

Chapter One: An Unpromising Beginning

Tash had always been told he was perfectly and completely useless.

'Perfectly and completely useless' his father would say, in a voice that was an instrument for making absolutely clear statements of mathematically precise fact. His brothers would nod their heads solemnly in agreement, and his sisters and mothers would creak wheezily from their alcoves to show that they also agreed that Tash was perfectly and completely useless.

Tash would bow his head and let his arms droop, as if to agree that what his father said was true.

'And yet' Tash would think to himself, 'I am not useless at all.' And he would daydream of what he would do one day to prove to everyone that he was not perfectly and completely useless and lose track of what his father was saying.

It is not my intention to excuse anything Tash did or didn't do on the grounds that he had an unpleasant childhood. I am not telling you this so that you will feel sorry for him, or so you can psychoanalyse him. It is only that if Tash hadn't had an unpleasant childhood, he would have gone on to live a very ordinary life like his brothers and would not come into this story at all.

For the first four years of his life no one said a kind word to Tash. Four years among the Thalarka is about the same as fifteen or sixteen of our years, for the world of the Thalarka rolls sluggishly around their great green marrow-fat pea of a sun. In all that time no one told Tash that he was anything other than perfectly and completely useless.

In point of fact, he was useless. To live in the Plain of Ua requires stamina, to work all day in the endless fields of mud: planting grith, and fertilising grith, and weeding grith, and warding off the beasts of mire and mist that are eager to eat the tender young grith plants, and harvesting the spindly fruit of the grith that must be picked in darkness and husked and pickled the same night it is picked so it will not spoil. Tash was weak, and could not do any of these things for more than half an hour at a stretch. Furthermore, he was sickly, and was forever getting fevers that made him no good for any work at all for days on end. Worse, he was impatient and easily distracted, and long before he was too weak to work he would usually have wandered off to tease some many-legged crawling thing with a bit of stick, or make little dams and canals in the mud with the hoe he was supposed to be weeding with. And he was clumsy: he would trample the little grith plants, and pull them up instead of the weeds, and at harvest time he would get bits of husk in the pickling pot, and drop fruit in the mud, and stab his fingers on the prickly parts of the fruit so that they swelled up and were perfectly and completely useless for any more husking.

Once in each long year of the Thalarka was the festival of Quambu Vashan, which was held in the city where the Procurator of the Overlord had her alcove, some days journey away on the edge of the Plain of Ua. There was always great feasting at the time of the festival of Quambu Vashan, and acrobats and clowns, though only old Raaku of all the villagers had ever seen them.

Two or three times a year the rain would stop and the sun would peer down through a canyon in the clouds. Then the Thalarka in the fields would down tools and mutter proverbs and try not to look up at the great green marrow-fat pea of the sun. Tash would always look up at the sunlit sides of the

canyons of cloud- which were almost too bright to see- and dream of what it must be like to be up there.

Eight times a year was the frenzy of the harvest, and after the harvest feasting, and after the feasting the coming of the Overlord's tax collectors, to carry off rather a lot of the pickled grith that was left over from the feasting.

Two or three hundred times a year there would be some sort of holiday to break the round of working in the fields, with the proper dates for each holiday kept in order by the priests. There would be dancing in figures, and wagers on fights between caged mire beasts that were things like hairless weasels, and the priests would usually sacrifice something and make patterns on the walls of the priest-house with dripping bits from its inside.

Every day it rained.

The plain of Ua was a plain of grey mud, and the skies were of grey cloud, and the stick-like grith were grey, and the huts of the Thalarka were grey. The Thalarka themselves were also grey. The huts of the Thalarka were dry inside with a fitful clammy dryness, in which lamps burned only with a feeble bluish flame. Tash thought fire was splendid, since it was not grey. That was how he managed to burn one of his hands rather badly just before the harvest. At this particular harvest he was needed more than usual, since his two oldest brothers had been married off into other villages since the harvest before, but because of his injury he ended up being even less useful than usual.

This was not long before the festival of Quambu Vashan. Besides clowns and acrobats, great numbers of sacrifices of a particular kind were always required at this festival, so it was the custom of the tax collectors of the Overlord to take with them from each village they visited at the harvest an appropriate sacrifice. This would not be important to the story if it were not that the sacrifices required for the festival of Quambu Vashan were Thalarka of about four years of age. It was required that they have all their limbs intact, and have no obvious serious blemishes, but otherwise it was all the same to the Overlord whether they were useless or not. This part of the festival did not feature in Raaku's stories, and the older Thalarka of the village tended not to discuss it in the presence of younger ones.

'We should give Tash to the tax collectors for sacrifice at the festival of Quambu Vashan' said Tash's father to his mothers one night. 'For he is perfectly and completely useless for anything else.'

Tash's mothers croaked their agreement. A family that freely gave the sacrifice for the festival of Quambu Vashan would be noted on the books of the tax collectors and not be called upon to give another for a generation, during which time more useful members of the family suitable for sacrifice would be spared to work in the fields. It was also the custom in Tash's village for the families who had not given a son or daughter to the tax collectors to bring presents to the family that had, and speak approvingly of them, so Tash's father's suggestion was quite a good one. It is only fair on Tash's mothers to report that they did not agree immediately, not until Tash's father had reminded them of these things.

So after the harvest when the tax collectors of the Overlord came to the village Tash was sent off with them.

‘You are being apprenticed to the tax collectors’ Tash’s father told him. ‘You will leave with them when they have finished lunch.’

Tash did not realise why he had been sent off until he had been travelling the rest of that day with the tax collectors. He had spent most of the afternoon staring up at the roiling patterns of the clouds, imagining that they had hidden meanings. They were like secret symbols from a mysterious power in the sky sending orders to its minions in the mire, in a tremendously complicated language that never said exactly the same thing twice. The tax collectors had already collected four other young Thalarka for the festival of Quambu Vashan. Three of them were girls, and Tash could not understand their speech – it was another part of Tash’s uselessness that he had a bad ear for women’s language – and the fourth was a boy. He was slow-witted and smaller than Tash, but he had paid more attention to the world around him.

‘Where do you think we will stop?’ said Tash as it started to dark, meaning ‘where are we going to stop tonight’, but the slow-witted one took him at his word and said, ‘At the festival’.

‘I know we’re going to the festival of Quambu Vashan’ said Tash. He was tired of tramping through the mud and peered impatiently ahead into the thickening gloom. ‘Where are we going to stop tonight?’

The slow-witted one didn’t say anything and they tramped along through the mud some more.

‘Why did you say, ‘at the festival’? said Tash, since he was bored and couldn’t think of anything better to do than quibble with the slow-witted boy. ‘Why not say we’re going to the city of the Overlord’s Procurator?’

‘I don’t understand’ said the slow-witted boy. He hung his head and drooped his arms in exactly the same way Tash had always done when his father told him how useless he was.

‘So, what does the festival have to do with it?’ said Tash impatiently.

‘I’m going to be a sacrifice at the festival’ said the slow-witted boy. He said it in the same way that Tash’s brothers would say things like ‘I’m going to weed the south-eastern corner of the field today’.

Tash looked around at the others and thought that the tax collectors had treated all five of them in exactly the same way since they had left the village. Here they were, all walking in a line through the mud. And he realised that his father had very probably lied to him, and that he was going to be a sacrifice as well. For a while he could hardly think at all.

‘I seem to be in terrible trouble’ Tash thought.

Over the next few days of tramping across the Plain of Ua Tash tried to escape many times, but the tax collectors were experienced collectors of sacrifices, and he had no luck. They went through nine more villages and collected nine more sacrifices for the festival of Quambu Vashan. Five of these were boys, and they were all slow-witted except for Zish, who was contrary.

‘I was opposed to the ways of the village because they were brutish and stupid’ said Zish, in a way that was bitter and mirthful at the same time that Tash had never heard before us, as if it pleased him more than anything to be calling the ways of his village brutish and stupid. ‘So I’m to be

sacrificed now' he went on. 'At least my blood will be of some use to the Overlord Varkarian, if it is of no further use to me.'

'I'm sure there is some way to escape' said Tash. 'If we work together'-

'There is no way to escape' said Zish in his bitter mirthful way. 'This is our destiny, Valgur'- he had confused Tash with one of the other boys, whose name was Valgur, and took no notice of Tash's efforts to correct him- 'to serve the Overlord by being sacrifices at the festival of Quambu Vashan. Our destiny is inexorable. Our destiny is irresistible.'

Tash stopped listening to Zish as he talked more about inexorable destiny and the usefulness of being sacrificed. Tash was not sure whether this was what Zish really believed or not. Perhaps he did not know himself whether he believed it or not. Sometimes Zish talked in such a way that Tash thought he must be mad, and sometimes Zish told Tash that he was mad.

'I have said the same thing to you a dozen times, Valgur, and you haven't said a word back, just gone on staring at the clouds' said Zish. 'You must be mad. It is no wonder you are only fit to be sacrificed.'

At any rate Zish was too contrary to be in any way helpful to Tash.

If he had not known he was going to be sacrificed at the end of it Tash would have had a lovely time. The long hours of walking were dreadfully wearying at first, but he felt himself growing stronger each day, and the sacrifices were fed twice a day with the freshly pickled grith the tax collectors had gathered, which was more and nicer food than Tash had eaten before. Each day he saw new villages, with new and different temples, and new fields cut into different shapes, and great coiling worms of rivers, and broad lakes spotted with rafts, and companies of spear-men and javelin-women marching on the highroads, their armour as silvery-grey as the lakes and spotted with metal spikes instead of rafts. He had seen nothing but his village and the fields immediately around it for his whole life and found he quite liked travelling.

At the edge of the Procurator's city Tash's party met up with several other parties of tax collectors. All the sacrifices were collected together and tied in a long chain to keep them tidy, ankle to ankle and wrist to wrist, and in this way they all shuffled together into the Procurator's city. This city was made of grey stone, huts and palaces alike, and they were scattered together in no particular order over the plain, at first with plenty of space between them but then closer and closer together until they almost blocked out the clouds.

In the middle was the Tower of the Procurator of the Overlord, ten or twelve times higher than any other built thing Tash had ever seen. It was carved on every side with images of mist-beasts and mire-beasts and thalarka, all larger than life, and all making gestures of obeisance to the sigil of the Overlord Varkarian, which was at the top of the tower and was worked in huge blue stones like fire.

'Sweeter than narbul venom is it to serve the Overlord' intoned the most senior of the tax collectors, when the party could first see this sigil in blue stones like fire. All the more junior tax collectors dutifully intoned in unison that it was sweeter than narbul venom to serve the Overlord, and so did the long line of sacrifices. Strictly speaking Tash had no idea whether this was true or not, having never tasted narbul venom nor anything other than grith. But he intoned along with the others.

They only had a few moments to look at the tower. (Tash stared longer than any of the others, and got a clout to hurry him along). Then they were steered through a big black door and down a long ramp into a chamber somewhere underneath it. The ramp ended somewhere in the middle of the chamber, which stretched off into darkness on every side, over-warm and evil-smelling. Some dozens of boys and girls for the sacrifice were there already, chained to posts set in the floor in groups of six or seven. On top of these posts there were lanterns, and every post that had thalarka chained to it had its lantern lit, with a dancing flame that was more green than blue. Tash's long line of sacrifices was split up into groups of six or seven and chained to posts, and at the same time the lanterns on top of the post were lit. But there were still many many more empty posts with unlit lanterns.

The thalarka who lit the lanterns was an old priest woman, bent over like a girth plant that has grown in too dark a shadow, and she lit the lanterns with a thin silvery stick longer than she was tall. Tash found the lighting of the lanterns very interesting and wondered if the old priest stayed down in the chamber all the time, waiting for a reason to light the lanterns, or if she went somewhere else. She seemed so completely a creature of the dark chamber that Tash could not imagine her being anywhere else. Tash ended up chained with a group of dim-witted boys around one of the pillars at the edge of the darkness.

As soon as all the sacrifices were properly chained a group of younger priests handed out something to eat that was not grith. They were cakes of something very much nicer than grith, though I dare say you or I would still have found them very nasty, and Tash devoured his greedily. So did all the others. When they had finished eating two more priests in more resplendent garments – still mostly grey, but shiny – came and gave speeches, one in male language and one in female language.

The speech that Tash heard went something like this.

'Welcome in the name of the Overlord Varkarian. Truly it is sweeter than narbul venom, and more pleasant than the song of horn and cymbal, to serve the Overlord Varkarian. Truly are you favoured, for through your sacrifice the Overlord will be glorified. Truly will your sacrifice bring the inscrutable designs of the Overlord closer the fruition. Though you may have been useless until this moment, very soon you will attain to a destiny greater than that of many a skilled spear-men or artifex. The part you play in the designs of the Overlord is a very great one.'

There was much more like this and Tash soon stopped paying attention to it. He was more interested in the costumes of the priests than in what they were saying. Their chest pieces were particularly splendid, much more splendid than the chestpieces the priests of his village wore when they sacrificed mire beasts. They were set with such marvellous stones, blue and green and other colours he could not name, and shone delightfully in the lanternlight.

The priest explained while Tash was not listening that they would be given things to eat as nice as the cakes, or nicer, for the next few days until the festival, and that they would be taken out in batches and cleaned and ornamented before the ceremony, and then again that theirs was a rare and glorious destiny.

Because he was not listening Tash was taken by surprise to be taken out and scrubbed and plastered with some sort of oil and hung with jangling bits of fine chain. The only good thing about the oil was

that it made it quite impossible to tell how evil-smelling the chamber was. The smell of the oil stung and tickled and burned and it was almost impossible to think of anything else when you had been plastered with it.

‘What’s that you’ve done to your hand, lad?’ asked the young priest who was seeing to the oiling of the sacrifices. ‘Burnt it, eh?’ The young priest found this amusing. ‘Well, mind you keep it away from the lanterns now. Stick one little finger in the fire and you’ll be sizzled to a crisp in an instant, with that oil on you.’

Tash took respectful note of this advice.

Zish had been chained to a post on the other side of the ramp from Tash, and he found it impossible to talk to the dim-witted boys who were chained with him. He spent the night peering out into the further reaches of the chamber, wondering what was there and thinking of all the marvellous things he had seen in the last few days and what a pity it was that he would be sacrificed in a few more days. The sacrifices around him shuffled and wheezed and jangled in their sleep and the smell of the oil hung thick and heavy in the air. No one came and turned down the lanterns, but they seemed to dim of their own accord, and burnt with feeble flames that were greenish-grey, if such a flame were possible.

Tash found it impossible to get free of his chains. Even if he had, it would surely have been impossible for him to have forced his way through the heavy doors, past the watchers beyond, and made his way to somewhere safe.

‘It seems such a waste, when the world is so big and interesting, to be ending so soon’ he thought to himself. And a black mood took him and he thought to himself: ‘Perhaps I am useless after all’.

Chapter Two: The Vanilla Bush Wind

Josie held her face into the wind and felt the wild exuberance of it like she had so many nights before. This time there was something different in the air, she was sure. The faintest trace of mists that had hung over ancient hedgerows, winds that had whistled across heather and down the chimneys of stone cottages, smoke belched from factories and railway engines.

'I can smell England' she told Miss Miles.

'Don't be silly' said Miss Miles. As usual, Josie could hear in her voice that she was nervous about being on deck after dark, though she tried not to show it. 'England is still hundreds of miles away.'

'Yes, Miss Miles' said Josie and sighed. She did not want to get into an argument with her chaperone, in which Miss Miles would invariably be the sensible one and she would be the self-evidently silly one. At the very least Miss Miles would be upset enough to make her come inside. She was always looking for excuses to make Josie come in out of the wind and the sea spray.

'Do you think father will remember me?' said Josie.

'Of course he will, dear' said Miss Miles.

'It's been almost ten years' said Josie. 'I would think you could bring just about any girl of about the right age and colouring and say she was Josephine Furness. Do you think he could tell the difference?'

'Don't be silly' said Miss Miles, and gave Josie's hand a squeeze. 'Of course he'll recognise his own daughter.' But to Josie Miss Miles sounded more nervous than ever.

Josie had only the vaguest memories of her father, a whiskery thundercloud of tobacco and eau de cologne that would roll into her life from time to time and then roll out again as quickly as it had come, 'on business' to Perth or the Eastern Goldfields or some other place, until one day he had gone away 'on business' to the other side of the world and never returned. And now Josie's Mama was gone, and her dear sister Gerry who had always looked after her when Mama had one of her turns was gone, and she was going to England to live with the whiskery thundercloud who had abandoned them so long ago.

It had all been sorted out by letter. It was impossible to tell, from the stilted words of her father's letters, if he really wanted her or not. She had made Miss Miles read and re-read them to her on the voyage until she knew every word by heart. It was possible that her father was stricken with grief for the troubles that had happened to the family he left behind, and was desperate to make what amends he could by welcoming his lost daughter, but just could not find the words to say so. Or, it was possible that he found the whole matter a great bother and distraction from whatever he did 'on business' and had long ago put out of his mind that he had left a family behind in Australia. She sighed again.

'It's getting terrible cold' said Miss Miles, with a shiver. The wind had shifted somehow so that it seemed to blow full in their faces whichever way they were facing. 'We should be getting inside.'

'Can I wait out just a moment longer?' said Josie.

It was a plea she made every night, and every night Miss Miles made the same reply. Miss Miles had been Gerry's friend- she was Narelle to Gerry, and was not so very many years older than Josie herself- and did not have the backbone an older chaperone would have had.

'Just for a moment, Josie' said Miss Miles. 'I'll wait for you inside.'

'Thank you, Miss Miles' said Josie, and turned to give her a smile.

'Just one more minute, then you come inside' said Miss Miles. She walked away, but Josie could tell she was hovering in the doorway, watching her.

'Go on,' said Josie. 'I'm not made of cut glass, you know.'

Josie heard Miss Miles mutter something about wilful girls and close the door. She was probably still hovering, just on the other side, but Josie did not care.

Josie could no longer smell England on the wind. It was all sea now, heavy with mermaid's tears and codfish and cold dark water that had spent a few lifetimes circling the world far below the surface before returning to the air again, just now. Josie's face was bitterly cold and if she had been sensible she would have suggested going inside herself ten minutes ago. She refused to admit that she was cold. She let the spray sting her face, trying to recapture the trace of England that she had smelled before. Probably the wind had shifted, and was coming out of the open ocean now. It was certainly getting stronger, minute by minute.

'If only I could be sure father would be happy to see me', Josie thought. Mama had never said a harsh word about Josie's father, only looked terribly woeful whenever he was spoken of. Not that he was spoken of much. There had been letters when Josie had been younger, but they were the same sort of stilted letters father had sent after the tragedy, and they had stopped coming a long time ago.

The wind seemed to stop entirely for an instant, and start up again from another direction, a proper gale. This wind had the trace of some flower in it that smelled a bit like vanilla bush- it wasn't vanilla bush, but it was something like it. Josie did not have time to think about what it could be, because at that moment the ship reared up like some fool of a thoroughbred and tipped her over the railing into the sea. Josie had no sensation of passing through the air but felt immediately plunged into the water.

'I suppose I am going to die now so there was no use worrying', thought Josie, surprised at how unafraid she seemed to be. There was no question of swimming in the heavy coat and long skirts she had been wearing to keep off the cold on deck. Josie was not sure whether she was upside down or right side up. She tried to compose herself and say a prayer, but all that came into her head was 'now I lay me down to sleep' which was not particularly appropriate for being tumbled through the icy waters of the North Atlantic. Josie felt very sorry for Miss Miles, who would surely think it was all her fault that she had been lost overboard.

'How silly I've been worrying about such a lot of silly things' thought Josie. She remembered in particular one time she had been beastly to little Ada Plummer over something that seemed of no consequence whatever now.

'I hope it won't be too horrible drowning' she thought. Then she was afraid, and thrashed desperately about without thinking at all.

Suddenly she was not in the water anymore. She did not feel desperately short of breath, and she did not feel particularly cold. For the merest instant she thought she might be in Heaven. She was lying on her back in soft grass, with sun on her face, and the air was filled with the smell of the flower that was something like vanilla bush- and also lemon blossoms, and jasmine, and three or four other pleasant things that she couldn't identify.

'But I can't see' Josie thought. 'Surely in Heaven I would be able to see.' She put her hand in front of her eyes and felt the flutter of her eyelids to make sure that she did not just have her eyes closed. She was still blind.

'And I wouldn't be wearing these clothes' she told herself. In Heaven she would have expected to be wearing long robes, but she seemed to be wearing the exact clothes she had been wearing on the deck of the *Southern Cross*, though they were now dry.

Josie sat up. She could hear birds singing, but not of any sort she recognised. She could also hear running water- she seemed to be only a yard or so from the edge of a stream. There were branches moving in the wind, but not right above her, maybe fifty feet away. The grass had little flowers in it, tufted ones shaped a bit like dandelions, and it was from these that the vanilla bush smell came from. The sun on her face cooled momentarily, then warmed again, and she imagined there must be little clouds scooting across the sky.

'Curiouser and curiouser' she said to herself, because the only thing she had ever heard of before that was remotely similar to what had just happened to her was what happened to Alice when she fell down a rabbit hole.

Josie stood up carefully expecting to be aching all over, but was not really surprised to find that she wasn't. She felt more cheerful than she had in a long time. It had been of course a very cheering surprise to find herself alive at all. But even if she had been in no danger before she felt she would have found the place she was in cheering. Somehow she had fallen into spring out of winter. She took a few careful steps and heard the whirr of wings- some of the unfamiliar birds had decided she had come too close. A few steps more, and her outstretched hands brushed against a bush. It had soft fleshy leaves that were not smooth, but covered with down, and it smelled marvellous but strange, like the birds sounded. She brushed her arm up and down, side to side, to get a feel for how big the bush was, and as she did so there was the startled sound of a hoofed animal leaping up and cantering away. It sounded like a sheep-sized animal rather than a horse-sized one. She could smell it too, a little- a warm deserty smell that was not at all like sheep's wool. The noise of the animal startled Josie in turn, and she laughed like she sometimes did when she had a fright that turned out not to be so bad after all.

'Excuse me!' she said.

The cantering slowed to a walk and then stopped. 'What did you say?' said a voice. It was a voice that could have made a good deal of money singing on the stage and seemed to belong to a girl some years younger than Josie.

'I said excuse me' said Josie. It had not sounded to Josie as if there had been anyone else there, but she supposed there must have been. 'I didn't mean to startle it.'

'I've never heard a Daughter of Helen say 'excuse me' before' said the voice. It really was a very pretty voice. 'You have a peculiar way of talking' it added cautiously.

'You have a rather peculiar way of talking yourself' said Josie.

'I didn't mean to be disrespectful' said the voice. It sounded nervous and so did the animal, which took a few paces back and forth. Josie wondered if she was riding the animal and if she was about to suddenly bolt off. 'If you don't mind me saying so, and I don't mean to be disrespectful, but you Daughters of Helen and Sons of Frank are usually too caught up in your own affairs as Ladies and Lords of Creation to care whether you startle gazelles or not.'

Josie hadn't heard any sound of harness, or of anyone moving about, just the animal. Josie had been reminded of Alice and the looking glass ever since she arrived in this place, and thinking of the conversation Alice had with a fawn in the wood she asked a question she had never asked anyone before.

'Are you a gazelle?' she asked.

'Yes' said the voice. 'My name is Alabitha. My mother is Falabitha, and my father is Caladru, who is the Prince of all the gazelles in this country.'

'My name is Josephine Furness' said Josie. 'You can call me Josie instead of Miss Furness if you like. My mother's name is Annabelle, and my father's name is Leonard. Pleased to meet you, Alabitha.'

'I'm so glad you're pleased to meet me' said the gazelle warily. 'I suppose I'm pleased to meet you as well.' There was a pause and a shuffling of cloven feet while Josie wondered which of the many questions she had she would ask first, but Alabitha spoke again first. 'Have you come from one of those faraway northern countries where men and animals get along with each other, Lady Josie?'

'I'm from somewhere a long way off' said Josie. 'It can't be any of the countries you are thinking of since we don't have any talking animals. I don't know how you would get there from here.'

'Oh' said Alabitha. 'Are you lost? Where are you trying to get to? I know all of the ways around here.'

Josie remembered the Red Queen saying that all of the ways were her ways, and for the first time since she arrived in this place felt uneasy. What exactly was she going to do? Where was she, and how was she going to survive in this place?

'I don't know' said Josie. 'I expect I must be lost. I don't know how I got here, or where here is.'

'That's too bad' said the gazelle. She padded a little closer to her. 'I don't know how you got here either. I'm sure you weren't here when I got here, and I'm sure I would have woken up when you got here – unless I'm getting a stuffed ear.' The gazelle snorted and shook its head three or four times.

'The last I remember I fell in the ocean' said Josie. 'And then I was lying next to the water here.'

'I've never seen the ocean' said the gazelle. 'It's a frightful long way to the ocean from here. 'This is Lion's Pool. See the carved stone where the water comes out of the rock?'

'I don't' said Josie. 'I don't actually see anything. I'm blind.'

'Oh' said Alabitha. 'I'm sorry.'

'It's not your fault' said Josie. 'I'm used to it.'

'I can tell you what the carved stone looks like' said Alabitha. 'It's carved to look like a lion, as large as life. The Sons of Frank and Daughters of Helen made it long ago, to show that it was one of the places where the Lion appeared.'

'The Lion?'

'The Lion, you know, Aslan' said the gazelle, in the gentle but nervous way you remind someone who has had a bad shock of something that they really ought to know.

At the sound of the name Aslan Josie felt something like she had felt when she could smell England on the wind over the ocean. It was like the first breeze from a far country that was at the same time terrifying and familiar, where everything is larger and brighter and stronger and at the same time more truly 'home'. She felt as if she never wanted to hear the name again, and as if she could listen to it forever. At that moment the first wanting was stronger, so though she was burning to know exactly who this Aslan was and why it was so important, she could not bring herself to say the name.

'Oh' said Josie.

'It was years and years and years ago' said Alabitha. 'Before anyone who is alive now was alive. Except for some of the trees, probably.'

'Which direction is it?' asked Josie. 'The carving?'

Alabitha told her and she walked up the stream for twenty yards or so on soft springy grass to the place. There was a mass of granite meeting her feet at about a forty five degree angle and she had to clamber up it a few steps and reach forward to touch the carving. The surface was worn and rough but the shape of the Lion's face was perfectly distinct. She could feel the whorls of the mane worked very clearly, the mouth closed in a calm and serious way and the eyes open wide. It seemed even larger than life to Josie, but she had never been close enough to a lion to touch one. She stepped back down onto the grass.

'I think it is splendid that you can make such things' said Alabitha, who had followed her, and was standing closer to Josie than she had before. 'It must be wonderful to have hands.'

The strangeness of everything was suddenly overwhelming. Josie could feel tears starting to well up.

'I don't know what to do' she said.

Alabitha shuffled awkwardly as if she was not used to humans being anything but imperious. 'You will probably think of it' she said. 'Daughters of Helen always do.'

'I suppose so' said Josie, in a small trembling voice.

Alabitha fidgeted nervously some more.

'You're sure to be here for some important reason, or you wouldn't have turned up at the Lion's Pool. I'll tell my father you're here and he will send someone wise to talk to you, and they will figure out what it is.'

'That sounds good' said Josie in the same small trembling voice. 'Thank you.'

Josie managed to pull herself together and not cry until Alabitha had trotted off. Then it was all too much.

After a while nothing had changed, but she felt better for the crying. She took off her coat- which was much too warm for this place- and her boots and stockings, and lay down in a shady spot where she could feel the deliciously cool grass on her feet. She listened to the tinkling water and the wind in the leaves and the strange birds and listened out for any other creature, but there was nothing.

'The wise gazelle will be here any minute, so I must be sure to stay awake' she thought, and laughed a laugh that was only a little a sob to think she was waiting on a wise gazelle. But she fell asleep anyway.