

festering foot. She then nods her head and smiles at me. "Don't worry, little one. We'll make you well. We're good at this."

Bear's face is tight and worried and sort of proud too because he brought her here. And I love him so, so much. I sink back, glad to be the little one, to have this woman here, her warm hands working to make me well.

I can smell herbs and garlic and onions and something acrid. Something unpleasant. But the woman's face and hands make me trust her. She sings as she wipes my brow and as she places a cup by my mouth and asks me to drink. Commands me.

"Come, Juniper. Your brother needs you."

Is it her voice that I'm hearing, this woman that Bear has brought to save me? Or is it Annie Rose, back in our glasshouse?

Someone calls the woman "Mama". Is it our mother? I can't ask Bear. I'm not sure what's stopped working, my brain or my voice, I just know I have to be silent. I can't form the words and my energy is needed elsewhere.

I drift. In and out of sleep and in and out of the Palm House too.

I stir when the woman touches my foot but she nods when I squirm and when my eyes close with pain. "It's good. It's good you feel it." And over again - "Shush, little one. We're here now."

The woman's voice sounds like music and she says these words over and over - shush, shush - though I don't think I'm crying. Time passes and the woman is still here, by my side.

She's not our mother. The voice calling "Mama" comes from another boy, almost my age. He comes into the mouth of the cave and brings things. Takes things away. He's always smiling and the woman calls him Cam. Sometimes Bear is with him, following him in and out like he always did with Etienne. Bear says the boy's name too. "Cam! Cam!" The name winds in and out of my head like a river.

It's not this boy I see in my dreams though. In my dreams, it's always Etienne.

It's not just hours, it's days passing. I know this because sometimes it's dark and then I wake again and it's light and, disorientated, I form Bear's name and he comes running. If he doesn't, the woman goes to the opening of the cave and calls him for me, calls him louder. His name sounds strange in her mouth. Foreign.

When Bear comes, his cheeks are red, like he's been running a long way, or if it's night, like he's just come from the fire that I can smell burning somewhere outside the cave. "Bear!"

"It's OK now, Ju! Hester and Cam and the others are looking after us. You're getting better!"

I nod. I can feel it. I'm not just clinging on, I'm waking

up, coming back to life. I've been shut up in the dark like that old jack-in-the-box, but Hester's winding the handle of the tin and with each turn the lid's lifting higher.

When I'm sat up for the first time and eating solid food – some warm thick soup with chunks of meat – Bear comes and sits beside me. He watches me eat and takes my bowl out when I've finished. When he comes back, his eyes are wet. "I thought you were dying, Ju." He can say it now because now it's not going to be true. He can see it. I'm getting better.

"You saved me," I say.

Bear bends down into the curve of my arms, cautious, afraid he'll hurt me. "You saved me," I repeat.

"Hester did that," he says, embarrassed. "She's Cam's mum. And Queenie's."

"Queenie?"

"Cam's sister. My friend."

I smile. "You saved me too. You found the cave and you brought me here. And you found Hester."

"I had to get help, Ju. I knew they were good, cause I'd heard them singing. They're the forest folk, Ju!"

"The forest folk?"

"The twig signs?" Bear says. "Don't you remember?"

"Hester's people made the signs?"

"Well, some of their people did. Forest folk, like I told you."

"Have you got the GPS, Bear? I wanted to check on the route."

His face scrunches up, red.

"Bear?"

"The battery's gone. I took the GPS to find the cave and I didn't turn it off. I thought I had, but I didn't, and now it's dead."

"Dead?" I repeat slowly. The GPS felt like a lifeline, winding out golden thread for us to follow. Maybe it was greedy of me to expect it to last all the way. "We have Mum's map," I say. "We can use that."

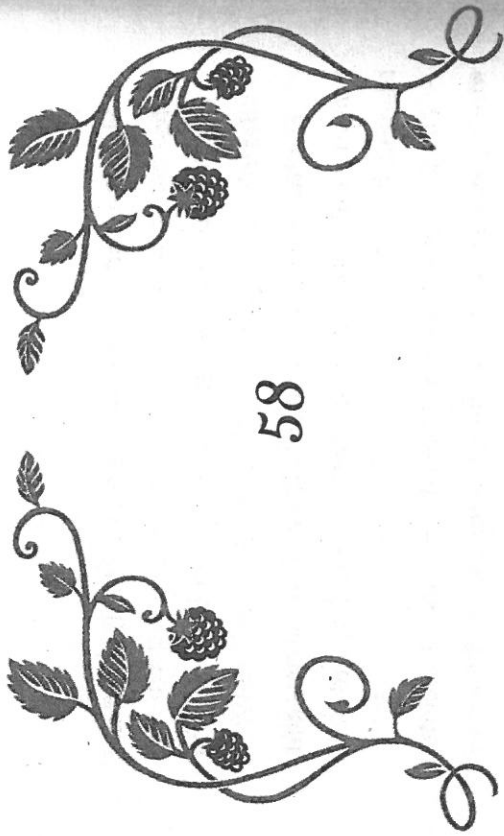
Bear looks relieved. "I found water too, didn't I? Proper mountain water from a waterfall!"

I hug him close. "That was the best water I ever tasted." "Really?"

"Cross my heart."

"But don't hope to die?"

"No, I'm all done with dying."



The next morning, Hester leads me out into the light.

My left foot feels strange, like it's not quite part of me, but then my right foot feels strange too. I've been lying down a long time.

Outside the cave, it's totally different to the world I left. It's not green any more, it's white. Everywhere. Everything bleached and glazed and frosted. We came through the wardrobe. We walked right into Narnia.

Sunlight glints off the snow like a thousand torches and I have to put my hand over my eyes to shield them from all the light.

We're on a hillside and down in the bottom of the valley is a lake. A looking glass, reflecting back trees and sky.

I'm about to ask Bear's question – Ennerdale, how many more miles? – when this silver-grey cat emerges out of the trees and stands there, watching me.

"Ghost?" I gasp.

"It's a good name for her," Hester says.

"She's different." I recognize the markings, of course I do, but she's a whole new shade of colour.

"It's definitely your cat," Hester says. "All the days we've been here, she's barely left your side."

"She was golden."

"She's grown her winter coat," Hester says, matter-of-factly.

"She's camouflaged," Bear chirps, appearing beside me. "Didn't you notice? For the snow. The snow's pretty, isn't it, Juniper?"

He sprinkles snowflakes on to my hand. Tiny ice crystals. Snow flowers, or stars, almost violet in the light. They prick at my palm.

"Beautiful," I say, distracted, already staring back at Ghost. I call her but she retreats back under the trees. Gone. Like she's changed into her name, a real phantom of the forest. For some stupid reason, I start to cry. The ice flowers melt away in my hand.

"Jul!" Bear says, wary.

A little girl's standing a way off, her head to one side. She has dark hair winding down to her knees and pink dusty cheeks and is wearing fur, like a rabbit. She's beckoning to Bear.

"Be off with you both," Hester says, shooing him, and



Bear scampers after the girl without a backwards glance. He's had enough of me crying.

Hester sits me down on a rock just outside the cave, where icicles hang down from the top. She puts a fur round my shoulders and I look at it, suspicious.

"It's not lynx," she says, laughing. "Mine is. Your cat doesn't think much of me! She gives all of us a wide berth. You and Bear though, it's one of the strangest things I ever saw. Like you're her kittens."

"How long have I been ill?"

Hester's face creases. "A couple of weeks, I reckon. When your brother found us, he wasn't talking much sense, but that wound of yours, I reckon it had been festering a good few days. More. Then we've been with you seven days now."

"Two weeks?" No wonder there's snow. It must be December already. We should have been at Ennerdale by now. "Did Bear tell you?" I say reticently. "That we're on a journey?"

"Aye, he did that. Ennerdale."

"You know it?" I ask in a rush.

"I have a fair idea. It's near one of our stopping places. We go to those valleys sometimes. We collect berries from your trees."

I look at her, confused, and she winks at me. "The juniper tree. They make a nice tippie of gin."

"Have you seen anyone?" I ask, impatient. "Any people."

Hester nods slowly. "There's a village down by the lake. We've traded with them, various times. It's not a bad destination to have, Juniper."

I can hardly believe she's saying it. She's seen people there. A whole village. "It's still there? Ennerdale?"

But Hester's face has changed. Darkened, like when the sun goes behind a cloud. "This ain't the right time of year. Not to cross those mountains."

I shake my head. "We have to. To our parents. Ennerdale's our home now."

"Aye, I get that. And if it were spring or summer, or even a few weeks back, we'd take you. Show you the way. But not wintertime. Not with the coldest weather on its way. The deep freeze. You ain't seen nothing yet. Wait with us. Wait a while. Let winter do its worst and then go."

"No," I say, still shaking my head. "We've come this far. We're so close now. We've got a map that tells us the way."

Hester swipes out with her hand dismissively. "The way over the mountains changes all the time. Storms and ice."

I keep my face composed. "Our mum left the map for us. She drew the route on herself and she's been there. She's there now, waiting for us."

Hester softens. "Listen, I'll make a deal with you. We'll go west with you a little way, until I see how that foot's bearing up."

"Yes?"