

A MATTER OF TIME

HOW IRONIC THAT THERE WOULD BE A STATUE to High Mage Rothbart placed in the Garden of Sighs. That fox was once a statue himself for daring to laugh at the White Witch. For his crime he stood a long cold, lonely vigil in her macabre collection of broken dreams, a look of horror frozen on his face by her dread enchantment.

His imprisonment ended when Aslan breathed upon him, and the divine wind dispersed the dark clouds of witchcraft. His icy gray countenance turned soft and red. His ears and tail slumped in blissful relaxation. But most importantly his last memory of pure evil was followed by an impression of pure goodness, and the pairing of the two with goodness washing away the evil made him giddy like strong wine.

He never realized how important such trivial things as scratching an itch and feeling the sun warm against his fur could be. He had taken for granted the gentle drumming of his heart, the tides of air whistling through his nose and mouth and the press of soft earth and grass against his paws. There were sounds everywhere, smells everywhere, feelings against his skin, movement, color, and the heady thrill of simply moving from place to place. It was as if he had become aware of everything in the universe.

That he had to channel that attention into the grim task of combat was not ideal but it was all right. He would fight for Aslan, avenging the Great Lion and all of Narnia against the White Witch. He would expunge the stain of impure blood.

After the battle at the Ford of Beruna, he was free to go home and take up his life where he had left off. Only this time the life that had returned to him had also returned to the world about him and Springtime chattered and whistled and throbbed in the air. The grass was so brilliant green and the flowers so sunshine gold that it

almost hurt to look on them. The air was fresh and clean and bursting with the sweet smells of renaissance.

All his life he had seen nothing but white snow and gray skies. The old landmarks had been swept away by a flood of green and it was hard for him to find his way back to Brockhurst. He had to ask directions repeatedly and even as he drew close to what should have been his village he saw few clues to tell him he was on the right track.

Still once he got on the main street he had little trouble recognizing the Flying Unicorn, the Gate of Solace, the docks and the Mayor's Estate. It was all just as if it had been yesterday, or at least last winter, which in fact it had been--for a very, very long time.

He was delighted to catch site of his little cottage sitting prettily in the middle of a green field with flowers along the sides of the walk and birds singing in the trees. What a wondrous thing it was, so familiar and yet so much more alive!

He ran up the front walk, but then slowed as he reached the door. He realized the magnitude of what he was about to do. Would she be home? Would she be expecting him? His dearest Briar Rose?

His heart hammering with expectation, Rothbart reached out with a trembling paw and knocked. "Rose, it's me! Open up!"

The latch clicked from the inside and the door slowly opened. An elderly face peeked through the crack. "May I help you, Sir?"

"Pardon me, Ma'am. I'm looking for my wife Briar Rose. Does she still live here?"

The old vixen's eyes widened and her mouth hung open. She gasped deeply, then raised a paw to her heart.

"Ma'am, what's wrong?"

"Rothbart? Is that you? After all these years?"

"Yes, my dear. So is Rose about?"

Her face contorted in a sob. She reached out with a trembling paw and stroked his cheek ruffs. "Don't you know me? Don't you know me?" She stiffened, then collapsed.

Old Briar Rose died in his arms.

Reeling with shock and near madness, the fox made a tormented pilgrimage of grief to his parents' graves, his sister's ruined cabin, and finally to his old smithy where an otter he'd never met was shaping an iron strap on his daddy's anvil with his daddy's hammer. Everything he once was and everything he once had was gone, melted away with the long, bitter winter.

The otter had the same giddy optimism that all the other villagers wore like a badge on their sleeve. If anything, the ocean of joy that surrounded him made Rothbart feel more alone.

"Can I help you sir?"

"Yes," the fox intoned. "I want to get drunk. Very drunk. Where's the closest pub?"

"Go straight left two blocks, then bear right. The Knight and Squire. You can't miss it."

He had some coins in his purse to go buy provisions. "Twenty crescents. That ought to do," he muttered. "Maybe that's enough to solve my problem permanently."

Rothbart sat unsteadily at the bar. "Inkeeper," he said groggily, "bring me another."

"Don't you think you've had too much, foxy?" the grizzled badger said. "You're clinging on with one toe, son."

"One toe too many," the fox murmured bitterly. "I want to sleep. I want to dream. It's all I have left."

"Come on, sir, surely you don't mean it?" He pulled a large club from under the bar and sat it in front of him.

"Threatening me, boy?"

"Not a threat, sir. Just a way to save money. You might as well smack your brains out with this...it will do you just as much good and it costs less."

The fox looked up at him with bloodshot eyes. "Making fun of me? Are you?? I wasn't a drunk a week ago! I was a soldier for Aslan! A soldier who fought the White Witch! I lost everything for him, and I have nothing left but an empty glass. Fill it up, boy. If I can drink enough today the problem will go away for good and we'll *all* be happier."

"Oh sir, I can't be the cause of your undoing. No sir, it violates my ethics."

"Ethics?" The fox laughed bitterly. "That's like fairness, right? Well there is no fairness, so ethics can go out with the bilge!" He waved a paw before his nose. "Fill it up. I can still see my paw in front of my face."

Just then, another paw slipped over his and gave it a sympathetic squeeze. He looked about at the old hare, stunned. "Marse Dooley?"

"Vicar Dooley now."

"Do you know me, Marse?"

"Of course I know you, Rothbart. Come home with me and tell me all about it over tea and biscuits."

If anything, Rothbart's strange odyssey from blacksmith to High Mage of Narnia was even more astounding than the path that sat him on that bar stool in long ago Brockhurst. Once he ceased to pity himself, he found he had a wonderful gift for ministering to others, and in healing their woes he found surcease for his own deep sorrows.

By the time Old Marse had retired as Vicar, Rothbart was superbly qualified to fill the vacancy.

On one of Aslan's infrequent trips to Narnia he stopped by the vicarage to see Vicar Rothbart, kissed him with a warm, wonderful lion kiss, and said, "You have freely given, and you shall freely receive." He also whispered something in his ear, a phrase that the fox never told another living soul. But we all suspected it was a passed-along greeting from his beloved Briar Rose.

Whatever it was, Aslan's blessing took hold and grew in the fertile soil of Rothbart's spirit, and no one was surprised when he became Mage...and finally High Mage...of Narnia.

THE END