, had been talking enough for two, describing the times he had met Aslan, and telling what he knew of the behavior of animals and birds in these parts. At one point, Shatterneck left Hemshull in the safety of a tree while he went after a wild hog; after making the kill, he transported both his meal and his friend to a spot of Hemshull's choosing: a place which seemed to promise the presence of plants that the koala found appetizing, so both travellers could eat at the same time. During this rest stop, the tiger had an uncanny feeling that Hemshull wanted to ask for more details about the crimes the tigers had committed which had led to their banishment from Narnia proper...but that, even without fear of angering Shatterneck, the old koala was restrained by a sense of delicacy. So Shatterneck decided to say something which could seem spontaneous, yet might give Hemshull a morsel of what he wanted without the need to ask for it.

"Envy is a peculiar thing," he said to the smaller beast. "Humans envy us tigers for our physical power; and if they knew about you koalas, they would probably expect you to envy tigers in the same way. But I envy you and the humans--for your hands! Look at the way you peeled those husks just now; it would be hard for me to open them with my claws without making a smashed mess of the vegetables themselves. And those platforms you make in the trees! When there's been time for us tigers to start on a new generation of baby cubs, I think we will be asking you koalas to build some tree-platforms in the lairing areas we use, as handier and safer places for the cubs."

"Yes...away from the snakes, or most of them," said Hemshull in a pensive tone, as if remembering something from his own childhood.

"And then there's birds," the tiger went on. "We tigers with our strength, and you and the humans and human-like beings with your clever hands, must ALL sometimes envy birds for their ability to fly--maybe even envy fish for their ability to breathe water."

"If you had had the chance to know King Frank and Queen Helen, you'd have enjoyed hearing the stories they could tell about the world of Adam and Eve. Not all the stories are happy, but all are instructive. And envy plays a role in many of the unhappy stories. Very early in the history of mankind, there was a man called Cain, who envied his brother Abel. The Emperor-Over-Sea, Whom the King calls God the Father, had shown more approval to Abel; and even though Abel had done Cain no harm, Cain still hated him just for enjoying that preference. Cain went so far as to murder Abel; yet God the Father ordered that he be spared from retributory death. Instead, Cain was banished from the land where he had lived."

"A meaningful story indeed," said Hemshull. "While our world still is young, perhaps we various kinds of thinking beings can do something to slow the spread of that kind of evil here."

After a little more relaxation, the two travellers headed for the nearest stream to drink; Hemshull planned also to refill his water-gourd. But as Shatterneck was lowering his muzzle to the water, he suddenly and startlingly felt his tail being grabbed.

His tail was being frantically pulled by the small hands of the koala, who was yelling, "Get back! Now! Move back!"

The tiger stepped backward, both to relieve the tension on his tail and just in case there was a reason for Hemshull's abrupt alarm. The reason erupted from the water, exactly where Shatterneck's head had been. It was a cold-looking creature, scaled like a giant fish, only with rougher scales, and it had jaws twice the length of the tiger's head, full of teeth like the tips of elephants' tusks. It looked appallingly large coming onto the bank, even before its long tail had followed it ashore. Shatterneck speeded up his retreat, with Hemshull mounting his back now that the tail-pulling was no longer needed.

The massive reptile did not pursue them very far from the water before it halted, seeming unsure whether a land chase was a good idea. Shatterneck looked it over--while also memorizing its scent for future vigilance. He felt he might be able to outfight it on land, but he was not about to try it without a reason to take the risk. He withdrew further, still cautiously facing the water beast, until it decided to forget him and return to the stream.

"What in Aslan's name was THAT?" the shaken tiger asked.

"Aslan says that the same kind of animal on Earth is called a crocodile. I hardly need say that it's a predator."

"All right, now I recall hearing some of you koalas casually mentioning 'crocodiles' among yourselves. But why didn't you tell us before now how bloody BIG they are?"

"I'm sorry about that; we koalas tend to think mostly about our own limited neighborhood. Crocodiles almost never come near our tree-town, because the waters thereabouts--not counting bog holes--are not as deep as they like."

"So how did you know that one was about to attack?"

Hemshull once more assumed a pensive look. "Before Aslan left us mostly on our own, He warned us about the predators He had created for this environment, including the crocodiles. He told us, if near bodies of water, to look for their eyes peeking above the surface. That's how I spotted this one; only his eyes were showing as he approached us."

"That sounds like a lesson," remarked Shatterneck, thinking back to the days in the palisaded quasi-prison, with Ripplestride and Slimtalon teaching the youngsters about Aslan's ways. "Evil can be moving in on us for a kill, and us an easy prey...unless we know what to look for. By the Lion's breath, I hope Slimtalon and Fear-No-Blast haven't run afoul of crocodiles! But now that I think about it, I believe Narnia's Talking Geese have reported before now seeing large creatures in the rivers of southern lands; I should have paid more attention to their accounts. Well, Fear-No-Blast will doubtless have advised Slimtalon to be careful around water, so I won't worry overmuch. Still, we should press on to overtake them. Ready to mount up?"

Fear-No-Blast just missed seeing Valamisa and Hookpaw, who happened to be under a tree when he passed by them. Continuing on toward the area from which he and Slimtalon had heard the banging sound, he was saving a burst of reserve energy for his reconnaissance on the scene. He would fly in fairly low, but at good speed--and making random evasive swerves, just in case any hostile persons were below and had bows and arrows or some equivalent thereof.

Thus it was that a loyal Narnian saw, for the first time, the people who would one day be Narnia's foes

in the not-yet-established kingdom of Calormen.

The gander knight beheld some ten or twelve stone houses, several tents, and evidently non-intelligent horses and sheep in what appeared to be recently-constructed wooden pens. There were humans moving about, at least some of them bearing weapons. One man was accompanied--yes, he was accompanied by a Narnian Nymph. That must be one of those Nymphs who had deserted to Jadis many months ago--although, as far as the gander knew, Jadis herself had no part in the current situation. The people were gathered round what looked like a tiger, to whom they were bowing as if in worship.

Risking a closer pass, the old scout saw that this tiger looked exactly like Hookpaw...but this tiger did not cast any shadow in the sunlight.

With the realization that there was an illusion at work here, Fear-No-Blast realized further who must be behind the illusion. A pure and righteous indignation, coming from somewhere far higher than the gander's own emotions, filled him. Diving toward the counterfeit Hookpaw, he honked out at the top of his lungs:

"By Aslan's mane and Aslan's roar, I rebuke you, evil spirit! By Aslan's teeth and Aslan's glory, you cannot remain unexposed in your deceptions!"

The false tiger scrambled backward from his rebuker, much as an ordinary tiger would recoil if threatened by a blazing fire in front of him. As he did so his visible appearance wavered, as reflections on a pond are distorted if the water is disturbed. For an instant he looked more like a Gryphon--then like one of the bird-headed humanoid statues Fear-No-Blast had seen on a previous occasion--then like the tiger again. In a voice that was not at all Hookpaw's voice, he shouted something in words the gander could make no sense of.

But he could make sense of the look on the face of the man standing beside the Nymph. That man pulled from his waist an object about the size of a hatchet, and pointed it at Fear-No-Blast.

The gander knight did not need any prior contact with firearms to act in self-preservation. As he banked steeply in flight, another banging sound was heard. A minor but startling sting of pain touched his right wingtip, and several feathers were torn loose by whatever had grazed him. The wound was by no means fatal or crippling, but it told Fear-No-Blast that he could not stay here. Evading a second shot, he worked his wings hard, flying past the nearest rocky ridge until no further attacks could menace him.

Amid the uproar of the amazed nomads, most of whom looked for an explanation from Tash, one nomad was looking in the direction of the Talking Gander's escape. Lifting her daughter Dilnara in her arms and holding her close, Zulika whispered, "That speaking bird said one word that had meaning for me! Did you hear it? The Lamb spoke of using a name based on our word 'lion'..."

"Yes, Mama," the little girl whispered back. "I heard the goose crying out 'Aslan.' "

Birds do not have a sense of smell, but mammals do. Thus--

"Valamisa! I smell her! My mother-in-law is somewhere upwind of us!"

The Nymph turned toward Hookpaw, whose blind face now displayed the most hopeful expression he had shown since being injured, stripped of his magic, and cast off contemptuously by his deceiver Tash. "Lady Slimtalon?" she said. "You told us before how she tried to persuade you to surrender yourself to King Frank's judgment. Perhaps the time at last is coming for both of us to do this."

Hookpaw pulled in a deep breath, then uttered three short but thundering roars, which he reckoned would carry farther than shouted words in his more human-like speaking voice. As the two exiles continued on in the direction of Slimtalon's scent, Hookpaw repeated the signal periodically. After the fifth time of doing this, a responding imitation could be distantly heard.

When Slimtalon came in sight of Hookpaw, she was more surprised to see the Nymph with him than to see the wounds all across his face. "Valamisa? Is that you? Valamisa from Four Springs Hollow?"

Valamisa knelt before the tigress matriarch, setting the shotgun down beside her. "I am she, Grandmother of Tigers. And Hookpaw you know: now my companion in grief and shame. I forsook Aslan to serve the White Witch, and have brought upon myself pain of the spirit; Hookpaw forsook Aslan to serve his own vanity and envy, found that in reality he was serving an evil spirit, and brought upon himself pain of the flesh."

"The pain includes blindness, Grandmother," Hookpaw added, lying down before Slimtalon in submissive-animal fashion. "But I dare to think that my spiritual eyes are being opened by it."

Though the gesture was wasted on her unseeing son-in-law, Slimtalon could not refrain from raising an eyebrow. "Then are you ready at last to confess the grave error of your ways?"

"More than ready, Grandmother. I begin to understand it now--my infantile discontentedness as I looked upon the lions who bore the likeness of Aslan. The ultimate root of the problem is plain at last: I never LOVED MYSELF enough!" His tone of voice bespoke a firm conviction that he had found wisdom. "My own greatness should have been evident to me without having to--"

"STOP!" roared Slimtalon, unnerving Valamisa and quieting Hookpaw. "Do not fall into one final delusion just as you are on the verge of redemption! May Aslan give you a sound mind at last, and a heart cleansed by acknowledgement of THE TRUTH. Only the truth can set you free, Hookpaw-- which, for that matter, applies also to you, Valamisa."

While Hookpaw digested this, Valamisa spoke in a small, meek voice:

"It is as you say, Grandmother of Tigers. Iskralida and I both resented the fact that other Nymphs than ourselves were chosen to be brides for the King's first two sons. Far from NOT loving ourselves, we were so infatuated with ourselves that we felt we deserved preference above all other Nymphs. We envied our chosen sisters as surely as Hookpaw envied the lions, though we did no bodily violence to those we envied. Instead we, and several other Nymphs with us, deserted to Jadis, in the nonsensical belief that this would result in the Witch finding desirable husbands for us. What it did result in was other Nymphs being transformed into Hags...and in Iskralida, after we fled from Jadis, letting herself be charmed by a brute on two legs...and in Bezbimbry the She-Dwarf asking to die, under the delusion that she would be reborn back into mortal life as a Nymph or a beautiful human woman."

"And it was my claws that granted Bezbimbry's mad request," Hookpaw groaned. "That, more than all the lions who died because of me, is the thing to rub my nose in. That, and my causing my mate, your daughter, to follow my delusions to her own death. You are right, Grandmother: I loved myself too MUCH, not too little. While I still fancied that the Great Gryphon's magic was really mine to command, and as I played with words to form a fantasy about cosmic oneness, I remember now that I actually said to myself that I would be MORE ONE than others! It was a lie, all of it was a lie; and now, because of me, the demon has his own human following, with its head man seeming to have the same arrogance as Lord Digory's notorious uncle. I will have more to relate about those newcomers; but before I say another word, Grandmother, please tell me if there is a way that I can yet obtain Aslan's pardon after I have so blasphemed His name!"

Slimtalon drew near to Hookpaw and nuzzled him comfortingly. "I wish you could have been there to hear Zendragund--yes, the very same lion who so heroically withstood you in unequal fight--pronouncing forgiveness to Ripplestride for her part in your uprising. If he, only a mortal Talking Lion, could be so gracious, Aslan would not be less gracious toward the repentant." The matriarch went on to describe various incidents that had occurred since Hookpaw fled from Narnia, incidents demonstrating Aslan's pardoning mercy--including the redemption of the wolf Ranshuk with the involvement of Father Christmas.

Hookpaw had been led so far as praying his own prayer for Aslan's forgiveness, when Fear-No-Blast came tearing through the sky toward them. "Lady Slimtalon!" he honked. "Is that a Nymph with you? There is another where the new humans are!" He landed in a flurry of wings--and Slimtalon could smell blood from a slight wound in one of the gander's wings--then continued speaking. "And Hookpaw has given himself up, I see. There are no fewer than fifty persons to the east, more than all the number of Earth-blood humans dwelling in this world up to now! The demon was there, posing in Hookpaw's own likeness! And the humans DO seem to have those Earthly weapons which strike from afar like a bow."

Hookpaw turned his maimed face toward the sound of the gander's voice. "I have good cause to know about their weapons. But that is a suffering I would have been spared if I had not been so slow to listen to my betters. I have much to answer for."

"Hookpaw, hearing you confessing your fault is a joy I would celebrate at more length if there were not another matter to turn to," said Fear-No-Blast. "Lady Slimtalon, do you think we may be able to steal into the nesting area of these new humans and rescue the other Nymph out of their clutches?"

Valamisa gave Slimtalon no time to reply. "Regrettably, noble bird, I must inform you that Iskralida is not under any duress; she is pleased to be exactly where she is."

Iskralida the ambitious Nymph was the only one in the crowd of onlookers who had understood what Fear-No-Blast had shouted at Tash; also, she was the only one who knew that Tash and Hookpaw had, up to now, not been entirely the same person. But now she was the only one who did not understand the confident-sounding speech Tash delivered once the gander knight was gone and his visual appearance had stabilized.

An evil spirit?

He had certainly been upset by the invocation of Aslan.

Did this have something to do with Valamisa's abrupt departure?

But...if Iskralida were to run away, she would have to survive in the wilderness without Hookpaw's strength OR Bezimbry's practical skills to help her.

Some part of what Tash said, gesturing toward the new king, caused the nomads, after much bowing to Tash, to turn and give Tisrukh his share of honor as well. Iskralida saw her opportunity to ask Tash for an explanation in English. "Indestructible tiger, I think I recognized that goose, one who serves the King of Narnia as a messenger. If...if all of us are Aslan, how is it that he would think Aslan could be against you?"

Tash projected a philosophical tone and expression. "A matter of arrogance. Much as Narnia's lions deluded themselves that their lion-form imparted superiority to them..."

(Iskralida had not forgotten that Hookpaw had come to doubt his own adverse judgment of the lions; but perhaps his returning now to that assertion as if he had never doubted it was one more exercise in the high spiritual achievement of self-contradiction.)

"...so that bird flatters himself that there is more of Aslan in him than in beings without wings. But you, of course, have seen me fly without wings."

"And--and--why did you change your shape like that when he cursed you?"

"I really did that for the benefit of the others. They did not understand the gander's words as you did; so, in order for our friends not to be alarmed, I displayed my versatility of bodily forms to prove what power is mine. That way, they will know that I have the power to protect them from whatever magical threat they might imagine the gander's visit portends."

"But why did you--?" Iskralida choked off this question, but Tash seemed to know what she had impulsively begun to ask him. He looked at her with an utter absence of expression, and the air between them grew colder.

"You mean to ask, why did I seem frightened for a moment myself? Little forest girl, you are going to have to decide which of two explanations better suits you to believe.

"Perhaps it never was true that everything is everything else. Perhaps all beings really have distinct individual identities, and some are good while others are bad. Perhaps I am not at all Hookpaw, but am in fact the evil spirit that Fear-No-Blast called me, and I have in reality the sinful trait which I falsely projected upon the Narnian lions, namely an egotistical desire to be praised and honored more highly than I deserve. It could be that I have been walking a tightrope ever since I entered the Narnian world, seeking to gain worshippers for myself and yet trying not to be SO aggressive about it as to provoke Aslan into stopping me by force. It might be that, much to my frustration and humiliation, I am compelled to admit to you that I know that Aslan sees every move I make; I also am forced to admit to you that I was not permitted to get Hookpaw and Valamisa out of the way by personally killing them, but rather they have departed to the west because they understood what a fraud I am but they saw no hope of inducing you to leave Tisruk and me. And perhaps Aslan compels me against my will to inform you that you could still escape from my influence; you could simply walk out of this encampment and follow your sister Nymph, Aslan would protect you from harm as you did so, and any future hardships you bore would at least be compensated for by your ultimate eternal reward in Aslan's country.

"You can choose to believe all of that...or you can choose to believe that the Everything-ness explains everything, that you are going to be the first queen of the mightiest nation that will ever exist in this world, and that my gratitude for your help in conjuring more Central Asian humans into this place will ensure that you always enjoy privilege and prestige in this life."

Iskralida was not sure how long she pondered this under the gaze of Tash; but it must not have been very long, for Tisruk had not gotten around to hovering over her again before she said to Tash:

"Will I get to wear a golden crown like the one Queen Helen wears?"

The counterfeit Hookpaw smiled. "Bigger than hers."

The Narnian world was still young enough that every new day was like a universal renewal. The sun had not even cleared the horizon before its first hint of light awakened Shatterneck and Hemshull where they slept in a tree. The tiger awoke feeling as happy and innocent as if his kind had never waged unjust war against the lions, and the koala elder felt as young as if he were barely out of his mother's pouch. Both travellers were soon ready to press on.

An hour's march later, they heard a tiger's hailing roar. "That's Lady Slimtalon!" Shatterneck exclaimed. "She must have caught our scent, since the wind is behind us. Hold on tight, I'm going to speed up!"

Their first sight of an approaching party was obscured by the morning sun gleaming in their eyes. "Who comes with you, grandmother of tigers?" Hemshull called out, to receive an answer from Slimtalon:

"I bring with me our long-lost Hookpaw, who has learned a harsh lesson. His heart is now set free by repentance and confession, but he will be needing some help with his physical needs. Fear-No-Blast is with us; and so is another strayed Narnian, who strayed by a different path yet has been reached by the same saving grace."

The one last referred to furnished her own identity: "I am Valamisa the Nymph, one of those who deserted to Jadis. The Witch lusts for life-and-death power over all Narnians, but she does not yet have it; thus I live to tell of my shame. Worst for me to bear is knowing that others who strayed with me have NOT been so lightly redeemed as I have been."

When Slimtalon's party came up to Shatterneck and Hemshull, these two were quick to notice that Hookpaw had been blinded. The penitent criminal told them briefly--or as briefly as possible, given the complexity of the events--what had happened with him, the Nymphs, and the now-deceased Bezbimbry. Fear-No-Blast added the little he knew of what had most lately been going on among the magically-summoned Turkic nomads. Then Valamisa suddenly broke in:

"Please, now that there are more of us, can't we go back and save Iskrallida?"

Slimtalon looked at her gravely. "It is not our numbers that give hope, but our faith in Aslan. Listen well, Valamisa: though your contrition is genuine and your heart has returned to Aslan, I do not think you are yet strong enough in faith to face what may have to be faced. You will be more useful if you go back west with Shatterneck--"

"You're sending ME away?" Shatterneck objected. "The whole reason Hemshull and I came out here was because Ranshuk had a dream that you discovered a great threat!"

"I need you to protect and feed Hookpaw on the way back to the tree-town," the matriarch told him, then faced Valamisa again. "Valamisa, our people will need to know everything you can report about the newcomers. If it's called for, you can also help the koalas to make human weapons for self-defense."

Now Hemshull spoke up. "Your senior male tiger, Quickspring, with his mate and some of the young tigers, has already begun escorting our people on excursions to find materials that could make our wooden weapons more effective: stones that can be flaked and sharpened, and certain bones from large beasts. We may, however, simply migrate farther away."

"Migrating I understand," said Fear-No-Blast. "But the evil afoot back there may spread as far as Narnia itself. We must at the very least find out more about it."

"I agree," said the koala elder. "Therefore, Lady Slimtalon, I must ask you to let me go with you and our brave gander as you continue your surveillance."

"We would be honored by your presence," the tigress matriarch replied; "BUT--there is a particularly urgent reason why you also must go back. It's nothing to do with your usefulness to us, and everything to do with the relationship growing between my people and yours. The evil spirit we are dealing with loves to generate mistrust, and he probably knows of your existence already. What do you think some koalas might imagine if you don't come back with Shatterneck? It's a big step, asking koalas to trust their lives to large carnivores, even though Aslan did predict our coming to you; we mustn't let anyone begin to suspect that Shatterneck devoured you as soon as you were out of sight of home."

Hemshull had to admit that there was good sense in this.

"When you do get back, ask my son Bluntmuzzle to come this way; he does have the strength in faith to withstand the demon."

"Lady Slimtalon," said Valamisa, "let me at least do one thing which may be of help in reaching Iskralida, if you get a chance to speak with her. During the time we spent with Jadis, before we fled from her and joined Hookpaw, Iskralida and I used to fantasize that each of us would bear a son and a daughter, so that my son could marry Iskralida's daughter and vice-versa. No one else heard us talk of this; therefore, if you mention it to Iskralida, she will know for a certainty that you have met me."

"And tell Iskralida something from me," Hookpaw put in. "Tell her I am sorry, sorrier than words can tell. I have been wrong about everything, and she should do the opposite of everything I led her to! Oh, and beware of an old woman called Tarazi. Slight though her power is, her malice is such that she may yet do some further harm."

"Maybe not," said Valamisa. "She no longer has the weapon with which she blinded you; I myself now carry it."

Soon, then, Hookpaw and Valamisa were bound westward under the guidance of Shatterneck and Hemshull, while Slimtalon and Fear-No-Blast planned a roundabout route to approach the nomads again.

"It is not for a mere shaman to question the wisdom of mighty Tisrukh," said Orhan to Tisrukh's brother; "but I confess that no spirit has revealed to me why our lord and master sends Tarkan away just when we are close to bringing more people across to our settlement."

"Our cousin is the best horseman among us," replied Murhat, "and so he is the very one to send forth when the most scouting needs to be done in the shortest time. The Tsar of the New Lands needs to know if there are more creatures like that magical goose nearby; and since Tash has withdrawn from view, we can't ask him. Besides, the coming of more people will mean the necessity of providing more homes, and possibly of locating more pasture for flocks."

"And with so much to think of, why is the Son of Destiny resuming his study of this land's language, occupying not only himself, but also Iskralida, who by Tash's own word is greatly needed to perform the summoning?"

"My incomparable brother thinks always of the future. We will inevitably have more dealings with creatures of this new world; so Tisrukh is getting as much progress made with their tongue as he can before he is forced to turn his attention to those who will join us from our old world." Murhat glanced toward the stone gate, which had been set up afresh by Tash before he disappeared. Other nomads were preparing the wooden pentagram within which Tisrukh and Iskralida would stand when casting the spell of summoning, and laboriously dragging some of the stone statues back to positions near the gate--the statues having been shoved aside when the gate grew into a tunnel on the day the present nomad group had arrived in the Narnian world.

Orhan looked in the same direction. "Inexorable Tash gave us some idea of what manner of people will come; but do you have any idea if they will have any idea what to expect? Will they have been given at least as much preparation as your invincible brother was granted through dreams?"

"You know as much as I do, shaman. At least it seems certain that they will speak our language, so that they can be told at once who is their new emperor."

"And I suppose that this covered position we've prepared, overlooking the gate, is a measure in case the newcomers don't like being told that?"

Murhat nodded. "And that's why you and I have practiced with your creations." He and Orhan were

armed with the first two bows of adequate strength and accuracy that Orhan had succeeded in making, and each had a quiver with seven arrows. "Since we can't count on ever being able to replenish the ammunition for our guns, now is not too soon to get used to using arrows. What's more, if you and I end up having to slay any of the newcomers, a silent arrow may leave the survivors uncertain of where the shot came from, giving us time to nock, draw and shoot again if need be, before they know where we are."

Orhan did not conceal his puzzlement. "If all-powerful Tash intends these next people to enlarge our numbers, how could it be that he would let it become necessary for us to kill some of them?"

"We would, even in the worst case, kill only men. It's more women that we need, the quicker to beget more sons for ourselves. It can be sons for the newcomer men as well, provided they accept our terms. Tash did tell us that we would not see much war in our time; the great thing is to increase our number of progeny, so that they will have the numbers for wars they may face in their day. I hope it won't be necessary for you and me to shoot anyone; the men who come are to be allowed to live, as long as they submit to Tash and Tisrukh."

A nine-year-old nomad girl walked up to them at this point: Monduli, the youngest of Orhan's children and the only one young enough still to be under Tarazi's care. Looking up at Orhan, she said, "Papa, when Bulgak bowed to Tash, they said he would be king after Tisrukh dies if he's good enough. If Bulgak is a king, will he still marry me?"

"Hold your tongue, stupid child!" Orhan snapped. In fairness to him, he might have spoken to his daughter less harshly if Bulgak's uncle had not been standing beside him. "You know that no bargaining has yet been done for your betrothal, to Bulgak or anyone else. What you may feel about him is of no importance; you will marry whomever mighty Tisrukh orders you to marry--or, if Tisrukh leaves it open, whomever I order you to marry."

The girl's tone grew pleading. "But Papa, Bulgak told me once that when he got married, he'd never beat his wife, so I want to marry him when I grow up. I don't want to get any beatings!"

"You'll get one now if you presume to advise your father! Go away!"

Zulika and her daughter Dilnara looked busy enough as they walked in the direction of the few boys still searching for Tisrukh's rifle. Bulgak had gone that way only minutes ahead of them. Zulika and Dilnara were both carrying armloads of dead branches--an activity too ordinary for the men to feel suspicious of, at least at a time when the men had so much else on their minds, like possibly acquiring extra wives (first wives in the case of the youngest men).

Zulika was glad that there was wood for fuel in this country. Not only because wood was less dirty to collect than dried manure...but also because the bolt-action rifle she was carrying could not have

been concealed inside a dung jar. As it was, only a very close inspection would have detected the weapon, wrapped with a protective cloth to keep dirt out of the barrel, in the center of the huge cluster of branches she was struggling to carry.

One of the gun-seeking boys gave Zulika an unsettling surprise by actually asking why she was carrying such a burden away from the settlement. But with a casual expression Zulika told the boy, "It occurred to me that, in case you lads wish to go on searching after dark, it would be well to have a bonfire."

"Stay out after dark?" said the curious child. "Not with demon birds flying around!"

"Don't be stupid!" another boy sneered. "Tash will protect us from them...but, um, the Tsar no longer threatens punishment for failure, so I'd rather sleep in my own sheepskin rugs tonight."

"Well, Dilnara and I will just leave the wood someplace around here. It could have other uses, like a signal fire." Zulika caught her son's eye meaningfully. "Just so I'm not in the way, where did you just finish looking?"

Bulgak gestured. "Over here, Mother. We went over this part very carefully." And thus, as quickly as could be done without the other boys noticing, the rifle was transferred to its new hiding place. "Now, Mother, let's talk about what I'll have to do if I get to be Tsar after Father."

What this really meant was that they should update their plans for escaping in the event of things becoming intolerable.

The nicking of one wingtip by Tisrukh's bullet, while not any threat to Fear-No-Blast's life, did cause him a little discomfort, and a need for minor compensating action in flight. So, for much of the roundabout way back toward the nomad settlement, the gander knight actually took Slimtalon up on her offer of a ride on her back. His webbed feet were of little use in keeping him in place once mounted; but, having human intelligence, he figured out for himself that he could reach his wings down on either side of the tigress matriarch's ribcage to steady himself. At occasional stops, Slimtalon left marks on trees, or even gathered stones together, to make a trail which Bluntmuzzle could follow, much as Bluntmuzzle had done months ago in the fruitless effort to find Hookpaw.

"I hope your son pays attention to Shatterneck's account of the lowland," the gander said at one point, largely to distract his own mind from the awkwardness of riding a tiger. "Those crocodiles are not to be taken lightly."

"Well, I taught all my--" Slimtalon began to say, then choked up at the reminder that Bluntmuzzle was the only one remaining of her many children who was neither dead nor reduced to a dumb beast.

"Yes, I'm sure you taught them to look out for strange creatures in all environments," Fear-No-Blast quietly finished for her. "But none of us knew to teach our young not to listen to demons pretending to be Gryphons."

They went on in silence for another half-hour; then Fear-No-Blast said, "My lady, I really should take at least one scouting flight before it gets too close to nightfall. When we find good cover, I'll take off from there. Before I go, I'll ask you for one more favor."

"What would that be?"

"To take my unwounded wingtip in your mouth, and carefully pull out two--**ONLY** two--of the pinions. That should equalize my wing balance enough so that I won't have to be consciously thinking about it as I fly. I'll need to have all my wits about me in case those humans catch sight of me and feel like taking another shot at me."

Tawnydart was anxious for the safe return of her husband Shatterneck. Tinkswid the girl koala was anxious for the return of her father Hemshull. Ranshuk the wolf was anxious to test the recovery of his injured (and still splinted) hind leg, and also to learn what had been discovered about the truth behind his alarming dream. And Wolfsfriend, the young tigress who owed her life to Ranshuk, was anxious to make sure he was safe. These four creatures, therefore, set out from the koala colony in hopes of meeting the others partway as they returned. Riding in the lead on Tawnydart's back, Tinkswid provided guidance to avoid bog holes.

The tops of the koalas' home trees had not been out of sight behind the horizon for very long before an easterly wind brought smellable news--smellable, at least, for the especially sensitive nose of Ranshuk. "Shatterneck is somewhere ahead of us!" the wolf exclaimed. "Another tiger is with him, and a koala, which would have to be Hemshull. Also with them is either a human being or someone from one of the near-human races."

"It would be wonderful finally to meet a child of Adam and Eve," Tinkswid remarked.

"That would depend on what sort of child it was," replied Tawnydart. Although the humans she knew personally were noble and righteous, all intelligent Narnians were aware (thanks to the honesty of their human rulers, and the preserved memory of Uncle Andrew, the "Neevil") that the vast world called Earth was also home to many cruel and wicked humans.

A quarter-hour later, the two tigresses were also able to catch the scent Ranshuk had picked up. Upon this confirmation, Ranshuk began a series of hailing howls, which were eventually answered by a hailing roar from Shatterneck. At last, the two parties came in sight of each other...though the party returning from the east included one who could see nothing. Tawnydart, overjoyed that Shatterneck was safe, ran to nuzzle him, not at first registering either Hookpaw's identity or his blindness. While

Tinkswid likewise happily greeted her father, Ranshuk stepped up to speak with the Nymph, while Wolfsfriend met the blinded Hookpaw.

"Uncle Hookpaw! What happened to your face?"

His unseeing eyes turned toward her. "Is that young Nippy?"

"Yes, Uncle. I have my permanent name now; I'm called Wolfsfriend."

"Friend of the one I smell here, I take it?"

"Yes. But what happened to your face?"

Valamisa and Ranshuk had quickly recognized each other from their time with Jadis. Valamisa interrupted her barely-begun account of Iskralida and Bezbimbry to turn toward Wolfsfriend and Hookpaw, holding up the shotgun she carried. "He was wounded by this weapon, which flings out small projectiles like stones from a sling. A human female did it--one of a number of humans who have just lately been brought into our world."

"Brought?" said Ranshuk. "Brought by whom?"

"By the same evil spirit who tricked me into my acts of wickedness," replied Hookpaw. "There is much to tell you. Slimtalon and Fear-No-Blast are seeking to find out more of how things now stand back east; meanwhile, Valamisa and I must go before all of the tigers and koalas, to tell what we know. There may be need for you to choose a course of action soon. The one act of making amends that is possible for me right now is to give all the information I can."

"Then let's get back to the koalas' wood," said Shatterneck.

Despite his blindness, Hookpaw managed--with a little guidance--to move quickly enough that they were all back in the koalas' wood by nightfall. Valamisa's appearance caused a stir. When she saw that the koalas were disappointed to learn she was only a Nymph and not a Daughter of Eve, she smiled to herself at the unplanned rebuke to her vanity. But she had their full attention when she displayed the shotgun to them, explained how it worked, and warned of the many firearms the nomads possessed.

Yugdug, the betrothed of Tinkswid, suddenly spoke to the chief elder of the koalas: "Grandfather--" (which the chief elder literally was to Yugdug) "--since peril and uncertainty are near us, I wish to be married to Tinkswid this very night, in case--well, just in case."

The koala leader paused, then nodded. "As soon as Tiger Hookpaw has given the rest of his information, we shall prepare for your wedding." He managed a smile. "I know Tinkswid well enough

to know that she will have no objection to the suddenness."

"Then could it be two immediate weddings?" asked Bluntmuzzle. His betrothed, Elkfinder, exchanged a smiling glance with Tinkswid.

Speaking for the tigers, Quickspring answered Bluntmuzzle: "I approve of it--provided that, in anticipation of the happy solemnity, no one fails to pay attention to the solemn report Hookpaw still has to make."

Hookpaw, his heart at once heavy with knowledge of his irreparable wrongdoing and lifted up with knowledge of Aslan's forgiveness, took over two hours to tell his tale. Subsequently, Quickspring and Shatterneck joined with all the koala elders in speaking words of blessing over the union of the two new married couples. Ranshuk, in addition, was asked to pray aloud for all four newlyweds, which he did most impressively. Thereafter, Tinkswid and Yugdug were assigned a treetop nest of their own in which to consummate their marriage, while Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder also sought privacy.

Meanwhile, those who had just conducted the double wedding, joined by Valamisa, Ripplestride and others, began conferring on how to defend against a possible attack by the demon-worshipping humans.

Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder allowed themselves less than an hour for the initial consummation of their marriage; but they fitted enough tenderness into that time to be worth remembering, and to promise good things for their lifelong relationship. Then, pausing only to eat one fish apiece and say goodbye to Quickspring, they set out eastward in the moonlight, following a safe path past the bogs which koalas had shown them before now. Once on firmer ground, they increased their pace--taking special care when crossing any stream, in case crocodiles might be present.

As they went, both of them were clearly remembering the wise wolf's prayer for them:

"Almighty Aslan, I thank You that I who now pray, and these tigers for whom I pray, are cleansed and liberated from our sins by Your mercy and grace. Please grant them, and me, the high privilege of being able to give You some satisfaction in return for Your mercy. For Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder I ask safe travel, in view of the way their married life is to begin with an adventure. May it please You to make worthwhile use of them in Your service, and may they be of help to the Grandmother of Tigers in facing and thwarting evil. Thereafter, may it please You to allow them long years of earthly life together in Your service. Though this mission our young friends undertake is far removed from what the humans would call a honeymoon, grant that the very sharing of perils will impart vigor to their love. Let all this be to Your glory, great Lion of Truth."

The newlywed tigers planned to go without a halt until about two hours past sunrise. Then they would catch some beast for meat; feed in moderation, lest heavy stomachs make them slow; sleep for a short

while, and then resume their journey to join Lady Slimtalon.

Iskralida stood in a pentagram under the same bright moonlight, with firelight also shining on her from left and right. Her presumptive husband-to-be was hovering very close behind her. Once he understood enough English, the Nymph intended to educate him about bathing regularly. Still, smelling Tisrukh's armpit odor was a small price to pay for being a prospective empress--and, for tonight at least, a sorceress carrying out a spell-casting of enormous importance to the community of the Kalor-descended nomads.

Facing her passively through the renewed stone arch were some of Hookpaw's magically-formed human statues, over which the nomads had draped cloaks to increase the sympathetic-magic effect of likening the stone figures to the people whose coming was desired. (Desired, but with caution; Murhat and Orhan were at their station with their bows ready.) Trying to make her voice impressive in tone (her words mattered little as far as the nomads were concerned; even Tisrukh would understand only part of them), she began calling for the expected additional children of Adam and Eve to come across from Adam's world.

Dobrynya, the Cossack trader and smuggler, had suffered a disruption in his business routine less than two days after the last time he had seen Tisrukh. During a drunken celebration of their recent prosperous trading, two of his men had gotten into a senseless dagger-fight over something utterly insignificant; the others--except for Dobrynya, who had tried in vain to make peace--had taken sides in the fight, until only one of the Cossack merchant's henchmen was even left alive, and that one wounded. Feeling bound by honor to arrange for the survivor to be cared for at a caravan-stopover he knew, Dobrynya had been forced to spend much of their collective income to ensure this. Then, shrugging off the adverse turn of fortune which had left him without an entourage, Dobrynya had found an opportunity for new employment.

A tough old Chechen reprobate of his acquaintance, named Akim, was passing through on a "business trip" with his four grown sons--collecting female slaves anyplace he could get them without bringing Russian troops down on his head. They would be sold someplace outside the Russian Empire's borders. Dobrynya joined up with Akim and his sons as an escort for the human cargo. He hardened his heart to the pleading of the several Russian maidens among the captives.

Not long after Dobrynya joined the illegal caravan, Akim confided something to the Cossack. The Chechen rogue had been having a series of peculiar dreams, about a tiger leading him to a faraway land of prosperity....

Taking advantage of the summoning ceremony holding everyone else's attention, Zulika slipped away from the stone village (with her son's knowledge--and Bulgak was prepared to mislead anyone who

questioned her absence from the spell-casting) to deposit a parcel in a hiding place close to where Tisrukh's rifle was concealed. The parcel included a waterskin, some bread, and miscellaneous necessities she would not soon be able to replace once she took her children and escaped: items a man might not think of, like needles and thread.

She was about to sneak back when she heard a flapping of bird wings. Looking almost ghostly in the moonlight, a gray goose landed not far from her...and looked at her as if he recognized her individually...as if he were thinking about her. Suddenly Zulika felt certain of something.

Putting down her spear and taking one slow step closer to the goose, empty hands in plain view, she said, "Are you the goose who spoke? The one who startled the Spirit Beast?" She purposely did not say "Tash," lest the creature think that she was a worshipper of the demon.

Then the goose opened his beak and spoke in reply.

What he said sounded as if it were in the same language as the Nymphs had partly taught to Zulika's people. In fact--yes, she made out some words in that language that she had learned by now: "people," and "far away."

Near the end of his speech, the goose very distinctly said "ASLAN."

Zulika nodded her head vigorously, echoing "Aslan! Aslan!" and making such gestures as touching her hands to her breasts, trying to show a favorable attitude on her part toward Aslan. Although this was not the tigress she had been told to expect, perhaps he was a friend of that tigress.

The goose clearly understood that she wanted to communicate. Seeming to reach a decision, he made a gesture of his own, surprisingly manlike: a beckoning motion with one of his wings. And, as if by divine providence, he spoke another English word that had been taught to Zulika: "Come." Then he walked away instead of flying.

Zulika looked around. No other nomads were near to see what she was doing. She followed the goose.

The wind that evening was out of the south, as it had been all day. Slimtalon accordingly was lying in wait north of the nomad settlement; if a breeze carried her scent to the newcomers' domestic animals, a tiger might as well organize a parade as try to creep closer unnoticed. She grew impatient for what news might be brought by Fear-No-Blast, whom sheep and horses could smell all day long without alarm.

The gander knight returned; and before he even came within view, that same southerly breeze notified the tigress matriarch that an adult human female, probably still within her fertile years, was following him. The not-yet-seen woman smelled of excitement, but not quite fear.

Fear-No-Blast approached. "My lady, do you remember I said that when I flew over and rebuked the evil spirit, one of the newcomer women looked at me in a different way than any of the others? That very one is with me now! Let's try to speak with her; it seems like she's one of those whom Valamisa taught some English to!"

Slimtalon did not rise to her feet, judging that she would look less threatening lying down. The woman she saw coming looked to be several years younger than Queen Helen, with a darker complexion and much darker hair. Her clothes were shapeless and ragged, but Slimtalon thought that within those clothes the woman had at least something of the kind of shape human males found pleasing. As for her face, it was pleasant enough in features, but most of all gave the impression of a strong intelligence which had never been given much opportunity to expand itself. The fact that she was daring to walk toward a tiger pronounced her either very reckless or very perceptive.

Doing what he could to prove that Slimtalon was not hostile, Fear-No-Blast came and stood next to the relaxed tigress. As the nomad woman took in this tableau of unlikely companions, Slimtalon spoke in the most gentle and reassuring voice she could manage:

"Peace to you, Daughter of Eve. May Aslan grant that you do not fear me, and that you can--"

She got no farther before the nomad woman staggered, clutching her head with both hands. When the hands dropped down, the woman's dark eyes looked as wide as sunflowers. "It's true! It happened! I understand!" she cried out...in perfect English. "I'm called Zulika. Dilnara and I--she's my daughter--met a Lamb who spoke to us, and He was Aslan. That was before we came here, but He knew that we would be here. Aslan told me I would meet you, and when you spoke I would become able to understand and speak your language too! I do understand it now! I am speaking it! I know a little Russian--by my grandfather's grave, I can even tell which of the Russian words I know have some connection with words in this language! And--I even know where this language comes from! It's the language of the English, the ones who fought the Russians over Crimea! But how does that language come to be in this world??"

"The first human beings to live in this world came from your world," Fear-No-Blast told her, "from the nation called England. Their language became the language of Narnia. We Talking Animals all speak this tongue."

"Narnia?" echoed Zulika. "Is that the place the magical woman Iskralida said was to the north?"

Slimtalon nodded. "She and the other one, Valamisa, were created in Narnia."

"Created, you say? Not born?"

"Daughter of Eve, this world has existed for much less than one lifetime of human beings. Many are still alive here who were created by Aslan, already adults, on the day He first made this world."

Zulika's wide-eyed stare became a narrow-eyed stare. "MADE this world? Are you saying that He is--" her voice dropped to a whisper-- "that He is Tash?"

It was Fear-No-Blast who first grasped why Zulika would say this. He told her, "If Tash claims to have created this world, he is lying, as he lies about everything. Aslan is the Creator."

"Then, are you saying that Aslan is Allah?"

Here Slimtalon could help again, remembering talks with Narnia's King and Queen about the diverse peoples of Adam's world. "It might be best to say that Aslan is in reality that One Whom you are trying to conceive of when you speak of Allah. I promise that we will speak of Him to your satisfaction soon; but first, my gander friend and I need to know what is happening among your people, and what intentions Tash has revealed concerning you."

"I will tell you what I can say quickly, before I am missed." Zulika now felt certain that these two miraculous creatures were her friends, and servants of the Lamb. "But I must beg you for a great mercy. If things among my people cannot be set right somehow, I must get away from here, with my daughter and son. Could you take me to that place called Narnia?"

"Our own situation is such that we cannot take you to Narnia," said Slimtalon. "But we would be able to take you at least to a safe place with friendly creatures, and perhaps Aslan Himself will appear and carry you to Narnia. Just tell me a few things now, and you can tell more to the gander as he accompanies you partway back to your camp."

"Very well, mighty servant of Aslan the Lamb. Back in our world, my husband Tisrukh was given dreams of a tiger leading him to this world, and one day a way actually opened up for us to enter. We were met by a tiger who could both speak and fly, and my husband used this tiger's apparent friendliness to him as a means to grab control of the clan away from the former headman..."

It occurred to Iskralida, in mid-conjuring, that Tisrukh had not yet formally married her, any more than he had yet demanded any physical intimacy from her. The thought flickered that the nomad leader might be waiting to see if this new summoning would bring in some woman even more suitable to be his empress...but no, judging by the nomad women she had seen so far, Earth was not likely to offer any bride more desirable than a Nymph. Probably it was just that Tisrukh did not want to risk the possibility that a too-soon change in Iskralida's maidenly condition might impair her ability to perform the magic with Valamisa no longer assisting.

After much beckoning and chanting, Iskralida was rewarded by seeing the stone arch growing itself

into a raised tunnel once again, as it had done just before the Turkic nomads emerged. Everyone watched eagerly--including Tisrukh, his hot breath falling on Iskralida's bare left shoulder--and Murhat and Orhan, standing by with strung bows in their camouflaged redoubt.

There was a swelling wave of human voices--all female. Had the magic been so superbly selective as not to bother bringing any men? But the women sounded more afraid than adventurous or amorous.

"Don't crowd in on them too closely!" Tisrukh shouted, realizing that the unmarried young men would be inclined to grab first and ask questions later.

Out from the gateway of the worlds came twenty-two young women, all reasonably attractive...none of them very neatly dressed...and all connected together by a rope, running from waist to waist to waist. Actually two ropes, producing two files of captive women advancing side by side. One line was of women resembling the nomad women, while the other was of women with lighter complexions, more nearly resembling the British stock that had given the Narnian world its very first human residents.

"What are they doing tied up?" exclaimed Iskralida, reflexively, in English. But her answer was not long in coming. Behind the women, prodding them along, came six armed men--armed with rifles like the one Tisrukh had lost.

Realization struck the Nymph. The male strangers, like Tisrukh and Orhan on the previous occasion, wanted to see this new world; but unlike Tisrukh and Orhan, they had chosen to force women through the opening ahead of them, so that if there were any danger the women would suffer first.

This was not quite going the way Iskralida had anticipated.

The string of Russian women was shorter than that of the Asiatic women: eight of the former to fourteen of the latter. As the men sheltering behind them came into view, one man proved to be Russian-looking himself; this one appeared to be in charge of moving the Russian women along, for obvious reasons of ability to communicate.

"DOBRINYA!" Tisrukh suddenly shouted, recognizing his trader-smuggler friend. He saw the Cossack show recognition as well; and this in turn led to identifying the leader of the newcomers, as a tough-looking Caucasian turned to Dobrinya and said in language that Tisrukh could follow adequately: "Is that your friend who you said was reported to have disappeared with all his clan?" Dobrinya affirmed this to his apparent new boss; then, shepherding his line of women over to one side, he made for Tisrukh. The summoning being complete, Tisrukh stepped out of the pentagram to greet his friend.

"Welcome, you old son of a drunken hedgehog! It seems you and your companions have brought the best merchandise yet!" Switching to Russian, he quietly and quickly added, "Are their intentions peaceful?"

"Reasonably so," Dobrinya replied. "Akim is the chief, the others are his sons. Akim was prepared for this marvel by dreams involving a magical tiger." Here Dobrinya reverted to Turkic speech: "So this is the new frontier opened for us! And if it has women like the one I saw you with as we emerged, the ones we brought will feel inferior."

"That is Iskralida, my new bride; but there are no others like her available for now, so your additions to the breeding stock are very timely." Now, seeing Akim coming up to be introduced, Tisrukh turned his attention to formal greetings.

Orhan and Murhat, meanwhile, were unsettled by the way the two groups were already mingling. This was going to make it hard for them to hit only enemies with their arrows if any conflict broke out.

Tarazi, Orhan's wife, had seen to it that she would take part, along with one of the clan's younger women, in presenting the bread and salt of welcome to the newcomers. Thus she would be in a position to make sure that Akim and his sons were made aware of something--something Tisrukh himself was not planning to hide, so no one would blame Tarazi for "happening" to make its first mention sooner instead of later. She noticed that two of Akim's sons were beginning to untie the bound women; she also noticed that the tunnel between the worlds was beginning to shrink back down to the original arch, so that neither those women nor their abductors would be able to return to Earth.

As the old woman and the young one drew near with their wooden trays of bread and salt, they heard Akim saying to Tisrukh:

"The tiger said that, rather than selling our stock, we were to take some of them as new wives for ourselves and hand over others to your unmarried lads. He said that we would be compensated in other ways than money."

"So you shall," Tisrukh affirmed. "You and your sons, with Dobrinya, will become part of a new empire; it won't be huge in size in our lifetimes, but our descendants will see it wax invincible."

Tarazi saw her opening, and signalled the girl beside her to step forward with her. "Peace to you, adventurous chieftain from the Kavkaz. Accept the bread and salt of hospitality, in the name of inexorable Tash--Tash, the very same benefactor who drew you here, about whom our great ruler is eager to tell you." As soon as Akim and Dobrinya had accepted their morsels of salted bread, the shaman's wife took the girl's arm and drew her away urgently. She had done enough; now Tisrukh would dig his own grave.

"Who, then, IS this Tash?" asked Akim. "Is he a djinn, such as Arabian tales tell of?"

Tisrukh beamed. "Much more than a djinn! Tash is the very Maker of this land you see!"

Dobrinia had seen something in Tarazi's face that had made him uneasy. Now, having a hunch of what was coming, he tried to pre-empt a confrontation. "Bold Akim, I think Tisrukh is saying that 'Tash' is a new name to be added to the wondrous names of Allah." But the Cossack's effort to keep the peace came to nothing, as Tisrukh's mouth flapped away.

"No, my honored guests, nothing so simple as that. You have arrived not only at a new place, but at new knowledge. Tash is not Allah--he is greater than Allah, and is the only god we shall--"

That was all the farther Tisrukh's creed went.

Before coming through the gateway that had opened in a hillside, Akim had let his sons know how to react if they heard him suddenly shout a loud "Allah akbar!" He shouted it now--at the same time as he drew his long dagger and went for Tisrukh's belly. The descendants of the Kalor would have needed a new king as of then, if Dobrinia had not grabbed Akim's arm, shouting, "Wait!" The Cossack's final effort to prevent bloodshed was shouted down by Akim's "Die, infidel!"--but Tisrukh was not to forget who had saved his life.

Chaos broke loose. As Akim felled his Cossack henchman with a fist, then found himself wrestling with his now-alerted intended victim, each of his sons pulled a slave woman in front of him as a human shield and opened fire past her with a pistol--the eldest son's pistol being a revolver like the one Tisrukh had taken from Orhan. Two of the young men of the settlement were killed before they realized what was happening, while another was wounded. Also injured were several women and children--including Monduli, the young daughter of Orhan and Tarazi, who took a bullet in the ribs, though not fatally.

What followed was uglier still. Every one of the slave women held by Akim's sons was shot dead by the guns of Tisrukh's followers, to get them out of the way. Then Murhat and Orhan, getting their clear shot, put arrows into the hearts of two of the Chechen youths, after which other nomad men dragged the remaining two down and made them very, very dead.

Akim, caring nothing for his own sons compared to the satisfaction of slaying infidels, was gradually getting the advantage over Tisrukh--when Murhat sprang upon him, cut his throat, and sent him to a very different destination than the seventy virgins he was expecting.

Tisrukh sprang to his feet, plunging his own dagger into the dead Akim also. Seeing that Dobrinia was the only male survivor of the newcomers, he shouted, "Honor to my brother for helping me! And honor also to this Russian who sided with me instead of with my foe! Hear my words: Dobrinia is not to be blamed for what has happened--he is one of us now, serving inexorable Tash! Now, how many of those women are still alive?" As soon as he had said this, he remembered his empress-to-be. "And where is Iskrallida? She also is blameless in what has happened."

Iskralida proved to be safe; she had found refuge from the gunfire behind a rock. Now, she was bandaging a wounded nomad boy. This was VERY far from what she had expected.

One of Tisrukh's first actions in the aftermath of the violence was to go to a pack-horse which had accompanied the newcomers. From it, he took for himself a rifle similar to the one he had lost, one which apparently had belonged to the late Akim. He also approved of Orhan taking possession of the revolver which Akim's eldest son had borne. Bulgak was unhurt, and there were still eighteen women available for use--with two less men to demand them. The overall outcome, Tisrukh decided, was for the good.

The moonlight was grimly reflected from bloody corpses. The fact that two of these corpses had arrows in them which Orhan had made was a source of satisfaction to Orhan, a satisfaction which did not lose its meaning when he once again had a firearm--since he knew that the ammunition for guns was still finite. Also gratifying to the shaman was the sight of his eldest son Urgut stripping valuables from the body of one of the Chechens whom Urgut had helped kill. Meanwhile, as the only surviving one of the men who had brought the captive women, Dobrinya began trying to calm them.

Tarazi, while also glad that her son Urgut was unharmed, screeched at the realization that her daughter Monduli was wounded. Cursing Tisrukh for causing the lethal clash by provoking Akim's jihadist rage, Tarazi succeeded in forgetting that she herself had intentionally facilitated that very provocation in the vain hope that Akim would kill Tisrukh. But anyone who might have been inclined to punish Tarazi was otherwise preoccupied.

"Where is your mother?" Tisrukh suddenly demanded of Bulgak, who was also unwounded.

The boy guardedly replied, "I'm not sure, Father. I know she was gathering firewood earlier. Do you want me to find her?"

"Not necessary. I can divorce her when she does show up. Time you got loose from her influence. Just a few more years, and you'll be capable of marriage. Hurry up and look over the women who just came to us; ask Dobrinya which one is the youngest, and we can reserve her for you."

Fighting to keep control of himself, Bulgak asked with forced casualness, "Please, Father, disclose your wisdom to me, and say what you are going to divorce my mother FOR."

"Oh, not for any fault of hers. It simply makes better symbolism for me to be the only man here who is married to a woman born in this world, meaning Iskralida; and by not having her and your mother at the same time, besides binding myself the more closely to my new realm, I show the discipline of not taking too much for myself. Same as when I shared out some of our livestock. I think I'll urge Dobrinya to marry your mother; they should get on well enough together. You'll still be able to speak to her, but

you must get used to having Empress Iskralida as your stepmother. I'm going to have Orhan whip up some kind of wedding ceremony as soon as our dead are buried and the Chechens are disposed of."

Bulgak did not breathe a word about the question of what his future status would be in the event that Iskralida should bear his father a son. Bulgak's own chance of inheriting the ruling position could hardly be enhanced by his mother having been set aside. In any event, a royal succession mattered far less to him than his mother being offhandedly discarded. Never before now had it seriously crossed his mind to wish he could kill his father; but it was of more practical importance to see if he could at least get to his mother and prepare her for what was coming. As for that, with the way Tisruk had been lusting after Iskralida for so many days, the divorce might come as no surprise to Zulika.

Having been miraculously given command of the English language, Zulika had managed to absorb considerable information about the Narnian world in a short time--first from Slimtalon, then from Fear-No-Blast as the gander knight began to accompany her back to the settlement. But they had not gone far when both were shocked into alarmed alertness by the noise of gunshots from up ahead.

Zulika had a horrifying vision of Iskralida's calling-spell summoning some rival clan that had a grudge against hers from their former world, this other clan coming through the gate at a charge, her own children possibly in the line of fire....Forgetting the gander beside her, she broke into a panicky run, then stumbled over a rock in the shadows and almost injured herself. "Let me look first!" Fear-No-Blast hissed, then took to the air. Zulika nonetheless followed.

She was not left to her terrifying speculations for long. Before she could reach the stone houses, Fear-No-Blast returned to her. "I haven't the night-sight of an owl," he told her, "but the moonlight's good. I saw eleven dead people on the ground, but all were adults, seven men and four women. Several others appeared wounded; but I recognized your husband standing upright, and he was speaking to a boy, also looking intact, whom I'd guess to be your son."

"Aslan be praised!" Zulika responded impulsively, and then realized that she liked the sound of those words coming from her own mouth. "All the same, I need to get back and see how things are."

"One moment, friend Zulika," said the old scout. "In my life of service to King Frank, I have developed a certain instinct for situations, whether by mere experience or by Aslan's direct gift. It may be that a slight delay would be to your advantage. If your son, who is loyal to you, could speak to you before anyone else there can, he might have news you need to hear."

"But how to pick him out from that crowd? It would have to happen quickly, before anyone thinks ill of my not returning sooner. It doesn't take much for my husband to accuse people of wrongdoing."

"We must rely on Bulgak's own qualities. By your telling, he's a smart boy; he'll expect you to have heard the noises, and expect you to be afraid for his sake, so he'll be looking for the first chance to find

you and show you that he's alive. If I can lead him to you, you and he can have your chance to talk privately."

Zulika was impressed by the Talking Bird's intelligence; but-- "How do you propose to draw him, and him alone, away from the others hastily enough? He still doesn't understand your language."

"Then we must use your language. Obviously I can speak his name to get his attention. You must teach me how to say this in your tongue: 'I am the magical bird, and I am your friend. I must lead you to where your mother is, at once.' "

The gander's plan to fetch Bulgak worked without mishap, though he had to get through some false starts in calling for Bulgak from various points of concealment as the nomads prepared to bury the dead. The awesome news of his mother making friends of talking animals took the boy's mind off those deaths, and made him feel a bit less uncomfortable telling his mother that she was to be "mildly" divorced. This was indeed no great surprise to Zulika, and only confirmed her desire to get clear of the nomad clan for good and all. It was a thrill for Bulgak to meet Slimtalon, whose words of greeting and advice the boy's mother was able to translate for him; but by being outside the village, mother and son missed out on greater excitement that followed soon after the deadly confrontation with the late and unlamented Akim.

Dobrynya the Cossack had managed to make the eighteen surviving captive girls understand that their circumstances were nominally improving: they were to become property with something of the dignity of wives, as opposed to property plain and simple. Having identified a reasonably pretty Uzbek maiden as the youngest--thus to be reserved for Bulgak--Dobrynya asked his longtime friend and now his new monarch: "Just who IS this Tash for whose honor we fought my former friends?"

"One who would not have you wear this any longer," Tisrukh replied, yanking loose from Dobrynya's neck the Ukrainian Orthodox crucifix the Cossack had worn for decades without giving it much thought. "Inexorable Tash made possible the magic that brought you to us--a magic that worked through my new bride, your new Empress, Iskrallida." He turned toward the shaman Orhan to say, "Wise archer! You have served me well tonight. Now serve again, by speaking words over Iskrallida and me in the name of Tash!"

Any disappointment the Nymph might have felt over the offhand simplicity and brevity of the ceremony was forgotten when--after too long an absence, in the minds of many--Tash himself, still wearing Hookpaw's appearance, reappeared just after Orhan pronounced the couple married. Hovering in the air before Tash was a golden crown, larger than the one worn by the Queen of Narnia; this crown floated toward Iskrallida, and settled lightly on her head.

"Glory to you, Tash, and thank you!" said the new Empress, before cheers from the crowd--except the mothers of the two clan men who had perished in the sudden fight--drowned out all individual speech.

When the shouting subsided, Tash addressed them in Turkic speech. "The small sacrifice of blood given tonight will bear good fruit, I promise you. This new marriage, and the others which will quickly follow, shall give rise to such prosperity for your descendants as your ancestors never dared to imagine. All this to MY glory! Let all now kneel down and worship me--you newly-summoned women also. Glorify me as your god!"

All the captive women joined their new possessors in bowing to worship...except one of the Russian women, who had a look Tash recognized. The recognition brought no pleasure to the demon; he had seen this look on the faces of Christian martyrs who scorned torture and death for the sake of their Savior. Tash sensed at once that she would have to be eliminated. But before he, or Tisrukh in anticipation, could utter any command of that nature--

The sun seemed to rise before its time, or perhaps the moon turned as bright as the sun. Or maybe the light was coming from the same source as the earth-shaking, bone-shocking roar that suddenly filled the air--a roar which also filled Tash with quivering, helpless terror.

To those present who had come to think of Tash as omnipotent, it appeared that Tash in his tiger form was rearing up with menacing foreclaws, ready for victorious battle. But to some--especially to Yevdokia, the captive Russian woman who had been ready to die rather than worship Tash--it was obvious that his front feet were held out, rather, in the gesture of one begging for mercy. And in his eyes was only fear. With good reason.

From somewhere, emerging from the sudden light and bringing it with Him, a Lion bigger than a horse leaped upon Tash and flattened him to the ground, not destroying him but making it plain that he could not resist the true Creator of this world. Holding Tash pinned, not permitting him to dematerialize, the Lion then swung His gaze across all onlookers. Dilnara, the little daughter of Tisrukh and Zulika, noticed that none of the domestic animals showed any fear of the Lion. From this, she knew that He must be Aslan the Lamb in His other form; but she remembered to say nothing, lest her speaking might compromise her mother. All the same, she wanted to run to Aslan and cling to His mane.

When Aslan spoke, every person heard His words in whatever language that person best understood. "It was high time to interrupt this foolishness. Tash is no god; the most he ever created was trouble and grief. I am Aslan, and it was I Who created this world. The demon beneath My feet has been allowed, and indeed will still be allowed, to be a deceiver who tests people's hearts; but let it be clear that he is NOT inexorable."

What Dilnara hesitated to do, the Russian maiden did now, running to Aslan to fling her arms as far around His furry neck as they could reach. "Are You Who I think You are, Lord?" she asked, in transports of joy, a joy enhanced as she received the Lion's gracious kiss.

"Yes, dear Yevdokia, I am He. Stand at ease here beside Me; you already know that you have nothing to fear from Tash when I am with you, and your gentle boldness will hearten your fellows. I see in your mind the thought of your four fellow-captives who died, one of them a Russian girl. Watch what follows." He addressed the others again: "Tash can destroy, within his limits; but I can UNDO destruction. Behold what happens as I will it to happen!"

There had not yet been time even to bury those who had perished in the fight. Now, adding still more to the astonishment of nomads, Cossack and slaves alike, the four slain slave women, one Russian and three Turkic, instantly returned to life, standing up unhurt. All of them looked straight at Aslan, and in the eyes of all four was a rapturous recognition, as of something long wished for.

Iskralida, Nymph and Empress, dropped onto her knees. It was not from boldness, but in stupefied wonder, that her new husband beside her still stood upright. Iskralida was at once desolated that Aslan was taking no notice of her, and frightened that He would. All the evasions about Cosmic Everythingness were evaporating from her mind, never to return; but what was taking their place was not yet the genuine repentance which both Valamisa and Hookpaw had attained.

"Distressed mothers of the blood of Kalor," the Lion continued, "I now also restore to life the two of your young men who died this night. The wounded ones are now healed as well." Cries of happy amazement from the bullet-struck nomad girl Monduli were part of the confirmation of Aslan's words. "The five evildoers who began the fight remain in death, in the first and the second death--for they had plenty of opportunity before now to have repented of their wickedness, and willfully refused. But this does not mean that you nomads can be complacent either. Tash, do not dare to move;" and Aslan stepped away from the trembling demon to approach Tisrukh. The self-proclaimed, demon-sponsored monarch stood rooted and frozen in dread.

Aslan looked him in the eye with sadness rather than fury. "Foolish mortal who flatters himself on being wise...you still have a chance to step back from the abyss you have been trying to hurl yourself into. You know that I could strike you dead, you and all your followers with you; but I take no pleasure in slaying--rather, that the wicked turn from his way and live. It will not take much for you to begin turning toward salvation; a very small step into truth would serve as a good beginning. For instance, there is the matter of a certain piece of amber jewelry, which you pretended was lost in a river; or the many times you were cruel to your children for no other reason than that you enjoyed bullying them. Weigh this in your heart. If you will choose to desire the true and the right, I will give you all the help you need, and Tash will have no power to hold you if you renounce him. It will, however, mean surrendering all your boastful pride, and confessing yourself to have been wrong about practically everything in your entire life."

Turning to Iskralida, Aslan spoke in English for her alone:

"Twice treacherous Nymph, you went from serving one enemy of Mine to serving the other. If this

very moment you forget all ambition and ask My pardon, you will be pardoned, though I make no promise of earthly happiness for you. But if you continue putting Me off, your final chance for salvation will come only when you are much older, and much less revered by those around you. This world is too young for you to have learned that one who relies on her beauty for all is at a loss when the beauty fades; but Eve's daughters could tell you as much. Follow Me now, at once--or else know that the last offer of grace will cost you needless unhappiness in your later years."

Not waiting for a spoken reply, Aslan padded toward the slave women. Iskrallida, fingering her crown, did not follow.

"Daughters of Eve!" said the Lion. "You did not ask to be brought to this place. Each one of you shall now have the freedom to choose one of three things. If you wish, I will send you back to your homes on Earth; once you arrive, I promise you that those who await you will accept your word that you were forcibly kidnapped and later escaped without having been defiled. But be advised that the empire in which you were born will soon be overthrown by evildoers who believe in no god but their own lust for power--men in comparison to whom this Tisrukh is kind and gentle. So your second choice is to be exactly what Tisrukh intended you to become: brides to men of his clan. But be advised that the false god Tash will then do all he can to estrange your souls from truth. Your third choice is to remain in this new world--but entrust yourselves to My care."

Yevdokia, again first to respond, leaned against Aslan. "Lord, I never wish to be parted from You. But there are those in Russia who love me, and would mourn my loss."

"You will never be parted from Me, be you in Russia or elsewhere," Aslan told her. "I will return you to your family, and to the honorable young Leonid who wishes to marry you, but you will always feel My breath upon you. There is little point in your telling what you saw here; but the memory of meeting Me in this form will strengthen you. You and your husband-to-be will need to be very brave in the years to come; but be faithful till the end, and you will bring honor to Me and eternal reward to yourselves."

"Now," said Aslan to the group of slave women, "who desires simply to return to the world you know? The gate will work to return you, in the way I spoke of."

The Russian woman who had been raised from the dead said, "Not I." One other Russian woman, and eleven Turkic women including the revived ones, also chose to stay in the Narnian world. The rest--including the Uzbek girl who had been thought of as a bride for Bulgak--clustered near the gateway and waited. Yevdokia kissed Aslan, then took her place with these. To all of them, the Lion said, "Understand that evil awaits your people there; but My Spirit will be near you, and any of you can call on Me and be heard. Farewell." And that group of women disappeared through the gateway, after which the gateway itself disappeared entirely.

The four women whom Aslan had restored to life approached Him now without fear, as did the other Russian woman--who proved to be an acquaintance of the revived one. The other women were more hesitant, but all paid close attention to Aslan's next words.

"You thirteen must now choose between the second and third alternatives. I would not even give you the option of joining Tisrukh's following, if not for the fact that Tisrukh's people are themselves being given the option of submitting to Me. But neither do I wish to force you to stay near Me if this is frightening to you."

One of the resurrected Turkic women, becoming the first besides Yevdokia to make so bold as to touch Aslan's mane, said, "My name is Raffira, O Great Lion. I will never fear to be with You; You gave me back my life, and it is Yours to command!" The other four standing near concurred in this; the second Russian woman added, "Take us to a palace or a swamp or a cave, Lord, but let us behold Your glory and it will be enough." Raffira then looked around and urged the other Turkic women to come stand by Aslan also; two more of them did so.

Aslan gazed upon the six who hung back. "Do you six then prefer to be taken as brides by the men of this colony? I can promise you that the men here will treat you no worse than most wives in your own communities are treated; but keep in mind that the demon whom I have humbled will still exist, and will still be seeking to make you worship him to your own hurt. If you make your home among these folk, My eye will still be upon you, but it will be difficult for you to achieve a communion with Me. Still, the choice is your own."

One more woman joined the group around Aslan after hearing these words. Tisrukh, regaining some composure by now, did a little mental arithmetic and concluded that the five remaining women, together with maidens already present among the nomads, should be just enough to let each young single man have one wife, but no one in the rising generation would have two unless more Nymphs became available.

"Each one has decided," Aslan declared. "You eight who have chosen the better part will shortly come away with Me to a place of safety, where you will begin to learn about the world which is now your home. You five who would be brides, remain here." His voice grew louder as He added: "And let every man who does not wish to die a fearsome death remember that these women are HUMAN BEINGS, not goats being bartered. Now, there is one more thing I must do before I transport My friends away from here."

The Creator of Narnia stalked up to the cowering Tash. "You, fallen spirit, caused the corruption of the Talking Tiger whose likeness you fraudulently wear. He has come to redemption by now, no thanks to you; and you shall never again be permitted to assume this disguise, or indeed any disguise!" Reaching one forepaw toward Tash, Aslan made a movement like one who pulls a quilt off the top of a bed; and it seemed that a complete striped tigerskin flew away from Tash and vanished. Where the "Spirit

Beast" had grovelled, there was now a coarse, ugly thing with a vaguely humanlike body and the head of a diseased vulture. "From now until the end of time, Tash, if you appear in any visible shape at all, it can only be in this repellent shape, which accurately reflects your true character. And even as you continue trying to deceive Adam's children, you will never be able to prevent Me from reaching some souls even in the very midst of your deluded servants. Now, before I go about other business, you will depart from your habits and speak the truth once."

Knowing what was expected of him, hating to do it but not daring to disobey, Tash rose upright in his ugliness and spoke to those gathered--with Aslan making sure that all hearers understood him regardless of language. "The Lion speaks the truth. I am a fraud and a deceiver, who has always and only sought to do you all harm by alienating you from truth and love. Though I am forced to say this by fear of His wrath, what I am forced to say is in fact the truth. If you have any sense, you will obey the Lion rather than me." As soon as he had finished, Aslan swatted him to the ground, stepped directly on his hideous face, and rumbled, "I go now, with those who have willingly joined Me. But you will never know at what moment I may reappear."

Aslan's breath now embraced the eight women who had pledged themselves to follow Him, lifting them gently off the ground. As all eyes watched with a turbulent mixture of emotions, Aslan and His new disciples flew away toward the west. But the little girl Dilnara did not weep at Aslan's having departed without her touching Him--because His voice came secretly to her even as He flew out of sight past the stony ridges.

"Courage, dear one. Trouble awaits you, your brother and your mother, but have faith in Me to take care of you. And prepare to leave the settlement soon, as your mother has whispered of doing."

Once Aslan had flown away, all eyes went to Tash--except that a few pairs of eyes first noticed a remarkable circumstance in their surroundings. There had been a change in the scattered stone statues. No longer did any of them look like humans or tigers; all of them now looked the way Tash now looked, including the intimidated, humiliated look on his beaked face.

But unlike the statues, Tash could recover his composure and bluff. Before anyone else could speak, the demon began doing what later generations of mortals on Earth would call "damage control."

"My people, including my newest people! Did I not say previously that those who serve me would be tested? This is that very test. The shallow and foolish among you could easily imagine that the Lion has just been proven to be my superior; but all of this has happened in order to teach you exactly what is the wellspring of true power. It is a matter of the WILL; and the will is never displayed so perfectly, so gloriously, as when it scorns facts to create its own reality! 'The mind is its own place, and of itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.' This is the hour for you to join your wills to mine, as we triumphantly show our united power to deny, deny, deny!"

Tisrukh, having more invested in Tash than anyone else present, was first to give the response the demon was hoping for. "Yes, yes, inexorable Tash! Lead us in denial! Show us how to make reality what we want it to be!"

"My blessings to you, Son of Destiny," said Tash, gaining confidence. "My appreciation of your loyalty is so great that you will not understand it fully until after your earthly life ends. Most of you have at least vaguely heard of how the prophet Moses challenged the Pharaoh of Egypt, calling down plagues in order to enforce the will of my Enemy. But less known to men, and more significant, is how the Egyptians recovered from that painful experience. **THEY DENIED THAT IT HAD EVEN HAPPENED!** And so shall we do, together, until reality is no longer what our Enemy wants it to be. Tisrukh, best of my mortal servants, just as you drove away the magical bird that insulted me, now you shall have the honor of beginning the denial!"

Inflating himself as the fear of the now-unseen Lion grew less intense, Tisrukh shouted to the whole assemblage: "Listen well, everyone: our god was NOT just now defeated and rendered helpless; rather, he outwitted his Enemy by pretending to be overpowered, so as to plant in Him a false sense of security which will lead to His downfall!"

Seeing which way the wind was blowing, Dobrinya decided to ingratiate himself with Tash--who, even in this new monster-shape, was less terrifying and repellent to him than Aslan had been. "My lord Tisrukh is right!" he shouted. "The Lion is doomed to fail, and is too foolish even to realize it--just as the Tsar back in Russia is too foolish to see that he also is doomed to be overthrown in days to come!"

Not to be outdone, Orhan the shaman joined in: "Anyone can see that it is Tash who is this world's maker; why else would all of those carvings have changed their shape in honor of his magnificent form? No doubt those women who have returned to the old empire were allowed to leave by Tash because they are unworthy of our strong young men; and the reason why Tash allowed others to depart with the Lion was to remind us that there is a world for us to explore and conquer!"

His son Urgut, wanting to make sure he was regarded as entitled to have one of those new brides, came alongside his father and added, "Conquer it we shall, to the greater glory of inexorable Tash!"

The re-introduction of the easily-chanted catch-phrase helped the process along. It was only minutes later that Zulika returned to the settlement, her anxious desire to know what had caused the noise and flash of light outweighing her hurt at expecting to be divorced by Tisrukh; but by this time the majority of the nomads already had very nearly succeeded in convincing themselves that Aslan had fled in fear from Tash.

"Your father would never believe that you haven't told me what's coming," Zulika whispered to Bulgak; "so you might as well put him off guard by acting as if you're not too bothered about it. Then, once you can slip away from him, you can hurry along our preparations."

The light brought by Aslan had departed with Him, and the sun had not yet risen; so only the last of the moonlight, plus two or three campfires, illuminated the stone-hut village. But Zulika could see that there were changes: the stone arch gone, the statues changed in aspect...and was that a crown that Iskralda had on her head?

Dobrynya and Murhat were standing beside Tisrukh, and Tash stood towering over them; but when Zulika drew near, Tash looked her straight in the eye--and it was not Zulika who proved unable to abide the eye contact. "My peerless deputy in the mortal sphere, I leave things in your hands," the demon said to Tisrukh, and hastily disappeared. Murhat was the only one of the three men who looked as if he recognized a connection between Tash's retreat and something about Zulika's undismayed bearing, but he said nothing.

"My father and ruler," said Bulgak, "I have brought my mother before you, having advised her that her status in the new order of things is to change."

"Very good, son," Tisrukh replied, then made his voice louder. "Hear me, all! In the cause of our adjustment to this new world, as I shared of my flock to support my people, so I will now give away another valuable possession of mine. Dobrynya Osipovich! You know that I have spoken well of Zulika to you in the past. She is barely thirty years old, healthy and accomplished, still capable of bearing children, and capable of meeting the tasks of a new life. Now that I have the empress destined for me, I shall at one and the same time disencumber myself, and reward you for your loyalty to me. Let everyone witness that what I do now is NOT because of any fault in Zulika, but for the purpose of a more equitable distribution of women with men. Zulika--" and here, for one last time, Tisrukh drew upon Islamic tradition, pointing a finger at the mother of his children; "--I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you! Our son shall remain in my care, the quicker to learn the ways of a warrior and a leader; Dilnara you may keep with you as you become Dobrynya's wife. Dobrynya, we shall bind you in marriage to Zulika on the day after tomorrow, giving time to establish living quarters for you and her. Zulika, your ancestors often consorted with the Russians; now you will have the chance to live as they did. Bow in respect to your successor, and then you may set about preparing to move your belongings out of those buildings reserved for Iskralda and me."

Zulika felt the way one sometimes feels after vomiting: the vomiting was unpleasant, but there is a great relief in having it over and done. She bowed as ordered to Iskralda, who was even less able to meet her eyes than Tash had been. Then she headed for what had been her house--to find her daughter eagerly waiting to tell her something more pleasant than Tisrukh's proclamation.

"Mother!" the child hissed. "Aslan was here! He was a Lion, and he knocked Tash down easier than Father knocking Bulgak down! He took some of the new people with Him and went away over the hills. But now they're saying it was Tash who chased Aslan away! It isn't true, I don't know why they say it. What can I do for you now, Mother?"

"Right now, as soon as I move some things, we're going to get some sleep, excitement or no excitement. We'll be needing our strength. You'll sleep with me, sweet lamb. Your brother has other things to do."

What Bulgak had to do was to prepare the tack of his horse and his mother's inconspicuously for travel. He wondered, though, if the Talking Tigress would put the horses into a panic. Bulgak hoped that the Talking Gander would show up again before they had to make their move; he would be able to fly to the tigress and ask her to stay downwind when they made their escape.

"See those craggy hills?" Bluntmuzzle said to his bride. "The new human colony must be just the other side of them."

"Your mother's trail seems to lead toward the northern end of the ridges," replied Elkfinder. "I wonder what she and Fear-No-Blast found out?"

"And I wonder what we're about to find out. Look up there: it's Aslan Himself coming to meet us!"

Aslan descended from the sky in front of the tiger newlyweds, bringing with Him eight young human women, of whom two seemed similar in racial type to the humans in Narnia proper. Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder bowed their heads in reverence, and then Bluntmuzzle asked, "Are these Daughters of Eve joining themselves to Your worshippers, Lord?"

"They are," Aslan affirmed, turning His face toward one of the darker-complected ones. "I have given the gift of knowing English to this one, whose name is Raffira. I have told all of them that they are to go to the wood of the koalas, where they will find haven for the present."

The girl Raffira ventured to speak up. "The Great Lion has told us that you marvellous beasts are His servants, and that we need have no fear of you."

"No fear indeed," Elkfinder said reassuringly; but Bluntmuzzle was uneasy.

"Are we to drop our errand and show them the way back there? Not that I wish them ill, but we came all this way to assist my mother, and are we not now only a quick dash away from her?"

"Your mother is unharmed, My child, and she will not hold it against you that you turned back in obedience to My wishes. Help will come to her when she needs it." Now Aslan addressed Raffira: "You women must now follow the guidance of these tigers. Be especially cautious when approaching water; there are dangerous creatures in the rivers hereabouts. But as long as you behave sensibly, all of you will reach the place of refuge alive."

Raffira lowered her gaze. "Please do not be angry with me for asking this, Lord Aslan, but since we have undertaken to settle where You place us, will there be men with whom we can start new households?"

Aslan surprised her by laughing gently. "Men of a sort. In this world I have created beings who are not strictly men as you would use the word--but who are enough like the Children of Adam and Eve to be able to marry them and have children with them. Some are called 'gods' as a figure of speech, though they are not omnipotent beings. In due time all eight of you will be introduced to such men; and you will find them to be strong and hardy, yet of a kindly nature such as you would not have easily found in your native country. But one thing at a time. Allow Me to provide for your journey."

When Aslan shook His mane, each of the women found that her tattered clothing had changed into a new, clean outfit with trousers, such as many Turkic women were already accustomed to wearing, along with sturdy shoes that fitted perfectly. And each woman felt and saw that a large basket suddenly came into existence hanging over one of her arms; each basket contained a loaf of bread and several pieces of fresh fruit. Speaking once more to the eight women, Aslan again caused all of them to understand His words.

"Have courage, Daughters of Eve; you will all see Me again, and you will not regret having chosen to trust Me. The creatures among whom you will stay for a time will teach you much. Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder, take charge of your new friends and lead them west!" Saying this, Aslan faded out of sight.

Tisrukh's cousin Tarkan wondered if he had missed out on anything of interest happening at the settlement while he was exploring. He had gone far enough south to reach the verge of a desert, not unlike deserts on Earth, and had slept one night on its sandy floor.

Taking care to note directions by the sun, he had ridden a fair distance into the increasingly dry terrain, seeing no large animals and no sign of people. Yet occasionally, on the wind, he had thought he heard something like men's voices calling to each other.

Unable to determine anything useful about the possible voices, he was now making northward again, going easy on his horse. If anything of any value lay on the far side of this desert, it would have to wait until Tisrukh's people were better equipped to cross. They were not strangers to desert survival, but they were still getting established.

Tarkan felt sure he was not far now from where the land would begin turning greener. He would be just as glad to be away from the heat-reflecting sand when the day grew older and hotter. It was interesting that changes in climate and geography were noticeable over smaller distances than would be the case on Earth; but if this world was smaller in area than Earth, it still was big enough to harbor the nomads' descendants for as far into the future as Tarkan cared to think.

Then, suddenly, his thoughts were forcefully pulled back from the far future to the here and now. Actually, to the twenty paces ahead, and now. In the path of Tarkan's horse there stood a man, in features and coloring not greatly unlike Tarkan's own Turkic people--but clad in fantastic clothing which seemed to reflect earth and sky like a calm water surface. He also seemed to be wearing a variety of masculine jewelry, such as gold wristbands.

The stranger was unarmed, and spoke to Tarkan in a voice with no hint of menace; but he spoke in words that meant nothing to the nomad. "Who are you, stranger?" Tarkan shot back. "Have those magical women conjured you from some place on Earth which I never heard of? Or are you native to this place? Are you one of the voices I heard?"

Only after he had said this much did Tarkan register the fact that the stranger was gesturing oddly every time Tarkan spoke. The stranger's hands moved as if they were gathering something unseen out of the air. When Tarkan stopped speaking, the stranger spoke again, sounding as if he were urging the horseman to do something. Tarkan listened closely, in case it might be possible to pick out even a shred of meaning, but he could not understand any of it. So he took his turn again--and as soon as he was talking once more, he felt sure that talking itself was what the stranger had wanted him to do, for the man resumed his gesticulation with facile fingers.

"My name is Tarkan," said Tarkan. "My people, ruled by my cousin Tisrukh, are taking possession of the grazing land on the north edge of this desert, unless you have a king of your own who already claims it. But I have until now not seen any people native to this world except for two beauties named Iskralida and Valamisa. Do you know them?"

The stranger did more "gathering," then looked as if he hoped Tarkan would say more. Therefore: "If you have a king and he has an army, don't attack us; the Spirit Beast told us we could make a home here, so argue with him if you have objections to our pioneering. Well, do you have an army? Do you even have any friends hereabouts?"

The stranger seemed to concentrate on something for half a minute. Then, relaxing, he looked Tarkan in the eye and spoke in Turkic.

"Thank you for lending me words! I always wondered why Aslan told me He was giving me this gift, if only one language was ever to be spoken in this world. How marvellous, to have a whole different set of words! My name is Kuzdikal. Have you brought those to whom I and my brothers are to be wedded?"

Trying not to look like a stupid provincial flabbergasted by this apparent magic, Tarkan calmly replied, "I confess I brought no brides to you; the men of my people have scarcely enough women for themselves. But what ARE you and your brothers?"

"We are what would be called Djinni in the world you came from. But we are not so powerful as I am told the imaginary Djinni in stories of your world are said to be; and my brothers and I serve Aslan."

The very mention of the name "Aslan" made Tarkan feel apprehensive and irritable. "Brothers, you say...Just where are your brothers?"

"South," replied Kuzdikal, "much farther into the desert. Though we are not bodiless phantoms but mortal flesh, we Djinni are much better able to live in the desert than you children of Adam and Eve. But in the years since Aslan made this world, we have always taken turns scouting toward the green lands, to see if the human beings have come yet, whom it was promised we would someday meet. And at last you have come--Aslan be glorified! Even if you bring no women for us to marry, you are still welcome; the women may arrive later, I suppose. We shall have brotherly fellowship meanwhile, all helping each other in learning to know Aslan better..."

Tarkan had initially intended to make friends with Kuzdikal, as a more sensible course than making enemies of the natives on their own ground. But the more the Djinn talked about Aslan, the more Tarkan felt an unreasoning dislike. The dislike swelled into hate, then the hate raised a musket and fired straight at the Djinn's chest.

The large bullet's impact knocked Kuzdikal backward and down. But he soon sprang to his feet again. His shimmering robe had been torn by the musket ball, revealing that he wore some kind of armor beneath it, which had stopped the projectile from penetrating. "Now I know why I was told in a dream to fashion this covering for myself!" he exclaimed. "You, Tarkan, are a breaker of peace--" Kuzdikal had to break off his protest to dodge, as Tarkan spurred his horse forward and swung his empty rifle's butt at the Djinn's unprotected head. Shifting the musket to his left hand after the missed blow, Tarkan drew a saber with his right and wheeled his horse back to attack again.

But Kuzdikal evaded him again, and cried out, "An unhappy way this is for the Djinni first to encounter Adam's race! I must take counsel with my brothers about this; if any wisdom survives in you, you will not follow me!" Then he took to running, at a speed scarcely slower than a galloping horse, and with such flickering changes of direction that Tarkan gave up on trying to get off another shot at him.

"Curse you, devil-man of the sands!" Tarkan yelled. "That gold you wear should have been my plunder! Well, it can't be helped now. Too bad he didn't say if his kind are in league with the magical women..."

At last, he resumed riding north. At least he would have something remarkable to report to his cousin. He wondered if Tisrukh was bored with waiting for his return.

It was not long before the Djinn Kuzdikal was joined by his eight brothers; the desert wind had borne hints to them that someone had attempted to do violence to their language-gifted brother. The nine

Djinni gathered atop a small mesa, which was one of their favorite places to study the stars of the Narnian cosmos.

Like the first-generation Nymphs, all nine of these Djinni had been created from nothing by Aslan--in their case, a little after Narnia's very first day. While all nine were equal in power and wisdom, Aslan had created them in a series, giving them a nominal heirarchy of seniority. Kuzdikal had been the fourth Djinn created. When he joined his brothers, the first to speak was the first created of the nine, Flazdigar.

"Aslan be praised that no harm befell you, Kuzdikal! Our Maker warned us when we were newly-made that there would be beings bent out of moral shape in this world; but I had not thought we would encounter them so soon!"

"What a shame that we should be forced to think of such things so soon," remarked Smedgarosh, the youngest brother. "We have not yet finished all the work Aslan set us to do, preparing the fertile region south of the desert for its eventual human inhabitants."

"I hope those inhabitants will not all be like the one I met," said Kuzdikal, and went on to relate his encounter with Tarkan in detail.

Flazdigar scanned the horizon, as if hoping to catch sight of the distant colony of the Turkic nomads. At last he said, "If Aslan does not explicitly give some other directive to us, I feel that we should search for the nearest intelligent beings who are NOT bent out of true as this man Tarkan is. If we can form an alliance with reasoning creatures who serve Aslan as we do, all of us together may be able to restrain the evil of the warped ones, and perhaps even prevail on them to give up their wickedness."

His brothers unanimously agreed on this. They accordingly began casting their mystic senses out upon the winds. Over the course of the day, this gradually brought them a growing sense that there were beings loyal to Aslan in a place west of where Tarkan's people were encamped. The feeling was that these good creatures could be found in an area with trees and bogs.

"If they're in a swamp, we'll have to be careful approaching them," observed Jeblajask, the seventh brother; "it's far from being our natural element."

Kuzdikal nodded. "It makes me wish we could actually fly, as Aslan told us Djinni in human stories can fly."

Whatever Tisrukh's Cossack friend thought inwardly about being matched with a discarded woman, outwardly he showed nothing but pleasure. Stepping close to Zulika--though not yet physically touching her, lest anyone accuse him of not living up to their moral standards--he said half to her and half to her ex-husband, "A better wife I couldn't ask for! Who wants to drink wine when the grapes

have only just been squeezed? This fine woman has the riches of experience to offer, while still being young enough to act upon her experience. Yes, Matron Zulika, we'll get along splendidly." Zulika tried to read his eyes and voice; the impression she received was that while Dobrinya would never love her, nor even trouble himself about whether he ought to love her, he was at least unlikely to be particularly abusive. It was another question, though, if he would resent Dilnara not being his own issue, and treat her badly. But Zulika hoped to be gone with her tigress friend before this question was even answered.

When she was able to get away from her two husbands for awhile, Zulika noticed that most of her friends and neighbors avoided speaking with her. It made sense; although Tisrukh had pronounced her blameless, and had shown every sign that she was to remain an accepted member of the community, who could be sure that her status might not worsen? And if her status worsened, no one else wanted to be dragged down with her. Or perhaps they were not so much avoiding her, as having their attention distracted by the receiving of the new women into the colony. Urgut, son of Orhan, was definitely being allowed to claim one, an Azeri girl as it seemed. All the new maidens looked like being snapped up in a hurry; if any girls found themselves the second or third wives of already-married nomad men, it would be some of the less-attractive young maidens who had already been here. Zulika did notice her brother-in-law looking at her more than once; Murhat's look suggested sympathy, but he said nothing to her.

As she killed a little time by helping the child Monduli get a straying goat under control, the girl said quietly to her, "Auntie Zulika, I'm sorry the Tsar doesn't want you anymore. I don't think any woman's nicer than you are." Zulika would have kissed the child for that; but her being seen to do so might reflect badly on Monduli in some people's minds. So she merely replied, "Thank you, Monduli. When you grow up, they'll say the same thing about how nice you are."

Monduli glanced around, as if intuitively understanding why Zulika had a guarded manner. Then: "When I grow up, I want to marry your son. If I get to marry him, you can live with us if you need a place to live."

"That's very kind of you, sweet girl--though our great ruler has decreed me a home with Dobrinya Osipovich."

Time passed with some uncertainty about what to do. Zulika didn't want to creep away too soon, lest someone be watching for her reaction to being suddenly betrothed to an outsider. Somewhere in this backwater of time, she managed to make herself eat something, and feed her daughter.

She had finished moving her belongings and her daughter's to the hut she was expected to share with Dobrinya, but was returning to sweep her former house out one last time--with a twig broom she had only made the day before yesterday--when she saw that Iskralida, her supplanter, had just entered the house. It leaped into her mind that now, after all these days, she was capable of having a real conversation with the Nymph; and, looking around, she saw that Tisrukh and Dobrinya were both still

otherwise occupied. Silently and quickly, she entered.

Iskralida's eyes widened a little upon suddenly seeing Zulika drawing near her. The newly-crowned Empress of a still-tiny empire looked like a naughty child frightened when caught stealing something. But now it was in Zulika's power to reassure her in the same language that Narnians used.

"Don't be afraid of me! I'm sure that you intended to share Tisrukh with me, and I'm still more sure that you first came here not guessing what was the power that led you. Far from wishing you harm, it is for your good that I want to talk with you! The fact that I now can speak more of your tongue than the small amount we've had time to learn should convince you that there is a power leading me, too."

Iskralida seemed to be put at ease, not fearing to pass within an inch of Zulika when she peeped out the door to make sure they would indeed have at least a few uninterrupted moments to speak together. Satisfied on this score, she actually reached out her slender hands to clasp Zulika's stronger ones. "You have no idea how frustrating it's been to have so little ability to talk with anyone here since Valamisa left! Say whatever is on your mind--just hearing something intelligible is a blessing." The Nymph made no mention of the all-too-intelligible words Aslan Himself had spoken to her only hours before.

On a grassy patch near the tree-town of the Talking Koalas--a spot from which there was a direct line of safe passage to the wood with no intervening bog--Ranshuk and Hookpaw were talking together about their respective experiences of being saved from damnation by the grace of Aslan. "I wish Father Christmas had shown up to fetch ME," the blinded tiger said at one point; "then I would have been spared this blindness." It was the closest Hookpaw had come to making a joke since Bezbimbry's death; Ranshuk's company was doing him good. Listening in on the conversation were Nubkarsh, the chief koala elder; Wolfsfriend, still harnessed into the drag-litter on which she had pulled the still-crippled wolf to this place; and Quickspring, who in Lady Slimtalon's absence was the ranking tiger.

When spiritual subjects had played themselves out for awhile, these latter three steered the talk back to more short-term concerns. "I've been thinking," said Quickspring, "that all of us carnivores should make an effort to familiarize ourselves with the scent and the habits of those crocodiles. They are, after all, probably present in many places where we will be hunting our meat; and we don't want to become food ourselves!"

"Only the really big ones would be a threat to you tigers," remarked Nubkarsh.

"But it was a really big one that Shatterneck and Hemshull saw the other day," replied Quickspring. "And another thought has been troubling me. Remember how Fear-No-Blast was attacked by an eagle during his journey to join us? He said he felt sure that Tash had influenced that eagle to behave differently from its normal habits. Now, if an eagle could be--" The chief tiger dropped his own sentence, and jerked his head in a direction that was straight downwind. That was the direction from which any creature would come that wanted to avoid being scented by Ranshuk's keen nose; and there

was a stirring in the weeds...

Suddenly, with a forepaw whose claws were sheathed, Quickspring scooped Nubkarsh up and skillfully tossed him directly onto Wolfsfriend's back. As he did so, he shouted, "Get them away, back to the trees, quickly!" During the second half of this sentence, he was heaving Ranshuk onto the litter. Wolfsfriend, now also hearing the sound of something coming, needed no further prompting to get moving as soon as koala and wolf were loaded up to ride. "Hookpaw, follow them!" Quickspring ordered, knowing that Hookpaw could pick out the sound of the drag-litter in motion and follow it. Quickspring then whirled--

--to face the colossal crocodile, even bigger than the one Shatterneck had seen, which had been creeping up on them through the weeds. An aquatic reptile should not know about exploiting wind direction; but this one seemed to understand when surprise was lost. It rose up, legs straightening almost as much as a mammal's would, and lunged at Quickspring with open jaws that looked as if they could swallow him whole.

Quickspring faked a dodge to his right, then dodged left instead. This maneuver got him past those teeth, but just barely; the return-snap with which the crocodile tried to follow his switchback slightly grazed his side. Spinning and closing, Quickspring clamped his own jaws onto the thick, scale-armored neck, clutching at the body with his forelegs to keep himself there behind the head. He should be able to do damage if he could maintain his fang-grip long enough to gnaw through those scales; but he was in for a tremendous battering, as the massive reptile began thrashing in an effort to fling him off.

Hookpaw could hear exactly what was happening, and the direction from which the sounds came. His ears, on which he now had to rely, could discern the difference between the crocodile's body hitting the earth, and Quickspring's body hitting it. Hoping that this distinction would be enough to guide him, he moved toward the titanic struggle, taking an oblique line in hopes of grabbing one of the crocodile's limbs.

Quickspring might have shouted to Hookpaw to get back, but he dared not loosen his jaws to say anything. A misjudged lunge caused Hookpaw to fall victim to a stunning blow of the crocodile's thick tail; but as soon as he was even half-recovered, the former criminal closed in again. This time, he gained the leg-hold he hoped for.

Now there were two tigers striving to bite through the huge crocodile's armor before it could shake one of them loose and deliver a bite of its own.

Tinkswid and her new husband Yugdug were talking with Valamisa the Nymph on one of the tree platforms when they heard Quickspring's distant shout of alarm. Although the shout was in human-like voice rather than beast-like roar, it still caught their attention. And from where they were, they could see clearly what had alarmed the senior tiger.

"Get the other tigers!" Yugdug shouted to his bride. Without another word, he grabbed up Valamisa's spear--part of their discussion had been about making weapons for defense--and dropped straight to the ground holding it. As the koala started toward the scene of danger at the nearest he could come to a headlong run, Valamisa saw her own chance to be of some use. Catching up Tarazi's currently-unloaded shotgun and the bag of shells, she also dropped to the ground, where she hastily broke the barrel and loaded. Overtaking Yugdug, she used her free hand to pull him along with her faster than he could have run unassisted. They had almost reached the spot where Quickspring and Hookpaw were battling the scaly monster, when--

A second crocodile, not as big as the first but big enough to dispatch human-size prey, came into view and started at them. Valamisa fired straight into this crocodile's face, just as Tarazi had fired into Hookpaw's face. The effect on the reptile's eyes was not as great from this longer range; one of the reptile's eyes appeared to be damaged, but the thing came on unchecked.

Yugdug jabbed at the attacker with the spear, only to see the crocodile biting the spearshaft apart after a few jabs. Valamisa, not yet finished reloading, rushed closer with a shriek to distract the monster's attention. It turned toward her--and, exploiting an instant when its mouth was mostly shut, Yugdug leaped onto its head, and wrapped his arms and legs around the great snout. The koala elders had spoken in the past of their belief that crocodiles did not have muscles for opening their mouths which were as powerful as those for closing their mouths. This now proved to be true; Yugdug was able to prevent those dreadful jaws from opening.

As if the koala were a hammer and there were a nail somewhere in the ground, the furious reptile swung its daring little foe up and over, to smash him hard onto the earth. If the ground here had not been soft, Yugdug would have had many of his bones broken at the first impact, and the rest of them at the second. But by the time he could no longer hold on, Valamisa had reloaded.

"HERE, LIZARD!" the Nymph shouted; and as the crocodile turned to dispose of its larger antagonist, she let it open the jaws it had so desired to open--and then fired point-blank, straight through the roof of that open mouth and into the small cold brain.

As the crocodile writhed in death-spasms, Valamisa slung the shotgun over her shoulder and lifted the badly-bruised Yugdug in her arms. She could see that Leapwell, the tigress widow, had already nearly reached the scene, with two of the largest male adolescent tigers: her own son Treescratch, and Babblefang, the one who used to speak out of turn in the teaching times. The other adult tigers were currently away, as were some of the koalas with tiger-escort.

Hookpaw, meanwhile, had made some use of the sense for movement and position that he had gained when he had been able to fly. Getting a feel for the giant crocodile's lurches, he seized a moment when it was trying to roll toward his side--and braced himself with all his might, stopping the roll. This

enabled Hookpaw to apply more force to his biting hold on the scaly leg, and likewise enabled Quickspring to bite deeper at the neck. By the time the mighty reptile managed to get in motion again, the tide had turned; blood was now streaming around Quickspring's jaws where he had bitten through the neck armor.

An instant later, Treescratch and Babbelfang had reached their elders, and helped to finish off the crocodile. But Quickspring had hardly risen to his feet and looked to see that Hookpaw had survived, when they beheld Leapwell already engaged in combat with a third crocodile--not as big as either of the previous attackers, but still a serious opponent.

"Get Hookpaw to safety!" Quickspring called to the young ones, as he bounded to Leapwell's assistance. With his help, Leapwell soon slew her enemy; but sounds in the near distance implied that still more crocodiles were near. As soon as they were sure that all their more-vulnerable companions were safely back among the trees, Quickspring and Leapwell also beat a retreat.

Nubkarsh, awaiting them on a low branch, was quick to say what would have occurred to his friends even if he had not spoken: "All of our people who are away from the grove are in danger of being intercepted as they return--Slimtalon and her party from the east, and Ripplestride and her larger party from the west!" All who heard him realized that, by "our people," the Chief Koala meant his own kind and the tigers together; there was no time to feel good about this now, but they would later be pleased to remember it.

"We must form two strong groups to find them, warn them, and bring them in safely," said Leapwell.

"Agreed," said Quickspring. "Leapwell, you should take your son, and another three or four who are up to it, and go in the direction from which we expect Lady Slimtalon to return. I hardly need tell you to be on the lookout. I'll take Babbelfang and a couple more youngsters, and go the other way. The rest of you should be safe here; those brutes can't climb trees."

He turned to face the groaning Yugdug, who was being anxiously ministered to by Tinkswid. "Friend Yugdug, you may be a Koala, but you clearly have something of the Lion in your heart!"

"Tell me how it is that you do speak perfect English now," Iskrallida asked, moving closer to Zulika now that she felt certain of the older woman's friendly intentions.

"Older woman": that was matter for thought in itself. Zulika was very far from being a crumbling old wreck, yet she was greatly the Nymph's elder both in absolute time and in experience of relationships. No one native to Narnia had yet existed for even twenty years. Iskrallida, and others like her, had been created by Aslan already adult, with considerable knowledge directly planted in their brains by Him as compensation for their not having had a childhood for learning; but He had not given them the actual experience of being children and having parents. Only after spending time among the nomads had

Iskralida felt keenly what she had missed; despite the harsh aspects of their life and customs, the Turkic people--even some of the men--were not entirely without elements of good, simple humanity. And none of them had shown this to the Nymph more plainly than Zulika, who so clearly loved her children and was kindly to other people's children besides. It was true that Iskralida would not have minded sharing a husband with Zulika; this, not only so as not to feel guilt for stealing her place, but also...

Yes, also because Iskralida would have loved it if Zulika could have been like a mother TO HER.

"The reason I can speak your language freely now is the same as the reason I am talking to you at all," said Zulika, leaning closer to the Nymph in turn, dreading to have less-friendly ears hear what she had to say. "ASLAN," she said, contriving to speak His name forcefully even as she spoke it quietly.

"Aslan brought it about that I would gain this ability. He did it so that I would be able to speak with beings of your world: not only yourself, but two others who I think are both known to you: the tigress called Slimtalon and the gander named Fear-No-Blast."

Those two names brought almost as tense a reaction from the girl-empress as Aslan's had. She looked out the window, past its crude curtain of woven reeds, to check again that they were not about to be interrupted. When she turned back again, her hands went from holding Zulika's hands to lightly grasping Zulika's upper arms. "Yes, I know both of them. Some time past, they tried to prevail upon Hookpaw to return to Narnia and submit to the King's judgment."

"You mean King Frank, the Englishman who used to be a horse-driver?" said Zulika. "Fear-No-Blast has mentioned him and Queen Helen to me. The wise bird holds them in great reverence."

At this, Iskralida remembered Aslan addressing her as "Twice treacherous Nymph." She burst into tears, whining softly in the attempt not to sob loudly. Any jealous resentment that had remained in Zulika's heart was dispelled by this display, which she felt certain was completely sincere. Her maternal nature aroused, she drew the Nymph into her arms and held her as she might have held a grown daughter. Iskralida clung to her and wept on her shoulder; but Zulika could not let this go on for long. Time was precious.

"Listen to me," she hissed in the younger woman's ear. "Not only do I not bear you any hatred, but I feel sure that Aslan does not hate you either. Slimtalon spoke to me of how Aslan loves to forgive wrongdoers and give them a new start. I'm aware that Aslan showed Himself here while I was elsewhere; there's no time for the questions I'd like to ask you about that, but I am convinced that He is holding out the offer of His pardon to ALL who have offended Him--except, perhaps, the demon, who is evil beyond salvaging. Those creatures who have befriended me have both encountered the demon before, and have turned aside all his efforts to dominate them by invoking Aslan."

Without pulling away from Zulika's comforting embrace, Iskralida showed bafflement. "Why are you telling me all this? How do you know I won't curry favor with Tisrukh by telling him those creatures

are near, so he can send men with guns after them?"

"Your tears tell me," said Zulika, giving her a gentle squeeze. "I know that you want to be important, but you don't want to hurt anyone on the way to being important. And you still miss what you left behind."

"I do miss it; and I've missed it worse ever since Valamisa ran away."

"Then maybe you--"

From a distance, but not much distance, Tisrukh's voice could now be heard: "Iskralida! Empress!" He was coming this way, and it sounded as if Dobrinya was with him.

"I will be grateful if you don't betray my friends out there," Zulika hastily told the Nymph. "And if we don't get another chance to speak like this, please do not give up the idea of being reconciled with Aslan! But here comes Tisrukh; pretend you are supervising me." She released Iskralida from her arms. Iskralida swiftly caught Zulika's hands and kissed them; then, as the dismissed wife of Tisrukh took to sweeping the floor, she stood back just in time for Tisrukh to suspect nothing.

"Faster, now!" she said to Zulika for her bridegroom's benefit.

"She'll finish quickly enough," Tisrukh said to Iskralida, scarcely seeming to see the wife he had discarded. "I want you to come out and let all the new maidens pledge their loyalty to you as their Empress."

As Iskralida followed her husband away, the Cossack poked his head in the door. "Busy woman, aren't you?" he said to Zulika in amiable tones. "I'm not overly demanding about cleanliness; but when you marry me tomorrow, I'll want you to start telling me everything that happened to lead your clan to this place."

With everyone safely up in the trees, the tigers conferred briefly on their plans. Nubkarsh, the chief koala, put in a word of good sense to Quickspring and Leapwell:

"Remember that, while it is urgent to prevent our people who are far afield from walking into a trap as they return, it is NOT urgent, if a ring of crocodiles forms around the grove, to penetrate through them immediately. You tigers can survive indefinitely in the open country; and so can those koalas who are out there, as long as they are under the protection of the tigers. Who knows, Aslan might be using this crisis to prod our pioneers into making a serious beginning of settling another wood. So don't worry about us who remain at home; the crocodiles can't get at us, and they will sooner starve themselves than be able to starve us out."

Ranshuk, also a party to the discussion, said soberly, "There is this, though: if the demon can stir up crocodiles, he could stir up other predators that CAN get at us up here. We must all watch out for snakes climbing up from below, and eagles or stranger flying creatures diving from above."

"Valamisa will be helpful against those threats with that human weapon she brought," said Quickspring.

"As far as fourteen more shots will go," said the Nymph. "Too bad we can't make more ammunition."

"Water may be a problem, if they crowd us closely," observed the newlywed koala female Tinkswid, whose work at learning to copy the Queen's Catechism had given her considerable prestige in the eyes of the tigers. "But we do possess vessels for catching rainwater."

Soon the tigers were ready to make their sortie. Hookpaw offered one more service that was within his power: to create a diversion. Taking with him those of the young tigers who had not been chosen for the parties with Quickspring and Leapwell, he climbed back down to the ground on a side of the grove away from where the others intended to set out. Going just a short way out from the safety of the trees, the diversionary tigers made a great racket with roars and snarls. As soon as this began to draw the attention of the besieging reptiles, Hookpaw's group retreated back into the branches--during which time the other tigers dashed away without mishap.

"Aslan go with you," sighed Hookpaw, turning his blind eyes in the direction Quickspring's team would be running, off to find Quickspring's mate Ripplestride and those with her.

"He will be with them," Ranshuk assured his fellow penitent, "_and_ here with us at the same time."

The koala elder Hemshull, father of Tinkswid, took several other koalas aside. "While I believe in the goodwill of our carnivorous friends toward us," he quietly told them, "it is merely good sense, in case we are stuck up here for more than a few hours, to make sure that there is other meat than koala meat available."

The young tigers who were present to see what ensued were duly impressed with the ingenuity of the koalas. Four koalas were lowered on long ropes from an outward-stretching limb of one of the outermost trees; reaching the ground before nearby crocodiles took note, they led the ropes over to the nearest of the three slain crocodiles, the one killed by Valamisa. Making the ropes fast to the carcass, they took hold, dug in their heels, and hauled the dead reptile over to the spot where they had descended. Their friends overhead then pulled in the slack, while the four in the ground party scrambled up to safety in their normal fashion. The four then joined the rest at the ropes, and soon the crocodile was hoisted onto a platform.

"Friend Hookpaw, and you other fanged folk, lunch is served!" Hemshull called out. "Since you eat

both mammals and fish, reptile meat should be palatable for you!" So it was; and the crocodile was large enough that, once the scales were dealt with, it yielded enough meat for everyone to have some. When the feeding was over, the skeleton was set aside, so that once dried, the teeth and some of the bones could be used for tool and weapon purposes.

Some time later, with the young tigers dispersed again to keep watch on all sides of the perimeter, Hookpaw quietly remarked to Hemshull, "I think I know your mind. Although we would sooner starve than treacherously devour our friends, I compliment you on your prudent caution."

Before another two hours had passed, the tigers and Ranshuk had still more cause to be impressed with the koalas' intelligence. A large serpent, of a kind which the koalas recognized as venomous, began climbing toward the platform that housed the convalescing wolf. Every tiger who saw it realized that, if coming to Ranshuk's defense, they would probably be bitten before they managed to kill the snake. Wolfsfriend, who was nearest, was nonetheless about to take the risk for Ranshuk's sake--when a young male koala, swinging on a rope, whipped a second rope with a weighted end at the snake. This rope whirled around both snake and tree-trunk, trapping the former against the latter. Before the snake could squirm free, a female koala, swinging on a rope of her own, lashed out with a club, cracking the serpent's skull. The weighted rope kept the dying snake from immediately falling to the ground; and once it was dead, the female retrieved its body.

"I think Wolfsfriend and I should be allowed to eat this one," Ranshuk joked in relief. Then, more seriously: "If you clever-handed beasts can extract its venom glands without danger to yourselves, perhaps you could find some use for that venom--against the larger reptiles, for instance, if it can be gotten past their armor."

* * * * *

Meanwhile, far to the south, the nine Djinni were beginning their northward march in search of allies against evil. Having never needed to fight anyone in their lives up to now, they had no swords, bows or spears; but they carried with them such tools as could be used for weapons at a pinch. Though completely without warlike training, they hoped that their natural quickness would compensate if combat became necessary. Their swift feet carried them in less than a day to that river which in the future would be known as the Winding Arrow.

Before they crossed into the greener country beyond, Flazdigar said, "I begin to sense that potential friends are to be found in more than one direction. Perhaps we should split up to search different ways."

Magladoth, second in seniority, replied, "If this hunt were occurring in the arid lands, I would agree. But I can already feel that this humid air is going to be uncomfortable for us; it might even make us weaker and slower. I think we'll be safer if we stay together."

Flazdigar nodded. "You may be right. For now, we will stay together. North we go!"

It had been a trying night, morning and midday for Slimtalon, having to wait for her time to take action--and meanwhile, to slip quietly from place to place each time the wind shifted, attempting always to be downwind from the nomad settlement, so that her scent would not frighten the livestock and bring armed men out against her. Just once, she went to a stream, where she drank deeply and caught two fish that assuaged her hunger. Fear-No-Blast, more free to come and go but also anxious to avoid being shot, managed to see much of what went on in the stone-house village--including the fact that Zulika had some sort of private talk with Iskralida--but could not spot any clue as to how soon Zulika would be ready to break for freedom.

Except one clue, in the afternoon.

"Slimtalon! I think our friends will be ready to move soon!"

"Did you get a chance to speak with Zulika again?"

"No, there was always someone too close--often, that one stranger who survived the fight and changed sides." Fear-No-Blast glanced back toward the houses, which were just out of sight from here. "But you remember how Zulika said her husband hardly ever took any notice of their daughter? It looked to me as if Zulika decided to take advantage of this, to send little Dilnara out of the camp ahead of her. The girl is heading toward our former meeting place, carrying what seems to be a bundle of necessities."

"Then I'd better get back there ahead of the poor woman-cub, so she won't be left unprotected."

"Very well; the wind favors you for now. I'll keep up my watch, and speak to our friends if a chance presents itself. I do wish I knew what passed between Zulika and Iskralida inside that cottage!"

The koalas who had slain the intruding viper were a son and daughter of Nubkarsh: Nubdarp and his sister Karshkree. They succeeded in removing the venom sacs from their prize--and from a similar serpent that was blown in half by Valamisa's shotgun half an hour later. Once the four venom sacs were lying on Ranshuk's platform ready to be emptied, they used thin creepers like twine to bind up small parcels of squashed-together snake meat.

"Simply having the crocodiles EAT the poison won't work," the onlooking wolf told them. "Jadis used to talk about poisons now and then; she said that snake venoms only work if they get into the blood. In a stomach, they're neutralized."

"Then we'll give the brutes a _prickly_ mouthful," said Karshkree after a moment's thought. "Nubdarp, have you still got those pegs you made for that new platform you were starting?" Nubdarp, instantly

grasping his sister's idea, went to retrieve the pegs, and a flint knife (a rare and precious possession among the Talking Koalas). Rejoining Karshkree and Ranshuk--and Tinkswid, who had come to watch--he began whittling sharp points on the pegs. "We'll get the pegs fixed in place in the meat bundles one way or another," said Karshkree to Ranshuk; "not sticking too far out, but able to break through skin, with the venom on the sharpened ends..."

"Then when a crocodile gobbles this treat, he'll pierce his own tongue or palate, and poison himself!" Nubdarp finished.

Tinkswid looked at the ground. Currently, one crocodile was loitering directly beneath the trees, while another was visible about a dozen yards away from the perimeter. "I hope this works. Our above-ground water cisterns are running low, and I don't think we'll see rain soon."

Before the task was completed, Valamisa was compelled to expend another shotgun shell: this time at a condor which was making menacing low swoops over occupied treetops. One wing destroyed, the great bird fell to earth and was finished off by the crocodile outside the trees. The other crocodile scrambled out to see if it could swipe any of the condor's flesh; this gave Nubdarp and Karshkree, joined by Tinkswid, a chance to descend and place the poison baits more precisely than would have been possible by tossing them down from the branches. Both as protection, and to grab a quick drink of water from a sort of ground-level water tank maintained by the koalas, some of the young tigers accompanied them down. All were aloft again before either of the nearby crocodiles could close in on them.

"Now to see if they take the bait," said Karshkree.

"Even if they don't," replied her brother, "surely once our tiger friends are ALL back here, alert and ready, they'll be able to kill or chase away all those monsters."

Tinkswid was watching the crocodiles intently, looking to see if they noticed the baits. "I should think so; but I hope the demon doesn't just keep stirring up other animals against us. May I be pardoned for saying so, but Aslan doesn't seem always to be in any great hurry to stop troubles like this."

Ranshuk uttered a wolfish sigh. "It's true that He keeps His own counsel about when to intervene in events. He hasn't killed Jadis yet."

When Aslan had transported Raffira and her friends away through the air, He had taken them far enough so that they met Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder before those two tigers had come very far. Consequently, the daylight hours were not quite over when this combined party met Tigress Leapwell coming to find them. With her were her son Treescratch and three other younglings, one male and two female.

"Cousin!" shouted Bluntmuzzle. "We bring new friends, only lately introduced to Aslan!"

"Goodness!" exclaimed Leapwell. "Are all the new humans female?"

"Is one of these the second Nymph?" asked Treescratch.

"All humans," Elkfinder told him. "In fact, these arrived from Earth more recently than the ones Lady Slimtalon and Sir Fear-No-Blast went out to investigate."

Raffira, being the only one of the freed slaves who could speak English, stepped forth from behind Bluntmuzzle to face Leapwell. "Aslan, Who is the true God, took us out of the hands of men who live like beasts, to place us in the company of beasts who think and reason like men! May He be blessed!" She did not think it right to ask so soon if she and her fellows would ever be introduced to men who acted like decent men.

Bluntmuzzle told Leapwell some of what had transpired to bring them here, then inquired how things were in the koalas' community.

"There's a bit of trouble," said Leapwell, "though so far we've lost no lives. The crocodiles have decided they have a strong appetite for us. They've not yet enjoyed any success at eating us; but with vulnerable creatures like these now under our protection, it would be a very bad idea to try to rejoin the koalas by night. Let us pass the night in the best place we can find close to here, and have two sentries on watch at all times."

"We women had to sleep on the ground more than once during our short captivity," Raffira told her. "And then we were awkwardly roped together. This can't be any worse than that."

"Indeed," said Leapwell, "you will find sleeping fairly comfortable when friendly tigers allow you to lean on them."

Raffira was not surprised when some of the other former slaves proved a little uneasy about actually resting their heads on tigers to sleep, kindly though their first two tiger acquaintances had proven to be. But when Raffira reminded them to trust Aslan on this point, they remembered His voice and were put at ease.

Bluntmuzzle scarcely slept all night. He wished he could have seen his mother before Aslan sent them back west shepherding these human females. And even without Raffira having mentioned it, he also was wondering if human or near-human males could be found to become their husbands.

A tent had been allocated to Zulika's use for the short interval before Dobrinya was to wed her-- possibly then for both of them with Dilnara for awhile, till housing arrangements were more settled all around. The transition to new quarters gave Zulika the chance to look busy and go this way and that

unquestioned; thus she could and did make all possible advance preparations for taking horses that she and her children would ride; another horse besides if Iskralda could be persuaded to escape with them.

It was drawing close to dusk when Fear-No-Blast finally found his opening to hail Zulika and speak with her. "Are you close to leaving? And have you tried to convince Iskralda that this Empress nonsense isn't for her?"

"Then you saw me enter the house with her? Yes, I tried. I feared she would denounce me to Tisrukh, but it was something I felt I was duty-bound to do. Iskralda was moved enough at least that I'm sure she won't betray me; but if I had to wager now, I'd wager that she won't join my escape."

"Speaking of your escape," said the gander knight, "I understand that you intend to ride horses. That's logical enough; but has it occurred to you that those horses will have no way of knowing that the Talking Tigers would not eat them? You will have to choose between the benefit of quick transport, and the benefit of Lady Slimtalon's protective nearness; she can't come near you as you leave without panicking your horses."

A sudden smile made Zulika's average-pleasant face become positively pretty. "Then let her panic our pursuers' horses! If she can delay anyone from being able to chase us, it will probably be all right if thereafter she keeps her distance, with you to keep us in contact. My son and I will have weapons."

"So, how soon do you think you'll make your move?"

"It would be right after sunset this evening if I had only myself, Bulgak and Dilnara to think of; I don't want to belong to that Cossack for even one night, even if he is fairly mild-mannered for a Cossack. But I do still hope to prevail on Iskralda to join us. From what I hear, my wedding to Dobrynya will be no sooner than late afternoon tomorrow; maybe I can make the getaway around noon, on the pretext of checking on the goats."

Not long after parting company with Fear-No-Blast, some fresh excitement occurred which Zulika WAS present for: Tarkan returned at last from his reconnaissance trip. The news he brought was at first heard only by Tisrukh, Murhat and Orhan; but Murhat, who clearly still felt sorry for the way his sister-in-law had been treated, soon passed it along to Zulika.

"Tarkan says that he discovered people in the desert south of here. They claim to be Djinni, though they don't seem to have powers like flying and turning into smoke. My brother thinks one of them could be responsible for the theft of his original rifle. In case these southern people prove to be a threat, Tisrukh says he's going to have two or three of the less-important young men scout northwards. It may be that we would find safer pastures in that direction, without going all the way to this Narnia place." He and Zulika exchanged a wordless glance at this; neither one quite dared to ask if the other might be thinking it could be a GOOD thing to visit Narnia, and perhaps meet Aslan.

The granting of quick and easy forgiveness, commendable though it is in the person doing the forgiving, sometimes prevents the wrongdoer from realizing just what injury the pardoned offense has done to its victim. The forgiving party, then, can be made to feel delayed pain, through overly casual or complacent behavior by the pardoned wrongdoer.

This was what Zulika had occasion to feel, not long after she and her brother-in-law parted company. She went on another of her errands, venturing out of sight of the nearer groups of herd-watching boys; then, when she was walking back toward the settlement in the last of the daylight, still just out of sight of the houses around a shoulder of rock in one of the ridges...Iskralida intercepted her. In the dim twilight, the hurrying Nymph seemed not to see the spear Zulika was carrying, so that the nomad woman had to drop the weapon to avoid hurting Iskralida, as the Nymph virtually collided with her, hugged her neck and kissed both her cheeks.

“Dear, sweet Zulika—I’m so glad I have another chance to talk with you privately!”

While Zulika felt a certain kindly solicitude toward the stealer of her husband (who had in some degree been manipulated into it), she did not feel such a positive affection that she would have initiated any new embrace with Iskralida. But the Nymph’s naïve sincerity was so conspicuous that she decided it would be downright heartless not to put her arms around Iskralida in return. Doing so, she asked, “Have you thought about what we discussed in the house?”

“Much indeed! But before we say more about that...I must beg you to...You see, we of the first generation of Nymphs have no mothers to tell us...I mean, Tisrukh has been busy since Orhan married us, but tonight he wants me under his roof...I must beg you to tell me, how IS it between a husband and wife? I know the Creator’s design for the passing on of life, but...what do I...what did you...”

To keep herself from strangling Iskralida, Zulika stroked the Nymph’s silky hair instead, until the brief, unbidden flash of hatred had been overpowered by Zulika’s deeper forces of kindness—forces which had become stronger and truer within her since she had met Aslan in His aspect as the Lamb. Then she proceeded to explain things to this magical girl, this living combination of sophistication and stupidity. Iskralida reacted dramatically to some of what she was told, but never ceased holding tightly to her teacher and mother-substitute.

In conclusion, Zulika said, “Women have been surviving this process for as long as there have been men and women. It is a harder thing than foolish optimists imagine, yet easier than foolish pessimists imagine. But now I have something to say on my own account. Would you think I was acting out of lingering jealousy, or would you think it a betrayal of promises—if I asked you to LEAVE HERE with me and my children, before this union is, um, fulfilled in material fact?”

Since the eventful preceding night, Tisrukh had been busy enough not to notice that Tash was not

showing himself today. But near nightfall, hearing Orhan try to explain about Tash to his new daughter-in-law whom Urgut had claimed, the petty emperor suddenly wondered what his deity of denial was up to. Forcing himself to ignore his tradition's antipathy to idols, he stepped close to one of the Tash statues and whispered to its beaked face, "What now occupies your attention, inexorable god of this world?"

And he received an answer, hissing not too loudly from the stone beak:

"I have been summoning and commanding some of the stronger beasts of my world to move against your enemies, creatures who serve the despised Lion."

"Do you mean the Djinni whom Tarkan encountered?" Tisrukh inquired.

"No--although the Djinni also serve our Enemy, and may have to be dealt with in their turn. My current quarry is a community of Talking Beasts to the west of you; the Talking Goose at whom you shot is one of their number. Presently, I shall call out of the Eastern Ocean a being mightier than any I have used today, and also more closely under my control. This one shall be of direct help to you, and lethal to those in the west. But that is for another day. Right now, I can tell you that the influence of our Enemy is creeping into the settlement—an influence more dangerous to your rule than the showy, futile gesture that our Enemy made last night. Be cautious about your brother Murhat...and be alert, this very moment, against your former wife!"

Tash fell silent; and suddenly, as if recovering from prior folly, Tisrukh wondered if he had not been too charitable with Zulika. Yes, it had seemed a good idea to give her to Dobrinya; but if Zulika somehow was a danger to be eliminated, maybe one of the clan girls of age fourteen or fifteen could be spared as a consolation prize for the Cossack. The more Tisrukh thought about this, the more—without really knowing why—he started to like the idea of doing harm to Zulika. In any event, this line of thought completely distracted him from a subject which would otherwise have stirred his curiosity: the question of what Tash had meant about a powerful creature coming out of the ocean to help the nomads.

If he had known what to ask, he could before now have learned from Iskralida that Narnians knew of at least one monster in their world's ocean: the sea-monster which had slain Lord Brightburn, the patriarch of Talking Tigers. Brightburn had died saving the lives of some Talking Sea Otters whom the monster had pursued onto shore; in his last fight, while the Otters escaped, he had left wounds on the creature, but had not slain it. That monster still lived below the waves, now grown even larger...and, in its cold, unreasoning way, was already hearing the call of Tash.

At the suggestion of running away, the startled Nymph so tightened her arms around Zulika as to give the first hint ever that she might come even close to equalling Zulika in strength. "Oh, no! I mustn't do that!"

"Why not? While I meant what I said about not hating you, still I can hardly believe that after only a few days, with limited ability to converse, you feel any abiding love for Tisrukh."

"I...well...forgive me for asking, my mother-in-spirit, but did...did YOU not love him in time past?"

Zulika grunted in a most un-ladylike fashion. "Among our people, I must confess, real affection is much sooner found between parents and children than between husbands and wives. And if you can trust that I don't say this out of spite, not only did Tisrukh never love me, he will also never love you. The true, passionate, and only love of Tisrukh's heart is Tisrukh. What I lost by being divorced was not love, but a measure of safety and stability, which I cherished for the sake of Bulgak and Dilnara."

As the nomad woman said these things, her nose and forehead came in contact with Iskrallida's; and she could feel the cool smoothness of the golden crown Tash had placed on the Nymph's head. It was a reminder, leading Zulika to say further, "You might henceforth enjoy that stability with Tisrukh, and even honor from the clan; but you will not be loved, unless it be by your children."

Iskrallida was silent for a moment, not ceasing to absorb the warmth of Zulika's uncondemning presence. Then: "You are right that I did hope to be loved; and I accept your truthfulness about your contrary experience. But the children I may bear are indeed of great importance. Although I no longer believe what for a time I believed, that all is one and everything is everything else--" (even in the near-darkness, Iskrallida's eyes, beholding Zulika's eyes two inches away, could see those almond eyes widening in bafflement at the pantheistic phrase) "--I do still believe that the spirit of my friend Bezbimbry waits to be reborn as my first daughter."

Zulika's brain found that its new English vocabulary contained a word for the concept Iskrallida was expressing. "Reincarnation? Dear girl, I have no grounds for believing in that. I know that neither Muslims nor Christians on Earth believe in it. But even if it were true, your friend could as easily come back by your bearing her to some future man, as to Tisrukh. So come away with me tonight! My heart feels sure that, what with your wedding being such a slapdash mockery, Aslan will not blame you for leaving Tisrukh if you leave him before you have sealed the promise with your body." Now it was she who tightened her arms around the younger woman, wanting very much for Iskrallida to escape with her. This was partly to deny satisfaction to Tisrukh, but also because she genuinely did wish something better for Iskrallida than to be an empress in theory but a demon's puppet in reality.

"I will miss you if you depart," replied the Nymph, her voice hinting at impending tears; "but if I do leave with you, all the men of the clan will doubtless be commanded to hunt for us, and to kill you for inducing me to run away. If you leave without me, they'll probably let you go. But better yet, stay with me instead! If neither of us ever enjoys the love of wedded passion, at least you and I can share the kind of affection a mother and daughter would have, or an elder and younger sister. Oh, please stay!--" and she pressed her cheek hard against Zulika's.

"If I insist on going," said Zulika, "it is NOT because I scorn your affection, but because I cannot remain among those whose chosen path in life is an obvious lie. Dilnara told me that it was Aslan Who humiliated Tash; but for some idiotic reason, Tisrukh and the rest are making themselves believe the opposite! Surely YOU know better? Surely YOU know that it is Aslan Who is the true God?"

Iskralida was too choked by shame to answer, and now she did cry on Zulika's shoulder, as she had done earlier in the stone house. Zulika continued: "I expect to be hunted even if you don't come with us, because Tisrukh will never let his son desert him. Even if Bulgak is not to inherit the rule, Tisrukh will still want him as a warrior in his service. Thus we'll be no worse off if you flee with us, and you'll be much better off."

When Iskralida recovered her speech, what she said no longer amounted to an organized argument. "Please, mother-in-spirit, please remain...I don't want you to be hunted and killed...If you stay, my influence will protect you...you won't have to worship Tash...you and I can both worship Aslan secretly...Just think, over time, we can have an effect on these people, get them to honor Aslan as well as Tash..."

When the Nymph went into another incoherent crying fit, Zulika (refusing to believe that this was a cynical pretense on Iskralida's part) kissed her forehead and whispered, "If you liken me to a mother, then listen to me like a dutiful daughter. You won't have any influence, crown or no crown; at least, not enough influence to prevent 'the Son of Destiny' from doing whatever he resolves to do. And you can't really think that Aslan will tolerate being expected to share His rightful glory with a demon! Come with me NOW! You don't even have to return to the village; Bulgak and Dilnara are already in the clear, and we have enough necessities to survive the journey to where there are friendly creatures..."

They were still closely embracing, exchanging Come-with-me's and Stay-with-me's, when they felt heavy hands descending upon them.

Tisrukh pulled them apart from each other in one powerful movement, not more forceful upon Iskralida than necessary, but violently flinging Zulika to the ground--where, fortunately, she landed on grass instead of rocks.

"Jealous, treacherous she-wolf!" he shouted at Zulika, kicking her in the ribs; the shout was in their Turkic tongue, so only his furious tone was comprehensible to Iskralida, but the kick declared much. "How dare you try to kill the Empress? You will die for this!" To Iskralida, then, he spoke in English, his vocabulary good enough by now that he could make himself clear: "I saw her fighting you; I am happy you are alive!"

"No!" cried Iskralida, unable to grasp how Tisrukh could have interpreted their hugging as a fight; she

had seen more than once how Zulika sometimes embraced her kinswomen the same way when talking about something of emotional weight. It did not occur to her, even after last night's ritual of denial, just how accomplished the self-appointed Tsar was at making himself believe whatever suited him. "Don't be angry, husband! She didn't hurt me at all!"

"I am glad you are not hurt; you are a good fighter. You would win the fight, but I did not want to risk you being hurt at all. Come home now;" and, leading Iskralida gently with one hand, he used the other hand to yank Zulika's hair and force her onto her feet--but only after kicking her a second time, harder.

All the way back, with other nomads quickly gathering in curiosity, Iskralida tried to make Tisrukh understand that nothing more untoward had been going on than a motherly talk about how a new bride should conduct herself; but Tisrukh, while not shifting any of his anger toward Iskralida, refused to listen to her.

There was, however, one who did listen, from behind a nearby tree. This one was not confident of being able to save Zulika by himself; but he took flight to notify Slimtalon and the children.

Among normal tigers in Adam's world, females do not enjoy as high a status as they do among lions. Male tigers are more domineering over their mates than male lions are, sometimes even forcibly robbing their mates of food. Perhaps this has some connection with why Aslan, though male, chose to appear as a lion rather than a tiger.

Be that as it may, Narnian Talking Beasts, not being so directly affected by Adam's fall as creatures in Adam's world are, almost uniformly practiced a tenderness in all relationships comparable with human families at their very best. Thus with the tigers Quickspring and Ripplestride; though hurried into marriage by Aslan's will after both had lost their original mates, they had not needed much time to form a real and satisfying mutual attachment--in which Quickspring treated Ripplestride with humanlike chivalry, and she appreciated it. Thus it was with real concern for her that Quickspring led the search for her pioneering group; and it was with real gladness that she heard and answered one of his hailing roars that night.

Ripplestride came loping to meet her husband, with one of the senior Koala females riding on her back. This koala, named Prilladil, hopped off Ripplestride's back in order not to be in the way as the couple snuggled and rubbed together in greeting. "What news?" Quickspring and Ripplestride both asked in unison, then laughed together at the coincidence.

"The fact that I can laugh," Quickspring then told his mate, "will show that my news is not as bad as it might have been; as of my latest knowledge, none of our people--of any species--has been slain. But there is trouble: reptiles and birds have begun assailing the tree settlement. We think that the demon has roused them against us: not actually inhabiting their bodies, for then he could be cast out again in Aslan's name--simply giving a nudge to their natural aggression. So far, all fighting has gone in our

favor, but we don't dare be overconfident. We'll have to judge, once we're gathered again, whether the ultimate solution is to try to outlast them, or try to kill them off in all-out battle, or evacuate everyone out of the grove."

"Migrating may work out well," Prilladil now interjected, "thanks to our party's happy discovery. To the southwest, as near as you can get to the desert and still find trees of any size, there's a wooded area running up a hillside, and the hill has a few small caves in it. Shatterneck judges that the place could be made into a highly defensible stronghold, even without our having tools of the quality that Narnian Dwarfs could have provided."

"That's providing that the demon, Aslan rebuke him, doesn't simply have the animals under his influence pursue us from one place to the next," said Ripplestride, looking from Prilladil to Quickspring and back again.

"Well, the world IS young, and there only ARE so many crocodiles and vipers in it," replied Quickspring. "Even though none of us has spoken with Aslan for some while now, I don't think that He would allow the demon to keep on pushing crocodiles at us until either tiger-kind or crocodile-kind is wiped out altogether."

"If at least one tiger will stay with us for protection," said Prilladil, "we koalas of the surveying group will stay at the new location, and commence work now in preparation for a move away from the old settlement. Begging your pardon, Quickspring," she added, "but if the situation back at the old tree-town is rough, I think you're going to want your wife to be the one to keep clear of it."

"What does that mean?" asked Quickspring.

"I'm sorry, I was distracted by your news of the trouble back home," said Ripplestride, finding it natural to describe as "home" the place where they had found welcome among the koalas. "What Prilladil means is that Aslan has granted you solace for your children who were reduced to dumb beasts for their--for OUR crimes. I am with cubs, husband, your cubs! It is a sign of grace and pardon; we should give them names reflecting this!"

Tossbone, Quickspring's lone remaining child by Lashtail, was standing within hearing during this; he had come with his father on this excursion, bitterly embarrassed over not having been close enough to help when his father fought the great crocodile. A goodhearted young beast, Tossbone had been tolerant of his unsought stepmother; now he pounced upon a chance to show her goodwill, though he would never actually address her as Mother. "Aslan be praised that I will have siblings again! And your idea about names is an excellent one. Perhaps one of the cubs could be called Lightborn, and the other Freedheart."

Ripplestride smiled at her stepson and student. "I like the sound of those. Unless there should be strong

cause to choose other names, we'll use them."

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Many miles to the east, beneath the waves of the Eastern Ocean, a creature which could breathe both air and water was ascending gradually to the surface. The mer-people warily avoided it...but had no idea that there was anyone in particular to whom they should be passing a warning about it. Nor could they have easily gotten word to land-living beings in any case. But it crossed the minds of some good mer-people to pray that Aslan would protect any intelligent beings who might be in the monster's path.

It knew not what was leading it, but it followed the impulse to seek a rivermouth. Broaching the surface not far from land, it frightened away the seabirds and headed for the river. In shape it was somewhat like a crocodile, but larger, and it had a longer neck which allowed it more easily to snap its great jaws in any direction through more than a half-circle around it. Those jaws, like the rest of the monster, were larger now than they had been years before, when that striped land-beast had foiled its effort to get at those tasty otters. Not only had the sea-creature suffered the first serious pain in its life at the striped one's claws, but it had not even been left in peace to devour that troublesome animal; other land-beings of assorted kinds had driven it away, as if even the dead body of the striped one was of value to them.

The dragon-amphibian was stronger now; perhaps now it could taste a variety of land-beasts, and not be driven off. Swimming lazily but powerfully against the river's flow, it proceeded inland under the moonlight.

The four young tigers accompanying Quickspring had kept respectful silence while their elders conferred; but once he heard the news of Ripplestride's pregnancy, Babbelfang could no longer contain himself.

"Teacher! That's terrific! How soon will the cub come? It won't be too long before I can take a mate and be a father. Will Aslan come to bless your new cub? Maybe He'll kill the rest of those stupid crocodiles when He comes! Why don't mother tigresses have pouches for their cubs, like the mother koalas have? I wish I could eat fruit and leaves like they do; fruit can't run away from you, and you don't have to stop and ask it if it's a talking fruit..."

After letting the youth spout his questions for awhile, and letting Ripplestride answer some of them (including telling him that a tiger pregnancy lasts about three months), Quickspring took charge again. First he addressed the koala matron: "Sister Prilladil, your news was good indeed. Ranshuk's dream comes back to my mind, and I think that the peril it suggested makes moving farther away from the new humans the best plan. You youngsters, I want you to join the others at the new site, and give Prilladil and the other koalas all the assistance you can in preparing that place for use."

"But tigers don't really need just one den to stay in all the time," Babbelfang piped up. "I mean, I'm glad to help our little friends, but the open country is all right for us tigers."

"Actually," Ripplestride softly told him, "an expecting mother just might prefer to have a protected place to give birth when the time comes."

"We'll go to the new lairing place and let Shatterneck and Tawnydart know what's up," said Quickspring. "Those two will return east with me; they should be enough reinforcement against the crocodiles and snakes, together with those who will be coming back with Leapwell."

Prilladil tapped his massive shoulder. "One or two koalas will want to go back with you also, once they hear what's threatening their community. They might be of some help with the slings they've made."

"How long do you think I'll be waiting for news of you?" asked Ripplestride. She did not argue against being left behind--both because of her pregnancy, and because she knew that Quickspring knew she was well-suited to supervise all the young tigers who would be with her.

"Not more than three days, I hope," said Quickspring, giving her a tender tiger-kiss.

People came swarming from the stone huts and the tents, many leaving suppers unfinished, to see what was going on as Tisrukh led Iskralida and dragged Zulika into what passed for a town square (where there were too many Tash statues for tents to be pitched). Even the young women who had only just been integrated into the colony were aware that the petty emperor had divorced his wife, but supposedly on kindly terms; no one could understand why he was now cursing her and handling her so roughly. Amid the commotion, no one thought to wonder why Zulika's children were not there to show alarm at the proceedings.

Dobrinya, feeling he ought to make at least a pretense of concern for his betrothed, asked, "Mighty Tisrukh, my king and friend, what has happened to make you indignant with your sometime wife?"

"A terrible thing, Dobrinya. I went looking for my Empress, and what should I see but her and my detestable, ungrateful former wife, over behind that shoulder of the hills, locked in mortal combat! Zulika, the daughter of scorpions, had attacked Iskralida in a jealous rage; fortunately, Iskralida was more than a match for her, and was fending off all her assaults until I came to rid her of her enemy."

Murhat, hearing this exchange and looking at both women, dispensed with honorific titles for his elder brother. "What are you saying? That makes no sense! If these two were fighting a death-battle in a place full of jagged rocks, how is it that neither of them has ANY bleeding wounds?"

Tisrukh's eyes narrowed as he remembered what Tash had said about Murhat. "Hold your tongue, brother! I doubt not your loyalty, in view of how you helped me against Akim; but your good judgment

I do doubt. Beware of letting unseen evil powers confuse your mind, making you question the word of your Tsar!"

Though Iskrallida could not understand any of the Turkic words, she could make a good guess at the sense of what was being said. This was her chance, despite the language barrier, to reinforce Murhat's challenge to Tisrukh's version of events. Shouting Zulika's name twice, and trying to make the shout sound as it would if the person named were dearly loved, Iskrallida forced her way to Zulika's side, flung her arms around Zulika's neck again, and showered her with kisses in the plain sight of a score of witnesses.

Tisrukh pulled the Nymph away from his prisoner, quickly saying to her in English, "I know you hate her, I know you want to finish the fight, but it is not for you to kill her. I will do that." Then, to her dismay, Tisrukh began a longer speech in the nomads' language, evidently to the same effect. He even gestured to Iskrallida as if she were a warrior who was to be honored for her victory. Iskrallida could see the stupid acceptance of her husband's nonsense in most of the onlooking eyes--just as when they had stubbornly denied Tash's humiliation by Aslan.

Tarkan was not fooled by his cousin's transparent lie. Tarkan had seen his own two wives fighting for real, quite a few times; in fact, when originally acquiring a second wife, he had purposely settled on one who seemed closely equal to the first in strength and will, so that neither wife would end up living a hell on earth by being helpless against bullying by the other. What had passed between Tisrukh's old and new wives obviously was not hostility...but it was to Tarkan's advantage to play along, and play along he did.

"Let's tie her to one of the statues!" he suggested to his cousin.

Two of the young men, beckoned forward by Tisrukh, brought rope and bound Zulika accordingly, with her left shoulder crowded up under the beak of Tash. Tarazi, wife of Orhan and mother-in-law of Murhat, now shouted, "Thus be it to all who cross the will of our mighty monarch!"--just as if she had not tried to get that monarch slain quite recently.

Realizing that she was being given no chance to clear herself, and that Murhat's and Iskrallida's attempts to intercede for her were being ignored, Zulika looked despairingly up toward the sky and whimpered, "Oh, Aslan, if I must die, let my children somehow be safe! Have mercy, Aslan!"

The moment she first pronounced the name of Aslan, deep cracks appeared all through the statue of Tash to which they had bound her. When she spoke Aslan's name the second time, the idol crumbled into sand, and the loops of rope dropped to the grass along with that sand. Tisrukh, however, was in spectacular form with his self-deception; he shouted, "Look at that! Tash is offended that one who names his enemy should touch his image! The greatness of Tash is demonstrated once more!" Tarkan, picking up the cue, raised the shout of "Inexorable Tash!"

Gulshim, eldest daughter of Orhan and Tarazi, saw the look on her husband's face as he grasped the enormity of his brother's dishonesty and injustice. "Keep your peace, Murhat!" she pleaded, grabbing his arm. "You _mustn't_ question him further; even you might not be spared!"

Meanwhile, Zulika was being tied to a tree instead.

Seven-year-old Dilnara found it intimidating to be alone with the Narnian tigress, the more so since the gift of speaking English had not been given to the child. But Zulika's daughter clung to the knowledge that her mother trusted Aslan, and trusted any creature Aslan told her to trust.

With her big brother joining her part of the time, and even the tigress helping to move things where she could, Dilnara had moved the cached supplies from their hiding places to a cleft in the rocks, the spot Zulika had settled on as an assembly point for their escape. Slimtalon, while a bit of daylight remained, had even bridged the communication gulf somewhat, by using a claw to scratch sketches on a fallen log stripped of bark. The sketches showed the tigress herself, and the fugitives with their horses and the magical goose, then movement lines indicating the tigress moving parallel to the others at a distance. Dilnara felt fairly sure she understood this; she was old enough to know that all domestic animals feared the big cats.

Bulgak was with his sister once again when Fear-No-Blast came flying hard to rejoin them. A wind seemed to come with him; and Dilnara was reminded of Aslan's breath, when she had seen Him as the Lamb. Both children felt this wind suddenly push its way into their nostrils, mouths, and even ears; and both heard a voice that was not the gander's, telling them in their own language: "You also will now need the gift."

The next moment, Fear-No-Blast landed in a flurry, began to speak rapidly to Slimtalon...and was understood by both children as well. The first news they ever learned in English was news they would rather never have heard; but it was necessary for them to know. "Zulika was falsely accused of attacking Iskrallida! Iskrallida tried to defend Zulika from the charge, but Tisrukhn won't listen to her! He's threatening to kill Zulika!"

Dilnara, less taken aback because she had some experience with Aslan, was first of the two siblings to reveal her new language proficiency. "Please, Tigress, please do something! I don't want my mother to die!" Bulgak, meanwhile, gathered up his father's rifle and his own flintlock pistol, both of them already loaded; then he said to Slimtalon, "I have to try to help whether you do or not! But if you do nothing else, please at least take my sister safely to the place with friendly animals."

There was no time to marvel at the language-gift being distributed further. Slimtalon answered straight to the point: "There are no beasts nearby that would eat your sister; she can wait here, while the rest of us ALL go to help your mother. Here's what we should do...."

"Thank You, Aslan, for the direction of the wind," Slimtalon purred. The wind was holding out of the west now, which meant that she could skirt that side of the settlement which faced away from the crags onto level ground. Thus, without the livestock scenting her, she could get into position for her surprise rush to help the rescue.

"But rescue of whom, Lord Aslan?" the tigress matriarch prayed further. "Will Iskralida finally quit this lot and come away with us? My heart feels that she will not. Lord Creator, if I misjudge the scent of this situation, please make me understand before it's too late for me to take the right action. I must rescue Zulika; but let me not omit anything You want me to do!"

It was agony for the boy Bulgak to have to delay going to save his mother; but he was the only one who could lead the chosen getaway horses toward the assembly point. That left it up to Fear-No-Blast to forestall the execution.

Tisrukh had caused Zulika to be bound to the largest tree near the stone houses. Brandishing his dagger--while Orhan's son Urgut gripped Iskralida's arms to prevent her from interfering--the petty monarch spouted more blather about inexorable Tash, hardly knowing himself what he said, and hardly caring as long as it sounded grand and lordly to his uncritical audience. And then, as he prepared to cut the throat of the wife who had faithfully obeyed and gratified him for more than twelve years...

A feathered missile came shooting through the air, its element of surprise helped by the fact that there was only firelight, the moon having not yet risen. A hard goose-bill struck furiously at Tisrukh's knife-wrist, causing him to drop the dagger with a snarl of pain and bafflement.

The better to strike amazement into those present, Fear-No-Blast now shouted a Turkic phrase he had asked Bulgak to teach him: "The Lion sends me, and He shall prevail!"

As four or five nomads readied muskets to fire at the gander knight, he evaded in a direction none would have expected--straight at one of the stone houses on a collision course. But in a maneuver no non-intelligent goose could have devised, he pulled his feet forward and struck the stone wall feet-first; then he ricocheted back into the air, while musket bullets wasted their force on the side of the house.

Flying faster than his own thoughts, his danger-defying instincts guiding his next pass, Fear-No-Blast went for Urgut, who on his own initiative was hefting an axe to finish Zulika, lest she get away. A goose's wings can deliver a harder blow than most people who have never owned geese would ever imagine; and Fear-No-Blast's right wing stunned Urgut with its impact. Using the drag from that contact, Fear-No-Blast whipped himself around to hit Urgut with the left wing as well, and the young bully ignominiously fell back onto his rear.

A pistol-shot by Dobrinya missed as Fear-No-Blast dropped to earth from his spent momentum; the

bullet grazed the arm of another nomad, causing that man to drop his own pistol before he could get a shot off. Frantically honking at Zulika in English, "The children have gotten clear!", Fear-No-Blast dashed between Orhan's legs as Orhan tried to hit him with his saber, then took off again. The gander knight had no illusions about being able to clear a path for Zulika all by himself, even if she got loose from her bonds; not with Tisrukh set on killing her. But if he could just slow the scoundrel down--

An opening presented itself, and Fear-No-Blast flew at the nomad ruler once more. Tisrukh aimed his revolver at the oncoming bird, but Fear-No-Blast climbed sharply, and another shot missed him--but wounded the troublemaker Tarazi, diverting Orhan from action as he turned to help her.

Dropping below Tisrukh's next shot, Fear-No-Blast aimed a lunge of his bill at the big man's face, and broke Tisrukh's nose. But he was pressing his luck. Another man made a wild grab and caught the gander's left ankle; Fear-No-Blast freed himself with a desperate twist, but injured his own ankle doing so. Then it was back into the air, flying hard--but not far. A hurled stone bashed his head, and he lost orientation. Another stone struck his body, knocking the wind from him--but also propelling him a little farther in the direction he was already going. He was dropping to earth when the hysterically angry Tisrukh fired a third revolver shot, and fractured his right wing.

Spilling and flopping into bushes, Fear-No-Blast fought the pain in his left leg, frantically struggling to drag himself farther into the darkness. He could no longer fly, could scarcely walk, and had no stream to swim away on.

He would have been caught quickly by the pursuing nomads, had not a diversion occurred. Tisrukh's brother Murhat was shouting something which drew men's attention to him. Even in the midst of his peril and pain, the fleeing Fear-No-Blast wished he knew what Murhat was saying.

Slimtalon would also have liked to know what Murhat was shouting; but she nonetheless availed herself of the opportunity to try to save her avian friend without yet revealing herself.

Willing her hundreds of pounds of bulk to be as flat against the ground as possible, she belly-crawled toward Fear-No-Blast. Finding him, she took the base of his uninjured wing in her mouth in cub-carrying manner, then dragged him with her as she slithered away. But not far away; whatever Murhat's outcry might add to the delay Fear-No-Blast had purchased, it would not add much; and Bulgak had not yet returned to play his part.

Fear-No-Blast said nothing to her of his sudden feeling that he would never recover his ability to fly. He did not want anything to divert her from carrying on the rescue that he had risked himself to make possible. And as soon as she had deposited him in a fairly sheltered spot amid some boulders, Slimtalon started back toward the firelight.

She could tell that Zulika had not yet been murdered. Where was she?...There she was, now being

watched by Tarkan and one of the young men. Where had Iskrallida gotten to?...shoved inside one of the houses, it seemed, to keep her out of the way, with several women including both of Tarkan's wives detailed to keep her there. Some of the nomads were also turning their attention to the older woman who had blinded Hookpaw with the shotgun, that one being seriously hurt according to the blood-smell.

Slimtalon had come here in the first place hoping to bring away Iskrallida; only after coming had she met and befriended Zulika. But it was looking more and more as if Aslan's priority was for them to save Zulika.

How soon to make her move? She realized, without having been told, that Fear-No-Blast was grounded for at least awhile, so he could no longer fly with messages to coordinate things. Had Bulgak yet made it to Dilnara with the horses? Was he on his way back with the rifle? And what WAS that man called Murhat shouting?

Whatever else it was, the tigress matriarch's ears pricked up when she heard Murhat, in the midst of some energetic gesticulation, utter the name of Aslan.

"Have a care, brother or no brother!" Tisrukh roared at Murhat, even as he pressed a piece ripped away from Zulika's jacket against his nose to stanch the bleeding where Fear-No-Blast had struck. "There can be no god mightier than Tash, who makes me the mightiest of men!" And in rage, he struck his unretaliating brother in the face with his free fist.

Steadying himself by gripping the nearest still-intact Tash statue by the beak, Murhat replied, "Haven't I always acted for your good? Well, it isn't for your good to go on believing nonsense! If Tash couldn't even prevent a _bird_ from bloodying you, what can he possibly do against Aslan?" As soon as Murhat repeated the name of Aslan, he almost fell over as the Tash figure crumbled into sand the same way the other had done.

Gulshim threw herself down before Tisrukh's feet. "Spare him, Son of Destiny! My husband isn't himself; the magical bird has cast a spell on him!"

"Then let him break the spell by renewing allegiance to Tash!"--and Tisrukh pierced his brother with a stabbing glare, though its dramatic effect was diminished by the fragment of cloth held against his broken nose. "Murhat, remember your place in the scheme of things! Bow down and submit to inexorable Tash; then all rebellious folly will be driven from your mind."

"Does the scheme of things call for you to murder my sister-in-law?" Murhat countered. "What wrong has she done? You know, everyone here knows, that she did NOT try to kill Iskrallida; why do you say she did?"

"I say it, because my saying it MAKES it so!" Tisrukh shrieked. "I am the voice of Tash among mortals! Reality is mine to command!"

Feeling she had nothing to lose now, and anxious for her kindly brother-in-law, Zulika suddenly spoke up: "And where is Tash to speak in his own voice? Why does he hide? He hides because he fears to provoke Aslan!"

"SILENCE!!" Tisrukh yelled, almost losing his voice with his own shrillness. "In this you show yourself near enough to a murderess--you threaten to murder the secure order that makes my realm great! And you would turn my brother against me; I see now that he desires you for himself. But no more of this; now you die!" His hoarse voice was losing volume, but his knife-hand was strong enough to raise his dagger for a killing slash across her throat. That slash never came, as Murhat caught Tisrukh's arm, took away the knife, shoved Tisrukh back, and made a slash of his own that severed Zulika's bonds.

Slimtalon had been trying to give the maximum time for her friends' horses to be well separated from the ones whom she would be scattering; but witnessing this, knowing that time had run out, she began to move...only to hear a sudden deafening bang from behind her, accompanied by a burning pain in her left haunch.

The same wind that kept the livestock from scenting the tigress, had kept Slimtalon from scenting a man behind her. This was a nomad whom Tisrukh had set out on sentry duty. He had spotted her partly silhouetted against firelight, and had aimed his musket carefully; only her beginning to charge as he fired had saved her from being shot through her heart. As it was, the damage was painful but superficial.

Whipping around, she flung herself at her assailant faster than he could take any further action. It was still unthinkable to Slimtalon to kill any descendant of Adam; but a blow from one of her forepaws, with claws sheathed, was enough to leave him unconscious for some time to come.

Her speed unimpaired as long as she ignored the pain, she started toward the stone houses once more. Somewhere among the noises from the settlement, she was sure she heard Murhat's voice exclaiming something about Aslan one more time--and being cut off. When her eyes located Murhat, he was on the ground, being hacked and stabbed to death by Tisrukh, Tarkan, Dobrinya and Urgut all together. Tisrukh turned from murdering his brother to grab hold of the hysterically crying Gulshim and pull her toward him; apparently Tisrukh intended to claim her as an extra mate for himself.

And Zulika? Approaching the scene, almost within the firelight now, Slimtalon saw that Zulika had tried to get away, only to be seized by another of Tisrukh's men before she could clear the northernmost house. That man, with a dagger like Tisrukh's, appeared to be about to act in Tisrukh's place...and Slimtalon was veering to try to reach him in time to save Zulika...

...when another shot rang out, a shot recognizable to nomad ears as coming from a flintlock pistol. The man who was about to kill Zulika had no chance to look for the shooter, because the pistol-ball went through his head and flung his instantly-dead body well away from Zulika.

Zulika and Slimtalon both knew there was only one person who could have fired that shot; but Bulgak was nowhere to be seen. Tisrukh, his bloodlust subsiding for a moment, finally added up the significance of his son's prolonged absence. Determined not to allow Murhat's interference to result in his victim's escape, Tisrukh ran faster than anyone else to recapture his discarded wife. (Some others, meanwhile, were heading out to investigate the reason for the sentry's musket-shot.) Zulika, for her part, could not run fast with two broken ribs pouring pain through her body.

But the next instant brought a sight which caused Slimtalon to pull back at the last second and keep herself still hidden, still in reserve.

Bulgak had detoured around one of the stone huts to come at his father from the side. All at once, the self-proclaimed emperor found himself confronted by a reality which he could not order away: his own cherished bolt-action rifle, being aimed at his belly by his son. Bulgak's timing, and choice of place, were perfect; no one else was immediately in a position to shoot him.

"Stop right there, Father, and stop the others--NOW!" Bulgak purposely intoned that "NOW!" the way his father had so often done toward him.

In his delusional egotism, Tisrukh might have defied an adult man pointing a gun at him. But to be thus menaced by the son he had long battered and bullied without cause--except that he enjoyed doing it, and enjoyed pretending to believe that he had a right to do it--was disorienting, to say the least. And a fresh corpse lay nearby to attest that Bulgak was serious.

Evildoers who love only themselves are usually amazed when they see that someone can be made strong and fearless by love FOR SOMEONE ELSE.

Tisrukh made a plainly visible gesture, commanding everyone to stay back; he reinforced it with what remained of his hoarse voice. "Everyone keep away--leave this to your Tsar!" Even now, he was concerned not to let his followers know that he was afraid of an eleven-year-old boy.

"Mother, over this way, but keep out of his grabbing reach!" said Bulgak--in English. Then, while Zulika came to him by a way that kept her out of his line of fire, Bulgak spoke again to his father in their native tongue: "Order every man to throw his gun away. As for that revolver you carry, put _just_ your baby finger around the butt, pull it out slowly, lay the revolver slowly on the ground, and step away from it. No, _not_ around that corner! I'll sooner kill you than let you get loose to have US killed! Mother, carefully pick up his pistol; there should be three shots left in the cylinder." Tisrukh issued the

required order, and it sounded as if he was being obeyed.

Though it hurt to bend over, Zulika picked up the revolver as soon as she could safely do so. It also hurt to speak, but she felt a need to keep her son informed on every detail she could supply of the situation he must now try to control. "Only two rounds left," she told him in English. Tisrukh was not so insane as to forget the precaution of leaving one chamber empty for the hammer to rest on. Then she thought of another order Tisrukh might be made to give.

"You must have one more shout left in you, _dear_ former husband. Command them to let Iskralida come here to us, alone!" She could perhaps be pardoned for taking some satisfaction from seeing Tisrukh flinch when she shakily aimed his revolver between his eyes.

The Nymph Empress soon came into view, looking more afraid than Tisrukh did. "Careful, don't let him take you as a shield!" Bulgak warned his mother's supplanter. He cared very little for Iskralida's life right now, but did not want her to be the cause of spoiling his rescue of his mother. Once Iskralida was alongside Zulika, the nomad woman leaned on her in an effort to ease the pain to her ribs from holding up her own weight.

In English, Zulika told Iskralida, "Slimtalon, the Grandmother of the Tigers, is out there in the dark. She came hoping to set you free, even before she knew I existed. Make this all worthwhile--make poor Murhat's sacrifice worthwhile--and come with us!"

Iskralida was melting in tears of childlike fright. "Please, please, there has to be some easier way, some way that everyone can be at peace!" She sank onto her knees weeping, almost causing Zulika to fall over. "Please don't ask me to be brave like you...I'm too AFRAID!"

Bulgak decided that enough time and risk had been spent on the stupid Nymph. He had his father under control at present, but every moment wasted was another chance for something to go wrong--such as Orhan seeing a chance to take back the leadership after all. It was time to play the last card held in reserve. In English, at the top of his lungs, he called:

"SLIMTALON!! Come now! Our horses are away; scatter the others now!"

For one icy heartbeat, Bulgak heard no response. Then came the beautiful music of a tigress roaring; it was an extra gratification to see his father jump in alarm, as if mistaking the roar for Aslan's roar. And the roar was followed by panicky whinnying and bleating. Slimtalon was doing her part.

Slimtalon made no attempt to join her human friends immediately, nor to go back for Fear-No-Blast; confusion for the enemy was the first order of business. At every opportunity, she helped the panicking domestic animals to stampede away from her--by breaking their tethers, tearing apart the tree-branch pens that had been constructed for them, and so on. She mentally blessed Bulgak for making the

nomads drop their guns; if not for that, she might not have survived her charge back and forth across the settlement. As it was, twice she knocked men unconscious when they came dangerously close to bringing newly-grabbed guns to bear on her. Two other men, one of these being Tarkan, did get shots off at her, but missed as she darted among the trees and rocks.

The tigress matriarch was just beginning another pass through the chaos she had made, when a dazzlingly white Lamb appeared in front of her and showed no fear of her. Knowing that she would know Who He was, the Lamb quickly said to her, "No need to fetch Fear-No-Blast; I'll take care of him. But watch for another human child whose heart I have touched; you won't need to ask which one!" Then He vanished.

Slimtalon hoped that this did not mean Fear-No-Blast was dead; she remembered his telling her that he expected to die soon. But there was no time to speculate; she had to keep moving, or she might reach Aslan's Country sooner than the gander knight.

On this charge, to avoid fatal predictability in her movements, she leaped onto the roof of a stone house, across to another house, and then down. This resulted in her catching a glimpse of Bulgak forcing his father to accompany him out into the darkness--which prompted the tigress to draw more attention to herself, lest Tisrukh be rescued too soon from his son's clutches.

Attention was given her indeed...in the form of an arrow flying at her, just when she was growing accustomed to facing firearms. It came in low, giving her a non-lethal wound across her stomach that hurt about as much as the bullet-graze in her hind leg. Without the help of a gunshot noise, she could not at once tell where the archer was, so she veered farther out where she would be harder to see. When she did spot the bowman, she saw that he matched the description Zulika had given of Orhan. Orhan's wounded mate seemed to be out of immediate danger--more than Slimtalon could say for herself. A second arrow from the shaman, even in poor light, came too close for comfort.

But when Slimtalon rounded and came in again, taking advantage of milling sheep to obscure her location, she saw a young girl next to Orhan whose expression caught her eye--a hopeful, expectant look like that of Zulika. This must be the child Aslan had said to look for.

Any doubt on this score was dispelled when, seeing Slimtalon coming closer, the girl grabbed her father's belt and yanked him off-balance. At the same time, Tarkan was trying to line up another shot of his gun; but the girl, snatching up a torch that someone had set into a cleft stump, shoved the burning end right into Tarkan's jacket. As the usually-bold ruffian yelped and struggled to pull off the burning garment, the child ran for her life--straight at Slimtalon.

There was only time to follow impulse. Halting just long enough for the girl to vault onto her back and grab hold, Slimtalon bowled over a man in her path, called up all the reserve speed she had left, and sprinted southward. One more musket-ball, and several rocks, flew near them, but then they were

safely out of reach. Still running, Slimtalon began thinking how she could take this child to join Zulika, without scaring off the horses that Zulika's party needed.

As they went, the girl shouted something in Slimtalon's ear. The words were Turkic--showing that the gift of English had not so far been granted to this runaway; but the very last word she said was "Monduli."

Hearing that, Slimtalon remembered Zulika mentioning that the shaman had a daughter named Monduli.

Tarkan had writhed out of his jacket, and rolled on the ground, fast enough to escape severe burns. His instincts as a hunter convinced him that the remarkable tigress had finished what she came to do and would not be returning. He accordingly did not feel unsafe about expending a shot straight up in the air, as a way to signal for attention. "Do nothing to endanger my imperial cousin! I don't believe the boy means to kill him, but don't scare him into it!" He could not see where Iskralida was, but she did not seem to have joined Zulika and Bulgak in their withdrawal to the north. Tarkan strode some distance in the direction they were going, hoping to observe what was going on without goading Bulgak into shooting Tisrukh. He hoped that his move to take command would prevent Orhan from trying anything treacherous to exploit the Emperor's predicament.

Orhan, fairly sure now that his wife would not die from her accidental bullet wound, had his hands full with his eldest daughter. "He killed my husband just because Murhat DIDN'T want Zulika to be killed for nothing, and now I have to marry HIM??" Gulshim was shrieking.

"Murhat would want you to do what was best for your family!" Orhan shouted back. "With your little sister fallen under the spell of the creatures who serve the hated Lion, it is up to YOU to prevent a shadow of disfavor from falling upon us. Monduli had already been heard questioning the supremacy of Tash before this; it would not have taken much more impertinence to get her sentenced to death--and her wicked insolence endangers ME! Therefore, yes, it IS your duty to let yourself be taken by the Son of Destiny, and to accept it as a privilege! Nothing less than this will blot out the disgrace of Monduli setting the Emperor's cousin on fire!"

In her bereavement--only now, too late, appreciating how fortunate she had been to be married to the only really kindhearted husband in the whole clan--Gulshim was losing all restraint. "Monduli would never have done such a thing, would never have wanted to run away, if YOU hadn't struck and whipped her so often for no real offense! If she fell under a spell, it was a spell of not wanting any more--"

Her outburst was cut short by a hard fist ramming into her stomach. Orhan did not want Gulshim's face to be marred, lest Tisrukh find her less pleasing. It would be hard enough as it was, competing for attention with a Nymph. But that very thought provided the shaman with his next words, once his

gasping daughter was able to hear: "If sleeping under Tisrukh's roof holds no charm for you, then take comfort from the likelihood that Tisrukh will leave you in peace most of the time, having that witch-woman to pleasure him. And I never whipped Monduli more than twice in any one day. Now, let your thoughts for the present be of seeing to your mother's care. I must look to see if that beast killed any of our people, since Tarkan seems to give no heed to that matter."

Orhan found it intriguing, as he made this search for casualties, to find that the tigress had not killed or maimed anyone, not even the horses, goats and sheep. He decided it would be to his advantage to be the first one to be heard saying that this proved the power of Tash--that inexorable Tash had not _permitted_ Aslan's servants to kill any of them. And, in the unlikely event that Iskralida ran away or came to harm, perhaps his daughter would become Empress by default. Yes, Orhan felt that his fortunes were not entirely disastrous.

Afraid to break for liberty with Zulika, afraid to do anything, Iskralida huddled miserably in the shadows. She glimpsed Tarkan passing by, following his cousin as closely as he dared. The lack of any further gunfire suggested that Tisrukh was still alive so far. Presently she heard Bulgak, farther off now, saying something in the nomad language, with what seemed a warning tone; moments later, Tarkan came back into the firelight, still not noticing the Nymph.

Someone else noticed her, though.

Feeling the air turn icy, Iskralida looked around and beheld a sight that made her wish that she had risked the escape after all. Tash, in the bird-headed form that Aslan had forced him to remain in, was towering over her.

"Now that the offensive influences of my Enemy have withdrawn from this place," he said to her in English, "I shall deign to make myself visible to you. And you should be glad of my return, for I offer you release from your fears. Your husband will soon be safely beside you again, to resume your much-deferred wedding night. I heard Zulika and Bulgak speaking in this language, so I know the boy's plan. He is an inventive little beast; a shame he isn't on my side. When they get far enough ahead of potential pursuers, Bulgak plans to force his father to climb into a tree, hang head-down by his knees from a low branch, and be tied in that position to be found later.

"Not only will Tisrukh be safe, but he will also think well of you for your refusal to run away with Zulika. And it isn't only on that score that you may feel relief. Even for Zulika the outlook is good. That tigress, who is known to me, has prevented a pursuit from being possible any time soon; but in fact, your husband will order that there be NO pursuit. He will reveal how my wisdom guided him in all that was done. By _pretending_ to have conceived an unreasoning hatred for Zulika, _pretending_ to be intent on slaying her, my chief human ally brought out of concealment the REAL treason that was lurking in the camp. Murhat, who for years had secretly lusted for Zulika, would sooner or later have made a bid to assassinate his brother so that he could take both Zulika and the leadership. Now that

threat to your community has been removed."

The ridiculous canard against the late Murhat roused some vestigial sense of moral indignation in Iskrallida. "How can any of that be true? Murhat saved his brother from that madman Akim who brought the slave women; if he wanted Tisrukh dead, all he had to do was be a little slower about killing Akim!"

Tash mimicked an indulgent sigh. "Poor little Nymphet, have you retained so little of your former grasp of the fluidity of reality? Murhat is dead, therefore why bother defending him? Just accept the official version of his death, and you need feel no grief at his passing; besides, with him in disgrace, his widow, though taken as your fellow wife to Tisrukh, will never enjoy such prestige as to be any threat to your position. Zulika is alive, and has every chance of remaining so, therefore why bother worrying about her? Just accept my word, and the identical word which your husband will soon be giving you, and you need feel no discomfort at being his wife. Do not think that he harmed Zulika; think that he freed her to live the new life which you know she herself desired. So all is well, and you have nothing to feel guilty about! Be a happy Empress, and name your first daughter Bezbimbry." Finishing with an almost casual, chatty tone, the demon faded away like frost under the sunrise.

Iskrallida was left waiting for Tisrukh to be retrieved; she hesitated to go after him herself, lest the very act of going might still make her decide to run after Zulika after all. Maybe, just maybe, Gulshim would eventually become for her the friendly confidante that Zulika could have been.

The sky was growing lighter behind Slimtalon as she loped along with the nine-year-old girl clinging to her back. Ambush predators are not as accustomed to endurance running as pursuit predators, but the tigress matriarch forced herself to put more distance between herself and possible hunters. Having cleared the rocky ridges, she began bearing right, to converge on the probable course of Zulika and her children.

When at last they stopped for a breather, Slimtalon wondered if the Daughter of Eve was hungry. Looking around, she discovered some succulent plants of a type the koalas had identified as edible. Drawing Monduli's attention to these, the tigress made paw-to-mouth gestures to convey the idea of eating the plants. Child of a people accustomed to living off the land, Monduli understood, and ate several of the succulents.

When they resumed their march, Slimtalon felt increasingly anxious about how she could transfer custody of Monduli to Zulika's party without scaring off their horses. She also wondered what was happening to Fear-No-Blast, if he had not simply been carried away to Aslan's Country.

Both questions were answered for her when a bold, brassy voice that she had not heard in months hailed her--from overhead. "Lady Slimtalon! Are cats now keeping humans as pets?"

Raising her eyes, Slimtalon beheld a cheering sight: a genuine Gryphon, far more wholesome to see than the fraudulent Great Gryphon that was Tash. It was, in fact, the Gryphons' patriarch Vortex, created by Aslan on the same day Slimtalon and her husband had been created. Tucked in the crook of a foreleg, Vortex was carrying Fear-No-Blast. The noble creature spiralled down to a landing, deftly setting down the gander knight before planting his own feet on the ground.

"Thanks be to Aslan that you're alive!" Slimtalon exclaimed to Fear-No-Blast. The old scout, his twisted ankle still hurting him, groaned in reply, "Indeed; but being held this way was a dreadful pain to my broken wing. Still, it couldn't be helped."

"How did you come to be here?" the tigress asked Vortex. "Didn't Aslan decree that our southward expedition must sever all ties with Narnia?"

The Gryphon's eared-eagle head nodded. "So He did. But in view of what an insult the demon offered to Gryphon-kind when he impersonated one of us to deceive Hookpaw, I prayed and pleaded that Aslan would allow the true Gryphons to contribute something to thwarting the demon's plans. Aslan heard my prayer; and at His chosen time, He transported me here in an instant, without letting me see all the ground your tiger-troop covered. I am to be allowed to render you assistance for a short while, and to hear how things have been with you--something King Frank is eager to hear, though it must be kept a secret from most Narnians--before Aslan returns me to the North."

Monduli, who in her own world had seen crude pictures of creatures like the Gryphon, found the boldness now to speak to Vortex, though he could not understand her Turkic words: "My name is Monduli. Are you an angel of Aslan?"

Vortex, gathering what he could from her tone, said to the girl in English: "I see that you do not fear me; this is good. Aslan has prepared your heart." Each at least could tell that the other had spoken the name of Aslan.

Meanwhile, with his old air-scout habits, Fear-No-Blast reported to Slimtalon. "The humans back there are still in turmoil. Vortex caught a sight of Iskralida, before he found me; it looked to him as if she was content to stay where she was. He also had a glimpse of Tisrukh, hanging upside-down from a tree limb and squawking with rage and embarrassment. I wish I could have seen THAT!"

"Honorable Gryphon," said Slimtalon then to Vortex, "the other humans I have befriended will be somewhere north of us, heading west on horses--which, as you'll understand, makes it awkward for me to draw near them. The ideal way you can help me is to carry Monduli here to where she can safely join those others. They have been granted the knowledge of our language, so you can call down to them from high above and arrange the transfer; the mother is named Zulika. Since Aslan has not chosen to heal Fear-No-Blast's wing and ankle at this time, I'll ask you to take him along also; he'll be better off with Zulika. And let Zulika know that I'll try never to be TOO far away from her."

"It shall be done as you ask." With gestures of his own, including wing movements, the Gryphon patriarch conveyed to Monduli the idea of her mounting on his back. He also scooped up the resigned Fear-No-Blast once again. To the tigress he said further: "When this errand is finished, I believe Aslan will give me enough time to catch a wild hog or some such for you, so you can have meat without needing to exert yourself. Rest for now and lick your wounds; I'll be back."

"One other thing!" cried Slimtalon as Vortex was spreading his majestic wings. "Please have another look at the settlement once you're disencumbered. I don't know how soon the men there will have their horses back under control, and once they do, I don't know if they'll come straight after Zulika."

"At your service!"--and with a swirl of mighty pinions, the Gryphon and his two passengers took to the sky. Slimtalon found a spring, drank deeply, and lay down to wait.

It was more than an hour before Vortex reappeared, carrying with his foreclaws the carcass of a young wild donkey, a prize large enough that both of them would be able to feed off it. Rejoining Slimtalon, Vortex told her, "Monduli and Fear-No-Blast are with Zulika now. She seems like a very brave woman; I'm sorry that I won't have the chance to enjoy her further acquaintance this side of Aslan's Country. When I reconnoitered eastward, sure enough, three of the men had gotten their horses retrieved and under control, and were setting out on Zulika's trail carrying weapons of a sort I never saw before. But Fear-No-Blast has let me know what those weapons can do. I gave them no chance to shoot at me; I made a great screaming dive at them from one side, knocked them out of their saddles, and climbed clear while their horses ran away again. One of the ruffians fell right into some thorny bushes; it serves him right for worshipping the demon!"

Slimtalon laughed, a laugh more of relief than vindictive amusement at the nomads' discomfiture. "Very well, now let's eat. Then I'll tell you our history to this point, before Aslan whisks you away home. One piece of information you really must carry back is that the rogue Hookpaw HAS come to repentance and grace. It will do Zendragund good to know that."

Sleepless as he was, Bluntmuzzle was first to catch a near-human scent from the south. Quietly awakening the others, he went a short distance in the direction from which the strangers were apparently approaching.

"If you serve Aslan, show yourselves without fear!" he shouted.

A manlike voice answered, "We do serve Aslan, blessed be He! My name is Flazdigar!" The speaker, and eight others like him, soon came into view: tall men, or very nearly men, carrying a variety of axes, hammers and other implements. Flazdigar, standing in front, said further, "We are the Nine Djinni, created by Aslan to tend and cultivate the empty lands beyond the great desert, in anticipation of children of Adam and Eve who will one day populate those lands." Here, he gestured toward another of

the Djinni. "My brother Kuzdikal has encountered a man from Earth, but that man was no servant of Aslan. We have come out of the desert to investigate what this new incursion of strangers into the Narnian world means."

Raffira, the only one of the liberated slave women who could follow what was being said, stepped up alongside Bluntmuzzle to speak to the newcomers. Meanwhile, the two Russian women were whispering to each other about how handsome these Djinni were, while the Turkic women did the same among themselves.

"My companions and I--the women, I mean--were among those who were brought into this world by magic," said Raffira. "Now we have been entrusted to the keeping of these Tigers who serve the Lord Aslan; but the people of Tisrukh, among whom we previously were, do not love Aslan as we have learned to love Him."

"She speaks mildly," said Bluntmuzzle. "Those others, with possibly some exceptions, worship as God a being who is false and evil!"

Another Djinn put hand to forehead in bewilderment upon hearing this. "They worship EVIL??? How can that be? It sounds like saying that the sun radiates darkness! Pardon me, I am called Smedgarosh. But let our first brother continue."

Flazdigar came closer to Bluntmuzzle without fear, as the other tigers also came to listen. "Aslan has taught us enough that we know there are beings bent and warped in spirit; but still it staggers the mind to think that anyone would _worship_ what is wrong."

Another Djinn came alongside Flazdigar. "I am the second brother, Magladoth. Could it be that these people have made some sincere mistake, as if we in our study of the stars were to confuse one constellation with another?"

"I'm still not sure how much these new humans understand," Bluntmuzzle admitted. "But I must now confess to you that, for a time, I myself served the same evil spirit who is exploiting these new humans! Aslan, in His mercy, saved me and pardoned me; but I bring from the experience an understanding of what a powerful deceiver can do. The evil one tricked me and others of my kind into imagining that the Talking Lions of Narnia were our foes and deserved to die. In all the time that I was being used for the demon's purposes, I would not say that I ever was entirely aware of what was really happening; but to my shame, I _must_ say that it took some cooperation from MY OWN will, some consent to being deceived, for me to become part of the demon's design."

Leapwell now spoke up: "I also was among the deceived, and I have shed innocent blood. Aslan has shown us mercy far above our merits; He has even graciously granted us the privilege of making some feeble amends for our crimes by serving His good purposes in these lands."

The one called Kuzdikal now approached Leapwell, extending a hand in greeting. She, on impulse, rubbed her furry cheek against that hand. There was something about these Djinni that inspired trust; the breath of Aslan was unmistakably in them. "What a wonder, what a glory, to hear that Aslan can thus extract good even out of evil!" said Kuzdikal. "My brothers and I will delight in learning more of how Aslan's love and power have done this. Who knows, perhaps this power of redemption can even straighten such a bent spirit as the man who tried to do me harm!"

Elkfinder, looking between the Djinni and the former slave women, spoke to the Djinni as a group, with the unself-conscious frankness of the young. "There's another wonder, too: you fellows popping up like this! By the smell of you, you are close enough in nature to Adam's race that you can mate with them and beget children with them. Do you already have wives?--because our friends here will need husbands to start a new community."

Raffira blushed furiously and withdrew when she heard this. Flazdigar laughed a kindly laugh. "Young tigress, I understand that the Talking Beasts, though longer-lived than common beasts, are for the most part still shorter-lived than human beings, and so marriage becomes a concern for you much earlier in life than is the case with mankind. It so happens that my brothers and I do NOT have wives; there are in fact no female Djinni that we know of, and Aslan has told us that we are indeed capable of intermarriage with Daughters of Eve. But all things in good order! You have known us only for minutes...and that is too short an acquaintance for us to begin confronting the potential awkwardness inherent in the fact that there are nine of us Djinni, and only eight of these lovely young women. Let thoughts of marriage and new families be deferred until a more suitable time."

Gentle though his reproof was, it left Elkfinder far more embarrassed than Raffira.

Bluntmuzzle broke the uneasy moment. "There are indeed more pressing matters that require our attention. West of here, the other Talking Beasts with whom we dwell are in some peril, a peril almost certainly caused by the same evil spirit of whom I told you. If you men--you Djinni are willing to join us, you can doubtless help us to rid our people of the creatures attacking them."

"My heart," said Kuzdikal, "tells me that this is the very adventure to which Aslan has called my brothers and me. Lead on; and as we go, I shall use an ability I was given, to speak directly with those other women who do not know the language of Narnia. Thus will we exchange knowledge more quickly."

As they went, Kuzdikal conversed for a time with the five Turkic women who did not know English; then, perceiving why the two Russian women could not take much part in this dialogue, he proceeded to absorb the Russian language as well.

Zulika, with Dilnara and Fear-No-Blast seated with her on a horse, now had still more cause to wish

that Tisrukh had not cracked her ribs. The pain had made it hard for her to experience the elation of briefly meeting such a fabulous creature as Vortex the Gryphon; she was afraid that in days to come she would remember the pain and forget the Gryphon.

The immediate concern, though, was whether there would BE more days to come for her and her children.

The Gryphon had turned eastward to cover their escape; the distant battle-screach which was the last sound Zulika had heard from him seemed one of aggressive confidence, not pain or fear; nor had any gunshots been heard in answer to it, so Vortex must have come away uninjured from whatever he was doing. Fear-No-Blast had expressed his own confidence to that effect. But Zulika wished that Slimtalon were here; more accurately, she wished that Slimtalon could be alongside her _without_ spooking the horses.

As it was, Bulgak was the only protector close at hand for his mother, his sister, and his probable future wife. The boy was keenly aware of this himself, as Monduli clung closely behind him on his horse. The third horse was carrying the bulk of their belongings and supplies; but Bulgak was keeping with him all three firearms they had in their possession. "I wish I knew how to make bows and arrows as your father can," he remarked to Monduli at one point. "Our guns will eventually have no more ammunition."

Monduli's reply vibrated with eagerness to be useful. "I watched my father when he worked on the bows," she told Bulgak, nestling still closer against him. "If we work together, I'm sure we can make them too."

Bulgak smiled. She was SO obviously anxious to ingratiate herself; but he already liked her, so if she was his only available future bride, he would be satisfied that he could have done far worse.

Zulika urged her horse up alongside her son's, despite the fresh pain this caused to her midsection. "Bul--gak--" she gasped, "we must--think of a plan for extremity--if they threaten to--overtake us. Keep studying the--countryside, and--watch for--places where we might--hide and continue on foot, if--we have to abandon--the horses as--a decoy for trackers."

"Please don't force yourself to talk, Mother. I understand what you have in mind. We'll sure be bad off if we have to resort to that! But I suppose it could happen. The next rest stop we make, I'll see about repacking our things so that Monduli and I will have some bare necessities right on our persons in case we do have to jump off and send the horses running. But any jumping-off place has to be on our left, because the tigress will be somewhere in that direction. If we don't have horses, at least it'll mean we can't lose anything by joining the tigress, in fact we'll _need_ to join her then!"

Monduli, listening to him, was not worried about the potential danger. She was as happy as a fugitive could be. Bulgak was already talking naturally of her as if she were part of his family. If it was Aslan

who was making this happen, then Aslan must indeed be the good and true God.

It had been a rough night for the koala colony. The poisoning trick had worked, killing two crocodiles, and no more of those beasts had shown themselves for the rest of the day. The afternoon, however, had seen air attacks by a vulture, an eagle, and a second vulture, each bird persisting in its assaults until Valamisa had shot and killed it; and in the eagle's case, she had missed twice before her third shotgun shell struck home.

At night, then, a genuine mass onslaught by snakes put the tree-dwellers in their greatest jeopardy yet. Valamisa used up the last of her ammunition slaying vipers; and even with several snakes dispatched in this manner, and more killed by other means, the climbing reptiles managed to bite three of the young tigers, and six koalas of various ages. The koalas knew how to treat snakebites and suck out the venom; but although they were able to save the lives of the victims, most of these would be too sick to do anything for many hours to come. When it seemed quiet enough to do so, some of the intact koalas skinned and filleted the dead snakes, to give their meat to the tigers and Ranshuk as breakfast.

Sunrise brought a reprieve. Nubkarsh, Hemshull and the other senior koalas discussed whether this meant only a pause before further attacks, or meant that Tash had exhausted the ranks of his feathered and scaly troops. Wolfsfriend risked leading a team of koala volunteers down onto the ground, to look for signs and to fetch more water up into the tree-town. They went unmolested, but the outlook for the rest of the day remained uncertain.

Later in the morning, they heard a hailing roar from the west; it was Quickspring, returning with Shatterneck and Tawnydart. Wolfsfriend wanted to drop down again and run to meet them; but Ranshuk told her, "They already know the hazards without you running to tell them, At least wait until they get closer."

The three approaching tigers were spread out: Shatterneck in the center, Tawnydart on his left and Quickspring on his right. Nothing attacked them. Quickspring, walking a little ahead of the other two, presently called out, "Is everyone still alive up there?"

Tinkswid, the young koala bride, was perched along that edge of the wood closest to the oncoming tigers. "Everybody with warm blood still has it flowing in their veins, though a lot of us have had close brushes with death," she answered Quickspring. Her husband Yugdug, from a nearby branch, added, "If you watch your step, I think you can all enter the trees in safety."

They could and did. Then Quickspring called a meeting with the koala elders, to discuss the prospect of evacuating to the new location. They were still talking it over when Bluntmuzzle's party came in view, now enlarged by what seemed a whole tribe of humans.

Watching them come, Ranshuk muttered to Wolfsfriend, "Have they got the entire band of new

humans there with them? I wonder if they turned out to be friendly after all?"

"I'd sure be glad for your dream about a great danger to be untrue," replied the young tigress.

The girl Raffira, being able to understand all that Narnian beings said, was admitted to the council in the treetops along with Kuzdikal, as a way to let all the liberated slaves learn quickly through them what was going on. The Djinn, having had little contact with Talking Animals in his fairly short life heretofore, was almost as fascinated as Raffira to see the symbiosis which had arisen between tigers and koalas.

Tinkswid, having heard much of what was being said between her father and the other elders, went to the platform where Hookpaw sat, to tell him as a courtesy what was at issue.

"Everyone trusts our human-type guests, because Aslan vouched for the women, while the Djinni--well, something about them just makes it so obvious that they are close to Aslan. Interesting about the women: I heard that the food Aslan placed in their baskets was replenished twice, out of nowhere, as they journeyed here. As for discussion of what the rest of us have already been going through: what it comes to is that our own elders want to wait until the ones who are ill from snakebite have regained their strength before anyone is evacuated; but Quickspring wants precisely to move the sick ones first, to get them away in the lull and enroute to the new refuge, before any more attacks occur here."

"If I had the right to advise them," rumbled Hookpaw, "I would side with Quickspring, and not just because he's a fellow tiger. The demon who is our true enemy, and who was my deceiver, tries to make his actions harmonious in some degree with the course of nature, in hopes of lessening Aslan's anger against his meddling. That was why he used me and--and my three companions..." He choked up for a moment, remembering Bezbimbry; then he resumed: "With us being nominally the conjurers, it was less an unnatural magic than if Tash had acted alone to summon those new humans."

"And how does this apply to today's decision-making?"

"It is in the course of nature--not for us Talking Beasts, but for dumb ones--that the weak are mercilessly dispatched. Now that some of both our races are weakened by snake venom, it would be 'natural' for them to be killed off."

"By what? The surviving crocodiles seem to have given up the siege."

Hookpaw sniffed the air, as if wondering whether some new predator might already be in smelling range. "Maybe more birds of prey; maybe swarms of hard-to-detect scorpions, Aslan help us. Even a dragon, if Tash dares to risk Aslan's heightened wrath by going so far as to take control of one of those. My point is that, because our sick ones would likely fall victim to hunters in a crude state of nature, Tash may suppose that Aslan will take no notice if he 'helps' nature along a bit. This means that the

sick ones would be the demon's quarry of choice. However many of us are evacuated, those need evacuation most urgently of any."

"But your same argument could lead to a conclusion," Tinkswid riposted, "that the sick ones remain HERE, instead of being taken out of the shelter of our treetops and carried across dangerous open country."

"Meaning no offense, that is by koala thinking. With US here, the sick ones could be transported to the new place far more swiftly and safely than any koala could have gone alone. As for that, I myself could even be the carrier of one or two of the sick koalas, as long as one who rode on my back was in good enough shape to be my eyes and guide my movements. Hmm, that's an interesting notion in itself..."

"But remember that there are young tigers also sick; they would be much harder to carry around at speed. Nonetheless, I shall take the first opportunity to tell my father about your worry that our enemy means to follow up against the most--Oh! What's he doing?" Hookpaw could hear her startlement.

"What's WHO doing?" the blind tiger asked.

"It's Bluntmuzzle! He's just leaped down to the ground, and is running off to the east."

"Not so mystifying, I guess," Hookpaw grunted. "No doubt he has reported as much as he needs to report to your father and Quickspring; and now, with his own bride and the human-types delivered to relative safety, he's impatient to find his missing mother."

Flazdigar, the nominally senior Djinn, also noticed Bluntmuzzle's unceremonious departure, and also asked about it--getting from Quickspring the same answer Hookpaw had gotten from Tinkswid.

"When we were starting up from the desert," Flazdigar then said, "we all sensed on the wind--"

"Begging your pardon," Quickspring interrupted, "but do you mean that you can smell things as we Beasts can?"

"We don't so much smell as feel things on the air. Anyway, we felt that potential friends were to be found in more than one direction. My heart now tells me that some of us should go with Tiger Bluntmuzzle; his mother may need more help than he guesses." Flazdigar turned to Chibrigon, the third brother. "Please go after the young tiger. Take along Kuzdikal, since there may be need for interpretation; he's already given the young women a start in understanding conditions here."

Three of the other Djinni volunteered to go as well: Ploskavar, Davradon and Thurikeb. "Just Ploskavar, I think," said Flazdigar. "The rest of us should remain with the koalas and help them prepare

their evacuation."

Chibrigon, Kuzdikal and Ploskavar said hasty farewells, lightly dropped out of the trees, and ran after Bluntmuzzle. Having already been warned about the bog holes, the three Djinni had no trouble avoiding them, and very little trouble overtaking the surprised Bluntmuzzle.

This left Flazdigar, Magladoth, Davradon, Jeblajask, Thurikeb and Smedgarosh to resume discussing business with Quickspring and Nubkarsh. Valamisa the Nymph presently awoke from the sleep that followed her long night of helping to fight off serpents; and when the Djinni were introduced to her, every one of them thought, without saying it aloud: "That makes nine women, and nine of us."

Finding himself not having to slow down for the Djinni, Bluntmuzzle decided to ask them a question that had pestered his mind since being introduced to them. "Why did Aslan put the nine of you so far from any human beings?"

Chibrigon replied, "Because there WILL be more children of Adam and Eve in our world than there are now. We plant, others will water, and the Emperor-Over-Sea will grant the increase."

"We expect the new people, toward whom we are now proceeding, to move eventually into the lands we have cultivated for them," added Ploskavar.

Bluntmuzzle snorted. "By the Lion's mane, that sounds wrong and unfair! By all report, these newcomers are wicked blasphemers against Aslan, and without any care for the rights of the weak. Can it be THEY who will reap the benefits of the righteous work you Djinni have done?"

"Not of all our work," said Kuzdikal. "Only of part of it. Have your King and Queen ever told you the story from Earth, of Isaac's wells?"

"I've heard of Isaac," replied the tiger, "but not of his wells."

"Abraham and Jacob were more adventurous than Isaac," remarked Ploskavar; "but I understand why Fourth Brother brings up Isaac, who was a peacemaker. Go ahead, Kuzdikal."

Kuzdikal went on: "When Isaac dwelt among people who did not know the Emperor-Over-Sea, he dug a well for the needs of his family and flocks. The neighbors intentionally said nothing until he had finished--letting him do all the work--but then they suddenly pretended great indignation, shouting that Isaac was trespassing on their land. So Isaac surrendered the well to them, and went to dig another one somewhere else. His wickedly selfish neighbors did the same thing to him again, and again he gave up the well. But now the water supply was sufficiently attended to, that even those jackals left Isaac in peace when he dug a THIRD well."

Chibrigon then seconded Kuzdikal: "We are being Isaac, before there even ARE such bad neighbors. When those morally-warped ones come into the lands we have prepared, they will find conditions already so good for their livelihood, that they will feel no need for a long time to press into other territories. And in those OTHER territories, there will thus be peace for still other people."

"We can speak more about this later, Third Brother," said Ploskavar. "Just now, I feel the need to conserve my strength so we can keep up with our tiger friend. I think the humid air IS impairing my strength somewhat."

Zulika wanted to rest--wanted, for awhile, NOT to have her cracked ribs feeling every step her horse took; but they had to keep going. They had to get the greatest possible benefit from the respite the Chief Gryphon had purchased for them by his driving back the first pursuers. Without having seen the three horsemen, she felt certain that one of them had been her ex-husband's formidable cousin. Tarkan would not stay discouraged for long.

Keenly aware of his mother's distress, Bulgak spoke to the Talking Gander who rode--also uneasily--at her saddlebow. "Fear-No-Blast, I understand you are a scout. When you first came to our settlement, did you do any real surveying of these lands to the west of it?"

"Well, some, in the very process of searching FOR your settlement," replied the gander knight. "But less than I was inclined to do, because Lady Slimtalon and I were trying not to announce ourselves too soon."

"By any chance, did you spot any places that might be suitable for fugitives to hide from pursuit? You know that Mother and I have discussed leaving the horses, making them run off in a different line than ours to distract hunters. Besides creating confusion in trackers about where we are, this would also mean that Slimtalon could freely join us. Now, if you tell me that we will soon pass a really good hiding place--to hide from human eyes, while still allowing Slimtalon to smell her way to us--I will urge Mother to resort to abandoning the horses, because this riding is torture to her ribcage. In a cave or such place, we could get Mother's ribs bound up, after which she could walk with less pain than riding is costing her. If there are tigers to help us, we would not need to survive terribly long on our own..."

"Alas, apart from caves right near where the stone houses were built, I remember no places I saw that I would feel certain were adequate concealment from a deliberate hunt. Zulika, what do you say? Can you bear to keep on riding longer? My advice would be not to chase off your horses unless it seems to be the only remaining hope of avoiding detection."

"For the sake of my children," said Zulika through clenched teeth, "I can endure more than this. But surely Slimtalon will be taking some action of her own meanwhile?"

"Maybe Aslan will come back to help us," put in little Dilnara.

"He sent the tigress to carry me away," said Monduli supportively. "Surely He wouldn't have bothered to do that if He was just going to let us get caught again."

Factors other than the intervention of Gryphon Vortex were helping to buy time for Zulika's party. Tisrukh, though livid with rage at his son for turning the tables of humiliation, was determined not to allow his formal bridal night with Iskralida to be deferred any longer. Apart from Tarkan's short-lived sortie which Vortex had foiled, no one attempted to give immediate chase even when all the stampeded horses were recovered--because there was indeed no life-and-death necessity to catch Zulika and the children with her, and Tisrukh wanted to maintain command over anything further that was done about this.

The Emperor and Empress slept until nearly noon. Awakening first, Tisrukh shook Iskralida awake. Without even thinking to ask her how she now felt, he got to business.

"Esteemed Empress, give me your best counsel. Do you believe that inexorable Tash would give you magical power to help track the she-wolf Zulika and retrieve my son?"

Iskralida, for her own part, forced all personal sensations out of her mind, still hoping to be of some help to Zulika even at a distance. "I told you, my sovereign husband, how Tash spoke to me last night. He assured me that last night you sought only to smoke out Murhat's treason, and that there would be no effort now to kill your former wife."

Tisrukh smiled. "And there will not be! But besides wishing to restore my deluded boy to his rightful allegiance, I need to know if Zulika is truly in league with hostile strangers. Any and all information we can obtain has a bearing on a concern which would be present even if Zulika had never tried to kill you. Unlike you Nymphs of Narnia, my people are dependent on our flocks for our main livelihood. It would soon become necessary in any case for us to move, as the grass hereabouts is getting used up. Thus, the same searching that might find Zulika, may also serve the more practical purpose of guiding our next migration."

"I can...I can ask Tash if he will empower me to scry information for you, husband. But perhaps it would be more fitting...if YOU asked him to give some power directly TO YOU."

It was in Iskralida's heart to hope that Tisrukh would prove unsuitable for an infilling of magic, so that magical hunting for Zulika would fail to be done, while Iskralida herself would not be blamed. But she was disturbed by the wolfish grin that lit up Tisrukh's face when she made her suggestion.

There was business to attend to at the nomad settlement before any actual migration could be planned. Khassan, the man who had been shot dead by Bulgak when he tried to kill Zulika, had to be given a

hero's funeral, while the "traitor" Murhat's body was dragged away to be left out for vultures. The fact that Khassan had been a second cousin of Zulika was pointed out by Tisrukh as making his noble sacrifice even more honorable--setting aside mere blood relationship in favor of loyalty to the Tsar.

Orhan and his sons, meanwhile, were set to urgently making more bows and arrows, since a part of the remaining supply of bullets had been expended in efforts to shoot Slimtalon when she was scattering the livestock. (Orhan's declaration that the power of Tash was what had prevented the tigress from killing man or beast was widely accepted.)

When he could get away, Tisrukh went to the largest of the Tash statues and asked: "Unstoppable Tash, it must be known to you what Iskralida and I have discussed. Will it please you to grant me some further aid?"

He was a bit startled when the statue morphed into a living, moving figure of Tash. "It pleases me well, Son of Destiny," replied the demon. "First, though, let me say something for your ears alone. You have done splendidly at helping to deny reality; but you must have the high, lonely courage to remain aware of what IS the reality that you are denying."

"Meaning what, O deity of deities?"

"Meaning precisely that I am NOT any deity of deities. The Lion Whom we hate IS more powerful than I am. This, of course, makes our denial still more heroic; but in practical terms, it means that we must reckon with His ability to annihilate us with a mere thought. I can give you some help, because the Lion allows much freedom to mortals; but the help I give must be so designed as to be not too greatly different from what mortal efforts might have achieved."

"Will these limits ever be overcome, O Tash?"

"We can hope so; all our denial of reality strives toward that goal. Meanwhile, I can provide you with information for your plans. Also, you already know that I am bringing a powerful creature from the ocean, which will be so guided as to harm only your enemies and never your people. Finally--and this will help your prestige among your people--I will furnish you with some sort of magical weapon that only works for you."

"A rifle that never runs out of bullets?"

"That might be too provoking for the Lion. But perhaps a bow and arrows with magical qualities..."

Although hardly anyone in the nomad settlement understood that the original "Spirit Beast," Hookpaw, had not been the same person as Tash, one benefit of Hookpaw's past activities remained with them. He had driven major predators far away for the safety of Iskralida, Valamisa and Bezbimbry when they

were conducting their magical experiments; thus, now the edible game animals near the stone-house village were in abundance. The available supply of meat had forestalled hunger problems, though the issue of moving to find fresh pasture for the flocks was real.

On the afternoon following Zulika's pre-dawn escape, Dobrinya the Cossack went antelope-hunting on the horse Tisrukh had allotted to him. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain by doing this job.

If he achieved nothing more than to bring in fresh meat, that would be helping to maintain his good standing with the self-crowned emperor. But there was other potential profit in the excursion. Although, after the Gryphon's intervention against Tarkan, Tisrukh had ordered an indefinite postponement of efforts to catch Zulika, it could not displease Tisrukh if Dobrinya "just happened" to pick up information about her on this hunt. He might also find sign of the enigmatic "Djinni" Tarkan had reported. And...if he should learn that there was in fact a force out there hostile to Tisrukh...being first to find their town or camp would give Dobrinya the option of deserting to their side if it seemed expedient.

He felt no such deep obligation to Tisrukh as he had felt to the fellow Cossacks with whom he had once ridden, traded and smuggled on the steppes.

Following the largest local river, Dobrinya noticed signs of something interesting after he had gone more than ten miles away from the village. Tracks, and a gouging of the riverbank mud, suggested that a lion or tiger had taken an antelope or deer beside the water...but that something really big had then emerged from the river and taken the prize away from the hunter, forcing the lion or tiger to flee.

No Cossack, however pragmatic, was without a sense of adventure; so Dobrinya decided to allocate at least half an hour to searching for further sign of the water creature. He did, however, take the precaution of riding at a greater distance from the riverbank than he otherwise would have done.

His effort was rewarded sooner than he hoped. Rounding a hillock on the side away from the river and then returning riverward, he almost fell out of the saddle at the sight awaiting him. It took all his equestrian skill to keep his horse from bolting.

Lounging on the muddy riverbank, apparently devouring another stolen game animal, was a reptilian thing scarcely smaller than an elephant, though lower in profile. Shaped roughly like a crocodile, it had a longer neck; and on the sides of that neck were gills like those of a fish. But there were also nostrils on the snout. The thing must be able to live both above and beneath water. "Is that the friendly monster Tisrukh expects?" he asked himself aloud.

He received an answer from behind.

"Yes, what you see is my gift to your new Tsar." Even before wheeling his horse, Dobrinya recognized

the cold voice of Tash. There stood the bird-headed demon, ugly enough to make the water-beast look lovable by contrast. "If you show faith in me and ride up to it, you will find that not only will it not harm you, but my power will cause even your horse to lose all fear of it. You can then have the honor of announcing its appearance. That is...IF you are prepared to forget your thoughts of deserting my people."

The visibly manifested Tash, and the unseen but omniscient Aslan, were not the only witnesses watching as Dobrinya chose between one fear and another, then rode up to lay an outstretched hand right on the snout of the placid monster. Not a hundred yard off, concealed from fleshly eyes by vegetation, and hidden from Tash's awareness by the will of Aslan, Slimtalon was watching.

Unlike Dobrinya, the tigress matriarch instantly knew that this dragonlike behemoth had troubled the Narnian world before. This was the slayer of her valiant husband; and she wanted to attack it heedlessly. No matter how hopeless the encounter, she wanted to punish it, make it feel pain in return for the grief it had caused her. Along with everything else, it was highly possible that if Brightburn had lived, Hookpaw would never have gotten anywhere with his feud against the lions.

In fact--perhaps Tash had sent this monster to the coast on that grim day FOR THE PURPOSE OF taking away Brightburn's good influence from Narnia.

Be that as it may, Slimtalon could not just throw her life away. She knew that Zulika's party was far enough north to be in no present peril; but they and others needed to know what was happening. She wished that Fear-No-Blast had not lost his ability to fly, or that Vortex could have stayed longer, or both. As it was, she must creep away undetected; and so she did, even as Dobrinya was obsequiously worshipping Tash.

When Aslan had suddenly granted the Chief Gryphon's prayer to be allowed to take some action that would spite Tash, Vortex had been occupied, along with the other Gryphons, in assisting their Talking Lion friends who had undertaken to explore westward from Narnia--much of their assistance, naturally, taking the form of aerial reconnaissance ahead of the lions' movements. When Aslan brought Vortex back from his meeting with Slimtalon, He did not immediately return him to the other Gryphons, but rather appeared with him at Cair Paravel.

"Hail, Aslan!" shouted every Narnian in sight. King Frank added, "And greetings, Lord Vortex."

"The Father of the Gryphons will tell you of his just-completed excursion, in private," said Aslan to Frank. The King accordingly led Vortex to a chamber where they could speak undisturbed, while Aslan visited with the Queen and all others present in the castle, to their delight.

Vortex told all that he had done, seen and learned in the south, taking particular satisfaction in relaying Lady Slimtalon's report that Hookpaw had come to repentance and salvation. Hearing that the outlaw

tiger was now sightless, the King mused, "You know, there are many stories told on Earth of men who only gained spiritual sight after they were physically blinded. It seems this can happen with Talking Beasts as well. And it's a fine thing to hear that those Talking Koalas took an interest in Helen's Catechism. She'll be glad to know that."

"For a certainty, sire," said Vortex. "But, meaning no disrespect to the will of Aslan, and I doubt not that He hears us talking right now, I can't help wishing that I'd been allowed to do more to help those to the south of us."

The King laid a friendly hand on one of the Gryphon's folded wings. "I'm sure you did exactly enough, by protecting that woman and her children from present harm, along with our gallant Fear-No-Blast, and helping Slimtalon to recover. Most great good purposes in mortal life are achieved by many contributions from many persons. We shall have to trust Aslan to keep on watching over those others, even if we don't find out any more about their fortunes in this life."

Soon Aslan appeared in the chamber with them. "Good Vortex, I will take you now to where your people are still at work supporting the Lions' enterprise. You are right that Zendragund will want to know about Hookpaw. King Frank, you may tell your Dwarfish artisans that they have done very well raising the monument to the Lion Patriarch." Without more ceremony, the Creator and the Chief Gryphon vanished.

"The woman called Raffira was especially appealing," said Chibrigon, as he, Kuzdikal and Ploskavar jogged alongside Bluntmuzzle. "She has not allowed the trouble she suffered to embitter her, but shows great faith in Aslan--and this after so short an acquaintance with Him!"

"The same can be said for all of the women whom we met with Tiger Bluntmuzzle," replied Kuzdikal. "You simply noticed it most easily in Raffira because she can speak English. But I can vouch for it that all of them are true in devotion to Aslan, even those who did not experience being raised from the dead by Him."

"Well observed, Fourth Brother," Ploskavar interjected. "All of them without question are worthy to be loved and honored in sacred matrimony. But as for their feelings in the matter, I do believe that Raffira has taken a definite liking to me. I think I will marry her."

Chibrigon shook his head. "Fifth Brother, it may be that your special interest in rocks and minerals has lessened your perceptiveness to the signs given by living things. I formed a distinct impression that Raffira preferred my company."

"I beg to differ, Third Brother. She spoke very pleasantly with me before we left the koalas' colony."

"I would venture to assert, however, that she spoke even more pleasantly with me."

Suddenly Kuzdikal pressed his hands over his ears, and exclaimed to the other two Djinn: "Oh, stop it, please! Don't you hear yourselves? You are in DISCORD! Aslan help us, you are ARGUING!"

Chibrigon halted in his tracks. "By the Lion's mane, Kuzdikal, you are right! Is this what conflict is like? What a horrible thing! I knew in theory what it meant, but to have it occur between us--! Ploskavar, forgive me!"

Ploskavar had also halted. "It is rather I who need your forgiveness; my tone of speech was becoming inexcusably abrasive."

"Both of you must forgive ME," Kuzdikal chimed in. "I was over-sensitive..."

Bluntmuzzle turned back to witness the three Djinni striving to out-apologize each other. "Excuse me, friends," he said mildly. "As one who has, to my shame, done REAL evil before the grace of Aslan redeemed me, permit me to assure you that none of you has harmed any of the others. I guess you nine brothers have never been in competition with each other before now?"

"There was never occasion for it," Ploskavar told him.

"Least of all over potential wives, a blessing never presented to us before we met your human friends," Chibrigon elaborated.

"If the disagreement I just heard is the worst conflict that ever occurs among you Djinni," said Bluntmuzzle, "you can count yourselves amazingly blessed. Believe it or not, a little bit of competition doesn't do ANY harm. If two of you are both attracted to Raffira, you can both try to gain her favor, as long as you agree not to resent each other."

Kuzdikal felt obliged to add: "AND as long as all of us try to avoid a situation in which one of the nine available women feels left out, feels herself a poor last choice."

Bluntmuzzle nodded, lashing his tail. "That's a good thought. All of you should try to let Aslan lead in lining you up with mates, just as it was Aslan Who ordained my marriage to Elkfinder, and that has proven good indeed so far. But I must remind you that learning what's become of my mother is more immediately pressing than any of that!"

The tiger then resumed his progress eastward, soon joined by three pensive but still swift Djinni.

The daylight hours ended uneventfully for Slimtalon. She had ranged ahead of Zulika's party and behind them, finding no sign of anything imminently threatening them. Near dusk, the air became totally still; so she took advantage of the chance to approach almost within sight of her friends,

knowing that her scent would not now panic their horses. In her loudest speech-voice, she called out, "Fear-No-Blast! Zulika! Are you safe?"

Both of those she addressed being injured, it was no surprise that a different voice answered, sparing them from the pain that shouting would likely bring them. "This is Bulgak! We are all managing so far! Are we closely followed?"

"Not that I can track or smell!" the tigress called back. "You should rest soon! But camp far away from any river; there is great danger in the water now, of which I'll tell you more later! Keep someone on watch by night! Fear-No-Blast, you remember the distress cry for extreme need; I'll be listening for it!" In a dire emergency, the gander knight would utter his shrillest migrating honk, one long and two short.

Now Slimtalon moved farther away again, and sought a suitable tree to sleep in. Though her two wounds were not life-threatening, the stiffness that grew in them had been fighting against her movements all day. She was glad that Vortex had fed her well in the morning; she was too tired to catch anything now. If she felt worse in the morning, she might swallow her pride so far as to ask the resourceful son of Zulika to shoot something with his rifle and let her go eat it after he and the others had passed it by.

Slimtalon did not usually dream extraordinary dreams; but tonight, in her sleep, she found herself vividly reliving two episodes from her past.

First--

It was the very day after Digory Kirke, Polly Plummer, and the disgusting Uncle Andrew had been transported back to Earth. All herbivorous Talking Beasts, except the Elephants and the pegasoid Fledge, had already dispersed to take up the business of living. The carnivores were feeding upon food which had been given them by Aslan without any creature needing to die; but they knew that very soon they would be taking up the role of predators in the Narnian ecology. Slimtalon was eating and conversing with her Lioness counterpart, Zavax.

"I think the reasoning plant-eaters all have accepted our promise never to hunt them," Zavax was remarking. "At least, they ACT as if they believe it. I noticed some of them taking pains to leave conspicuous trails as they departed, which suggests that they count on us to take note of their trails in order NOT to stalk them by mistake. But there will have to be some kind of rules, or agreements, to help us avert tragic errors."

It was for just this purpose that King Frank, authorized by Aslan, convened a council of all carnivores, including aggressive omnivores. He spoke--not yet in the royal tones he would eventually acquire, but with an eloquent sincerity--about the moral duty each intelligent predator had, to go hungry rather than slay a fellow Talking Beast.

Zetow, the patriarch of lions, was the first beast to offer a concrete suggestion. "Your Majesty, it seems to me that we flesh-eaters should assume some sort of rotation to watch over plant-eaters, like those men on Earth you call 'shepherds.' Our presence with our herbivorous friends would at once make other talking carnivores aware that these beasts were off-limits for hunting, and provide protection against NON-intelligent predators."

Brightburn followed suit with a complementary proposal. "If Your Majesty approves of Lord Zetow's well-thought-of idea, I would suggest a division of labor something like this. Let large hunters like ourselves protect plant-eaters that go about in herds, like antelope, deer and sheep. For animals like rabbits and squirrels, which are smaller and more scattered, let flying creatures like eagles and hawks go to and fro over the areas they frequent, giving some sign like gestures of their wings to announce themselves as friends and protectors of the talking herbivores..."

Second--

She now saw only her husband and the original Talking Lion and Lioness pair. Lord Zetow was saying to Lord Brightburn the exact words that Slimtalon remembered him saying so long ago--back when there had not yet been any great calamities inside Narnia, back when Zetow's eldest son Zendragund was still very young and had both of his eyes.

"Friend Brightburn, friend Slimtalon: you know that the intelligence Aslan gave us is intended by Him to make use of our animal instincts as is appropriate. You know that these instincts are the real reason why cubs of both our kinds play at fighting as they do--to ready themselves for adult necessity. But unlike our dumb-animal counterparts, we are capable of talking about this and seeking wisdom to the profit of all of us."

Brightburn laughed a good-natured laugh. "Your son Zendragund has already taught wisdom to several of our cubs _without_ words! The moves he made in play-fighting would have killed every one of our children who were tussling with him, if those had been real fights."

It was part of Zetow's greatness that he really was not speaking of this matter to gloat at the tigers' expense, and the tigers knew it. "You tigers have us overmatched in weight and raw power; but skill counts for more than strength. From the little I have been told about lions in Adam's world, I think that Aslan created us lions with an advantage in coordination because of the types of animals we would be hunting. Be that as it may, I can offer you something which can never be given to ordinary tigers. You have minds and speech; you can learn; you can be TAUGHT."

Brightburn's face reflected the realization of his colleague's generosity. "You mean that you would teach us tigers how to use the fighting techniques you lions use?"

"Exactly," Zavax answered for her husband. "We will teach our methods to adult and cub tigers alike."

Zetow continued, "If it were only a matter of hunting success, I would see no need to make this offer. But since the White Witch skulks somewhere in the world beyond Narnia's borders, we cannot say what future troubles she may cause for us--at least for any of us who go exploring outside Narnia. The kingdom one day may need all strong beasts like us to fight against creatures that serve the Witch; because of this, we who serve Aslan ought to share knowledge and skills with each other as much as possible, to make all of us more effective in our common cause...."

Abruptly, Slimtalon's awareness drew back from the scene she was still seeing, to remember what came later. Now she began saying something she had NOT said back then--something she suddenly wished she had said that day. "Wait, Zetow! Don't do that! You're going to need your advantage; keep it to yourselves!" When neither Zetow nor Zavax took any notice of what she was saying, Slimtalon shouted louder and more urgently: "Stop! Stop! If you teach all your skills to tigers, then your advantage will be cancelled, and tigers will be able to make their size and strength count against you! LISTEN to me! They're going to attack you! Both of you will die!"

No matter how desperately she tried to warn Zetow, he did not hear. Then, out of nowhere, the sea-monster came in sight, and in one gulp swallowed Brightburn, Zetow and Zavax. Slimtalon went on shouting vain warnings to Zetow as if he were still there--

--until she woke herself up with her own shouts.

Coming back to reality, she at once made a check with all senses. The monster was nowhere near. Then she wept in the darkness. When the weeping had exhausted itself, she found that she remembered one thing from her dream with special distinctness. She remembered Zetow saying, "Skill counts for more than strength."

She looked up at the stars. "Lord Aslan, is that Your true message in this? That skill may yet overcome the monster's power? Oh, please grant it! Vengeance aside, my heart tells me that my living loved ones will need to be defended against that thing! If You are not willing simply to destroy it Yourself, which You could do effortlessly, please make a way for us to defeat it!"

Here the tigress matriarch had to turn her attention to her own state of mind. She was in danger of becoming presumptuously angry at Aslan for NOT simply destroying the monster now--indeed, for not having destroyed it before it slew Brightburn--in fact, for ever creating the accursed thing in the first place.

This made it harder for her to get back to sleep.

It was gratifying to Bluntmuzzle that his new friends, unconsciously comical though they could be,

were tough when toughness was needed. Like Bluntmuzzle himself, they got by with scarcely two hours of sleep that night, and all four companions were on the trot again before the sun rose.

The Djinni did not immediately seek water to drink; like desert herbivores, their bodies could extract water from various plants they snatched up and ate on the run. When Bluntmuzzle remarked at one point that he could smell the scent of game animals, the three quasi-men began a scholarly discussion of the ranging habits and breeding habits of wildlife in the area. Their esoteric chatter was by now no surprise to the tiger; but what followed was as big a surprise as his first meeting with the Djinni.

A buck antelope came in sight, much too far away for Bluntmuzzle to have caught it in the open; but as soon as Chibrigon said, "I sense it is no Talking Beast," Ploskavar drew from his belt a hefty hammer, which he threw all the way to the skull of the antelope, killing it instantly.

"We eat meat ourselves only occasionally," Ploskavar explained; "and when we do, it is usually carrion, since we are immune to the diseases decaying carcasses may transmit. But when there is occasion to take fresh meat, it is our rule never to kill unless we can kill quick and clean, without causing the animal to suffer." Then he and his brethren accelerated together, prompting Bluntmuzzle also to put on speed, running up to the slain animal. Kuzdikal drew a knife and began expertly skinning and gutting the body.

"Forgive us for killing you, creature of the Creator," said Chibrigon solemnly. "May you be welcomed into Aslan's country, where the hunters can pick their meat off the trees, and there is no more death."

"We don't need the hide just now," remarked Kuzdikal; "but I'll hang it over a tree to dry, somewhere away from the bones. If we come back this way, we can retrieve it."

Bluntmuzzle thanked the Djinni for saving him hunting time, then ate as much meat as he judged he could eat without significantly slowing himself down. Each of the Djinni also ate a little: the first time Bluntmuzzle had ever seen humans or near-humans eating raw meat. This done, all four now had a drink of water from the nearest spring; then they continued eastward.

Admiring Ploskavar's deadly-accurate hammer-throw, Bluntmuzzle asked him, "Are you prepared to slay a man like that, if he is aiming a gun at you to kill?"

"May Aslan spare me from having to do such a terrible thing; but under certain circumstances, if non-lethal force were not enough, I would indeed slay. Our desire for peace with all reasoning creatures does not obligate us to allow the worst to prey upon the best."

Then they were silent for the better part of an hour, until Kuzdikal said, "I feel more life-movement on the breeze. I think that there are humans--friendly ones, or so I sense them--farther along the route we are following. Friend Bluntmuzzle, please let us know as soon as you pick up any scent of them."

Ripplestride did not much like being the only adult tiger at the hillside location where koalas were preparing a new, more defensible settlement. She knew that Tash could stir up trouble anywhere, though he would find it harder to herd crocodiles to this place. As the koalas worked, and some of the young tigers helped them to move things here and there, other young tigers joined Ripplestride in patrolling the perimeter continuously--the youngsters in a group on one side, while Ripplestride circled opposite to them.

Thus, Ripplestride was alone when she smelled, and almost immediately sighted, the wild lion.

He seemed to be ignoring Ripplestride, and stalking toward the nearest koala work team. None of the koalas appeared to notice his presence; perhaps it was just that they were trusting the tigers to protect them.

She started moving to intercept the lion; but before she had quite gotten in between him and his potential prey, something dragged at her, slowed her. She felt sure that it was not any supernatural power impeding her. It was something in her own mind. In all the time since her capture and repentance, she had never once had cause to do violence to any lion, wild or intelligent.

It was guilt that was hobbling Ripplestride's limbs.

This lion was no demonic monster; SHE had come closer to being a demon than this poor dumb brute ever would. She had attacked wild Narnian lions without legitimate cause; far worse, she had played a role in murdering the father and mother of the Talking Lions. What right did she have now to bare a claw against any lion?

The lion had almost passed by her; in a moment, he would be close enough to make a rush at the koalas. The koalas now seemed to notice him for the first time; a stampede began, with cries of sudden terror--

--and some of the koala voices were calling Ripplestride by name, calling on her to save them.

Almost too late, but not quite too late, she dashed to interpose herself between the lion and the koalas. It would be justice of a sort if she herself died at a lion's claws; but she could not let her vulnerable friends die. With more show than substance of bold resolve, she uttered a fierce territorial roar, then gathered herself to do reluctant battle if the lion attacked.

But the lion neither attacked, nor fled, nor tried to circle her and get at the koalas. Instead, he grew larger in size, and far more golden in mane and fur.

"That's better, daughter!" said the Lion, Who was Aslan.

Ripplestride only stood staring amid conflicting emotions. Aslan went on, "Your own thoughts have taught you the lesson you needed. Your past sins must not paralyze you, lest you fail to do the good I have made you able to do. If even a Talking Lion threatened evil now, past guilt would not change your present right and duty to oppose the new evil. You needed to drink this lesson in well, for in your time you shall bear the responsibility of being the top-ranking female among your kind."

Now Ripplestride found her voice. "Lord Aslan, do You mean that Slimtalon is, is--?"

"No, dear one, she is not yet reunited with Brightburn in My country. Before very long you will see her again. But it remains true that your moral strength must be fortified against the future demands that will be placed upon it. Now, cheer up, you did pass the test. Let's go inspect the koalas' progress."

And as frightened as the Talking Koalas had briefly been, they were far more joyful now to be visited by Aslan--even though none felt as if they had permission to ask Him exactly how everything was going to turn out.

As if in reward for their NOT pressing Him on such matters, just before Aslan said farewell, a shake of His mane caused the two water wells they had begun digging to be instantly finished and ready for use, complete with rope-and-bucket arrangements such as human beings would have used. A second shake of His mane caused a stone lookout tower, proportioned in every detail for koalas, to come into existence at a suitable spot close to the trees. A path from the tower to the trees was shielded with stone walls.

The last thing Aslan said before vanishing was addressed to some of the koalas: "Let several of your people work on providing more missiles for your slings."

Having heard Slimtalon's warning call about peril in the rivers, the fugitives did not try to refill their waterskins until they found an isolated spring among some rocks. The disabled Fear-No-Blast could have swum in a river even without use of his wings, to search for his customary aquatic food; but since they had to avoid streams, he was fed morsels of the bread they had with them. Dilnara took pleasure in serving him herself during the rest stop at the spring, having done the same with domestic fowl at such times as the family had owned any.

"I'm terribly sorry that we ate geese before," the child said gravely. "We didn't know that any of them could talk."

Fear-No-Blast extended his good wing to give Zulika's daughter a humanlike pat on the shoulder. "The ones you would have eaten were not able to talk, or to think worth mentioning. I would be quite annoyed with you if you knowingly ate any Talking Birds, but the devouring of common animals is all part of nature--THIS nature, anyway."

"What do you mean by 'this' nature?" asked Zulika.

"I mean that which the ignorant think is all there is: the visible, touchable world, or should I say worlds, that we experience. I've heard King Frank and Queen Helen quoting holy words that went something like, 'The creation is groaning in travail, awaiting the revealing of the children of God.' Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, no place known to us is free from the curse of evil and death-- which is why we have to accept that some creatures will be eaten by other creatures. That's in THIS nature."

Bulgak, listening to this exchange, translated it into Turkic for the benefit of Monduli, who continued huddling close to him as much as possible. When a question occurred to her mind, she had him translate it into English:

"Then do you mean that nature is different where Aslan dwells?"

"Very different," the gander knight assured them. "In Aslan's country, there is no death or pain or sorrow; and if it even IS necessary for people to eat there, then Aslan provides food in His own way."

Another question came from Bulgak's probable future bride:

"Did Murhat go to Aslan's country when they killed him? He was always kind to me."

"I cannot speak for Aslan," said Fear-No-Blast, who knew what Murhat had done to argue for Aslan and to save Zulika; "but I know of no reason why Murhat should not be in Aslan's country, indeed receiving a hero's welcome there."

Zulika had had more than enough to think about in the approximately thirty-three hours since their escape. Now, however, hearing these words, all at once she found the leisure to weep for her brother-in-law. She hoped that the gander was right. From the little contact she had had with Aslan so far, He did not seem like a Deity Who would coldly disregard one who had both given Him recognition and perished in the act of doing what pleased Him.

As they mounted their horses again, Zulika glanced up at the great fluffy clouds in the sky. For a moment, one of the largest clouds appeared to be forming a sculpted scene. It was a scene with a huge Lion sitting on His haunches, while a man knelt before Him as before a king. The cloud-shape shifted, and it seemed that the Lion leaned forward to give the man a Lion's hearty kiss, after which the man stood up and seemed to wave cheerfully to Zulika. The scene was gone before she could decide to call the children's attention to it; but she treasured it in her heart.

And...since she had been given no cause at all to pine for her former husband Tisrukh, Zulika allowed

herself to wonder if Aslan would ever lead her to meet some other man as decent as Murhat had been.

Tash's visible appearance in the village square was enough to command attention without further ceremony. "My most worthy Tisrukh, Son of Destiny, approach me!"

When Tisrukh did so (having just arisen from a night of introducing Gulshim to her new role as second wife of the ruler), Tash handed him a well-made compound bow. "Take this weapon as a sign of my confidence in you, Tisrukh. Any arrow you shoot from it will be able to CHANGE DIRECTION as it flies, in accordance with your own will, as long as your attention is on controlling it. Thus you will be able to shoot foes who think themselves safely under cover."

"I thank and praise inexorable Tash!" Tisrukh exclaimed. "Is it, then, your will for me to put this bow to use now?"

The hideous vulture-like head nodded. "Since, as you know, your people will need soon to move to new pasturing lands, you must appoint a deputy to organize this overall movement for you, in such a direction as Tarkan may recommend on the basis of his recent scouting. Meanwhile, you will take a few trusted fighters to seek and slay the Djinni, who are servants of the hated Lion. You will not need many with you, now that you have the aid of the creature I summoned, along with your special weapon. Success to you!"--and the demon vanished.

Tisrukh had known that something like this was coming, so he did not have to hesitate about assignments. "Honorable shaman Orhan! You will take charge of preparing for the migration! Tarkan, my cousin truer than a brother, you will assist Orhan!" This assignment for Tarkan served two purposes at once: Tarkan would safeguard against the unlikely possibility of Orhan trying some treachery, and leaving Tarkan out of the warlike expedition would prevent him from gaining too much of the martial glory that should go to Tisrukh.

"And now for my companions," the self-styled Emperor continued. "Since our worthy Dobrinya announced the coming of Tash's ocean-dwelling servant, he deserves the honor of accompanying me. Urgut, son of Orhan, will come as well, to represent his father. Suleiman, brother of the fallen hero Khassan, you shall come with us for your brother's honor. Two more besides should be enough-- Ismayil and Rashid! Let us make our preparations."

The last two named were the two young men who had been raised from the dead by Aslan after the fight with Akim's party. When they had been in the darkness of death from gunshots, Aslan had spoken to them before He returned them to their bodies. But they had not liked what He had to say; it had involved things like telling them NOT to treat women like dirt. So, after coming back to life, they had worked very hard to make themselves believe that Aslan did not deserve to be obeyed.

Now Ismayil and Rashid smiled proudly; they had the opportunity to act upon the allegiance they had

chosen.

The fugitives continued westward with no sign of new danger--but also disturbed at having no further communication from Slimtalon. "It's just because the wind's from the south now," Zulika reassuringly told the children and the gander knight. "Since she's south of us, she has to keep her distance to avoid panicking our horses." Fear-No-Blast seconded her on this; but Bulgak, Dilnara and Monduli still wished that the friendly tigress could be with them.

Eventually, someone was with them, quite suddenly.

Starting up a gentle rise of ground, they heard an eager male voice shouting, "Mother! Mother, are you there?" Fear-No-Blast recognized the voice, and said hastily to his companions, "That's a friend, another tiger." Then he honked at the top of his lungs, "Bluntmuzzle, wait! Stay back! You'll scare the--!"

But his warning was too late by a split-second. As the eagerly-rushing young tiger crossed the skyline, all three horses went crazy with fear and bolted, throwing off their unprepared riders (and, in the case of the pack horse, more than half of its cargo, including the one piece of crockery Zulika had brought away, which broke). This was especially bad for Zulika, who shrieked from the pain in her ribcage as she hit the ground.

Hard on the heels of Bluntmuzzle came three strange men. Bulgak, who had retained his rifle since it was slung over his shoulder, instantly brought it to bear on the closest of the men. Though he accepted Fear-No-Blast's word that the new tiger was a friend, he had no grounds for feeling safe with human strangers; for all he knew, these three, who looked formidable and all bore weapons, might just now have been chasing Bluntmuzzle.

"Stop! Stop!" cried Bluntmuzzle, guessing by Bulgak's face and actions that the thing he held was one of those far-striking weapons. "They all come in peace! I'm sorry I spooked your horses--I can't seem to do anything right!--but the Djinni here can probably bring them back for you."

The strange men conferred, as if in reaction to Bluntmuzzle's words, and then two of them did start after the fleeing horses. The third followed Bulgak as he went to attend to his groaning mother.

As Chibrigon and Ploskavar started after the horses--their speed on foot amazing the onlooking Monduli--Kuzdikal approached the writhing Zulika, whose son now joined his sister in hovering helplessly over their mother.

"Trust my friends to help," the Djinn said first to Monduli in Turkic, sensing that she did not know English; then he said in English to the others, "I am Kuzdikal, the Fourth Djinn. I can help you."

"Can you heal my mother?" Bulgak asked, setting aside till later the less-pressing issue of this man claiming to be a mythical Djinn.

"I cannot heal her in an instant, as Aslan could; but my brothers and I have a certain ability to...you could say, to _encourage_ life's processes. I can quicken her own body's recovery. Where are you hurt, Daughter of Eve?"

"My ribs--were broken, and--the fall made them worse," Zulika managed to gasp out, vaguely gesturing toward her fractures. "My own husband did this to me, after--he divorced me without cause."

"My sense of the wind is that no enemy is closely pursuing you," said Kuzdikal. "Your healing will go faster if you let me put you to sleep. I cannot do it if your will resists. Will you consent to it?"

"If you--swear by Aslan--that you are a true friend and--you know what you're doing."

"As you require, I so swear. Tell me your name, Daughter of Eve."

"Zulika, discarded wife of--Tisrukh, who has made--himself a Tsar."

Kuzdikal nodded, and remarked cryptically, "Zulika? Why, every consonant sound in your name is also in mine! Rest now, Zulika; let sleep carry you toward relief." And as she fell asleep, Kuzdikal gazed on her, as if seeing in her a beauty that no one but her children and Aslan Himself had seen until now.

Slimtalon was within two miles of Zulika's party, and saw from a hillock the panicked horses fleeing in her general direction. Apprehensive about what might have happened to Fear-No-Blast and the humans, she started north. Catching her scent, the horses veered west away from her...and soon afterward, two strange men came into sight, amazingly running as fast as the horses were. Slimtalon guessed that these were the desert-dwellers whose discovery had agitated the Turkic nomads.

The runners appeared to notice the tigress matriarch. One continued after the horses, while the other came toward Slimtalon with an open hand raised in greeting. Once within earshot, this man called out, "Aslan's grace to you! I assume that you are the Grandmother of the Talking Tigers; I am Chibrigon, the Third Djinn! My brothers and I have made the acquaintance of your son Bluntmuzzle, who is most anxious for your safety!"

"I am Slimtalon," she affirmed as Chibrigon drew near. "If you are a servant of Aslan, then in His name I charge you to tell me why those horses, belonging to human friends of mine, were stampeding."

"Alas, your son was the unintentional cause of it. The wind was not right for him to know if you were on the other side of the rise, but we Djinni had faintly heard voices thitherward, so Bluntmuzzle dashed ahead in eagerness to find you and be sure that you were well."

"Are the humans well? And was there a Narnian Talking Gander with them?"

"Yes to both questions--except that the adult Daughter of Eve, already hurt by the actions of a man clearly bent out of moral shape, fell from her horse and suffered great pain. But Fourth Brother is treating her injuries."

All of Slimtalon's intuition was that the Djinni could be trusted. After she and Chibrigon had hastily exchanged further information, she said:

"My friends probably would have been compelled sooner or later to leave those horses behind in any case. The only logical, reachable refuge for them is with us Talking Tigers and other Talking Beasts; and ordinary horses, incapable of being told that we would spare them for their owners' sake, would never come near us. The best purpose those horses could now serve would be if it were arranged for hostile humans to find them elsewhere, creating a false idea of which way Zulika went. But at least some of the possessions of my friends ought to be retrieved."

"Their goods can ALL be retrieved," said Chibrigon, "once Ploskavar collects the horses. We Djinni can carry very heavy burdens for great distances."

The tigress actually smiled at having new help offered, after so much worry. "I can carry some things too, if someone ties them onto my back."

"Then my suggestion is that, once Ploskavar has the horses in hand and we unload them, we will undertake to redirect them, while you join your son and the others. In fact, you need not wait; go now and ease your son's anxiety."

Slimtalon was glad to do as Chibrigon urged. She even forgot the pain of her wounds as she loped away to see and smell her one remaining child.

On one of the larger platforms in the koalas' original tree-town, Hookpaw and Ranshuk were talking while they awaited the word to prepare to be helped to get underway in the incremental evacuation. Ranshuk had jokingly dubbed himself and his fellow penitent "the Knights of Uselessness." Wolfsfriend (currently on perimeter patrol) appreciated her lupine friend's wit, but Hookpaw remained somber.

"I was just thinking," Hookpaw said to the wolf, "of something that happened a year or two before you were born, when I was rather young--and, as I see now, VERY foolish. A family of goats was planning to establish itself among some hills that Black Dwarfs were going to be mining and building cave-homes in. The goats would furnish milk, hair for garments and rope, and a certain amount of cart-pulling; in turn, the Dwarfs would provide the goats with shelter and armed protection, as well as

writing letters for any goat who cared to dictate one.

"I was escorting these goats on a two-day journey to those hills; and, growing bored with herbivore chatter, I brought up a matter of interest to ME. It seemed only fair that I could ask a favor in return for my protecting them until the Dwarfs took over--the same kind of reciprocal relationship the Dwarfs themselves were offering the goats. I asked what I thought was a small thing: I asked them for information on the movements and habits of the non-intelligent goats among whom they had often grazed, so as to make it easier for me to catch some of those goats.

"Because I wasn't asking them to betray any Talking Herbivore, and they knew that I would never hunt any such, it never even occurred to me that my request could be offensive to them; but they were terribly upset all the same, and ended up complaining to the Dwarfs, who passed word of it to the Centaurs. Three days later, I found myself being reprimanded by Regulus; and when I protested to Lord Brightburn, he only joined in reprimanding me!

"NOW, of course, I can see what a horrifying thing my request was from the goats' point of view, even though they knew that as an obligate carnivore I needed to hunt. But I wish I had understood then. If I hadn't indulged in self-pity over that incident, I might not have been such easy prey for the false grievances Tash eventually cultivated in me." Hookpaw sighed long and wistfully; his regrets outreached the scope of his words.

"For what it's worth," Ranshuk replied after a minute of quiet, "the first step I took toward my own treason against Narnia was much more stupid than your indiscretion. It was in autumn, when some of us--"

But the wolf's confession was cut short when Valamisa the Nymph climbed up to their platform with Tinkswid. "Shatterneck says the route seems clear for you two to be moved to the new settlement," announced the koala scribe, trying to make her shrill koala-voice sound as dignified as those of the two disabled predators. "It does appear as if Tash has used up all the reptiles and birds that Aslan is going to permit him to expend against us." She then took off along the branches on some errand or other, while Valamisa began telling her Narnian friends more of the current plan for migration.

The Nymph was baffled when, in the middle of one of her sentences, Ranshuk heaved himself up and toward her with his three good legs, nudging her carefully but urgently toward the ladder with a bark of "Get off! Climb down!" She retreated, but not so far that she could not see the wolf's next peculiar action. Shouting, "Hookpaw! Go to Valamisa!", Ranshuk flung himself into a sort of diving shoulder-roll onto a section of the platform right next to where Hookpaw was lying. Hookpaw, having learned in his blindness to accept guidance from sighted helpers, did as Ranshuk bade, working his way past Valamisa without knocking her off the ladder.

Then the Nymph saw what was really happening.

A swarm of scorpions had come up over the platform edge opposite to the ladder, and had been making for both Hookpaw and Valamisa. A flicker of thought in the Nymph's brain said, "Of course, Tash would have more cause to wish us two dead than Ranshuk, who never had any dealings with him." Hookpaw's movement being fatally slowed by present circumstances, he would never have gotten clear before some of the scorpions reached him--if Ranshuk had not crushed all of the nearest scorpions with his own body.

But several of the venomous arthropods survived to sting their enemy, who jerked with a shrieking yelp...and fell off the platform, breaking two branches on the way down before hitting the ground with a muddy splat.

Hearing Valamisa scream "Scorpions!", Tinkswid scrambled back to the platform, cursing herself for complacent unwatchfulness. The koalas knew how to exterminate scorpions, but she should have realized that heavy land beasts--especially a blind one!--would be at a disadvantage in the confines of a platform. The alarm spread from tree to tree; even as Tinkswid brandished a stick and efficiently killed the scorpions that had stung Ranshuk, other koalas were efficiently checking every tree trunk for other scorpions.

But Valamisa, joined by Wolfsfriend as soon as that young tigress knew what had happened, had only one thought now. Dropping to earth, both females dashed to the side of the still-breathing but incoherent wolf, begging him not to die.

It seemed to Ranshuk that he awoke sitting in a puddle of dirty water. The puddle was in the bottom of a sort of ravine, like a dry streambed. But as he took in more detail, he saw that it was a highly unusual ravine.

The part of the ravine he sat in was actually at the top of a hill. Odd that there would be water left at the top when lower parts were dry...He could see it running down to the bottom, where it soon ran up another hill to the top. A still further hill seemed also to have the path of the streambed passing over its top, suggesting that when there was water in the stream it could run uphill as well as down. At the far extreme of sight, there was one more, taller hill; on its top, apparently at the source of the dry stream, stood some kind of fruit tree. The tree was beautiful, suggesting superb fruit; but Ranshuk thought he saw a large snake coiled around its base.

"Baffling, isn't it?" said a deep voice which the wolf recognized. Turning, he saw his benefactor, Father Christmas, crouching on the bank of the ravine, looking down at him. Beyond Father Christmas, Ranshuk now saw that the unusual streambed ran up and down other hills in the other direction. In that direction, the ravine at last led up another tall hill, to where there stood a tall manmade wooden cross.

"Father Christmas! Am I dead?"

"Not exactly," replied the saint. "You may recall that Jadis tried to change you into something worse than you were, and failed. Aslan proposes to make a change of His own, and make you still more of the good thing you are already becoming. I realize that what I just said would be applicable if you were simply dying and entering Aslan's country; but no, this is not our time to die. It is, however, your time to gain understanding of evil. You made a little excursion into evil when you deserted to Jadis--like wading in a puddle; but stricken humanity has gone in far deeper. Look at the tree again."

When Ranshuk looked at the hill with the tree, it seemed as if the serpent loitering there turned into water, dirty water like the puddle. The water became a huge brownish flood, running up and down the path of the ravine--until it reached Ranshuk, sweeping him off his feet. It carried him down the cross-ward side of the hill he had been on, and up one more hill before it subsided.

Ranshuk looked around, but could not see where Father Christmas had gotten to. He looked at the hill with the cross--and from there he saw a new flood coming along the streambed, this time colored bright red, like oxygen-rich arterial blood. This flood washed over him with greater force than the first, yet did not knock him about as the first had done. When the crimson flood had run all the way to the place of the tree, it changed into pure water and ran the length of the streambed yet another time.

Thoroughly washed--remembering the human term "baptized"--Ranshuk looked around for Father Christmas, wanting a more complete explanation. He was noticing a new scent, a sweet one; it made him remember something King Frank had once said, about the prayers of the saints being incense pleasing to God. And now he could hear prayers; they seemed to be in familiar voices. The scene around him was fading, but the prayers grew louder.

He felt as if he were being cradled in someone's arms, and his body felt somehow different...

One never knows which details will stand out when one returns to the mortal world after a close gaze with eternity. All of his life, anytime Ranshuk looked out of his eyes, there had always been a wolf-snout occupying the bottom of his field of vision. But no more. Now, the phenomenon of binocular eyesight presented him with translucent images of a human nose on either side of his field of vision. At once, keeping in mind Father Christmas' reminder of Jadis' effort to make a Werewolf out of him, he ran his tongue over his teeth; he found he no longer had fangs, and his mouth overall was smaller. Human-size. Then, he must have--

Sure enough, it was a pair of human forearms with hands (though hairy by human standards) that he was holding up in front of his eyes. And how sharply he now saw the shading of color in his new skin, as well as the trees in the background! Aslan had given the ability to see colors to Talking Beasts who would otherwise have been colorblind; but his new human sight proved much more precise than lupine sight in distinguishing colors. He supposed that this would be his compensation for losing--but wait, no, he had not lost his original sense of smell! Aslan had left him that, as if to reduce the

disorientation of his metamorphosis.

All through this awakening, he had been hearing voices around him; but it was a rich female scent that focussed his awareness on the source of one of the voices--the same person whose arms were around him.

Valamisa the Nymph, of course. She seemed to be praising Aslan for saving Ranshuk's life, and her tears of gratitude were falling on the former wolf's face. Wolfsfriend was nearby, also overjoyed though also amazed; and several koalas including Tinkswid were converging on the spot. But it was the Nymph who now commanded Ranshuk's attention.

Up till now, Valamisa had ranked as no more than a friendly acquaintance for the wolf; the one great thing they shared was the experience of having turned traitor to Narnia and then having been forgiven and redeemed. This was, to be sure, a very great thing; but the nature of it was to turn their thoughts more toward Aslan than toward each other. Now, however--

He tilted his head back so that he could see her face. He had always known intellectually that the Nymphs were purposely created by Aslan to be extremely beautiful to human tastes; but only now had it become even theoretically possible that this could matter to him. Now, the perfection of her face and hair, and of as much of her body as he could see at this angle, struck his eyes and mind like an avalanche.

But striking still harder, and less pleasantly, was a sudden torrent of simultaneous contradictory emotions, more complex than anything Ranshuk had ever felt at one time as a Talking Wolf. At one and the same time, he desired:

- To possess and use Valamisa with beastly lust, in the worst possible sense of "beastly."
- To love, honor and cherish her as The King of Narnia did his Queen.
- To dominate and enslave her, as if he were a male Jadis.
- To protect her from harm and respect her dignity.
- To contrive some way of blaming her for his former defection to the White Witch.
- To shield her from all blame for her own defection to Jadis and subsequent service to Tash.
- To seek some way of changing himself back into a wolf, and Valamisa with him, so that they could be mated as wolves.

-- To master all the mysteries of being human, and so be a worthy husband for this radiant creature.

When the Nymph leaned down and kissed Ranshuk's right cheek, the second, fourth, sixth and eighth of these feelings managed to gain supremacy over the others, as least for the present. And now came another surprise:

Father Christmas had accompanied him out of the dream-realm into the material plane, and was standing with a fatherly hand resting on Valamisa's bare left shoulder. "You are no longer dreaming, friend Ranshuk," said the holiday saint. "I'm here in the immortal flesh. I realize it isn't Christmas; but then, Aslan in His form as Jesus Christ wasn't actually born in winter, anyway. That was a measure to-- oh, never mind. What matters is that, by the will and purpose of Aslan, you ARE now a human being. What you saw and felt in your dream was just a hint of what you have inherited, for good and ill, by joining Adam's race."

Ranshuk moved his tongue experimentally inside his mouth before venturing to say his first words as an adopted Son of Adam. "The same contending floods are already surging back and forth in my soul, sir. Will it always be like this?" What he did not say was that he hoped Valamisa didn't guess at the darker side of the reactions she had evoked in him.

Father Christmas looked quite solemn. "I'm afraid you will never be entirely rid of the fouler impulses until you arrive in Aslan's country. This is part of the burden which Adam's children must bear. But there is honor in resisting the evil desires; and Aslan's living breath--which is to say, the Holy Spirit Himself--will help you if you desire help, so that the ability of evil to tempt or discourage you will grow ever weaker and weaker. And as one who has been a Talking Beast, you will have special insights to share with the sons and daughters you will one day sire."

Something about those last words caused Ranshuk and Valamisa to look each other in the face--and then, to look away again as each saw that the other was also looking. Valamisa, being less disoriented, was first of the two to formulate words for what was being suggested: "Upon whom is he to sire these children?"

This brought back the saint's joviality. With a deep, wholesome laugh, he replied, "Upon the best possible wife: one who, like himself, has been brought back from darkness and so can better appreciate the light! This is a gift from Aslan to both of you, Ranshuk and Valamisa: through me, He makes known His will that you two should be married to each other, with His assurance in advance that His power will help you to love each other truly and be always a blessing to each other. I myself will perform the wedding, this very hour--since, like Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder, you will be compelled to turn to urgent business on the very heels of your first embrace as spouses."

"Is this pleasing to you, Valamisa?" asked Ranshuk.

"It is indeed," she replied, "precisely because you are someone I had the chance to become acquainted with before there was any possibility of, um, this kind of desire. My experiences as a runaway taught me more than enough about being lusted after! If it were still only friendship between you and me, that would be better than being a thing to be used; but I feel confident that we will have much more than friendship."

Father Christmas nodded. "Such is the Lion's will, children. And He blesses me in the same blessing; for in my own mortal years as a Bishop on Earth, I had a special interest in helping others to find marital happiness."

"Then I guess I'd better get started practicing two-legged walking," said Ranshuk, though he felt reluctant to lift his head from its comfortable resting-place in the Nymph's lap. "My right rear leg--I should say, my just plain right leg--feels as if it's been healed." Father Christmas helped him to his feet, whereupon for the first time he saw that he had on clothing of a sort: short breeches and a sort of moccasin-boots, the whole ensemble seemingly made out of his own former wolf skin. Trying out his longer, flatter human feet, he tottered unsteadily at first but did not fall. Valamisa, meanwhile, was noticing that Ranshuk's new human physique was a very well-formed one, though this was not the reason why she felt she could love him.

"You've been spared from a far worse dizziness," Father Christmas told Ranshuk. "Many Sons of Adam and many Daughters of Eve--given situations in which they even had any choice about their marriages--have staggered and stumbled frightfully in the search for love, and often failed to find it. Be thankful for the mighty gift being given to you, and make it an occasion to set a righteous example for others." Much more quietly, he whispered in Ranshuk's ear, "Another benefit of your change is getting rid of a nasty colony of parasitic worms. They had gotten inside you when you were immersed in that bog, but they're gone now."

Ranshuk turned toward his abruptly-acquired bride-to-be. "Honored Valamisa, would it be presumptuous of me if I asked you to demonstrate to me how humans and near-humans...kiss each other?"

With a truly Nymphic smile, Valamisa flowed up to him, slid her smooth arms around his powerful shoulders, and began demonstrating. Father Christmas was kind enough to give Ranshuk enough time to get the idea, before he interrupted. "You can do more of that once I pronounce you husband and wife. Now, let's gather some more witnesses."

"I hope a blind witness counts; I can still smell them, and Ranshuk still smells a bit like the wolf he was," put in the bystanding Hookpaw. The former outlaw, knowing how much his Nymph comrades had longed for husbands, felt a big-brotherly joy on Valamisa's behalf.

When Zulika awoke, the first thing she noticed was that her broken ribs did not hurt as much--not even

as much as just before she had fallen off the horse. The next thing she noticed was that she was in motion after a fashion, as if being carried while seated on something that was not quite a saddle.

Her eyes opened and focussed. In her peripheral vision to the left, she could see Bulgak walking beside her with his rifle slung and no sign of having suffered any harm, which was reassuring. The voices of Dilnara and Monduli were also audible from somewhere, not seeming to be in distress. As for what was carrying Zulika, her head was too near to Bulgak's level for her to be astride a horse. Now it registered on her brain that her back was resting against--against what felt like the back of a wooden chair. Her hindquarters were seated in what would be the seat of a chair, albeit a very roughly constructed one; but there seemed to be no chair legs below the seat section. If this was only something to support her weight in motion, it would need no legs. Groping behind herself with her right hand, which was on the side away from her fractured ribs, she discovered that some sort of harness was holding her half-chair firmly against the back of what seemed a tall, hard-muscled man.

She tried to remember the name of the stranger who had called himself a Djinn. "Kaldikuz?"

"Kuzdikal," came the reply. "I hope your pain is less. I'm doing my best not to jolt you."

"My pain IS less, thank you; whatever you did must be working. Where are we?"

"Many miles closer to the place of Slimtalon's people, good woman. But you may ask Slimtalon herself. Noble tigress, please drop back alongside us; the beautiful one is awake. Bulgak, Son of Adam, your mother doubtless is thirsty." Bulgak took a waterskin from Kuzdikal's belt, gave his mother a drink, and reattached the waterskin in its place.

Soon the tigress matriarch was where Zulika could look at her. "Where are the horses?" the woman asked her Narnian friend. "And did I just hear him call me beautiful?"

"It became expedient to let the horses part company with you," said Slimtalon. "But fear not; almost everything you had packed was salvaged. Kuzdikal's two brothers constructed a litter with poles and shorter sticks, and they're carrying everything but Bulgak's firearms on it--as lightly as Kuzdikal is carrying you. He's been carrying you, and they've been carrying your belongings, for better than five hours now, with never a stop to rest. Fear-No-Blast is riding on Bluntmuzzle's back at the moment. And yes, Kuzdikal has referred to you several times as 'the beautiful one' in the hours you've been asleep. As far as I'm concerned, Zulika, he's right."

"Well, obviously!" interjected Bulgak, as if his mother's beauty could no more be questioned than the beauty of the sunrise. But Zulika demurred, "He must not have seen any Nymphs yet, if he thinks I'm attractive." She said this part in Turkic, forgetting that Kuzdikal had shown proficiency in her language.

"I have been to the seacoast and beheld Mermaids," Kuzdikal told the surprised nomad woman in that Central Asian tongue. "They of course had outer-layer beauty; but we Djinni see more than that. Your physical features and contours are sufficiently symmetrical, Zulika; but the real glory is within--to be detected through your eyes, your voice, your actions, and the character of the children you have borne. When I look at you, I see love, kindness, courage, skill, humor, generosity, diligence, friendship, loyalty, imagination, fortitude, integrity...and a steadily growing faith in the Lord Aslan. My brothers and I have been waiting for..." Kuzdikal paused, as if suddenly feeling shy. Then:

"The warped man who once had a claim on you has forfeited it by his own fault. You are now a free woman, as free as the desert antelope. I mustn't say anything to make you feel obligated or trapped, especially upon so brief an acquaintance; but--well, it simply is a fact that all nine of us have prayed for the time when Aslan would introduce us, as He said He one day would introduce us, to Daughters of Eve with whom we could be joined in honorable marriage. And in all my dreams and guesses of what sort of woman Aslan might choose for me, all the most important qualities I ever hoped to encounter in a bride are exactly, EXACTLY those qualities which I can plainly see that YOU possess! If more were needed, I have been made aware, not only of your children's love and devotion toward you, but of how for your sake the gallant Talking Bird accompanying us risked his life, and your brother-in-law _gave_ his life, may Aslan reward him well. All these things bespeak your great value, Zulika; and knowing what I know about you, your outward appearance, precisely as it is, becomes for me the very signature of what you are all through. For me, no Nymph could surpass you in loveliness. At some time when you will feel secure that no _demand_ is being placed upon you, when you know that your right to refuse or accept is respected...I shall desire the privilege of speaking with you about the possibility of...of your allowing me to be for you the loving husband that this Tisruk chose not to be."

If Kuzdikal could have seen behind his own head, to see the wide-eyed look on Zulika's face as she heard him saying these things, he would have gained more confidence of her eventual acceptance. But she said cautiously, "This much debt, at least, I certainly owe you for your kindness: to make sure you know what it is you're asking for. This is no princess of legend you are carrying on your back; I'm a nomad woman, thirty-three years old, which is a bit late in life to be starting a new family, though it's not impossible. I've borne the two children you see, and seem to be adopting the girl Monduli besides; I could never marry a man who wasn't prepared to love them as his own--"

"Which I would!" Kuzdikal assured her; and as soon as he uttered those words, she was positive that he meant them. But she went on:

"I can't sing or dance very well; my hands are calloused; I'm accustomed to rising before the sun to work; I've sheared and butchered sheep, woven woollen and cotton cloth, started campfires with flint and steel, helped to dig wells, and caught fish with my bare hands in a stream. I have at least six visible scars--well, fourteen visible if my clothes were off, just take my word about them--from various accidents in the course of my daily tasks; and after my pregnancies, I'll never have a perfect waist again."

"Glory upon glory!" exclaimed the Djinn. "You are a story to read, as well as a delight to look upon! Be advised that it is no idle existence you and I would lead together, but one filled with worthwhile toil. Everything you are saying about yourself only makes you more fascinating to me, noble Zulika!"

She did have to admit to herself that she really, really liked being spoken to this way; no man EVER had said such things to her before. "It's wonderful of you to say so, Kudki--um, Kuzdikal; but do you think I could even keep up with you? I don't have any magic powers; I certainly can't run as fast as a horse, though I occasionally sweat like one."

"Aslan gives each of us our abilities; all that we can give back to Him is our willingness to serve Him. Your heart-inclination for doing good is a treasure; better limited abilities with a right attitude, than fabulous powers wasted on a lazy soul. If Aslan chooses to bring us through all present perils in safety, I believe that you and I will be so happy together that my brothers will be at risk of committing sin by envying me. But you need not give your final answer now, beautiful one; and I promise you in Aslan's name that my goodwill toward you will not change in the event that you decide not to marry me."

During this exchange, Dilnara and Monduli, who earlier had been talking with Chibrigon and Ploskavar, had drifted back alongside Bulgak and Slimtalon. Now all three children took to making every silent sign they could imagine, with gestures, glances, nods, and mouthing of words, to the effect of telling Zulika, "YES, YES, YES!! MARRY HIM!!!"

As Vortex the Chief Gryphon had carried the injured Fear-No-Blast to safety, now he was carrying another disabled fellow Narnian. This time, his passenger was a Talking Lioness cub named Yar-Kiza, some time past weaning, who had suffered an accident in the mountainous region where many Talking Lions were pioneering with Gryphon assistance.

When Aslan had instantaneously returned Vortex to the western mountains after the visit to Cair Paravel, Zendragund and the lions with him had been disappointed not to see Aslan appearing with Vortex; but they had been overjoyed to hear the Gryphon patriarch's news that the notorious Hookpaw had come to repentance and salvation. (If any Lions were privately glad that Hookpaw had been blinded, and so had not gotten off too easily, they did not say so.) Yar-Kiza, unfortunately, had wandered off in disobedience to her mother when her mother was preoccupied with the Chief Gryphon's report, and so had come to mishap. The greatest harm the cub had suffered was a fractured jaw. This did not threaten immediate death, but in wild-beast conditions would have meant a slow death for her, due to inability to feed herself normally. Repairing the damage, and making the cub functional again, called for more help than felines were able to render.

Vortex, accordingly, was now carrying Yar-Kiza by air back into Narnia, where he would bring her to a Centaress who had settled not far from the western-border waterfall and was providing healing

service to Narnians thereabouts. But with the time it took for a creature of his weight (especially encumbered) to fly such a distance, it would be necessary for Vortex to feed his passenger several times as well as transport her. The lion explorers had, at least, had meat available for Vortex to eat before he began the trip.

At his first hunting stop Narnia-bound, the Gryphon patriarch deposited Yar-Kiza in a tree and went after simple prey: mountain marmots, one of which would have been enough for the cub under normal conditions. Devouring two for himself, he set about carefully skinning and dismembering the third for the little lioness, after he had relocated her to level ground. He thought that the marmot's liver, torn into small pieces, would be soft enough for the broken-jawed cub to get down. She managed to swallow four pieces, but was clearly in pain even from that much motion of her mouth.

“We’ll have to think of something else,” Vortex told her as they took off again. He had consumed some of the mostly-uneaten third marmot himself, in connection with the alternative he had in mind.

At a rest stop an hour later, he declared, “The Centauress may be able to get a mug of milk and pour it into your throat; but I have only one thing to offer that may go easier than that liver did. We Gryphons, like some types of true birds, are able to regurgitate partly-digested food into the beaks of our young. Let me get you into a position with your mouth upward, and I’ll heave up some semi-liquefied marmot for you.”

“That’s disgusting!” Yar-Kiza objected; or rather, she got as far as the syllable “dis” before her speech turned into a whimper of pain. “Don’t talk!” snapped the Chief Gryphon. “You need to have nourishment, and this is the gentlest way I can give you some.” He did succeed in nourishing her, but it was not fun for either of them. He gave her water to drink in a similar fashion.

Two uncomfortable days later, they came in sight of the wooden hut the Centauress healer had built for herself. Vortex made his descending approach, glad to be relieved of the responsibility of feeding a carnivore who couldn’t bite anything.

But another annoyance awaited him right in front of the healer’s hut.

The Centauress was there, applying poultices to a Faun who had run afoul of poison ivy. Several Talking Sheep were nearby, apparently awaiting their turn to be examined. But when these sheep sighted Vortex coming in, and saw what manner of creature he was carrying, they suddenly became indignant. Not frightened; all Talking Beasts knew that there were no non-intelligent Gryphons, so that any Gryphon they saw could be relied on to obey the law against hunting Talking Beasts. The sheep did not fear Vortex; but they seemed uncharacteristically angry—at the lioness-child.

The eldest ewe present bleated, “Killing beast, fighting beast, go away!” The others instantly followed this by bleating in unison, “The MA-A-A-A-AD-NESS of war, the MA-A-A-A-AD-NESS of war!”

The one ewe added, “Sharpened claws, all the same!”, leading again to “The MA-A-A-A-AD-NESS of war, the MA-A-A-A-AD-NESS of war!”

Landing, Vortex took a position on the far side of the little flock from the Centauress, to show that he respected the sheep’s prior place in line. But they gave him and Yar-Kiza no peace.

“Fighting each other, no chance for peace!”

“The MA-A-A-A-AD-NESS of war, the MA-A-A-A-AD-NESS of war!”

“Lions and tigers, just the same!”

“The MA-A-A-A-AD-NESS of war, the MA-A-A-A-AD-NESS of war!”

Sheep though they were, they were adult sheep; and their strange behavior frightened Yar-Kiza. “Hold off there, neighbors,” Vortex appealed, “This is a hurt Talking Lion cub, and she needs the healer’s care as you do.” The only result he achieved by trying to reason with the sheep was:

“Healer never kills, killer never heals!”

“The MA-A-A-A-AD-NESS of war, the MA-A-A-A-AD-NESS of war!”

“Lions and tigers, all the same!”

“The MA-A-A-A-AD-NESS of war, the MA-A-A-A-AD-NESS of war!”

This much sufficed to draw the attention of the Centauress. “Please calm down,” she said to the sheep. “No cub is to blame for her species, nor have the Talking Lions disgraced themselves.”

“Old or young, all sharpened claws, all the same! Lion hates tiger, tiger hates lion, all the same!” cried the eldest ewe. But before the others could resume their “madness” chant, Vortex opened his wings without taking flight: a gesture chosen to attract attention at once without making the sheep think he intended to assault them.

“Sheep of Narnia, by the Lion Who created all of us and protects us, I bid you cease this commotion! If you mean to say that the Talking Lions like this one are equally to blame as the Talking Tigers for last year’s violence, you know nothing about it. I, on the other wing, DO know about it; and I can tell you that the Tigers, and ONLY the Tigers, were the attackers in that situation! The surviving Tigers have themselves confessed this to be true! The Lions did nothing to deserve to be—“

The sheep now did their level best to drown his voice out with more “madness” chanting; but the

Centauress, just putting the last touches on the Faun's poultices, shouted them down instead. "Stop that! And I mean you Sheep, stop it, NOT you Sheep AND Lord Vortex equally. Everyone is NOT the same, and the Lions WERE innocent in the whole sorrowful business! Now be quiet while you're on my property—that includes the old ewe, with all of her all-the-same talk—or I'll pour henna dye on you and turn your wool reddish-orange!"

This actually silenced the sheep. The Centauress attended to their needs, giving some of them an ointment to eliminate fungus under their hoofs. Then, coaxing the dull-witted beasts along to remember their own names, she wrote down the record of treatment given. What arrangement there might be for the sheep to pay for this care was unclear to Vortex; for his part, he anticipated hunting meat for the healer's human stomach, and bringing in bunches of sweet alpine-meadow grass for her horse stomach, during such time as Yar-Kiza might have to stay on the healer's premises. When the sheep departed, they were not yet out of earshot before their bleating of "The MA-A-A-A-AD-NESS of war!" could be heard once again.

"I've heard Narnians of many types mixing up who was the aggressor last year," Vortex told the healer, "but none were SO stupid about it as those sheep!"

"There are others equally emotional and irrational," the Centauress replied. "Rabbits, for instance. They all seem to expect me to side with them—to side with them in refusing to distinguish the sides--just because I'm a physician. But I know that the Lions didn't give the Tigers any true provocation for the attacks. Now, back to business. What happened to this lioness-child?"

"A broken jaw, plus two sprained toes and some bruises and abrasions. Her name's Yar-Kiza. She took a bad spill up in the mountains; you probably heard about the leonine colonizing in progress there. Strange to think, though, that if she had been attacked by an Evil Minotaur, those sheep would say that she was as guilty for it as the Minotaur..."

The healer lay down—sitting was virtually unheard-of among Centaurs—to examine the suffering cub more closely. To Vortex she said, "I believe you're aware that, when Aslan imparted knowledge to us Centaurs, one thing He taught us was the concept of 'surgery': physically mending damaged body parts. If Yar-Kiza is to be able to live normally, her jaw hinges must be repaired with precision, so that they can propel her carnassal teeth to bite through flesh and bone. I must both reattach, and align, the mouthparts."

Vortex shook his head, grateful for the simpler construction of his mighty beak. "What you speak of is obviously a physical activity, not an enchantment; but it sounds almost as remarkable as magic."

The Centauress frowned in thought. "I have a cousin who did such an operation on a Talking Bear; it would be a great help if she could work with me on this. Do you suppose you could fly over to fetch her? I'll see to it that Yar-Kiza is kept alive while you're away."

And so, once furnished with directions, Vortex found himself airborne again. He hoped that this other Centauress wasn't also being harassed by flocks and herds of dim-witted herbivores proclaiming false moral equivalence.

As evening drew near, Tisrukh and his party were following the sea-monster upstream along the only river in the region large enough to float it. They did not yet know that this would bring them close to the koalas' grove, nor did they know that they could have overtaken Zulika's party in less than a day of hard riding on almost the exact same route; but they knew that Tash had instructed them to follow the monster. Urgut, Suleyman, Rashid and Ismayil had each been compelled to approach the monster as Dobrinya had done, to find that it was indifferent to them. Tisrukh had not been required to do this; and, although he realized that the monster was doing as Tash wished it to do, he shouted encouragement to it from time to time, as if it were he who commanded its movements.

Rashid and Ismayil, since they had the most to prove concerning loyalty to Tash, kept up a noisy stream of what they considered appropriate remarks, as when Rashid said "This water-dragon could probably swallow the foolish Lion in one gulp," and Ismayil said "How could we ever have thought Allah was great, when mighty Tash was awaiting us?"

The sea-beast rode as low in the water as its bulk permitted, and the watching men found it remarkable that the thing was actually able on a few occasions to get near aquatic birds before they detected the danger. On each occasion, the monster's mouth shot out a tongue like a chameleon's tongue, not less than ten feet long; two of the tries were successful, adding a duck and a heron to the contents of the monster's belly, and adding to the nomads' knowledge of their hideous ally's capabilities.

The horizon was bisecting the sun when a rider came galloping up from the rear; he had a spare mount with him, and seemed to have used both horses in turn so as to catch up sooner without killing the animals. It was Orhan the shaman, who made quickly for Tisrukh with news.

"The horses pilfered by the disgraced Zulika and your wayward son have returned to camp, great Emperor! They came from a southerly direction, which suggests that the fugitives from your peerless justice may have taken a different route than the one we supposed. I conferred with Tarkan about informing you; he deferred to my judgment, so I left him in charge of the migration preparations and rode to tell you myself."

Tisrukh inwardly admired his cousin's discretion. He knew Tarkan was no coward, but it had been wise of him to behave in a fashion which Tarkan probably foresaw would result in Orhan riding out while Tarkan stayed behind. By showing respect to Orhan, the younger man had sown goodwill in that quarter just in case Tisrukh might perish; at the same time, counting on Orhan's vanity to make him want to be the messenger, Tarkan placed himself in command of the settlement, precluding the slight possibility that Orhan might have attempted some treachery in Tisrukh's absence. Tisrukh decided that

he would have done the same were he in his cousin's place. All was well, provided that Tisrukh kept an eye open against Tarkan someday trying to take Tisrukh's place.

Aloud, he said to the shaman, "Understand, we are not exactly chasing Bulgak and Zulika at present. If our going this way allows them to elude us, I still trust inexorable Tash to make our current expedition profitable to my dynasty. It might even be more satisfying to catch Bulgak and Zulika at some later time, when they think they're safe; and if that is how things go, it would please me to have Zulika see that I have new and more loyal sons by Iskralida and Gulshim, before she begins to die."

"What of Bulgak in that case?" asked Orhan.

"If I do have other sons to inherit, I will almost certainly put Bulgak to death for his rebellion; but I will not utterly rule out forgiving him—if, say, he comes to his senses and brings his execrable mother back to me tied up in ropes."

"My ruler, will you allow my father, now that he's here, to remain with us and have a part in the adventure?" inquired Urgut, who had fallen in beside them.

Tisrukh nodded. "I shall. No doubt he will acquit himself with bow and arrows better than anyone here who does not have an enchanted bow given by Tash."

"I trust," said Orhan, "that the Son of Destiny will not scorn to use bullets as well as arrows, if tigers press us closely and the sea-monster can't get all of them."

"Bullets if necessary," Tisrukh agreed. "But we will have to get more fully accustomed to archery very soon."

The mixed party of Djinni, tigers, people and one flightless goose did not stop for more than a short rest and a quick bite at sunset. Chibrigon provided the night's meat for those who desired fresh meat: as Ploskavar had done with a thrown hammer, Chibrigon did with a hurled axe, cleanly slaying a stag on the run. The tigers ate just enough, and this quickly; the Djinni again partook a little also. The humans and Fear-No-Blast settled for dry bread and water. Uncertain how much of a lead they had on the monster that Slimtalon had seen, and decidedly not wanting it to overtake them in the dark, they continued ahead at a sustainable pace for most of the night.

The humans and Fear-No-Blast fared better than their comrades. Kuzdikal continued to carry Zulika as before, and she actually managed to doze awhile. She dreamed vaguely about being a baby again, carried in a harness on her mother's back. The two little girls rode on Slimtalon's back, and also succeeded in sleeping some. Bulgak insisted on still walking on his own feet, rifle in hand; but after three hours of this, no one thought ill of him for accepting Chibrigon's suggestion that he place his rifle on the cargo litter that Chibrigon and Ploskavar were carrying, Fear-No-Blast also being settled among

the baggage. The boy still retained in his belt the revolver with two bullets left in it, the flintlock pistol with its one shot, and the dagger he had taken from his father. He kept this up for another hour, after which it again did no harm to his reputation to accept Bluntmuzzle's offer of a ride.

All that time, Slimtalon was remembering the horrible day when she had learned of her husband's sacrifice. The Talking Sea Otters, against their normal habits, had come inland to give their testimony of the sorrowful event. Slimtalon had striven for years NOT to remember the things described about Brightburn's last great fight; but now she needed to try to call it back.

Fellow Narnians, at least one Centaur among them, had not been close enough to the scene to help the tiger patriarch, but close enough to prevent his body from being eaten. Yet Brightburn himself, though mortally wounded, had inflicted some kind of damage upon the monster--something that had prevented it from simply proceeding to catch and devour the Otters. What had it been? What had the Otters described? The answer would have a bearing on how the monster should be fought now.

Slimtalon was fairly sure that the first thing Brightburn had tried was the top-of-the-skull biting technique that Lord Zetow of the Lions had always set so much store by; but that had not worked on the sea-monster's armored cranium. WHAT ELSE had Brightburn done? What attack had he discovered in his last moments of mortal life, which had at least slowed the thing down?

She had to remember, and soon...for she was convinced that the migrant band of Talking Tigers was going to have to fight that scaly creature.

Ranshuk had left Narnia assuming that he would simply never know marriage or fatherhood, being rejected by canid society for his past sins. He had grown accustomed to his role of priest-like impartiality and objectivity among the tigers; but when being made human made it possible after all for him to know earthly loves in their good and proper form, the quickness with which all his legitimate emotional desires awoke from hibernation startled him nearly as much as it had startled him to be changed into a man instead of dying.

As if reading the ex-wolf's mind, Father Christmas spoke during the impromptu but fully sincere wedding ceremony about the way that Aslan often granted good things after His children had given up trying to obtain them. Wolfsfriend, listening, reflected on the excessive eagerness for adult freedoms that had led her almost to death; it had been after being chastened by this experience that she had risen closer to real adulthood, by taking on the care of the wolf who had saved her.

Meanwhile, Raffira and the other liberated slaves whispered among themselves, wondering if all of them soon would be taking equally supernatural husbands.

Once Valamisa was his bride, Ranshuk allotted three or four minutes to further study of the marvelous humanoid manner of kissing; but further intimacy was deferred for just awhile. Ranshuk, though his

reflexes and sense of equilibrium had been altered to suit his new anatomy, still needed time to feel more confident in his movements. Before bidding farewell, Father Christmas had a private talk with Hookpaw, which seemed to do the blind penitent good. Then, at virtually the last moment, the saint presented wedding gifts to the unusual but happy couple:

“Valamisa, this is an exact replica of a Remington twelve-gauge double-barrelled shotgun. I copied it from one I saw in America; there are lots of people who remember me there, if not very accurately. It works the same way as the one you had, only with two barrels that fire independently, and the recoil is stronger. Here’s a box of forty shells. This gun will drop animals up to deer-sized.”

“And evil men at need, no doubt,” speculated the Nymph, not with bloodlust but only in realization of what might become necessary.

“It would, all right, even two at once if they’re close together; but you will not be staying here to confront the evil men who are coming. Before this day is out, the most vulnerable members of your composite community will be ready to start heading for the new settlement. You and Ranshuk, along with Tigress Wolfsfriend, will be their guardians on the way. Besides protection on the road, your weapon may provide meat for your husband, since by no fault of his he is not yet ready to do his own hunting again. Of course, he can also eat vegetables now. Be this as it may, understand that, when you have shot the last of the shells I’m giving you, the shotgun will disappear. Although Aslan is permitting you to use a firearm in these difficult times, it is not His design for such weapons to remain a part of this world’s hardware. Oh, and remember never to let the barrels get plugged with dirt; you want the shots to go out the front end, not come through the breech into your face.” Then Father Christmas turned to Ranshuk.

“My fine two-legged friend, for you I have a gift that may seem less impressive than Valamisa’s; but it will not vanish, and you can bequeath it to your firstborn son. It is a spear, which bears an enchantment to give its wielder great skill with it, as long as it is used for justified purposes. If hurled or thrust for wicked motives, it will always miss. This weapon will offset your temporary disadvantage from being new to the human form. The shaft is Archenlandish oak; the head is tempered steel, sized and edged to allow cutting as well as thrusting. The steel shoe on the butt end can also do damage in a close melee. With this weapon, you will have a good fighting chance both against trained human warriors, and against beasts too strong to be killed by Valamisa’s shotgun.”

“So why are you sending me away,” asked Ranshuk, “instead of letting me help in the defense of this village?”

The six Djinni who were present had up to this point kept quiet; but Magladoth, nominally second in rank, now spoke. “If my sense of Aslan’s will is correct, He does not want us to destroy the demon-worshippers, nor even dominate them by force and fear. He only means for this koala-and-tiger colony to be preserved until it can transplant itself to territory farther from the human heathens.”

“Correct enough,” said Father Christmas. “They are to be given opportunity to come to repentance and enlightenment by their choice; and in their history to come, there will be those among them who do so. Besides that, even if the majority of them don’t follow Aslan, the strength which they will attain in time will be so great as to make even Jadis think twice about trying to expand her dominion into their part of this world—which will in turn be good for your human descendants.”

“And for MY descendants, going by all I hear about the White Witch,” interjected Wolfsfriend. Ranshuk took advantage of now having hands, to give his young tigress friend a good scratch around her ears and jawline.

Father Christmas turned to Wolfsfriend. “The greatest peril to your kind is not from Jadis, but from corruption in your own hearts. Though no Talking Beast has the same curse of ingrained sin that Men must contend with, you tigers as a group have strayed very far from Aslan’s path, and must guard against doing so again. Tigers are to bear the chief brunt of protecting the weaker ones here, not only for the sake of those who are protected, but for the cleansing of the tigers’ own character. Not that Aslan’s love and grace can be earned; but the accepting of a noble duty will help—IS helping those of your race to become in practice what Aslan meant them to be, and what the gallant Lord Brightburn was in his day. And you, dear Wolfsfriend, have a special duty to discharge. You are to carry a private message to Ripplestride at the new settlement; you will know when the time has come to deliver it.” The saint crouched and whispered at some length into the young tigress’ ear.

With his final goodbye, Father Christmas told the newlyweds, “Ranshuk and Valamisa, you are not to fight in the front line with the tigers here, because what is coming is part of their story in Aslan’s great pattern of life; but many stories are yet to come with you two in them. For now, learn love together, and look forward to the children you will beget—children who will mingle with the children borne to these worthy Djinni by Daughters of Eve.”

As the horsemen, now seven in number, followed the water-dragon, Tisrukh practiced with his magical compound bow. He had brought only four arrows in his own quiver; there had not been time for Orhan’s family to manufacture very many of them, and four should be plenty for the magical bow.

The petty emperor tried shooting one arrow at a tree, then willing the arrow to veer aside, miss the tree, circle around it and return. The arrow did exactly what its owner had thought of it doing, even resettling itself in the quiver when it came back. The other six men were duly impressed—especially Orhan, who had made that particular arrow with his own hands, not long before the whole uproar about Zulika that had cost him a son-in-law while his youngest daughter turned runaway.

Then Tisrukh decided to try a living target, one farther away. A hyena came into sight on a hilltop downwind of the group. Tisrukh sent another arrow at the ugly beast, willing it to plunge into one side of the hyena’s body and emerge out the other side.

The arrow struck and killed...but did not have the force to burrow all the way through the dead hyena. No matter how he exerted his will, Tisrukh could not make this arrow uproot itself and fly back to him. Once halted, the arrows were no longer controlled by the archer's mind. "Suleyman, go retrieve that arrow!" Tisrukh commanded, and the brother of the late Khassan did as he was bidden. Besides recovering the arrow, Suleyman drew his scimitar and hacked off the hyena's head, which he wrapped in a filthy scarf and carried back with him. "A trophy of your marksmanship, sire," he said, holding out the head to his ruler.

Tisrukh passed the head in turn to Dobrinya. "Here, you carry it for me." The Cossack accordingly stuffed the gory souvenir into a saddlebag that did not contain anything for whose cleanliness he was vitally concerned.

Wondering if he might by greater concentration be able to increase the penetrating power of his arrows, Tisrukh hoped that another hyena would appear. When one did, Tisrukh shot it, clenching his teeth in the effort to will the arrow to go all the way through the scavenger and emerge still flying. This time, it did so, and came flying back to its quiver like a falcon to the wrist. Elated, and beginning to think that he must have some sorcerous power in himself, Tisrukh ordered the taking of the second hyena's head as well.

Orhan coughed loudly. "Your pardon, Son of Destiny, but we should move along. The water-beast is getting farther ahead of us."

"Fear not," replied Tisrukh. "It's not as if we're likely to lose its trail. And I have a hunch that having these trophies to display will be useful to me at some later point."

The monster actually slipped out of sight for a little while around a bend in the river. When the riders came to where they could see it again, it was farther off than they would have expected it to be...and visibly growing more active, swimming faster, as if something were catching its interest.

Tinkswid the koala bride had received a delightful surprise from Father Christmas before he disappeared: a complete set of writing materials, such as were used by the humans up in Narnia. With these, she would be able to prepare proper copies of Queen Helene's Catechism--provided she lived long enough to do the job, and provided her fellow koalas lived long enough to learn to read so the Catechism could be taught. Supposing that nothing could be done until the present crisis was ended, she kept her gift bundled up, ready to be transported if and when she and Yugdug found themselves moving westward.

It was the koala elders who had had the most say in planning the stages of their evacuation; after all, their people had the most to lose. Nubkarsh, Hemshull and the others had actually wanted the hostile humans, if they came this far, to see a koala-town apparently still fully populated and NOT ready to

transplant itself, so that they would not suspect the existence of an already-viable new settlement farther off. "If an attack here is repelled, so much the better," Nubkarsh had said. "But if they prove too strong for us and we have to flee, then our foes will assume that all survivors are scattered and disorganized, not worth worrying about. In that event, we will trust Aslan not to let the demon simply tell them where we went." Enough able-bodied koalas would stay to make the colony look normally active; and some of these would be preparing camouflaged positions in the marshy land outside their grove, from which missiles and lariats could be hurled.

Now, the last creatures expecting to leave before a possible assault were assembled: mostly koalas, of course, but there were also Raffira and the other liberated slaves, plus a couple of young tigers who had been convalescing from snakebites. Ranshuk and Valamisa, forcing themselves not to think about what they wanted to be doing with each other in privacy, would go in front of the column, while Hookpaw and Wolfsfriend would bring up the rear. Since Ranshuk still had his lupine sense of smell, there would be good sensory potential both fore and aft, in case there was need of detecting hidden threats. Along each flank there would be koalas capable of using slings; due to a shortage of stones nearby, most of their missiles were made of packed wet clay, which would in fact deliver a hard impact. The Daughters of Eve, in addition, were provided with wooden cudgels, and the Djinni made sure that the women understood the basic moves to use them effectively.

As the theoretically most senior Djinn--though Aslan had actually created them within moments of each other--Flazdigar went back and forth from Ranshuk to Hookpaw to Quickspring to Nubkarsh to Raffira, trying to keep everyone's intentions clear in his own mind. He was within hearing of Hookpaw and Shatterneck when his brothers Davradon and Thurikeb approached him.

"First Brother," said Thurikeb, "some of us have scarcely had the chance to contribute anything so far, and we are eager to be of more use. There is a service we could perform which the Daughters of Eve could not, because the nomads would only see them as objects for greedy lust, and which the Talking Beasts could not, because they have not a Kuzdikal to speak the nomads' language."

"What we mean," Davradon added, "is that some of us should go and meet the nomads, to see if they cannot be made to see reason without any violence occurring. If some of us present ourselves unarmed, and Kuzdikal speaks to them of how this world has room for all, they may see the sense of it."

Hookpaw drew attention to himself by groaning loudly. "Alas! You Djinni would not be so hopeful about such a plan if you had been up in Narnia when I was leading the campaign against the lions. There were Narnian creatures then--Fauns, Dryads, Talking Rabbits and the like--who began crying for peace from the moment it was known that conflict was afoot; but I _smirked_ every time I hear their whining. I knew that if ANYONE listened to their sweet pleadings, it would be precisely the ones who were NOT causing the trouble. For my part, their calls for peace were a joke to be dismissed with contempt; for I had resolved that my definition of 'peace' would be a Narnia with no lions in it. You Djinni are more virtuous than I ever was on my best day; but accept the insight of one who has been

evil, for it is evil you propose to face. Tisrukh is a man I have spent time with, and he is out for his own advantage no matter who has to suffer for it. If he thinks it to his advantage to pretend to listen to you, and then attack you without warning, that is exactly what he'll do. Don't throw your lives away!"

Davraddon laid a friendly hand on Hookpaw's head. "You are a better beast now than you realize you are, Tiger Hookpaw; Aslan's grace has worked marvellously in you. But be not anxious for our sake; we are not foolish rabbits. What we propose to do is taking a calculated risk with our eyes open."

"We are not at all counselling this community as a whole not to make ready to defend itself," Thurikeb seconded. "Only a part of our number will be making the conciliatory attempt; everyone else will still prepare to fight."

"Well, then," said Shatterneck, "what say, before you expose your lives to this calculated risk, someone goes out and reconnoiters? All of us tigers are getting impatient anyway to see if our Matriarch is safe."

"That makes good sense," Flazdigar said, "especially since Kuzdikal, the brother on whom speaking with the nomads will depend, is still out there too."

"Let me do it!" exclaimed Hookpaw. "My koala friend Yugdug likes the idea of riding on my back and being my eyes--which is the sort of arrangement that's planned for me in the evacuation in any case. He and I can run out and learn how things are to the east; and if things are really bad, I'm expendable. Please, I can't help in a major fight if it comes, but this is one more chance for me to be useful to you. Let me do it."

Quickspring and Nubkarsh were told; and, seeing how greatly Hookpaw longed to give something back to those who had forgiven and sheltered him, they agreed that it should be as he asked. Yugdug found Tinkswid none too happy about his taking this risk, but he reminded her that danger had come to them even in their own trees.

The day was far along when Zulika asked to be let down from the half-chair, half-harness on which Kuzdikal had been carrying her. She had not been off it, except for bodily necessities, since she had first been placed on it. "I feel good enough to walk now," she insisted, "and I'd feel I was terribly selfish if I asked you to go on carrying me."

The Djinni were totally honest beings. Kuzdikal replied, "Although I could continue bearing you at need, I'll be just as glad for the respite. The air here, more humid than what we're accustomed to, does seem to reduce our stamina."

"REDUCE your stamina?" Zulika marvelled. "You've been carrying me for more than twenty-four hours almost without any break, certainly without sleep—"

“Well, we can sleep after a fashion while walking, if no complex action is required. And you’re not overly heavy, so it hasn’t been too distressful for me, even in this atmosphere.”

“Aslan bless you!” said Zulika, noting to herself that this was the first time she had ever said that exact phrase to anyone. “Besides everything else, you’re modest! I think you could break Tisrukh in half like a twig, yet HE boasts of how tough and strong he is.”

They were quiet for awhile; Dilnara and Monduli walked beside Zulika for half an hour or so, holding her hands. Thinking of the ignorance she had encountered in Iskralida, Zulika eventually reopened her conversation with the superhuman gentleman who was astonishingly interested in marrying her. They had been conversing in English, but now she switched to the nomads’ language, lest Monduli feel as if something was being concealed from her.

“What has Aslan told you and your brothers about marriage?”

“He told us that it is a mystery which brings together the two halves of humankind, and indeed of all creatures with comparable intelligence: the male and the female. Each has something that the other does not; there is of course a considerable overlap in abilities between males and females, but still they are not simply interchangeable. Together, then, they are more, and can do more kinds of things, than two males or two females can do. In marriage, a new sovereign society is created, whose partners can and should embody the sacred qualities of love, kindness, courtesy and loyalty: this for the benefit of all with whom they have dealings, especially any children whom Aslan may grant to them.”

Young Monduli spoke up: “That doesn’t sound anything like my Papa and Mama!”

“It sounds like my Mama,” Dilnara put in, “but not my Papa. I mean my old Papa, the bad one,” she emphasized, not wanting Kuzdikal to think for an instant that she would not welcome him as her stepfather.

“Go talk with the tigers for awhile, children,” Zulika said gently. When the two girls were out of earshot, the discarded woman looked long and hard at the Djinn, a person simply too good to be real, who was offering her something she had never in her life been given any grounds to hope for. “Did Aslan tell you what marriage is like in the part of Adam’s world I come from?”

“A little—enough to make all of us Djinni glad that we live here instead of there. But here is where you are now, beautiful one. What was evil in that other world you can leave behind you, and what was good in it stays with you. By the way, in case your dismissing the children had anything to do with wishing to ask me how well I understand the physical actions involved in perpetuating life into a new generation, yes, I know in detail what is done. Aslan explained it to us, and explained what He wants it to mean for those who do it. It is meant to build love between the spouses as well as bring children into being.”

Zulika sighed. “Tisrukh definitely didn’t have the same teacher you had.”

“But you are free of him now. He cut the tie by his own choice, for no fault of yours, and he has no right to object if you find a—“ suddenly, the loquacious Djinn seemed to be at a loss for words. Realization then made Zulika laugh, despite the pain laughing gave to her partly-healed ribs.

“Oh, oh, Aslan bless you again, handsome Kuzdikal! I see what it is: you were starting to say, ‘—if you find a better man;’ but then you realized that this would be boasting, and you don’t want to be guilty of sinful pride! Perhaps I can ease your worry on that score: the fact is, a rat on a dungheap would be a better man than Tisrukh is! I have no idea how he ever managed to beget a boy so brave and good as my Bulgak, or a girl so sweet and pure-hearted as my Dilnara. Nor—“ and here she sobered; “—nor how he managed to have a brother so decent and honorable as Murhat was.”

“Any Child of Adam can go in either of two directions,” Kuzdikal said quietly. “It would have been possible for Murhat to take the path of evil, and for Tisrukh with Aslan’s help to take the path of good. If Tisrukh, even yet, will repent of his wickedness, he could still be forgiven, and could find himself someday entering the same eternal happiness which I have NO doubt Murhat is now enjoying.”

Zulika thought for awhile again, then said softly, “If Tisrukh does repent and change into a good man—which would be as magical an event as anything else I’ve seen in this new world—I hope that you’re not going to say that it means I have to go back to him. I don’t think I could ever stand to live with him again; he did try to murder me, after all.”

“Now, that is a thought to ponder,” Kuzdikal replied. “It reflects your depth of thinking. I hadn’t considered that Aslan might save Tisrukh from being evil in the very near future, and then require you to go back to him and let him try to make amends to you. I must pray for clear guidance in this; my own desires, however eager, have no authority to gainsay Aslan’s will.” The Djinn fell into contemplative silence.

This was the first time, since he had first shown his feelings of attraction to Zulika, that Kuzdikal had in any way backed off from these sentiments. And it was this very change of his mood that abruptly made Zulika realize just how profoundly his interest in her had already affected her. She did not want him to stop wanting her! In fact, although she had too little experience of anything good between men and women to be sure, it seemed to her at this moment that she must be falling in love with Kuzdikal. Which made for a quandary. Aslan would probably say it was wrong to wish for Tisrukh to die and be eternally damned so that Kuzdikal would see no obstacle to marrying her; but if Tisrukh did come to salvation, would Aslan command her to go back to him? For that matter, what would then become of Iskralida and Gulshim?

But these thoughts were interrupted by an urgent exclamation from Slimtalon. “Friends, listen to me!

The wind's turned, and I can smell something behind us! It's the smell I smelled from that accursed monster! By the strength of the stench, it must be gaining on us. We need to press ahead faster!"

"That means that you mount up again, Zulika," said Kuzdikal, crouching to facilitate her getting back onto her carrying-seat. "I'll be as easy on your bones as I can." It grieved Zulika to hear the subtle alteration in his tone; it was the voice of a helper speaking to the one who receives help, not the voice of a lover addressing his beloved. The disappointment she felt crowded out of her mind even the fear of being caught by this frightful dragon-thing which so far she had not herself seen. It also made her wish very intensely for Tisruk to be devoured by his own blasted monster.

The Djinni and the tigers called on all their reserves of endurance, and managed to gain distance on the great reptile without needing to abandon the human fugitives' belongings. They forged ahead well past sunset. It was long after midnight when Slimtalon judged that they could now finally afford some sleep. Fear-No-Blast, as the most-rested member of the whole party, volunteered to stay awake the whole time the others would be asleep; he could not fly, but his keen hearing should give warning if the monster drew close. Even the Djinni slept, on the bare ground, leaving such bedding as there was to the humans.

Bulgak, determined to play his part like a grown man, went without a blanket himself, so that his mother would be more comfortable. After he fell asleep, though, Kuzdikal gently lifted him and placed him on a heap of pulled-up shrubbery, making sure there were no thorns in it. Then the Djinn stripped off his own outer robe, and spread it over this courageous boy whom he was more than willing to regard as his own son.

Zulika slept with the two little girls nestled against her. Their presence was comforting; but Zulika fell asleep wishing that it could be Kuzdikal who was sharing her bed.

Fear-No-Blast had plenty to think about as he stood guard over his exhausted friends in the darkness. Being flightless for two days now had given him a new sympathy for the blinded Hookpaw. But as Bluntmuzzle had affirmed, Hookpaw was managing well enough with his remaining senses that he could still get around some...whereas Fear-No-Blast might as well be a potted plant, for all the mobility he had now. Smelling, touching and hearing might substitute for seeing; but swimming and waddling would never substitute for flying.

Suddenly, life seemed horribly unfair to the gander knight. No one else in this whole group of travellers had been so profoundly disabled as he had been. Everyone else here was experiencing changes for the better; why, Zulika and the Djinn attending her seemed practically ready to start a nest. And what could a grounded gander look forward to? Paddling around in marshes until some crocodile ate him? It just wasn't right...

If there was any serious danger of the old scout falling into the trap that was yawning for him, it was

done away with as soon as he took a fresh glance at the girl Dilnara, who had fed him by hand and stroked his feathers lovingly, telling him over and over what a hero he was for helping to save her mother's life.

Fear-No-Blast glowered into the darkness, hissing, "Nice try, Tash, but I still reject and rebuke you in the name of Aslan! You need to try a new game, demon; the self-pity trick is wearing thin. Aslan be praised for creating this human child!"

And from that moment, the very air around the gander knight somehow felt more pleasant.

The sleepers had slept for a little over three hours, with no sign of the monster, when he discerned the first fringe of predawn semi-light in the east. The three Djinni were lying in positions on the east side of their bivouac, where any threat that came would threaten them first; waddling to them, Fear-No-Blast quietly awoke each one in turn, assuring them that his watch had passed without mishap. The first stirrings of the three more-than-men caused Bulgak to come awake also; finding the robe covering him and a sleeping pallet of sorts beneath him, he quickly realized what had been done, and thanked Kuzdikal.

"We may succeed in reaching the tree-village today," the multilingual Djinn told the son of the woman he desired. "We seem still to have a lead on our enemies; but Aslan alone can say if we will have to make a run for it before we get there. If your mother feels up to some walking today, I will change the load on my back, bearing instead some of the most needful of things on the cargo litter my brothers have been bearing. If we four men all carry modest bundles on our backs, it should be possible at need to dump to earth what remains on the litter, put your mother on there with Fear-No-Blast, and all make a dash for safety without losing all the gear you tried to save. Your sister and Monduli would ride on Slimtalon's back, while Bluntmuzzle took rearguard position."

"If it comes to that," said Fear-No-Blast, "I will not slow you down by continuing to ride the litter. As long as pursuers don't see me hopping off, I can slip into the nearest bushes and let them charge right past me, after which I'll have a fair chance of making it to the grove by a detour over land and water."

"Stouthearted bird!" Kuzdikal applauded, not offering any argument, but paying the gander the respect to accept his offer (if needed) as earnestly as it was meant. "But may Aslan grant that it is unnecessary."

Bulgak hunkered down beside his mother. When he touched her cheek, she murmured, "Of course, always, my dear chieftain, always;" her eyes blinked open, unfocussed at first, and her hands reached up as if to embrace someone directly above her. When she found no one there, she snatched her hands down to her sides again, seeming embarrassed. Then she turned to rousing Dilnara and Monduli.

Bulgak wondered if Kuzdikal for his own part had dreamed such a dream about Bulgak's mother—

indeed, hoped that the Fourth Djinn had done so. It was not lost on the boy that Kuzdikal had included him in the phrase “we four men.”

Hookpaw and Yugdug had persuaded the evacuation party led by Ranshuk and Valamisa not to wait for them to come back. Assuming the two scouts did return safely, one of the oldest female koalas (thus an evacuation candidate) could stand by at the grove to take over as Hookpaw’s rider, whereupon Hookpaw would be able to overtake the emigrants while Yugdug assumed his defense post.

Once past the boggy zone, Hookpaw let his limbs out into a canter. After all he had been through, being able still to run with guidance was such a mercy that he had been quick to make himself learn to trust his rider-guides. As they went, they conversed off and on. At one point Yugdug remarked:

“When Aslan created the first of us, He gave each one a name similar to whatever was the first sound they made as they sprang to life. The names were never intended to be anything but speakable sounds that would distinguish one koala from another. So when you new creatures came to us, it was amazing to us how most of you—all of you except Valamisa and Ranshuk—had names that were from known words. Is that method of naming the usual thing up north in Narnia?”

“It is more or less prevalent,” Hookpaw confirmed. “We tigers use that method, because it allows us to assign meaningful permanent names, in just the sort of way as Wolfsfriend received her permanent name. But sometimes a permanent name IS given at birth. I was Hookpaw from birth—more correctly, from the day I was awakened into intelligence by Aslan. Lord Brightburn, accompanying Aslan that day, gave me my name because my claws were a bit more steeply curved than most tigers’ claws.

“The Talking Lions, on the other paw, use names purely made up for the sound. Some others, particularly the Dwarfs, do the same. And some, like the Fauns, use names which I’m told have some kind of connection with names once used on Earth. There needs to be a variety of given names, because no one seems yet to have started figuring out any ‘last’ names, such as people on Earth have had for centuries.”

“What’s a century?” asked Yugdug.

“It’s something that this world of ours will have in the future. A century means one hundred years. One day, after you and I will have been up in Aslan’s Country for a long time, the Narnian world will have passed a hundred years in age, and then the second Narnian century will begin with the year One Hundred And One.”

Yugdug reflected on this, then said, “I hope that our descendants then won’t be troubled all the time by descendants of this two-legged crocodile, Tisruk.”

Hookpaw did his own reflecting on that. He almost wished he had slain Tisruk the day he had first

met the man.

They did not need to expend time finding food; Yugdug had a ration bundle on his back, including dried meat—the drying of meat being a new skill for koalas, but one which they had figured out for themselves after being told that there was such a process. With Yugdug’s assistance, Hookpaw was able to eat while at least still walking forward. Yugdug then ate fruit and greens for his own lunch.

An hour later, a fresh conversation, about whether koalas might ever build ground-level houses like those of Men, was interrupted. It was interrupted by a very distant sound from far ahead, which only barely reached their ears. It was the noise of gunshots.

In the course of rearranging the burdens, the Djinni had pulled off their items of masculine jewelry. These were placed onto the cargo litter, and would be the first things discarded, without regret, in the event that escape dictated lightening the load. Bulgak transferred the rifle and its ammunition to his person, along with the remaining powder and shot for his flintlock pistol.

Zulika did feel sufficiently recovered in her torso that she could walk under her own power. Dilnara availed herself of the opportunity to have Kuzdikal carry her instead, on his shoulders. Monduli held Kuzdikal’s hand for periods of time, when she was not holding Bulgak’s hand; and Bulgak did not conceal his enjoyment every time the Djinn included him in some discussion. All three of the children seemed to be of one mind regarding what ought to happen between Kuzdikal and Zulika, and the sooner the better.

Slimtalon, meanwhile, engaged Chibrigon and Ploskavar, along with her son, in talk about the thing that was following them.

“I’ve been wracking my brain, trying to remember everything those otters reported about the monster, and exactly what my husband did against it. It’s maddening; something is eluding me, and I’m afraid that everyone’s peril will be greater because of my tired old brain’s forgetfulness.”

“Never think of reproaching yourself, Mother!” Bluntmuzzle exhorted her. “I know that the whole subject is a piercing pain to your heart; and how could you have known that there would ever be any NEED to remember details about it? By the Great God-Lion, there is not one tongue that will ever blame you, even if we suffer—“

“TONGUE!!” Slimtalon suddenly shouted, startling the Djinni. “Bless you, Bluntmuzzle! That’s part of it! Ploskavar, Chibrigon, and you, son, listen carefully. The monster has a horrid long tongue, like a toad’s tongue, that can shoot out to grasp things. It’s probably strong enough to catch any one of us and pull us into the jaws.”

“Ah, give me the sands!” lamented Chibrigon. “That creature sounds as loathsome as it is menacing—

blasted wet sloshy thing. I wish it would just head back to the Eastern Ocean!”

But the wet sloshy thing was just then demonstrating its ability to move on land. Forsaking the river at lengthy bends, it cut straight across on land, saving substantial distance; Tisrukh’s party did the same as they tried to overtake it. But the first overtaking of the day was done BY the monster, not to it.

The wind was out of the west again, allowing no eastward alert through smell. But Fear-No-Blast heard something, before the Djinni could pick up anything more than vague misgivings from their oddly subjective “reading” of the air.

“It’s close!” honked the gander knight. “I don’t hear our human enemies with it; maybe it turned on them, and they either were eaten or had to flee back east! Ploskavar, do you see that hill with rocks? You can let me off there; the sea-beast probably won’t like waddling over uneven stone, so I should be safe, and you’ll be less burdened.”

“Rather,” said Ploskavar, “let us simply ALL veer to that rocky slope, so the monster will be equally impeded in chasing any of us.”

Chibrigon signed that the litter should be set down. “Let’s toss the most expendable things now, and I don’t mean you, Fear-No-Blast!” He and Ploskavar then threw away all their gold ornaments, not bothering even to see where they fell. Zulika ordered her daughter and Monduli to mount on Slimtalon’s back, and Bluntmuzzle moved to cover the rear as had been discussed.

They had not gone far—crossing the maximum possible distance on rocky ground-- when they first heard the dragon-like beast’s voice: a sort of discordant double sound, half abrasive roar and half metallic screech...and then it came into view, a new sight for all present except Slimtalon. Its jaws gaped like a portable cave. Even human noses could sense the fishy reek of it, and the Djinni felt suddenly dizzy with nausea. It was most certainly hunting them; at its present speed, with its belly dragging on the ground, they could outrun it, but none were sure whether it could heave its body higher and sprint much faster. No human foes were in evidence; but this thing was foe enough.

Bulgak did not wait to observe the monster’s posture and gait. Already, disregarding his mother’s cries for him to keep to the front, he had dropped to the rear alongside Bluntmuzzle. Bringing rifle to shoulder and sighting in a split second, he tried a shot into the scaly left shoulder of the beast, hoping his bullet would penetrate into a vital organ. But all it did was make a crack in one of the armor scales on the massive body, like the first crack in thick ice on a frozen river. Now the monster was hardly more than a hundred paces away.

Instead of reloading the rifle, Bulgak reslung it, and almost in the same motion he drew left-handed the revolver he had taken from his father. The first of the two loads remaining in it went between the creature’s eyes; again a scale was damaged, but less badly than the one struck by the rifle bullet. The

monster at least seemed this time to notice that it had been hit; it roared in annoyance, looking around as a man might look for a mosquito that had tried to drink his blood. But then it came on again. Ploskavar's hammer, flung in the rapid interval as Ploskavar let down the litter for Zulika to climb aboard, flew neatly past within inches above Bulgak's head, and whacked into the same spot Bulgak's bullet had just hit. Shaking its head, the monster did lurch backward for a moment, shaking its head; but then it showed that it could indeed rise a little higher on its legs and charge faster.

Bluntmuzzle made a feinting rush at the creature. Knowing the danger of its darting tongue, he evaded it with a hair's breadth to spare when it shot out at him. Failed attempts to catch him in its jaws delayed the monster while Bulgak and the others grabbed for distance. Then Bulgak turned to cover Bluntmuzzle as he withdrew. The boy's second revolver bullet was aimed actually into one reptilian eye, the right eye, as the huge ugly head was still pivoting on the long thick neck in efforts to gobble up the daring tiger. Bulgak thought that surely the eye must be vulnerable, and his shot went true to the mark; but though the monster now roared louder as with real pain, its blinking ended with a functional eye still there. In a flicker of thought, the boy's madly-galloping brain recalled that there were snakes with a transparent shield over each eye, to keep sand grains out. Perhaps the sea monster's eyes had a stronger version of what the snakes had? But that question mattered less than the question of what target to try next.

He tossed the now-useless revolver away; as a cap-and-ball weapon, it would take black powder, but the size of the last few pistol balls he had for his flintlock was too large for the revolver's barrel.

"Come on, lad!" Kuzdikal yelled, running to place himself between Bulgak and the monster, providing his own form of covering fire by hurling two rocks, one from each hand, into the gaping mouth. The thing paused again to spit out the distasteful objects, and Kuzdikal hurled a small bronze shovel into its mouth, breaking loose one of the smaller teeth in its double rows of many, many sharp teeth. Bulgak had used these moments to unlimber the rifle again, reload, and put another bullet—

--neatly into the monster's left nostril.

This produced the greatest effect so far. Its roars thundering louder still, the monster sat back on its haunches and pawed at its hurt snout with its forefeet that were both webbed and clawed. "Good—but enough now!" Kuzdikal exclaimed, hauling the boy bodily away from the creature. By the time the sea-beast recovered and resumed pursuit, its quarry had gained almost fifty paces; and one more advancing-and-retreating dash by Bluntmuzzle bought another twenty paces for the bipeds in the party.

As they fled, Fear-No-Blast resolved that no one was going to be fatally slowed on his account. With a honk of "Aslan be with you all!" he jumped off the litter, flopping awkwardly as he hit the ground but getting to his feet in a hurry. Chibrigon had known that the gander knight meant to do this at a pinch; he would not have thrown the gander off, but he accepted the gander's voluntary act, the more so since there was cover hereabouts that could avail for a goose when the pursuer had larger game to catch.

The monster made no attempt to find Fear-No-Blast, but kept on after the main party. It had just passed by the gander's place of concealment when he rose up and honked his loudest honk at it, adding in speech-voice, "Here, stupid thing! Didn't they teach you that goose tastes better than human flesh?"

The monster dallied long enough to make a brief, unsuccessful attempt to tongue-snare the impudent waterfowl, who had rocks to dodge behind. Then it turned after the rest of its intended victims; but they had gained more distance meanwhile.

Remembering his flintlock pistol, Bulgak fired once more when the monster began to close the gap again. Hitting the forehead where it had already been struck twice, he distressed the animal enough to purchase another ten paces of precious distance. By the time the nightmarish pursuer had begun to close distance again, the pursued had reached more hills: this time steeper, more uneven ones, which impeded the monster more than they impeded the fugitives.

Left in the dust, Sir Fear-No-Blast commended his life to Aslan's care and began waddling on his way west, reckoning that if he lived, he would learn after three or four days how everything had turned out.

Of course, if he didn't live, he would still hear what had happened; only, the news would have to reach him in Aslan's Country.

The gander knight saw from cover when Tisrukh's little cavalry squad came into sight, following their monster; so it had not swallowed them. It was a shame that he could not carry word of this to his friends; but no, he was not going to let himself be overcome with self-pity for losing the power to fly. Waddling and swimming would be enough, if Aslan willed them to be enough.

When Tisrukh's detachment spotted where objects had been dropped by the fugitives, all eyes were captured by the gleaming of gold in the sunlight. Dobrinya, Orhan, Urgut, Suleiman, Ismayil and Rashid all turned their gaze from the abandoned jewelry to their leader, as if asking permission.

"Go ahead and pick up the loot; load it on one of the spare horses, and redistribute some of that horse's former load to the others. On my word given to Tash, this gold shall be divided among the six of you, or the survivors of the six of you. I do not require any of it for myself; my treasure is in the well-being of my people." Of Tisrukh's companions, only Dobrinya and Orhan had the wits to understand what Tisrukh himself understood: the reality that, in this new and still underpopulated world, it was unlikely that any of them would live to see a full-scale market economy developed in which gold would actually serve a consistent monetary purpose. Thus, in leaving this windfall to his men, Tisrukh was making them feel good, without really losing anything that mattered to him.

The Cossack decided to join this game: "Comrades, I also shall forego my share of this gold. I have been with mighty Tisrukh for so short a time compared to the rest of you, I don't feel as if I deserve a

share in this wealth. Being able to have a wife, start a home, and continue to serve inexorable Tash, is likewise treasure enough to suit me.” Dobrinya had no particular cause to think that any of his companions would have murdered him for his share of the Djinni’s gold; but now he had eliminated that danger completely.

The five men who were to share in the gold all dismounted. Urgut being Orhan’s son meant that Orhan’s family was getting a double share; but the shaman had enough residual prestige that the others did not seriously resent this. Meanwhile, it was Tisrukh this time who first noticed a change in the movement of the monster up ahead of them.

“Look there.” He was pointing with the rifle that he was carrying in addition to his magic bow. “Tash’s pet seems to be breaking off pursuit of the Djinni. He’s probably tired of chasing meat that runs so fast.”

“You think he’ll turn up some carrion?” Dobrinya speculated.

“Likely enough,” said Orhan. “Whatever he finds to eat, I hope he doesn’t get sluggish then.”

“Trust in our great god Tash,” Tisrukh urged him. “Surely Tash, while permitting the creature to sustain its life, will not let it gorge itself into slumber. If you men have the gold gathered, let’s use the time while the dragon-thing eats to follow the Djinni’s trail a little farther. Maybe the monster veering aside will make them overconfident, they’ll slow down and we’ll catch them. If that doesn’t happen soon, we’ll take a rest and have some breakfast ourselves.”

Dobrinya quietly remarked to his friend-turned-monarch: “I notice that you speak of us as pursuing the Djinni--even though the gunshots fired at the sea-beast would seem to prove that your corrupted wife and rebel son are among them.”

Tisrukh nodded. “Without question, Dobrinya Osipovich. But it is the Djinni who are of concern to my people as a whole; so, as a conscientious Emperor, I speak about that which touches the interests of my people.”

“Does that mean you’re NOT obsessed with catching your family?—because I was thinking: if we should have the luck to retake Zulika, it wouldn’t hurt anything to let her live in the aftermath of a grand victory over the Djinni. We could say that the Djinni magically influenced her...and maybe even say that you spared her as a favor to me. Then I could have some fun enjoying her gratitude to me for saving her; and—as in the matter of the gold here—I would be forestalling any resentment that might be caused by your giving me any woman some other man wants.”

Tisrukh’s eyes were hard. “Your thinking is clever, old friend. But I’m sorry, Zulika will have to die.”

Dobrynya sighed. He really had thought she might be pleasing to him. But that would have to be written off, as the deaths of Akim and his sons had been written off.

As they got on the move again, Tisrukh was hoping that he was right about Tash not allowing the monster to shirk its duty. He wondered if he might be able to use one of his mentally-guided arrows as a sort of prod, to nudge the monster back onto the trail if it was proving lazy.

Riding on Hookpaw in the direction of the gunshots, Yugdug strained to see anything that would tell him who was shooting at what. No koalas were that far east of their colony, so it did not seem plausible that the shots represented any action hostile to koala-kind. Had the people from Earth begun fighting among themselves? Hookpaw did not utter any guesses aloud; he was saving his wind for running.

Eventually, the koala sighted figures running toward him, looking much more tired than Hookpaw. Three of them he recognized as the Djinni who had volunteered to accompany Bluntmuzzle; and—yes, there was Bluntmuzzle himself, with his mother!

“Over here!” shouted Yugdug. His voice was not very resonant, but the ears of Djinni and tigers were keen. Soon there was a hasty reunion.

“The nomads have a sea-monster helping them—the same one that killed my mate—but bigger now!” Slimtalon panted. “It’s been chasing us...and probably is out to kill any koalas or tigers it finds. Are the young ones evacuated?”

“They are,” Yugdug assured her. “Can that thing be stopped?”

“I believe it can,” said Bluntmuzzle for his weary mother, who had been carrying Dilnara and Monduli for miles now. “But it will take all of us tigers acting as a team, like a lion pride going after a big, dangerous buffalo.”

Hookpaw’s nose had been sniffing out the roster of those who had just arrived. “Where is Fear-No-Blast?” he inquired anxiously. “Did the creature eat him?”

“Not that we’re aware of, but he can’t fly because his wing was hurt—while he was defending me, a few nights back,” said a sad Zulika. “He’s out there in the wilderness.”

“He jumped off this litter,” Chibrigon clarified, “and scrambled for cover amid the rocks and bushes. He was lightening our load; and, from the way things looked for awhile there, he had at least as good a chance of surviving on his own as with us.”

“We’re praying he makes it back,” said Slimtalon. “He’s a smart old veteran, who knows how to make

the best use of hiding places; his chances may be better than we think.”

Chibrigon looked in the direction in which the monster had last moved. “We should proceed to the tree-town and give the warning. That abomination will doubtless be getting back to business in a little while; and armed men are following on its heels.”

Yugdug and Hookpaw exchanged whispers; then Hookpaw spoke aloud: “The rest of you go on. Yugdug and I have one more service to perform before I go back to being helpless and useless. As I’m not nearly so winded as you must be, we’re going to go out another mile or so, obliquely toward Tisrukh’s party—he is leading them, isn’t he?”

“I have no doubt he is,” Tisrukh’s former wife affirmed.

“Very well,” said Hookpaw. “I don’t plan to try talking with him—as you Djinni will soon hear, your brothers want to try exactly that—but I’ll sing to him a bit.” The other tigers understood what Hookpaw meant. He would go far enough so that a roar from him would be audible to Tisrukh’s party. It might frighten their horses; and if nothing else, being heard from an unexpected quarter, it would sow in the nomads a little uncertainty about what their adversaries might be up to.

If this gained even a few minutes for Slimtalon’s party, those would be minutes in which they were getting closer to reporting the situation and organizing a defense.

Slimtalon, Zulika and their companions made it to the outskirts of the koala colony without further mishap. Several koalas, under the leadership of Nubdarp son of Nubkarsh, emerged from camouflaged observation posts to help them avoid the bog holes as they entered the hazardous area; and Flazdigar, already familiarized with the safe paths, came out with Tinkswid to meet them.

The first thing Tinkswid said was, “Is my husband safe?” Zulika and the children were charmed by the Talking Koalas, but allowed Chibrigon to answer for their party.

“You are Yugdug’s wife, are you not? Yugdug and Hookpaw were safe when we saw them last; they took some of the pressure off of us by going to create a diversion for our enemies.”

“With Aslan’s mercy, those two should be returning here soon,” said Ploskavar.

“May I touch you?” little Dilnara asked one of the koalas. “Your fur looks so soft!” She had been through so much fear and stress in the past few days, that the very sight of such cute, friendly creatures--the one to whom she spoke did allow her to stroke his fur, and fingered her long black braids in turn--made her young mind want anxiously to believe that the danger was now past.

“The pressure is not only from humans,” Slimtalon impatiently told Flazdigar. “The sea-monster that

killed MY husband has emerged from the ocean at the call of Tash, to act as Tisrukh's hunting hound, and it chased us. We outlasted it, and it turned aside to find easier food; but it may continue in our direction at any time. I must speak with all the tigers about how to fight it."

Flazdigar nodded. "That is obviously a foe with whom there is no chance of reasoning. But perhaps it can be made unnecessary to fight the nomads at the same time. Kuzdikal, this concerns you. Davradon and Thurikeb wish to offer those unregenerate Sons of Adam the opportunity to renounce their malice and make peace; and since it would probably take more time than we have for you to impart a new language to your brothers, you will be needed as the mouthpiece for us all, to address Tisrukh."

"This is well, First Brother," said Kuzdikal. "No matter what the demon thinks he can accomplish with Tisrukh's people, those people could never have come here without Aslan permitting it; we should, therefore, be most hesitant to shed their blood. Most emphatically, it would rend my soul to slay anyone who was blood-kin to Zulika here. I will go with Davradon and Thurikeb, while the rest of you prepare in case we fail."

Zulika suddenly found that she had the energy left to protest vigorously. "What are you saying? Do you think you can talk Tisrukh into being friendly? He tried to put ME, his WIFE, to DEATH, on an accusation that he made up in his own bloodthirsty head!" She caught hold of Kuzdikal's right arm. "Kuzdikal, dear Djinn, don't do this! Tisrukh's cousin tried to kill you without provocation; do you think Tisrukh will be kinder? Have you heard nothing I told you about him? Oh, this is a mad world; in my world, it's women who ask men to be peaceful, and men who say it's necessary to fight--but now I'm telling you that you must fight those men if they come here. They'll come to kill--to kill the tigers and the koalas as well as the rest of us!" At this, she sank onto her knees beside him...not as a manipulative gesture, but in genuine physical and emotional exhaustion.

Looking up, Zulika could see that he was moved, and she realized that never before in his life had Kuzdikal experienced being thus implored and entreated by any woman, let alone one for whom he clearly felt at least something like love. She also saw, though, that he would not allow her to make up his mind for him. But he was not like Tisrukh, who would have scorned any plea from her that ever went against his self-interest; rather, the Fourth Djinn was maintaining a resolve to do what seemed best for the good of others, and was taking no pleasure at all in refusing a request from his object of honorable desire.

Kuzdikal scooped her up in his arms and looked at Flazdigar. "There still is a little time available for discussion. Let us quickly re-evaluate the merits of attempting diplomacy. Slimtalon, you and your son go ahead and gather all your fellow tigers to prepare against the monster; I will see to it that everyone else is brought up to date."

"Mother," said Bluntmuzzle, "you can tell the others what needs to be told. I'll stay out here with Nubdarp's group, just in case trouble catches up faster than we expect." Nubdarp's mouth did not say

that this was welcome news, but his beady eyes declared it.

Grim purpose dispelled the tigress matriarch's weariness, even with the wounds she had almost forgotten. She headed for the grove, her mind already picturing the positions the tigers would take to assail the monster.

Kuzdikal cradled Zulika in his arms the entire time he was reporting to those around him. A great warmth filled the sorely-tried nomad woman, and she came to realize that, weary though he was, her peculiar suitor was exerting his power of "encouraging life"--striving to hurry up the complete knitting of her cracked ribs. It was as if he did not want to leave this job undone, in case....

She did not interrupt his relaying of information to Flazdigar and the koalas, nor their discussion of the likelihood that Tisrukh would listen to reason; but when he was finished, and he began walking toward the tree-town still carrying her, she ventured to see if her bones felt sufficiently recovered that she could make the exertion of winding her arms around him. She found that she could, as long as she did it lightly. Flazdigar, walking alongside, gazed at the two of them in the Djinn manner that was already becoming familiar to Zulika: detached and scholarly in a way, and yet also with such honest and guileless goodwill as to make his appraising glance inoffensive.

"Marvellous it is how Aslan does all things for each," the Djinn leader presently remarked. "There was not yet time to tell you the truly wondrous thing that happened to the Talking Wolf who was dwelling here. Aslan transformed him into a human being! He then promptly married the Nymph, with whom he was already acquainted. This left the male and female numbers unequal again; but now--"

"Now there is another woman to make up the number," Zulika finished for him. The arithmetical view of love and marriage did not spoil her mood--not while being carried in the very arms of the heroic figure whom she decided she could think of as her lover. "Not for long have I known Aslan, but one event after another teaches me to trust Him. It has come to me that there is no future husband in sight yet for my daughter Dilnara; but there is time still for Aslan to provide for her in some way--time, that is, if we live!" She brought her face as close to Kuzdikal's face as she could do without serious discomfort in her present position. "Oh, Kuzdikal, you must live! You mustn't let yourself be taken away from me now!"

His own face leaned closer. "I have been trying hard to feed strength to you, beautiful one; but it's working in the other direction as well. You have the power to give me an even greater will to live than a life-loving Djinn already has! Unless Aslan, blessed be He, has profound cause to summon me away to His far land, I shall indeed live, with you and for you--that is, if I have your consent."

Zulika laughed, gasped at the pain of laughing, but forced a smile. "Consent? What I would NOT consent to would be to let you choose anyone else! You have poured strength into me, all right: your strength, a clean strength given to you by Aslan, and it makes you known to my heart. Ah, Kuzdikal, I

feel unworthy of you; but if it really pleases you to desire me, it most certainly pleases me to return your feeling without further waiting! So let me be the first woman--in fact, the ONLY woman, except for daughters present and future--to say to Kuzdikal the Fourth Djinn, I love you!" She kissed a spot on one of his brawny arms that was within reach of her lips. "I love you, and I want you to be my husband and a father to--" She hesitated.

"What is it, beloved?" This was the first time Kuzdikal had dared to make so free with endearments, and now it was amid new doubt. "You can't be worried about me not loving the children? I delight in them, including the girl not born to your body but welcomed by your love."

"The problem is Tisrukh," Zulika groaned. "What if he does renounce evil, and asks me to come back to him?"

Kuzdikal made a rumbling sound in his chest. "I have thought much about that since we first spoke of it. Unless Aslan corrects me, my sense of the wind is that your Tisrukh, having BOTH tried to kill you AND taken TWO new wives in your place, has NO rights anymore concerning you, even if he does repent. In fact, I would say that it would be the very proof of genuine repentance on his part if he admits that he irrevocably forfeited all claims on you!" He looked at Flazdigar, his eyes pleading for agreement.

Flazdigar seemed to be rapidly searching his mind; then: "You know, Fourth Brother, how Aslan has told us about the Holy Book of the thoughts of His Father the Emperor-Over-Sea, which is given to those who follow Aslan on Earth. I have just remembered that in this book, it is noted by a man called Paul that if a follower of Aslan is married to an unbeliever, and that unbeliever by his or her own choice dissolves the marriage, when the believer had tried in good faith to preserve it, then the rejected believer IS NOT BOUND by any further obligation. That means, Daughter of Eve, that you are free to marry Kuzdikal; and I do believe in my heart that he will survive to share a life of love with you."

With that, Flazdigar strode ahead, so that they would not be distracted with his looking at them. The three children, for their part, could not tear their eyes away, as they saw Zulika draw her suitor's neat-bearded face down to her own, guiding his mouth to hers, and introducing both of them to the triumphantly tender kissing of lovers that was equally new to both. Bulgak was overjoyed that his mother could now be happy, and that Kuzdikal would become his new father; but, although he liked Monduli well enough, he inwardly doubted that he would ever enjoy kissing her like that. Monduli, meanwhile, was inwardly quite certain that, when they were old enough, Bulgak would most assuredly enjoy it.

After Hookpaw had uttered a succession of his most sonorous roars, from a succession of different places, Yugdug picked out a cluster of succulent vegetation atop a small hill, where they could lie low while the koala watched for Tisrukh's reaction (and had a snack on the juicy plants).

Lying on the side of the hilltop away from the enemy, Hookpaw tensely waited for Yugdug's words. When they came, their tone revealed that the koala was in at least as much suspense as the tiger.

"I see the men on their animals...so THAT'S what horses look like! Noble animals; too bad they're being used by evil men. All of them were looking our way for awhile, but most are now looking back toward the grove. I think I've spotted one who matches your description of Tisrukh. He's carrying one of those curved wooden things that throw the pointed sticks...he's putting a pointed stick onto it now--"

"Then get under cover!" snapped Hookpaw. He was genuinely solicitous for his koala friend's safety, though he could be pardoned for also not wanting to be left in the open country, blind, with no guide.

"But he isn't pointing it this way," replied Yugdug. "In fact, he seems to be shooting at nothing. Just practicing, perhaps; you did say that those humans relied on the noisy weapons at first, right?"

"That's right; they began making bows and arrows after they realized that there would eventually be no more ammunition for their guns."

"Then I guess Tisrukh's just making ready for his attack; doesn't bode well for any efforts to talk peace with him...Now, that's odd; he's gesturing, seems to be calling the men's attention to something. All of them are looking at the same thing now, whatever it is...their heads are turning together...turning more toward us again..." A moment later, the koala scout's voice rose a full octave in sudden alarm, crying out, "Get downhill, roll down!"--and Hookpaw could hear the koala scuttling through the brush as if evading an attack.

Powerless to do anything but what he had been told, the blind tiger tumbled and slid down the sheltered slope of the hill; he could tell that Yugdug was doing something, but he could not understand what.

There was neither time, nor easy wording, for Yugdug to explain to his companion what was happening. The horsemen had been watching Tisrukh's arrow flying scarcely a foot above the ground; it had taken a curving path, coming around toward the hill on which the two scouts lay, then followed the slope up, to lunge straight at the one visible target, Yugdug.

Dropping out of Tisrukh's line of sight had saved the koala from instant death; but the seemingly-living arrow was not finished with him yet. Lifting itself in the air now in a vertical attitude, the arrow stabbed downward at a spot of ground within two feet of Yugdug; striking only dirt, it rose up again, to jab down at another place on the other side of the koala. It was like the beak of a heron, darting into shallow water to catch a frog.

But without being able to see his intended victim directly, the archer could only guess where to direct the enchanted missile. After dodging five more stabs, Yugdug seized the arrow by the shaft before it could rebound upward, and broke it in half. As soon as he did this, the broken arrow lost all animation,

and lay harmlessly on the ground.

"Come on!" said Yugdug, his very voice at least reassuring Hookpaw that he was unhurt. The koala mounted on his friend's back as he spoke. "We need to get moving, right away, out of their sight! If you have it in you, let's move away from the grove at first, give one more diversion roar from farther east, try to draw them back away a bit from our people; but then, successful or not, we'll have to swing around for home ourselves."

Hookpaw did all that Yugdug urged. Only after they had further distracted the enemy, and were starting the roundabout run for the grove, did Hookpaw expend breath on a question: "What happened there on the hill?"

"I'm not sure myself," admitted Yugdug; "but our enemy has been given some special power by the demon to make his weapon deadlier. Aslan preserve us all!"

When Slimtalon arrived among the other tigers under the shade of the inhabited trees, Elkfinder waited no longer than politeness demanded, absorbing some of the most essential information, before she hurried out to join her husband and the koala sentries. Quickspring then said to the matriarch, "What counsel do you offer for us in combatting this monster and avenging Lord Brightburn?"

"All the way back here," Slimtalon replied, "I was wracking my brain to remember everything the Sea Otters reported about my husband's last fight. I remembered that the monster has a great long tongue that can grab you; I remembered that in time for the knowledge to help my son. Since then, I've also remembered that the monster has a line of sharp quills or spines all along its back, like sheathed claws, that can spring up to stab any creature that climbs onto its back. Brightburn was gravely wounded by those quills when he leaped onto the monster's back. But the missing pawprint in this trail still evades me. There was something my husband did as he was dying, which hurt the monster so painfully that it gave up on chasing the otters even after Brightburn was no longer a threat to it. This makes me feel as if I'm the very first Narnian beast to grow so old as to lose my brains; I just can't remember what it was!"

"Don't reproach yourself, Grandmother," said Smoothtail. "You've carried so many responsibilities in all those years, and no one could have predicted that now you'd be trying to remember the details of an event that you weren't present for!"

"Let's just list everything that could be a weak point on a creature like that," said Shatterneck.

Slimtalon replayed in her mind the terribly recent chase in which the unwelcome role of quarry had been hers to experience. "One would expect its eyes to be a soft spot, but Bulgak found otherwise when he shot the thing in the eye. The nostrils proved subject to pain, but only on the inside."

"That snatching tongue you described is a weakness as well as a weapon for the monster," mused Quickspring. "If it were severed, the stump would bleed spectacularly. And then there's the axillae--"

"The what?" asked Leapwell.

"Sorry, that's an anatomical term I picked up from a Centauress. It just means the inner parts of joints--like a man's armpit. Places that have to be less rigid, or else the joint wouldn't be able to flex at all. Hookpaw got hold of such a spot on that crocodile he helped me fight. Our adversary must have axillae, since it has limbs. We might be able to get at those--or maybe one of the Djinni could, with a weapon."

"The Djinni felt sickened just from being near it," said Slimtalon.

"But not incapacitated, or they wouldn't be here," Quickspring persisted. "If any of the Djinni could get close for just an instant, he might be able to drive in a spear. We could help make his opening if we could force one of the monster's limbs up to expose its axilla."

"Failing that," interjected Tawnydart, "maybe we could create a weak spot elsewhere. Scales on reptiles and fish usually aren't attached all the way around; they have an outer end, like a fingernail. Maybe we could get hold of the ends of some of the monster's big scales, and pry them up. It wouldn't need much opening for a spear to penetrate."

"Or a bullet?" said Smoothtail. "You said that the boy has one of those shooting weapons."

Slimtalon shook her head. "No, Bulgak has done enough; we can't ask more of him. He must take his mother and the other children and go with Hookpaw to the new colony. Let him be a defender to them on the way with his rifle."

"But prying up the scales may still work," said Leapwell.

Slimtalon visualized the effort of prying loose those iron-like reptilian scales. Whoever was doing the prying would need lots of protection, but it might work...

Then, as this image grew sharper in her mind, she pounced on a realization. "That's it! That's it! Oh, Brightburn, my love, you shall be avenged!" All eyes were on her as she continued: "It has GILLS as well! THAT'S where my husband struck back at his slayer: he tore at its gills! The gill-flaps would be at least as easy to pry up as the scales, probably far easier to lay hold of; and almost any wound inflicted inside there would sever some blood vessels!"

"Hurrah for you, Grandmother!" exclaimed Shatterneck. "We'll get the filthy thing now!"

Slimtalon grew solemn again. "But consider this: any tiger attacking the monster's gills will be within reach of its foreclaws. That didn't matter to my beloved; he was dying already, with nothing to lose. It was enough then for him that he saved those Otters. But I don't want any of us to die needlessly. So don't attack only the gills; the scale-prying and joint-biting are still worth trying also. Take whatever opening Aslan's providence grants us; but I believe that the gills will be decisive."

"Right," growled Quickspring with guarded optimism. "We'll form three teams, to attack the monster from three sides. Grandmother, your son and your daughter-in-law are the natural ones to fight beside you; and I'll trust them not to let YOU throw your life away needlessly. Shatterneck and Tawnydart are another natural team. Leapwell and Smoothtail, you'll be with me. If the Djinni can spare one of their number from their effort to deal with our human foes, he can operate independently, watching for his chance to exploit any opening we create. Now, everyone get a drink of water--um, after we pray for Aslan's mercy."

All eyes went to Slimtalon. The matriarch led them in a prayer:

"Almighty Aslan, You called us Talking Tigers from the beginning to be protectors of the weak. As a race, we have strayed far from this duty; but in Your grace You have given us another chance to fulfill it. I ask you to grant us victory over the evil that is drawing near: not for the sake of my personal grudge against that monster, but for the sake of all the lives that it threatens at this very moment. May all of the evil assailing us be thwarted, including and especially the demon Tash, on whom be Aslan's rebuke!"

"So say we all!" Quickspring concluded.

The Nine Djinni also held a conference, much more wordy and wandering in subject matter than that of the tigers. While the tigers were gathered among the trees, the Djinni were out in the open, on the side of the grove toward which danger was expected to approach. Zulika and the children were closely grouped around Kuzdikal, and thus were witnesses to the verbose discussion. During it, Bulgak sent frequent glances toward the east, in case his father or the monster (in Bulgak's mind, his father or the other monster) might appear before the Djinni were done spinning speeches.

Flazdigar opened the proceedings: "Brothers, let us note with honor the deeds of our three brothers who went with Bluntmuzzle and helped bring to safety these goodhearted Children of Adam and Eve. But that safety remains in doubt. We know the reasoning of the koala elders: that by defending this place AS IF there were no other sanctuary for koalakind, we may prevent our enemies from guessing the existence of the new settlement--in the event that our enemies prove strong enough that it even matters to mislead them."

Magladoth and Smedgarosh began here to digress about the options for koala habitation, options which were greatly broadened for the little creatures due to the help and protection the tigers could offer; they

even wondered if the koalas might in the near future attempt humanlike agriculture. Flazdigar eventually led everyone back to immediate concerns, for which Zulika was grateful. Zulika knew exactly why her son kept glancing to the east.

"We Djinni can, of course, provide a modest degree of healing of injuries to those who may be hurt in the impending confrontation," the First Djinn continued. "But in the present circumstances, repugnant though violence is to us, it will probably be our duty to contribute also to actual combat. Even if our hope to bring peace with Tisrukh is realized, Tisrukh may not be able to restrain the sea-beast from attacking this place."

The gentle courtesy that she had unfailingly encountered from the Djinni emboldened Zulika to speak up herself at this point: "Your hope of peace with Tisrukh WILL NOT be realized. I've tried to make--" even now, she could smile at the realization of what Kuzdikal had become for her; "--to make my betrothed realize this: Tisrukh is not merely a little bit unenlightened. He is EVIL, and he WANTS to be evil! He used to beat my poor brave son, just because he LIKED doing it! If nothing else, at least let your emissaries wear armor. I'm told that you Djinni possess three breastplates among you; let them be worn by the three peacemakers. Don't present complete vulnerability; Tisrukh will see it only as an invitation to attack!"

Zulika might have held her tongue if she had realized how many tangents the meeting would follow as soon as she spoke of evil. All of the Djinni began chattering to her and to each other like schoolteachers, about the gradations of corruption in a soul, from simply being less than perfect to being diabolically committed to obstinate wickedness. They spoke of the poison that had come into the universe through the sin of Adam and Eve, of what it had done to all humanity thereafter, and how even the intelligent races of Narnia, though not directly inheriting Adam's curse, were still rendered more capable of sin than they would have been if mankind had not rebelled against the Emperor-Over-Sea, Who was God the Father.

Chibrigon said one relevant thing in the midst of this benign uproar: "Tisrukh will be as aware as we are that only about three hours' worth of daylight now remains; and he can't be so stupid as not to realize how tigers could come stalking him in the night. Perhaps a realization that he has overextended himself will make him less resistant to diplomacy than he otherwise would have been." This was followed by more digressions.

Zulika did not feel herself authorized to shut them up, so Kuzdikal intervened on her behalf. "Noble brothers, our time IS short. Let us return to the pragmatic. Davradon, Thurikeb and I already know what role we are to play in what is coming: we three will be the ones to offer peace to the hostile humans." He gave Zulika a reassuring caress when he said this, knowing how distressed she was at the thought of his walking up to Tisrukh unarmed. "But what actions are the others to undertake?"

"Whatever else is done," said Jeblajask, the Seventh Djinn, "at least one of us must be detailed to

assist the tigers against the sea-monster. Fighting the monster is the tigers' chief concern, in part because all of them are extremely reluctant to shed the blood of any human being, even one who is grossly warped out of moral shape. All of you know that, of the nine of us, I have had the most exposure to wet, muddy smells, due to my study of soil types and water tables. It follows that I should be the least susceptible to being troubled by the loathsome stench our brothers reported the monster as emitting. Thus, I propose to fight alongside the tigers."

Jeblajask's offer was unanimously approved--though it seemed all the comments dwelt on the logical soundness of it. Zulika, having been closer to the sea-monster than she ever wanted to be again, privately felt that they ought to be commending Jeblajask for his bravery, not his logic.

The Djinni's conference dragged on after the tigers had finished theirs. Quickspring came by to listen, just in time to witness the dismay of Zulika when Flazidgar said that she and her children should be sent away to the new settlement for their safety, Tisrukh being interested in retaking them. "Ploskavar, since Kuzdikal has to stay here, you shall escort them on his behalf," said Flazidgar. "No one will think you a coward for departing, as you have already done brave deeds. Moreover, if it be Aslan's will for the rest of us to perish, you will still be alive to teach toolmaking and metalworking to those who come after us. We only await Hookpaw's return to complete the new evacuation group."

They were not waiting very long for Hookpaw. Zulika was still sobbing on Kuzdikal's chest, while he comforted her as well as he could with words and kisses, when Hookpaw and Yugdug were sighted, galloping madly as if an elephant stampede were on their heels. Hookpaw tripped over something and took a spill--probably not the first time, all onlookers guessed, if he had been running so hard; but Yugdug recovered and remounted, and the two continued at the same speed.

It seemed obvious that they would have news to tell.

Bluntmuzzle and some of the koala sentries had to hurry out to intercept Hookpaw before he blindly ran into a bog hole. They then shepherd the panting tiger into the presence of Quickspring and the Djinni. There, the less-winded Yugdug described the close call he and Hookpaw had experienced with the magically-guided arrow.

"This," observed Magladoth, "makes the human threat potentially as deadly as the reptilian one." He turned to Davradon, one of the would-be negotiators. "Maybe you three should wear the breastplates, after all."

"Yes! Yes!" exclaimed Zulika.

"No," Davradon insisted. "The point of principle, giving Tisrukh every chance to make peace, is unchanged by this development."

Thurikeb then said, "But we could have three others behind us wearing the armor; then, if we are shot, those others would have some protection while applying life-encouragement to keep us from dying."

Flazdigar tugged his beard in thought. "That confirms having six of us committed just to this parley attempt; but I was expecting it to turn out that way. Ploskavar will be taking Hookpaw and the humans to the western haven; Jebblajask will be fighting the monster....We should have one Djinn in reserve, patrolling the perimeter of the grove in case of some unanticipated threat. Chibrigon, that one should be you--since, like Ploskavar, you have already had a turn at facing danger. So, Magladoth and Smedgarosh will don breastplates and bear weapons along with me."

Ploskavar laid a friendly hand on Hookpaw's head. "If you have the energy left to depart now, we should not delay. We should start moving, in case the enemy might try to head us off."

"Where is Lady Slimtalon?" inquired the blind tiger. "I smell her; I must say a word to her, and to Shatterneck, then I'll go." Those whom Hookpaw asked for were soon by his side.

"Shatterneck," said the former outlaw leader, "in case you might perish in the conflict that's coming, I implore you to forgive me for having made a criminal of you. I would that this blindness had befallen me the very day I first thought of murdering lions, rather than that I had brought you to exile."

Shatterneck touched noses with his old comrade. "Aslan is making use of our very exile to accomplish good; and He will cause the remainder of your life to produce good things as well. Go in peace, my friend, and be absolved."

Hookpaw next lay flat before the tigress matriarch in a posture of reverence. "Grandmother of the Tigers, little joy have you had of me. If it should be your lot to be reunited soon with your gallant mate in Aslan's Country, tell him that I beg him not to despise me."

Slimtalon kissed her penitent son-in-law. "Even before joining my dearest love up there, I already know that he does not despise you. Brightburn could not be in disagreement with Aslan, and Aslan will never despise a contrite heart. Go in peace, but in haste."

Hookpaw rose to his feet, seeming to have gained his second wind. "Thank you, most virtuous Lady Slimtalon; and my thanks to all whom I ought to thank. May Aslan's power guard you all. Yugdug, thank you for letting me run free once more. Ploskavar, I am at your service, as soon as we pick up that grandmother koala who is to ride my back as we go."

This also meant a most reluctant goodbye for Zulika. Clinging to Kuzdikal one more time and kissing him passionately, she choked words out through her desperate tears: "My love, my hero, you **MUST NOT** die! With my children to live for, it would be false if I said I would die without you; but this joy so briefly dangled before me will die if you perish. No other man will ever see in my eyes the

longing with which I look upon you. LIVE, therefore, beloved Djinn, and make with me a life of the honest work we spoke about!" One more searching, pledging kiss, and they parted.

Bulgak wanted to give something to his hoped-for stepfather; but he felt thwarted by Kuzdikal's intention of carrying no weapons today. So the boy approached Flazdigar. "Sir, this sheathed dagger belonged until recently to him who is my father in flesh only. It would please me greatly if it might be returned to him, point first, up to the hilt in his rotten heart."

Flazdigar accepted the slightly-curved blade, then surprised Bulgak by hugging him. "Good lad, it is right for you to condemn your flesh-father's wickedness; but I hope that you can learn in time to forgive him. By 'forgive,' I do not mean to make excuses for his crimes, but to hope that he may find pardon as this tiger Hookpaw did. If Aslan wills it, you and I will discourse about these things on another day. For now, keep your mother, your sister, and your future bride safe. I believe the koalas have some provisions wrapped up for you to take on your journey. Go with the Lion's grace upon you!"

After careful inspection of the ground where a tiger and some smaller creature had been, Tisrukh's party concluded that the animals had been acting under the direction of the Djinni, probably as a diversion. But a diversion from what?

"If there's any kind of town or camp near here, there must be magic hiding it from us," Dobrinya muttered. "Great Son of Destiny, perhaps you should send one of those arrows flying directly ahead of us, and see if it bumps into some invisible houses or an invisible city wall." Although the Cossack remembered to address his old friend as royalty, he was in a foul mood from having to carry two stinking hyena heads in his saddlebags.

"Perhaps what baffles our quest is not outright magic, but a failure to realize what we're looking for," speculated Orhan. "Has not Empress Iskralida said that, in her native land, there are little people who live in homes under the earth?"

"What I want to know," grumbled Suleiman, "is what we plan to do with, or to, any sort of people that we do find. Seven of us, plus a sea-dragon and a magic bow, make a good enough raiding party to kill some people or animals, and to make off with some plunder--but not an army to conquer and hold a piece of territory. I understand, um, sire, that avenging my brother's death and running your treasonous former wife to ground are worthy goals if it pleases you to deem them worthy; but without presuming to advise the mouthpiece of inexorable Tash, I would like to know if you think we are going to uncover those Djinni whom your noble cousin judges to be a menace to us."

"I believe we may see them any moment," said Rashid, one of the two ungrateful beneficiaries of Aslan's resurrecting power. "But I trust in Tash to lead us in any case. The sea-beast already almost caught those who so offended our Tsar; when it has finished eating whatever it is it's finding to eat off yonder, no doubt it'll guide us to whatever Tash wants it and us to kill."

Tisrukh, in the middle of drinking from a rider's flask, belched in his haste to commend the youth. "Well spoken, Rashid! I see that your heart is true to the task." Then he looked expectantly at Ismayil.

Feeling Tisrukh's gaze, the other ingrate satisfied the expectation: "We don't need to know every step ahead of us, to know that infallible Tash will take us to a great victory over the verminous lackeys of the detested Lion!"

Rashid added, "And when we're finished, there'll be no more talk, anywhere in our Emperor's domain, of the Lion's foolish notions about so-called justice. The weak shall serve the strong, the strong shall serve the strongest, and mighty Tisrukh shall live forever!"

"Well, I'm glad I _am_ fairly strong," remarked Suleiman, looking at the cavalry lance he carried. "Once I fire the one shot in my pistol, and the one reload I have left, this lance and a hatchet will be the only weapons I have to slay my ruler's enemies with. I hope the shaman and his son do well with their un-magic arrows; and I hope the dragon-thing keeps at its part of the job."

It was not much longer before the monster seemed to return to duty, leading them westward again. But after only a few minutes of this, it veered to its right. "Shall we follow it?" asked Urgut, the shaman's son.

Tisrukh looked straight before him. "I think not. My heart tells me that Tash wishes us to ride on in our present direction. See those treetops on the horizon? I believe we will find that some kind of people dwell among those trees--people whom we can kill. And I believe that the monster is being led by Tash to make a separate attack, in the god's own timing."

Kuzdikal trod the safe path between bog holes, shown to him by the koalas. Davradon and Thurikeb followed him till it was safe to walk abreast; then Davradon stepped to his left and Thurikeb to his right. The three brothers wore nothing but trousers. It would have been easy to conceal weapons inside their robes; but they had no intention of telling a lie when they said they were unarmed. Lying was something they had never attempted in all their lives up to now--not that there had been many opportunities, in a world still so sparsely peopled.

At a fifty-pace interval behind them were Flazdigar, Magladoth and Smedgarosh, who made no secret of being armed. The First Djinn carried an iron-headed gravel-rake and a bronze trowel (he had been working on a landscaping project just before Kuzdikal's fateful encounter with Tarkan), plus the steel dagger Bulgak had given him before leaving. The Second Djinn bore a flint-headed spear presented to him by the koalas, a sling of his own making with ten stones brought from the desert, and a small bronze knife that was intended more as a tool than a weapon. The Ninth Djinn had a wooden mallet also given by the koalas, a knife like Magladoth's, and a one-handed iron pickaxe made for him by Ploskavar (who had an identical one as his principal weapon on the just-begun march west with Zulika

and Hookpaw).

"I feel from the air that the monster is not far off," said Magladoth to his two companions.

"Yet not very near," Flazdigar answered, "or the koalas would have seen it from their perches in the trees."

"It's truly remarkable," Smedgarosh reflected, "how much even relatively small depressions and rises in the earth's contours can conceal things from an onlooker. I was just doing a little trigonometry in my head, trying to calculate how close the monster could come to the tree-village on several possible approach vectors, before being seen by one of the koalas, assuming a tree whose highest climbable point--" The Ninth Djinn fell silent in mid-sentence, as he and the others noticed hand signals from Kuzdikal, to the effect that the nomad horsemen were approaching.

Thurikeb, who was in a position to do so, made signals of his own to the koala outposts. The koalas in those camouflaged positions would do nothing to reveal their presence, except in the most extreme emergency. The Djinni all fervently hoped that their cute new friends would not have to be drawn into the action.

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The seven horsemen had only a very slight rise to cross before they would be in clear sight of the Djinni, whom they had heard speaking among themselves. Tisrukh hastily instructed Orhan, "You speak for me, unless I start to speak for myself. Make it simple: demand surrender and submission, you can fill in the phrases. I'll want to be free to keep my concentration on THIS;" and he shot one of his remaining three arrows off to one side. With his focussed will, Tisrukh made the arrow come back near him, inconspicuously orbiting in tight loops around his horse at fetlock-level. This would allow him to appear as if he were not about to use his bow. It would allow him to appear willing to talk, yet leave him the option of making a deadly attack at any instant.

The other men had enough sense not to stare at the circling arrow, lest their being seen to stare at it should give away the surprise. They turned their minds to other things. In Urgut's case, this meant muttering to Suleiman, "If there are Djinni women, they should be worth dragging off!"

Kuzdikal surveyed the nomads as they advanced in line abreast. The assortment of weapons he had seen Bulgak wielding helped him to assess the firepower of Tisrukh's party.

Farthest to Kuzdikal's left rode the two youngest nomads. Each of these held a rifle whose mechanism seemed similar to Bulgak's flintlock pistol; that would mean a slow reload after every shot. But he had no doubt that they were highly accurate; needing to make each bullet count would promote careful aim. Next over was a man set apart by his European facial features; this must be the one Zulika had

described as almost becoming her second husband. He had a bolt-action rifle similar to the one Bulgak used: probably still single-shot, but far faster to reload. He also had a curved sword, whereas the first two seemed to have only long daggers for close work. But perhaps the butts of those muskets were sturdy enough to double as clubs.

The one in the middle had to be Tisrukh. There was enough cruel smugness on his face for ten far-fallen Sons of Adam. He too had a bolt-action rifle (Bulgak had mentioned that his father had found a replacement among the effects of the deceased slave traders), AND that enchanted bow about which Yugdug had warned them. But he seemed to be in no hurry to use either of them. Kuzdikal almost thought that he saw some unusual movement near the feet of Tisrukh's horse, but the intermittent shrubbery made it hard to be sure.

On Tisrukh's left rode the oldest man in the party, a balding and somewhat fat man, but still vigorous. This man had a bow, a curved sword--and a revolver like the one Bulgak had used up. Next to him was a youth with a marked family resemblance to the balding one. This youth also had a bow, and his quiver had the largest quantity of arrows--probably because he did not have any firearm. He did have an impressive axe, though. Farthest out on Kuzdikal's right was a man who looked to be at the exact middle point of the age range in the group. He bore a long spear, possibly the most dangerous melee weapon in the party; and in his sash was a flintlock pistol.

Since the peace initiative had been the idea of Davradon and Thurikeb, Kuzdikal had felt it would be wrong for them not to be able to do any of the talking. He had accordingly taught each of them one Turkic sentence to say by rote (and had of course explained the meaning). Now Davradon called out to the horsemen, "Travellers from afar, we greet you in peace!" Next, Thurikeb shouted, "Let us talk together!"

The balding man, evidently with Tisrukh's approval, urged his horse ahead of the others. As he did so, he let the Djinni plainly see that he was unstringing his bow.

"That's a hopeful sign," remarked Thurikeb.

"It would be more hopeful if he also put away that fire-weapon he carries," Davradon replied. "Kuzdikal, the rest is up to you--under the will of Aslan."

Kuzdikal stepped forward a few paces; and since Tarkan, who had met him before, was not present, he introduced himself.

"I am Kuzdikal, the Fourth Djinn of the Great Desert. With me are my brothers, Davradon and Thurikeb. Speaking for all the Djinni, and for other inhabitants of this region, we invite you to discuss with us how your people can live in harmony and mutual benefit with us and our friends."

"I am Orhan, son of Kurgan, descendant of the great Kalor Clan, and servant of the invincible Emperor Tisrukh, may he live forever!" The balding man sounded like one accustomed to speechmaking. "There is little to discuss, for you have already offered peace."

Kuzdikal raised a curious eyebrow. "But peace IS the very thing to be discussed! Learning each other's ways, exchanging knowledge: there are--"

"Is this world filled with simpletons?" Orhan interrupted. "The only possible meaning of peace is that you, and all talking tigers and birds who may be hereabouts, instantly and unreservedly surrender yourselves to the unchallengeable authority of Tisrukh, who is the chosen one of the great god Tash!"

"Perhaps I have not mastered your language as well as I thought I had," said Kuzdikal, maintaining his calm. "I thought that 'peace' connoted some degree of mutual goodwill. We have shown goodwill, in that the first of us to meet you are unarmed. Had we ill-will toward you, we could have simply let you ride into bog holes and be drowned; for there are many bog holes as you draw closer to the tree-village back there."

Orhan puffed himself up. "It is the proper act of a good slave that you inform your masters of such hazards. When my master formally accepts the submission of all who dwell in that primitive settlement, they can come forth onto solid ground to prostrate themselves."

Kuzdikal was finding it harder to keep a friendly tone. "There will be no prostrating, Orhan, son of Kurgan. I have heard that the Almighty in His patience allowed men to initiate the owning of persons by other persons in the world you come from; but there is to be no such atrocity in the Narnian world. Even kings here are obliged to respect the rights of all reasoning beings, or answer to Aslan for it. Freedom is Aslan's gift to all who think rationally."

Orhan snorted. "Back in Russia, there are men talking freedom--and throwing bombs!" He gave Kuzdikal no chance to ask what a "bomb" was, but ranted on: "Only anarchy will come of their deeds; but the incomparable Tisrukh will bring order to this world, no thanks to your overrated Lion. Tisrukh shall give iron-hard laws, to the greater glory of Tash!"

Kuzdikal allowed himself to frown. "I hesitate to reproach you for worshipping Tash, ignorant as you are; but Tash is a false god, and his deluded followers will not impose their will on us. All the same, there is no reason why we cannot--"

Orhan interrupted once more: "Witless barbarian, do not dare to defy Tash! His lightning bolts may fall on you from above at any moment!"

Exerting more willpower to keep his voice level, Kuzdikal said, "We also used to believe that lightning fell from the sky. But what actually happens is that electrical charges in the soil shoot UP to form an

arc with opposite charges in the clouds. There are also cloud-to-cloud discharges, which--"

The next interruption came from the young archer. Bringing his horse up alongside Orhan and nocking an arrow, he shouted, "Cease to mock my father, and cease to defy my Tsar! All of you must beg for mighty Tisrukh's mercy, or die!"

The wind had been completely still for the past hour. No scent could reach any nose in and around the koalas' grove, to tell them that the monster was circling at a distance to reach the western side. The tigers and Jeblajask were gathered on the eastern fringe of the trees, expecting the monster to come up alongside its human allies.

Hookpaw, Zulika, Bulgak, Dilnara, Monduli, and the last elderly koala to be evacuated, had made a clean getaway, convoyed by a vigilant Ploskavar. Yugdug had gone aloft, to reassure his bride that he was uninjured after his wild gallop astride Hookpaw. They went along arboreal walkways to their own platform near the southwest edge of the tree-town, to snatch a little food before going back to watch the outcome of the Djinni's placating overtures. Chibrigon, the Third Djinn, was trotting briskly around the less-guarded three-quarters of the perimeter (north, west and south) and back the other way. At one of his passes below them, Tinkswid called down to him, "Do you know how your brothers are managing?"

Chibrigon shrugged. "We Djinni can sometimes sense distant events in a vague way, but we can't see through each other's eyes or send verbatim words across the miles. I'm as much in the dark about their success as poor Ploskavar is, out there on the grassland. You two, at least, can go back to the east side and look for yourselves."

"Most of our people who are still in the grove, ARE over there watching," said Yugdug. "We'll be rejoining them shortly."

Chibrigon resumed his watchman's circuit; but after scarcely ten paces he turned toward his koala friends again. "Do you hear something out there?" He gestured northwestward with the sharp-ended iron spade he was carrying as a weapon.

Tinkswid listened with all her concentration. "I don't hear anything but a few birds."

"I feel something," said Chibrigon. "Please tell the tigers and Seventh Brother that I'm having a look to see if the monster is trying for a surprise rush at this side of the grove."

Tinkswid and Yugdug looked at each other. The much-discussed sea monster was bad enough, anywhere near the koala colony. But to have it closing in with NO tigers in its path to contest its onslaught...

The newlywed koalas raced through the branches as fast as they could.

Ismayil, one of the two young men who had achieved the dubious feat of ignoring Aslan having raised them from the dead, found his pride in this achievement suddenly weakening from the moment Kuzdikal began speaking. Something in the Djinn's voice was uncannily like the voice of Aslan. He stole a sidelong look to his right; Rashid showed no sign of being affected by what Ismayil was feeling. But Ismayil could not help reflecting on what the Djinn said about freedom. The nomads had long resented being under the heel of the Russian Empire; but was Tisrukh not proposing to do to others the same thing the nomads resented having done to them?

"We beg for nothing," said Kuzdikal; "but we still _offer_ peace--and with peace, truth. It is Aslan Who is the true God, and He has more to offer you than Tash ever could."

"No!" shouted Orhan. "Tash is above all! Inexorable Tash! Inexorable Tash!"

Kuzdikal's controlled voice cut through the shaman's bellowing. "Even if your so-called Emperor will not make peace, any individual among you is welcome to forsake the lies of Tash, and come--"

Screaming a curse, Urgut loosed his arrow. He meant to kill Kuzdikal, but his aim was off. It was Thurikeb whom the arrow struck--almost. At the last instant, Thurikeb's hand flashed up like a striking snake and caught the arrow before it could pierce his chest. Meanwhile, Orhan was leaning over to slap his undisciplined son's face.

Tisrukh judged this to be a good time to start his magic arrow on its roundabout way. Orhan was keeping the Djinni's attention on himself, saying, "My son acted without permission! We will spare all your lives if you submit. But the woman called Zulika, if she is with you, must be handed over to us, to receive the due punishment for her crimes; and the talking goose who dared to assault me shall be--" Orhan stopped talking then, as he saw that his audience was about to be skewered.

The mind-guided arrow plunged into Davradon's left side...came out his right side...bypassed Kuzdikal, because he stood farther forward...passed through Thurikeb in the same fashion as Davradon...and then, as the two injured Djinni fell to earth, circled sharply back to dart at Kuzdikal...but not fast enough to strike him before he caught it and snapped it apart.

All pretense of negotiation being forgotten, the horsemen advanced together. Tisrukh was already fitting another arrow to his magic bow, and everyone with a firearm besides Tisrukh was taking aim. But their aim was disrupted by an unexpected intervention, as Nubdarp and three other koalas popped up from cover and began volleying wet-clay sling-missiles at the nomads. Every shot hit somebody; none of the hits inflicted serious damage, but the interference caused all the gunshots to go wild, except for one from the man farthest away from the koalas. That one, Rashid, was shooting past the three Djinn ambassadors, at the armed ones farther back. He struck Magladoth in the chest, but Magladoth's

breastplate warded off the bullet. The horses, being struck by throw-sticks that followed after the sling barrage, reared up and stopped advancing for the moment.

No mortal eye noticed that Ismayil, for his part, had fired his musket off target on purpose. He reloaded as slowly as he could manage, looking to see what happened next.

Hoping that his armored brethren could cope with the treacherous assault, Kuzdikal dropped to his knees and stretched out his hands toward his wounded brethren. He willed a great surge of shared vitality to flow into Davradon and Thurikeb; then he dragged them closer together, so that he could physically press his hands over the exit wounds of both, physically slowing the flow of blood at the same time that he strove to encourage life in their traumatized bodies. He could hear new gunshots, apparently directed against the koalas; and he could hear Flazdigar, Magladoth and Smedgarosh running toward him. Then he felt a burning pain: a non-magical arrow, sent by Urgut with more deliberate aim, had given him a flesh wound. But it was not severe enough to halt his efforts to help the worse-damaged Sixth and Eighth Djinni.

And Ismayil beheld a remarkable sight. The three Djinni to the rear, though their speed of movement made it plain that they could have been upon the horsemen much faster than a musket could be reloaded, were not attempting a counterattack. Two of them ran to help their wounded brothers, while a third, the one with the odd-looking rake, shouted "Nubdarp!" and seemingly ran to the aid of one of the little furry people who had launched the sling volley.

Could these be the same Djinni who Tarkan had insisted were fierce enemies?

Slimtalon and her daughter-in-law Elkfinder were perched on a low, sturdy limb of one of the easternmost trees in the koalas' grove, watching for the sea monster to make its appearance. The rest of the tigers, with Jeblajask, were congregated on the ground below them, watching (and faintly, partially hearing) the interplay between Kuzdikal and Orhan.

When Tisrukh's enchanted arrow felled both Davradon and Thurikeb, Jeblajask was in agony. He knew there was cause for him to stay focussed on combatting the monster, and he knew that his three armored brethren were competent to cope with emergencies; but he still wanted to race out and help them, unarmored though he was.

A moment after the first gunshots, though, Jeblajask and the tigers were given something else to think about, as Tinkswid and Yugdug dropped from a higher branch almost onto Slimtalon's back, both babbling at once about the monster.

Quickspring looked up from below. "Talk slower! Did you see the reptile?"

"No," Tinkswid replied, "but Chibrigon felt him near: west and a little bit north."

Quickspring looked west, east, and up again. "Grandmother, do you think the creature has the brains to come by stealth?"

Slimtalon's muscles tautened. "He who sent it, Aslan rebuke him, has the brains. Leapwell! Go to help the Djinni in Jeblajask's place: try to creep near them unseen and panic their horses! Bluntmuzzle, Elkfinder, Jeblajask--with me at once! Quickspring, keep the others in reserve unless you hear noise from our direction that confirms where the monster is."

Since Chibrigon was alone, Jeblajask now felt no ambivalence about hastening to his aid. With a great bronze-headed pruning hook in his hands, and a machete at his belt, he easily kept pace with his three tiger companions as they ran weavily between the thick boles of the trees. A few koalas called questions down to them, to which Slimtalon shouted back the reply, "Watch out! It may be coming from the west!"

By the time they had made their interior crossing of the koala colony, there was no more need to say "may be coming."

Not far outside the tree line, the shape like a giant long-necked crocodile was now plainly visible. Chibrigon was retreating before it--a fighting retreat. The monster's long hawser of a tongue lashed out time and again in attempts to catch and devour the Third Djinn; Chibrigon, dodging, answered each attempted grab with a clanging blow of his spade right against the monster's nose. Slimtalon, uttering the alarm roar that would summon Quickspring and the rest, swerved to come at the monster's right side. Jeblajask went with her, while Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder broke right to go at the monster's left side. Slimtalon claimed the honor of the first claw-swipe at the monster's neck, though she missed the gills. Jeblajask also tried for the gills with his pruning hook--only to have the weapon dashed out of his hands and its shaft broken by a huge clawed and webbed forefoot.

Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder attacked just as the others were rebounding from their first pass. Elkfinder made a feint at the head which did no damage, but gave Bluntmuzzle an opening to pounce onto the sea-beast and try to yank a few scales loose.

No longer having to face the monster alone, Chibrigon briefly allowed himself to feel the sickening effect of its rotten wet smell. Scrambling back from the melee, he bent over and vomited.

By the time Chibrigon felt able to fight again, Jeblajask, machete now in hand, had fallen smoothly into the rhythm with Slimtalon, as they and the young tigers alternated attacks like a lion pride wearing down a difficult prey. Right flank...left flank...right flank...left flank...some attacks nearer the monster's head, others farther back along its body. They could not count on the monster not having the intelligence to notice predictable patterns.

Nubdarp and one other koala had been wounded by bullets, but not critically. The second koala had the bullet embedded in one arm; Flazdigar dug it out with Tisrukh's dagger, then exerted all his will to give a surge of life-encouragement to the two casualties. To the unhurt ones he said, "Now, help these two get away on the retreat route you planned!"

Smedgarosh, meanwhile, was bandaging Kuzdikal's flesh wound with a torn-off piece of his robe sleeve. This done, he said, "Now, let me take over for you!" Moving into Kuzdikal's place, he began applying his own life-power to Davradon and Thurikeb, keeping hunkered down to present as small a target as possible.

Magladoth sent one of his sling-stones at Tisrukh. Struck on the left hand, the petty emperor lost hold of his magic bow; cursing thunderously, he dismounted to retrieve it. His hand was numb; but if he could get an arrow on the string at all, even a feeble effort at shooting it should bring the enchantment into play. Meanwhile, Dobrinya got off a shot that barely missed Smedgarosh's head before he was stunned by Magladoth's next stone--for the Second Djinn had sensed that the Cossack was a great potential threat with his rifle. But before Magladoth could send another stone, Orhan's revolver and Suleiman's flintlock pistol were both sending bullets at his head--the two men having seen that a body shot was no good.

Such was the reaction speed of the Djinni that Magladoth could actually see the two bullets as they flew at him. Yanking his head down, he escaped having his brain splattered; but he was not fast enough to evade the bullets entirely. Both sides of the crown of his head were hit, and he fell unconscious and bleeding. Kuzdikal turned his efforts to preserving Magladoth's life, while Smedgarosh continued as he was with the other two.

Ismayil, taking all this in, realized that Magladoth probably could have slain Tisrukh and Dobrinya with those stones, but that he had only incapacitated them. And now, even under deadly threat, each of the Djinni was more concerned for helping the injured than for protecting himself.

This was not the picture Tarkan and Tisrukh had painted.

Staring mesmerized at the huddled group of Djinni, Ismayil did not see Flazdigar emerge from the koalas' vacated position and hurl his bronze trowel, which knocked the revolver out of Orhan's grasp. What Ismayil saw was a more compelling sight:

A lion--without question, THE Lion--was standing just behind the group of Djinni, gazing upon them with what seemed like the loving gaze of a Father upon good, obedient children.

Then He raised His head and looked Ismayil straight in the eye.

None of the other nomads could see Aslan; but they heard him, and some saw him, as he fired his

musket harmlessly up in the air, trying to call a halt to the attack. "Stop! Stop it!" he cried frantically. "The Lion is here, and it is the Lion Whom we should be serving!"

"You lie, blast you!" shouted Rashid, swinging his musket-stock against Ismayil's head and knocking him out of the saddle. But Ismayil, still conscious, rose to his feet, gesticulating.

"Stop the attack! There's no REASON for it! This world is big enough to--"

That was as far as Ismayil got before his throat was pierced, choking off his cries. Tisrukh had managed to get another arrow in flight, and had used it for the sake of his great priority: silencing the truth.

Dying on the muddy ground, Ismayil was still the only one who could see Aslan. The gleaming Lion stood over him now, saying softly to him:

"Just a moment now, My child, and the pain will pass. You are about to enter a much larger world, where all the willful stupidity that murdered you is remembered only as a laughable folly; and there, I will introduce you to a man who once hung on the cross next to Mine..."

Back on the west side of the grove, Chibrigon added unpredictability as he rejoined the fray. Making a daring headlong dive, he slid under the monster's massive neck, set his spade against the inside of the left jaw hinge, and tried with all his strength to dislocate the jaw. All he accomplished, however, was to be grasped around the waist by the monster's tongue, as that snaky tongue whipped over the monster's chin and under the throat. The Third Djinn would have been the first dead Djinn in another instant, had not Slimtalon and Jeblajask intervened; the Seventh Djinn jammed the point of his machete into the monster's right nostril, while Slimtalon clawed the tentacle-tongue just above the part holding Chibrigon.

Released, but exponentially more nauseated by that foul tongue's contact, Chibrigon feebly crawled away while the younger tigers were making their next attack; he made it only a short distance to one side before fainting. Jeblajask retrieved his brother's dropped spade, and began delivering blows with both hands--machete, spade, machete, spade--at every opportunity.

But the battle was not stationary. The monster gained ground bit by bit, until it was among the trees; then it suddenly grappled with one mighty trunk, loosening the roots until a second later the whole tree--fortunately with no koalas in it--came toppling heavily toward Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder. They evaded the falling tree, but their evasive action left space for the monster to push another tree at Slimtalon and Jeblajask. The tigress matriarch and the Seventh Djinn also escaped being crushed; but peripheral branches, and the vine-ropes of a wrecked koala walkway, came down all around them, impeding their movement. And like a high wave washing over a coastal rock, the great reptile swarmed over the fallen tree in an effort to reach and Slimtalon and bite her in half before she could struggle

free.

It might have succeeded--if not for the simultaneous onslaught of Quickspring and Shatterneck, both of whom laid hold on the monster's long, tree-thick neck and bit in hard where their jaws first connected. Tawnydart and Smoothtail were close behind the males, lunging together at a hind leg and trying to pull that foot out from under its owner. All four of the reinforcing tigers were flung off, but not before Slimtalon and Jeblajask had gotten into the clear, while Chibrigon recovered somewhat and picked up the hooked half of his brother's broken pruning hook.

Everything up to now had been little more than preliminary skirmishing. Now the monster knocked over three smaller trees with its tail, and one larger one with its right shoulder, giving itself more maneuvering room before nine adversaries converged on it. Some koalas, aware of the new threat by this time, began flinging every missile available to them at the dragon-thing, having no discernible effect on it. When one of their throwing-sticks hit Smoothtail in the head, almost causing her to be caught by a tongue-attack, the koalas quit throwing and started praying.

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Like almost all beasts of the Narnian world, Leapwell had never been attacked with firearms; but she had seen the wounds her matriarch bore, and knew she would accomplish little for her friends if she simply got shot to death in her first onset. So she approached the nomads on a curving trajectory, using all available cover--and being careful not to fall into any bog holes as she went.

What stung her to greater haste was glimpsing how an arrow shot by Urgut caught Kuzdikal unprepared, sinking into his right lung. That left four wounded Djinni all in a cluster, with Smedgarosh still making no effort to defend himself as he strove now to extend his life-power to all four of the others. Flazdigar was drawing fire away from the rest, but even with his breastplate he would not survive much longer at this rate.

Rising up and showing herself, Leapwell gave out a hearty roar. It should have panicked all the horses...but it did not. Apparently, whatever influence from Tash had prevented the dumb beasts from being afraid of the sea monster, was also suppressing their fear of normal predators.

Leapwell grimly decided that she would have to be prepared to shed human blood after all. She charged at the nearest enemy, Rashid. With a zigzagging approach vector, she took only a grazing impact from the musket shot he fired at her, no worse than what Slimtalon had suffered before. Once within reach, she made a soaring leap that carried her clean over the stupefied horse, and carried Rashid with her off the other side.

Pinning the wide-eyed young man flat on the ground, Leapwell made one last bid not to have to kill him. "Go away, foolish human!" she said in English; though she knew he would not understand the

words, she guessed and hoped that he would get the idea when she allowed him to sit up.

Rashid seemed subdued and no longer threatening; but Leapwell's attention was now seized by an arrow from Orhan parting her fur. Alarmed by the unexpectedness of the near miss, Leapwell moved laterally toward some nearby bushes for concealment; but she had not gotten far when the stock of Rashid's musket crashed into her head, even more unexpectedly than the shaman's arrow. What Rashid lacked in wisdom, he made up for in speed; moving fast enough to exploit Leapwell's off-balance moment, he plunged a dagger into Leapwell's neck.

It was a serious wound, but still not a fatal one. Leapwell might have spared the young man's life even now--but she saw him drawing a second knife, and he had done enough damage that the tigress could no longer take him lightly. Therefore, as swiftly and cleanly as she could, she sprang upon Rashid and killed him.

He did not receive the sort of welcome into eternity that Ismayil had received.

For an instant, Leapwell thought that the grief of having been forced to slay a Son of Adam--something no tiger had ever yet done, even when they were at their worst--was causing the sharp pain she felt in her side. But no, it was two arrows hitting her: Tisrukh's last enchanted arrow entering her ribs, and an arrow from one of the ordinary archers piercing her left flank.

Her heart was not pierced, so she could hope to survive; but she had to get herself out of sight, lest she be finished off. She could do no more to help the Djinni.

The tigers, and the two Djinni with them, were keeping the monster wheeling this way and that to meet their ceaseless attacks. Twice Chibrigon managed, with the shortened pruning hook, to pry scales loose from the huge reptilian body--and, on return attacks, to draw blood from the exposed places. The blood, oddly, was blue in color. A corner of Chibrigon's mind remembered, years ago, receiving from the Mer-people some descriptions of aquatic life; they had mentioned fish with blue-colored blood.

But whatever the color, the sea monster was not so far losing enough blood to slow it down significantly. Nor did it seem to be capable of getting tired.

An attempt at reinforcements came: three male koalas, Yugdug among them, came swinging on ropes, armed with sharpened stakes, to drop onto--the monster's back. "No! Not on his back!" Slimtalon cried out, but too late. As soon as the tree-dwellers landed on their target, the sword-like spines popped up from their slots and stabbed all three. Wailing in pain, the koalas were stuck in place like gruesome decorations on their enemy's body.

Jebblajask was behind the monster at the moment the brave koalas were skewered. Letting his weapons fall to the ground, he ran right up the monster's tail, dodging around each spine or grasping it and

swinging around it. The furry ones, in their present plight, had nothing to lose by a rough rescue; so Jeblajask pulled the first one straight up off of the impaling point of bone...and hurled him high into the air. In the time this one was in flight, Jeblajask pulled the other two free (one of these being Yugdug), tucked one under each arm, hopped off the monster, tossed the koalas he held onto a leafy part of one of the fallen trees...and then made a prodigious leap, to catch the falling one still in the air and bring him down in a soft landing. "Chibrigon! You help these!" he shouted--since, of course, Chibrigon was more distressed by the monster's rotten stench, and so might as well take charge of trying to keep the koalas alive.

Understanding his brother's reasoning without need of discussion, Chibrigon ran to the koalas, at the same time tossing the bronze hook back to Jeblajask. While Chibrigon fought to keep the koalas from dying, Jeblajask resumed fighting the monster.

Tisrukh's little cavalry troop was down to four men, besides Tisrukh himself; and Dobrinya was just coming to. Tisrukh cursed Ismayil for falling with the next-to-last arrow still jammed in his neckbones, and cursed that tigress for having such a tough body that the last arrow had lost momentum...

"Orhan! Toss me another arrow!"

The shaman did so, while his son Urgut was wasting two other arrows shooting at the oncoming Flazdigar, who caught them both. Getting his replacement arrow airborne, Tisrukh made it flicker back and forth all around the First Djinn, forcing him to dodge it repeatedly, like a man harassed by a wasp.

While the one battle-ready Djinn close by was thus temporarily neutralized, Orhan barked to Urgut, "Here's your chance! Toss in the firepots--but watch for bog holes!"

Urgut, who still had five arrows unexpended, kicked his horse into motion. Not attempting to take the beleaguered Flazdigar at a disadvantage with another shot, he took up instead another weapon for another purpose. Behind his saddle, encased in a leather pouch to save the horse from scorching, hung two earthenware pots, tightly sealed but breakable, filled with live coals. The inside of the pouch was thoroughly smeared with sheep fat, in the hope that the whole thing would ignite quickly as soon as the coals were released. Riding as near as he dared to the trees, Urgut swung the pouch around his head and threw it. His throwing aim was better than his archery aim; the firepots broke as their container struck a thick tree trunk.

The shaman's son did not wait to see if the fire spread quickly; he wanted to get away from the shadowy trees, lest another tiger emerge from them to deal him the same end Rashid had met. He could hear the roars of what seemed a tiger army from somewhere out of sight.

Flazdigar, meanwhile, had finally rid himself of his lethal feathered wasp, swiping it out of the air with the tines of his gravel rake. Once he ascertained that Urgut's movement was not aimed at killing

Smedgarosh and those with him, Flazdigar did not spare a further glance in the direction Urgut had gone--because, not knowing the nomads' Turkic language, he had no idea that Orhan had instructed Urgut to try to burn down the koalas' grove. He supposed that the young man might have been told to go and see how the monster was faring.

But Flazdigar still had his own worries. Arrowless again, Tisrukh fired his rifle at the leading Djinn. He was trying for a head shot, but his aim was a little too low, so the bullet ricocheted from Flazdigar's breastplate, making him stagger but not damaging him. Dobrinya, firing an instant later, came closer to making the instant-kill hit from which no Djinn power could have revived Flazdigar; the Cossack's bullet furrowed Flazdigar's left cheek and took a piece out of the ear.

As Leapwell had shrunk from the thought of slaying a child of Adam and Eve, so did Flazdigar. The Djinni had tried their best to avoid such a recourse, to their own harm. Now, as Tisrukh and his friend worked the rifle bolts to reload, it became clear to the First Djinn that he was going to have to go on the offensive, up to and including slaying if necessary. Otherwise, Magladoth, Kuzdikal, Davradon, Thurikeb and probably Smedgarosh would be murdered in a matter of two minutes at most. Accordingly, Flazdigar hurled his rake through the air: not spear-like, but purposely whirling end for end in a horizontal plane.

The shaft of the rake struck Tisrukh in the face, knocking out one of his front teeth and spilling him over his horse's rear. Dobrinya, already dismounted, was made to duck by the sudden close movement of the unlikely missile; and when he fired his next shot, it was in too much haste, and it missed.

Suleiman, out of ammunition, saw his chance for glory, and charged his horse at the approaching Djinn with lance ready for a killing thrust. But Flazdigar ducked the stab and kept running, bearing down on Tisrukh. Dobrinya and Orhan, the former still mounted, both drew their sabers to meet him. Flazdigar drew the one weapon he had left: Tisrukh's own long dagger.

And all the while, Smedgarosh was fighting a still harder battle than what awaited Flazdigar. As he exerted his life-encouragement upon four fellow Djinni at once, the sensation for him was like trying to swim in one of the bog holes with a boulder or a log tied to him. After all, three of the four brethren to whom he was ministering had sucking chest wounds.

Urgut's crude firebomb did not so swiftly set the grove ablaze as he and his father had hoped it would. The koalas had long kept most undergrowth cleared away, to make it harder for predators that got past the bog holes to approach their trees by stealth; and a two-foot-thick living tree trunk simply does not burst into flame easily. But loose bark and smaller branches did start burning modestly on the tree the device had hit; and two or three minutes later, several koala noses picked up a burning smell, prompting the owners of the noses to investigate.

Meanwhile, the tigers had gotten more of the feel of the monster's movements--at a cost. Elkfinder,

thinking herself relatively safe making a distraction attack on the monster's tail, had been struck by that same tail as if by another falling tree--to learn by experience how Zulika felt having broken ribs. Two more koalas who had come to the scene scurried in and hauled her out of immediate danger.

Quickspring, who had faced the menace of the monster's tongue and jaws at close range more than any of the others, had at last gotten a good grip on a gill flap with his teeth and begun to tug it outward--only to be severely clawed by a webbed forefoot, which then came crushingly down on his hindquarters besides, fracturing one leg. Jeblajask hacked at that webbed foot with his hook, then laid hold of Quickspring and dragged him clear--while Slimtalon shouted to the rest, "Take out a forelimb, _then_ get the gills!"

Slimtalon chose an instant when the monster's head was turned one way, snapping at Shatterneck (who also had borne a more than equal share of danger near the thing's head), to attack the foreleg on the other side. Finding a spot where scales had been loosened in previous attacks, she got in a good bite, filling her mouth with a rancid fishy taste.

Tawnydart pounced on the opening Slimtalon had given her, going for a gill flap. The monster, however, did have enough brains to realize its own vulnerability--the more so after Quickspring's bite. Before Tawnydart could obtain the grip she wanted, she was herself gripped by the snaky tongue. Not many coherent words had come from the tigers' mouths once the battle had started; but now Tawnydart screamed in speech-voice, "HELP!"

Even as she cried for help, she also helped herself. Instead of simply pulling straight against the pull of the horrid appendage, the tigress moved _with_ its pull, but at an upward angle. She succeeded in vaulting above the reptilian snout, where she sank every possible tooth and claw into the scales of the monster's face to anchor herself. Now it was a grim tug-of-war, in which Tawnydart felt as if she were the rope as well as being a contestant. Even as its tail found another target, knocking the wind out of Smoothtail, the monster set itself to reel in and consume its prey. By pulling against claws that were dug into its hide, the monster loosened many of its own facial scales--but it was also loosening Tawnydart's desperate grip.

Tawnydart, however, did not have a husband for nothing. Shatterneck went for the tongue, finding the same part that Slimtalon had clawed before and biting there with all his force. The monster injured itself trying to shake him off, but Shatterneck held on and bit harder, while bracing his forepaws against chin and snout to try to keep himself outside those jaws.

If the monster had let go of Tawnydart, it might have saved its tongue; but it was furiously determined to devour the troublesome quarry that was hurting its face. Besides pain, the sea-beast was driven by maddening hunger with so much edible meat all around. It kept on tugging and yanking--until suddenly it no longer had the outer two-thirds of its tongue to yank with. Shatterneck had bitten clean through, drenching his own face with an abrupt fountain of slick, fishy, bluish blood. "Tawnydart! Are you--?" he began to ask, even as he tried to regain his footing and scramble clear. In a frenzied rush of jumbled

awareness, he could hear Tawnydart jumping back down onto the ground; he heard her shouting his name in that voice he loved so well...saw the lunging monster's jaws opening wider, blotting out the trees and the sky...felt huge teeth amid the darkness coming down and snapping his backbone, while other teeth tore into his chest from below, the teeth meeting in his heart...

And all at once the monster, the other tigers, and the koalas' grove were gone. Shatterneck was lying, all in one piece again, on the sweet, fragrant grass of Aslan's Country; and Aslan Himself was gazing upon him and saying, "Well done, My child, well done indeed."

The Djinn leader was an intimidating sight, advancing resolutely without seeming to notice the bleeding wound on the left side of his face. Between Flazdigar's physical superiority, and his brain's innate ability to calculate the most likely movements of others, no Son of Adam--unless it were one of the very best warriors Earth ever produced--would have been able to beat the Djinn in unarmed combat. But where edged weapons were involved, Flazdigar's flesh was just as vulnerable to being cut or punctured as anyone else's. And the sabers wielded by Dobrinya and Orhan gave them a reach advantage.

To avoid being boxed in, Flazdigar darted to the side of Orhan's horse away from Dobrinya. The Cossack then decided to remount his own horse, while Flazdigar was busy parrying savage saber-cuts from Orhan with Tisrukh's dagger. Before Dobrinya could even return to the fray, Flazdigar had fresh lance-thrusts from Suleiman to cope with as well. Fortunately, before the Djinn had three outreaching weapons all menacing him at once, he found an opening to grab Orhan's ankle and pull the shaman out of the saddle. A backfist punch to the ear put Orhan out of action for the moment; but when Flazdigar tried to take his saber, he was thwarted, having to spring back to evade a terrific stroke of Dobrinya's blade.

He might have tried for a chance to vault onto Orhan's horse and catch Dobrinya by surprise with a flying tackle from there; but a lance-jab that missed him, wounded Orhan's horse. Distressed by the poor animal's harsh scream of pain, Flazdigar wished he could aid the beast; but any attempt to do so would only have meant the Djinn's death.

Besides, there still was Tisrukh to be reckoned with. The petty emperor did not seem to have a sword, and his magic bow had no more arrows; but he did have more bullets for his bolt-action rifle. Flazdigar had to use perfect timing to drop under the shot aimed at his head.

Further evasive action--which included evading a swing of Tisrukh's rifle butt, when Tisrukh found the boldness to do that much at close range--brought something good. Flazdigar's hope of retrieving his iron-headed rake was disappointed; the motions of combat were not letting him get to where he could reach it, otherwise he would soon have had Suleiman and Dobrinya out of their saddles and sprawling in the dirt; but he did find the trowel he had thrown. This gave him, at least, two weapons to parry the attacks of lance and saber.

When Orhan recovered, he saw that his horse was hurt, and that Ismayil's and Rashid's were not close enough to catch quickly; so, not being a coward, the shaman charged on foot. Dobrinya and Suleiman shifted their horses to accommodate Orhan, and suddenly Flazdigar was in the center of a lethal triangle, dancing a deadly dance in which he had to ward off weapons from every direction.

When Dobrinya, no slouch at swordplay, got in a cut on Flazdigar's left shoulder just outside the shoulder-piece of his breastplate, the Djinn realized that, if he wished to live to see which of the liberated slave women Aslan would pair him with, he would have to be willing at least to _inconvenience_ a horse. Diving beneath Dobrinya's mount, the First Djinn surged up against its belly, lifting the animal entirely off the ground (though this filled his wounded shoulder with agony) to drop it on its side, pinning one of Dobrinya's legs under it.

Dobrinya, however, proved himself a true Cossack. While Flazdigar dodged another bullet from Tisrukh, and parried more cuts and thrusts from Orhan and Suleiman, Dobrinya managed even in his awkward position to bring his own rifle into place for a shot. He squeezed the trigger, heard his weapon roar, and saw that he had wounded Flazdigar in the right hip.

Now there were two widowed tigresses who hated the sea-dragon. Shrieking in grief and wrath, and with no need now to fear the snaring tongue, Tawnydart hurled herself back onto the hideous face from which she had only just descended; and Slimtalon found space to join her there. Both widows found new, deeper wells of strength to punish the predator from the ocean--which included trying hard to break through the transparent shields over its eyes.

Not greatly weakened even by the profuse bleeding from its severed tongue, the monster strove to shake them off, claw them off, or smash them off. Tawnydart had almost half of her tail bitten off at one point, while Slimtalon had a shoulder numbed from a slam straight down into the dirt. But Bluntmuzzle was already lending his aid: forcing his way under the creature's right forelimb, he struggled to force his jaws up against the axilla, to bite into the more vulnerable flesh there.

As if realizing what Bluntmuzzle was up to, the monster moved to roll onto him and crush him before he could inflict critical damage. But Quickspring, in turn, realized what the monster was up to; and, from his own well of strength and courage, he hobbled in on three legs, to hurl himself under the left forelimb. That limb, rising as the monster started to surge onto Bluntmuzzle, was exposed to easier attack--and, with one gasped call of "ASLAN!", Quickspring put his every remaining ounce of power into that attack. His jaws found the perfect grip; in that instant, it seemed that it was the most perfect biting grip he had ever done in his life. Cold flesh yielded under his fangs; blue blood poured into his nostrils and eyes, but he kept biting in and biting in, also clawing as well as he could.

Now hurting far worse on the left side, the monster tilted away from Bluntmuzzle to bear down upon the senior male Talking Tiger. Suffocating, his body compressing, Quickspring kept biting in. The

crushing weight forced him onto his back, but he replied by raking at the scales with his rear claws...and he never ceased biting while any consciousness remained to him. The one adult male Talking Tiger who had stayed true to Narnian law when Hookpaw led the tigers' uprising...the tiger who had cast his lot with his chastened kinsbeasts, never condemning them...died with his jaws locked, his body pulverized...to find himself suddenly in the place where Shatterneck, and two men called Murhat and Ismayil, and a Dwarf-woman called Bezbimbry, and the great Patriarch Brightburn, and Quickspring's first wife Lashtail, had arrived before him.

But Quickspring left the monster with a crippled forelimb. Now that clawed foot could no longer oppose an attack on the left-side gill flaps. And Slimtalon was there.

"DIE, filthy thing!" the tigress matriarch screamed as she set her claws in the best supporting position she could manage; then she clamped her teeth upon the nearest gill flap and began pulling and tearing. Jeblajask, who had been trying in vain to draw some of the monster's fury away from the tigers by chopping at the massive tail, and then had pulled Quickspring's ruined corpse away too late to do anything for him, now closed in to reinforce Slimtalon's attack. Prying up the second gill flap with one powerful hand, he sank the hook into exposed, capillary-filled flesh and ripped.

Tawnydart, still crazed with fresh grief, was concentrating on breaking through the shield of the thing's right eye. She finally did break it, and tore out the eye beneath. Bluntmuzzle, for his part, made a new and more successful biting attack in the hollow of the right forelimb; but this hardly mattered now. The grotesque marine reptile, slayer of Brightburn, Shatterneck and Quickspring, was beginning to die its long-overdue death.

As if in a diabolical caricature of Quickspring's tenacity in fighting to the end, the monster made its own final effort. It did not now even try anymore to dislodge the tigers and the Djinn who were killing it. Instead, in a movement that was half snaky crawling, and half walking with its still-functional hind feet, the sea monster lurched eastward. Chibrigon, witnessing this from where he crouched keeping three koalas alive, wondered fleetingly if the monster were following blind instinct, retreating toward the familiar ocean where it would never swim and hunt again.

But there was more to the dying charge than that. The monster was using the last of its strength to batter down every tree it could ram. The first of the trees thus broken almost broke Tawnydart's back with it. Koalas who had just brought Urgut's arson fire under control now yelped with renewed alarm as their homes toppled. This had to be the malice of Tash, who dared not show himself in person.

Between the monster and the fire, almost a quarter of all the living space in the Talking Koalas' colony was destroyed by the time the monster fell still and moved no more. Jeblajask, not waiting to exult in victory, ran to see if there was anyone who could use his healing help; he needed to go no farther than where Tawnydart had fallen in a heap. Slimtalon, meanwhile, still had her jaws locked as tightly in life as Quickspring's jaws had been in death, tearing the gills even more thoroughly apart.

Bluntmuzzle came and rubbed his cheek against his mother's face; both faces were soaked in the monster's blood. "You can release your hold now, Mother," he said softly. "The monster is dead; Father is avenged."

Lady Slimtalon's mind seemed to return slowly from a faraway place; then her eyes focussed, and recognized her one remaining son. Amid the sudden quiet, she croaked out words: "And you, my son, and Hookpaw, are now the only adult male Talking Tigers in the whole world. You, son, are your father's heritage; I know he is pleased with you."

"And greatly pleased with you, Mother."

Ignoring their koala friends who gathered to inspect the slain monster, Slimtalon and her son both wept for a long time.

Tisrukh was very efficient at getting another bullet loaded; but he was mistaken to think of the Djinn as an immobilized target. Flazdigar executed a no-hands-on-the-ground cartwheel over Dobrinya's horse before that horse could rise (and the Djinn was glad to see that the innocent beast could rise), and another shot was wasted. This was Tisrukh's final shot in the encounter, as Tisrukh's dagger was returned to its owner point-first...but not quite as Bulgak had urged. Flazdigar, making his throw as he emerged from the cartwheel, only sent the blade into his foe's right wrist, making him drop the rifle.

Dobrinya was not to be counted out yet; struggling to his feet, he aimed yet another saber-cut at Flazdigar even as Suleiman was trying to get close enough to the Djinn for another lance-thrust. Dobrinya's point nicked Flazdigar's throat--but then Flazdigar's empty right hand caught hold of the unsharpened spine of the blade. Snatching the weapon away from the Cossack was facilitated by a kick to the stomach that whooshed all the air out of Dobrinya's lungs.

Having at last a weapon in hand to compare with the weapons menacing him, Flazdigar felt one last flicker of hope that he might be able to save himself without taking a human life...but then still another jolt of pain informed him that an arrow had sunk into the rear of his right thigh. Urgut, galloping back from his fire attack on the trees, had shot that arrow, and was now drawing his axe as he closed in.

Pulling out the shaft, Flazdigar knew now that he would bleed to death before much longer if he could not get help.

Which meant that some enemies were going to have to die. He had given them their chance...

His right leg now almost completely unusable, Flazdigar made a great bound propelled only by his left leg. This took him high enough that, with the aid of Dobrinya's saber, he could force Suleiman's lance

down, passing over it and right over the head of Suleiman's startled horse. Suleiman had no time to grasp what was happening, as his friend's saber in his enemy's hand whipped back to the ready with blinding speed, and struck. Standing one-footed on the horse's neck, Flazdigar slashed the tempered blade all the way through Suleiman's body just above waist level. Both halves of the corpse hit the ground a split-second before Flazdigar back-flipped off the horse.

Temporarily discarding his trowel again so he could retrieve the fallen lance, Flazdigar hurled the lance into the oncoming Urgut before the shaman's son could get in even one axe-blow. The lance came clear out Urgut's back in a shower of blood. As that corpse fell in one place instead of two, Flazdigar spun back to fight two foes instead of one. Orhan was attacking in a frenzy of mindless hate after the death of his son, while Tisrukh forged in swinging his rifle-butt in desperate self-preservation.

Trading blows till he saw an opening, Flazdigar split Orhan's bald head from brow to chin. When Tisrukh saw this, and then saw his own last frantic attempt to smash the Djinn's head from behind being parried...the mighty emperor, the Son of Destiny, the chosen one of Tash, dropped to his knees. Blubbing like a panicky child, he begged for mercy from a foe who looked barely alive himself.

The saber point froze in air. Flazdigar would never slay any foe who pleaded for his life.

Although sparing the lives of Tisrukh and the incapacitated Dobrinya, Flazdigar could not tolerate the idea of the Djinni's costly peacemaking attempt being absolutely for nothing. It hung heavily on his mind that, if he and his brethren had accepted the inevitability of conflict from the start, they not only would not have suffered so many casualties for themselves, but they could have spared more of their number to help the tigers against the sea monster. And, without anyone having yet come out from the grove with news, Flazdigar sensed it in the air that the monster had perished, but at least one of the tigers had also died in achieving this victory.

For an instant he wanted to slay Tisrukh after all; but he sternly forbade himself to project onto a vanquished adversary the self-dissatisfaction he felt over the Djinni's miscalculation. So, dropping Dobrinya's gory saber, he closed his right hand hand lightly--not strangling--around the petty emperor's throat. Forcing his fingers and thumb up through the matted beard, he pincered them into place on either side of Tisrukh's jaw, so that with a lifting motion he could force the nomad up onto his feet. Gathering up Dobrinya in similar fashion, Flazdigar began forcing both his captives to stagger backwards while he walked forwards.

He was taking them toward the still-huddled group, where Smedgarosh all by himself was exerting life-encouragement upon Magladoth, Davradon, Thurikeb--and Kuzdikal, whom Flazdigar especially wanted to see. Actually, he wanted Tisrukh and Dobrinya to see Kuzdikal, who alone among the Djinni was capable of speaking with them.

That is, if Kuzdikal himself was capable of speaking at all.

Getting his first close glimpse of the Ninth Djinn since before the fight with Tisrukh's party, Flazdigar was appalled. Smedgarosh, nominally the youngest of the Djinni, now looked older than any humanoid being native to the young Narnian world could possibly be. So much life-power had gone out of him to keep the others alive, that his hair and beard had turned white, and his skin had almost a shrivelled appearance.

Making his captives lie flat on their bellies, Flazdigar sat on them to keep them quiet while he addressed his brother: "Smedgarosh! Withdraw your flow of strength from Second Brother; I sense clearly that he will recover in time without further draining of you. And let me take over supporting Fourth Brother's life."

Smedgarosh was visibly relieved to be stimulating recuperation for only two casualties rather than four. His breathing grew easier, and he could talk again. "First Brother, be careful of your exertions; you need help yourself!"

"Plain physical bandaging will be enough for me for the time being," replied Flazdigar. "You can do that for me without increasing the burden upon your spirit." While his own bleeding was being dealt with, Flazdigar was already transmitting life-energy to Kuzdikal. The puncture in the Djinn linguist's lung was already partly closed by Smedgarosh's power; now, his coughing up of blood began to subside.

Presently: "Kuzdikal! Have you the strength now to speak without worsening your hurts?"

"I think so," groaned Kuzdikal, raising his head. "Aslan be praised--that man you have captured matches Bulgak's description of Tisrukh! I take it you want me to talk to him."

Flazdigar's bandaged head nodded. "And to the other one, who is of different blood than Tisrukh but knows his language."

"That would be Dobrinya; Zulika told me about him also." Kuzdikal tentatively sat up. Finding that he did not faint, he smiled grimly at his brother. "Yes, I feel up to it. And I do have quite a bit to say to these men." He summarized in English what he had in mind to tell the captives; Flazdigar heard him out, then said, "That should cover the ground. They're yours to teach."

Looking at his brother's prisoners, Kuzdikal realized that he had barely begun to understand what it was that led the children of Adam and Eve to pursue evil. In English, he quietly prayed, "Most Holy Aslan, please make me--make us--understand what manner of creatures these wicked men are, that we may know what we ought to do about them."

Aslan did not become visible or audible, but Kuzdikal fancied that he felt a stirring of the Lion's divine

breath touching his face. He gestured to draw the attention of Tisrukh and Dobrinya to himself, addressing Tisrukh first.

"You are the former husband of Zulika, are you not? What an amazing fool you are, to have despised so intelligent and beautiful a woman as she is! I understand that you conferred royal dignity upon yourself--in your own mind, at least; but I will tell you that you are not worthy to gather dung-chips for her campfire. Hmm...I see it in your face that you wish to answer me, but that you fear being slain if you affront us further. I bid you speak; I promise in Aslan's name that no mere words from your mouth will bring any violence upon you."

Glancing toward Flazdigar and seeing no threat offered from that quarter, Tisrukh nerved himself to say, "As an Emperor, I deal perforce in grander matters than the running away of disobedient wives. It is my duty to bring order and unity to this ignorant and poorly-organized world. You spoke to us about peace before; but only when all who live are subject to one central and all-embracing authority can there be peace."

At this moment, Kuzdikal found that a strange gift was being given to him: the gift of sarcasm. "I don't see a lion's mane around your face; it follows that you are not Aslan. Perhaps you desire to tell Aslan that He made a mistake by planning that the future Kingdom of Archenland should be independent in governance from Narnia. No doubt Aslan, Who is only the Creator of this world, is absurd to imagine that separate groups of thinking beings, NOT forced together under your vaunted regime, could still enjoy peace and mutual friendship. Yes, absurd of Him to suppose that unity in Him could be unity enough without a flea-bitten little human monarch to show Him how to run His world!"

"But I have lived in a far wider world than this one!" Tisrukh objected. "I bring the wisdom and the warnings of its long history!"

"You bring a far wider MOUTH to this world, that is for sure. Close that mouth now for awhile, so that I may question your companion. He baffles me more than you do; my heart tells me that he did not set out in life on purpose to be a destroyer, but somehow he has let himself be allied with you."

Dobrinya Osipovich had never been precisely a coward, but from childhood he had always had a deeply-rooted habit of looking out for his own best interests. A crux was clearly coming for him now.

Since Tisrukh had been conclusively defeated, this might be a good time to repudiate him, blaming him for everything. Dobrinya could claim to be a victim of circumstances--which would not be altogether untrue--and fawn on the Djinni for "freeing" him from Tisrukh's demon-sponsored tyranny. But what future would he have if he were allowed to dwell in the bizarre composite society whose defenders the Djinni seemed to be? It would not be comfortable being among tigers who might at any time take it into their heads to devour him; and, judging by the way Kuzdikal spoke about Zulika, it sounded as if a woman who had cause to detest Dobrinya was the most popular human member of this weird new

community. Also, since the Djinni seemed prepared to be merciful to the vanquished Tisrukh, what if Dobrinya were forced to go back to the nomads--AFTER just having denounced Tisrukh as a villain?

Desperately trying to keep his options (if he had any) open, Dobrinya chose his first words to say to Kuzdikal as Kuzdikal (still unsure what to ask first) was gazing curiously upon him.

"Among the people of my birth, in that other world, bonds of friendship are sacred. I have long had such a bond with Tisrukh, and so have shared in his adventures in this fantastically different world of yours. I realize that this world must be the most normal, even ordinary thing for you Djinni; but for US, it's no easy matter to comprehend a world in which beasts and even birds can talk. The fact that you have not now slain us outright may mean that we rode out here not fully understanding the nature of this world's man-like beings; perhaps you also have not fully understood us--?"

All the while Dobrinya was saying these words, Kuzdikal was making little gestures with his hands, as if gathering something invisible out of the very air. At last the Djinn spoke again, though a damaged lung made his voice less impressive than usual:

"I think I have more of the sense of you now. You grew up among people who had some of Aslan's truth available, but mingled with many false ideas and much moral degradation. I know from Zulika that, in your own region of your native world, it is horribly common for the strong to oppress the weak. I think that, for you, this has come to mean that, while making yourself as strong as you could, you were always ready to attach yourself to greater strength for your own protection. What I heard before now about you and the man called Akim suggests further that you know how to break loose from one leader in favor of another when it seems good to you. Alas, that you did not meet someone who was strong for justice and mercy! Then you might have become a man of great virtue."

Dobrinya kept his peace, not wanting to burn any bridge in any direction. Kuzdikal coughed up a little more blood, swung his gaze back toward Tisrukh, and said:

"The false god whom you serve does not love you, nor does he value you except as a tool. If we let you go, and you remain under Tash's influence, he will probably manage in time to convince your inferior mind that WE somehow attacked YOU, rather than the other way around...and even convince you that YOU somehow defeated US, rather than the other way around. But tell me now, if you have any wits about you: do you even know why you came here against us? I know that you would have liked to punish Zulika for her crime of not having been murdered by you, and punish Bulgak for not letting you murder his mother; but there must be more to it than that."

Every minute that passed without his being killed brought back a little more of Tisrukh's bravado. Now he ventured to say, "It is a matter of what principle shall dominate in the lives of those who people this world. Are we to be ruled by mere facts, or are we to DO the ruling, by commanding the facts to be what WE want them to be? I rule my people, and by right I should rule yours, because I have the force

of will to put a bridle and a saddle on reality! My freedom of choice ought thus to overrule yours!"

Kuzdikal stared with wide eyes at this warped Son of Adam. "Do you remember the tiger whom you called the Spirit Beast? Do you even realize that he and Tash were NOT the same person?" When Tisrukh did not reply to this, Kuzdikal added, "I mention that tiger, because he was under this very kind of deception before you were. And the Nymph called Valamisa has informed us that, before the tiger found salvation through the mercy of Aslan, he used to utter the same kind of nonsense you are now uttering."

Not one of the surviving tigers was unscathed, and the Djinni Chibrigon and Jeblajask were busy exerting life-power upon injured friends. Koalas therefore undertook to patrol all around their territory for signs of any lingering threat. They found none; but a party led by the elder Hemshull did find the gravely-wounded Leapwell. Rigging a drag-litter, they laboriously hauled her back to the grove--after pausing to strip clothing off of Rashid's nearby corpse, from pieces of which they fashioned bandages for the tigress.

"What of the others?" Leapwell feebly asked. "And the monster?"

"The monster is dead, and good riddance," replied Hemshull. "But I grieve to tell you that Quickspring and Shatterneck have been summoned away to Aslan's Country."

The return path led them near where Tisrukh and Dobrinya were being detained. Seeing Kuzdikal alive and conscious, Hemshull called out to him, "The monster is destroyed! We are taking Leapwell to receive aid; you can tell us later what disposition you make of those two foul brutes."

Among the trees again, they found Jeblajask just rising from where he had knelt beside Tawnydart; he was confident now that she would survive the massive bruising she had suffered when she was glancingly bashed against the tree during the monster's death-throes. The Seventh Djinn promptly turned to minister to Leapwell; he was less drained than Chibrigon, who had pulled his three koala patients out of the very darkness of near-death. Chibrigon was less depleted than Smedgarosh, but his hair now showed some gray.

A wobbly Elkfinder tottered slowly over to Tawnydart to check on her condition. "How are you, Tawnydart? I'm so sorry about Shatterneck."

The newly-widowed older tigress struggled to speak. "He died in the grace of Aslan...so I don't have to face the everlasting loss that poor Leapwell over there had to face...when Jasperclaw died in unrepented sin."

Elkfinder lowered her eyes. "I know what Shatterneck did to save you. I pray that Bluntmuzzle and I will always have that kind of love between us."

"I'm sure you will." Tawnydart turned achingly to address the young koala female Karshkree, the Chief Koala's daughter, who was passing near at that moment. "Little friend--were there any losses among your people?"

"We just finished making a head count," said Karshkree. "There are many hurt, but not one dead. Our thanks are deep, to Aslan and to our brave defenders." She shuddered at the remembrance of seeing Shatterneck's and Quickspring's mangled remains mere minutes ago.

Tawnydart managed something like a smile at this. Lifting her eyes to the blue sky, she spoke to someone unseen: "Husband--my love--we did it! We returned to our calling...and fulfilled the commission of Aslan to the tigers. NOT ONE KOALA DEAD!...Aslan commanded us to be protectors of the weak...and we have done it! Wait for me now, my dearest love; in Aslan's chosen time, I'll find you up there."

Physically and emotionally exhausted though Lady Slimtalon was, she was less injured than some of the tigers. Accordingly, once she had seen that the badly-wounded Leapwell was being helped, she walked out of the grove to have a look at the captive Tisrukh. Her mind was so preoccupied that she almost walked into one of the bog holes, recognizing the mushy feel around her forepaws only just in time.

Reaching the tableau of mostly-wounded Djinni and their prisoners (the latter being unnerved by the sight of an approaching tiger), she said in her most matriarchal voice, "May Aslan reward you, noble humanoids, for making our cause your own! Are all of these yet alive, as I hope?"

Smedgarosh looked at her over his shoulder, giving her a disturbing view of how his life-sustaining efforts had aged him. "All of us live, thank you. But from the way my brothers tell me I look now, I think I'll demand to be called the eldest from now on."

"Ninth Brother jokes," remarked Flazdigar, who stood nearby leaning on a stick; "but I say in earnest that, by his noble self-giving rather than by his change in external appearance, he should henceforth be called the eldest."

"Flazdigar, I see that they've lamed you," said Slimtalon; "I invite you to ride on my back when I return to the grove, so you can begin recuperating."

Flazdigar bowed to her unsteadily. "My thanks, Grandmother of Tigers. I actually used our surviving enemies to lean on to walk this far; a ride for the rest of the way sounds good indeed. Fourth Brother here has been questioning the captives. It seems that the one who looks more like us"--he indicated Tisrukh--"began his foray into our world out of mere ambition, wanting power and importance for himself but not especially wanting to harm anyone else. The greater his prospects became, though, the

more he actively hated anyone who in any way seemed to thwart his desires. As for the one who looks more like the Narnian humans"--he indicated Dobrinya--"he has remained on the same level of self-interest all through his part in events. He hates no one, but the priority he places on his own well-being has been enough to lead him to do violence as surely as if he DID hate others."

The tigress matriarch nodded, then reached out a velvety forepaw to tap Kuzdikal gently on the shoulder. The startlingly humanlike gesture was as amazing to the onlooking humans as her presence was intimidating.

"Kuzdikal, please tell them that I am the tigress who scattered their horses on the night I helped Zulika and her children to escape. Tell them that I went out of my way NOT to slay any children of Adam that night, and that neither I nor... excuse me, you don't intend to put these two to death, do you?"

"We considered it," Kuzdikal admitted. "But from what I've learned before now about Tarkan, the man who would surely assume leadership of those humans if Tisrukh died, leaving Tarkan in charge would only incline that community to still more aggressiveness. We therefore lean toward sending these two back alive. There is also that foolish Nymph to consider. Notice that I don't say her name, because it could cause her trouble if Tisrukh realized that she was of some interest to us. I understand that Aslan told her she would have only one more chance for salvation, and that this required her to grow older and see herself losing men's admiration. That suggests that Aslan wants her to be left for now in a situation with some stability; and if Tisrukh failed to return, other nomads might get the idea that the Nymph had somehow brought bad luck upon him. Besides, although Tisrukh has tried to act bold and defiant here, perhaps when he's had time to think he'll find his way to repentance."

"I suppose I agree with your reasoning," said Slimtalon. "But I need you to add something to what I already asked you to say to them. Ask them if they have seen the Talking Gander who was with me in the rescue of Zulika."

Kuzdikal relayed everything that Slimtalon wanted to be said, then listened to the reply and turned back to Slimtalon. "They both insist that they have not seen Fear-No-Blast since that night, and I think they speak the truth. I took the liberty of suggesting that they would face grave consequences if they lied."

"Thank you, Kuzdikal. Flazdigar, I'll give you that ride now, and others will shortly come out from the grove to minister to these other Djinni. Then, as soon as all is in order, I have one more obligation to fulfill: I will be going out to search for Fear-No-Blast, which perhaps could be combined with escorting the humans partway back to their settlement."

Nubkarsh, the leading elder of the Talking Koalas, joined Bluntmuzzle in examining the carcass of the slain sea monster. "Even though we intend migrating away from this grove," said Nubkarsh, "I hate the thought of our first dwelling place being defiled by this huge thing rotting here."

Bluntmuzzle mused awhile, dissecting the creature in his imagination. "It would probably take all nine of the Djinni with ropes, _plus_ us tigers harnessed in, to drag this body away whole. But it must be possible to dismember it, especially now that metal implements are available. And of course, the total weight to be moved will be reduced if we eat the better parts of its flesh."

Bluntmuzzle had never seen koala eyes go as wide as Nubkarsh's eyes went now. "You would EAT this thing? I know you're carnivores, but...well, you saw how it sickened Chibrigon to be near the monster."

"The Djinni are a special case," replied Bluntmuzzle. "They like pure water just fine, but anything of a seriously muddy and slimy nature is repugnant to them. That's bound up in their being made for the desert. Although this monster is foul to us all because of what it stands for, it still is just a flesh-and-blood animal created by Aslan. So eating it should not be much different from eating crocodile meat."

Nubkarsh did his own mental dissection; then: "Well, if the creature is to be taken apart, there are surely bony parts that my people could put to use. Those dorsal spines that nearly killed Yugdug, Bripkak and Shaptiff could probably be made into some kind of weapons."

"There would be a certain justice in that," said Bluntmuzzle.

As nightfall drew near, Jeblajask, satisfied that Leapwell's life was out of danger, performed the experiment which Bluntmuzzle and the other tigers were just a little hesitant to do: hacking out a piece of the dead monster's raw flesh with his hook and eating it. A look of concentration suggested that he was somehow sensing the meat's progress into his digestive tract. Presently he declared, "My feline friends, I am confident now that there is no harm in doing to this monster what it wanted to do to us!"

The surviving tigers now realized that, even though mourning their fallen, they were all ravenously hungry. So, with some help from Djinn and koala hands wielding tools, they soon had the whole carcass chopped, ripped and broken up into manageable portions. Every tiger, and such of the Djinni as cared to sample the monster's flesh, had as much to eat as they wanted.

Tisrukh and Dobrynya were due to start home soon under Slimtalon's observation; she did not want to wait until morning, lest a few hours' delay might mean the grounded Fear-No-Blast succumbing to some wilderness peril. But the two men were allowed to make a fire, also under observation, to cook the portion of monster meat which they were allowed, or rather coerced, to eat. (It was hoped that respect for the hospitality customs common to many peoples on Earth would make Tisrukh less willing to cause future trouble for beings with whom he had shared food.) Wood for their fire was provided.

Only after the human prisoners had finished eating, and their cookfire was dying down, did Kuzdikal exert the painful effort to walk up to them. Still intermittently coughing blood, he gave them instructions for their departure, including permission to transport on horses the bodies of their dead companions. The Fourth Djinn waited until the logistical points were covered before he leaned close to

the petty emperor to say some things he particularly wanted to say on his own account:

"Presumptuous Tisrukh, you do not want to accept the infinite superiority of Aslan over all created beings, including your false god; but I pray that before you die you will humble yourself and acknowledge Aslan, Who will reward such a choice by forgiving your despicable deeds of wickedness. I am glad that it was not my hand that forced you to beg for mercy; for if it had been I who fought you, and if I had slain you, I should have regretted killing the father of the children Bulgak and Dilnara, whom I hold in high esteem as surely as I hold you in contempt. As it is, I am sorry that the girl Monduli has lost her father and eldest brother to death; but I think she knows that it was not Flazdigar's fault that he was compelled to make an end of them. All three of those children, AND Zulika, will by Aslan's grace enjoy a life of happiness with ME henceforth, until their memory of enduring _your_ presence is no more than a bad dream fading away. It should not be necessary to add this, but because you are an idiot I will spell it out for you: although none of us intends any further vengeance against you provided you behave yourself, if you ever do anything in the future to threaten harm to Zulika or _our_ children, I promise that I will drive my fingers into your stomach and pull your backbone out the front.

"Oh, and I almost forgot something else. The fuel you used for this cookfire included the smashed pieces of your accursed magical bow." Kuzdikal would always remember with pleasure the look on Tisrukh's face upon hearing this.

Fear-No-Blast had lived up to his reputation for survival skills, evading hyenas by plunging into water, and crocodiles by knowing when to get out of the water. Along the way he had managed to forage enough nourishment to keep himself going; but although no predator succeeded in devouring him, worry for his friends ate at his composure all the rest of the day after he dropped off the litter and briefly distracted the sea monster. Near the end of that day, he faintly heard from very far away what he felt sure was the sound of those otherworldly fire-weapons. The agony of suspense this evoked in him kept him waddling on his way through that night.

In the first light of dawn, he ate some insects and edible-seeming weeds. Continuing his march for another half-hour after breakfast, he finally found his eyes going out of focus, and knew that he was just too tired to go any farther without sleep.

A dense thicket ahead appeared to offer concealment. Before entering it, the gander knight used his webbed feet to scoop up some rocks and fling them into the foliage, to flush out any snakes that might be in there ahead of him. No snakes showed themselves; so in he went, forcing his way through tangled leaves and stiff stems, until he felt more than saw some sort of comfortable sloping surface against which he could nestle down. After a prayer for the lives of his friends--not the first such prayer he had uttered on this uneasy journey--he sank into the sleep of exhaustion.

When he awoke, the noon sun was above him...and the cushiony something against which he lay was

breathing.

"You have slept enough, My friend, small in size but huge in courage," said the voice of Aslan. "Before you need to sleep again, you will be met by Slimtalon as she comes in search of you. "

"My Lord Aslan!" Fear-No-Blast softly honked, rising to his feet to perform a waterfowl's version of a knight's bow to his King. "I beg You, tell me how the rest of my comrades are faring!"

"Two tigers, Quickspring and Shatterneck, have gallantly completed their service and have gone to their everlasting reward. My Father, the Emperor-Over-Sea, is pronouncing His commendations not only to them, but also to one of your human foes who came to repentance just in time. No other creature friendly to you and Me has fallen. Most of the human aggressors have perished into everlasting darkness, and the monster in which they trusted has died the death of any brute beast. The demon's intention, to destroy a community of My children, has failed."

"Thank You, Great Lion! Even if You now tell me that I still have to walk the rest of the way, I will walk with a lighter heart. Though two of ours have died, they clearly did not die for nothing. I suppose the Djinni have been helping wounded ones to recover?"

Aslan simply nodded.

"But I further suppose," Fear-No-Blast went on, "that it is beyond the power You gave to the Djinni to reattach a severed major tendon in a gander's wing?"

Again the Lion nodded.

"Resisting the pull of death is a great power to be given them anyway; but I suspect that they can't remake destroyed body parts. That would explain why I never heard any suggestion that they might cure Hookpaw's blindness."

Aslan gave a third nod.

"I suppose, my Lord, that You are letting me waddle my own way through a series of thoughts that ends up with my resigning myself to never having my wing healed."

The Lion did not now trivialize the gander knight's unhappy speculation by remaining silent. "My brave child, you have ever pleased My heart with your willingness to dare hard things for the sake of your flock and friends. I am calling you henceforth to dare one more hard thing for the good of others."

"A thing that can be faced better waddling than flying?"

"It was for the eternal good of the tigers that they should be challenged to face death in the defense of weaker creatures. In a similar way, it will be for the good of certain children of Adam and Eve to undertake responsibility for a disabled friend who can be of little future usefulness to them. Your duty will be precisely to need their help, so that they may practice kindness and gratitude. Zulika owes you a very great debt of gratitude, and therefore so do her children; but in the world where they lived until recently, people were often quick to forget obligations if the person to whom they were indebted could no longer do them any additional favors. Therefore, harboring you in their new home will always remind them that I expect them to remember the debts they owe. If they cannot practice consistent kindness to one who has a right to receive it from them, it will be hard indeed for them to progress toward any concept of universal charity."

Wonderful though it was to be in Aslan's presence, Fear-No-Blast could not repress a wistful sigh. "So, I am never to fly again until I migrate yonder to Your Country?"

For a moment, Aslan's eyes were moist, as when He had shown His compassion for Digory Kirke's mother. "Such is your calling now, My valiant knight, for a valiant knight you truly are. And there is this which ought to comfort you: that in the mortal days remaining to you, human children will find their spirits flying through the skies when they listen to you speak. For I gave you eloquence, little though you notice it yourself. You shall tell them tales of distant Narnia, and of your experiences flying across this world, and even of the things King Frank and Queen Helen told you about Adam's world. Your words will give wings to their imaginations; and when your time comes to fly again in My Country, those you leave behind will remember you with love and honor, as a great knight and a great teacher."

Then Aslan was gone.

Resuming his trek westward, Fear-No-Blast began thinking about what stories he would relate to human children. It shouldn't be too hard; he had told enough tales to his own goslings in years past.

"I will bear this duty as a knight should, Lord," he said to the unreachable sky.

The magic that had prevented the nomads' horses from fearing the sea monster or the tigers was recognizably fading--which forced Jebblajask and a now-conscious Magladoth to help round up the animals, and forced Slimtalon to change her plans about escorting Tisrukh and Dobrinya away in combination with beginning her search for Fear-No-Blast.

This was just as well to Slimtalon's mind; she could thus get started even sooner than the humans were ready to move. Bluntmuzzle, having confirmed that Elkfinder was expected to recover completely, accompanied his mother. Kuzdikal made it known to the two released prisoners that Jebblajask would instead be following them...carrying Orhan's bow and as many arrows as had been salvaged. The nighttime departure worked in favor of Jebblajask being able to kill the two men if they tried any

treachery, and the two men were aware of this. But there was a consolation in the circumstances: it was precisely because Tisrukh and Dobrinya were more vulnerable in the dark that the Djinni had judged it safe to make an extremely gracious gesture to them. Each man was allowed to keep his rifle, along with three rounds of ammunition; Dobrinya, furthermore, was given back his saber, while Tisrukh was given Suleiman's lance (with Urgut's blood washed off of it). This was to give them a chance of defending themselves against wild beasts that might be attracted to the scent of the five corpses they were taking away with them.

As this party headed east, the Djinn Chibrigon and the tigress Smoothtail--being reckoned as fit for travel as anyone else left in the grove--headed west, in order to carry the news, both triumphant and sorrowful, to Ripplestride, Valamisa, and the others who had evacuated to the new settlement.

Through that weary night of plodding along, Tisrukh and Dobrinya were almost as silent as the bodies of Orhan and the rest. But when dawn came, and looking around seemed to reveal that Jeblajask was no longer closely following, Dobrinya said to his unimpressive monarch, "Isn't it time we decide on what story we'll tell to your people?"

For just an instant, Tisrukh toyed with the idea of shooting Dobrinya without warning, then reporting--with no one to contradict him--that some kind of doublecrossing by the Cossack was responsible for the unsatisfactory outcome of the expedition. But then he decided it was better to have Dobrinya alive as an ally, in case their failure might incline the clan to choose a new leader. So Tisrukh said:

"The most formidable man remaining among those who await us is Tarkan. He is unlikely to try to supplant me; and if he backs up whatever story we tell, the rest should swallow it."

"Then we'll make our story as flattering to Tarkan as possible when he had no part in the fighting." Dobrinya managed a smile. "I should say, no part in our VICTORY." Seeing a certain lift in Tisrukh's eyebrows encouraged the glib Cossack to continue. "Consider: although we lost most of our men, the people have no way of knowing that the monster was defeated, nor of knowing how many of our adversaries we killed. Since we were going to migrate north to fresh grasslands anyway, no one is likely to investigate in the direction of that inhabited stand of trees. It bolsters our case that we still have guns--which any normal enemy certainly would have taken from us. And we have evidence of our victory to show: the two severed hyena heads I've been carrying in my saddlebags--just a sample of the _many_ hostile talking beasts we slew in the great battle. Also, the strange desert-men seem to have taken no further thought for the dropped gold ornaments we collected earlier; we can display them as trophies from a mighty desert warrior whom you vanquished in single combat. We can even say that there was more gold captured, which we buried in a secret place for future use."

Tisrukh looked back over his shoulder in case Jeblajask might show up after all, then gave Dobrinya an approving nod. "That's good thinking, old smuggler. But how do we work flattery for my cousin into this?"

"Well, we can say that, before our expedition set out, Tarkan gave you some kind of information about the Djinni that eventually helped you to beat their chieftain in a duel. And, if you think it would work, we can perform another strongwilled contradiction of known facts, by saying that it was _Tarkan_ who manufactured our bows. After all, Orhan and his son are no longer in any condition to dispute that point."

"It will work, my excellent Cossack servant," said a sudden cold voice. Tash had just appeared alongside them...and he was carrying Flazdigar's heavy gravel-rake. To Tisrukh, the vulture-headed fiend said, "The Djinn who captured both of you forgot to retrieve this. You, therefore, can show it off as the exotic weapon of the desert warrior whom you so brilliantly defeated. And it is quite right that your people will not bother investigating; they will mourn their dead, accept your account of events because that is easier than rising up against you, and try to get on with their lives. The move north will bring you to good land; you will dwell there for a long time, and perhaps have opportunities in the future to waylay and rob residents of Narnia who venture to explore in your direction."

"My lord Tash," asked Tisrukh, "is it true that one of the Djinni is taking Zulika as his own wife, AND is claiming my son as his also?"

"It is true; but fret not over this. Iskralida and Gulshim will both give you sons who will be much more obedient to you. And after these losses of men, the relative number of women will be such that you can take one or two more for yourself, AND reward your faithful Dobrinya with two or three of his own. Direct your mind now to building your own nation, not to unproductive thoughts of revenge."

By the time Tash left them, the two survivors were supremely confident of getting past their embarrassing failure without lasting detriment to themselves. Amid their further discussion, Tisrukh had an inspiration concerning the Talking Koalas whom they had glimpsed and shot at.

"I can say of them what I used to say about Jewish people: call them the offspring of apes and pigs!"

When the main evacuation group had set out from the tree-town, Valamisa had wasted no time beginning to tell the former slave women--by means of Raffira translating both ways--more about life in the Narnian world. She had strongly emphasized the fact that none of the young women would be _compelled_ against her will to marry anyone; that they had as much right as men to make decisions for themselves.

"But I think you would be making a mistake NOT to welcome the Djinni as husbands," Valamisa had added. "I am convinced that they are at heart exactly what they represent themselves to be, with no deception about them at all. My darling wolf-man and I both had to come out of terrible sin and foolishness to find the love and happiness Aslan wishes husbands and wives to share; but you innocent girls and those innocent Djinni should be able to step into it easily."

Ranshuk had mostly avoided speaking to the freed slaves, not wanting anyone to think that he had any improper interest in them. The women of Turkic origin, given their Islamic upbringing, would for their own part have avoided speaking with him anyway; but the two Russian women felt a harmless curiosity about him. Knowing what Ranshuk had been before Aslan changed him into a man, they could not help being reminded of the famous Russian folktale of the wise and benign gray wolf who had helped Prince Ivan in his quest for the Firebird. As for the Turkic women, there were plenty of Talking Koalas with whom they could comfortably converse through Raffira.

Ranshuk became an active part of the women's adjustment on their last day of travel, when he slew a charging wild boar with his spear. As he skinned the carcass and went to work building a fire to smoke the meat (procedures he knew about from his past human associations, although as a wolf he had simply eaten his meat raw), some of the Turkic women expressed repugnance at the thought of being expected to eat pork. When this was made known to Ranshuk, he asked Raffira to translate his response to the women's qualms:

"The choice of your food, like your choice of husbands, is a matter in which no one will compel you by force. But you should know that Aslan, in His human form as Jesus of Nazareth, proclaimed all foods to be clean. This is something about which I heard King Frank of Narnia speak long ago. Aslan said that it is not what goes into a man's mouth which can defile a man, but what comes out of his mouth, because what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and sin arises in the heart. As you are all now followers of Aslan, you should enjoy the freedom He grants. You are still free not to eat pork if you would rather not, but you are also free TO eat pork."

Raffira set an example by eating some of the smoked pork herself, as did the Russian women.

By sunset of that day, they were within sight of the hill on which the koalas' new stronghold was taking shape. Ripplestride came out to meet them; on her back rode Prilladil, the senior female among the Talking Koalas present at the new site. Prilladil welcomed everyone, absorbed a rush of information from the profuse chatter of her fellow koalas, and took charge of getting the new arrivals housed. Only the three protectors of the caravan--Ranshuk, Valamisa and Wolfsfriend--lingered outside the new settlement, for it was clear that Ripplestride wanted to talk with them.

The tigress took only minimal notice of Ranshuk's metamorphosis and wedding to the Nymph, which under other circumstances would have been a matter for long and fascinated conversation. She went straight to the point: "What news of my husband?"

"When I last saw him," said Valamisa, "Quickspring was in good health, confident of repelling any enemy assault, and looking forward to being with you again. But by the very nature of the evacuation, we were clear of the grove and on our way here before any action commenced."

"There hasn't been any fearful action here," said Ripplestride. "So, I think that you armed humans--" (she counted Valamisa as a human for simplicity) "--should have no trouble at all keeping this new village safe. You'll understand if I go east at once. I can't stand not knowing what has happened to my husband."

Wolfsfriend spoke up now in deferential tones. "But, Teacher, you are still carrying Quickspring's cubs; he would not wish you to jeopardize them."

"I shall not forget that responsibility," Ripplestride assured the younger tigress. "I won't lightly take any risk of harm to them. But I must know how dear Quickspring fares."

"Then I'll go with you," said Wolfsfriend.

As beasts who did not need to pack anything for a journey, they said an immediate farewell to Ranshuk and Valamisa, then started eastward. Travelling by night was no inconvenience for tigers.

As they went, Wolfsfriend suddenly recalled the message Father Christmas had given her to relay to Ripplestride. Father Christmas had said that she would know when to say it. The words were: "Know this in your heart, sweet Ripplestride, that when we tread those high trails, there will be no rivalry or jealousy, and no one will ever be made to feel rejected."

Remembering this message brought up another memory which suddenly revealed the message's meaning. Wolfsfriend remembered the time the tigers had spent in their probationary dwelling in Narnia. Quickspring, as the only adult male tiger not guilty of any crime, had been accorded respectful hearing whenever he spoke...and when he spoke of life after death in Aslan's Country, he had always referred to it as "treading those high trails." As for the reference to feeling rejected, Wolfsfriend recalled that Quickspring had sorely missed his first wife Lashtail, who had passed away in righteousness before Hookpaw's uprising; and once marrying Ripplestride, he had consciously striven to avoid making her feel inferior. Quickspring's son Tossbone, the last cub Lashtail had borne to Quickspring and the only one of that couple's children who had not followed Hookpaw to disaster, had never condemned or shunned his stepmother; but Ripplestride herself could never forget that she was in fact morally inferior to Lashtail.

Wolfsfriend felt a terrible certainty that Quickspring was now reunited with Lashtail; that Father Christmas had foreseen Quickspring's death in battle, and had entrusted her with a message of comfort to Ripplestride--exactly the message that Quickspring himself would have left for her if he had known his fate. But Wolfsfriend would not pass the message as long as there was any hope that she was mistaken about its intent.

With light feet but a heavy heart, Wolfsfriend continued loping along through the night with her teacher.

Before the night had passed, the hurried retracing of their steps brought the two tigresses within clear smelling range of Ploskavar, Hookpaw, the old female koala being transported by Hookpaw, and the four humans. The Djinn, being on watch at the time, had sensed them vaguely before they sensed him clearly, and contact was made without mishap. Allowing the children and the koala to continue sleeping (as it was, Bulgak had already stood guard for the first half of the night, jointly with Hookpaw), Ploskavar wakened Zulika as Hookpaw awoke on his own. Zulika was pleased to meet Ripplestride, about whom she had heard from Slimtalon.

Ripplestride pleaded for information: "Have you news of the battle? WAS there a battle? What became of my husband?"

"There probably was a battle, because Tisrukh was out for blood," replied Hookpaw. "And he had with him what seems to have been the same sea monster that slew Lord Brightburn: a most foul-smelling reptile, by all accounts. We got clear before any foes reached the grove; but we heard gunshots in the distance behind us not very long after the grove was out of our sight. I know that our people, and Ploskavar's brethren, and the koalas, did have time to make defensive preparations; but I have no clue how things turned out."

"As for me," said Ploskavar, "My feel of the wind is that there was conflict, and I believe in my lungs that the servants of the false god have been defeated. But there may have been losses to our side."

"You didn't say anything about that when we made camp," said Zulika, almost accusingly. "Do you sense--I mean, might any of your brother Djinni have--?" She meant Kuzdikal, of course. She could not force her mouth to speak of the possibility that he might have perished. The mutual feeling that had sprung up between herself and the Fourth Djinn offered so great and wild a hope of unprecedented joy and bliss, that Zulika had an aching dread of this joy suddenly vanishing away, as her keepsake amber brooch had been lost.

"The wind only tells me as much as Aslan allows it to," sighed Ploskavar. "I don't know for a certainty that any of ours died, nor what kind they were if any died." Zulika regretted using sharp tones talking to him; she knew that only the need of escort for herself and other vulnerable ones had prevented Ploskavar from staying with his brethren to confront the menace, and Ploskavar was quite unhappy about not sharing the fortunes of the other Djinni.

"I think that nothing should change about your party's plan to continue to the new settlement," said Ripplestride. "Zulika, Daughter of Eve, Wolfsfriend informed me that you are still recuperating from fractured ribs; you ought not do any otherwise than continue to safe refuge with your children. Be the news from the koalas' first home happy or sorrowful, we can obtain it for all."

Without much more discussion, it was agreed that the party under Ploskavar's care should continue

westward as it would have anyway. Before she and Wolfsfriend resumed their own travel eastward, Ripplestride offered what she hoped was a word of comfort to Zulika:

"I sincerely hope that you will not be denied the joy of being united with your chosen mate. But you must trust in Aslan. He paid me a special visit while I was looking after things at the new colony, so I know He is not neglecting us. If, contrary to our hopes and prayers, your beloved is taken from you, know that Aslan has many ways to console us in our losses. When I lost my first husband Grovestalker, it was as if my heart and entrails were pulled right out of my mouth, leaving me empty. But Aslan, blessed be He, graciously comforted me in His timing with the love of Quickspring, whose cubs I now carry. I even dare flatter myself that I was allowed to be of some slight comfort to Quickspring and his son Tossbone after their own bereavement--although I know, without their ever having rubbed my nose in it, that Lashtail was a better, more virtuous tigress than I ever was."

It was mid-morning when Ripplestride and Wolfsfriend caught sight of Chibrigon and Smoothtail. Sight rather than scent, because the breeze was out of the west. Smoothtail had obviously caught their scent, and could be seen reacting to the awareness of who was approaching.

Wolfsfriend could see that Smoothtail was looking solemnly at Ripplestride.

And Wolfsfriend knew that it was time to speak, right now.

"Teacher, I have to tell you something before they join us. When Father Christmas conducted the wedding of Ranshuk and Valamisa, he gave me a message that was for you, and said I would know when to say it. This is the time. Father Christmas said to say to you, 'Know this in your heart, sweet Ripplestride, that when we tread those high trails, there will be no rivalry or jealousy, and no one will be made to feel rejected.' "

Ninety seconds later, with her heart broken again, Ripplestride nonetheless did take some comfort from this message which clearly was given on Quickspring's behalf. It comforted her enough, in fact, that even as she sobbed on the ground, she knew that she would be able to find the strength not only to go on living, but also to help comfort the bereaved children of Shatterneck.

In the time since their creation, the Talking Koalas had lost exactly thirty-eight of their number to death. Excepting six who had been carried off by predators in the open country, all of the deceased (or the retrievable remains) had been interred in a cemetery east of their native grove, a place clear of the bog holes. It was placed where it was in consideration of the water table, so that the resting places of decomposing bodies would be downstream of the koalas' water supplies. Having no literacy before the arrival of the tigers, the koalas had made no inscriptions over the graves; but they planted young trees in the vicinity. No man happening by would have known that this was hallowed ground; but the koalas knew, and Aslan knew.

Flazdigar's fight against the nomad horsemen had taken place almost on top of the koalas' burial ground.

Quickspring and Shatterneck were buried on the north side of the cemetery: the side closest to Narnia, toward which their heads looked. One of the slain sea monster's teeth was buried beneath each tiger's body, in symbol of the victory the two heroes had made possible. And above each body was planted a sapling that would bear fragrant blossoms next spring.

Tawnydart lay for a long time on Shatterneck's grave, long enough that when Ripplestride came to Quickspring's grave she found Tawnydart still grieving. Tinkswid the koala was sitting on the ground beside Tawnydart in silent commiseration.

When Ripplestride had had some time for weeping, she looked over at Tinkswid and said, "Thank you, little friend. Our thanks are to all of your people for honoring the fallen."

There were tears in Tinkswid's eyes also. "It is a poor and feeble repayment for us to make," she replied. "Your husband, and Tawnydart's husband, indeed all of you tigers, could have simply run away, left us to our fate, and been safe yourselves. As it is...the tale of what all of you did, especially these two who have entered Aslan's Country, will be told and retold with reverence and gratitude as long as there are koalas in this world."

Tawnydart gave the koala scribe an affectionate face-rub. "It will do us good to know that we are remembered with love for doing right, rather than with hatred and contempt for our former crimes." (She did not mean to slight Quickspring by failing to mention that he, like Slimtalon, had been innocent of those crimes; it was a fact already well enough known.) "That such goodhearted creatures as you koalas think well of us is a mighty gift of grace from Aslan. I feel this the more keenly when I consider the Djinni who came from afar to share our peril; they are as pure in heart as you koalas, and all of them are being amazingly modest about their own deeds."

"And I have no doubt," added Ripplestride, "that when there has been time for us to hear more about the lives of koalas who went before, we shall know that many of you little ones have done acts of love and kindness that also deserve memorial." She was thinking back to the days the tigers had spent in and around the palisaded shelter in Narnia--where Dwarfs, Talking Badgers and other Narnians had shown them such undeserved generosity. "It must be terribly hard for you, who have been mostly sedentary since Aslan made you, to be leaving these graves behind as you migrate to the new settlement."

"It is hard," Tinkswid admitted. "But it is a lesson given us by Aslan. Our beloved dead are not actually IN these graves, but are alive and happy up in--" She suddenly paused, remembering what she had heard about Ripplestride's first husband Grovestalker; based on this, it seemed extremely unlikely that Grovestalker would ever be seen in Aslan's Country.

"All, at least, are offered the chance to come to those high trails," murmured Ripplestride. "I have at least one husband up there; and there'll be time enough when I arrive to figure out what share of Quickspring's companionship Lashtail and I each get in eternity. I suppose it will be more like all of us being cubs in a litter together. But I understand the track you are following, Tinkswid: no matter where we go in this world, the blessed souls above will be no less able to look down and see us. And no matter where our own bodies eventually rest, we will meet on the high trails."

Tisrukh, bone-tired but still clinging to his illusions and his dignity, managed to convince himself that it was Tash's care, not Aslan's mercy, which made it unnecessary for him or Dobrinya to expend their few remaining bullets. No wild animals threatened them on the way to the stone-house village. Accordingly, just before they rounded a shoulder of rock that would bring them within sight of their people, Tisrukh told the Cossack to fire a shot in the air, after which both men shouted the word "Victory!" several times.

In the village square, amid the statues of Tash, only one man waited to greet them, Tisrukh's cousin Tarkan. He, at least, seemed happy to see his kinsman and ruler come back alive. "Hail, Son of Destiny and son of my uncle! Welcome also to you, Dobrinya Osipovich! I beg you tell me of your exploits."

"The Tsar shall tell you," Dobrinya assured him. "But where's everyone else?"

"A reasonable question," Tarkan conceded. "They are all on their way to claim the pasture lands to the north of here, into which my mighty cousin in his wisdom previously sent scouts."

Tisrukh raised an eyebrow, which at this moment was almost all that he had the strength to lift. "But, cousin, if you're still here, who is leading them?"

"The Empress is in command of the people until you rejoin them, sire. I judged that this would have been your will... because by now enough of our people understand some of Iskralida's native language that she can give general instructions, and yet no one can have so detailed a conversation with her as to try to draw her into any plots against you. Not that I think anyone IS plotting against you..."

"And plots are less likely now than ever," Tisrukh said, "since Orhan and Urgut are among those who gave their lives to gain our magnificent victory over the Djinni and their animal servants. But go on."

Tarkan had the energy to raise both his eyebrows; but he continued without immediately inquiring further about the battle. "Since the sister of the Empress was so foolish as to run away from you, I thought it not amiss to seek a way of binding the Empress more strongly in her heart to our people. By letting her feel useful with her superior knowledge of the lands in this world, and letting her feel needed as she supervised many constructive concerns of people's daily lives, I was convinced that Iskralida would emerge from this migration genuinely loving our people, so that it would never in future cross her mind even to consider departing. Gulshim, for her part, seems to get along well with

Iskralida, and assists her without complaint. Once you have rested, we should be able to overtake them all in a day's hard riding."

"Well done, cousin!" Tisrukh bellowed, his spirits revived by hearing news of his women being kept in line. He then told his highly-interested cousin an almost truthful account of the battle at the koala colony. But he kept it relatively brief, spending no more than two or three minutes embellishing his own exploits--because it was getting harder for them to ignore the smell of the corpses of Orhan, Urgut, Suleiman, Rashid and Ismayil. Tarkan suggested lowering all five bodies into a large crevice among the crags, then covering them with enough rocks that no scavenger would dishonor their bones. He and Dobrinya performed this work, allowing their Emperor to rest.

Before he and Dobrinya collapsed into their sheepskin sleeping-rugs, Tisrukh told his cousin, "Your quality as a fighter I already knew; but now you have shown yourself also a wise planner in matters of peacetime. This heartens me, for inexorable Tash ordains that we turn our attention to peaceful things for a time, now that Dobrinya and I and the sea-beast have warded off the threat of the Djinni. Tarkan, your household shall become a hereditary aristocracy, and your given name shall become the very title borne by each elder son in your line to come!"

Tarkan, who had had more sleep lately than the other two men, kept watch over them while they took the three hours of sleep he had suggested. It did occur to Tarkan in a hypothetical way that, since Orhan was gone, he could murder these two in their sleep, say they had never returned, and make himself Tsar. But he had not done any of his actions up to now with any such treachery in mind; Tisrukh WAS his blood relative; Dobrinya was someone useful to Tisrukh...and there was always the possibility that Tash would avenge the murders of his servants.

Therefore, three and a half hours later, three men rode north together.

"Aslan, are You sure You intended me to live on for years?" honked Fear-No-Blast.

The gander knight's luck had almost run out. A lizard three or four times his size--what on Earth would be called a Nile monitor lizard--had chased him by land and water, finally trapping him inside a fallen hollow tree-trunk which was only barely too narrow for the lizard to get in. The reptile's claws, longer and sharper than a crocodile's, were tearing away hunks of rotting wood. It would not be long now until the old air scout was caught like a rabbit caught by a ferret.

But just as he was commending his soul to his Maker, Fear-No-Blast heard a blessedly familiar roar. The astonished monitor lizard was yanked away tail-first; and Fear-No-Blast wriggled out of his uncomfortable refuge to see his would-be slayer being finished off by Tiger Bluntmuzzle. With him was Lady Slimtalon, who sprang solicitously to the gander's side. "Are you all right, Sir Fear-No-Blast?"

"Better off than I was twenty seconds ago!" the gander knight laughed.

"Then at least I've done something right," said Bluntmuzzle, his tone suggesting that he was feeling like a failure because of something that was yet to be told.

"And I see that you two survived the action, at least," Fear-No-Blast continued. "So tell me how everyone else has fared."

Since Fear-No-Blast had no such intense emotional stake in Quickspring and Shatterneck as their mates had, and since he had been accustomed to objective reporting of events all his adult life, Slimtalon gave him an objective overview of the successful defense of the koalas' grove, relating the two heroic deaths where they had occurred in the order of events. Bluntmuzzle said nothing until Quickspring's death was described; then:

"I'm ashamed of my performance at the crunch. If I had done better attacking that right forelimb, Quickspring wouldn't have had to die saving me. He was saving me, you know; I was about to be crushed, but he drew the monster's weight and force onto himself instead."

Slimtalon tenderly nuzzled her son. "You might just as well say that you gave Quickspring his opening for the sacrificial attack he was willing to make. He was able to get far enough under the left forelimb because it rose up a bit as the monster was leaning right in the effort to crush you. All of us gave what we could; it's just that, in Aslan's design, two of us were called to give the final measure. You must honor their memory by being the best tiger you can be. I hope you realize, Bluntmuzzle son of Brightburn, that you are now the top-ranking male of our race."

Bluntmuzzle's eyes widened. "I honestly hadn't thought of that."

"I'm sure you hadn't, son. I believe that Aslan likes giving positions of leadership to those who are not puffed up with notions of their own superiority. Just look at the Djinni: they're terribly dissatisfied with themselves for achieving so little relative to what they could have done. But I don't blame them for the debacle of their peacemaking effort; wise though they are in doing good, they simply did not have enough experience in encountering the ways of evil. They will do better in the future; and so, dear Bluntmuzzle, will you."

"Your true greatness is still ahead of you, youngster," Fear-No-Blast put in supportively. "Your heart is in the right place; and if Aslan wills it, you will have many years to achieve good for tigerkind and its allies. But we can speak more of all these things on our way back to greet friends and honor the fallen. I would really appreciate a ride on someone's back just now; but of course I can wait while you eat that confounded lizard."

At the koalas' new semi-fortified settlement, Prilladil and the other koalas joined some of the young

tigers in listening while the humanoids had a discussion about marriage. Zulika and Raffira were providing the bridge over the language gap. The activity somehow helped Zulika to feel more confident that Kuzdikal would not be taken away from her. Hookpaw was remaining aloof--not because anyone had made him feel unwelcome, but because (now that he was permanently rid of his demonic delusions) it was an agonizing grief to remember the family that he had lost by his own fault.

Ploskavar opened the conversation by saying to all of the former slave women, "It is my hope and prayer that Tigress Ripplestride will return to us with news that the sea-monster has been killed or driven off, the warped men have been made to see the error of their ways, and all of us will be free to begin calculating our future."

"Calculating?" Zulika echoed. "Are you sure you want to put it that way?"

"Oh, go ahead and make it sound female in your translation."

Zulika gazed at this Djinn who had conscientiously guarded her, and applied some of his life-boosting power to further the knitting of her fractured ribs, even though he was not the one who was in love with her. "I'm sorry if I haven't spoken more pleasantly to you, Ploskavar; I should be friendlier to my future brother-in-law." She did not add the remark she thought of making, about that other brother-in-law who had given his very life for her even though he had never desired her for himself. She would have to remember to cherish and respect the selfless giving that reached past the bounds of romantic or marital ties. Keeping this in her heart, she proceeded to interpret Ploskavar's words. This much done, the Djinn added more:

"It must be plain to all of you women what a blessedly tender and mutually supportive relationship has been granted to our friends Ranshuk and Valamisa to enjoy." He nodded toward the Nymph and the metamorphosed wolf, who sat nearby on a log, holding hands. "May Aslan grant it to the rest of us to enter upon such harmony in marriage!"

The older of the two Russian women--the one who had not experienced death and resurrection--had a remark to offer at this point: "A sad thing has happened among my people back on Earth: many Russians believe that sweet, passionate love can exist between men and women...but that it is more likely to occur in adulterous relationships than within marriage." The woman was a little taken aback to find that every one of her hearers who was native to the Narnian world was confused about the meaning of "adultery." There was an uncomfortable digression to explain it, into which Raffira injected some bitter words about women being falsely accused of this offense; but Ploskavar was able to link this back into the original subject.

"It stands to reason that a spouse would be more tempted to infidelity if the marriage was forcibly imposed in the first place. Thus, now may be the very time when I should stress again that there is NO COMPULSION imposed upon any of you women. You have every right to refuse marriage with us

Djinni. But even if any of you decline marriage, we all will still be at least associated with one another in some degree, since Aslan has called us to build a community that can continue beyond our mortal lifetimes. Accordingly, I ask each of you to review for the rest of us what skills you possess-- agricultural, domestic, medical or otherwise--that might be of practical assistance." This proved a more agreeable digression, giving each of the former slaves a chance to hold forth about herself. Zulika smiled as this went on, recalling happily how Kuzdikal had regarded her prosaic biography as making her more attractive rather than less.

Eventually the talk drifted back toward marriage, with all of the women seeming receptive in principle to marrying Djinni. In the only contribution to the discussion made by an animal (apart from the recent expressions of bafflement about adultery), Prilladil spoke of how Ranshuk had become known for the eloquence of his prayers, and urged all concerned to give the anthropomorphized wolf a role in whatever sort of wedding ceremony would be devised. This was well received.

As the meeting was winding down, Ploskavar said, "I am troubled by a persistent irrational apprehension that, in spite of our mathematical match in numbers of husbands and wives, there could come to be unpleasantness if, say, two males wanted the same female, while one female turned out to be no one's first choice. We must all promise each other that, with Aslan's help, we will resist any impulses toward conflict in this regard."

The women, including Zulika, unanimously assured him that the prospect of any husbands as kindhearted as all the Djinni clearly were would sufficiently delight them that there should be no friction.

"Well, just to be safe," Ploskavar concluded in a low voice, "I plan to be, myself, the last of all the Djinni to choose a bride. Because I have not been part of the fight against the threat of Tisrukh, I feel unworthy to urge my preferences at anyone else's expense. Therefore, although I consider all of you Daughters of Eve worthy of love and honor, if it should happen for any reason that any of you seems least preferred, I will marry that one. She and I can then choose to see each other as valuable."

The thinnest of the young women, a Kyrgyz girl named Habibi, stood up and gestured for Ploskavar's attention. Through Raffira she told the Djinn: "If that is your intent, I can save you some time. While we were in bondage, Akim, that son of snakes, declared many times that he expected to get less money for me than for any of the others. Therefore I shall be your bride!"

She looked pleased with herself for daring to take so much initiative. Once it was clear to her that Ploskavar welcomed her offer, Habibi decided to strike one more blow against her old upbringing of timid silence. Coming out of the cluster of seated women, she pranced up to Ploskavar and clasped one of his hands with both of hers. She did not quite feel bold enough to kiss him just yet; but the appreciative look in his eyes assured her that they would get to that at the proper time. And the thought of the handsome Djinn speaking words of love to her was a further incentive to learn English.

Bluntmuzzle, carrying Fear-No-Blast on his back as they headed west, was also having a discussion with his mother about the begetting of a posterity for their species.

"I know we're not in imminent danger of extinction, with so many adolescents almost old enough to mate; but until they are ready to mate, I'd feel better about it if there were at least one couple besides Elkfinder and me to produce a litter or two NOW."

Slimtalon was not the matriarch for nothing; she had been thinking about the same subject. "Well, there is one other fully-adult male...Hookpaw."

Bluntmuzzle tilted his head. "I guess it's odd of me not to have thought of him as still being able to sire cubs. I know he is cleansed of his sins by Aslan; but do you think any tigress will be willing to take on the burden of marriage to him, when he'll always need at least some help?"

"Considering that I am the only Talking Tigress in the world who is too old to bear cubs, and all tigresses have the instinct to raise young, I should think someone would be willing! And there is one who I'd say is by far the most likely. She was married to Hookpaw's closest male friend, and was friends with Hookpaw's first wife."

"Why, of course! Tawnydart must be closer in age to Hookpaw than any Talking Tigress now living. And they have a long acquaintance, which would enable them to have some kind of companionable relationship at least."

Slimtalon did not have to say aloud that her son's reference to Talking Tigresses still living had been a poignant reminder that somewhere Bluntmuzzle had sisters who had been reduced to dumb beasts. What she did say aloud was, "If Tawnydart bears even one litter to Hookpaw, his blood will thus live on among us. As for Leapwell and Smoothtail, I know they're openminded to taking mates younger than themselves. I think your nephew Tossbone would be the best available husband for Leapwell; he's levelheaded and goodhearted. And I'd recommend Babbelfang to marry Smoothtail; despite his excessive chatter, he's a good young tiger. While I'm thinking of it, I'd also match Leapwell's son Treescratch with Wolfsfriend."

"Good thinking, Mother. Of course, that's the kind of thinking I've learned to expect from you. I'll venture to predict that every one of the matches you suggest will in fact occur, and be successful." Bluntmuzzle glanced over his shoulder. "What do you think, Sir Fear-No-Blast? You've been very quiet."

"What I think," said the gander knight, "is that Aslan will work everything out; but Lady Slimtalon is probably right on all points. For myself, my blood lives on in plenty of children and grandchildren, so I can't complain. You know that we geese only marry once, so it's no loss for me in that sense to be away

from my own kind. I'll be trying to leave a spiritual legacy among tigers, koalas and humans, until I join Comb-The-Weeds up yonder."

"You should have plenty of that to give."

"I hope so. I was thinking about how it used to be, flying at different altitudes and finding the wind blowing in different directions. Maybe talking about that could help earthbound hearers to think about living in three dimensions, and that in turn could lead to a discussion of how different life looks from our Creator's point of view..."

As when an individual is ill for a long time, and then upon convalescing is unsure just when the disease began to fade away, so the Talking Koala community shuffled uncertainly back to a sense of safety. It helped that no koalas had perished. There were no new hostile moves from the nomads; and in less than a week, Yugdug, Nubdarp and the other injured koalas were out of danger. Tinkswid, freed from dread of losing her husband, redoubled her efforts at mastering written English. When Slimtalon and Bluntmuzzle returned, bringing Fear-No-Blast with them, there was universal gladness that the grounded gander knight had survived. Before the transfer of population to the new settlement was even complete, Fear-No-Blast was already beginning to find an audience for his reminiscences of aerial adventures--and the spiritual lessons to be derived from them. Numerous koalas were compensated in this way for not having lived in Narnia proper.

As soon as Elkfinder felt up to it, Bluntmuzzle began to spend a great deal of time with her out of sight and hearing of the others; they were both eager to do their part in rebuilding the Narnian world's population of Talking Tigers. Slimtalon, meanwhile, had heart-to-heart talks with each of the unattached adult tigresses in turn about what they might do along the same lines. Only the twice-widowed Ripplestride proved unwilling to consider any future mating. "Even if I felt I could face possibly being bereaved yet again," she told the matriarch, "I could never find another husband to measure up to Quickspring. Understand, I am proud to be carrying his children, and I will do my best to raise them as tigers worthy of their valiant father; but that will be the end of my childbearing, though I hope to live long enough to enjoy being a grandmother."

"My heart tells me that you will live to meet your grandcubs," replied Slimtalon; "and that they, as well as your own children, will be worthy indeed--for you will teach them to be true to Aslan as Quickspring was."

Ripplestride gazed up at the sky. "You mean, true to Aslan as Quickspring IS."

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When Kuzdikal got through a whole day without coughing up any blood, he decided he had waited long enough. Taking a knife and a cudgel, and accompanied by a more heavily armed Jeblajask, he set

out walking for the new colony to which Zulika and the children had gone. Nubkarsh, the Chief Koala, availed himself of the chance to hitch a ride, clinging to the back of Jeblajask. The travellers knew that those in the new location would be aware by now of how the battle had turned out, since Chibrigon had gone to them.

But they all underestimated how impatient a certain woman would be to see Kuzdikal.

The Djinni and Nubkarsh all heard what they had learned to recognize as a hailing roar. It lacked something of resonance, suggesting that it came from a chest not fully matured. Sure enough, one of the youngest male tigers proved to be approaching. Walking with him, and seeming to converse with him as boys would converse together, was Bulgak, rifle slung over his shoulder. Also present as further convoy was Ploskavar, walking hand in hand with one of the Asiatic women and grasping his pickaxe in his free hand; but running out ahead of them all was the mostly-recovered Zulika, now pronouncing Kuzdikal's name flawlessly in loud yet rapturous tones.

Many had striven and risked greatly for the life and freedom of this woman, whom the men of Central Asia would call average-looking, but who to Kuzdikal was the incomparable embodiment of womanly beauty. One man had died for her sake. Before Zulika had closed the distance, Kuzdikal glanced heavenward and said softly, "Murhat, I give my promise to you as well as to Aslan, that I will make your sacrifice count for great good, as the life you enabled your kinswoman to continue shall count for great good." Then, looking again at his beloved, he summoned a burst of life-encouragement to project into her at the last instant--so that she would not freshly damage her ribs when she flung herself upon him.

Bulgak had all the time he needed to question Jeblajask and Nubkarsh about current conditions at the old koala-town, hear Ploskavar asking other questions, and listen to all the leisurely answers, while his mother and her Djinn husband-to-be were fervently embracing and kissing. In fact, the boy felt as if he might have time to walk to fabled Narnia and back, and would find them still clasped in each other's arms when he returned to this spot.

But at last Kuzdikal released Zulika for a moment and acknowledged Bulgak (which gave Zulika a chance to congratulate Habibi on being betrothed to Ploskavar). The Djinn and the nomad youth exchanged a manly hug, and Kuzdikal asked his stepson-to-be, "Is all well with your sister and your future wife?"

"Yes, thank you, sir. And as for me marrying Monduli, there's been so much talk about marriage at the new camp lately, that I feel as if I understand better what Aslan wants it to be--SO different from how it was when Mother was bound to the man who USED TO be my father. It would probably be all right to do something that would've been done back on Earth: go ahead and announce Monduli and me as engaged to be married, long before we're old enough to get married for real. I really do like her, and I suppose when I'm full-grown I can learn to like, um, that kind of stuff with her."

Zulika laughed a musical laugh and ruffled Bulgak's hair; it did both her son and her lover good to hear her laughing happily. "Son, I will be absolutely delighted, when you're old enough, to see you doing this with Monduli;" and she fastened her mouth to Kuzdikal's once again, wrapping her arms around his mighty neck once more while his arms tenderly encircled her back and waist.

The young tiger sidled up to Bulgak and whispered, "If this is the way all Aslan-fearing humanoids are in courtship, you had better work hard on your practical skills like archery while you still are young; when you and Monduli reach marriageable age and start nuzzling, you might not find time for anything else!"

It was not long before Davradon and Thurikeb were sufficiently recuperated to mingle with prospective brides; and not long after that before every Djinn had paired up with a woman who found him suitable. Irina, the Russian woman who had been prominent in the discussion of marriage, selected Smedgarosh, because at twenty-six she was the eldest of the former slaves, and Smedgarosh now looked oldest among the Djinni. By Aslan's grace, no one had to endure feeling slighted or left out even for a moment.

There was a nine-couple wedding, at which no one was more ecstatic than Kuzdikal and Zulika. Indeed, when the couples were announced officially united, it was from this couple that all the others took their cue in the matter of kissing the bride. (Some of the Turkic women had come to the very morning of their wedding day still feeling some traditional Asiatic reserve; but when they saw Zulika unabashedly kissing and caressing her new husband in the open, they all decided that they were glad to be in the Narnian world after all.) Ranshuk did indeed pray over each couple; so did the Chief Koala, as host of the gathering. Valamisa sang a song she had learned from Queen Helen long ago; and Fear-No-Blast recited portions of the Queen's Catechism from memory. It was left to Bulgak to perform, spontaneously and to the startlement of many present, the one action particularly customary for his former tribe that would be done that day: he fired an exuberant rifle shot into the air, then reproached himself for wasting ammunition.

But he need not have worried. He soon became a skillful archer, grasping the technique so well that in time some of the Djinni asked him to help them improve their skills with this weapon type that was new to them. The new humanoid community took over the responsibility of keeping the koalas safe from such lesser danger as still existed; this allowed the tigers to resume at last an existence more natural for them.

As had been discussed long ago--it seemed like a lifetime ago--all the mated pairs of tigers dispersed to find separate hunting areas. Some of those near-adult tigers who were still unattached remained for a time with Slimtalon and Ripplestride, nearer to the koalas than the other tigers were. All the tigers did gather together at intervals, including every Christmas; and one couple or another might at any time come to visit their koala and humanoid friends. The latter were making great strides at raising crops,

living now in houses outside the koalas' territory but not far off. Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder were the most frequent visitors, always glad to see Slimtalon and Fear-No-Blast again. They were thus the first of the far-ranging tigers to see the complete copy of Queen Helen's Catechism that Tinkswid finally succeeded in producing. They were also on hand to congratulate Kuzdikal and Zulika on the birth of their first son, at whose birth Valamisa had assisted.

No one was surprised that Zulika named her new son Murhat. This Murhat would one day marry the first daughter whom Valamisa bore to Ranshuk, named Helena in a slight variation on Queen Helen's name.

Dilnara grew to be a captivatingly beautiful maiden. When she was fifteen years old, mere days after her brother and Monduli were joined in marriage, the question of where Dilnara might find a husband was answered in a totally unexpected way. The family was on an excursion to the coast of the Eastern Ocean when Dilnara found a Mer-man washed up onto the beach in obvious distress. It developed that he had been poisoned by some venomous ocean creature, whose poison seemed especially to affect his ability to breathe water. Only in the air, using his lungs, could he breathe; and even so, it took all of Kuzdikal's life-encouraging power to help him recover.

The Mer-man's water-breathing seemed permanently impaired; so Kuzdikal urged him to assume human form full time. The Mer-man, Udragubo by name, was so grateful to Kuzdikal for saving him, and to Dilnara for finding him in time--and so conscious of Dilnara's beauty--that, after getting word to his family of what had happened, he joined the hybrid humanoid community. It was not long, then, before Dilnara's mother had it proven to her that she had been right to trust Aslan to provide a good husband for Dilnara. Udragubo even contributed to the intellectual life of the scholarly Djinni, by sharing his extensive knowledge about the ocean.

Tisrukh never troubled them again; his people had moved closer to Narnia, but not so close as to have to submit to King Frank's authority. The mixed-humanoid colony, which had come into being because of the emigration of the Talking Tigers, went for a long time without adopting a collective name for itself; but when Bulgak assumed the mantle of full manhood with his marriage to Monduli, he proposed that they call themselves the Slimtalonians, in honor of the tigress who had helped his family to know Aslan. When they moved south of the great desert as they meant to do eventually, some actual area of land would be called Slimtalon. The proposal was hailed and accepted; and Lady Slimtalon lived long enough to be amused and humbled at having a nation named after her.

Tawnydart did take Hookpaw as a husband after a decent interval of mourning for Shatterneck. Many tigers, and Ranshuk as well, paid frequent visits to the couple in case they might need any assistance; but Hookpaw functioned very well for a blind tiger, becoming highly proficient at nocturnal activity. Tawnydart bore one litter to Hookpaw before she lost her fertility; and it was a remarkable litter. The two cubs, one of each sex, were the first tigers born in the Narnian world, wild or sapient, to have _white_ fur where other tigers were yellow. Slimtalon, when she gave her matriarchal blessing to the

cubs, pronounced their whiteness to be symbolic of their father's sins having been washed away. Hookpaw therefore gave them unique permanent names from birth, rather than wait for some incident to generate each one's adult name. The male was called Truepardon, and his sister became Gracebearer.

A brother-sister pair (fine specimens with normal coloration) was also born to Ripplestride to carry on Quickspring's bloodline. For them also the giving of temporary names was bypassed; Ripplestride named her son Bravespring, and her daughter Quickhope. It was the most natural thing for the son and daughter of one hero's widow to marry the daughter and son of another hero's widow; and seeing the righteous character all four of these new-generation tigers displayed allowed the aging Slimtalon to feel content that the Talking Tigers would go on walking in Aslan's ways after she departed for Aslan's Country.

When Slimtalon did make her peaceful departure--having outlived Fear-No-Blast by several years, and Hookpaw by one year--Bluntmuzzle and Elkfinder, with their many children, were among those gathered to bid her a loving farewell. The tigress matriarch, resting at last from her faithful toil, blessed all who were around her, tigers and others; but her very last earthly words were for Bluntmuzzle alone, in his capacity as Chief Tiger, whispered into his ear:

"Never forget that some future generation of our people will be called on to render secret aid to humans who will flee from Narnia in a time of great calamity. There must always be one or more of our people who know this; but be careful to reveal the secret only to tigers of the highest moral integrity--which is to say, to tigers like yourself. I love you, son, and I know you will do well."

It seemed to Slimtalon that she had scarcely finished uttering these words to Bluntmuzzle when the scene around her changed--and Aslan stood before her, His glory now visible with a brightness that only immortal eyes could be allowed to see. Though unable to see herself, she knew at once that she was young and strong and beautiful again.

"Welcome to the True Narnia, My very dear daughter," the True Lion said. "Long and hard have you striven to uphold what was right among all Talking Beasts; now begins your reward, and never will it end." Slimtalon fell down to worship Him...after which, Aslan relaxed His solemnity and told her with a smile, "Now, daughter, if you'll turn and look behind you, you'll see the second being you have been longing to see."

She turned...and there was the love of her youth, Lord Brightburn, also young again, joyously galloping to greet her.

No mere token rubbing could adequately express the soaring elation of that reunion. Fully aware that now they were both invulnerable to all harm, the long-parted mates absolutely crashed into each other in a celebratory play-fight, digging claws and teeth into each other in their eagerness to grip and

squeeze ever closer and closer together. Over the fragrant foliage of Aslan's Country they tumbled and rolled together, every pretend-attack an utterance of love and affection that went beyond the reach of words.

At last, Slimtalon lay pinned beneath her husband. Now he did start rubbing faces with her, intermittently touching his mouth to hers in humanlike kisses. "You see, I'm winning the fight!" he declared with mock fierceness.

Laughing, Slimtalon asked, "But what are we fighting about?"

Still keeping his straight face, Brightburn replied, "I don't know. But I can tell you that the outcome of this battle will determine the outcome of this battle!" Then he also laughed--and the mutual deluge of love continued. There was no need for them to populate the world which was now their home; Heavenly loving was something they could do while close or at a distance. They poured the very energy of happiness itself into each other, like the Djinni exerting their life-encouragement. It was all so perfect, perfect beyond telling to any mortal, that Slimtalon didn't want it ever to end.

And then she remembered that it wouldn't ever end.

After Hookpaw, Quickspring, Shatterneck, Fear-No-Blast, Zetow, Zavax and many others had joyfully welcomed Slimtalon into Heaven, she was presented with a major surprise. Not a frightening surprise, for fear, like death, was no more; but a surprise. "What is THAT doing here?" Slimtalon asked, staring in amazement at what was indisputably the very same reptilian monster which had slain her husband, and upon which she had inflicted her vengeance. It was eating grass now, but she knew every detail of its appearance.

"What it's doing here is what all the dumb animals you will see are doing here," Brightburn told her. "It's living in peace, free from the curse of death. You were right to destroy it back there in our former world; but is nonetheless WAS just a dumb brute beast, not morally accountable for the things Tash prompted it to do. So don't begrudge it a place in Aslan's Country. And as for wild animals being admitted here...use your nose, darling."

Slimtalon sniffed carefully, then her eyes lit up. "I smell our children!"

"You are smelling those of our wayward offspring who were only reduced to wild beasts rather than being slain. Aslan's mercy shows them a leniency not afforded to the far-strayed Children of Adam. They will dwell with us here in the True Narnia as peaceful animals; and although they will not be given back their power of speech, you will find that they can understand what we say to them."

Slimtalon moved among these children of hers, grateful to have any of her lost cubs back in any form. After she had exchanged animal greetings with them, Brightburn called her to follow him elsewhere.

"There's something due to happen on the mortal plane that you'll want to watch," he told her, and led her to the immeasurable cliffs which border Aslan's Country. "Look down, and you'll soon begin to see and hear what is happening below. It concerns a Nymph of Narnia whom you tried to help, and a Daughter of Eve whose whole family you succeeded in helping."

The now-immortal tigress got the knack of projecting her perception downward, until she was beholding the same region where her adventures with the Talking Koalas and the Djinni had occurred. The time was first light, and she recognized Ranshuk and Valamisa strolling together, heading for a house that she felt sure was the home of Zulika and Kuzdikal. The Nymph and the former Talking Wolf now appeared to be well past age forty. Valamisa had by no means lost all of her Nymphic beauty, but she certainly would not now be described as young. It occurred to the watching Slimtalon that the other Nymph, Empress Iskralida, must be at the same stage of maturity.

A tigerish voice abruptly hailed the pair; she knew the voice to be that of Truepardon, white-furred son of Hookpaw. Expanding her field of sight, she found that Quickhope, Truepardon's wife, was beside him. Behind them walked one grown man, three grown women, and two girls. Each adult carried a smaller girl, and four more besides rode on the backs of two other tigers who brought up the rear, Quickhope's brother Bravespring and his wife Gracebearer. All of the humans were wearing the sort of clothes worn by Tisrukh's nomads.

As Ranshuk and Valamisa turned to look upon the newcomers, Truepardon said, "Aslan guided us well; we found them, and bring them now safely to freedom."

Ranshuk, still possessing his wolfish sense of smell, sniffed the air. "Were you pursued?" But before he could get an answer, Valamisa and the oldest of the arriving women recognized each other. Crying aloud in gladness, Iskralida and her sister Nymph dashed at each other with reaching arms, and then were too busy hugging and kissing and weeping to say anything informative. But Quickhope told Ranshuk, "There was a tardy pursuit, and it was not of long duration. We put the fear of Aslan into them, or at least into their horses. But it's well that they no longer have those fire weapons."

Now Truepardon made introductions. "Ranshuk, this woman is Gulshim, widow of Murhat of blessed memory, lately wife by coercion to Tisrukh, still more lately demoted by him even as he did the same to Iskralida. Gulshim was the mastermind--mistressmind?--of their escape, with assistance from the one male here, Bakir, her youngest son by Murhat."

Bakir bowed with dignity. "Marvellous persons who keep company with marvellous beasts, we are grateful to be allowed to come among you. Be it known that I never believed the lies my foul uncle told about my honorable father; but until my esteemed mother devised a plan of escape, it was not in my power to be free of the tyrant."

Next Gulshim spoke up: "Worthy ones, this young woman is Bezbimbry, eldest daughter of Iskrallida. All the children here are either mine or Iskrallida's; you'll know them all soon enough." Bezbimbry made her own bow of greeting and respect.

Hearing her daughter's name spoken, Iskrallida leaned back in Valamisa's arms just enough to say, "Be it known that I do not any longer believe in reincarnation; I have had all the nonsense pounded out of me, one way and another. But I still named my daughter in memory of my departed friend. Both Gulshim and I found it easier to take daughters away with us than sons." At that, the two Nymphs resumed squeezing each other.

"Iskrallida and I were both obliged to leave behind our sons by Tisrukh, including the Imperial Heir, Iskrallida's firstborn," Gulshim resumed. "His name, of course, is Tisrukh the Second. My mother spent the last years of her life hating Tisrukh the First--not without cause! She studied the plants of this world, supposedly for medicinal purposes, until she succeeded in concocting a virulent poison. On her deathbed, she told me where she had hidden the poison, and called on me to avenge my father and brother with it. I did not find the will to use the poison until after the day came when Tisrukh proclaimed that, apart from the matter of the imperial succession, his three new young wives would be preferred above both Iskrallida and me. So, having told Bakir to be ready for an escape, and confirming Iskrallida's willingness to flee with me, I fetched the..."

"You poisoned Tisrukh?" burst out Ranshuk. He would have felt no qualms about slaying the petty emperor face to face, but this was different.

"Don't look at me that way," said Gulshim. "I didn't kill him, I only gave him a mild dose of the poison, enough to make him sick. I did the same to that snake Tarkan and that jackal Dobrinya. The excitement and alarm this caused enabled us to make our escape, with no one noticing it until we had a head start. And then these magnificent tigers were guided to help us by Aslan, Who is surely the true God."

The Nymphs had finally caught up sufficiently on sisterly affection for the time being. Iskrallida declared, "Blessed be Aslan! He granted me that final opportunity He had promised, and I did not fail to avail myself of it. I owe thanks also to brave Gulshim, who provided the daring that I lacked. And now, I understand that my mother-in-spirit still lives; please, where is she?"

"Here with me!" boomed the voice of Kuzdikal the Djinn from an unexpected direction. "We also like to take early-morning walks." Now a gray-haired grandmother, Zulika still had a pleasant face for her age, and a healthy upright posture. She also still had the energy to run to the delighted Iskrallida, and there ensued a second session of kisses, close clinging, and joyous laughter. When this new round of rejoicing subsided, Zulika said to the ex-empress, "Kuzdikal, and all of our children, have heard about you, and they all have prayed along with me that you would not miss your last chance for deliverance. Now here you are--glory to Aslan!"

"I'm sorry that I came too late to thank Slimtalon and Fear-No-Blast for all they did," sighed Iskralida. "The only good thing that came of my delaying repentance is that Gulshim and I have our daughters to bring with us, as well as her son."

Kissing the Nymph once more and giving a motherly caress to her hair, Zulika replied, "Now that you are in fellowship with Aslan, you will in your time get to thank those who went before. Now, let us attend to the needs of you and your children. WHAT a lot of talking we have to do!"

Even in Heaven, Slimtalon and Brightburn found that it added something to their joy to see such a loose end being tied up in the shadowlands.

As the happy group of mortals all headed for the house, Kuzdikal took Ranshuk aside and said, "My sense of the wind is that this event of redemption and liberation is the sign we have awaited: the sign that it is migrating time for those of us humanoids who have not yet removed ourselves beyond the great desert. The work we did here will not have been for nothing; it will benefit the realm of Archenland as it takes form and grows in this direction. But henceforth, our tiger friends will have their own path to walk."

"I believe you speak truth," the nearby Gracebearer mused. "But we'll miss you two-leggers. I'm glad there'll still be koalas around to do things that need hands."

Bravespring, son of the noble Quickspring, spoke for all the Talking Tigers when he said, "Our elders did great deeds in their day; I pray that our deeds in times to come will be worthy of them."

And so the time came for the Talking Tigers to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining their faithfulness to Aslan without more humanoid guidance than the Catechism that Queen Helen had sent to them. Having that much spiritual truth to shape their minds and hearts, their descendants would one day be there to rescue and shelter humans who would come south fleeing from the White Witch. The descendants of those humans, then, would live to see the day when Aslan would make it safe for descendants of Adam and Eve to enter Narnia once more. And if the deeds of noble tigers were little remembered within the borders of Narnia, they would not be forgotten by the Great Lion.

THE END!! (But be sure to read "The Lion's Share" by Timbalioguy!)