Of Ghosts and Valkyries II: United We Stand

by Furiyan

Summary

The team grows closer, and the days ahead grow darker. New allies and old friends await, and love blossoms in the unlikeliest of ways, but the road is long and fraught with danger. Enemies will rise, shadows will fall, and hope will seem like a distant memory.

Only together can the Ghosts survive.
Rebirth

"You and me,
We're in this together now.
None of them can stop us now.
We will make it through somehow.

You and me,
Even after everything.
You're the queen and I'm the king.
Nothing else means anything."

Nine Inch Nails - "We're In This Together"

Of Ghosts and Valkyries II

Act III

It was the sound of thudding that first stirred her, an endless, regular explosion with perfect cadence that reverberated throughout her ears, like an metronome-timed artillery barrage.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

For a few moments, Elsa thought bombs were falling nearby, and considered diving for cover - until the scent and taste of the air hit her. It was a pervasive smell of damp and mildew that filled her nose with its pungent aroma and made her taste buds recoil in horror at its bitterness. Part of her railed against her body's imperative to breathe, lest she draw in more of the infernal odour.

Oddly, the moldy edge in the air was lessened somewhat by the presence of something wholly incongruent to the air on which it rode - a fresh, crisp chill that conjured images in her mind of snowmen, winter and laughter.
Senses slowly returning, though her eyes were still covered by a thick veil of black, Elsa became vaguely aware of being laid on her right side, on something soft yet damp. Her left hand twitched, and her mind was instantly bombarded with an assault of stimuli from her fingertips - a scratchy, coarse surface she thought felt like cotton, yet reminded her more of barnacles clung immovably to a rock face. The nerves in her fingertips registered the touch of the material with such sharp, astounding clarity that her fingers instinctively curled inward, seeking the normalcy and relative comfort of her own skin - only to find a surface as cold as the air she breathed.

Slowly, reluctantly, as though her body was betraying her mind's will, her eyelids opened. A haze of blurry grey greeted her sight, with malformed rectangles forming some sort of pattern. She blinked. Again.

Darkness.

Light.

Darkness.

Light.

Her sight sharpened every time the veil of black was drawn away, and the rectangles became bricks and cement in such detail she could see so clearly the tiny grooves, indentations and holes constituting each brick like she was peering through a scope.

Her body betrayed her yet again, subjecting her to an onslaught of aches and stiffness in places she never knew she had, burning and twinging, making all post-battle aches and pains she had ever experienced feel like nothing in comparison. She gingerly pushed herself up to a seated position by her right hand, and that was when a dull headache pulsed through every inch of her skull. Groaning, she instinctively rubbed at her forehead with her left hand - the chill of her skin helped somewhat with calming the pain - which was when a voice, clear as daylight, made her realise she wasn't alone.

"You're awake!"

Squinting slightly, and taking care to move her head as slowly as possible, Elsa looked upon the smiling face of someone she hadn't expected to - at least, not just yet.

"Anna?" she said, her dry throat reprimanding her for daring to speak.

Sat on the bottom step of whatever room Elsa was in, her sister looked at her with palpable relief and a wide smile.

"You had us going a bit there, champ." Anna stood, and moved to sit on the end of the bed. The sudden dip made Elsa wish she hadn't. "How're you feeling?"

Elsa managed a single, exhausted snort. "Like an Odin tank ran over me," she groaned, just as she noticed something over Anna's right shoulder that was too perfectly timed with the metronomic booming that it couldn't be coincidence - drops of water falling from the ceiling onto the floor. "Why do I feel like I'm having the hangover from hell?"

Anna frowned slightly as she fumbled for something on her right hip, and tilted her head. "You don't remember?"

Elsa looked away and attempted to search her memories, eyes blankly moving from puddle to puddle, too busy searching the blank space in her recollection to remark upon the oddity of puddles indoors. It was like grasping at wisps in her mind; faint images and sensations just out of reach. The
feeling of flying, and of being held by someone. The odd feeling of safety. Beyond that? "Not really…"

It was as she swallowed, starkly aware of the arid desert of her mouth, that her throat pulsed with a sharp, raw pain. What in the world happened to her? Why did the bed feel like sandpaper, or the drops of water sound like bomb blasts?

Her eyes glanced up to the space between them at the appearance of something being handed to her - a water canteen. After feeling like her body had been emptied of everything important and filled with heavy rocks of pain, the offering of water was beyond welcome. Gratitude in her mumbled thanks, Elsa unscrewed the cap and took several small sips that turned into a deep draught.

"I'm kinda not surprised; you had a hell of a night. I mean, I'm over the moon you're okay—and it means you're better now, though this room looked like hell—but it's so cool it's happened and you pulled through, and I can't wait to see what you can do, and I—"

Anna's excessive, excited babbling had reached such a pitch and volume that Elsa was forced to duck her head and wince, screw her eyes shut, and yelp, "Too loud, too loud!"

"Sorry! Sorrysorrysorry!" Anna said quickly, her voice mercifully reduced to a whisper. "I forgot; your senses will all dialled up to eleven for a while. It'll normalise, don't worry."

"But why?" Elsa croaked, and immediately made peace with her throat by another sip. "Why does it feel like this?"

"You really don't remember?"

Elsa looked at her sister, a plea for understanding in her eyes, and slowly shook her head. Encouragement in her smile mixed in with a little pity in her eyes, Anna leaned toward her a little. "You bloomed, Elsa. You're a fully-fledged abnormal… one of us, now."

If Elsa was supposed to feel anything positive about Anna's revelation, be it relief, joy or basic realisation, she utterly failed. The only thing filling her body was a deep sense of resignation, going well with the feeling of her heart sinking to the floor. A long sigh was let slip from her lips, and she buried her forehead in her hands. "It finally happened, then…"

"You… don't sound happy about that…"

Elsa could easily hear the confused, faintly stung tone to her sister's voice, and cursed her ears for picking it up so clearly. How could she be happy about it? Being an abnormal had cost her a romantic connection, a sisterly relationship, consigned her to three years locked in a room, no contact save for regular serum injections, allowed out only when Anna was out of the house. She couldn't explain the anxiety and fear bubbling up whenever the buzzing would start, and the frantic scramble for the suppression pills like it was some sort of addiction. To hate herself for being what she was - to be uncomfortable in her own skin, and to wish she was anyone else but herself?

How could Anna understand?

"It's… complicated."

Sensing Anna was about to prod further into the topic, as she was always apt - the drawing of breath was a clear sign - Elsa quickly deflected the incoming question with one of her own. "So, what happened?"

Visibly reluctant to follow the query line, Anna filled Elsa in on the events of the night before, with
the first startling revelation being that Elsa had been in that room for a solid sixteen hours - explaining nicely the sudden growling of her stomach. Astrid, Merida and Rapunzel had disobeyed her direct order-yet-not and revealed their true nature to the Ghosts. Frustrated and angry at being kept from the truth for so long, Frost - though her memory could swear his name was Jack - had stormed into Elsa's room, intent on getting answers… only to find she had fled the house through the window. Half an hour later, Frost had returned carrying her in his arms, and explained the truth - Elsa was blooming. Quick thinking had led her being placed in the basement both for her safety and everyone else's, and for the next half-day Elsa was enduring the most painful experience of her life thus far.

"Was I… was I alone?"

It startled Elsa, how lost yet hopeful of the opposite her voice was, like the idea of being alone was terrifying. Anna seemed to pick up on it; her expression held a momentary flash of guilt before quickly becoming one of reassurance.

"No. I wanted to be here with you, I really did - but Frost wouldn't let me, on account of the baby. And he was right - the house got so cold. Even under the blankets, most of us were shivering-"

Elsa snorted bitterly - yet another reminder of how dangerous she was. Her own sister couldn't be there, lest she be harmed by her kin.

"-so, Frost stayed down here with you."

"I'm not surprised I was kept away from—wait, what?"

Elsa stared at Anna with bewildered surprise, face utterly blank. Were her ears playing tricks on her, or was Frost truly at her side throughout the whole ordeal? From one revelation to the next - Elsa's head was beginning to spin.

"Yeah - he had us lock him in the room with you. Said you shouldn't be alone - only one of us immune to your powers."

Anna's eyes fell to somewhere around Anna's navel, the classic expression of deep thought. Could that have been why she could remember a pair of arms, remember being held, recall the feeling of safety? Did he go further than simply keep her company, and comfort her?

A small smile tugged at the corner of the lips at the irony; her boyfriend Dylan, whom she had great feelings for, abandoned her in her time of need - whereas her once-enemy with whom she shared a contentious, uneasy truce was there for her every step of the way. It was a small smile, and a flicker of warmth in her heart.

"You okay? You're looking a little pink."

Elsa looked up, and counted her blessings at Anna's presumable obliviousness. Keen to avoid being probed, she said with hastiness, "Yes, I… I'm just hungry, I suppose. How… how is Frost?"

She did not like the grave look that crossed her sister's face, nor the essence of worry behind her eyes. "He's… he wasn't too good."

"Tell me," Elsa said, surprised with the sternness with which she spoke. Anna immediately began fiddling with her thumbs, grimacing in hesitation.

"After I opened the door for him, he… he practically fell to the floor. He was pale, weak, could barely stand. Pitch and I had to carry him to my bedroom so Rapunzel and I could check him over.
He's better now," Anna hastily added, noticing the deep concern on Elsa's face, "but he wasn't great."

"Why?" Elsa breathed.

Anna looked at her for a few seconds, before taking a deep breath and answering. "You remember what Papa taught us about exothermic and endothermic reactions?"

Elsa nodded.

"Well, take me. I'm exothermic; I literally radiate heat, can create and set myself on fire… I generate energy, yeah?"

Elsa nodded her understanding. Already she could see where Anna was leading to. "And since Frost and I both create ice, we are endothermic?"

"Yeah," Anna scratched her temple, "that's right. You both draw your energy from the nearby environment, right?"

"Right." Elsa took a sip.

"Well… from how Frost described it, your powers were going crazy from your bloom. Which, for the record, they all do. Anyway, while you were doing that, you weren't just drawing energy from around you… you…"

"I was draining it from Frost," Elsa whispered, heavy resignation settling on her shoulders. Of course it couldn't be so nice. She couldn't have had a warm little memory of being looked after, without the knowledge she was slowly killing him.

"Yeah," Anna said, her voice solemn. "To compensate, Frost was subconsciously feeding off the area around him, but not quickly enough."

Elsa sighed, and rested her forehead in her right hand, guilt and shame washing over her. It only reinforced her belief she was a danger to everyone around her.

"For what it's worth - he didn't leave until you'd finished blooming. He could've left when it got really bad, but he stayed to make sure you'd be okay."

"I need to see him."

Elsa's blurt, sincere as it was, preceded a shuffle toward the edge of the bed. Her entire body promptly screamed obscenities at her for daring to move so abruptly, and a pained whimper rang out as her head felt like it was about to explode. She curled in on herself, regretting her impulsive idea.

Though, it was the searing heat of Anna's hand on her right knee that did the most to stop her, and the sternness in her tone. The medic must have overruled the sister; even a glance up into Anna's no-argument eyes reinforced that particular assumption.

"You need to rest, Elsa. You've been through something all of us go through times ten, so, you need to recover your strength first. Doctor's orders."

Elsa said nothing - couldn't say a thing. Her head was spinning enough thanks to her hypersensitive senses, temporary as they were, but learning what she did from Anna, both her bloom and Jack's comforting role in it left her decidedly overwhelmed. It was too much information to process in one go, and she knew she needed to digest the biggest change of her life first - her abnormality.
"Listen - I'm gonna get you some food, okay? You stay down here as long as you need - and when you're ready, Frost and I are holding a meeting with you and the other girls. Might help you understand some things."

Elsa mumbled her acknowledgement, and laid back down on the mattress with great care so as not to antagonise her aching muscles any further, clutching the canteen on her chest. The fabric still felt damp, but she couldn't find it in her heart to care. There were more important things on her weary mind.

The mattress sprung up at the end as Anna rose to her feet, and footsteps changed from concrete to wooden as she undoubtedly climbed the steps. Elsa stared at the damp-looking ceiling - was that ice in the corner? - listening to the steps recede, until she heard them stop with no opening or closing of a door to speak of.

"Elsa?"

She gently lifted her head up, and peered down to where Anna was halfway up the steps, fiddling with her hands as she looked at her.

"I figure this-" she lightly waved her hand in vague arc around the room, "and the reason you were locked away from me are connected. I hope… I hope, one day, you'll be able to tell me about it."

Elsa looked at her for a few more seconds before gently nodding. She knew Anna deserved the truth. Some form of closure, at least. The problem was it was hard enough recalling the feelings of deep isolation and worthlessness, the belief she was somehow built wrong, let alone talk about it.

Anna wished her a good rest and promised she would soon return with sustenance before leaving the room. Laying her head back on the pillow, Elsa resumed her thoughtful staring at the ceiling and sighed, feeling a heavy weight settle in her chest and pull her into the floor.

It was done, it was over. There was nothing she could do about it now. She held it back for as long as she could, but she knew she was only delaying the inevitable. Her worst nightmare had come true, and she would have to live with it for the rest of her life.

Elsa later found out, much to her chagrin and discomfort, that getting used to her hypersensitive senses was to be trickier than she thought - and not the only thing to warrant adjusting.

Anna had faithfully returned with food and another canteen of water, which despite her lack of appetite and her sense of taste turning a common ration bar into an unpalatable taste explosion - there were a few instances where Elsa had thought she would throw up only to find she had no energy to do so - she finished off every crumb and felt the better for it. After a further hour of laying in the bed, digesting both the food and the details, Elsa decided her stiff and aching body could use a relaxing shower.

Only, that presented a new set of problems.

Whatever her bloom had done to her body had resulted in what would ordinarily be a warm, soothing shower just the way she liked it becoming something like searing hot lava pouring down on her skin, nearly scalding her in the process and causing her to shriek in pain. Angry red spots and patches blossoming where the water had touched, she'd immediately turned the dial down only to find the temperature she wanted was firmly set in lukewarm territory. The fact that she could barely wash herself thanks to the deafening thunder of water droplets hitting the shower floor forcing her to cover her ears didn't help matters either.
Alerted by her cries of shock, Anna had conducted a hands-off examination, surmising her skin no longer tolerated such hot temperatures but assured Elsa it was only temporary.

Elsa had her doubts.

To make matters worse, drying and dressing herself, or even the simple act of her fingers contacting any surface resulted in a thin layer of ice spreading in an albeit pleasant, filigree-like pattern from wherever she touched. Her towels rustled with brittle frost, and as she'd looked back at the en-suite bathroom, her anxiety had only risen at the sight of small snowflakes on the floor where wet footprints ought to be.

She then came to the conclusion, flippant as it was, that things were *not very fucking good.*

Her mind had then filled her with unpleasant thoughts of what would happen if she so much as touched her friends, and that was when Elsa decided she had to do something - which was when she remembered an item of clothing given to her by Merida.

Quickly dressing herself in her military clothing of a black vest and pants - a soldier has her habits - so as to minimise attention paid to the frost spreading where her fingers met fabric, Elsa attempted to open her nightstand drawer with the side of her hands. Her *powers* granted her no peace, however, when another layer of ice spread from the drawer knob like a taunting display, causing her to recoil. Hands held high not unlike a surgeon, she stared at the frosted drawer whilst her lower lip was nibbled to death, taking deep breaths through her nose, hearing her pulse thump in her ears and feeling the angry moth of frustration in her chest.

It was ridiculous; she had walked into furious battles, led a misguided invasion and stood toe-to-toe with the leader of the Ghosts, and there she was… defeated by a bit of frost and a drawer.

There was nothing else for it. With a speed born of anxiety and frustration, Elsa yanked out the drawer hard enough for it to fly out of the nightstand and crash to the ground, rolling until it impacted the opposite wall. Too full of victory and anxiety to pay much heed to how the drawer had been turned into a mess of jagged chunks and splinters with the force of its impromptu ejection, Elsa knelt down to pick up its contents.

Her pill case… and a pair of gloves.

A strange heaviness settled upon her heart as her eyes fell upon the silver object, its purpose made redundant in the space of a day. Her right hand hovered over it for a few moments, before she thought better of it and slipped on the gloves instead. Sure, the inner lining might soon be adorned with icy crystals, but at least she could at least touch things - and people.

Throwing on the hooded sweater of which she’d indirectly taken ownership, and tying her hair into an abysmal excuse for a braid, Elsa left the room and made her way down the hall toward Frost's room wearing a deep frown, frustration burning in her stomach at the unwelcome sense of fragility occupying her body. She was physically fit, toned, a warrior and a soldier with a skillset most of Unity's military could dream of… and overnight, had become a quivering mess, unable to tolerate a once relaxing shower without the water being lukewarm, unable to eat without wanting to retch from the taste, incapable of touching anything lest she cover it in a layer of ice.

On the other hand, increased aural sensitivity seemed to have its perks. As Elsa closed in on Jack's bedroom, voices that *sounded* like the speakers were talking in a sub rosa manner were clear as a bell. Her steps slowing, Elsa turned her left ear in the direction of the door just as someone - Astrid, judging by the richer tone to her voice - made an insightful remark.
"You seem to have changed your opinion of us overnight, Jack."

So his name was Jack. Jack "Frost". How apt. A small smile tugged at the left corner of her lips.

"Yeah, well, when you're holding someone in your arms who is screaming in agony before passing out, waking up and then screaming and passing out all over again, it kinda puts things into perspective."

That voice was definitely Jack's, and brought with it a strange sense of warmth in her heart and confirmation in her mind - she wasn't dreaming of a pair of arms comforting her. It was real.

"How so?" Rapunzel asked - her buoyant tone was inimitable.

"Way I figure it: Elsa was scared about what we'd do if - when - we learned the truth about you all. What other organisation would make people feel that same fear?"

"Unity," Merida chirped in.

"Bingo," Jack said. "To Elsa, even if she didn't mean it that way, we were Unity. I don't ever want any abnormal to feel that way - Ghost's third rule: help all abnormals, no matter who they are. So, yeah. I kinda had a change of heart."

"That wasn't the only thing you did," Rapunzel said, and there was a teasing edge to her voice that screamed 'smirking'. If Elsa had a suspicio-meter, it would have been exploding; Rapunzel's voice only ever displayed that tone when she was about to top the scoreboard in the game of Wind Merida Up.

"What are you talking about?" Anna asked.

"He sang to her."

Elsa's eyes widened, going nicely with the catch of her breath, and the sudden heat in her cheeks. She didn't remember that.

"Did not," Jack said.

"Did too."

"Not."

"Did."

Anna sounded skeptical, yet amused. "Did you, Jack?"

"No!"

"What was it," Rapunzel said in a sing song voice of mock recollection, "far over the twisty valleys old?"

"Far over the Misty Mountains cold, actual-" Jack abruptly cut himself off, evidently coming to the same conclusion as Elsa's thoroughly burning cheeks. "You did that on purpose."

"Maybe I did," Rapunzel giggled, "but it sounded so romantic…"

"Ah-ah!"
Jack's seemingly reflexive bout of embarrassed scolding kicked Elsa into gear; any further down that particular path and it was likely she would spontaneously combust with awkward, sheepish blushing - especially since it was highly likely Rapunzel would keep prodding and poking. Stiffening her body, she held her head high and walked on towards the door, and knocked twice on the frame.

Facing the door, with Anna by his side, Jack was the first to look up. Astrid, Merida and Rapunzel twisted round in their chairs, with the blonde woman remarking, "Jeez, you look like hell."

Elsa tore her eyes away from Jack's decidedly pink face to give Astrid a funny, wrinkled-nose glare, just as Jack said, "Hey, you mind giving Rip Van Winkle a break?"

It was the reprimanding whap Merida administered to Astrid's right shoulder that did the most to shut her up, though Elsa did cast a grateful glance in Jack's direction.

"Rip Van who?" Rapunzel asked.

Anna waved it off. "Before your time."

Jack gestured to the empty chair at Rapunzel's right. Ensuring her gloved hands were hidden in the pocket of her sweater, Elsa circled the four chairs facing the bed Jack and Anna were sat on and planted herself down, though was unable to stifle a tired huff as she did.

"You okay?" Rapunzel asked, and then did something that sent both the tension in the room, and Elsa's anxiety, through the ceiling: she reached a comforting hand to Elsa's shoulder. Yelping in fear, Elsa jerked away hard enough to briefly tip the chair, eyeing the hand like it would burn her.

"Don't!" she hissed.

Rapunzel's hand shot away, and she stared at Elsa, wide-eyed surprise and hurt written on her face. "Sorry! I just-"

Elsa's eyes darted on each occupant of the room as silence fell between them, from the looks of shock her ex-team were giving her, to the oddly sympathetic eyes of Anna and Jack. What once had been due to the knowledge that Jack had gone out of his way to comfort her in ways that admittedly made her feel just that little bit special, her steaming red face radiated the heat of self-conscious shame. Not to mention the tempting desire to flee the room. Elsa closed her eyes for a few moments, her mind valiantly attempting to calm her racing heart.

"It's okay, Rapunzel," Jack said in a gentle voice, attracting Elsa's gaze. He was holding up a reassuring hand. "It's not personal, and there's a reason for Elsa jumping a mile."

Astrid couldn't help herself from shooting Elsa a wary glance, as though she was liable to explode. Which made her feel so much better. "And that is?"

"Think back to your blooms." Anna shuffled to the edge of the bed, holding the gazes of each ex-Valkyrie in turn. "Didn't everything feel a little overwhelming? Y'know, things like sounds, sights, smells?"

There were nods and murmurs of agreement, with Merida even lamenting the migraine as a result of her brothers' combined shrill voices.

"Well, most of us don't really notice on account of us making a mockery of the laws of science, but for a little while after a bloom, our senses are a mite… sensitive. Now, 'cause Elsa's bloom hit her way harder than any of ours, her senses are all dialled up to eleven."
"Why?" Elsa found herself mumbling - and wondering where the phrase 'dialled to eleven' came from. At least they didn't know the real reason she flinched away from Rapunzel.

Jack was the one to answer. "You remember back on the Star, when I told you we were better at everything?"

"Yes." Elsa nodded, curling a single eyebrow. "As I recall, I found it overconfident hubris."

"Wasn't overconfidence. We abnormals are superior."

Silence fell once again, with the four women exchanging glances between each other and the two Ghosts patiently watching them, as if such a claim was so outlandish they had to be joking. Astrid was the first to speak, with a deadpan, "Come again?"

"The Toxin, the thing that makes us who we are," Anna tapped her chest with both hands, "doesn't just give us our powers, but adapts our bodies so we can safely use them. Now, this morning y'all showed me what you can do, and I can tell you this: if you used your powers without the adaptations-

She pointed at Astrid. "You'd have developed uncontrollable tremors and possibly severe osteoporosis before your twenty-first birthday."

Merida. "You would have developed uncontrollable seizures at best, and fried your brain and entire nervous system at worst. Not to mention cooking your body from the inside."

The final finger went to Rapunzel. "You would have developed terminal metastatic cancer within a year."

Anna didn't need to mention Elsa for her to extrapolate from there; frostbite would have claimed her fingers, toes, and then her feet and hands. She looked over at her friends, and felt a small morbid amusement at the way their faces had drained of colour.

"Way to scare the kids, Anna," grumbled Jack in a low voice. It was curious how he had so far kept his voice barely above a whisper - her eardrums were in a state of gratitude.

Anna grimaced, and mumbled an awkward apology.

"Point is," Jack continued off the back of Anna's somewhat overly grave statements, "all of these changes mean we abnormals are stronger, faster, tougher than ordinary humans. I'm guessing you three already know, having to hold yourself back all the time in the military, right?"

Another wave of nods and murmurs, with Astrid muttering, "You got that right," and as Elsa cast a look of suspicious disbelief at the three of them, Rapunzel grimaced and said, "Sorry, it's true…"

"You mean… all those times we sparred, when you and I went to the gym…"

"Aye," Merida said. "We were severely pullin' our punches."

Elsa's shoulders slumped, and a loud huff escaped her lips. Every victory felt false, every win on the sparring mats was meaningless. As if the past three years weren't already built on a lie, the discovery that her own team was letting her win? The feeling of worthlessness was not helped.

There was a small voice in the back of her mind, one she liked to call the voice of schadenfreude, that pointed out how it explained part of Astrid's less than amiable demeanour toward her. Astrid hated losing, so the idea of losing on purpose would have made her especially sulky.
"How come Elsa could stand toe-to-toe with you, though, if you were supposed to be better? I mean, you ran rings around me," Astrid asked Jack, one skeptical eye narrowed.

"I can answer that," Elsa said, her voice flat and void of emotion. "I trained every day for the sole purpose of killing him. I studied his technique, his speed, his form and his flaws, and trained against droids programmed to fight like him." She looked at Jack. "It was how I bested you in the Depot."


"Uh, as I recall I had you on your knees."

"Yeah, after Astrid saved your ass." He nodded to the woman in question. "Nice shoulder check, by the way. Thing of beauty."

Elsa glanced at Astrid long enough to notice her looking thoroughly pleased with herself. A strange, unpleasant flicker appeared in her chest - she couldn't help recalling Astrid's history with Jack. "Yes, well, I had the edge in the mess hall."

"Did not."

"You'll find I did."

"Not."

"Did."

"Not - and don't forget, you were on your kn-"

"Girls!" Anna said loudly as she held up her hands to cut them both off. "You're both pretty! Seriously - talking about my sister being on her knees is conjuring mental images that are very freaking unwanted!"

Elsa's lips snapped shut as her eyes widened, and as her ears burned with a fierce red, she caught Jack's eye before they both averted their gazes. He was as red as she felt.

There was a moment of awkward silence, with Astrid looking thoroughly amused by the whole situation, until Anna irritably added in a rapid cadence, "He's right though, you were on your knees in the mess hall."

Rapunzel uttered a mock-scandalized gasp that went well with the dirty snickering courtesy of Astrid, and the heat in Elsa's face burned all the fiercer. For a few moments, she debated hiding in the basement for the rest of her life, or until the world was ripped asunder. Whichever came first.

Merida seemed to be the only one more interested in the original topic of conversation rather than how many ways Elsa being knelt could be taken the wrong way. "Okay, so... we get these cool powers, and our bodies get an upgrade tae use 'em... I'm nae seein' a downside. There's always a downside. What's tha price?"

Astrid gave her a sidelong glance, replete with a curled eyebrow. "You mean, other than mankind hunting us down for what we are?"

Merida ignored her sarcastic tone but not the content of her words. "Aye, other than that. There's always a balance; good and evil. Light and dark. Love and hate, order and chaos."
A gift, and a curse, Elsa found a voice speaking in her mind.

"So, I find meself wonderin'... what's tha catch?"

Elsa glanced between Jack and Anna, with the former giving the latter a pointed look and a nod, and the latter frowning into an expression most hesitant.

"In a word?" Jack said. "Immortality."

Elsa and the three ex-Valkyries exchanged dumbfounded looks, with Astrid going so far as to break out in a nervous bark of laughter. One glance, however, at the perfectly straight faces of the Ghosts, and Elsa knew then it was more than a flippant remark.

"Yer kiddin', right?"

Jack shot Anna an unimpressed look, scoffing. "The one time I'm serious, and everyone thinks I'm joking. Am I a funny person?"

"Debatable," Anna said, wearing half a smirk.

Jack pulled a face at her, before turning his eyes back to the group. "Few months ago, Pitch and Night Fury went on a mission, and encountered four hostile individuals who'd gone through extraordinary changes. I mean claws, teeth, acid spit, the works. One of them was a young woman. Looked to be in her twenties. Course, Pitch and Fury had to neutralize them... but it wasn't until long after that we found out those individuals were the first abnormals," he paused, casting each of them a look, "products of an experiment conducted over fifty years ago."

"Fifty years..." Rapunzel breathed.

"It's just a theory," Anna quickly added, holding up a hand, "but despite the hostiles looking pretty freaking butt-ugly, they seemed like they hadn't aged a day. No atrophy, no wrinkles, nothing. You'd think after being underground for five decades they'd look like wet walnuts, but nope." She adjusted her position, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees while her hands animated the talking. "My theory is that not only does the Toxin re-engineer our cells, it also makes them resistant to cellular degradation over time. The tougher something is, the longer it lasts, you know?"

Elsa's head was spinning from one revelation after another, and if it was a fairground ride, she wanted to get off. Learning about her physiological changes, and the fact that her team was handling her with kid gloves was overwhelming enough, but after hearing Anna's theory... she wasn't sure how much more she could take. Immortality, with the fear of her powers crushing her day by day? Condemned to eternity as a monster?

"S-so what you're saying... is..." Rapunzel said in a faint voice, attracting Elsa's gaze. She looked as blown away as Elsa felt. "we can't die?"

"No, we're still mortal," Jack said with somewhat more of a blunt edge to his voice than the fragile atmosphere warranted. "We'll still buy the farm if we get shot, or blown up."

"It's just that we might have longer life spans than humans," Anna continued. "Ballpark number... maybe three hundred years."

There was a long exhalation of breath, though Astrid seemed to less than convinced. A quick glance at her expression revealed skepticism incarnate.

"Okay, I gotta call bullshit. Abnormals being humans two-point-oh I can buy, but having five times
the lifespan of an ordinary human? That's fantasy," she said, scoffing. "You got any proof?"

"How could we, Hofferson, when no abnormal has lived long enough to be proof?"

All eyes turned to the doorway, where Pitch Black leaned against the doorframe with his arms folded. His grey face was etched in a light frown, regarding Astrid with a cold gaze. Elsa found herself studying him; there was a man whose abnormality manifested in a not-so-subtle manner, and yet he seemed perfectly comfortable with who he was.

"And I must say I find your skepticism curious, being someone who could shatter stone at will, as well as in the presence of someone who can fly."

"Only 'cause I've seen it!" Astrid retorted hotly.

"And I saw their bodies. I read the reports. Fifty years ago, the first of our kind was created in a lab, and fifty years later, they looked exactly the same when we killed them. Our lifespan is an educated guess, but not fantasy."

The number fifty kept swirling around Elsa's mind, dancing at the cusp of her memory like a forgotten task. It was not the first time she had heard that figure associated with something so profound.

When blonde hair and purple eyes filled her mind's vision, and a voice of a legion spoke her name, she remembered.

"I believe them."

Elsa instantly felt the burning of six pairs of eyes bearing down on her, from the disbelieving gaze of Astrid to the surprised looks of Jack and Anna.

"Why?" Astrid asked.

"Because if what Sleeping Beauty said was true, which I believe it is, then she was around seventy years old when I helped her to die." Elsa's gaze fell, and her gloved fingers fiddled with each other inside her pockets. "She looked no older than you or I."

There was a muted breath, as though blown into some form of container. Drawing her eyes to the culprit, Elsa noticed Merida leaning forward with the lower part of her face cupped in both hands. "Red?" she called to her.

"If what yer sayin's true… I'm gonna outlive ma brothers… the kids of their kids're gonna call me Great Aunt Merida, an' I'm gonna look like I do now..." she murmured.

"You're assuming you live long enough," Pitch remarked.

There was something in his remark that didn't so much touch a nerve as administer a brutal one-two to it. Merida jumped to her feet, yelled, "How about ye just shut tha fuck up!" and stormed out of the room, making sure to yank the chair away hard enough for Jack to recoil in surprise. Her furious exit left behind a wake of silent bewilderment, with most gazes pointed at the empty doorway.

Gazes immediately drawn to a slow clapping from the bed; Anna, glaring with deep disapproval.

"Well done, Pitch. Classy. You really know how to make a girl feel better."

Pitch looked bemused, like he had no idea why Anna was so peeved with him, nor anyone else in
the room, for that matter. Five hearty glares would have made anyone want to shrink into the floor, 
yet he seemed genuinely puzzled.

"But-"

"But nothing, Pitch. Now how about you take that foot out of your mouth, put it on the floor and go 
apologise to Merida."

"I-"

"Scoot!" Anna made a shooing gesture. "Skedaddle!"

Pitch cast a look at Jack, who shrugged and said, "Don't look at me, I'm on her side. Unless you 
want me to make it a direct order."

Opening his mouth, the scowling Pitch looked ready to issue a biting rebuttal, but a final, "Begone!" 
from Anna did the trick. He huffed, and stalked out of the room like a petulant child.

Whilst eyes danced between the newly empty doorway and the Ghosts, Anna emitted an exasperated 
sigh and scratched at her temple. "Sorry about that. Pitch is a good soldier and a great teacher, but 
he's got about as much empathy as a honey badger and the tact of a runaway hover train." She 
gestured frustratedly at the doorway. "That's the first time he's spoken to her since last night."

Rapunzel frowned. "I thought they were getting on?"

"So did I - but after last night's mass confession... let's just say the air was extra cold."

"Look," Jack abruptly cut in, "the past couple of days have been tough for everyone, and you've all 
got a lot to process. Let's call it a day - tomorrow, you're gonna learn how to use our firearms."

Astrid rolled her eyes and huffed. "Jack, we already know how to shoot."

"Not with our weapons, you don't," Jack replied, tossing in a wink. Elsa couldn't work out why, but 
the unpleasant sensation returned. Had Astrid 'helped' him recover, with her hands and mouth? One 
last bang, for old time's sake? If it was flirting, however, Astrid seemed to miss it. Rather, her face lit up as she glanced at 
Rapunzel, likely at the prospect of new weapons to play with. Odd how she seemed to be taking the 
news of their longevity in her stride. Then again, she had explicitly stated on many an occasion that 
the Valkyries were her real family, so as far as she was concerned, she wouldn't be outliving them.

The same rang true for Elsa, she realised. She had already outlived her parents, and would hopefully 
live as long as Anna would... but as a walking time bomb. Maybe it was that knowledge that was 
scaring her so much.

Astrid and Rapunzel bade their farewells and left the room, audibly discussing in hushed tones all 
they'd learned so far, but as Elsa rose from her seat, she noticed Jack turn to Anna.

"Give us a minute?"

Anna stiffened and glanced between them with a curious, peculiar expression, like she wasn't sure 
she should leave. Elsa couldn't blame her; she was slowly killing him during her bloom.

"Sure," she said after a moment's hesitation, "but don't forget, I need to show you the thing I found 
when we cleared out the basement."
Jack nodded his acknowledgement, and Elsa sat back down as Anna rose from the bed and left the room. Jack then muttered something about eavesdroppers and open doors, and reached for his open staff behind him. Heavy clunks boomed through Elsa's head as he used the staff to help him walk to the door, and just before she heard the click of it being closed several feet behind her, she clearly caught a hiss of "dammit!"

Typical Anna. It heartened Elsa to know her sister's nosiness hadn't diminished in the slightest.

Movement at her left caught her eye, and she watched Jack approach and wearily lower himself onto the mattress, using his staff as support. There was a protracted clicking as it shrank to barely ten inches, followed by an uncomfortably long silence as she found herself the recipient of a lengthy, studious gaze. Long enough, in fact, for her to look away from his bright blue eyes.

"How are you feeling?" he finally broke the silence, abruptly enough to cause Elsa to stiffen slightly… yet soft enough to immediately relax her.

Elsa snorted quietly, her eyes remaining on the comforter dangling off the edge of the mattress. "How do you think?" she murmured.

There was a light chuckle. In the corner of her eye, Elsa saw him draw his legs under him in a cross. "Scared, tired, overwhelmed, numb, angry… stop me if I'm on the wrong track."

Elsa looked at Jack for a few seconds, before snorting once again, and shaking her head as she looked away. "Was it that obvious?"

Jack slowly shook his head and adopted an expression of the worst attempt at innocent sincerity possible. "Nope. Other than, you know, jumping a mile when Rapunzel tried to touch you."

Elsa let out a long breath, closing her eyes whilst a wave of embarrassment flooded her body. If anything were to prove how unsoldierlike she was feeling, that would be it. "I suppose I needn't waste your time by blaming my acute sense of touch."

"If you want, but we both know it'd be a thick slice of bullshit."

Though she couldn't help it, and would rather not encourage such crude and vulgar language, Elsa broke out into silent chuckles as she slowly shook her head. Maybe it was the bluntness with which he spoke.

"I could have killed you," she whispered, once the odd mirth subsided.

"But you didn't."

"But I could."

"Coulda, woulda, shoulda, didn't…a."

Elsa shot him a look that danced halfway between a frustrated glare and an incredulous stare. Throwing a hand halfway into the air, it slapped down much to her thigh's chagrin as she said, "How can you be so flippant?"

Jack merely shrugged. "Probably because I knew what I was getting myself into. This isn't my first rodeo, y'know."

Elsa tilted her head. "You've been present for many blooms, then?"
"Nah," said Jack, shaking his head a micron. "but I've taught many an abbie how to control and use their powers, or rescued a fair few after their blooms. The fear, the anxiety, thinking you're a monster, that there's something wrong with you? It's perfectly natural. Seen it every time someone walked through my door."

Elsa's reply was a dismissive blurt, born from the uncomfortable, self-conscious feeling he was looking right through her. She felt like a holo-violin with how easily he appeared to be striking a chord with her. "Did you hold and sing to them, too?"

It wasn't until a few seconds of silence had passed that, with widening eyes, she realised exactly what she had said. Jack's cheeks turned as glorious a shade of pink as hers, his eyes widening. For a good few moments, Elsa wished the ground would swallow her up - that way she could get away from the awkward situation she'd just created. Now he knew both Snowfields were consummate eavesdroppers.

Jack cleared his throat behind a loose fist, looking away as the other hand scratched at the nape of his neck. "Well… uh," he mumbled, looking adorably embarrassed, "no. You'd be the first."

It was strange how she found it hard to look at him, but couldn't stop flicking her eyes up to him every few seconds, even as the silence moved further into awkward territory. Confusion added itself into the mix, a sense of puzzlement at, despite her feelings of self-loathing and fear, the fact that he cared about her left her feeling relatively light… and special. He'd risked his wellbeing to be there for her, after all. No-one else had done that.

She murmured a quiet thanks, and then said, "So… what do I do now?"

Hell of a question. What could she do? She couldn't touch a thing without covering it in ice, and wouldn't dare lay a finger on a living being. She didn't know if contact against bare skin on any part of her body would spread a layer of ice, either, so sparring was uncertain.

"What is my mission?"

"Whatever you want it to be," Jack answered smoothly. "You're not part of an army anymore. No rank, no insignia."

But she needed that. Years of military discipline plus years of strict adherence to a routine… she needed to belong. To be part of a whole, something greater than herself.

She wanted to fight.

To do that?

"You… you said you trained people in how to use their…" she hesitated, holding herself back from uttering the word 'curse', "…powers?"


She looked up at him, trying to hold his gaze. "Will you train me?"

Jack's expression did not change, did not falter in the slightest. Nary an eyebrow twitched nor did the corner of his lips when he replied.

"No."

Elsa flinched slightly, and didn't even bother to hide it. She didn't expect him to refuse - nor did she
anticipate his acceptance, of course, but for him to flatly deny her?

So much for 'help all abnormals…'

"...why not, if I may ask?"

Jack straightened up and folded his arms, his impassive expression unchanging as he watched her. "I'm not convinced you want it for the right reasons."

Frowning at him, her eyes danced left and right in her puzzlement. "But I do want it. I'm asking so I can learn to control it, so I don't hurt."

"I'm gonna stop you right there," Jack said, holding up a hand, "because that's why. You are asking me out of fear."

"I am not scared."

It was a complete and utter lie, and she knew it… as did Jack, it seemed.

"So why have you kept your hands in your pockets since you came in?"

There it was. Any rebuttals she'd prepared died in her throat, and the supposedly secret hands fiddled with each other within the relative safety of her pocket. She felt a heavy weight slam down on her gut, pulling her gaze down to the floor.

"Let me see your hands, please."

Her brow furrowed; she didn't want to. Please don't make me, she thought. So far her mind had treated the ordeal as some kind of nightmare, and the leather covering her fingers was a barrier to the darkness that had befallen her. To reveal her fear would validate it.

It was unfortunate that her heart betrayed her, and superseded her mind's control. Slowly, reluctantly, her hands withdrew from their confines and revealed themselves in all their black leather-clad glory as she rested them on her thighs. Jack emitted a long breath through his nose, one that she thought sounded like he was disappointed of, disapproving of and judging her.

When she risked a glance at his face, however, it radiated empathy. Oddly, it made her feel worse.

"Every person I trained walked through my door because they wanted. They wanted to learn what they could do, how they could benefit themselves and everyone else. They asked me to train them because they wanted to be who they were born to be, and accepted what they were."

One of his hands gestured toward her.

"You're asking me because you're scared. You don't want to use your powers, you want to control them - and if you ask Pitch, he'll tell you history is littered with tragedies because people tried to control what they feared." His head tilted in a random direction. "Hell, Unity is terrified of us abnormals, so they try to oppress and control us."

Jack extended his staff once again, and a wooden clunk reverberated through the room as he rose from the bed. "You've only been a full abbie for less than a day. You're tired, overwhelmed… and scared. Scared of who you are, and what you can do. People do stupid things when they're scared, and those things could get me, as a teacher, hurt."

He moved to the door, heavy clunks regularly vibrating through Elsa's chair, body and skull as his
staff helped him to walk. "So I'm not going to train you, not yet. Not until I'm sure you want it for you. That you want to better yourself, embrace who you are. I want to see you committed, so I know you want it bad enough you're willing to overcome your fear of yourself to learn."

There was a metallic scrape, and the hairs on the back of Elsa's neck stood high from the rush of air into the room.

"Or you can hide in your room, wear your gloves, treat yourself as some kind of time bomb, deny yourself the amazing things you could do, 'cause you're so scared of what could happen. Your choice… but just remember that sometimes? You just gotta let it go."

*Let it go.*

It sounded so easy, so simple. Just *let it go.*
Located southwest of the last safehouse before the Canadian border was a derelict, abandoned high
school, not too far removed from the modern schools situated around Unity territory. It had the usual
accoutrements; several class rooms, an assembly hall, food hall, sports hall and football field - though
hoverball was the sport most practiced nowadays.

Of course, the stark difference was that one was state of the art with holo-technology, hard light and
impeccable cleanliness, and the other had been mercilessly ravaged by animals, the elements, and
time itself. Jack always thought the worst kind of school was one void of life and laughter, and it was
ironic that he'd chosen the forsaken place for the weapons training.

Then again, it wasn't bothering him nearly as much as it should have been. Perhaps it was that the
presence of eight men and women, some to teach and some to learn, was breathing new life into the
old establishment.

Sat on an aisle of the field's western bleacher, semi-hunched with his elbows on his knees, Jack
regarded the 'students' with half a curled smile. In a weird way, it was like being back home - only
his charges were far older. Ahead and below him was a wide table Kozmotis had snaffled from
somewhere in the school, upon which a baker's dozen pistols, rifles and shotguns were laid, with
their ammunition clips and bullets dotted in between. Kozmotis had even been so meticulous as to
order them by size, from the large M14 sniper rifle and the ferocious AA-12 automatic shotgun to the
dependable MP5 and the humble 9MM Beretta.

Of the looks given to the weapons by the women engaged in conversation on the other side of the
table, Astrid's was by far the hungriest, and heightened vision wasn't necessary to notice she had her
eyes on the AA-12. Rapunzel's, by contrast, was a look of discomfort and consternation, as if the
very existence of those weapons was resonating with her in an anxious way. Merida regarded the
sniper rifle with a curious gaze, as though lost in thought. Jack wondered if she was comparing it to
her trusty bow.

Elsa, however, was unreadable.

Anna and Hiccup sat on the third row at Jack's two o'clock, with the latter fiddling with some gadget
as per usual, the purpose of which Jack had no clue, and the former rested her crossed legs upon the
back of the seat in front whilst she tossed a small ball of flame from one hand to the other. Kozmotis
sat at his eleven o'clock, filling the immediate area with metallic clicks and scrapes as he checked
Emily Jane over and over, slipping the clip in and out, chambering a round and then peering down
her sights at a gym mat suspended from the goal posts.

"Alright, listen up," Jack announced, silencing the chatter as all four women looked at him, "y'all
need to pay attention, 'cause one wrong move and someone's gonna get hurt. Kapische?"

Four bodies stood at ease, watching him with expectation.

"Now, we all know about the stun pistols and rifles. They either knock you out or switch you off.
They're clean, efficient... humane, right?"

Murmurs and nods of agreement reflected back at him.
"These things," he gestured toward the table, "are from a whole different type of warfare. They're designed for one purpose and one purpose only - to kill. Pitch?"

Upon hearing his callsign, Kozmotis pulled back the slide with gusto, stood and wordlessly made his way down the aisle, past the ex-Valkyries and stopped roughly a hundred yards from the suspended gym mat. With seven pairs of eyes watching him, he shouldered Emily Jane, and took aim at the gym mat - two seconds later, gunfire ripped through the air in staccato cracks and bangs as bullets tore the helpless mat to shreds, with chunks of material flying off in all directions and littering the grass in a disaster of upholstery proportions.

Jack didn't miss how Rapunzel turned her head away.

Kozmotis emptied about half the clip before flicking the safety back on, and strode back to the bleachers, Emily Jane in both hands. Astrid's head followed his weapon with an expression of awe.

"Chemically-propelled metal slugs travelling at three times the speed of sound, at a rate of twelve bullets a second. You all saw what they did to the gym mat." Jack gestured toward its shredded remnants. "Imagine what they do to the human body."

He leaned to the right, where Pippa was hidden behind a row of seats. Standing up, he held the M4 aloft and said, "I'm telling you this, because they're not clean and clinical. They're loud, brutal, and messy. Don't ever point one of these at someone unless you're going to kill them, and don't squeeze the trigger unless you're committed to being the only one who walks away alive." He rested Pippa in a vertical position, leaning against the table. "These represent your event horizon, folks. Once you use these on another living thing, there's no going back. Any questions?"

Rapunzel was the first to ask, and her voice rode heavy with disapproval. "Why do you still use these, if they're as barbaric as you describe?"

"S'a good question," Jack answered, holding up a finger. "You see, these are weapons of the past, and Unity wants to pretend the past doesn't exist. Funny thing about the past…" His eyes moved over to Elsa, his lingering gaze returned in kind, "It always comes back to bite you on the ass."

Elsa's response was condensed into an arched brow and an unimpressed glare.

"Anything else?"

"Yeah," Astrid answered. "When do we start?"

Chuckling, Jack said with a gesture to the table, "Soon as you pick your weapon, you'll pair off into the same teams you did for Perdition. Your trainer will take you to the targets Pitch and I set up around the school, and—"

"I can't."

Seven pairs of eyes turned to Rapunzel, who looked as resolute as rock despite the anxiety in her eyes as she stared back at Jack.

"Why the fuck not?" Astrid said, frowning in bemusement.

"I became a medic to preserve life, not take it. Mom and Dad always said, 'do no harm', and I already betrayed that by being a Valkyrie. The second I pick up one of those-" her eyes flicked down to the assortment of rifles, "-I become everything I never wanted to be."

"That is the most—"
"You know what?" Jack cut Kozmotis off like a sword through butter, "I respect that." He twisted round to face the strawberry blonde behind and to his right.

"Hey, Anna, what was it that guy said to the kids in that story about a school of magic? About courage and friends?"

"It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends," Anna said with all the air of reciting a quote. "Always knew you were a Gryffindor," she added, winking at Rapunzel, who looked tall and proud despite the shy blush.

Anna then turned and looked at Jack, half a smile on her face, and shrugged. "It's no problem. We can practise hand-to-hand or something."

When Jack threw her a concerned frown, with his eyes somewhat pointedly flicking down to her abdomen, she held up her hands and hastily added, "We won't be sparring. Gym bags and stuff only, promise!"

Shooting her a skeptical glance, Jack said, "Fine. Elsa has also chosen not to participate, so I'm gonna be on the tallest building-" he thumbed behind him, "-keeping overwatch. Listen to your partners, and above all, don't shoot 'em - none of these will save you from me if you do. Comprendez?"

Four heads nodded their agreement, and Jack promptly opened the weapons for selection - it was no surprise the AA-12 was in Astrid's hands before he could say the words, "have fun!".

Jack shook his head.

Kids.

"Alright, now load the drum into the housing like I showed you."

Hiccup watched as Astrid did just that, sliding the circular magazine along the rails and into the rifle itself, its arrival proclaimed by a click. It had been amusing how she'd treated it as though it was the coolest thing since food replicators - though a mite worrying - and wasn't surprised she'd picked the biggest, loudest gun available.

Much of Astrid was a mystery to him, but that was obvious.

"Hey, are we good?" she asked, her eyes on a second gym mat suspended between another football goal post.

Hiccup looked up from the shotgun to the left side of her face. She radiated that kind of prettiness, the variant of confidence only derived from a tough life. The kind of bravado that falls down like a house of cards.

"How do you mean?"

She gave him a sidelong look that lingered on his eyes. "I mean us. You and me, after that night. We good?"

Hell of a question. Were they? Hiccup couldn't deny the stung feeling at finding out the hidden truth twice in two days, when he was still getting over the first dragon-shaped revelation. Finding out they were abnormals too only added to the maelstrom, and he had found himself sympathising with the less-than-positive reception from his team.
During the all-nighter of Elsa's bloom, however, where the climate was balmy like the Antarctic, he had started to think about why they kept it secret. They were scared - well, some of them. Scared of their past being used against them, doubly so when their biology was thrown into the mix… and yet, they came clean of their own volition. That deserved Hiccup's respect, more so than Rapunzel's gift to him.

Though, he couldn't shake the annoyance that they could have given them a heads up from the start.

"I'll tell you in a few moments," he said, hiding half a smirk. He knew what was coming next - it happened to anyone who used the AA-12 and didn't stand properly.

Astrid's eyes lingered on him for a more before issuing an uncertain, "Okay…"

"Cool. Now, that thing," he gestured lazily to the rifle, whilst producing a cylindrical object from his pocket, "fires these. Shotgun shells, filled with pellets that spray out the further they fly. So, the closer the target, the more likely they won't be getting up again."

He took a few steps back, well out of any danger. "When you're ready, squeeze the trigger."

Astrid's eyes followed his movements for a second, before she turned her head back to the gym mat. Hiccup watched her roll her shoulders back, click her neck, and then level the rifle at the mat… which was when he noticed something was wrong. Her posture.

"Careful with the recoil," he blurted, "that thing's got a kick."

He heard a scoff - her position hadn't changed in the slightest. "I'm super strong; what recoil could possibly-"

As if to prove a point, she quickly squeezed off three rounds… and found herself flat on her back, staring up at the sky with a stunned expression.

"What the fuck…” she breathed.

Trying desperately to stifle his laughter, though unable to hide his wide smirk, Hiccup said, "Told you the recoil was a doozy. All the strength in the world's not gonna help you if your centre of gravity is in another country."

He leaned over and offered a hand - still popping, Astrid's eyes flicked over to it. "Now we're good," he chuckled, pulling the vertically-challenged woman to her feet. "Want to find a different gun?"

Astrid looked at him like he'd grown a second head, and held the rifle closer to her as though he'd asked her to give it up. "No way - this thing's awesome."

Shaking his head, Hiccup asked if she wanted him to adjust her posture - not only was her agreement unexpected, but so was the flutter of something in his stomach every time his hands touched her body.

A few minutes and two drums of ammo later, what once existed as a gym mat became a mess of chunks and fluff spread around the grass, with Astrid looking like she had the time of her life…

…yet all Hiccup could think about was the feeling of her hips in his hands.

Seeing Astrid get knocked on her ass was the highlight of Jack's day, and a permanent addition to the box in his mind entitled Memories for Rainy Days.
Sat with his legs dangling off the edge of the tallest building, staff across his lap, he listened to the sounds of dozens of sudden cracks and bangs ripping through the air as he kept a watchful eye on the surrounding area, occasionally seeking the team out to make sure no-one was hurt. So far there were no injuries, aside from Astrid's pride, and the pairs were working as well together as they had done in Perdition. He would be lying if it didn't arouse a sense of optimism and trust within him - if his subordinates could find it within themselves to get on with the very team who hunted them, maybe there was a future for all.

There would be bumps in the road, no doubt about that.

"Are you expecting Unity?"

Namely, Elsa.

Jack glanced over his shoulder at the sound of her voice; somehow she had navigated her way through an unfamiliar school building to the rooftop. The steel door closed behind her with a hollow click as she stood, gloved hands hanging at her sides, braid resting on her hoodie-covered shoulder.

He wondered if she had used her proximity sense - since her bloom, what used to be a semi-reliable compass was now a faint echo, its trustworthiness all but diminished.

"Nah," he said with a casual air, waving aside the question, "nobody comes this far north, and there's not another anti-Reaper incursion scheduled for a week." He let out a breath through his nose. "But, y'know, it pays to be careful."

"Indeed," she remarked, and Jack was struck with the knowledge his words resonated with her more than him. "May I?"

Jack glanced at her once more, and offered a 'sure' as he gestured to the space beside him. A few footsteps and some shuffling later, and Elsa sat too with dangling legs. "Looks like rain's coming soon," he murmured offhandedly.

"May I ask you a question?"

"Shoot," Jack said, just as Merida's sniper rifle shouted through the air. That was weird.

"Has there ever been a time when you have been afraid of your powers?"

Jack didn't need to look at Elsa to sense her searching gaze, and there was a part of him that wondered, should he look at her even once, whether he'd be entranced like Medusa's victims in the Greek tales of old. So, with a scoff, he kept his eyes in the distance and said, "Oh, yeah. We were all afraid at-"

"I meant you." Elsa's voice turned firm. "Specifically."

That time, Jack did chance a quick look - his limbs remained mercifully stone-free. "Yeah."

"Why?"

"It's a long story, and-"

"Please," she shuffled a little closer. "I want to know."

The look he gave her was the longest yet, and was more than enough to tell she was sincere in her quest to know. Any reluctance or hesitation vanished, and he closed his eyes with a defeated sigh as
he scratched his temple.

"I'm guessing, after all your research into me, you know all about my bloom, right?"

Elsa grimaced a little as she shook her head. "Sadly, no. Beyond recordings of operations you've conducted, records of you are rather scant, I'm afraid. I don't even know your true name, other than Jack."

Jack didn't know whether to be pleased or offended. Sure, it made him somewhat of a ghost in the system, but after all the crap the Ghosts had caused, one would think Unity would have conducted extensive research into their biggest pain in the ass.

Now he knew how Eugene felt when they couldn't get his nose right.

"What happened?"

Jack sighed - that was the part he was hoping to avoid. "I don't remember much. All I know is I was goofing around on a frozen lake. Skating, sliding, that sort of thing. Course, if I wasn't having so much fun, I'd have noticed the ice cracking beneath me... and by the time I did, I was under. All I remember is that it was freezing cold, pitch black, and before my body gave out, I was terrified."

He didn't miss the frown that crossed Elsa's expression, the classic cogs-turning look, and heard her murmur, "cold, dark... terrified..."

Dismissing it as mere repetition, he continued, "So, that was it. Technically, I died in that lake... but, next thing I know, I'm waking up in a regeneration ward of a nearby settlement. Apparently there had been a Reaper attack near the lake, and when the ice thawed just enough a few days after I died, I'd floated to the top and broke through. A search party rescued me. The docs asked me if I remembered anything - my name, where I came from, my family, but I couldn't... it was like my memories had been wiped clean. So they brought in a brain specialist to scan for amnesia. The lady offered me her hand... and that was when it happened."

"What?" Elsa whispered.

"Soon as I touched her, ice spread out all over her hand. She shrieked out, yelling for security, that there was an 'abby freak', and ran out. Two seconds later, three clones came in, yelling at me to get down on the floor. I was panicking, freaking out, not understanding what happened to me or why they were being so hostile, so I managed to escape out of the medical hut, and ran to the nearby woods. Course, the clones followed me - and pretty soon they had this scared kid cornered. So I picked up a stick to defend myself, and as they came to take me down, I closed my eyes and swung. I heard this horrible gurgling, and when I finally looked... they were dying, writhing on the ground, ice consuming them. I killed three people, and didn't know how. So I ran, and ran, and ran."

"You were just defending yourself," Elsa said. If it was an attempt at sympathy or support... the gesture was appreciated, if unnecessary. Jack had long made peace with the events of that night.

The other part would haunt him for the rest of his unnatural life, however.

"Yeah, well, to a kid wandering from settlement to settlement, starving, begging for help from anyone but was ignored or avoided 'cause he left little ice patches wherever he walked, that wasn't much comfort. To have all that happen, and not understand why."

It then struck him how he and Elsa were two sides of the same coin. Her prison was of four walls, of repetition and fear. His, of invisibility and incomprehension, ignored and alone in a crowded street. The world pretended Jack didn't exist, and Elsa wished she did not exist in the first place.
"Surely you began to remember?"

"Oh yeah," Jack chuckled bitterly. "Yeah, the memories came back about two weeks later, bit by bit. First it was my name, then my sister's, then my mom's. Slowly it all came back, and as soon as I remembered where my home was, I went there as fast as I could. And let me tell you - finding out you can fly after wishing you could get there faster? Freaky as shit. So I'm literally riding the wind home, excited to show my sister Emma what I can do, looking forward to actually mattering to someone~"

"Emma," Elsa murmured. There was that thoughtful frown again.

"-but when I landed, and I saw the carnage, the bodies… I realised my home was no longer there anymore."

"What?" Elsa breathed.

Jack smiled sadly as he gave her a look, and his eyebrows rose in a forlorn way. "The search party that found me, as they were looking for survivors of a Reaper attack? Turns out the settlement those bastards attacked was Settlement Four. My home."

He let out a shaky breath; up until that moment, he had just barely kept the pain, the guilt and the shame at bay. His hands trembled against his lap, and eyes of blue no longer scanned the distance, but looked inward.

"Pitch called it cryosis, or something, insofar as my abnormality went through this supercharged bloom in response to the shock of falling into sub-zero water. Y'know, to protect me, my powers froze me. But while that was happening… a swarm of Reapers were busy killing everyone I ever knew and loved."

He swallowed down the lump in his throat; rarely did he speak of his past, so much so that he could count those who knew on one hand.

"So, yeah. I was afraid of my powers… but I hated them more. While I was busy becoming who I am, my friends and family were dying and I wasn't there to protect them - becoming an abnormal cost me everything."

"I know the feeling…" Elsa muttered. "Not in so tragic a way, though."

"Maybe not, but you still lost three years of your life, cooped up in your room. We both lost the most precious thing of all - time with our families."

Elsa frowned and opened her mouth, undoubtedly to question just how the hell he knew that. "You told me," he cut her off before she could speak, "on the night you bloomed. I needed to keep you conscious, so I asked you. I know everything about that night. Your boyfriend was a dick, by the way."

Elsa snorted, her cheeks filling with an adorable pink. "Oh. Well… yes. Yes, he was." Under his gaze, she looked down at her gloved hands, turning them over and over. "So you know what it's like?"

Half a smirk curled Jack's lips. "Yep… but you wanna know what turned it around?"

Elsa looked up to him. "Yes."

"I was refused training."
The way her brow furrowed in disbelief was amusing enough, but the pretend sound of her jaw hitting the floor was icing on the cake. "You must be joking."

"Nope. After I was rescued by the Ghosts and brought to the Star, I asked their leader Firework to train me. See, I didn't just blame myself for not protecting my family, I blamed Unity, too. Way I saw it, we were deep in Unity territory, so they should have been there to stop the Reapers. I wanted to make Unity hurt like I hurt, I wanted to throw down all my hate on it, and what better way than my powers? So, seeing the Ghosts as a way I could do that, I asked for training." He held up a finger. "Only, Firework point blank refused. Told me I was asking for all the wrong reasons, that I was treating my powers as a weapon rather than a part of me, and until I learned what it meant to be an abnormal, and made peace with what happened to me, she would never train me. Said, 'how would Sarah and Emma feel?'"

"Sarah and Emma," Elsa repeated again, frowning once more as her mind visibly ticked over - which was starting to get more than a little annoying. "What changed?"

"Kids." Jack conjured a snowflake, and smiled to himself as it danced a gentle bob around his fingers. If his memories were a holo recording, he was approaching the happy ending. "I was up on the Star's deck, brooding and moping and basically being a petulant ass. Wondering how the hell I was supposed to do what Firework said. I was so busy sulking that I didn't notice how the weather was reflecting my mood… but I did hear laughter. So I turned around, and saw three kids playing in this massive patch of snow I'd subconsciously created. You know, snowmen, snowball fights, the works - and then one of them asked if I wanted to play. It was that moment I understood what Firework meant."

He lifted the snowflake to his lips, and gently blew it away, where it lazily soared through the air.

"Those kids knew nothing about me. They didn't know about my bloom, the Reapers, any of it… all they saw on the deck was an opportunity to play. The snow and ice wasn't some threat to them, it didn't take anything away… but it gave them something. Snowballs and fun times. That's when it clicked - my powers were no more responsible for losing my family than I was. It was just a horrible situation, out of my control…"

"And if you hadn't bloomed, it's likely you would have died there, too."

Jack gave Elsa another look that fell to her gloves, and nodded. "Yeah. I don't believe in fate or destiny… but some situations make me wonder."

"So you're saying I was fated to be locked away?"

He shook his head "No. I'm saying what's done is done, there's no changing the past. You need to give yourself a chance."

Elsa emitted a bitter scoff, and in a reversal of roles it was she who looked off into the distance, eyes as cloudy as the veil of grey drawing overhead. "It's not that simple, Jack."

"Not saying it is, but-"

"Jack."

"—uh, yeah?"

Widening, her eyes snapped to his, an expression of dawning realisation quickly taking over her face. "Jack, Jack, Jack," she repeated again and again, clicking her gloved fingers.
Though her almost mantra-like repetition was weird enough, there was always the opportunity for a smirk and a bit of humour. "You know, when a lady says my name over and over, it's usually for a different reason."

"Jack," she continued, ignoring him, "Jack something… Jacksomething...

... Jackso—Jackson!" Elsa snapped upright as though a live wire had been applied to her, powering on the lightbulb in her head. Her finger pointed to him. "Jackson Overland!"

"Yeah, that's—wait…" Jack narrowed his eyes with a suspicious look, "how do you know?"

"A facial recognition program I ran after the battle at the Depot!" Elsa looked positively elated. "It brought up your records from the census database! It was you!"

Jack immediately started to shuffle some distance from her. Move away from the crazy person. "I don't know if I should be flattered or violated…"

"I only searched because—oh, it doesn't matter now. Jackson—"

"Jack.

It was strange, like something had visibly lit a fire inside Elsa, as though she had found some purpose. "Jack, your records list you as deceased, but it lists your mother and sister as alive!"

"Elsa…"

"Don't you see?" She turned her body toward him, excitement and hope radiating from every inch. She looked a far cry from the hesitant, fearful woman in his room the day before. "We can find them!"

And, like Elsa's exuberance seemed to grow and brighten, Jack's mood took a turn for the darker. Exploring his past was bad enough, but…

"They're dead, Elsa. Stop."

"How do you—"

Jack threw his hands into the air. "Because I saw their bodies, okay?!"

He didn't mean to snap so harshly, though it was the inevitable conclusion of the conversation, the only result of his rising frustration. Elsa's mouth snapped shut as she flinched, staring at him with stung, uncomprehending eyes. Guilt made itself a space in his chest - she meant well, and he knew it. Maybe she felt it was her ticket to redemption, some way to make up for her past. A long sigh escaped his lips as her gaze fell, and he looked away - it almost hurt to see her hope be quashed in such a way, like a light going out behind her eyes.

"You've been around casualties before, so… I'm gonna assume you know what it's like. You're walking through the aftermath of a battle; there are bodies and limbs everywhere, blood all over the place… it's carnage. But every now and then, you come across something you recognise. A dress, a bracelet… an arm that was broken in two places from when your sister fell out of a tree climbing after you, or a chipped tooth from when your mom slipped on the ice that one time." Jack swallowed hard - up until that moment his eyes were doing a sterling job of holding back his tears, but time was running out. "I buried them myself… what was left of them. I know they're dead."

"But why…" Elsa whispered, voice faint and weak.
"Why does the census say they're alive?" Jack snorted with dark cynicism. "The Massacre of Settlement Four is considered the biggest failure of Unity's mandate to protect its citizens. If, unchecked, a Reaper swarm managed to get deep enough into Unity territory and wipe out a settlement before the military could even react, people would lose confidence in the regime. How can the government protect its people, if a hundred and fifty members of a small settlement supposedly safe from danger were slaughtered in less than an hour, and the Reapers responsible in the wind? So, Unity built a new settlement in the same zone, called it Settlement Four, and swept the massacre under the rug. The search party who found me were threatened with jail if they talked - though when they were asked if anyone survived… they said no. Protecting me, I guess. So as far as Unity's concerned, I died in that lake, and the inhabitants of Settlement Four are alive and well."

He looked up at her, hard as it was. Elsa's face was written with horror, sadness and shock, and it made the pain in his heart all the sharper. "Like I said - Unity lies."

Elsa frowned away at the floor, and a quick glance at small movements on her lap revealed gloved hands to death. "Jack… I'm so sorry. I just hoped…"

He didn't know why he did it, maybe it was some subconscious desire to help her feel a little better, but his hand moved over to grasp her left and cease the wringing. In response, her fingers curled around his and squeezed like there was no tomorrow. "I get it, and I appreciate it, but there's nothing you, me, or anyone can do about it now. The past is in the past - all that matters is how we move forward."

She looked up at him. Silence reigned, a tense, pregnant silence, thick with emotion and pain that hung in the air. Jack found his mind had become suddenly and unhelpfully blank, except for the wonder of what Elsa was thinking, and the knowledge that she hadn't let go of his hand.

A piercing whistle burst through the air. Stiffening with a start as Elsa quickly abandoned his hand, Jack's gaze snapped down to the source: Anna, waving them down. "Looks like they've finished. C'mon," he said, pushing himself to his feet and nodding to the door Elsa entered through beforehand, "let's go."

To say Elsa's mind was ablaze would be an understatement, rather it felt like a forest fire of memories, thoughts and emotions.

So that was the life and times of Jackson Overland before he became the Ghost Jack "Frost". A life of tragedy and isolation, fear and anger. A victim of Unity as much as she was, though in a different way. His oppression was silence and abandonment, hers of rules, walls and fear. Then again, every single member of the combined group was a victim of Unity in one way or another.

She had found herself thinking about him a lot on their journey back to the safehouse. How he'd hated and feared his powers, been refused training for the same reason he refused hers, and pushed through all that to end up as leader of the Ghosts. How all of them had endured their own personal trials and come out stronger. If they could do that, why couldn't she?

What was holding her back if not herself?

But it was different for her, and she knew it. You tell someone something often enough, and soon they'll start to believe it - and though no-one said she was dangerous, that her powers were cause for fear and distrust, their actions spoke louder than words ever could. How can someone not think they are a monster, if they are locked away and injected with something designed to inhibit a part of
them?

For a psyche as fragile as Elsa's was, that night six years ago, it was all too easy to believe.

Change, however, came from the most curious of places. On the way back to the safehouse as the slate-grey clouds overhead were preparing their onslaught, Elsa overheard a conversation between Merida and Astrid, one that instantly perked her ears and aroused surprise. Pitch had implied there was one way Merida could see her family in the future, and that was to win the war.

Which had then prompted the fiery Scot to ask, "What d'ye think they'll say if I ask to be a Ghost?"

It went without saying that Elsa's attention was immediately piqued, for it was a question that had been floating around her mind ever since catching a glimpse of the shadow falling across her mouth in the mirror.

Astrid had then said Merida wouldn't know the answer until she asked, but that there was every chance she'd be refused. "We've still got a lot to make up for," her once second-in-command had added.

Merida replied that she would wait for the right time - maybe get a feeling from the others as to which way they would jump.

For Elsa, it required a lot less thought. What currently constituted her life? Days of staying in a safehouse, watching her sister leave for a mission, hoping against hope she would return? A life in limbo, watching time and opportunity pass her by? She wanted most to protect her sister, but to do that she had to be on the front lines. Not in a prison of her mind. So, to do that…

"I want to join the Ghosts."

Halfway up the front path, wide soily garden either side of him, Jack froze in step - as did the three Ghosts flanking him. All conversations stopped, all joviality ceased, and within seconds, all eyes were upon her. She stood her ground.

"Come again?" Jack's reaction was audibly disbelieving.

"I want to join the Ghosts," Elsa repeated, with more resolve.

Jack scoffed, and waved aside her declaration before turning away. "Not gonna happen."

"And why not?"

Jack halted again. Six pairs of eyes glanced between them, nervously watching the unfolding scene, like it was some tense soap drama. Elsa stood at ease, her eyes fixed immovably on the back of Jack's head.

"Because," he began, not turning around "part of Ghost membership is mastery of your gifts. You already showed me."

"Then I want training," Elsa declared. "You wanted me to show you I'm committed."

"Yeah. I guess I did." Jack turned around, and fixed her with a focused, stern look. "Pitch - get my iPod, and find me my song."

"Which—oh." Elsa wasn't sure she liked the smirk that slowly grew over Pitch's lips. "Granite."

The tall man went inside whilst Jack took two steps toward Elsa, his gaze unflinching. "Okay. Let's
see how committed you are." He threw his staff to Night Fury, who barely caught it in time. "Fight me."

Elsa's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Excuse me?"

"You heard." Jack advanced on her. "In fact, let's make it a bet. Best of five - whoever gets knocked on their ass the most loses. If you win, you get training, and I consider everyone for Ghost membership. If I win, you don't ask again, and none of you get considered. Oh, and the buy-in?" He pointed at her hands. "The gloves come off."

"Jack, that's not fair."

"Life isn't fair, Hiccup," Jack interrupted. "I wanna see Elsa fight for her friends, too. We Ghosts, we move as one, fight as one, die as one. We go into battle knowing the Ghost beside us is one hundred percent willing to give it all they've got."

Astrid drawled her customary sarcastic disbelief. "And you didn't get that from when we fought you?"

"No. Elsa fought for something different to you three - she fought for herself. I want to see her fight for you."

As much as she hated to admit it, Jack had a point. The Valkyries were just a vehicle for a cold, ruthless woman to get her revenge.

"No."

Rapunzel gasped. "Elsa, think about-"

"Jack would flippantly have me gamble our future on a bet, as though it is some sort of prize. This is not some childish whim to be decided on something so immature and... masculine as a fight. He knows how much I want this-" she stalked past him, and petulant though it was, took care to bump against his shoulder. "-but I will prove it another way. I don't need to do so with my fists."

Astrid piped up as Elsa passed her. "Y'know, I really wanna hit you right-"

"No, no." Elsa heard Jack speak. "The Valkyrie's right."

"Jack would flippantly have me gamble our future on a bet, as though it is some sort of prize. This is not some childish whim to be decided on something so immature and... masculine as a fight. He knows how much I want this-" she stalked past him, and petulant though it was, took care to bump against his shoulder. "-but I will prove it another way. I don't need to do so with my fists."

"No, no." Elsa heard Jack speak. "The Valkyrie's right."

Elsa stopped in her tracks. Her entire body went rigid with anger. Her heart pulsed hot, teeth clenched, fists balled. How dare he. After all he had said - why was he being so hurtful? "Choose your next words carefully, Frost." She turned around and fixed him with an icy glare, and her anger bubbled at the half-smirk. "I am not a Valkyrie."

Jack's face adopted a look of confusion that couldn't be more insincere if he tried. Looking around him, arms wide open, he sauntered toward her and said, "Huh. And this whole time I thought you were. If you're not a Valkyrie..."

He stopped so close, their faces were merely inches away and locked gazes with her. Challenge radiated from his sapphire blues, a call to arms that rushed through her like a tidal wave.

"...what are you?"

Elsa's response was wordless. Face of stone, she never took her eyes off him as she pulled off the sweater and tossed it aside, revealing her toned arms and black vest. She lifted her hands, so Jack could watch as she pulled off the gloves and tossed them aside. Almost instantly did her skin sing at
the kiss of fresh air against it.

"There she is," she heard his almost sing-song voice delivering it like a taunt.

"You just made the biggest mistake of your life, Frost," she said in a low, threatening growl. Jack simply uttered a single chuckle behind lips that smirked on the left side, leaned close enough for his breath to ghost over her right ear, and whispered, as a rumble tore its way through the melancholy grey overhead:

"Show me."

To Be Continued...
A Warrior's Dance

"A Warrior's Dance"

Words became raindrops, a light *pitter-patter* that provided background noise in lieu of conversation. No-one said a thing - *dared* to - unless it was somehow related to the fight itself.

Retreating to the soily ground on the other side of the path, the hard paving acting the part of a battle line, Jack clenched and relaxed his fingers over and over whilst he waited for Elsa to take position. She glided to stand opposite him, perfectly opposite, her eyes fixed upon his. Every muscle tensing under her arms, every economic movement she made radiated strength and combat readiness. The light rain bothered her as little as it did Jack, merely a part of the world falling away from them.

"Can you two come inside, maybe prove your superiority another day?" he heard Rapunzel call out.

"No," was Jack's answer. "We do this now, or not at all."

"Speak your terms," Elsa addressed him, her voice firm and sharp as a razor's edge.

"Best of five knockdowns. Whoever's on their back loses the round." He gestured with his head toward the house. "Night Fury referees."

"I do what now?"

"Surprise surprise, he picks a Ghost," Merida grumbled.

"Night Fury isn't biased and doesn't have anything riding on this." Jack snapped. "Anything else?"

Merida's silence was the answer he received. Kozmotis returned not three second later clutching the iPod and its speakers, and hummed quietly to himself as he set about navigating the device.

"What's the deal with the music?" Astrid asked.

"It's called Granite by some group called Pendulum. It's Jack's song," Hiccup answered, "for when he won't be holding back."

Elsa dropped her left leg back and brought her fists up in front of her face, boxer-style. Jack mirrored her posture in response.

"On my mark," Hiccup announced, "three… two…"

Jack noticed Elsa's right shoulder move back an inch - *so that* was the hand she would lead with. Odd how she telegraphed her intent so early.
"One!"

The speakers roared into life. Both combatants advanced step by cautious step, eyes locked, fists high. Elsa opened with a right jab as predicted, which Jack easily parried away. She followed up with a right-left, parried and dodged, and blocked Jack's counter-jab. Skin stinging with the contact, Jack parried away another one-two and blocked a snap kick to his head with both forearms, the impact knocking him aside a little.

So far, so obvious. She seemed to be testing him, probing his reaction speed, searching for flaws she could exploit. Only, Jack knew for a fact she was already aware of his strengths and weaknesses… so why the foreplay?

On and on they sparred. Jabs were parried, hooks were blocked, kicks were dodged, with Elsa proving herself to be as agile as Jack was. Strikes he was sure would hit passed through nothing but air.

"Stop trying to hit him, and hit him!" Astrid yelled, not that Elsa heeded her frustration… but she had a point. Love taps and predictable strikes would drag the fight - maybe offense was the best defense.

Jack pulled his right shoulder back an inch so as to throw her a jab, but feinted with a left. Elsa weaved right and parried it away just in time, and counter-aimed a kick directly at his chest - only for Jack to twist away from the kick, slap the leg down and lunge into her with an outstretched arm. Caught off-guard by the clothesline, Elsa let out a cry as his arm connected across her chest and sent her flat on her back into mud churned by the rain and their feet.

"Point to Jack," Hiccup called out, much to the groans of three ex-Valkyries.

"You're looking remarkably relaxed, considering your sister is fighting your best friend," Kozmotis said, his eyes in a sidelong glance at his once-protégé.

Anna simply shrugged. "Don't get me wrong - I know who I want to win. Thing is - Jack made a bet." She returned Kozmotis' look. "Jack is terrible at betting."

The Ghost leader kneeled at the side of his opponent, feeling the rain plaster his hair to his head. Mud clinging to her skin and once-pristine now-sodden braid, Elsa scowled as she rolled over to her knees.

"Why do you do that?" he asked.

Elsa shot him a look. "Do what?"

"Fight like a human. You're not one of them anymore." He rose to his feet just as Elsa did. "These love taps - you're better than that, so how about you actually hit."

The sudden impact caused his head to snap back, amid several gasps audible over the rain. Pain blossomed from his lower lip as he staggered backwards a step, a sharp pain that spread to a dull ache through his jaw… and a copper taste filled his mouth. Fingers gently touched the pulsing heat
on his lip, and his eyes caught blood on the tips before he looked up - Elsa, her eyebrow arched and her fists at the ready.

"How's that for a love tap?"

The left side of his lips drew into a smile.

"Now we're talking."

Spitting the blood from his mouth, Jack straightened up and circled her as the rain beat down on him. He called out for Pitch Black to repeat the song, and once more did the synthesised, frenetic rhythm fill the street with a beat that, apparently, was to Astrid's liking - a one second glance revealed her gentle jigging along.

It was clear to him she had been holding back - maybe she didn't want to actually hurt him beyond a quick jab to the face. Maybe she was hesitant to unleash her full potential upon him, unaware of how fast she could be. She could easily be as fast as him, as agile as him. She could fight him to a standstill.

If only she would allow herself to.

Then again, Jack felt himself holding back, and was not certain why. Maybe he only fought as hard as his opponent - which would explain why sparring sessions with Kozmotis always ended up with Ariel entertaining their combined presence in the Star's infirmary.

Maybe… maybe it was something else.

Jack mentally brushed aside the thought; it was not the time for introspection. It was the time for blood.

Without warning, Jack lunged forward, catching her by surprise. His right fist connected with her right cheek at blistering speed before she could react - with a hiss, she rolled with the punch and ducked his left swing before putting all her strength into a quick one-two into his chest. Ribs screaming curses with the blossom of pain spreading from the impact, Jack ignored the mild winding and weaved to the left, avoiding a fist destined for his head, and caught her wrist before bringing his knee up to her chest. Quickly taking advantage, he looped her arm around her panting chest and held it there, his chest pressed up against her back, and as her left hand flew behind her up to his face, he caught it and held it across her abdomen. For a few seconds, the two of them stood there in a strange embrace, his head hovering over her right shoulder, close enough to feel his breath bounce off her skin. To an innocent bystander, the sight of Elsa wrapped up in his arms would have given off an entirely different vibe.

Jack merely tilted his head, feeling the rain plaster his hair to his scalp, and said, "You're holding back."

"Am I?"

"Yeah." He smiled at her, slowly shaking his head. "Don't."

There was a split second where he was certain he saw a smile curl at her lips before her boot slammed down on his right foot, followed by an elbow to his chest once his grip had been weakened. Having been jarred back, Jack was then the recipient of a back kick to his chest, further increasing the distance.

He barely had time to react before Elsa surged toward him, fists flying and victory in her eyes.
Kozmotis watched the two combatants go at it with a critical, abstract eye. Watching combat was always engaging to him, yet the fight between Jack and Snow Queen held a particular interest. A clash of titans, the leader of the Ghosts versus the ex-leader of the Valkyries. Chaos versus order, discord versus structure.

Every attack one made, the other mirrored. Strikes from one were blocked or parried as though the other anticipated them, from the roundhouse kick Jack sidestepped to the cartwheel kick Snow Queen effortlessly whirled around - the very same kick that floored Kozmotis back on the Star. Their fight was a blur of limbs and swings, an inhumanly fast blur where ground was lost and gained, positions were changed and styles were switched. Savate became tae kwon do, boxing became Krav Maga.

And yet, despite the lightning fast speed at which they struck, blocked, parried and countered, and how each attack fluidly flowed into the next, neither could score a hit on the other. They were too equal in skill, two sides of the same martial coin.

And that was without the miniature bursts of shockwaves that froze the rain in the immediate vicinity of where their arms connected. Little instantaneous spheres that turned the raindrops to ice.

For the first time, even after watching Jack fight countless battles, Kozmotis was not sure who would win.

One thing was for sure, however - to the two warriors, it was no mere fight.

They were dancing together, a rhythmic waltz in the language of war - and something Kozmotis couldn't put his finger on fuelled their strikes, their looks and the way they grappled closer than one would expect. A strange air around them as the rain beat down, a kind of electricity that could power a tank.

"If this is how they fight," Merida remarked, and a quick sidelong glance revealed she was as fascinated by the battle as he was, "I dinnae wanna be around when they fuck."

"When they whatnow?!" Rapunzel exclaimed.

"C'mon, lassie! Canna see it? Watchin' this, it's even making me want tae ride someone!"

Kozmotis found himself instinctively shuffling away, a movement that attracted a glance from the newly crowned Hunter. He wished he hadn't caught the look.

Rapunzel seemed unconvinced. "You're deluded."

"Red's right," Astrid piped up, just as Jack caught both of Snow Queen's arms, wrapped them across her chest and pinned her against the fence. "I know fighting, and I know sex. This feels like both."

Rapunzel shot her a look. "How'd you figure?"

"Because the song ended two minutes ago... the rain's coming down hard, and they're still going at it."
Jack ducked another right swing and threw his arms up to block the elbow on its return journey toward his head. Frustration ignited like a rekindled flame in his gut - and it wasn't to do with being unable to land a hit on her. Elsa had technique; she adapted, improvised, gave ground when keeping it would have compromised her position and took ground the second it was available. She was every bit the skilled fighter he anticipated… but it wasn't enough. She was still holding back - and, quite frankly, Jack was getting pissed off with it.

His frustration seemed to be shared by her, judging by the scowl permanently etched upon her face and the vexed snarls every time her strikes were stymied. She knew what was at stake, that was made perfectly clear - so the many chances Jack gave for her to floor him, only for him to yank them away must have been infuriating her. Enough to make a mistake.

Having swerved to avoid a rather beautifully executed butterfly kick from the sodden, mud-covered woman, Jack steadied his posture just as Elsa switched to a classic jiujitsu charge, ducking low and covering her head to close the distance. Her right shoulder slammed into his diaphragm hard enough to force the wind from his lungs with a loud grunt, and as his feet skidded back on the muddy soil, her hands lashed down to the backs of his knees. Before she could finish the job and pull his legs from under him, however, Jack slammed his elbow in the space between her shoulder blades. Crying out with the pain, Elsa's grip loosened just enough to lose the advantage - something Jack capitalised on by driving his thigh into her face. Shoved upright by the counter, blood seeping from her lip, Elsa attempted a wild haymaker - one Jack ducked under as he surged forward and threw one arm between her legs whilst the other wrapped around her right shoulder. With a roar born of anger, frustration and exertion - the claws of fatigue were well on their way to dominating his limbs - he bodily picked her up and allowed her weight to pull him down, slamming her into the liquid earth, her cry of pain and anger drowned by the battering of the rain.

"That's two to Jack," Hiccup called out. "Match point next."

Anna barely heard him. She watched with deep anxiety etched upon her face as Jack clambered to his feet, his arms clearly lead-heavy, and saw his chest rise and fall like waves as the unstoppable rainfall soaked him to his bone, his soil-covered face to the sky.

Elsa was barely moving, coughs wracking her body as the rain beat down on her.

"Come on, Elsa," she murmured to herself. "Get up."

It was hard enough watching her best friend and her sister fight, despite her assurance to the contrary. Jack would never purposely lose, but he'd never fought that hard when she sparred with him.

Tearing her eyes away, she glanced over at Elsa's friends - people who all wore the same expressions of fear and worry.

"It's like the old phrase," Kozmotis said, appearing behind her and resting a hand on her shoulder - instinctively, her right hand went up to rest upon his, "you don't know how badly someone wants something… until you're the one standing in their way."
A groan from the ground could be heard, loud enough over the rainfall. Breathless, Jack looked down at his fallen opponent, taking in every inch of her form as she struggled to turn over.

There was a part of him that was angry with himself. It wasn't because of the two point lead; as far as he was concerned, if Elsa really possessed enough conviction in her claims, she would have at least scored a point. Sure, she was skilled at combat and had proven so on many an occasion, but there was more than just martial prowess to the fight, and so his two victories were more than fair.

No, he was angry at the pleasure he took from seeing his once-hated enemy, groaning and fallen, caked in mud and defeat. The punches, the kicks, the grapples, the two times he had dropped her like a sack of fuel cells… they all felt good.

It was like the triumph of good over evil, freedom over oppression - but Elsa was no longer his enemy, the source of fear and distrust. So why did it feel like he was back on the Star, engaged in a life-or-death battle for the safety of his kind?

The rain continued its ceaseless barrage, the splashing drops in the mud reminding him too much of the storms that would cover the Atlantic.

Maybe he was never truly over the destruction of his home, and the loss of his friends, his surrogate family. Emotions he thought he had made peace with, like grief and rage poured through him, and the woman pushing herself to her feet was not the betrayed Elsa Snowfield but the cold, vicious Snow Queen, scourge of his kind and ever-present threat. Maybe, having been stymied by the peace he made with Elsa in his bedroom all those days ago, those emotions were pushed aside and, yearning to be felt, validated and made real, made themselves known once again in the only way they could.

Revenge.

Maybe he needed the fight as much as she did.

Elsa clambered to her feet and turned to face him - she was a sorry sight. Her admittedly beautiful looks were covered in earth, matting into the hair plastered to her head. Her entire body rose and fell with each breath - she looked tired as she stared at him, uncertainty and resignation in her eyes. She was losing, and close to accepting it.

No. That would not do. She would not give up, not on his watch.

He looked to Anna, and hoped the apology in his eyes would mitigate the damage coming.

"You know," he called, turning back to face Elsa, "I think I figured it all out."

Elsa said nothing, staring at him instead.

"Most of us, your friends included… we wake up in the morning and ask ourselves, 'just what am I gonna put up with today?'"
He slowly circled around her.

"So we pick up our weapons, and we fight. We take no shit... but you?" He shook his head, a bitter smile curling his lips as he chuckled without mirth. "You took it. You laid down and took it all. You didn't even fight. You just accepted what they were doing to you, and asked if you could have more. All of this happened because you let it happen!"

He stood in front of her, squaring off like a predator establishing territory. Their noses were inches apart. "Where is your anger, Elsa?!" he roared, spreading his arms wide. "Where is your passion?! You perpetuated the same oppression we fight against in your own damn house! You let them make you their guinea pig!"

Something ignited behind her eyes, a flash of indignation in her blues. "You know nothing about my parents," she growled.

"Oh, I do," he snarled back. "I know the stuff they created to shut people like us down was perfected by testing it on you! When one of us feels the serum take away who we are, making us helpless and scared, it's because you let them pump it into you!"

He could almost feel her fists clench. "Back. Off."

"I also know you had a Uni-Com in your room. I know that all it could have taken was one call to your sister to let her know what had happened, so she didn't spend six years thinking it was her fault she lost you, but you never made that call! Know why?"

Elsa was silent, much like a volcano in the moments before its fiery lava screams to the sky. She was almost there... just one little push.

"Because you never loved her!"

He could almost hear the way she snapped, feel the eruption of lava blasting into the sky. Elsa's eyes went wide, and with a shriek of pure rage she launched herself at him, fists flying at terrifying speed. Jack barely had time to react before the first blows were upon him, and his satisfaction at finally getting her to feel was fleeting when he realised just how hard she was hitting. He had only just blocked a left-right combo destined for his head before her left fist slammed into his gut with the force of a missile, causing a wheeze of pain as he staggered back, searing heat blossoming through his abdomen.

He looked up and managed a smirk just as Elsa marched toward him, spitting fury etched upon her face. He threw up his arms to block his head just in time for the fists to rain down upon it over and over, hard enough to jar his body yet fast enough to prevent him from countering. Every punch forced him to step back, and every retreat was her advance.

Elsa pulled in a punch before flawlessly slamming her shoulder into his chest, and aiming a side kick into the same spot - Jack wasn't sure, what with his adrenaline-addled mind screaming alerts of pain, but he could swear he felt something crack.

Elsa gave him no reprieve. As he pushed through the pain and swung for her cheek, she fluidly whirled past the strike so her back was to him, aimed an elbow to his face to daze him, grabbed his outstretched arm and finished by using her momentum to pull him over her shoulder and into the ground.

For once, it was Jack that felt the squelchy bite of the mud in his back.
"Point to Elsa. Two to one."

Hiccup's announcement was met with hisses of 'yes!' from two of the ex-Valkyries, yet Rapunzel regarded the scene with a concerned eye. Kozmotis chuckled to himself as he watched Jack attempt to rise to his feet, only for Elsa to yank him up by his shirt and throw a punch at his head. Probably a medic thing.

"Maybe we should stop this," the brunette called in a voice of uncertainty.

Astrid sounded bemused. "You kidding? Right when Elsa's finally fighting?"

Kozmotis winced as Elsa blocked a hard snap kick with her forearm - surely her bone fractured with that impact. Maybe her adrenaline and rage was numbing the pain.

"No. They need this," he said.

Rapunzel gaped at him and threw a hand to the battle, where all finesse and skill had been abandoned in favour of rage and brutality. "She'll kill him!"

"No she won't," Kozmotis answered simply, glancing at her. "He won't let her. When the fight ends... you'll know."

He looked back just as Jack was the victim of a swift sweep kick that sent him flat on his back, earning Snow Queen another point.

Everything, every hope and dream depended on the next round.

Jack's body felt like lead.

No, that wasn't strictly true. His body felt like a lead shell, where everything inside him had been emptied out and filled with sharp rocks of pain. His muscles burned like a forest fire, his bones ached with countless impacts and stiffness. Every breath sent a sharp pain throughout his ribs. Even the act of clambering to his feet felt like trial worthy of Hercules, when all his body wanted to do was to drop him down into the mud and keep him there for the next two days.

But he couldn't. There was still another round to fight. The deciding round.

Dragging his eyes up to meet Elsa, it was clear she wasn't faring much better. The rage and fury that had propelled her blistering assault had seemingly ebbed; her arms hung loosely from drooping shoulders, one hand protectively covering her left forearm, and the simple act of breathing was visibly tiring. She looked as bad as he felt.

One more round.

He could do that.

Swaying slightly as he drew himself to his full height, he put up his fists and slowly bobbed from foot to foot. Elsa straightened upright in response, pulling her injured arm back and holding her good arm defensively across her. He stepped forward. She did the same. He swung for her head, putting
his body weight behind the punch - though she blocked it, either her weakness or his strength caused the arm to falter and the fist to connect with her nose.

His arm swinging wide at the follow-through, leaving him wide open, she thrust her injured hand into his cheek. The coppery taste of blood filled his mouth, and there were a few moments as he staggered sideways and collapsed to his knees that he wondered if she hadn't loosened one of his teeth. He looked up, breathing heavily with fatigue; she was doubled over, her hands on her knees, chest rising and falling with every lungful of air she sucked in.

One last strike. He had just enough in him for one last strike. Fight to the end, Mulan always said. Everything you are, fight.

He struggled to his feet, one hand protecting his chest. With sluggish legs, he backed away from the beleaguered woman, every step feeling like a mountain climb. She mirrored him perfectly, though with a limp to her left leg, hobbling away one step at a time. Curiously, her face hadn't changed an inch - not that it was easy to tell, her expression was hidden behind an inch of natural camouflage paint. Maybe she knew his intent, and was ready to do the same.

Reaching the fence behind him, Jack drew one leg back, his eyes fixed upon the distant woman ahead. One last strike.

He tensed his legs, forcing his mind to ignore the pain in his ribs. It wouldn't matter in the end. One last strike.

With a deep breath, he launched into a sprint - far slower than his top speed, but enough for a charge. In his blurring vision, where shapes moved and warped under the rain pounding down, he could see Elsa surge forward too. Feet slammed into muddy earth, water splashed against skin, pain pulsed with every breath. His roar mixed with her shriek as he drew his fist back just as Elsa did, and he leaped into the air at the same time as her. He poured all his energy, his anger and his power he could muster into his fist, driving it relentlessly into Elsa's face - just as he glimpsed reddened knuckles rushing toward his nose.

The instant his fist connected with her head, and hers with his, an invisible force slammed into his body and catapulted him backwards through the air. His insides feeling like they were escaping through his chest, the wind ripped from his lungs, Jack slammed down into the earth and slid backwards a few feet, panting as he stared up at the sky. He was vaguely aware of worried voices as they came closer, and as the rain splashed against his upturned face, and as his heavy limbs melted into the mud, his vision dimmed with each blink until, finally, there was nothing but darkness.

"Help me get his shirt off."

"Fuck, he looks like he's been fighting a tank…"

"Wait, what if he catches a cold?"

"...stop looking at me like that, Pitch, it's… okay. I get it."
Stirred by the sound of several voices all melting into one, and the sensations of fingers probing into every single damn place that was a beacon of hurt, Jack snapped awake. His hands lashed out like angry vipers, gripping the wrists of whoever was touching him - though they did not struggle against his grasp.

It took him a few dazed blinks that wiped away the haze of unconsciousness to recognise the slick brunette bob and green eyes belonging to the woman kneeling over him, gazing with the reassurance only a medic could provide.

"Easy there, big guy. It's me. Same side, remember?"

"Oh." Jack's head flopped back down into something soft and squelchy. His hands released her wrists, and one went up to wipe the rainwater from his face. "Hey."

"Hey yourself. You scared us." Strange how her voice seemed like the best thing ever at that point, like all the tension in his body simply melted away.

"Yeah," he murmured distantly.

"Mhm." Rapunzel's expression suddenly went stern. "You're done."

Jack looked at her, eyes widening. He still had a fight to do, right? He couldn't just lay down on the job! "No, no I can still—"

It was when he instinctively tried to get up that a shock of pure agony burst throughout his chest from somewhere in his left ribcage, causing him to yelp out loud and drop right back to the ground, cradling his chest like it was precious.

"Okay. I'm done… I'm done."

"You deserved that for ignoring me." Rapunzel gestured toward him, looking off to another figure he couldn't quite see. "Help him back to the house - I can't work my magic out here."

Jack felt a strong hand leash itself around his right arm a second before he was bodily yanked to his feet, and judging by how his arm was moved to rest on shoulders as high as his head, Kozmotis was the one helping him up. "You're really tall, you know that?" he said, words slurring into each other a little.

Kozmotis' response was a simple grunt as they walked toward the house.

The two slowly walked in silence behind Rapunzel and Hiccup, with Jack protecting the beacon of 'ow' in his shirtless chest - but when he remembered that it was Rapunzel checking him over and not Anna, he realised precisely why he was being checked over in the first place. "How's Elsa?"

A grey hand vaguely gestured across his vision to his left. "See for yourself."

Jack's head followed his direction. Covered in mud, escorted from behind by Merida and Astrid and helped along by Anna, Elsa limped heavily back to the house, her left arm across her sister's shoulders. Though he tried to catch her eye, Elsa avoided his gaze, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the ground. Anna, however, shot him a withering glare that could incinerate a forest.

"So who won?" he asked as the group of women pulled ahead.

"It was a draw." Kozmotis sounded almost disappointed, yet there was a edge to his voice that struck Jack as almost fascinated. "The moment you two hit each other, there was a flash of light that froze
the rain around you."

"Flash of light?" Jack murmured.

"I don't know. Possibly due to your shared gifts, or the connection Anna believes you share. Whatever it was, when the blast passed, we found you twenty feet away from each other, both on your back, unconscious. Hiccup called it a tie."

"Coolest thing ever," came Hiccup's voice from behind him. Rapunzel must have shot him a look, as the next thing he said was with a voice of wincing awkwardness. "Scary, but cool."

As much as Jack would have liked to believe him, the only things on his mind were a good long sleep, and a prayer that Anna wouldn't hate him too much.

Having experienced Rapunzel's gift for himself, Jack was fast becoming of the opinion that she would be important, if not critical, to the team's survival chances.

Elsa got first dibs, as expected, but when Rapunzel finally got around to tending to his injuries, what had followed was the most peculiar experience of his life. Sat in Elsa's dimly lit bedroom, Jack spent the next twenty minutes feeling his bones re-knitting themselves, his skin sewing itself back together and the searing pain across his entire damn body lessen in intensity, all under the golden glow of Rapunzel's as she set about her task. Her powers turned a three month recovery period into less than half an hour, and if she could do that, what else could she do?

It did bear a warning, however, to not become reliant on her powers. To not become complacent in battle, and wade carelessly into a firefight believing in one's invincibility simply because their teammate could bring them back from the brink. He'd have to talk with her about her feelings on what she could bring, and whether she felt she needed to play triage with her gifts. Anna's medkit for little boo-boos, Rapunzel's powers for missing limbs.

Of course, that was the only talking going on at that point. Aside from Rapunzel grumbling irritably at herself at "hot-headed fools" and their inability to "solve their problems without violence", the air in the room was particularly cold and silent. Elsa didn't even look at him much less utter a word, and were it not for Rapunzel's decree they had to sit next to each other so she could pass from one to the other without traversing an entire room, Elsa would likely be at the other end of the house.

He could have also done without the filthy look Anna gave him as they passed each other, having been asked to leave by their resident healer. On the other hand, Astrid's remark that Elsa, "did almost as much damage to him as I did when we slept together" was heartily amusing.

Even if he disagreed.

"And… done." Rapunzel stood up, and gave them both an unimpressed look. "Broken fourth and fifth rib, fractured tibia, fractured metacarpals, dislodged molars, several contusions, several lacerations, fractured temporal and nasal bones, fractured jaws and… a stubbed toe. All healed."

Jack gave her a blank look. "Am I supposed to know where all those are?"

"Nope." Rapunzel shook her head. "I just wanted you to know how much of a pain in the ass it was to heal you both." One hand went to her hips, and the other gestured half-heartedly as she talked. "I can heal the injuries, and even repair the nerves, but you're still gonna feel the pain for a few days."
"And the bruises? Can't have anything compromise my dashing looks," Jack joked - but Rapunzel seemed less-than-entertained by the humour.

"Oh, they're staying. I could heal them, but I'm not going to. Call them a reminder of what happens when a pair of idiots use fists rather than words."

"Thank you," Elsa murmured.

"No problem." Her finger pointed disapprovingly at them. "But you two need to find a better way to work off your sexual tension."

Jack's eyes went wide, and he exchanged a mortified look with Elsa before throwing Rapunzel a bemused gape.

"Uh, we don't—"

"We're not—"

Rapunzel's lips thinned, going well with the skeptical brow that nearly touched her hair. "Uh-huh. I'm gonna go tell the team you're gonna be okay. Try talking. I hear it works wonders."

Without another word, Rapunzel turned and swiftly left the room, closing the door behind her. The click, albeit ordinarily a quiet sound, cracked through the silent room like thunder. Nary a word was said, both seemingly content to dwell in a tense cloud of unsaid words and uncertainty of what to say - for Jack, at least. Elsa could still be majorly pissed with him for all he knew.

Minutes passed in the uncomfortable quiet, with Jack feigning interest in every object in the room, until, finally, he tired of the tension and got up to leave, moving toward the door.

"You're wrong, you know."

Mildly startled by the way her voice cut through the silence, despite the soft distance with which she spoke, he drew his hand away from the door handle and turned to face her. She was looking down at her wringing hands, elbows resting on muddy knees. She looked far removed from the tall, proud, uncompromising Snow Queen or the softly spoken, witty yet reserved Elsa. She looked… broken.

"I am?"

She looked up at him.

"Yes. I love my sister. I love her more than anything. I would do anything for her, and shutting her out was the hardest thing that ever happened to me… but it was to protect her."

Jack nodded - though his heart twinged with memories drawn out by the love of one's sibling. He would do anything for Emma. If she was still alive. "I know," he said. "I always knew. Hell, you ran away when you were blooming because you didn't want to hurt anyone."

Her brows furrowed, and a look of uncomprehending anger crossed her face. "Then why did you say the things you said?"

She got up and advanced toward him, hands balling into fists at her side, her volume rising. "Was it to make me hurt? Well, congratulations, because I—"

"Because you are a person, okay?!"

Jack didn't realise he'd snapped until he saw Elsa freeze in step and stare blankly at him.
"You're not some political puppet to be thrown away when you're no longer useful, or some animal who needs to be locked away and sedated 'cause she \textit{might} hurt someone! You're a living, breathing person with thoughts, dreams, hopes, memories and \textit{feelings}, a person who was wronged and who kept being wronged and—"

Jack didn't realise how his own voice had been steadily rising since the snap until he cut himself short, sensing he wasn't just showing his hand, but throwing his cards all over the damn table. He roughly rubbed a loose fist across his lips, waiting for the anger to subside before daring to speak again.

There came a sound he did not anticipate, one that sounded completely incongruent to the antagonism beforehand and the rising temper in that moment: a soft giggle. He looked up at Elsa with surprised eyes - she looked right back at him with an amused gaze, a wry half-smile and... was that a blush?

"What?" he said, completely missing the point, it seemed.

"It's very sweet of you."

His slow-on-the-uptake-ness continued. "What is?"

"You... caring about me, it's..." she trailed off as her hands went behind her back. "It feels like a while since anyone was sweet enough to get angry on my behalf."

Jack spread his arms wide, more out of frustration than antagonism. "Why not \textit{you}? How are you not angry about what happened, what \textit{kept} happening to you? I mean... I know I said there's no changing the past, but... you should be \textit{furious}."

"I don't know. I didn't let it happen, if you still think that." She looked away, and a frown crossed her face as her eyes went to a distant place in time. "Maybe, deep down, I am. Otherwise I would not have reacted the way I did. Maybe there are a few things I have not confronted yet, buried deep down. Maybe... I need to make it real."

Jack scratched at the back of his head, and sighed. "Maybe. I just know that sometimes, to make any progress, you have to piss someone off... and there's no-one better at pissing someone off than me."

Elsa laughed, a sweet laugh that instantly seemed to lift his spirits at the same time as cut through the heaviness in the room. "Now that I can believe."

Jack looked at her, a smile curling at his lips. For a few moments, the only two occupants of the room simply gazed at each other, silent, whether content not to speak or unsure of what to say. There was a lot to be explained, however - so Jack gestured to the bed before parking himself on the edge, Elsa taking place beside him. He leaned over with his elbows on his knees, fingers playing with each other while he worked out precisely how to tell her he'd been lying outside.

"Look... I don't know your parents that well, but I know enough from Anna to understand they loved you both very much. I don't think they used you as a guinea pig... I think they did what they did because... they didn't know what else to do. With Unity breathing down their necks, drugging you up was probably the only choice they had, and, 'cause it worked... they just stuck with it."

"Then why did you—"

"Because six years of thinking you're a monster, that you're somehow less than human doesn't go away overnight, Elsa. Every time that door was locked, every time you took that serum, you were reinforcing this idea that you were somehow wrong."
He glanced up at her, and she watched him with an unblinking, rapt gaze.

"When the only person wrong is everyone else. I said what I said because, aside from love, the only emotion stronger than fear is anger. I needed you to have some damn confidence, some pride in yourself for once in your life by saying things we both knew weren't true."

"So you didn't mean…"

"Hell no. Look, Elsa-"

His right hand turned upward, and a four inch wide snowflake materialised above his palm. Curved and elegant, with heart-shapes and gentle filigree filling the spaces between the arms, it hovered lazily in the air.

"It's beautiful…" she murmured, entranced by the shimmering quality of the snowflake.

"It's you."

Elsa's eyes widened as they snapped up to him, shock that he would say such a thing radiating from her expression.

"Me?"

"Yeah. Before you went away. This represents everything Anna told me about you… and this?"

His left hand turned up, and another snowflake materialised above his palm. Unlike the one on his right, it was sharp and angular. There were no smooth curves nor elegant filigree adorning its shape, but rigid lines and vicious-looking points. It reminded him very much of the shuriken weapons he saw in Mulan's collection.

"This is you as a Valkyrie. Snow Queen. Methodical, dangerous, focused, determined. Vengeful. Ruthless. Everything this one-" he jigged the smoother one up and down, "-is not."

Elsa's gaze seemed to falter; she winced as she clearly tried not to look away.

"I reckon, since our teams linked up, you've been trying to go back to being this Elsa."

He jigged the smoother one.

"But you can't. You've seen too much, experienced too much. You've been around war and violence, hate and fear. You've looked death in the eye. That kind of thing changes you - trust me, I've been fighting since I was sixteen."

He jigged the jagged, brutal-looking snowflake.

"Thing is, you don't want to be this one again. So much has happened. You've done things you find horrifying now. You can remember the rage, the hate, the need to kill me."

"I don't want to walk that path again…" she murmured. "Snow Queen… is a name that means death."

"So change it."

She looked up at him. "The name?"

Jack shook his head. "No, the meaning. You can change a callsign all you want, but it's the person
behind it that defines the name. Make the name Snow Queen mean something else."

"How?"

"Well, that's up to you, but you wanna know what I think?"

He lifted his hands a couple of inches into the air, and pressed them together, sandwiching the snowflakes in between. When he drew them apart, what existed, hovering above his right palm was a snowflake not like the ones that came before it. The six points were still triangular, straight and sharp in nature, but smooth curved lines and detailed filigree filled the space between. An amalgamation of the two.

"I think this is the person you could be. Intelligent, witty, loving, kind… but if you fuck with her friends or anyone she loves? She will use her respectable skillset to end you." He twitched the hand toward her as a silent offering, one she accepted when a dainty yet strong hand carefully plucked the snowflake from its resting place.

"You make it sound so easy," she murmured, turning it over in her hand as she gazed down upon it.

Jack’s shoulders rose and fell, though the simple act felt like he was lifting weights."How easy or hard it is, is up to you. Just… give yourself a chance to grow, okay? Training begins when you are ready. Not before."

She looked up at him, dumbfounded confusion written on her face. "What? But… we tied? You said —"

"Win or lose, I wanted to see you fight - and you've more than proven how far you'll go for your friends. That was what I was looking for, and… uh…” he pointed at the spot where two ribs used to be broken, "what I got."

Elsa winced, and a guilty look crossed her face as she looked away. "I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be." Jack chuckled, waving it off. "I started the fight knowing full well what could happen. We were just two consenting adults beating the crap out of each other."

Elsa said nothing. She drew a strand of mud caked hair behind her left ear and wore a small, awkward smile as she glanced at and away from him several times. Sensing another silence on its descent, Jack pushed himself to his feet.

"Listen, I'm gonna go. I need to do some damage control with Anna, and then take a long, long hot shower."

Elsa chuckled breathily. "Hopefully she won't kill you first."

Jack uttered a single bark of laughter as he rose to his feet. "Yeah. I've had enough of a beating for one day." He nodded a sign of respect in her direction, and before moving off toward the door, said, "See you in the morning."

"See you… and before she kills you, could you send her in? We have a lot to discuss… I think it's high time I told her the truth."

Jack nodded, and only managed a few steps when she quietly called his name, and the moment he turned around, he felt a pair of arms wrap themselves around his chest and a chin rest itself on his shoulder. It took him a few moments to realise… she was hugging him. Probably the first person her bare hands had touched - so it felt only right he return the embrace.
Strange how it felt so good when she squeezed him a little.

Of course, it took about that much time for the pain in his ribs to rail against the pressure, and with a yelp, he pulled back and covered the spot with his hand, much the same time as she hissed a breath and cradled her forearm.

"Yeesh, she wasn't kidding about the pain part," Jack wheezed, with a heavy wince.

Elsa nodded in discomforted agreement. "Indeed. Sorry about… about…"

"About what?"

"Um…” was all she could manage.

It took Jack a few moments to notice how her eyes had widened a little, and her cheeks had flushed a deep red. He followed her gaze just as she averted hers, and realised - he'd been shirtless since they walked into the house. She'd seen almost everything.

"Some advice - you may… want to, uhm, cover up before you talk to my sister," she said rapidly.

In the hope of fending off the awkwardness, Jack joked, "Eh, that's alright. We've seen each other naked."

"Yes… well…” her head whirled toward him, eyes wide with shock. "Wait… what?!"

Jack took the opportunity to disappear before Elsa was the one that killed him.
"Resistances Are Forged By Hope"

"So, I'm guessing there's one or two of you that are curious about where we're going, right?"

Jack looked around the dining table, upon which a worn map of North America, torn in several places, was held down by empty magazine clips, and surrounded by the four Ghost hopefuls. Those same four raised their hands.

Kozmotis leaned on the kitchen counter, occasionally casting glances out of the window, away from the proceedings. His opinions were clear.

Hiccup stood not far behind Astrid, whilst Anna sat at Jack's right - the latter leaning on the table with splayed fingers.

The air in the room was thick with expectant curiosity; after all, every time a group meeting had been held by Jack, something big had happened. He was starting to think he should just drop the meetings altogether, in case a meteor suddenly and inexplicably slammed into their safehouse.

"Well, my team and I discussed it, and apart from one of us against-"

Four pairs of eyes simultaneously glanced at Kozmotis.

"-we figured it's time we let you in on the plan."

"Hold up," Astrid raised a hand, "you're actually trusting us with this?"

"The way we figure it, if Unity ambushes us or flattens the place before we get there, we know one of you is responsible," Anna said.

"Which means one of you will disappear."

Jack gave Kozmotis a snarky look over his shoulder - or rather, the back of Kozmotis' head. "Yes, thank you, Mr. Tall, Dark and Threatening."

"Just stating a fact."

Jack rolled his eyes with a disapproving grunt. Kozmotis had made his point clear on many an occasion, so at that point he was just beating a dead hover-car. Not to mention that his intimidation tactics were proving less and less effective; the faces of the four women wore variations of the expression of '...seriously?'

"Moving on," Jack continued, "I think we can all agree that the longer we stay in Unity territory, the quicker our luck runs out. Now, as luck would have it, the very first Ghosts set up a training camp somewhere in Canada. Only problem is, we didn't know where to look - until now. Anna?"

He turned his head to give the strawberry blonde a quick nod, which she returned with an excited smile and a cheeky salute before addressing the group. "While Elsa was going through her bloom, I distracted myself by doing another inventory - turns out the box of masks had a false bottom. Under that was a small sheet of paper with coordinates written on it."

"Coordinates," Jack continued, "that lead us right-"
His right index finger tapped on a red X marked in the mid-northern part of a state labelled Manitoba, where rivers and lakes meandered through the land like veins in the skin.

"-here. That's where we're going."

"Whoa, whoa whoa!" Hiccup immediately threw up his hands, eyes wide with fear and incredulity, abruptly enough to attract four surprised gazes from the women sat in front of him. Jack expected this part - Anna already knew of the plan, and Kozmotis was the one who deciphered the coordinates. "That is a terrible, terrible plan!"

Astrid looked between him and Jack, catching his glance. "Why is that terrible? As far as I know, Unity leave Canada pretty much well alone aside from anti-Reaper search-and-destroy incursions."

Hiccup looked even more dumbfounded. "And Unity never told you why?"

"We weren't privy to other military operations that did not involve the Ghosts," Elsa said. "We were told Canada had only pockets of Reaper swarms, and the incursions were to isolate and neutralize those pockets."

Anna gave a nervous, high pitched titter before addressing Jack. "You might as well tell them."

Jack nodded, and tapped his finger several hundred miles south of Manitoba, where another red X had been scrawled. "Okay. This is us, in the northernmost safehouse."

He tapped the X in Manitoba. "This is where we think Camp Bravo is. All of this..." he slowly wiped a hand across the entirety of Canada, "...is Reaper territory. Canada doesn't have pockets of Reapers... Canada is owned by Reapers."

Whatever good cheer, expectant curiosity or confusion vanished in that instant, sucked in by the shocked gasps of the four ex-Valkyries. Elsa and Rapunzel exchanged worried looks, Merida looked at him like he'd grown a second head, and Astrid did not look impressed.

"How do you know?" Rapunzel asked.

Kozmotis answered without looking away from the window. "Several years ago, one of our sources intercepted intelligence regarding Reaper numbers in Canada, and the possibility of launching a full-scale offensive to cleanse it in order to establish settlements for populating the area."

"And?"

"The numbers were unquantifiable, but the phrase that stuck with us was infestation level. As a result, any offensives were deemed pointless, so Unity declared it a no-go area."

"But why tha incursions?" Merida asked. "Why send clone battalions into Canada if they're nae doin' a thing?"

"Mostly for the population's benefit." Jack shrugged. "That way, Unity looks like it's at least doing something. Even if they're making it worse."

"I'm not sure I want to ask," Elsa said.

"When a clone is killed by a Reaper, that clone becomes a Reaper - so when Unity sends these battalions over the border, they're just adding to the numbers. Put it this way-" Jack gestured across Canada once again, "-if the Reapers were ever to get their shit together and attack as one huge swarm, we'd be looking at the fall of Unity in weeks, if not days."
Silence descended in the room, pale faces staring back at him in what could be described as restrained fear. It struck Jack how little the ex-Valkyries knew when it came to military operations - sure, most forces operated in a pseudo-secular state, but they at least had peripheral knowledge of what others were doing, especially to coordinate between each other. Commander Larsen seemed to want to keep the Valkyries on a tight leash - though it made sense. No need to keep his puppets in the loop more than absolutely necessary if you're going to have them killed.

"So let me get this straight," Astrid said, her tempo slow, her words clear and her tone low and almost growling. "You want to take us on a suicidal journey through Reaper territory, all so you can maybe find some place that may or may not still be there?"

"I want us to survive. I want all of us to survive."

"But that's insane, Jack," Rapunzel leaned in, almost pleading him to reconsider, "we'd be going into the heart of the swarm…"

"Because staying here is any safer?" Elsa said, shooting her a look.

"Helluva lot safer than bein' Reaper chow," Merida snarked.

"Colour me surprised Elsa's standing up for Jack," Astrid said.

Elsa's eyebrows shot up with a glare, and she couldn't look any more challenged to Jack than if she put her sassy hands on her hips. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

Astrid didn't back down. "I've seen how you look at him - and don't tell me that fight was just a fight."

Heat pricked at the tips of Jack's ears - was Astrid just baiting Elsa? For a few seconds, his chest tightened in worry… what if the occasional glances he sent her way had been equally obvious?

"You're being ridiculous—or is it jealous?"

"Like hell I'm jealous!"

"Aren't we straying from the topic here?"

Rapunzel's valiant attempt to get the meeting back on track went the way of the futile, as she was drowned out by the bickering between Astrid and the amusingly blushing Elsa. Both women rose from their chairs at the same time to square off, heightened voices arguing between the so-called looks and the suicidal insanity of Jack's plan. Merida, sat between them, wore a face of deep exasperation as she held her forehead in her hand whilst Rapunzel desperately tried to get a word in edgeways in an attempt to bring back the peace. Jack shot a resigned look at Anna, who merely cocked her head and back again as if to say, "Nothing else for it."

He inhaled a deep breath which was let out in a long sigh. Plucking his staff from his bracer and extending it - the click of its extension was drowned out by the near-shouting - he held it aloft and then bangled the end on the floor. The bickering abruptly ceased at the reverberation of metal hitting wood, and all pairs of eyes looked at Jack in surprise.

"Here's how this works," Jack said in a firm, uncompromising voice, his face as hard as his tone, "you wanna get off the Ghost train, this here's your station. You're all soldiers, you can take care of yourselves. Your asylum is officially over. There's a lot of ways to die out here, and I'm not gonna wait around here while Unity chooses ours. I intend to go to the one place Unity's too scared to go to keep my team safe, so either help me out, or get the hell off my team. Choice is yours."
He left the ultimatum hanging in the air like a weighted silence. It was true enough in his mind; the ex-Valkyries had been practising the evasion techniques between them in the suburban streets whenever they had the chance, sharing what they'd learned with each other - though nobody had come up to him and asked whether kissing was truly part of blending in, to his relief. They were skilled warriors, so if they wanted to leave, they could.

Mouths closed, Elsa and Astrid returned to their seats. Jack had his answer.

"Alright," Jack said in a much softer voice, looking at each of the women in turn. "Believe it or not, Unity is more dangerous to us than the Reapers. They're completely blind, so they rely in their hearing. They only ever come out after dark, so as long as we're sheltered and quiet at night, we'll be fine - and the best part? They hate winter."

"How come?" Elsa asked.

"Dunno," Anna shrugged, "probably because they're always butt naked."

"It's not so bad..." Jack found himself muttering. Unfortunately for him, Anna was well-tuned to his murmurs.

"Well, course you'd think—wait-" she twisted around to give him a teasing half-smile, "-how do you know?"

"I'll tell you when you're older," he waved it off, smirking.

"Gotta ask," Astrid held up a hand, "how is it you're so confident we can handle Reapers better than Unity?"

Jack held up a finger. "One, because the people around this table are some of the most badass folks I've ever known, and two-" he held up a second finger, "-I've had the pleasure of being up close and personal with them."

"How close?" Astrid leaned in, curious.

"Nearly as close as you and I were," Jack said, cocking a sassy eyebrow incongruent to his deadpan expression.

Astrid's brow furrowed as her lips pursed together in a long, impressed whistle. "Damn. That close, huh?"

"Mm-hm." Jack involuntarily glanced at Elsa, who was frowning something fierce. "Point is, we've got a long road ahead of us, and we don't know what it's gonna be like when we get there. We're gonna need supplies, so someone's gonna have to drive down to Perdition and use the last of our credits to stock up on food. Hell, steal it if we need to."

"I'll do it," Merida declared instantly, holding up her hand.

Jack looked at her, cocking an eyebrow. "You didn't even hesitate - and are you sure? You did kinda start a bar fight."

Merida shrugged like it was no big thing. "Food needs getting. I can do that. What's ta hesitate about?"

Temporarily bereft of a reply for Merida's blunt declaration, Jack cast a sidelong glance at Anna, who shrugged much like Merida did. "Alright," he said, spreading his hands, "that was, like, the
easiest thing ever. You're not going alone, though."

"I'll accompany her."

The mild surprise at Merida's announcement morphed into utter disbelief. Turning, Jack shot an incredulous look at Kozmotis - or rather, the back of his head. Behind him, Merida uttered a loud huff, not even bothering to conceal it, whilst Rapunzel muttered under her breath, "Did he just…?"

"Dude…" Jack began, but found himself unable to articulate anything more complex than, "...what?"

Kozmotis' head slowly swiveled like an owl. Golden eyes locked onto him with an expression more blank than Jack's mind in the morning. "Problem?"

"Yeah. You volunteered. Again."

Kozmotis muttered a 'hm', and stared at him for a moment longer before returning his distant attention to the window. He was usually disconnected and taciturn at the best of times, but seemed to Jack to be unnaturally guarded.

"Merida accurately conveys my thoughts on the matter," he finally said.

Jack threw Merida a glance over his shoulder, who looked like someone had told her she had detention and extra homework. Obviously Kozmotis hadn't apologised for upsetting her a few days ago - he just hoped the two of them would set aside their differences and put the job first.

"Alright," he sighed, placing his right thumb on his temple whilst rubbing between his eyebrows with two fingers, "you leave soon, you should be back before we leave. Check in every three hours, and holler if there's an emergency. Class dismissed."

Carrying a duffel bag over her right shoulder containing her black Valkyrie fatigues, wearing clothes she'd swapped with Rapunzel - the brunette figured wearing the same outfit she wore to start a fight would attract attention of the law - and sporting one hell of a sullen frown, Merida pulled open the front door of the safe house and strode out.

If she was quick enough, she could get to the jeep and drive off without him. Stupid ass, thinking he could say what he wanted with no repercussions. She went out of her way to make friends, and for what? So he could be all 'everything dies' right when she most needed support?

And then suddenly volunteer to be her partner on a risky mission?

Who did he think he was?

"I suppose you think you're being terribly clever."

Merida jumped at the sound of Pitch's voice behind her, and whirled around to fix him with an incensed glare, thumping heart filled with hot irritation he'd managed to actually startle her. Her right hand clenched hard around the strap of the duffel bag.

"Hell do ye want, Pitch?"

The tall, slender man unfurled his arms from across his chest, and pushed off the wall by the front door with his upper back. He regarded her with an impassive face, but his golden eyes flashed
"To know why you are attempting to leave without me." His hands went behind his back in a semi-stand easy posture. "You know you are not supposed to go alone."

Merida clenched her jaw behind closed lips, and hissed, "Watch me," before turning her back on him and striding down the path to the jeep parked in the street.

"I know the real reason you volunteered," he called after her.

Before she could stop herself, Merida snapped. Hot anger billowed through her chest like a forest fire. The duffel bag hit the paving stones, and she whirled around and stormed toward him. Her hands lashed up to grip the material of his black T-shirt, and she pushed him hard against the wall.

"Ye know nothin', laddie," she snarled.

Pitch didn't react. He wasn't perturbed, irritated, or even angered in the slightest. No murderous rage or violent counterattack. The man with the reputation for being the most ruthless, bloody, vicious of the Ghosts, and there she was, pinning him against the wall.

She'd be lying if a faint rush of anxiety hadn't tensed her body in preparation for a pair of fist-blades through her ribs, but most of her was just too frustrated to care.

"You're right," he said.

Merida felt her anger ebb a little, and her brows un-knitted themselves. "Ye what?"

"I said: you're right."

Her fists tightened, and the scowl returned with a vengeance. He was messing with her. He had to be. No-one was that honest. No man would say that in truth.

"Ye'd better not be messin' with me."

"I'm not." Still, he did not move, allowing her to pin him against the wall. "I don't know what it's like to have a family that loves you, or to love them back. I don't know what it's like to love - but I do know what it's like to care, and to miss someone and think you'll never see them again."

Merida's breath caught in her throat and hovered there, absorbing the anxiety, anger and frustration, before taking the emotions out with it in a long breath through her nose. Her scowl slowly relaxed into a frown - the irritation was still there. "Who?" she asked softly.

"His name is Hiro. He's fourteen. Arrogant, precocious, stubborn, but a technical genius with a kind heart. I vowed to protect him, and I did by sending him away - but I still miss him."

"Ye'd better not be messin' with me."

"Because the nature of what we do means we need to face the reality we may never see those we care about again."

"And ye think I dinnae know that? D'ye seriously think that when Harvester looked like he was gonna fuckin' slice me in two with a door, that I wasnae thinking I was gonna die in the middle of the fucking ocean and nae see ma brothers again? Don't patronise me, Pitch, I'm not some naive lass who doesnae know tha risks."
"No, but you have hope."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"Yes."

Merida let out a sharp breath through her mouth. She looked off to the side in incredulity, before shaking her head and turning away. Great. Not only was she pissed off and exasperated, but depressed, too.

"Then again - resistances are forged by hope."

She turned her head slightly - not enough to see, but to let him know she was listening. "What?"

"You have hope you'll see your family again, but you're aware of the possibility you won't. Volunteering to travel to Perdition means you'll have the chance to talk to them again, even if it is the last chance - and you'll risk everything to take it."

Merida tried her best to hide the shaky breath that escaped her lips. One hand enclosed into a fist over her heart whilst the other wrapped around her abdomen. All she had thought about since learning of her lifespan was time, how it was an enemy she could not defeat. It would march on without her consent, taking with it all she loved until they became lost. Perdition was a place of suffering and fear, oppression and suspicion… but also hope, and time.

Time that sauntered for her yet marched for her family, and all it could take to freeze a moment forever would be a single call.

But with Pitch being an infernally perceptive bastard, her moment felt like it was slipping through her fingers.

She spoke softly, in a voice of dread and worry. "Are ye gonna tell Jack?"

"No."

Merida turned to face him upon hearing the one answer she hoped but never expected to hear, her mouth parted and eyes radiating surprise. "What?"

"I'm not going to tell him anything."

She was stunned, her brain vacating itself from her skull. "Why not?"

Pitch folded his arms. "Because it's nothing to do with him."

Merida blinked. "But… what about what ye said in tha meetin'? Something like this, aren't ye duty bound ta tell him about anythin' that might put tha group at risk?"

Pitch, though his face was as impassive as it had been since the moment he surprised her, conveyed his clear indifference with a small shrug. "Provided you have taken on board all you've been taught, there should be little risk - but if he finds out and I am subsequently asked, I will be honest with him. However - have you thought about how you'll call without alerting any tracking algorithms Unity may have?"

Merida's eyes fell - he kind of had her there. All she knew was that she wanted to talk to her family - she just hadn't thought about how. In that moment, legions of clone troopers descending upon her and her friends filled her mind's eye, twisting her gut and clenching her heart with guilt. Those not
already dead, being led away in chains… and the faces of her battle sisters, their eyes asking the same question: why?

"No," she murmured.

"Then it is fortunate I intercepted you - as I would not be able to help you if you had left."

Her sky blue eyes snapped up to meet his golden ones, and she almost flinched in surprise. "... ye what?"

"We Ghosts have a way of isolating Uni-Com calls from the greater surveillance network. It allows the caller to communicate without snooping programs running facial recognition algorithms in the background. It used to be voice calls only, but Hiro refined the method - as he loved to remind me whenever the opportunity arose," he finished with a restrained groan.

"Ye… wait… you… you're helping me?"

Pitch's eyebrow arched, and his lips set into a thin line. "Shall I repeat myself, or would you prefer it in Gaelic?"

That was it. She had left the meeting and walked into a parallel dimension where Pitch was actually a nice guy. Well, trying to be nice. He still had the social skills and bedside manner of a spiked cactus. So bewildered was she that his acerbic jab merited no retort, as one hand went to her left hip and the other massaged her forehead.

"But… I cannae let ya. I dinnae want ye ta get into trouble fer me-" she gestured wildly at the wall, "-what if Jack finds out?"

"If he does, then it will be better for you if I am involved as well - he will not be suspicious you are betraying the team." He folded his arms. "Which, I hope, is not your intent."

Merida scowled and threw him a hearty glare. "Of course not, laddie. Stupid question," she snapped. As if he could insinuate such a thing. "But… why are ye helping me? What's in it fer ye?"

"Nothing."

"Don't bullshit me, Pitch." She took a step forward. "No-one risks their safety or gettin' heat unless they can get somethin' out of it. What is it ye want? Blackmail?"

Pitch scoffed, and for the first time since they started talking, his impassive expression cracked. He looked insulted. "Please. If I wanted to hurt you, I would be far more direct than that."

"So ye say - but ye're not answerin'-"

"If you must know: I am repaying a debt. I don't like debts. You got me out of Perdition - by helping you contact your family, we're even. In addition-" his hands went behind his back, "-I am poor at saying sorry, so consider it my way of apologising for upsetting you the other day."

Merida recoiled her head back an inch, and a smile tugged at the left corner of her lips. "Well, isn't this a turn up fer tha books," she chuckled. "Pitch Black is actually a nice guy at heart. Who knew, eh?"

The so-called 'nice guy' rolled his eyes with a disdainful grunt, his arms returning to their rightful place across his chest. "If you want me to take it back-"
Merida waved both of her hands, smirking as she chortled louder. "I'll take that as an apology - and I'll take that apology. Be nice ta have company. Thanks."

"Don't mention it." His arms unfurled for a gesture toward the jeep. "Now, shall we go, or would you rather waste more time?"

Oddly unable to wipe the smile from her lips, Merida turned and made for her bag. "Aye - but I'm driving."

"I think not."

She bent down and picked up her bag. "I think so."

"I'm driving."

"Rock-paper-scissors ye for it."

"You'll lose."

"Try me."

Ten minutes from that moment, a sulking Pitch sat in the passenger's seat whilst Merida, grinning like a cheshire cat, enjoyed her spoils of victory.

---

_Time: 02:32_

"Alright," Merida said as she squeezed through the back door of the bar, wondering why the hell Pitch had the door open so narrow, "tha stuff's loaded on tha jeep."

The irony was not lost on her. It was the same bar they'd escaped from all those days ago, but two in the morning meant the bar - and, indeed, the streets - were deserted. Especially with reports of another swarm on its way. For making a sneaky call to her family, it was the ideal environment.

She took a quick look back through the doorway at their hover jeep a dozen yards down the side street, where the back seats and trunk were filled with different sizes of crates carrying all types of food they could get their hands on. Fruit, vegetables, even some meats - however, only a third of it was legitimately purchased. The rest was stolen from various stockhouses attached to the stalls that backed onto the side streets - the knowledge they were stealing from innocent citizens weighed on her mind.

Pitch, however, had no such compunction. He was right when he looked over the purchased goods with a disdainful eye and remarked it wasn't enough to feed eight people and two dragons, and rationalised it that their needs outweighed those who would surely sell them out if they learned what Merida and Pitch were. Still, she could not shake off the discomfort. Life in Perdition looked tough enough without someone stealing food.

"Good," Pitch said as his fingers worked at something on the top left corner of the door. Intrigued, Merida sidestepped further into the room and watched him tie a long string to the head of a bent nail embedded in the wood.

"Whatcha doin?"

Pitch said nothing. He finished tying the string to the nail, before closing the door and looping the
string through a screw hook embedded in the top left of the door frame. Ensuring it was taut, he let the string run through his fingers as he walked to a worn, damaged bookcase resting against the bar's stockroom wall, upon which stood a dozen glass bottles of various types of synthohol. Tugging it a few more times to be certain, he looped the string around the neck of the leftmost bottle on the top shelf.

"Oh! Nice."

"I thought so," Pitch murmured, giving his improvised early warning system the once over.

Merida shot him a look. "Smug, much?"

"Confident." He thumbed behind him toward the main bar. "The Uni-Com has been isolated. It's ready when you are."

Merida's chest tightened, catching her breath. There it was, her moment of truth. Her legs rooted themselves to the spot, her eyes fixed on the taut string, seeing through it. Scenarios filled her mind like a tidal wave, bringing with them emotions she had been compartmentalising up until then. Joy, for seeing her family. Fear… what would they say? Would they be happy to see her, or angry? What would her brothers look like… would they even recognise her? Their elder sister, hardened by war and death?

"We can leave, if you would prefer."

Merida's eyes automatically switched to find his, as he looked down on her with the same neutral expression he'd been wearing since they arrived. For a few brief seconds, she wondered if her mind was tricking her into seeing sympathy in his eyes, or whether he really was trying to reassure her.

The door looked tempting.

But then, she'd never know for sure what her family would say, would she?

"No," she whispered, feeling a semblance of strength and bravery fill her heart. "I'm ready."

Pitch gazed at her for a few moments, before nodding. He led her through the bar door into the main room, where the darkness was oppressive and the lights filtering through the broken blinds created shadows that danced insidious shapes over the furniture. He veered away to the window to the right of the bar entrance, and leaned against the wall peered out into the street through the haphazard blinds.

Merida inhaled a breath that came out far shakier than she anticipated, and turned her attention to the Uni-Com in the far corner, the device's transparent screen bestowing a pleasant, welcoming blue glow around it, radiating hope and reassurance. Heavy feet guided her to it, her hands slick with sweat, her mouth dry, her heart racing a thunderous rhythm.

The words left her mouth before she registered them. "Uni-Com, call Elinor Dunbroch."

"Working..." the device dutifully replied.

Merida threw Pitch a quick look over her shoulder as the Uni-Com attempted to connect. It was odd how striking he looked, his black trenchcoat absorbing the Uni-Com's faint glow while the yellow light from the streetlamps outside fell across his face in slits, giving his golden eyes the uncanny impression of glowing in the dark. A shadowy, dangerous presence that in a strange irony meant death for others but comfort for her.
She hadn't realised she had been staring, until the Uni-Com chimed in, and her head snapped back as her heart leaped into her throat.

"Connection established. Activating holographic interface."

The holographic software must have undergone a recent update in her absence, as rather than a slow construction of lines upon lines, an intangible, blue-hued woman instantaneously blinked into existence.

Merida felt a tear slip over her smiling lips as she gazed upon her mother, Elinor.

"I swear, if it's that New Burgess bar again asking for more-"

Their eyes met, and Elinor's face went slack in recognition. Her hands clamped around her mouth.

"OH MY GOD!"

"Hey, Mam," Merida said, her voice soft and cracking.

"Oh my God! Oh… oh my daughter! Merida!" Tears welled in her mother's eyes. "Is it… is it really you? Please don't be a trick…"

"No tricks, mam. It's me."

Elinor rambled on, her words spilling out like a waterfall of emotion, "...because I don't know what I'll do if it is—they told me you were dead, that you'd done all sorts of things and-"

"Mam, it's nae a trick!" Merida said quickly, throwing her hands up in a calming gesture. "It's not a trick, it's really me!"

Elinor, her hair a classic bird's nest and wearing a long white nightgown, stared in disbelief while her hands hid her mouth. Seconds went by while the two Dunbroch women simply gazed at each other, waiting for the shock to pass.

"Oh, my daughter… my precious, beautiful daughter…"

"Mam…"

Elinor surged forward, her arms outstretched for a hug that Merida instinctively and desperately attempted to receive, only for her image to flicker and distort upon contact with Merida's physical body. Her heart clenched with pain, catching her breath in her throat. Elinor cried out in frustration, backing up a little to let her image reform. "Oh, damn this holo-thingamajig! I just want a wee cuddle!"

"It's okay, Mam. I'm just happy tae see ye. How… how are ye?"

"How am I? How am I?! What about you, lassie? We heard all sorts of—wait, lemme get your father. He's not been the same since… well, he's been in pieces. Hang on."

Elinor turned to something outside of her Uni-Com's field of view. "Fergus! Fergus! Wake up! Och, come on, wake up, you daft lump!"

She picked up what looked like a small cushion and flung it to her side. A small yelp could be heard, followed by an irritated whine of, "What d'ye do that fer?!"

"So you could see who's calling!" Elinor jerked her head toward Merida. "Get over here, there's
someone who wants to see you!"

"Och, who tha bloody hell's callin' at two in tha-

The humongous frame of her father Fergus Dunbroch, with his large nose, wild moustache and kind eyes filled the space beside Elinor. Once his tired gaze rested upon his daughter, his expression turned from sleepy to wide-eyed shock.

"-Oh, my stars! Merida!"

"Hey, Dad," Merida smiled, giving him a wave with one hand as the other wiped away a tear.

"She's alive, Fergus. Our brave daughter is alive."

Fergus’ huge hands went behind his head. "I… I cannae believe it! I thought I'd never see ye again… are ye alright, lass? Where are ye, d'ye need me ya come get ya? Just say tha word and I'm comin' fer ye."

Merida shook her hands, and her head. Though the appeal of being physically able to be there, to reunite with her family was almost impossible to resist, the danger was too great, and she refused to abandon her friends.

"I'm fine, Dad. Ye don't need ta worry about me."

"But I do, lass! They told us ye were killed, that ye'd murdered the Supreme Commander! 'Course, ye mam and I both said ye'd nae do that, but… Merida, let me come get ye. I cannae leave ye alone-

"I'm not alone, Dad. Far from it."

"Yer sure?"

"I'm sure, Dad. I'm…"

She stopped herself just in time. To explain further could be disastrous for all concerned - yet her parents were notoriously stubborn and wouldn't accept vagueness, and if she was honest, she wanted to tell them. She turned to look at Pitch; he'd say one way or the other.

Still gazing out of the window, he gave no indication he was listening… until she saw him give a single nod. A breath of relief escaped her lips.

"...I'm with tha Ghosts."

The intake of breath from both of her parents was loud enough to attract a curious eye from Pitch. Both Fergus and Elinor's eyes went wide, and her mother's hand latched onto her husband's comparatively huge digits.

"Right, I'm going ta wake tha boys," Fergus said, "and then yer gonna tell us everythin', okay?"

Her father disappeared from view, and Elinor quickly declared she would find some chairs for them. Given a moment's respite, Merida looked over her shoulder at a table behind her, and pulled one of the surrounding stools to where she had been stood.

"Uni-Com, reduce volume," she told the device, which then issued its acknowledgement and compliance.
Pitch's voice softly swam from the window. "Are you okay?"

"Ask me later," Merida said quietly as her fingers played with each other.

A few minutes later, two chairs materialised in the bar - "the laddies can sit on the floor," Elinor had stated, and not a moment after that, Fergus returned his bulky frame into view… followed by three identical triplets, six years her junior.

"Hamish, Harris, Hubert," Fergus announced, "guess who's callin'?"

Three pairs of eyes locked onto Merida, followed by three loud gasps which, thanks to Merida lowering the volume in anticipation, were followed by a unified and muted squeal of, "'SIS!'"

"Hey boys! Ye been good fer Mam and Dad?"

"We thought ye were dead!" Hamish breathed.

"We'd been told-"

"Aye, aye, I know. Unity told ye all about how the Valkyries supposedly murdered the Supreme Commander, and we were shot down fer it. Trust me, laddies, I am way too badass ta die."

"And how!" Hubert cheered.

"So, what happened?" Elinor asked, inching forward on her chair. "From the top. Don't leave anything out."

And Merida didn't - well, anything that involved their current location, names of the Ghosts, their objectives and combat readiness was well and truly omitted. She told them all about the past events, from the beginning of the Purge...

"Och, if I ever meet this Harvester-"

"He died, Dad. His wife is one of tha Ghosts."

"...oh."

"Besides, I was tha aggressor. We all were. I started tha fight, he finished it."

...through the events that followed; the investigation into the murder of Elsa's parents and the exoneration of the Ghosts, the finding of the so-called Fairy and the betrayal that followed, the timely arrival of and rescue by the Ghosts, all the way to Elsa's fight with Jack. Her family listened, rapt, as Merida filled them in on nearly all of it, and many a gasp or cheer filled the bar. For a happy, long hour, Merida was home.

"Awesome, my sister's a Ghost! You're, like, a superhero!"

Merida shook her head and waved off Hamish's exclamation. "Not yet, laddie. Still a ways ta go."

Elinor smiled at her sons. "The boys all think the Ghosts are heroes, Merida. To be honest, after what ye told us, I'm not sure I disagree."

"Aye, well," Merida took a long look at Pitch, "they're all good people just tryin' tae survive."

"Merida, why d'ye keep lookin' over there?"
She looked back at Fergus, who had one eye narrowed in suspicion, and thanked her stars her embarrassed blush at being caught didn't pick up on her holo transmission. "I… I what?"

She glanced at Pitch, who by then was watching her with an arched brow and a quick shake of his head. Translation: nope.

"You did it again!" Harris gasped. "Is one of them there?"

"I… well…"

Elinor leaned in, like it was some kind of scandalous secret. "May we see this person?"

Merida looked back at her mother, who regarded her with hope and anticipation. She glanced at Pitch again, who by that point had his face covered by the palm of his hand, peering at her through his fingers. She gave him an awkward half-smile, half-grimace, and shrugged.

"Sorry, laddie - they're nae gonna stop until they see ye."

Pitch's hand fell from his face, revealing one hell of a you-have-to-be-kidding-me expression. Huffing, he said, "Fine," and pushed himself from the wall to quietly walk toward her.

"Mam, Dad, boys, I'd like ye ta meet ma friend-"

Pitch threw her a quizzical look as he pulled up by her side.

"-Pitch Black."

"Hello," Pitch said in a curt, uncertain voice. The greetings he received were far more exuberant, especially from the boys, and there were nothing but smiles sent in his direction. Merida watched his reaction, and noticed a flash of puzzlement - perhaps he was expecting them to recoil in surprise at the colour of his skin and piercing golden eyes, only to receive a warm welcome instead.

"So yer tha one who's been lookin' after ma daughter, then?"

"Dad!"

"With all due respect, Mr. Dunbroch," Pitch replied calmly, "your daughter is perfectly capable of looking after herself."

If it was meant as a jab - Merida was never quite sure with Pitch - it seemed to go over Fergus' head. "That's ma girl!" he boomed proudly.

Poor Pitch was then subjected to a barrage of questions from her brothers, from his age to his powers, how long he'd been fighting and, much to Elinor's vocal dismay, how many clones he'd killed. Yet, despite the anxiety Merida could sense from him, he remained polite and respectful, dodging or answering questions where appropriate.

"You're very tall," Elinor remarked, and Merida wasn't sure she liked the growing smirk.

"Er… thank you," Pitch replied. "Now if you'll excuse me, I must return to keeping watch. Mr and Mrs Dunbroch." He nodded once, and moseyed away from the Uni-Com. Merida didn't blame him for stopping to take a bottle of synthohol from the bar.

Once out of his earshot, Merida glared at her mother. "Mam!" she hissed, "what was that?"

Elinor tried to look the picture of innocence. "What was what?"
Merida rose her eyes to the ceiling and did her best to imitate her mother's voice. "You're very tall - what was that?!"

"Oh, well," Elinor adopted a none-of-my-business look, "I was just remarking on his height, is all."

"Handsome lad, isnae he?" Fergus added.

"Dad!"

Elinor gasped and turned to him, her gossip voice on.

"I know, right? Did you see his cheekbones, and that jawline? Oh - and that beard? Very rugged."

"MAM!"

"Aye, and didja hear how polite 'e was? Mr and Mrs Dunbroch - I like that. Not like that Macintosh fella."

"Charming, wasn't he? English, too! Not often we meet someone from our neck of the woods."

"Oh, God, I am not hearing this."

They were making fun of her. They had to be. All that time away from home, she was overdue some parent-induced embarrassment. That was it.

Elinor gave her a cheeky look - it was about to get worse.

"Have you asked him on a date yet? If you haven't, you really should."

There was a choking sound from the vicinity of the window, and Merida felt her entire face burn with the fire of a thousand suns, the colour indistinguishable from her hair.

"OH MY GOD WILL YOU STOP!" she practically shrieked. "Boys, please, tell me about how yer school's going. Please."

Her brothers were only too happy to oblige, given their visible discomfort at Elinor and Fergus' remarks - though Harris looked mightily amused at his sister being reduced to an embarrassed mess. They spent the next hour regaling her with tales of their mischievous antics, how they barely passed their end of semester finals, and how Hubert had a crush on one of the boys in his class - a revelation that hurt Merida's heart. Unity was colour blind, but their stance on same sex relationships? Forbidden, and punishable by jail. It was yet further fuel for her desire to see Unity fall.

For Fergus and Elinor, life had been very much normal, much to Merida's relief. Unity could easily have revealed her identity and those of the Valkyries when news broke of Henrik's murder, leading to her family - and, indeed, the families of her friends - being shunned by Unity society as a whole. She suspected it was due to the Dunbrochs, Coronas and Hoffersons being fairly important to Unity's infrastructure that, for now, they were spared the humiliation.

And while Merida listened to everything she'd missed, time felt like it had stopped. It was on her side, for once, granting her the chance to walk with her family again.

Unfortunately for Harris, Hubert and Hamish, however, time was not kind. The early hours of the morning were visibly sinking their claws into the young boys, with yawns and the rubbing of eyes betraying their desire to stay up, so Fergus quickly parceled them off to bed - but not without a promise from Merida to see them again.
"Oh, I forgot - your father's been inspired to brew a new synthohol recipe. It's going to be stronger than the Widowmaker."

"Oh, aye?"

"Aye," Fergus chimed in as he materialised at his wife's side. "An' I know what I'm gonna call it."

"What's that, then?"

"Tha Brave Princess."

Merida opened her mouth, but the sudden lump in her throat vetoed any attempts to speak. Her eyes, which had forgotten the feeling of tears since the long talk began, welled up once again - and Fergus' face tensed over and over as he visibly tried to hold his own emotions back. Elinor clucked in sympathy, and enclosed his left hand in both of hers.

"We're so proud of you," she said, her voice soft and cracking. "Standing up for what's right, defending your kind. Your father and I couldn't be more proud of you."

"Mam…"

"Doesnae matter what ye are - we love ye," Fergus added. "Abnormal or no, yer still our wee brave lass."

"Dad-"

There came the sound of glass being smashed from the stockroom, and Merida's heart leaped into her throat. She looked at Pitch, who glanced between her and the entrance to the stockroom via the bar, a concerned frown on his face.

"I'll take care of it," he declared quietly as he passed her, and disappeared into the stockroom.

Seconds passed with her breath frozen in her throat, until she heard a voice cry out in frustration, a muffled thump, and the sound of something falling to the floor in a heap. A few moments after that, the shadows of the doorway parted to allow Pitch to pass.

Merida asked, with her eyes, her silent question. "Is he dead?"

Pitch shook his head. "No, but we are out of time."

Merida felt a sharp pain squeeze at her chest. It was an illusion that time would stop for her. Time stopped for no-one, marching on unfettered by human hope and despair.

Yet… it did grant her the gift she always wanted - time with her family.

She inhaled a deep breath, and forced herself to look into the eyes of her parents. "I have to go now," she whispered.

Elinor's eyes widened, and she shook her head in denial. "No, no, don't go yet! We've barely spent any time together! Please stay!"

"I know, Mam - I want tae stay too. More than anything… but I can't. I'm sorry."

"No! It's nae fair - we only just saw you…"

"I know, Mam," Merida croaked, doing her best to wear a happy smile despite the tears freely sliding
down her cheeks. She stood up from the stool, and took two steps toward her parents. "But I'm gonna make a promise tae ye - we'll see each other again, alright? We'll see each other again, and it'll be in the flesh, right? So ye can have that wee cuddle ye wanted."

Elinor smiled widely in spite of her visible pain and the shimmering lines sliding from her eyes, and a translucent hand reached out to caress Merida's cheek. Her skin registered no contact… but her mind felt the touch.

"Be safe, daughter."

"I will, Mam."

"Fight strong, fight hard, come home safe, a’right?" Fergus added, wrapping an arm around Elinor's shoulders. "We love you so much."

"I will, Dad. I love you too." She kissed the tips of her fingers and held them toward her parents. "Until we meet again… Uni-Com, end call."

The last thing she saw before the holographic images of her parents disappeared into the dark was her mother waving farewell. In the space of a second, darkness ruled the room, broken only by the faint glow of the Uni-Com.

"Delete last call," she whispered, before letting loose a shaky breath, staring at the space her parents once occupied, feeling their absence claw and scratch at her heart. A void filled for a few brief, precious hours, emptied and aching.

"Your family love you very much," Pitch spoke, his voice calm and soft.

"Pitch?" she whispered.

"Yes?"

She gulped down a lead ball in her throat, feeling her hands tremble. "I'm gonna ask ye a very important question, and I need ye tae be honest."

"Of course."

She inhaled a breath - her strength was waning. "Are ye c-capable of physical contact?"

She could almost feel his bemusement. "I tend to avoid it where I can, but I am capable, yes. Why?"

Merida sniffed, and the words that spilled out of her mouth were broken, faint, and barely held together.

"Because I really need a hug right now…"

Her senses registered the approach of his presence, so, taking his silence as permission, she burst into sobs and whirled around. Burying her head in his chest, she cried and wept, clawing at his T-shirt while her body jerked and trembled with her tears. To her faint surprise, his arms enclosed around her, though his height meant they rested around her shoulders, and she could feel by the tension in his body and the hesitance of his embrace that such close contact was exceedingly awkward for him.

But he was there for her. It was enough.
The departure from Perdition was a lot simpler than Merida expected, which worked out just fine for her. Having spent a couple of hours talking - meaning, she talked, he didn't say a word - they waited for the settlement to awaken at six, where a small convoy of jeeps would leave Perdition in search of wild animals to hunt. Under Pitch's direction, Merida had slipped their jeep into the rear of the convoy and followed them out of Perdition's gates, breaking away when it was safe so they could circle the settlement and travel north.

Once clear of Perdition, it was little more than a lazy drive back to the safehouse, with the morning sunrise painting the canvas sky in a gorgeous collection of watercolour golds, pinks, reds and purples, chasing away the tension and darkness of the night. The humming of the jeep provided a soothing lullaby, and with the air rushing through her red curls as she kept the jeep on the straight and narrow, it felt like freedom. She had satisfied her need to see her family again, pretended for a few blissful hours she was all caught up in the nuances of their lives. It was only temporary, of that she was aware, as the moment they return to the safehouse would be the moment her war resumed.

Still, there was time yet to dwell in the past. As she drove with one hand on the wheel and the other resting on her lap, she sang an old Gaelic song to herself, an ancient language long consumed by the passage of time yet kept alive by people like her.

**Noble Maiden Fair**, Elinor called it. A lullaby for times of darkness and fear, when thunderstorms would shake the house. Merida, in her youth, would run and hide under the table, bed, or even Elinor's skirt as soon as the sky cracked open with the first thunder. Elinor would then scoot her out, enclose her in a reassuring cuddle, and sing that very lullaby. It was a song that stuck with Merida, a song she sang when she needed strength to carry on.

Unfortunately, the combined effect of the lullaby, the humming of the jeep, no sleep for over twenty four hours and the feeling of her body relaxing into her seat meant fatigue was beginning to claw at her bones. She felt her eyelids start to drop, and over the next mile was forced to correct her direction at least three times.

Then came the yawn - and she was betrayed.

"Pull over," Pitch said.

She threw him a tired glance - his golden eyes regarded her with a serious gaze. "What? No, I'm fine."

"Pull over."

"Why? Are ye scared… of my driving?" she teased, though another yawn had cut her sentence in two.

"No, but you're falling asleep at the wheel. You could crash."

She smirked at him. "Aww, ye do care about me."

Pitch arched a brow. "I didn't survive countless battles and the sinking of my home to die at the hands of a sleepy driver. Pull over."

Merida threw him an insulted look, but the moment she did, the jeep sharply swerved, almost embedding it in a ditch at the side of the dusty road. Yelping, she quickly corrected herself - and though the adrenaline flooding through her in surprise fought back the fatigue, she knew it was fleeting. The next time, she might not be so lucky.

"Alright," she groaned, and slowed the jeep to a stop in the middle of the road. Pitch immediately
clambered over his door and circled the vehicle, allowing Merida to somewhat awkwardly climb over to occupy his seat. She watched as Pitch slipped out of his trenchcoat and opened the door, and before he climbed in…

...he passed her his coat.

"Um… what?" she mumbled blankly, staring at the offered garment.

"There are no blankets. This will suffice."

She shook her head as an attempt to refuse - however, whether it was the act of kindness or the comfort available, her refusal was half-hearted. "I'll be fine, laddie."

Pitch said nothing, choosing to convey his reply with a shake of the coat. Her eyes dancing between his and the garment for a few seconds, her resolve eventually caved, and she reached out for it. Taking the coat, she pulled it around herself - the leather felt worn and well-used under her fingertips, and smelled slightly of him. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." The driver's door slammed shut. "That song you were singing - what was it called?"

The jeep's engine hummed into life as it drew on its power cell. Merida felt the vehicle lift a few inches into the air as the repulsors kicked in. "Noble Maiden Fair. Why?"

"It sounds familiar."

"Oh aye? From where?"

Pitch pushed on the gas pedal, and the jeep resumed its journey. "It doesn't matter. Get some sleep."

Merida opened her mouth to argue, but the finality in his voice coupled with the heaviness of her eyelids made the idea futile. Indulging the need to sleep took precedence over indulging the need to pry, and so the argument became a cavernous yawn. "Alright… but one more thing?"

She heard an exasperated sigh as her eyes began to close. "Yes?"

"Thanks fer being there fer me. It means a lot, Pitch."

"Pitchiner."

Her eyes opened just enough to regard him with a quizzical look. His gaze remained fixed on the road ahead, his expression impassive as always. "Come again?"

"My name. Kozmotis Pitchiner."

She smiled to herself as her eyelids closed, and pulled the coat up under her neck as she snuggled further into the seat. "Kozmotis. Cool name," she murmured, before the pleasant sands of sleep claimed her.
It had been a long time since Jack had ever felt peace and freedom, even if there was only a semblance of it. The tension around his chest and the niggling pressure in his mind had been a companion for so long it had become consistency, like the varying degrees of anxiety had been his barometer for what was normal and what was not. Since inheriting leadership of the Ghosts and four prospective members, the feeling of constantly being on edge had only intensified. It was a nigh-permanent state of alertness that, while beneficial more often than not - had he not felt Elsa's arrival on the Star, the Purge would have been far more catastrophic - had been with him for so long he'd forgotten what anything else felt like.

So when he had soared over the border into the country once called Canada, with the Fairy flying at his six and flanked by Astrid and Hiccup on their dragons, and the hover jeep a kilometre below him following a long road north, it was startling enough for him to almost fall out of the sky with introspective surprise when his body instantly relaxed to the point of near-malleable. The anxiety in his mind and chest had retreated to the darkest recesses, and the tension running through his muscles like thread through a tapestry went with it. It was like the knowledge that Unity's reach ended at the border meant his concerns were left there too, and he could lead the team without worrying about whether a clone brigade was going to drop in unannounced for coffee, cookies, and gratuitous violence. For the time being, there was no reason to run, no need to look over his shoulder.

Of course, that was only those worries, and Jack knew he would be deluding himself to think otherwise. There was no guarantee they were travelling to the right place, and that was if Camp Bravo even existed. The further they travelled north was the further they were from civilization - such as it was - and humans were social creatures. The band of eight were, to Jack's knowledge, the only people in Canada - even though one could consider the vast majority of Unity territory to be hostile, there was at least the idea that there were people. Faces, even if they weren't friendly.

Canada was… isolation.

Well, at least, for intelligent forms of life. Reapers formed the other source of concern in Jack's mind, compounded even further by being up close and personal with the voracious little shits, and there were moments on the flight where he wondered if he had not traded one threat to the team for another. The Reapers were many, as were Unity. They were everywhere, as was Unity. Both were merciless, both endless. Yet with the creatures operating to such a rudimentary night-slash-day schedule and the predictability of their behaviour, there was at least the freedom to move about in the day time, with only the darkness bringing with it the knowledge to stay inside and quiet.

The thought that tickled him? He hadn't had to adhere to a curfew since he was fifteen.

It was when he gazed down at the ground far below him, with snow-covered trees unfettered by human interference forming a textured white carpet below him, breathing in the sweet Canadian air of freedom, that something hidden in a clearing caught his eye, barely visible amongst the treetops.

It looked like one of the old radio towers not unlike the ones on the Star, poking out through the blanket of the topmost veridian leaves. Muttering a quick command to his goggles, he slowed his flight to a lazy hover whilst holding a fist in the air - a signal to halt - as his view zoomed in on the artificial structure.

Anna's voice rang out over the comms from the Fairy's pilot seat, curious anticipation unfettered by
the minor artificial tone. "Got something?"

"Maybe." He scanned the immediate area around the radio tower; if there were any structures or paths, they weren't evident. It could be just one of the towers used for the ancient cellphone devices rendered obsolete by wristcom bracelets. "Confirm coordinates?"

There were a few moments before Anna's voice returned over the comms, bringing with it a definitive end to their journey. "Coordinates confirmed. If this is where Bravo is supposed to be, we're here. What do you see?"

Jack's head went on a halfhearted swivel as he shrugged. "Other than a radio tower, I see trees, snow, more trees and… wait… more snow."

Hiccup, as always, brought his particular brand of dry sarcasm. "So, trees and snow, then?"

"You know it."

"Looks too dense for us all to land close by. I saw a clearing a quarter mile south - I reckon we should land there."

Merida piped up over the radio from the jeep far below. "Tha road carries on from here, so it definitely leads tae something."

"How wide is the road?"

"Not wide enough for tha Fairy."

"Alright." Jack rubbed at his forehead. "Set down in the clearing, then head on up the road. I'm gonna scout ahead."

"Frost, you know you're not supposed to go alone," Anna gently rebuked him.

"Well, if you hear my blood-curdling screams, you know what to do."

"Run away?"

Jack turned and spread his hands. "Hell no. You take the Fairy, and you come get me."

"What, and risk my ship?"

"I'm serious! It's cold, and there are owls and things."

Jack let the wind gently carry him down through the forest canopy as laughter filled the comms - which was a lot harder than he first thought. Leaves gave way to branches scraping in places they really shouldn't scrape, and freaked-out birds scattered from their nests at the arrival of something they likely had forgotten existed: one of those annoying, featherless, bipedal creatures. Not to mention the flakes of snow being flicked onto his goggles.

He touched the ground, twigs and broken branches snapping under his feet. It had been a while since he was that close to nature, where the early afternoon sunlight filtered through the gaps in the leaves and tree trunks. Such peace and tranquility, broken only by the calls of startled birds and distant animals, it was like his troubles were a world away. He turned west and jogged up to the pure white, undisturbed road leading to wherever the radio tower was built, and retracted his staff before pulling his M4-A1 around his body to sit comfortably in his hands while he followed the road ahead.

It wasn't long before he discovered exactly where it led.
As he followed the slight curve in the road where the left side was raised in a natural camber, the overhanging and intrusive tree branches receded like theatre curtains to reveal a chain link gate, with similarly constructed fencing running either side of it into the forest. Some parts had been loosened by time, as his ears picked up the wind causing the metal to clink against the heavy posts. Vines of white-flecked ivy entwined themselves within the defensive metal tapestry, an odd amalgamation of natural and artificial; and fixed to the fence at the gate's right, a moss-covered, frosted rectangle hung at an angle. Tilting his head, Jack let the rifle hang by its shoulder strap as he reached for the rectangle, and began to scrape away the mossy covering with his fingers to reveal the words hidden by nature.

Well, what was left of them. It was a sign, Jack could ascertain that, but time and the elements had stripped it of whatever it was supposed to say. Broken letters, warped numbers, and possibly the insignia of the Canadian Army. Crossed swords, entwined maple leaves and a crown above them both - the emblem of a military that no longer existed.

His breath leaving his mask in a wispy vapor, Jack felt the snow crunch under his boots as he trudged over to stand in front of the gate. Turning his ear toward it, he listened out for the slightest noise; snow had a way of either dampening or intensifying sound waves depending on how recent the snowfall, so it was a crapshoot at best. Grunting at the pointlessness, Jack swung the rifle across his back and pulled out his staff, and as he summoned the wind to gently lift him into the air above the gate, he muttered a command for his goggles to switch to infrared.

Nothing. Not a single colour other than a tapestry of blue, purple and black. Anything even remotely living would have stood out like a sore thumb - if the place was inhabited, the present tenants weren't outside. Jack let out a long breath through his nose, and switched off the IR vision. Blue became white, and black cuboid shapes became small structures poking out under the thick bed of snow. If anything or anyone was living in those buildings, they'd likely be dead as a result of being snowed in.

Much as he disliked the notion, the snow also presented itself as an obstacle to the team; it had piled higher inside the fence than outside, and obscured too many of the buildings for Jack to get a vibe of what the place was. No-one would be able to get through the gate, in fact.

His first course of action would have been the snowball fight to end all fights; wait until he heard the seven-strong footsteps of his team trudging up the road, and then subject them to a mortar barrage the likes of which they had never seen. Until he got flanked into next week, of course, and buried under seven soldiers' worth of snowballs.

Plan B, then.

He held his staff aloft, as though the tip met the sky, and drew wide, lazy clockwise circles in the air. The wind, answering his call, breezed past him toward the snow-covered buildings, like an extension of his will yet with its own sentience. Jack continued drawing rings in the sky, letting the wind build up in strength until, like glittering diamonds, flakes of snow took flight. Jack smiled to himself behind the mask as little by little, the whirling wind swept the snow with it like shimmering snakes in a slow cyclone, higher and higher into the sky, casting it away until eventually only a thin dusting of white remained within the fencing.

"Show off."

Jack turned in the air and looked down - the team had arrived, with Hiccup shaking his head in amused disapproval, and beside him sat Toothless, trying desperately to lick the snow out of the air. Elsa gazed in wonder at the falling snowflakes, Rapunzel was happily spinning with her arms wide, and Anna was busy on her tippy-toes trying to catch them with her tongue. Kozmotis looked sullen
as per usual, whilst Merida, her vivid red hair gloriously standing out against the pure white, was bending down to scoop up a handful of snow, casting an impish look at Astrid - whose expression screamed *try it and die*.

Stormfly, however, looked giddy at the prospect of a game of fetch.

"You know it, Fury," Jack smirked. Realising his X.O wouldn't have seen the cheeky look, one hand disconnected the mask and then held it whilst he pulled the goggles from his head.

Astrid, her eyes resting in suspicion at her flame-haired friend, asked him, "Think this is the place?"

Jack turned back as he tried to clip the mask and goggles to his belt - a trickier task given only two fingers of his staff-hand were useable. He traced his eyes over the newly cleared structures; it *looked* like a military base. Square, and surprisingly large. One building at the rear was clearly a barracks, and another in the northeast corner seemed to be some sort of vehicle garage. The other buildings Jack couldn't quite identify, however, which meant further investigation was required.

"Only one way to find out." Jack floated down to the ground, and returned his staff to his bracer. "Four teams of two. Pitch and Hunter, you take the barracks on the far end."

"Aye-aye, Cap."

"Fury and Viking, you take the garage in the northeast corner."

"Copy," Astrid said.

"Snow Queen and Streak, you've got the few buildings on the eastern side."

Anna gave him a two-fingered salute off her temple, but then her face tightened into a quizzical frown. "Wait, what?"

"Switching it up a bit. Blondie, you're with me. We've got the western side." He turned to look at her. "You okay with that?"

All heads turned to Rapunzel - who was caught. Wide-eyed, she emitted a squeak as she froze, her arm mid-throw and clearly aiming a snowball at Merida's head. Her eyes moved from one to the other, before landing on her target - who straightened upright and folded her arms. Quick as a flash, her hands went behind her back, and she plastered the sweetest and most innocent smile possible. Like that could fool anyone.

"You and me. Check. Sounds good. Totally not doing anything," she babbled hastily. Jack made a mental note to never turn his back on Rapunzel for too long.

He reached out for the gate, but as he did so, Elsa jogged up to him and feigned assistance by helping him whilst muttering in a hushed tone,"I thought it would be you and I?"

Jack cast her a cheeky smirk, replete with a wink. "Can't bear to be away from me?"

Elsa scoffed and rolled her eyes, turning her head towards her side of the gate. Funny thing about snow - blushes stand out a mile away. "Don't be ridiculous. I just thought we were working well together."

"Yeah, well, variety is the spice of life." Jack swung his rifle to sit on his front, and rested his hands upon it as he regarded her with a curious eye. "Thought you'd be happy to go with Anna?"
"Oh, I am!" Elsa threw up her hands- she had no weapon, having chosen not to use one until she was ready in case her powers accidentally froze the trigger. "It's just... she's been a little distant lately ever since I told her the truth about that night."

Jack cast a wide gaze over the camp in an attempt to detach himself. "Maybe she has a lot to process. A lot's happened to her, and then finding out everything she knew about that night has been turned on its head..."

"Maybe. It is a lot to take in." One hand went to her hip whilst the other gesticulated at him. "Do... do you think I'll be able to do that? The thing you did with the wind and the snow."

"I think-" Jack gave her a meaningful look, "-you can do anything you put your mind to... if you put your mind to it."

Seeing the matter as closed, Jack turned to address the group. "Eyes open, guns up, stay frosty and watch your partner's back. Shout over the radio if you found something, or found trouble. Plenty could go wrong here."

He gave Rapunzel a pointed look and jerked his head toward the western side of the camp. She drew her stun pistol and fell in behind him as the rest of the group split up and headed off in their assigned directions - Astrid's sudden yelp and gritted snarl followed by Merida's suppressed cackles told Jack he would need to watch those two in the near future.

Or ambush the both of them. Show them how it was done.

Shouldeing his rifle, Jack went on to the closest structure, a moderately long building with a concave, corrugated metal roof and double swing doors. The outside walls looked like they had seen better days, with the paint having been stripped by the elements until it was little more than patches of dirty green over a concrete surface, and Jack was pretty sure snow didn't rust. The windows just under the roof's edges looked intact, though, so there was that at least.

Jack scooted over to the left side of the door while Rapunzel took the right, her body tensed and her stun pistol at the ready. Locking eyes, Jack moved his hand near the vertical handle and counted down with his fingers - three, two, one - and swung the door open as fast as he could. Rapunzel darted in first, pistol level and steady, weaving to her immediate right whilst Jack entered and swung left, his rifle straight as he peered down the sights, eyes scanning the pitifully lit room, trying his damnest not to inhale the moldy, stagnant air rushing past him to the door.

At first glimpse, it looked to be a mess hall of some kind. Benches and tables lined the middle of the floor in three perfect rows, and at the far end was what looked like a food dispensary with glass sheets covering the steel tubs. Murky light filtered in faint beams through the windows just under the ceiling, illuminating with ruthless clarity the thick layer of dust over every surface, and the particles of it floating in the air. Nothing like sunlight to show up when the housework had been neglected.

Silence reigning as it likely had done before their shuffling footsteps, Jack carried on past the tables and circled the food receptacles at the end, with Rapunzel doing the same at the other side, until they found themselves passing through another set of double doors into the kitchen. Like the mess hall behind him, dust had encroached over every conceivable surface, with more than a few large spider webs here and there, and what Jack was pretty sure was the biggest rat he'd seen in his life scampered away toward the kitchen's rear.

In the end, the mess hall was, aside from the odd creature, empty. To be sure, Jack and Rapunzel both scouted the small adjacent rooms on either side which happened to be restrooms, dishwashing room and a walk-in freezer, but they seemed to be the only life in the mess hall that walked on two
"Place is clear," Jack declared as he exited the freezer, allowing his rifle to hang at a semi-ready position across his chest.

"The ladies' restroom's in need of a little spring cleaning, though." Rapunzel holstered her pistol, a grimace cutting across her face. "Like, a day long deep clean by a swarm of drones."

Jack chuckled while his eyes traced over the kitchen surfaces, as he walked back toward the mess hall. Once upon a time, food would have been prepared in that kitchen with regimental precision by a dozen or more soldiers. Now, it possessed merely the echoes of what was. "Think this whole place could use a little TLC."

"Do you think this is Camp Bravo?"

Jack shrugged as he pushed open the door into the mess hall. There were a few items he'd noticed on his way through that had been compartmentalised in favour of ensuring the building was safe. "Might be. I mean, the coordinates pointed here, where this base is... but there's nothing yet that can tell us for sure."

He looked down at the closest centre bench. Plates had been stacked next to ordered piles of knives and forks, and four dust-covered bottles stood in a line to the left of the plates. Behind them, over a dozen flute glasses did their best impression of clouded glass. "If this is Camp Bravo... it means everything the Ghosts are, everything we've done... it all started here. Birthplace of the resistance."

He walked over and picked up one of the bottles by the neck. With one hand, he wiped across its body - champagne. Not synth-champagne, or the paintstriper his neighbour used to make but actual champagne. His eyes went up to the mouth - it was unopened. The cork still sat firmly in place, held by metal wire.

Whatever celebration was due to take place, something happened before it did.

"Why was... is... there a resistance in the first place?"

Jack looked up at her through his eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

"I mean," she added hastily, clearly sensing the stupidity of her question. "Why do humans hate us so much that we have to resist them—that... that places like Camp Bravo had to be built?"

"Ah." Jack raised his eyebrows, giving the champagne one last look in thought. Hell of a question - and not as stupid as he first thought. If he was honest, he appreciated her interest to know why things were the way they were. He deliberately replaced the bottle on the table a good six inches away from its brethren, leaving a clear circle that stood out like a sore thumb against the dust surrounding it, before making his way to the main doors. You get your rebellion where you can. "Now that... that's a long story."

Rapunzel kept pace, taking a quick right to pull up beside him. "I'm guessing a more truthful one than Unity gives, too."

Jack let out a breath, and a heaviness settled on his heart. The history of the abnormal was not a pleasant one. "The thing is... they're not wrong."

"I don't understand..."

Jack gave her a look. Rapunzel gazed up at him, being a head shorter, with puzzled eyes - it would
have been weird for her to find out that, for once, Unity was telling the truth. He gave her a smile, one that was supposed to be casual yet probably looked like he was grimacing.

"Come on. I'll tell you on the way to the next building."

"I guess," Hiccup said after a solemn sigh, as he and Astrid walked toward their assigned location with Stormfly and Toothless in tow, "we should probably start at the beginning."

"Edgy. Original. I like it."

Hiccup threw Astrid a ha-ha-you're-so-not-funny sneer. "Oh, hey, sarcasm. How avant-garde of you."

Astrid snickered behind a toothy smirk. "Sorry. Please continue, o great storyteller."

"You want to hear our history or not?"

Astrid's sniggers ceased instantly, though the innocent expression she suddenly adopted was anything but. Especially with the AA-12 she named Hansbuster hanging from her shoulders… and the way her lips pursed as though trying desperately to suppress laughter. "My bad. So… uh… where do we begin?"

"Wait—don't you already know all this?"

"I want to hear it from you."

There was a look in Astrid's eyes that sent Hiccup's heart aflutter, even if it was only faint. She wanted to know, wanted to learn it from him. He felt an unwelcome heat tickle at his cheeks, and under her gaze felt the odd sensation of being put on the spot.

"Well… uh…” he scratched at the nape of his neck, "I guess we start with the Third War. Halfway through, pretty much every country was caught up in the fighting."

"The biggest contenders being the United States and Russia, right?"

Hiccup nodded. "Right. Anyway, we think the Russians launched a ballistic missile at what they must have thought was a high priority target - only, it was that very act that changed the world as they knew it."

"What happened?"

"Well, what we call the Toxin was spread all over the world in a gaseous form, carried by the winds. Pretty much every country was tagged by it, and in the following weeks, a small percentage of the population started going through Bloom Events, or became hosts. Pretty soon, you've got people causing electrical discharges, cracking rock… hell, even controlling other people."

The snow-covered grass crunched under his footsteps, and those of Astrid, as they closed in on the garage. It was strange how it felt like they were the only two people in the world, that talking with her felt so easy and natural.

"Of course, people were freaked out. I mean who wouldn't be? Mrs Smith, two doors down, who everyone knew as a cupcake-baking soccer mom suddenly starts levitating metallic objects with her hands? It was chaos… but then, y'know, to some people? Opportunity."

"I'm guessing by the cynical tone and the use of the words some people," Astrid said flatly, "you
mean the military."

"We have a winner! Yeah, the US military. They saw these new abnormals, saw the destruction some of them caused when they bloomed and thought, 'we need an edge in this war, right? How about we weaponise these people?'" Hiccup snorted in discomfort. The idea that extraordinary people were taken and turned into weapons of minor to mass destruction never sat well with him - an irony which was not lost on him. "These people… they let the military experiment with their powers, make them warriors."

"Yeah. Who in their right mind would consent to that?"

There was an uncomfortable tightness in his chest as the dry sarcasm in her tone drove her meaning home. He glanced awkwardly at Astrid - her eyebrows were raised, and her expression spectacularly unimpressed. Yep. Foot, meet mouth.

"You're different," he hastily tried to amend. "You had no choice."

"Neither did they." Astrid lifted up the AA-12 and rested it on her right shoulder so her left hand could rest on her hip. "You want a spade for that hole you're digging?"

Hiccup winced and looked away, and counted himself lucky they'd reached the garage. Any further on that particular topic and he'd find himself at the centre of the earth. Clearing his throat - not that he could feel any more awkward than he already was - he drew his pistol and took position at the left of the huge, rusted main shutter doors. Standard procedure; take position, count, then one enters first while the other covers behind.

Except Astrid had no time for procedure, it seemed. Before Hiccup could even mouth the number 'three', his partner had bent down and then yanked up the shutter door with one hand, before shouldering her shotgun and moving inside, all without a single word.

"What the—Astrid, we're supposed to-"

"You do what you want."

Gaping, Hiccup quickly followed her in with the two dragons in tow.

Chains hanging from the ceiling clinked together with an ominous cadence thanks to the rushing of the outside air into the garage. Dust kicked up by the breeze floated like aged fairies in the streaming light, and the faint smell of metal and oil tickled at Hiccup's nose. It was spacious, room enough for three hover cars with space to spare. A couple of wheeled toolboxes sat in the far corner next to a door that, Hiccup assumed, led to an office, and heavy-duty tools were fixed to the wall on the far right.

His eyes flicked over to Astrid, who was busy scanning up high through her iron sights. Rather than the amiable interactions they'd shared up until that point, there was now a cold, tense atmosphere between them. He hadn't thought before he spoke; maybe on some level he assumed she'd understand his opinion based on how much they had in common, but it only drove home how different they truly were.

And how his interest in getting to know her better only sharpened the guilt at clearly offending her. Evidently she was more damaged underneath that bulletproof armor than he thought.

"Clear," Astrid said with all the tone and finality of a slammed rubber stamp.

"Yeah, clear, that's good." He rubbed at the side of his neck. "Listen, Astrid, I'm sorry about what I
"Uh-huh." She didn't even look at him, more interested was she in the heavy tools. Her clipped reply cut him off in his tracks, and the rest of his apology died in his throat. "So what happened next?"

Hiccup found himself bereft of speech. "What... happened?"

"With the abnormals."

"Oh." He looked down. "Right. Um... well..."

"Those abnormals that weren't already in the military," Anna said as she closed in on the door to the second structure on their path, "were asked by them if they wanted to join. Rather than put up with funny looks by other people, they could put their powers to use for their country. Patriotism, y'know?"

"They didn't seem to have much of a choice," Elsa said. There was an edge of meaning to her tone that attracted an uncertain glance from Anna, and the twinge of an ache in her heart.

Maybe she didn't have a choice in being locked away - but as much as she hated to admit it out of loyalty to her sister, and how the only reason Jack said it was to enrage Elsa into losing control, he was right. One message, one call... one piece of paper under the door would have been all it took to not let her spend three years wondering what she had done for Elsa to disappear like that. God knows if the roles were reversed, Anna would fight through hell and high water just to reach out, if only once.

But locked away from her because Elsa was an abnormal? Did Mama and Papa think that little of just how much Anna loved Elsa, and how much she would risk just to hug her and tell her it was going to be okay?

"I guess not. Maybe they thought if they served in the war and came back heroes, people might actually give them some respect." Anna straightened up as she held her MP5 at the ready. "Sometimes you gotta fight for it."

Elsa looked up at her, and a frown crossed her face. Focusing her attention on her task, Anna lashed her left hand out and pushed open the door before quickly returning it to her rifle, and glided inside.

Anna let out an impressed, "Whoa..."

It took all of two seconds to realise the building was an armory. Every single conceivable space on the three walls was occupied by a firearm of almost every type, from the sniper rifle and M4 to the humble Beretta and Glock 9MM. Khaki green metal crates labelled CAUTION: GRENADES were stacked to the immediate right of the door, a rocket launcher was laid in the far left corner, and to her immediate left she spied a worn, well-loved table with a vice and various gun-cleaning tools resting upon it. However, hooked up at the highest point on the far wall was a long, rectangular black case Anna couldn't identify, bearing the letter 'Z' in white paint.

"I think we may have found Astrid's new home," Elsa quipped. Anna threw her sister a glance over her shoulder; the elder's eyes rested in fascination on one of those swords Jack called a katana perched in its sheath just under the long box.

"We found something, alright."

Elsa walked over to the katana, and with great care plucked it from the wall. Anna heard the metal
glide from its sheathe as her sister asked, "So, what happened to the abnormals who joined up?"

"Huh?" Anna gave her a blank look, before her mind gave her a cantankerous kickstart. "Oh. They were trained alongside the ones who were already in the army, to wage asymmetric warfare against superior numbers. They even got their own name."

Elsa returned the katana to its sheath, and replaced it on the wall. "Which was?"

"Ghost Company."

Anna received a look over her sister's shoulder that stood betwixt impressed and incredulous. "As in —"

"Yep." Anna smiled proudly. "They were the first Ghosts. Everything we know, every battle we've fought and survived, we owe to them."

"So they fought for the United States Army?"

"Mmhm. They would drop behind enemy lines, fuck up what they could and get out. First mission in France went south, though; the army couldn't extract them because the Russians had made a surprise push and occupied Paris. So what did the Ghost Company do?"

"What?"

"They stayed. Moved from target to target, taking out supply lines, airfields, command posts. They'd messed up the Russian line so much that the U.S Army literally walked into and took France - story goes that when the 501st finally arrived to relieve them, Ghost Company were all sat on busted tanks, saying, 'Took you long enough - what, were you napping?' Biggest bunch of badasses ever."

Anna smiled to herself. The legend of Ghost Company was one of the first things she had learned as part of her training; the knowledge of where the Ghosts, Spirits and Furies came from. Tales of bravery and derring-do always enthralled her, so it was almost like being told the adventure stories she heard as a child all over again. She always wanted to be a part of something greater than herself, and once she had completed her training and earned her place on the team, it had filled her with an immense pride she still felt all those years on.

"They certainly sound heroic," Elsa mused as she inspected what Anna thought was the British SA80.

"Mmm. Only problem is that nearly every country had the same idea - so whatever ground the Ghost Company took, was lost elsewhere by hostile abnormal teams. Pretty soon… we abbies were killing each other." Anna's smile fell, as did her eyes which came to rest upon the dust-covered concrete floor. "Pitch wasn't kidding when he said our history was written in fire and blood."

In Anna's peripheral vision she saw her sister turn to face her, and felt her eyes burn into her mind. It wasn't Elsa's fault. None of it was. Something life changing happened that ripped them apart, and Mama and Papa were just doing what they thought was best to contain a situation out of their control.

But it still didn't stop the pain, the regret at what could have been.

Sure, they may have been protecting her… but did anyone bother to ask how she felt?

"It got worse, didn't it?"
Anna looked up at Elsa, giving her a lingering glance.

"Yeah. It did." She turned toward the door and emitted a long sigh, rolling her tired shoulders in preparation for holding her rifle at the ready. "Y'see, as the war went on, this little crazy fringe political party were gaining strength. Of course, no-one really thought they'd get into power… until Clearwater."

By Kozmotis' count, there were six officer and one base commander's quarters in addition to two large troop barracks, both filled with basic yet functional bunk beds - and not a single one bore the tell-tale signs of use. The bed sheets hadn't even been laid; each bed still had a pillowcase, bed sheet and blanket neatly folded in size order at the end, not to mention the dust covering every inch of the material. It was like someone had walked in, frozen the camp in time, and tootled off again.

"I remember Clearwater."

Kozmotis, in the middle of being fascinated by the diary he'd obtained from one of the officer's quarters, looked up from its cover and shot Merida a raised eyebrow. The redhead was busy opening and closing each locker that stood beside each bunk, curiously inspecting inside. There were moments he questioned her respect for history - then again, it wasn't like the previous owners were in any position to give a shit. With that in mind, he pulled at the armhole of his utility vest and slipped the diary inside.

"So if you already know, why are you asking me?"

Merida, who was in the process of circling one of the bunk beds toward the next locker, shrugged and said, "Yer voice is easier on tha ears than ma teacher's."

Kozmotis' lips snapped shut, and Merida paused in step as though realising just what she'd said. He heard the quiet clear of a throat, and saw her hand disappear into her hair - ostensibly to scratch her head.

"Right…" Kozmotis gave her a wary look through the corner of his eyes. "Well, while the Ghost Company was fighting overseas, the situation for abnormals was bad - history repeating itself bad. Abnormals were rated as to how much of a danger to the public they were. Separate water fountains. Separate queue lines. Different entrances. On subway and interstate trains, abnormals had to stay in the rear car. You could be arrested for walking the streets while an abnormal, and there were often instances of 'accidental' shootings by the police."

Merida stared at him, stunned. Kozmotis chuckled bitterly inside himself; evidently that part was skipped in the curriculum. Only sixty years before the Third War were those kinds of things going on based on skin colour - it only cemented Kozmotis' belief that humanity reacted negatively to anything considered 'different', and were thus undeserving of respect.

Except, maybe, the Dunbroch family. They seemed nice.

"Yer kiddin'."

Kozmotis shook his head. "Not in the slightest. If you were an abnormal, you were second-class. Such fear over them… it was easy for Unity to capitalise on it."

"Somethin' tells me I wasn't taught this part."

"History is written by those in power, Merida - and they like to gloss over the parts not showing them in a good light. You see, Unity's entire campaign was about three things: ending the war, better
living through their technology, and ridding the world of the abnormal threat. They said that
abnormals started the war, so they could inherit the world… and the best way to get the public on
your side is to give them an enemy. Now, with the US political system being mostly partisan, most
people agreed with Unity but were afraid to show support for such a lunatic fringe party, so they
were never able to gain any real power… but then, on the fourth of March, a fifteen year old girl
walked into school."

"Clearwater," Merida said, her voice low and solemn, her eyes to the floor in distant thought.

Clearwater. The name that sealed the fate of every abnormal who was or would ever be. The tragedy
that would be the darkest moment in the history of the abnormal.

"Four hundred students…" Merida murmured.

"Indeed. Unity hates us because they fear us, fear what we can do… and they are right to be scared.
Clearwater showed humanity just how dangerous we are."

There was a tinge of something Kozmotis rarely felt, and actively chose not to feel - pity. Maybe it
was thanks to him being around his friends for so long, and the time he had been spending with
Merida, but as the days went on he was starting to do what he once deemed as weak: he was starting
to care.

Being a Purge survivor meant he could relate a little more readily than he could before.

At seven minutes past nine in the morning, students were milling between classrooms for their next
sessions. Laughing. Teasing. Kissing. Teachers were psyching themselves up for another round with
their errant charges.

At nine minutes past nine, the last piece of rubble fell onto the heap of debris and metal as a blinding
cloud of dust filled the air, and what was once called Clearwater High School had been wiped from
the face of the earth in the space of two minutes. Four hundred students and three dozen school staff
members blinked out of existence like the switching off of a light.

Questions had been asked. Investigations were conducted. No-one could provide a satisfactory let
alone scientific explanation as to why a perfectly good and well constructed high school suddenly
imploded, with no plausible signs it was ever in danger. Blame was thrown this way and that, with
some even citing Russian sleeper agents striking at the heart of America.

Weeks on, after over four hundred caskets were laid to rest and a nation in mourning, and no-one
had any answers.

"Unity held the opinion that an abnormal caused the Clearwater." Kozmotis snorted bitterly. "And
they were right. The school security camera system's hard drive survived the implosion… her name
was Katrina. She was on her way to Calculus when she underwent her Bloom. Minutes later, she
and over four hundred of her fellow students were dead."

Kozmotis straightened up and inhaled a breath. "After that… Unity had all the support they needed.
President Trump was impeached - not that it was hard, as I understand he was a cretin - and… well,
Unifier Weselton literally walked into the White House and took power. Abnormals were rounded
up and dragged into internment camps, and fitted with shock collars to punish them if they used their
powers. The kicker, as Jack would so eloquently state, was that not only were the abnormals facing
hate and distrust from Unity… but a betrayal of their own minds."

"What are ye talking about?"
"The Toxin was driving the first generation of abnormals insane."

---

Every building Jack and Rapunzel had scouted turned out to be mercifully Reaper-clear, aside from the odd raccoon and, of all things, a moose in the makeshift gym building. *That* was a surprise - more so to the moose than the two adventurers. With every other structure reported as clear by the rest of the team, and no sign of trouble, Jack felt comfortable relaxing a little bit, to the point of casually pushing open the double glass door to the largest building in the centre of the camp.

Only, his senses warned him Rapunzel's proximity was no longer as close as it was before. With his left arm holding one of the doors open, he turned his head to look over his shoulder.

Rapunzel stared at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, her arms hanging limply at her sides. "I'm s-sorry… *what? Insane?"

Jack winced - that was the part that usually created a whole new set of questions, and honest reassurance to boot. "Not all of them," he held up his other hand to discourage her mind from losing itself down the rabbit hole, "but enough to judge the rest of us."

"Why? H-How?"

Jack nodded his head toward the door as a silent prompt for her to get her ass moving, which, though her expression of shock still persisted, she did. "We don't know for sure. Theory goes that the Toxin that flooded the planet was in a concentrated form, so the effect it had on certain people was… stronger than others. It wasn't so obvious at the start but, y'know, as time went on and as the situation got more like a goddamn tinderbox, some abnormals started to suffer. Paranoia, no impulse control, violent outbursts, sociopathy… hell, even some of the Ghost Company felt themselves losing it. If that wasn't enough… a bad person is one thing, but a bad person with powers is a terror. You've got abbies using their powers to rob, destroy, hurt innocent people, whether they meant to or not. Most of 'em were lashing out."

She stopped a few feet away, looking back at him as she waited for him to catch up. "But… does that mean we…"

Jack let go of his rifle barrel to wave away the implication, and Rapunzel gave off a breath of relief. "Nah. We're, like, the second or third generation, plus the Toxin was already bonded to us when we were conceived. There hasn't been a case of Toxin-induced psychosis for decades."

Jack caught up, and walked side by side with her into the main room. At first glance, it looked like some sort of command centre; a large wooden table took pride of place in the room's centre, with sheets upon sheets of paper haphazardly sprawled over its surface. Thinner tables each with dedicated chairs sat flush against the left and right walls, with the ancient devices Kozmotis called 'computers' perched on each one. What held Jack's curiosity was a huge circular object hung on the far wall, covered by an equally large sheet of cotton - and, as ever, there was more dust than a legion of cleaning drones could cope with. Whatever action the camp saw, was directed from that very room.

Well, when the lights worked. Whatever natural sunlight there was, was dulled by the grimy windows and barely made it through the door.

"So what happened to Ghost Company?"

"They were Stateside a few months before Clearwater, but once the tragedy happened, they were
restricted to being on base for their safety. Meaning: everyone else's. They were told it was only because of their heroism and service that they weren't being taken away… but they figured it was only a matter of time. So they stole what they could and fled to Canada."

"And built Bravo."

Jack glanced at Rapunzel. Stood near the computers, she drew a strand of hair behind her ear as she squinted down at something rectangular in her hand.

"Yo, Cap?"

Distracted away from Rapunzel, Jack put two fingers to his ear. "Sup, Fury?"

"Viking and I found the power supply to this place. The main system won't work because it's connected to Canada's offline power grid, but there's a backup battery, one of those regenerating ones they installed during the war. Looks like it's still got some juice, but it'll need a jump start. Want me to go get the jeep's power cell?"

Before Jack could answer with his approval, Merida jumped in. "Don't need one. Ye got me. Whereabouts are ye?"

"North-north-east part of the base. Grey box."

"A'right. On ma way."

Jack opened and closed his mouth, blinked a few times, then simply shrugged and let them get on with it. "Keep me posted," he said. Autonomy for the win.

It'd surely help the lighting situation - though the idea of sneaking around a darkened camp, ambushing someone with a snowball to the face and then cackling as he vanished was tempting.

"So, yeah. Rest is history, I suppose. Ghost Company had to leave Bravo just as they finished it 'cause Unity annexed Canada - not that it was hard, since it got hammered pretty hard by the Russians - and they did what they do best. Asymmetric warfare. Bring down Unity, one inch at a time."

Jack leaned his rear against the table's edge, and crossed both of his hands over the butt of the rifle as he gazed down on the floor in distant thought.

"We resist because… because we never asked for this. We didn't ask to be born normals. Katrina never asked to bloom, or to bring her school down around her ears. None of us asked to be what we are, but we're just trying to make the best of it. We're just trying to live our lives, but because of something that makes us different, we are hunted and oppressed. We have just as much right to live, love and be free as any other human, because, even with all these cool powers and awesome bodies, we still have the same flaws humans do. So until the day an abnormal can wake up in the morning and not be scared, we will resist."

Silence followed. Jack looked up; Rapunzel was studying him, wearing half a smile, still clutching the object in her hands.

"I got a question for you, Cap," Hiccup's voice came in over the comms - there was a sly, mischievous edge to his tone Jack wasn't sure he liked.

"Shoot."
"Why couldn't that have been your speech on the Star?"

His eyebrows dipping, Jack gave the space between the main door and the first computer table a puzzled look. "My speech on the-

His eyes widened. His voice as he had spoken, had risen in volume with his passion and conviction. The team heard it all.

Burying his furiously pink face in his hands, he moaned, "Oh, God."

"Ayep. Gotta say, you should have led with that one."

"Shut up, Fury."

"Ten out of ten, would listen again," Anna added. She couldn't sound any more teasing and theatrical, like mocking him was some sort of open-air play.

"I'll drink tae that," Merida chirped in, complete with a grunt of effort. Whatever jump start was required seemed to be trickier than she anticipated. "If I had a drink, that is."

"Do you want a snowball to the face? Because that's how you get a snowball to the face."

"There are unopened bottles of champagne in the mess hall, Hunter," Rapunzel chimed in, chuckling to herself as she reached down to take something wrapped in dusty plastic from the corner of the table Jack leaned on. "The real stuff, not sham-pagne."

Even with the slight distortion inherent to radio comms, Merida sounded far too interested. "Are ye tellin' me there's real booze?"

"Yep. Real, fifty-plus year old booze."

"Welp, bye guys. It's been fun, but this is where we part ways. I'm outta here. Ye'll find me in tha mess-"

"Hunter…" Kozmotis chided her.

"Alright, alright," she grumbled, sounding like someone told her no dessert until after dinner. "But I got dibs on tha first glass."

"Get the power working," Jack said, "and you can have a whole bottle to yourself."

"Laddie, fer that? I'll let ye marry me, take me, have yer wicked way with me." Merida issued another growl of exertion. Jack thanked his stars the room was too dark for Rapunzel to see the fierce red light up his cheeks like a pulse cannon barrage… though when he did throw her an awkward glance, she wore a smirk rivalling Anna's on her cheekiest days.

"First Astrid, then Elsa, now Merida?" she teased, murmuring. "You seem to have a way with the ladies."

"Shut up."

"I mean, it does explain why I feel like swooning around you-"

"Shut. Up."

"-and look! There's a perfectly good table here. Why don't you and I-"
"Rapunzel, I swear on my iPod, so help me I will snowball you in the face."

"I bet-"

Jack threw her a hearty yet wholly insincere glare, brandishing a finger in her direction to finish. "In the face."

"If you two could stop flirting, that would be great."

Astrid didn't miss a beat. "Now who's jealous, Snow Queen?"

"Viking, I am this close to-"

"For fuck's sake, people, cut the chatter!" Jack snapped, his irked state made all the more so by Rapunzel's mirthful cackling. "Hunter, you'd better have that battery online."

"In the words of the Bible," Kozmotis said, garnering one hell of a bewildered expression from Jack as he tried to work out what possible relevance a book from a defunct religion could have, "Genesis, chapter one, verse three. Then God said: Let there be light.""

There was a heavy clunk that seemed to fill the entire room with its sudden sound, causing Jack and Rapunzel to shoot alarmed glances at the ceiling. Whirring followed the clunk, and with a subsequent hum, the computers against the wall before him sparked awake. Jack watched as the once-black screens filled with green text that wrote itself line by line.

"What are those things," Rapunzel asked, eyeing them with wary suspicion, "and are they dangerous?"

"Only if one of them asks if you want to play a game."

Rapunzel gave him a funny look, and Jack felt a surge of impish pride crossed with a sense of cheapness; sure, it was fun to fox her, but how in the world would she have understood the reference?

Before she could query his obscurity, however, a dull buzzing reached his ears from the ceiling as long strip lights flickered and blinked into life, and the once dark room was bathed in a bright artificial glow. Objects once hidden by a blanket of darkness were revealed by the all-seeing light, including the items in Rapunzel's hands; a small plastic pouch containing discs that looked to be made of fabric… and a photograph frame made of wood.

Hiccup was the first to pipe up. "We cooking with gas?"

"What's 'cooking with gas'?"

"What's 'cooking with—'" Kozmotis groaned in frustration, as though Merida's question had physically hurt him. "For crying out loud, Hunter…"

"I will hit you."

Jack had to hold himself back from laughing down the comms. "We've got power, thanks. Good job, Hunter. Rendezvous inside the centre building."

"Thanks! See, Pitch? Frost knows how tae compliment a lady."

"Don't start that again."
Jack shook his head, smiling in exasperation; it was times like those that he missed his kindergarten kids - they were easier to manage than the bunch of so-called adults. Hell of a lot easier if any squabbles started; you could just hold the kids at arm's length whilst they took swings at thin air. Not to mention they weren't exactly as proficient in multiple types of martial arts.

"Say, Jack? What did Ghost Company look like?"

Jack cast a look at Rapunzel, whose attention was back on the photograph. He blinked a few times in the hope the act would engage the memory centre of his brain; hell of a question considering he didn't actually know. Descriptions of them had been passed down through the generations of the team, but sixty years' worth of Chinese Whispers could mean that for all he knew, the sapper called Tiny was in actuality less than five feet tall, and not an ironically-named titan. His eyes glazed over as he looked through one of the booted-up computer screens, a map of the base which was surrounded by an irregular red circle beaming back at him, and puffed out his cheeks to let loose a breath as he tried to recall those old tales Mulan told him.

"Um… well, there was Wolfhound as the youngest; he had the teeth, eyes, hearing and speed of a wolf."

He gestured lightly into the air, as though it would help.

"Hades was kinda like Anna, only more powerful. Bit of a temper, though. Liked to wear a head of blue fire - he was one of the team who succumbed to psychosis. Thought he could take on a tank."

"Anyone else?"

"Um…" Jack scratched his head. Why'd she ask him? Kozmotis would know way more. "Ironclad. She was big, tough. Used to be a bodybuilder. Had skin as hard as steel… she fell when Unity started using pulse rifles."

"Her skin couldn't stop energy bolts, I take it?" When Jack nodded, Rapunzel then prompted him further. "Anyone else?"

"Oof. I can't rem—wait, I got one. We only know of her as 'Z'. She was short, quiet, very private person. Liked to wear a hood. Korean-American, I think. Only one who could shut Hades up. She was the team's sniper on account of her abnormality turning her hand-eye coordination up to eleven, only she never used a sniper rifle. Preferred a—"

"Bow and arrow?"

Jack's jaw loosened in shock. He snapped his eyes to Rapunzel, giving her one hell of a bewildered stare. "How did you know?"

Rapunzel said nothing. Merely curling an eyebrow, she handed over the photograph frame. Eagerly taking it, Jack stared down at the picture - after over five decades he thought the image would have degraded beyond recognition, a tea-coloured canvas with brown shapes that were supposed to be people. No, it looked pristine, as though the old saying that a photograph was a moment frozen in time was a literal phrase. For a few fleeting seconds, he surmised it was the protection of the glass and decades of darkness that had protected the photograph of twenty men and women, some kneeling, some stood, most toting assault rifles - or, in the case of the well-built woman on the far right, a fucking minigun - but all smiling widely at the camera.

Wolfhound stood in the far left, grinning, his yellow eyes and pronounced, razor sharp-looking canines on proud display.
Hades in the centre with his arms folded, his skin as grey as Kozmotis' but with far more ridiculous a chin - and his hair was on fire.

Ironclad, with long flowing black hair, leaning on her minigun with her feet crossed, smirking as smugly as possible. Jack would be lying if he didn't feel a sense of intimidation cross his spine - she looked like she could break him in half...

...and knelt in front of Ironclad on the far right could only be Z, with her hood hung over her head, and her bow held in her left hand whilst she saluted the camera with two fingers of her right to her temple.

"Sonuvabitch…" he breathed as they beamed back at him. "It can't be…"

Ghost Company. No other explanation for it.

His eyes pored over every inch of the photograph taking in the smallest detail; like the current incarnation, they all wore T-shirts of black, yet their pants were a pattern of black, white and grey camouflage. They looked happy, or at least close to it given the circumstances of their time, though Jack's heart underwent a surge of mournful regret - every single one of them was dead, sacrificing themselves for freedom.

Jack's eyes were drawn to Z once again, as the only member in the photograph not wearing a T-shirt. Rather, she was clad in a black military jacket - and it was the presence of something circular on her left upper arm that twigged in Jack's mind, enabling the puzzle to fall into place.

Without looking away from the photograph, Jack held out his left hand. "Hey, Rapunzel - pass me that packet?"

She did so, just as the sound of the main doors opening reached his ears as well as the clamour of six voices melting into one big conversation. He let the world around him wash past, subconsciously distancing himself. He turned over the packet in his fingers, and his jaw loosened - they were patches. Circles of material designed to be sewn or glued onto uniforms to denote rank, or in this case, a company's insignia. It was a pair of white isosceles triangles pointing toward the upper centre denoting, and a thick, white, zig-zagged curve as a smile.

"Jack?" he became vaguely aware of Elsa's concerned voice. Close, as though she had drawn up to him. "Are you okay?"

Now he was. Now he knew what was hidden. Now he knew where they were.

Without answering, Jack turned just enough to toss the packet of patches back onto the table, and still clutching the photograph frame, surged off the table and strode to the furthest wall of the room. Puzzled queries as to his odd behaviour followed him, not that he was paying them any heed, eyes fixed upon the dirty grey cotton sheet that hung from whatever it concealed to pool on the dusty floor.

Slowly, he reached out a hand, unfurling cautious fingers toward it, and when his fingertips were but inches away, he hesitated. What if he was wrong? What if this was just a stopover for Ghost Company, and they'd accidentally left things behind?

What if he'd got everyone's hopes up and taken them several hundred miles into Reaper-land... for nothing?

Silence fell in the huge room, and he could feel seven pairs of eyes boring a hole into the back of his head. Uncomfortable, awkward heat pricked at his neck and ears; how silly must he look, frozen,
with his hand outstretched to a gigantic cloth that hadn't seen the colour white for generations?

His pride and self-consciousness overrode both his hesitant apprehension and overwhelming curiosity. There was nothing else for it. With fingers that leashed out to grasp the fabric - it was every bit as old and musty as it looked, and *smelled* - he gave it a sharp yank to the floor.

The cloth fell to the ground like the descent of curtains at the theatre, and Jack's eyes were rewarded. Fixed to the wall was a huge black disc, easily taller than Kozmotis on his most arrogant day, and grinning down on him like a malevolent entity was the very same face as on the patches. A white-eyed, white-mouthed demon.

Above the eyes and following the natural curve of the disc were painted words - a motto:

*DEATH COMES FROM THE SHADOWS*

And below the face, a name that not only proved Jack right, but filled him with hope and the uplifting glow of joy that everything they had worked towards, everything he had lost sleep over had come to fruition… and that maybe, just maybe, he could actually lead.

*106th AIRBORNE*  
*GHOST COMPANY*

"I did it," he murmured, as cheers and whoops broke out from behind him. Camp Bravo had been found, the place of safety and sanctuary that would tend to and nurture them, until the day they would strike out and raze Unity to the ground. The place that, after over five decades, would see the Ghosts rise again.

Better than that, in Jack's somewhat superficial thoughts - they had an insignia to wear with confidence.

He slowly drew his eyes away from the titanic grin, and rested them on the photograph. Twenty pairs of eyes and twenty beams shone back at him.

"I did it," he murmured to the still faces. "I took them home. Hope I did you all proud."

For Hans, as obvious as the realisation was, being Supreme Commander was a whole different ball game to being the oh-so-illustrious commander of the *Training Ground*. For a start, his new office was far larger and used to be in possession of several things not usually available to all but a select few. Pre-war books, for example, with words physically written on paper using ink. Oil paintings. Relics of a bygone age that no longer held meaning in the age of Unity.

Not to mention that his workload had increased by double or more. Not only was he overseeing the *Training Ground* from a much loftier view, but the entirety of Unity's military as well. From simulations or predictions regarding war with the Alliance, to reports on simple wargame exercises between battalions, all manner of tasks crossed his desk. Still, a packed schedule was a small price to pay for such a prestigious promotion.

It had then hit Hans that he hadn't so much been promoted to the rank of Supreme Commander, as inherited his brother's position… and his predilections - a thought that antagonised his pride to no end. Maybe the Unifier didn't see it that way, but even *that* notion didn't dissuade the suspicion creeping in the back of his mind that, to everyone else, he was given a hand-me-down. Henrik-Lite,
if he could stomach the phrase, to his family. A younger, weaker brother simply in the right place at the right time, undeserving of such distinction.

No. He *earned* the rank. He conceived, nurtured, lovingly tended to a plan that was still in motion. Everything that brought him to the rank of Supreme Commander was governed by his own hand.

And a little bit of luck.

He owed his family *nothing*.

So, with that in mind, he had set about making the Supreme Commander's office his own. Gone were the archaic record players, anachronistic books and ancient pieces of furniture. Away went anything from a forgotten age, and anything belonging to a useless, weak man. Spartan would be his workplace. No personal knick-knacks, no pointless, sentimental objects to distract him. Just black furniture, grey walls, and the mandatory Uni-Com. Much more in keeping with the society's current interior aesthetic.

Well, aside from one thing: Elsa Snowfield's sword *Frostpiercer*, given to him by request once the investigation was complete. Pure unidium, so it survived ground zero of a fuel cell overload blast, and became a token of his victory.

In the middle of fine tuning the position on his table of the rack upon which *Frostpiercer* rested, a pleasant yet soft two-tone bell rang out throughout the office. He'd have to get used to that - in the *Training Ground*, the notification of someone requesting entry was harsh by comparison. Assuming people used it of course, rather than punch down the door like the newly promoted Admiral Bludvist did.

Hunched over his desk, his dress jacket hanging on the back of his chair as he closely studied the position of the sword rack, he called out a brisk, "Enter."

The door slid open with a hiss, and the sound of smart low-heeled shoes echoed throughout the room now that there were no random objects to dampen it.

"Perfectionism is a sign of greatness," came the silky, siren-like voice of Lieutenant-Colonel Kowalski, newly promoted Adjutant to the Supreme Commander. "Or insanity."

Hans didn't look up as he tweaked the rack's position the slightest degree. "That's 'sir' to you, Lieutenant-Colonel. Our agreement does not mean we dispense with the formalities outside of private surroundings."

He then looked up at her through his eyebrows to reinforce his point. The smartly uniformed Kowalski snapped to attention, bringing her right hand up to salute - though the left side of her lips still wore that devious smirk of which he was so fond.

In fact, everything about her drew a fondness from him. She could walk into a room, and the mere sight and scent of her never failed to arouse something primal, burning within him to want her, *take* her. She truly was intoxicating to his senses.

Such a woman was devastating to his self-control, were it not for his discipline. What was it about her he found so addictive?

"Yes, sir. My apologies."

Hans let out a single chuckle, and straightened up. "No harm done. You can apologise to me properly later." He gestured to the data tablet tucked under her left arm. "What do you have for me?"
"Something you may find interesting, sir." Her right hand drew out the tablet and handed it to him. "As per your request I have been regularly checking logs of Uni-Com calls made to or from the Hofferson, Corona and Dunbroch households."

Hans peered down at the glass tablet. "And?"

"For the most part, there have been no suspicious calls. Mostly to or from friends, or other departments. For instance, the Hoffersons have been in regular contact with Logistics regarding distribution of the new pulse assault rifles."

Hans flicked his fingers up the clear surface. It all seemed above board, and if he had to be honest, rather dull. Calls to medical huts, hospitals, armories, bars. "I presume you're going to get to the part that interests me?" he drawled.

"Yes sir." She gestured to the tablet. "Yesterday morning, someone called the Dunbrochs from a bar in Perdition."

Hans merely raised an eyebrow. It was obvious as soon as she started speaking she would rather tell him what she had noticed instead of let him read for himself. Perhaps she wanted to appear indispensable… but people like that were a threat.

In addition - a family in charge of synthohol-production, receiving a call... from a bar. How suspicious.

The left side of her lips twitched into a smirk once more. "A call made at two o'clock in the morning."

His other eyebrow joined the first, and his lips parted in comprehension. Well, now. That was a development. To confirm her story, he quickly tapped the leftmost white-lettered subheading 'DUNBROCH' and, with some nifty finger-work, organised the list into recent calls first.

Sure enough, there it was. A call made from a bar in Perdition at just after two in the morning - the only call at that hour on any day - and the duration of the call clocked in at over two hours. Granted, the skeptic in Hans pointed out it could simply be a long order, but it was tenuous at best. There was no other reason for a long call at such a drastic time, other than the desperate need for familial connection.

Which only meant Merida Dunbroch. Big mouth, big target… such a move could get her and her friends killed.

"Do we know for sure who made the call?"

"No, sir," Kowalski said. "Attempts to identify the caller through our surveillance software, even retroactively, were interfered with - most likely a third party program that scrambled the connection. All we know is that a call was made."

That was it, then. His suspicions, ever since the 'investigation' into the Valhalla's destruction, were becoming more and more plausible. None of the Valkyries knew how to interfere with Uni-Com software at such a level, which meant they had help.

Dawning comprehension washed over him like a heavy wave. This was not good.

"That will be all, Lieutenant-Colonel."

"Sir, I-"
Hans' tone turned hard and uncompromising. "Dismissed."

Kowalski's face flashed with hurt for a split second, before her military discipline came down like an impenetrable gate, turning her expression cold. Offering a final salute, she turned on her heel, and left the room.

Hans placed the tablet on the desk, and rested his left hand behind his back while his right index finger, in a loose circle, tapped on his lips as he stared off in thought. By rights, his first action should be to notify the Inquisitors of his suspicions, and let them take care of the problem. It was sedition, after all, and he was duty-bound to obey law. Perdition would be the recipient of several Inquisitorial guests who would leave no stone unturned.

The problem was: the Unifier believed the Ghosts, and the Valkyries, were dead. To follow procedure would be to put a gun to his head and pull the trigger.

No, there had to be another solution. Something far more subtle than a squad of Inquisitors turning a settlement upside down and making a racket.

It was when his eyes landed upon Elsa's sword that an idea hit him with all the satisfying force of a particularly strong synthohol. Subtle, yes, but risky.

"Uni-Com," he called out, "activate Sandbox Mode. Authorisation: Larsen-delta-four-four-six."

The customary faint blue of the glass screen morphed into a pale orange. "Awaiting command input," the speech line gently fluttered in the dead centre.

*Sandbox Mode* was a feature built into all Uni-Coms, yet known only to few and accessible to even fewer. It allowed the user to create and implement into the wider network programs of whatever they wanted, be it recording statistics of a particular holo-show, or snooping algorithms against a particular person. Another reason why it paid to talk to the right person at the right time, the right way, and with the right incentive.

"I want you to create a program," he said, and took one lingering look at the sword on his desk. He smiled to himself. She must think she is safe. She must think she is free of him, in the arms of the Ghosts.

No.

Elsa Snowfield still had her part to play - and she would be their end.
"Olaf"

"Olaf"

"I'm ready, Jack."

"Okay, normally ladies speak with a way huskier voice than that when they want my—"

"Can you not be so... so... you... for just one second?"

"Nope. Ready for what, Elsa?"

"Training."

"You sure?"

"Yes. I'm tired of running. I can't escape what I am, only embrace it. I choose to embrace it."

"Alright. We start at seven tomorrow morning. You're not up and outside by then, I'll know you changed your mind."

"I'll be there."

And she was.

See, from the moment Jack had awoken at six, a few mornings after their arrival at Camp Bravo, his mind had been filled with all the thoughts his younger, carefree self would have balked at. Things like maintaining the water supply to the base; since Canada's main water network had been inactive for decades, Bravo would have to rely on its backup water tanks, which meant Jack and Anna would have to melt snow inside the tanks every other day for the foreseeable future. Routine and regularity - anathema to the kid he used to be.

Although, the water was electrically heated, so there was that at least. Not to mention figuring out that the red line surrounding the base on one of the screens happened to be a rudimentary motion sensor system, a fact they realised with rude clarity when a piercing alarm had blared out across the base, scaring the hell out of them.

The culprit, once the team cottoned onto what the alarm was for and where the breach occurred? One moose, bemused as to why eight bipedal creatures turned up pointing weird-looking things at it.

So, with all those thoughts filling his mind as he walked out onto the empty patch of frost-tipped grass between the control room and northern fence at ten minutes to seven that morning, still munching on his second ration bar, he could be forgiven for nearly walking into her. There she was, smiling at him, a picture of winter stood with her hands behind her back, the white-flecked grass and snow-covered structures behind her one hell of a pretty backdrop.

And there he was, staring in surprise with one cheek puffed out by a half-chomped mouthful of ration bar.

"You're early," he mumbled, words half-distorted by his food.
Her eyes twinkled. "So are you."

It was so weird how her voice was fast becoming part of the list of Favourite Sounds on a Winter's Day, up there with the crunch of snow underfoot and children's laughter. He gulped down his mouthful and blinked - she was tidily dressed in her active duty uniform, much like him, of a black T-shirt and arctic camouflage pants he suspected had been procured from elsewhere in the base. Worse still, she looked bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. "How long have you been waiting?"

Elsa's head tilted to the side and back again. "For about half an hour. I wanted an early start."

Early was right - the sun was only just painting the white eastern sky with its scarlet palette. An impressed 'hunh' vibrated from his throat - certainly an eager beaver. Jack took his staff from his bracer, extended it, and tried to ignore the doubt in the back of his mind as to whether he could still teach while he used the staff to lower himself into a cross-legged position on the ground.

Elsa regarded him, perplexed. "Um…"

"You can stand if you want," Jack said, looking up at her, a chuckle escaping his lopsided smirk, "but it'll be murder on my neck after a while."

Elsa blinked. "Oh! Of course. Comfort." She dropped to one knee and lowered herself on one hand to mimic his position of both hands on the knees - sans staff, naturally. She watched him with the patient air of a student awaiting the teacher, far different to the last Snowfield he trained. Anna could barely keep still.

"Right." Jack laid his staff between them; whether it was a conscious or subconscious action, it felt like a physical boundary. "First we're going to start with a test. Y'know, so I can see for sure you want this."

An exasperated sigh rang out, and Elsa's entire body seemed to slump at the prospect. "As if the two of us beating each other up, and my coming to you wasn't enough proof?"

"Oh no, you've more than proved your conviction." Jack leaned forward. "But a race isn't decided until the last leg. I know there's still one thing you fear, and it's gonna hold you back. Pass this test - and you beat that fear."

Jack turned over his right hand, palm up, and moved it closer to her. "Take my hand."

Elsa's eyes went wide, and what colour once existed in her pale skin drained. "W-what?"

"Take my hand."

Her head quickly shook, and her hands enclosed each other. "I can't. I'll hurt you. Besides," she looked away, "when we fought, I touched you. That should be proof enough."

"When we fought, you weren't thinking about what happens when you touch someone, you were only thinking about taking me down." Jack gestured to her hands. "This is different. You're definitely thinking about it, and scared of it. Push past this fear… and nothing will stop you."

Elsa looked back at him, lips parted, eyebrows peaked in worry as her eyes lingered on his. He made a small beckoning gesture with his hand. "Take it. You can't hurt me, I promise."

Sapphire blues fell to his offered hand. Jack could see her chest rise and fall, over and over, until she took one big breath through her nose. Her lips fastened shut, and her eyebrows knitted together - slowly, her left hand retreated from the other, and cautiously glided across her thigh. Jack felt his
heart race; sure, there was the excited anticipation of Elsa finally taking that final step, but it felt so much stronger, somehow. Her hand inched closer and closer, leaving behind a faint, almost invisible trail of frost in its wake.

"It's okay," he murmured in encouragement, once she too noticed the twinkling on her thigh and hesitated. "You can't hurt me."

She looked up at him, and back down to her hand. Her lower lip dipped between her teeth, and she forced herself onward, inch by inch, millimetre by millimetre until, in a moment that caught Jack's breath, their fingertips connected. They were mildly calloused, a side effect of years of battle, and a thin layer of ice did indeed creep around his fingers much to her visible fear - but she was touching him.

Elsa let out a shaky breath, one Jack suspected carried with it her pent-up anxiety and fear at the simple act of touching someone. "I did it," she whispered.

Jack smiled at her. "Yeah. You did." He gently withdrew his hand, and wiggled his frost-tipped fingers at her. "And look, I'm not hurt."

Elsa's eyes found his. "But why did you-"

"Baby steps." Jack flexed his fingers, and flicked off the icy coating with his thumb. "It took a lot for you just to touch my fingertips; I'm not going to push you to go further than you're comfortable with."

The left side of her lips curled into a faint smile, and the hand once hovering aimlessly above her knee retreated to the protective embrace of the other. "Thanks."

"No problem." Jack's hand went back to its original position of resting on his right knee. "Fair warning though, we're going to be doing that at the start of every session. Pretty soon you'll be high-fiving people before you know know it."

Elsa's smile curved into something resembling lopsided bemusement. "I don't high-five."

Jack shrugged. "First time for everything."

Elsa chuckled to herself, and her once interlaced hands stroked awkward lines over her thighs. "So, what do we do? Am I to create a snowflake, or…?"

"Not just yet," Jack said, shaking his head. "We'll get to that. First we're going to help you understand your powers. What they are, what they mean, stuff like that. Everything you do starts here," he finished, tapping at his temple.

Elsa nodded slowly, and her eyes travelled down to his right hand as he picked up his staff, and gently stirred above the ground at his right. Two snowballs coalesced into existence and plopped down with a light crunch upon the grass.

"What are those for?"

"I'm gonna ask you a question," Jack announced as he returned the staff to its prior place. "and I want you to answer with the first thing you think of. Get it right, nothing happens. Get it wrong, you'll find out what they're for."

Elsa looked deeply uncertain at the prospect, her eyes dancing between him and the snowballs beside him. "Okay," she murmured.
"Okay. Let's start with a few warm-up questions. Sky - green or blue?"

"Blue," Elsa answered immediately, curling an eyebrow.

"Weapon - sword or gun?"

"Sword."

"Me - handsome or gorgeous?"

"Neither," Elsa quipped, smirking.

Jack sucked in a mock-offended breath. "Nice. Your powers - gift or curse?"

"Curse—aaah!"

Elsa yelped in shock as Jack, with viper-speed, grabbed a snowball and smooshed it all over her face. Wearing a lipped smirk, Jack watched her body freeze, face covered in flecks of snow.

"What the hell?"

"You got it wrong."

Elsa vigorously wiped off the splodges of white, and shot him a fierce glare once her eyes were clear. If it was anyone else, Jack would have felt the smallest regret - but it was all he could do to stop himself from bursting into laughter at the sight of two decidedly annoyed eyes surrounded by white powder.

"And that was the punishment?" Elsa made an irritated sound, and wiped off the rest of the snow. "Should I have answered with 'gift' then?"

"Sure, but you'd still be wrong."

"But…" she stared at him, eyes mildly wide in exasperation as she flicked the white powder off her hands. "How am I supposed to answer correctly?"

"That's the point - you don't. The question was to find out how you honestly feel about your powers and yourself - you feel cursed. Right?"

Elsa's eyes fell - there was no way she could lie on a reflexive answer. "Yes," she murmured, following a few seconds of hesitation.

Something in Jack's heart twinged at her response; the feeling of being cursed, or that something was wrong with them was an unfortunately common mindset for abnormals first coming to terms with their abilities, even minor ones. Yet for Elsa to confess her negativity toward herself pricked at Jack's heart in ways it never used to.

"Don't beat yourself up for being honest - because if you're not honest with me, I can't help you."

Jack shifted his weight onto his left buttcheek to better access the sidearm strapped to his thigh. Plucking the pistol from its holster, he checked the safety was on with his thumb before placing it between them.

Jack pointed to it. "What's that?"

Elsa gave him a funny look, like she could see his faculties abandoning him, and quickly shot a wary look at the snowball. "A gun."
"Right." Jack clicked his fingers. "In this moment, is it good, or bad?"

Elsa's right eye narrowed. "Neither."

"Exactly. Right now, it's just occupying space, but when you pick it up-" he laced his hand around the grip and held it in the air, finger around the trigger, "-then it means something."

Despite the uncertainty with which she eyed the pistol, Elsa slowly nodded. "The person holding the gun dictates whether it is used for good or evil?"

"Yep. It could be used to kill, or-"

Jack rubbed the barrel against his temple, much to Elsa's widening eyes of worry.

"-to scratch an itch, or-"

He placed it on the ground.

"-as a paperweight, or even-"

Jack picked up the pistol, and rested it on top of his head.

"-a spectacularly useless hat."

Elsa snorted into bemused giggles behind her hand, crinkled eyes fixed on the impromptu headwear. It struck Jack as odd in a self-conscious way how he normally launched straight into the speech with everyone else, yet felt compelled to make her laugh by goofing around. And when she did laugh, oh, was it a sweet sound.

Realising just how silly he looked with a pistol sat on his head, he cleared his throat and deadpanned his expression whilst returning the pistol to its holster. "Point is, like this gun, your powers are inherently neither bad nor good. They just are. What gives them meaning is what you use them for - you could use them in a bad way for a good reason, or use them the right way but for the wrong things. No matter what you use it for, your ice will still be just that: ice."

"I understand."

"Good, because this leads to the other part of understanding your powers - controlling them."

"How do I do that?"

"Easy - by realising you have no control."

Elsa blinked. "Okay. I take it back - now you're just intentionally confusing me."

Jack chuckled, and raised his hands in innocence. "It's not deliberate. See," he gestured to her hands, "your powers are an extension of you, which means they're going to be a reflection of you."

"In what way?"

"Well, when I'm sad or worried, the wind picks up and the air around me drops a few degrees. When Anna's anxious or angry, it feels like someone turned up the thermostat and didn't tell anyone."

"So I should control my emotions? Try not to feel?"

"God, no. That'd be a disaster. You can't control how you feel any more than you can stop the sun
from rising." Jack slowly shook his head. "Nothing good ever came from concealing and not feeling - because the harder you try to hold back the river, the harder the river fights against you. And in the end, you'll lose."

"You are a veritable well of analogies," she drawled.

Jack let out a self-effacing chuckle. "Blame my old mentor. Anyway, the key is not to stop your emotions, but recognise when they're affecting your powers, and act accordingly. Know when to calm down, and when to cut loose."

"I think I understand. Rather than attempt to suppress my emotions in the hope of controlling my powers, I should just accept that one is a part of me as much as the other."

"Bingo. Once you accept that, on a subconscious level, it gets easier. Your powers will respond to what you want them to do, without you even having to think it. See where I'm going?"

Elsa nodded.

"Good, because now you're going to cut loose."

"In what way?"

"As in," Jack leaned forward, curling his lips into a knowing smile, "you're going to use your powers for the first time."

Elsa's jaw visibly loosened, which went well with the widening of her eyes. Not to mention it was the second time she felt the colour drain from her face.

Oh, and the sensation of her stomach dropping to the ground.

"W-what?"

"You heard me." Jack picked up his staff, and jabbed it into the ground so he could use it to pull himself to his feet. Elsa's eyes followed him as he rose, praying he was kidding. "I could talk and talk, but until you take the next step and accept your new abilities, that's all it'll be."

Elsa shrank in on herself. Her hands clutched at each other, and her eyes dropped to a distant point around his knees. "I don't know if I can."

Jack cocked his head. "Why not?"

"I just don't know if——"

"Not good enough."

Elsa clamped her eyes shut. The air around her whipped itself into a sharp breeze, too harsh to be gentle but too weak to constitute a full gust. Jack wasn't upset or anxious, at least not outwardly, so it could only be her doing - and that idea alone sent a shock of worry down her spine, one she fought hard to control. "Jack, I can't just——"

Jack's voice rose. She could feel his frustration. "Yes you can, Elsa, what's stopping y——"

Before she could stop herself, something inside her snapped under the pressure of her achievements and Jack's scrutinizing eye. "Because I'm scared, okay?!"
Nothing could be heard in the moments following her outburst, but the snow-laden trees rustling with the gentle wind in the distance, the sound of Jack's breathing through his nose, and Elsa's own heartbeat in her ears. Though she could barely feel it, she was sure the temperature around them had dropped a degree, which didn't help the self-conscious burning in her cheeks and neck. She wasn't supposed to be this weak, like a scared child avoiding the space under their bed. She was a soldier, damn it.

"I'm sorry," she said amidst a self-reproachful sigh, and propped up her head with her right elbow on her knee, and temple in the crook of her hand. "This must be frustrating for you."

"Actually, it's pretty common."

Elsa looked up at him in mild surprise, with a little skepticism thrown in. Jack let out a breath through his nose, and squatted down before her, resting his head and weight on his staff as he held it upright with both hands.

"The fear, the uncertainty, I get it. It's different for some people than it is for others. Some think their powers are awesome from the start, y'know, 'cause they can do all this cool stuff, but for others?"

He gestured vaguely in her direction.

"You grow up thinking the world is what it is, you learn humanity's limits, and then one day you're doing stuff science says humans really shouldn't do. You're defying the laws of nature… and it's terrifying."

He leaned forward a little, and the left side of his lips curled into a lopsided smile. "But believe me when I say there is nothing wrong with being scared. Just remember that everyone here is one hundred percent behind you."

Elsa heard the words leave her lips before she even registered their exit, and wondered why the hell the question was so important to her. "Even you?"

And why, equally so, was his answer.

Jack smiled a full smile, throwing in an encouraging wink. "Especially me. You can do this."

"I can do this," she breathed. Her brow furrowed, not out of confusion or skepticism, but resolve. She repeated, in a stronger voice, "I can do this..."

Jack pulled himself upright and offered his hand. Elsa's eyes tracked it for a moment, but remembered - she couldn't hurt him. With no further hesitation she grasped his forearm, and as soon as she felt him reciprocate, she pulled herself up to stand.

Odd how her stomach tightened at the touch. For long enough to give Elsa the peculiar sensation of the world falling away, the two ice-wielders stood in silence holding each other's arms, before Jack cleared his throat and pulled his arm away. Her skin mourned his absence, until, of course, an awkward blush lit up her cheeks.

"So," she began, stopping once to clear her throat as convincingly as he did, and made an aimless motion with her hands, "...how do I do this? Do I… do I use my hands?"

Jack swung his staff to rest on his shoulders, and looped his arms around it before shrugging. "Whatever feels natural, but we use our hands to interact with the world around us, so it's a good place to start."
"Makes sense. But…"

Jack's eyebrows rose. "Something wrong?"

"No! Well, not wrong, per se, but…"

"...but?" Jack dragged out the vowel.

She couldn't help but glance up at his staff. Every recording of the battles he fought, every time they clashed in the theatre of war, he and his staff were one. Whenever he used his respectable powers, it was through his staff. Back when she was… that person… she once theorised it was a weakness she could exploit.

Jack followed her glance, and she admonished herself for telegraphing her thoughts so transparently when she saw him wince. "Ah. Yeah."

Elsa threw up her hands in a hasty attempt to remove the foot from her mouth. "I'm sorry, that was impudent of me. You don't have to—"

Jack shook his head, though he still looked visibly disturbed. "No, it's cool. I don't know why it doesn't work like that for me. I can whip up snowballs and snowflakes, no problem, but… without my staff…" he unfurled his arms to flick the staff up over his head, and caught it in one fluid motion. "...that's about all I can do."

Elsa cocked her head. "Why do you think that is?"

"Dunno." Jack shrugged, quirking his left cheek like it was no big thing. "Thought a lot about it, but, y'know, only reason I can think of is 'cause of how I bloomed… how I died. When I came back, I came back wrong."

The words left Elsa's mouth before she knew it. "I don't think you are."

"What?" Jack cocked a brow and a small, bemused lopsided smile.

It took a moment for Elsa to realise precisely what she had said, and was startled by how they had left her heart, not her mind, and the ease with which they were spoken. It startled her further still when, betraying her, her mind filled itself with the memories of something she had heretofore cast aside as meaningless - their kiss. Not helping.

She cursed the contrast of red upon pale pink. "Uh… I mean… you seem to have adapted…"

"Heh." If he had noticed her furious blushing, or was reading between her lines, he was hiding it. "Well, adapt or die. Anyway, we're here for you, so… clear your mind. Your powers are like your emotions; they wanted to be acknowledged, validated, felt. They've craved freedom for so long, so set them free."

Elsa found herself increasingly focused on his eyes.

"Give control to the controlled."

She understood - it was simple enough. She needed to let her powers flow and thrive, let them flourish. Cede control, and let her powers roam free without direction or aim, purpose nor thought. A moment's chaos from years of order.
Feel, not conceal.

Jack wordlessly moved aside, and a strange sensation within her informed her he had taken position behind and slightly at her right. She inhaled a breath, consciously willing herself to allow the apprehension, the nervousness, the fear to roam freely. She was about to defy all she had ever known and been taught, about to abandon control and let her powers roam wild. Precisely the thing her parents warned her against... but they weren't around anymore. Maybe they were right back then, but it was different now. She was in the safest place she could be, with someone who she couldn't hurt. Granted, she didn't know what would happen... but was that not the point? To turn the unknown into the known?

Inhaling another breath, Elsa focused on an empty patch of grass twenty feet ahead. She raised her arm straight, hand open, fingers loosely spread.

And then, rushing through the gates she had opened, came the sensations that used to terrify her and have her reaching for her pills: a chilly tingling, blossoming within her chest like the kiss of water on arid soil, spreading through every inch of her body, through her arms and down to her fingertips. Her mind rallied an alarm, her heart implored her to continue. The cold buzzing grew and grew, like she was merely a vessel for unimaginable, terrible power.

Her mind panicked. Memories of her room, her luxury prison filled her mind. Her father's eyes as he would look at her, radiating reassurance yet hiding helplessness. Her mother, constantly shifting on her feet as though to comfort her, yet held back by her fear.

The humming peaked, as though slamming against an invisible barrier. Elsa screwed her eyes closed and tensed her entire body, physically willing herself to let go. She held her breath, pushed, and pushed, until her body shook, and her pulse thundered in her ears.

Her powers stubbornly refused to obey.

The need for air overwhelmed her, and the breath she'd been holding burst out. Her entire body sagged, and when she opened her eyes, hoping to see her labor's fruits, she was greeted with nothing. Not even a sprinkling of snow.

Elsa tried again, pouring her frustration and will into her attempt. Once more, her body blossomed with the familiar hum of her gifts, once more did she throw everything she had into conjuring something. A snowball, a snowflake, a mere gust of wind. Something to reward her effort.

She was rewarded with the same gasp of air, and the same result - zilch.

"I can't do this." She shook her head, chest heaving with lungfuls of air. "I can't focus. My head is..."

Whether by exhaustion or unwillingness to finish her sentence, Elsa trailed off - but the meaning was clear: fear. Things that could go wrong, had gone wrong. Her ultimate enemy and greatest test: herself. She turned to look at Jack, hoping for an answer. Clarification, a boot up the ass, something to help her move the immovable.

Jack's expression was thoughtful as he leaned on his staff, sapphire eyes distant. "Well, I've often found true focus lies between rage and serenity."

Elsa recoiled her head a little, shooting him a skeptical look. "That's quite profound - I didn't know you were so wise."

Jack threw back his head and let out an abrupt bark of laughter, face cutting a self-effacing smirk.
"Me, wise? You're funny. I like you. No, I can't take credit for that - it's a line from an old, old movie. Z-Men, or something. Can't remember. Anyway, that line stuck with me 'cause it's true - so what I want you to do is find a memory of when you were your happiest. When nothing else in the world mattered but that moment in time. Picture it, feel it, hear it, live it… and try again."

Well, that was vague.

Elsa frowned at him, and carried that frown as she looked away. Eyes gazed into the past. A happy memory? There were many, too many to count. Which should she choose?

Her fourteenth birthday, where Anna tripped and face-planted Elsa's birthday cake after insisting she would be careful?

When the compatibility index test they took as a joke presented an eighty-five percent compatibility result between her and Dylan?

Maybe the evening where she spent time with Papa, simply watching reruns of Me, My Clone, and I, laughing at Four-Nine-Nine-Two's habit of getting into awkward situations, content to make the most of the father-daughter time?

But then a memory rose to the surface, beckoned by the call of her consciousness. The night before Anna's ninth birthday, where she sneaked into Elsa's room at an unholy hour, too excited to sleep. The sky was awake, Anna had told her, so she was awake… thus she had to play. In reality, Unity's air force was conducting flyovers in preparation for Unity Day in a month's time, so what constituted 'awake' were the blue trails of ionic jets against the starlit sky.

Of course, that mattered little to Anna. All she wanted to do was play - therefore, after several solid minutes of pestering and that damn song that never failed to crumble Elsa's willpower, the elder sister reluctantly rose from her bed, mourning the warmth of her sheets and the embrace of sleep.

It wouldn't have been so annoying had it not happened every damn year.

Cunning deactivation of the house's security system and wilful ignorance of the government-imposed curfew had led them outside in the house's wide back yard, where freak snowfall had covered it in a thick layer of soft, white powder.

The sensation of burning pricked at her eyes, and of the tightening of her throat as she smiled to herself. Yes. That would do. It was worth a shot.

Elsa looked back at the spot she'd been aiming at, the patch of frosted grass that had been taunting her. She lifted her hand, letting her mind dwell in happier times. Her heart ached with the memory, but it was strange how the pain and her powers existed as one, chasing away her fear and anxiety. She closed her eyes, allowing the memory and the warm humming to envelop her.

"I feel it…"

The wind began to pick up around her. She could feel its twists and turns, the way it glided over the grass and how it ruffled at her hair. Feel it, like the presence of an old friend.

"...what are you doing, Anna?"

"Making a snow angel! Come on, you try!"

"I don't think—"
The world around her suddenly sprang to life in her mind. Billions of twinkling, glittering stars, and she was connected to each and every one.

“What are you—oh, no.”

“Yep. Snowball fight. You in?”

“Oh, it's on!”

She felt the stars lift themselves into the black, floating and soaring around her, felt the hum of her gifts pulse and thrive. Streams of diamonds and lights encircling her, swirling from her fingertips, whirling around in the wind.

“Something's happening…”

She vaguely heard Jack's voice, like he was speaking from the very edges of her consciousness.

“You're doing great! Keep going!”

Her breaths were ragged. Her body trembled. Her lips remained curved, even as hot tears slipped from her burning eyes to trace wet lines down her cheeks. She was happy. Joyful.

"Hi, I'm Olaf, and I like warm hugs!"

"I love you, Olaf!"

The streams of stars found each other in her mind, coalescing together to form shapes. One sphere. Another, smaller than the first. A third, oval shape, and two more spheres, smaller than those before it.

A… person?

Before she could at least attempt to discern what it was, the last vestiges of her endurance left her, battered by the swell of unbridled emotion. Her body sagged, exhausted, her chest heaving for air, able only to feel so much. The humming diminished and faded away, its purpose complete.

Elsa opened her eyes.

It was not a person, but a snowman. Not just any snowman, but-

"Olaf…"

As close to Olaf as it could be. What was supposed to be his lower half was his middle, the small orbs constituting his eyes were uneven - not to mention the snow-carrot on his chin - and his head was misshapen… but it was him. The snowman she built with Anna. She let her emotions run free, let herself be enveloped in the warmth of happier times, and Olaf was the result.

Elsa took slow steps toward him, not daring to believe it. Did she truly create him, or did Jack quickly build him whilst her eyes were closed?

The instant her fingers touched Olaf's powdery cheek, however, she knew. Her hand shot up to cover her beaming lips, tears of joy and laughter spilling forth.

Creation.
Olaf was hers.

"I did it..." she murmured. She shot up, joy and excitement bubbling through her veins, and called out, "I did it!"

Elsa whirled around. "Jack, I did—"

But Jack wasn't there. No white-haired man casually leaning on his staff with an expression of pride - she'd even take a told-you-so look. Unless Jack had suddenly grown boobs and strawberry-blond hair woven into a tight bun, the only person there was...

"Anna?"

Anna's eyes went past her to rest on Olaf, unfocused, distant, like she was staring at something on him no-one else could see. Slow were her steps as, under Elsa's gaze, she moved past her, fingers warring with themselves.

Elsa couldn't place her expression - she was frowning, sure, but she was putting a lot of effort into maintaining it.

When she spoke, her voice was cracked and strangled. "His eyes are wonky."

Elsa blinked, and glanced between them. "Oh, I—"

Anna sniffed, and swallowed. "His nose is in the wrong place..."

Was she seriously nitpicking? Elsa's first success at using her powers, a landmark for her confidence, and there Anna was, being pedantic? Annoyance bubbled within as she raised an eyebrow.

"Well, it is my first—"

Anna's lip trembled, and the cracked quality to her voice reduced it to a hoarse whisper, "And his body is top heavy..."

Elsa rolled her eyes and groaned. "Anna..."

"But he's perfect..."

"He—what?"

Anna's whimper took Elsa so off guard that, when the younger sister in a split second turned and surged herself toward her, knocking Elsa back a few inches, she was completely unable to respond. Elsa's body went rigid whilst her arms shot away, and the anxiety depriving her of human contact shot up to alert levels.

When she realised what was happening, when Anna's warmth spread across Elsa's body like a cosy fire, with her arms wrapped around her midsection so tightly Elsa struggled to breathe - when Anna buried her face in Elsa's shoulder and sobbed - Elsa decided.

Her fears be damned; the moment she had been craving ever since she saw Anna in the barn all those weeks ago was finally here. Pushing aside her anxieties with greater strength than she knew she had, Elsa enclosed her arms around Anna.

It was like nothing she'd ever felt, to be able to hold her again, and be held. Her lips etched themselves in a smile so wide, and as Anna's legs seemed to give way and pull her to the ground, Elsa was only too happy to oblige. As soon as her knees met the stiff grass, Elsa buried her head in
Anna's shoulder, letting her own tears flow free and proud, both bodies jerking with sobs.

"I m-missed you so s-so m-much..." Anna managed to croak a muffled whimper.

"I m-missed you t-too," was Elsa's response.

Anna suddenly pulled back, her reddened sky-blue eyes wide and pleading as she stared at Elsa. "Don't leave me again. Please, p-please don't leave me again!"

Elsa smiled with lips of tears. "Never."

"P-promise me! Promise you won't leave!"

Elsa stroked the side of Anna's face, feeling the wetness of her sister's unbidden emotion under her fingertips. "I promise. I promise I will always be here."

"S-sisters forever?"

"Sisters forever."

Elsa didn't know from where Anna had managed to procure a carrot, but nevertheless, with some twigs and stones collected from outside of the camp and a little reconstructive snow-surgery, Olaf looked less like a warped snowman and more like the one from her memory.

There wasn't a single moment where Elsa wasn't smiling as they worked, for nothing in the world could dampen her spirits. There was no awkwardness, there were no unsaid words nor the prevailing sense that Anna wanted to be elsewhere. Nothing but two sisters building - or rather, rebuilding - a snowman.

After that, it had been decreed in a rather theatrical voice that a royal picnic was in order, so a quick jaunt to the mess hall had yielded an assortment of fruits and nuts, plus further reinforcement of Elsa's opinion Anna had a borderline unhealthy addiction to carrots and was likely to eventually turn the same colour as her hair.

"You know," Elsa said, midway through slicing off part of an apple with Anna's spare combat knife, "I've given it a lot of thought, and you were right."

Sat at Elsa's side, on the bedsheets masquerading as a picnic blanket, Anna looked at her. "About what?"

It was surprisingly easy for Elsa to ignore her pet hate of people talking with food in their mouths. Maybe she was mellowing out in her old age, or such quibbles were, in light of their grand arena, inconsequential.

"The second season of Into the Night was better than the first."

Anna blinked. "Elsa, that was ten years ago. I mean, yeah, I'm right, but... damn, 'sis. You still remember that?"

Elsa snorted into a chuckle. "Up until the deck of the Guardian Star, the argument over that was the biggest fight we'd had."

"Shyeah, and look at us now." Anna popped a slice of apple into her mouth. "Two soldiers capable of killing someone with our bare hands, who have seen more than anyone should see."
Elsa hummed her agreement. "Who taught you that thing with your legs, by the way? Where you…"

She trailed off, and it wasn't until she mimicked a pair of legs over her shoulders that Anna's confused expression brightened. "Oh! You mean where I-" she make a rolling gesture, "-that was Jack. Took me ages to master it, after a lot of face-planting the floor, let me tell you!"

"Well," Elsa chuckled, remembering how she was thoroughly schooled by her little sister, "it was a thing of beauty - and looking back, I think… when we talked in the mess hall, when you stood between me and my mission, I realise now… I've never been more proud of you."

With another two slices in her mouth, Anna's impression of a wide-eyed hamster was on point. "Big thither thayth what?"

"We are sisters, we are family, and you knew that - but you still held your ground, because you knew it was the right thing to do." Elsa smiled, and attempted to ruffle Anna's hair - though the nature of her braided bun meant the only thing wiggling was Anna's entire head. "Doing the right thing always came so naturally to you."

"I learned from the betht," Anna nudged her.

Elsa scoffed. "Hardly. The right thing, all those years ago, would have been to at least send you a message. Jack was correct in that judgment."

Anna swallowed, and inclined her head as if to concede the point, but not outwardly state it. "Maybe - but it's not like you take all the responsibility."

"What do you mean?"

Anna sniffed, and exhaled a sigh. "Remember in the church, when I told you I wanted to be stronger, be better so I could come rescue you?"

"Yes."

Anna began picking at the frosted grass at the edge of the sheet - the immediate white-tipped area around her fingertips began melting. "If I'm so good at doing the right thing, I'd have actually done that."

"Why didn't you?"

"It would have put everyone else in danger. Pitch told me a pretty convincing scenario where I would be captured, they'd figure out who I was, and then interrogate me for information."

Elsa's stomach turned at the prospect.

"Not like I'd've told them anything, but… then he told me they'd find you. They'd reunite us… and then they'd put a gun to your head. I'd have told them everything, everything they needed to know just to keep you safe - and then they'd kill you in front of me."

Elsa nodded gently to herself. Such ruthless tactics would be just another Tuesday to the Inquisitors - for extra cruelty, they'd keep her alive long enough to watch them destroy the Star using her information.

"So you stayed - which was the right thing to do."

It was Anna's turn to snort. "Doesn't feel right, most days."
"Sometimes it doesn't."

Anna let out a breath through her nose, and continued her distant stare at the grass ahead. Elsa watched her closely, watched how her brow dipped and rose, how she picked at the grass with increasing viciousness, and noticed the rather pleasant smell of cooked apple wafting through the air, ostensibly from the half-fruit in her hand.

It didn't take a detective to know what was on her mind, for Anna acted much the same way the night Elsa explained what happened to her.

"Don't hate Mama and Papa for what happened to me," Elsa spoke softly.

"I don't—" Anna blurted, and then hesitated as though checking herself, chewing at her lip as she exhaled through her nose. Repeating in a much softer voice, "I love them. Since you told me, I've been trying to figure out how I feel about them… and I don't hate them."

Elsa sensed a 'but' coming, and prompted accordingly.

"But I'm so angry with them, and not just for taking you away from me. For how they dealt with it. There were better choices they could have made but…"

"Anna," Elsa tried to soothe her, "they did what they thought was best."

Anna closed her eyes, shaking her head. "No, they did what Unity thought was best, what they told them to do. They told them to lock you away, and cut off your contact with everyone but them."

"None of us questioned Unity on anything, Anna. Sometimes we didn't like it, but we submitted, because we all thought they knew best…"

There was a sudden rush of wind at her back, strong enough to ruffle her hair and whip at the sheet they were weighing down, and she looked up at the sky just in time to see Jack and Night Fury whizz overhead. She smiled to herself, feeling her stomach flutter.

"It's only now that we know different."

"I know, I know," Anna sighed, flopping her head down on her fist. "I just think they could have handled the situation better."

Elsa's smile became a one-sided smirk. It was classic Anna; grudgingly concede the point, but not do so in any obvious manner. "How?"

"I dunno." She shrugged halfheartedly. "Maybe taken us both and run away, or something."

"Which would have created a whole new set of problems, Anna. A life on the run… is no life for two young girls. Especially when one is blooming and the other… well, let's look at this another way. Let us hypothesise that, rather than do what they did, we all ran away. What would have happened then?"

"I don't know," Anna mumbled.

"Exactly. It is easy for us to look into the past and make judgement calls, but the fact is that we were not the ones making the decisions at the time with the facts at hand. We did not know then what we know now - and I feel that, as painful and terrible as it was, Mama and Papa were doing the best they could to protect the both of us."
"Sure. Taking away three years of your life sounds like protection, alright."

"Anna, listen to me." Elsa shuffled on her legs to face her, and in a moment that surprised both her and the little voice of worry in the back of her mind, took her sister's hands. "Yes, it was hard. Yes, I mourn the time we lost. Yes, part of me is angry at what happened, and yes, there are some choices I should have made that I didn't, and shouldn't have made that I did."

Anna turned to look at her. Sapphire eyes filled with thought and emotion, that Elsa could almost see the chaos behind.

"But all of that led to this moment in time. You and I, sisters again. I've made friends of people who I never thought I would. I'm going to be an aunt-- she nodded toward Anna's abdomen--and for the first time forever… I feel whole again. So maybe things could have happened differently, but to be honest?"

Elsa's smile, if it could curve any wider, met the burning of her eyes.

"I would not change a single thing."

There were times she would think to herself - what would have happened if she never became a Valkyrie? If she had given in to those urges all those years ago to open the window, take Anna, and run away?

But then her mind would remind her - very little would have changed. The Spirits and the Furies would likely still have fallen, and the Purge would have happened regardless of her involvement. There would simply be three Valkyries instead of four, and if the takedown of the Furies was any indication, the Valkyries would have functioned perfectly well without her involvement. Not to mention the possibility of Anna not being a Ghost; how would the Purge have progressed without her presence? Would they still have survived, or would they have fallen under Unity's boot, ushering in a new age of hopelessness for abnormals everywhere?

She always found it curious, how the thought of Jack's death, or the idea of never meeting him in the first place, never failed to arouse a strange sense of fear.

No, for her to have what she had now, history had to progress exactly as it did… even the deaths of her parents.

A flurry of movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention, and she looked just in time to see Jack and Night Fury gently land, with the former walking off to meet an approaching Rapunzel whilst the latter dismounted Toothless and went off to the mechanics workshop. Jack walked off toward the command centre with Rapunzel falling in step behind him, listening to her talk and animatedly gesture about something Elsa couldn't quite catch, and an unpleasant sensation tickled at the pit of her stomach.

When he turned and caught her eye, however, the uncomfortable prickling vanished in favour of an uplifting flutter when he gave her a wink and a smile.

Unfortunately for Elsa's dignity, she'd forgotten how observant Anna could be, since the shy smile and wave she gave in return wasn't subtle enough.

"I've seen that look before."

Elsa looked at her sister, frowning. "What look?"

Anna casually popped a slice of apple in her mouth. "That's the look you had when you liked
Dylan.

Anna then made a coughing noise that sounded suspiciously like 'prick'.

Elsa rolled her eyes, though she wished her cheeks were not the recipient of a heated blush. "You're seeing things."

"If you say so."

"I do say so."

"But if you want my opinion-"

"Not really."

"-you have what we in the medical profession call a crush."

Elsa scoffed, and dismissively waved off the implication. The notion was ridiculous; Jack was a colleague, friend, and superior officer. Childish things such as crushes did not enter the equation. Even if it did explain the lightness and flutters she felt whenever she was around him.

"I suggest you re-apply for your license to practice medicine, as your diagnosis leaves much to be desired," Elsa drawled.

The knowing smirk on Anna's lips filled Elsa with the deep desire to freeze it off. The irritated scowl she threw her sister's way would have to do.

"Look, Anna," Elsa abruptly said, intent on changing the subject from something as wholly embarrassing as her sister's flights of fancy, "I don't know why Jack disappeared and you came to be here, or how. I'm just glad you're here with me."

Anna's infernal smirk became a much more palatable smile, and she leaned in for a hug - one which Elsa was only too happy to reciprocate. Having Anna in her arms once again was like nothing she'd felt before, and quite honestly, she couldn't get enough.

"Me too, 'sis." Anna rubbed her back. "And I promise you: no-one, nothing is gonna tear us apart again. After all-"

Anna pulled back, and rested her left hand on her abdomen.

"This little one needs their aunt and godmother in their life."

Elsa's jaw loosened in shock. "Aunt and… godmother?"

Anna nodded vigorously. Words failed Elsa, in that her brain was unable to form complex sentences - so she went for the physical expression instead: surging forward for another tight, loving, sisterly hug.

Now she had another joyful memory with which to work her magic.

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice cracking far too much for anything louder. "I swear I will live up to this honour."

"I know you will," Anna murmured, sniffing. "And I'm going to ask you a question, and it's the most important one of your life. So, no bullshit. Okay?"
Anna pulled away once more, and something inside Elsa flinched at the sheer seriousness radiating from her younger sister's expression.

"Okay," Elsa spoke.

Anna straightened up and regarded Elsa with an expression of utmost solemnity, she would have easily passed for a city court judge. Bar the twitch of her lips.

"Elsa Marie Snowfield-

Until the twitching became a betraying beam.

"Do you wanna build a snowman?"

Elsa breathed an internal sigh of relief, one that went well with the soaring of her heart into the stratosphere. Those words, those magic words that banished all the negativity in her mind, and awareness of the shitty state of the world.

There was only one answer.

"Anna Iduna Bjorgman," she announced, and clapped her hands together.

"I would love nothing more."
Inner peace was not something Merida was familiar with - or peace of any kind, in fact. See, living with three boisterous brothers and an equally spirited father, she had gotten used to controlled chaos and nigh-endless noise. It had become somewhat routine. When silence reigned in the DunBroch household, it would mean two things: either the family was asleep, or one of the boys was in deep trouble. Three, if the boys were up to shenanigans.

So the transition to joining the Ghosts - at least, in an honorary form as she, like the other three had not been formally invited yet - was jarring at first. Still, time had enabled her to acclimatise to it. Living with them was a case of ordered chaos, a pseudo-military bedlam. On a sliding scale of order, it was smack in the middle between Elsa and Hubert.

Speaking of Elsa, she had been settling into her training with difficulty, yet nothing Merida thought she couldn't overcome. Astrid, Rapunzel and Merida herself had all practiced and played with their powers in secret over the years, and the Ghosts had undergone training in how to utilise their gifts both on and off the battlefield. Elsa, on the other hand, had been forced to learn from scratch far later than the others.

Still, Merida was impressed at how quickly Elsa had grasped the basics, in between wondering why Astrid was in yet another bad mood. Sure, for everyone else it was second nature, but as Merida wandered the base in search of something to do, she never failed to catch a glimpse of the childish wonder and awe on Elsa's face every time she conjured something as small as a snowball or snowflake.

And Jack's expression? Merida wasn't sure if it was a mentor-like warmth and pleasure, or something more. There were a few instances where Merida debated signing up for powers training, but there wasn't much Jack could teach her that she didn't already know.

The unfortunate effect was that it all left Merida feeling somewhat of a loose end, of existing outside of the continuum and the natural progression of time. Everyone else had something to do, from Hiccup - to Merida's bewilderment, that was his actual name - and his scurrying around to ensure the camp was ship-shape, to Anna and Rapunzel's efforts to bring the medical bay up to code.

She had tried to busy herself with practicing using her sniper rifle, which she had tentatively named Longtooth. She could dismantle and put it back together with average speed, and using it wasn't much of an issue. Peer through the scope, place the crosshairs, compensate for wind, make the final adjustments, and squeeze the trigger. Sure, she was accurate, and could hit the bullseye all the live long day.

It all seemed so clinical, though, and using the scope brought with it a tunnel vision that caused her to be caught off-guard whenever someone approached. She missed her wider field of vision, disliked the detached form of killing - she had no illusions as to what she would be doing - that came with viewing the world through a small lens.

In short, she missed Heartseeker.
She missed the satisfaction of mastering the arc, trajectory and wind direction to guide an arrow exactly where she wanted it. Missed the tickle of the fletching between her fingers, and the pressure of the drawn bow string against her fingertips as it yearned to snap straight. She missed it like she would a limb - indeed, her affinity for a bow and arrow was as much a part of her as a limb.

So, even with the sense of peace gained from a semi-reunion with her family, and a new purpose in the world, she had still felt like something was missing.

It was a feeling that, as she slammed the clip into *Longtooth* and pulled back the slide, sat cross-legged on her bed in her quarters, hoping to distract herself, had not gone away no matter how she tried to get used to her rifle. Shouldering the stock, she peered down the scope, only to be struck with a realisation that she probably would never become accustomed to it.

Grunting with frustration, she forcefully yanked out the magazine and flopped the rifle down on the bed, and then ran her hands through her hair with a loud sigh. Even *Longtooth* was taunting her.

Three raps echoed from her door.

"Come in," she called in exasperation. Visitors weren't high on her list, but it might be important.

The door slowly swung open, and Kozmotis' head curled around it. His golden eyes glanced between her and *Longtooth*. "Do you have some time?"

Merida snorted, and made a sweeping gesture in approximation of her situation. "Far too much, apparently. What's up?"

"Something you may be interested in." Kozmotis moved into the room and closed the door behind him, causing a flash of mild annoyance in Merida's chest for not asking, first. Then again, his social skills approximated that of a jagged blade. "Do you remember that book I took when we were exploring the base a week ago?"

"Aye." She frowned. "I hope ye're not reading me a bedtime story."

Kozmotis gave her a funny look as he pulled up a chair by the bedside. "Of course not - and besides-" he tapped at the left pocket of his pants, "this is not a book suitable for children."

Merida narrowed her eyes. "Did you just call me a-"

"No, I'm about to tell you of its contents."

"Oh. Okay."

"Okay."

Merida and Kozmotis looked at each other for a moment, with the latter sporting a bemused expression, and Merida herself one of awkward blushing. She looked away and scratched at her scalp. "So, what's tha book about?"

"It's a journal."

Merida rolled her eyes, and her lips quirked into an uneven line. "Dear diary: today I saw a moose. I called him Steve."

"Joke and be derisive all you want." Kozmotis' expression was spectacularly deadpan. "But there is something in this of interest to you."
Merida looked at him through the corners of her eyes just as his black eyebrows rose. Exhaling a breath through her nose, she lamely gestured in the vicinity of the pocket as a prompt.

"This journal belonged to Ironclad, and it details many of the team's exploits over the years. I can only presume it was left behind in the scramble to leave this camp - but there is a particular entry in here about one of the more legendary members of the team."

Merida's hands fiddled with each other, and she shrugged as if to say, "So ye gonna tell me, or what?"

"Tell me, what do you know of Z?"

Absolutely nothing came to Merida's mind. All she knew was that Z was one of the founding members, and used a bow and arrow. "Nada," she answered.

"Well, I won't bore you with the details. In fact, I'll commit a great travesty against literature, and skip to the end."

Which was a good thing. Merida's reserves of patience were small, and fast wearing thin.

"It was an intel-gathering mission gone wrong. One of their sources had leaked the development of a new type of tank - which became the Odin-class - and so the Ghosts' mission was to obtain the plans from a nearby data transfer site in order to ascertain any weaknesses. Only, the source was inaccurate."

"What happened?"

Kozmotis relaxed into the chair and folded his arms, giving a small shrug. "Unity were there in far greater numbers than the Ghosts were led to believe. The team proceeded anyway, believing that the blueprints were worth the risk, but in the end, were nearly surrounded. Worse still, Unity was moving on their extraction site. So the command to retreat was given, and the LZ moved to the other side of a small forest north of their location."

Nodding, Merida gestured for Kozmotis to continue. "The problem they ran into was that Unity was hot on their heels, and even if they reached their helicopter, Unity would be close enough to shoot it down. So, as they ran through the woods, Z stayed behind."

"I know this part," Merida said, frowning with recollection as her index finger floated up and down. "they used ta tell stories of this in tha Staging Grounds."

"Yes." Kozmotis nodded. "With her bow, named Windsong, Z commenced a series of hit and run attacks throughout the woods on the advancing Unity troops. She was, if you'll pardon the phrase, like a ghost - she'd appear one moment to put an arrow in a soldier's head, then disappear the next, only to strike from a different direction each time. One by one, soldiers would fall. From what I heard, the survivors talked as though the forest itself was attacking them."

"Aye, and I remember hearin' how tha soldiers were too scared ta advance any further, 'cause they were gettin' picked off like daisies." Merida chuckled to herself. "I always did wonder why Drill Sergeant Murphy came out in a sweat whenever that day was mentioned."

"And for good reason. Z single-handedly held back the troops long enough for her team to get away. She was a one-woman army, if you'll pardon the hideous over-simplification."

"Obviously she didnae make it out."
"No." Kozmotis' lips twitched - was that a smile? "It took an airstrike that razed the forest to the ground for her to fall - her last words over the radio being, 'Took them long enough'. Thanks to her sacrifice and bravery, we are still here."

"Sounds like a kickass lady,"

Merida quipped with an ill-hidden flippancy, "but I'm still wondering why yer tellin' me all this?"

"Because-" Kozmotis paused. Pushing himself up by his knees, he made for the door and opened it just enough to lean round and retrieve something hidden on the other side. "-when Z fell to Unity, all that was left was her shattered bow."

He turned back and closed the door behind him with one hand... but in the other was a long black plastic case held by the handle. Merida caught the letter 'Z' emblazoned on the front. "In my perusing of the journal, I happened upon an entry where Ironclad fondly talks of Z and of Windsong. Of course, this journal was written before Z's death, but..."

He lifted the box toward her.

"Would it interest you to learn Windsong had a sister?"

Merida's eyes flitted between his golden gaze and the box in front of her. Her eyes widened. It couldn't be. He had to be messing with her, baiting her hope only to snatch it away. Kozmotis jiggled the box a little, and whatever reservation Merida possessed, vanished. Shuffling to the edge of the bed so her legs dangled from the side, Merida carefully took the box from him and rested it upon her lap. It was fairly heavy, but evenly weighted, and the 'Z' shone up at her in the overhead light.

Merida opened the clasp of the box and lifted the lid, as Kozmotis said, "Merida Dunbroch, meet Trueshot."

She gasped and rested a hand over her heart, for what graced her eyes was a bow, the most beautiful compound bow she had ever seen. Black, it was sleekly built with pulleys on the bow tips, and a small lip upon which to rest the arrow. In her shocked gaze, she even saw a laser sight fixed to the handle. "Is... is this fer me?" she whispered.

"Yes," Kozmotis answered, causing her to look up at him in disbelief. "You've been walking rather aimlessly around the camp of late, and it has become a tad annoying seeing you bereft of purpose. After all, what use to us is an archer without her bow?"

Had Merida not been so stunned by the unfolding of events, she would have kicked his leg for being so blunt. Sliding the box from her lap onto the bed so she could stand, she grasped Trueshot by its handle and took it from its cushioned confines. Feeling the rubberised grip under her fingertips, she admired its lightness and well-balanced construction. Unlike Heartseeker, Trueshot was a compound bow rather than a recurve, and as such, would be tougher on the first draw in exchange for increased range, power, and accuracy. Not that she needed it, of course; her secondary abnormality granted her near-unerring aim.

Except for the time she shot at Kozmotis, but she would never talk about that in public.

Enclosing two fingers around the string, she aimed an invisible arrow at the wall to her right and pulled it back - the resistance was strong, and it took some effort to fully draw it. Definitely tuned for an abnormal's innate strength.

"I..." she murmured, slowly relaxing the string, "I dinnae know what tae say..." She looked at him.
"Thank—"
Kozmotis held up a hand. "Don't mention it. You can thank me with every clone soldier you shoot. I expect at least sixty."

"Laddie," she turned back her gaze to the bow… her bow, "I'll kill six hundred."

"Good." There was an almost upbeat quality to his voice which caused her to throw him a surprised glance. "Now, there are a few crates of arrows in the armory. I suggest we practise."

Merida raised a brow.

We?

As it turned out, yes. We.

Kozmotis had taken the liberty of setting up three targets in the outdoor space between the mess hall and the armory. Three dartboard-like discs resting on wooden easels, each set at varying heights, specifically for Merida to practise.

To her consternation and ire, she needed it. What was she thinking? It was a completely different bow in a completely different environment. It wasn't like she was going to instantly nail the bullseyes without thinking, like she used to, after weeks and weeks without a bow. Sure, her arrows always landed within the centre circle, but it wasn't enough. It demanded—she demanded—perfection. Dead centre or bust.

Another arrow sailed through the air faster than the eye could see, and again to her howling anger, it landed just on the cusp of the bullseye.

"Damn it!" she yelled, throwing her head back and her free hand into the air.

Kozmotis moved in front of her, hands clasped behind his back, and walked over to inspect the targets. "You've consistently hit the bullseye every time, Merida."

"I know."

"You're accounting for arrow speed and-" he gestured around him, "-a particularly breezy day."

"I know."

"So what's your problem?"

Merida made a sound of frustration. How did he not get it? Mr. Bloody Learned and Intelligent, not figuring why she was so vexed? "'Cause it's not right! I could hit an arrow dead centre, an' then fire another arrow right through that one without even thinkin'! This—this is just pathetic by ma standards!"

With his hands still clasped behind his back, Kozmotis turned just enough to regard her over his shoulder. He uttered a thoughtful hum, then looked away. "Perhaps you need an incentive."

Before Merida could ask what the incentive was, Kozmotis swept off to the highest target. He wrenched out the arrow from the bullseye, tossed it away, and positioned himself in front of it, checking for something over his left shoulder. Seemingly satisfied, he took three steps toward her, and stood at ease.

"I'm afraid I don't have an apple to put on my head."
Merida's heart couldn't decide whether to sink to her feet or leap to her mouth, but her stomach clenched all the same. Kozmotis had positioned himself between her and the target so that the true centre of the bullseye was just visible past his left cheek. Barely half a centimetre.

"Yer kiddin'..."

Kozmotis raised a brow. "Do I look like I'm joking?"

"No, and that's what's freaking me out!"

"I thought you feared nothing?"

"I dinnae fear anythin'!"

"Then what's the issue?"

Merida spread her arms wide, looking at him like he had grown a second head. "What's the—I might hit ye, ye daft spoon! What d'ye think yer playin' at?!"

"You won't hit me."

Merida's eyes went wide with disbelief. "What makes ye say that?!!"

"Because I trust you."

"I—" Merida began, but the words stilled in her throat. She blinked. "...ye what?"

"I'm not in the business of repeating myself." Kozmotis stiffened, lifted his chin and rolled back his shoulders.

"No—no, no-no-no. Wind it back a minute-" she made a rapid circular gesture with her finger, "-ye just said ye trust me."

Kozmotis' expression barely shifted from unreadable stone. "As I said, I'm not in the business of repeating myself. Now, are you going to take the shot, or shall I assume you are—how does Jack put it—bottling it?"

Whatever surprise and shock Merida felt at Kozmotis statement of trust vanished behind red hot pique. He always knew what to say, what buttons to press. "I don't bottle it, laddie," she growled.

"Then take the shot."

"Not with ye in ma way."

"Why not?"

"Because I dinnae wanna hurt ye, alright?!" she yelled.

Silence descended between them following her outburst, though to the momentary confusion mixed in with her heated emotion, Kozmotis didn't even flinch. In fact, the left corner of his lips were the only thing to move.

"And that is why I trust you." His chest rose and fell with a deep breath that annoyingly came off as smug. "Besides, Rapunzel is merely a call away. Should the worst happen, I will be fine."

"And what makes ye think I won't hit ye? What if—"
"Merida," he said in that silky voice, which was fast becoming one of the nicer things to grace her ears, "the first shot you ever took at me, missed. As much as I wish it weren't true, history likes to repeat itself."

Merida stared at him, weighing it out - and ignoring the less-than-subtle dig. Kozmotis seemed confident, even trusting, in her ability to once again miss him and hit the centre. So much so to stand in front of her, and intentionally put himself in harm's way… for her. Such trust swelled her heart, but the way it grated against her rising anxiety sent her stomach into knots.

"One condition," she said in a no-nonsense tone. "Ye get so much as a scratch, I'm callin' Rapunzel."

"If that is what it takes for you to get a move on, then, fine. I haven't got all day."

"Ye're insane," she whispered to herself.

With a heart that beat a dull ache of worry, Merida pulled an arrow from her quiver and nocked it. Adjusting her feet at shoulder-width so her left side faced Kozmotis, she drew back the string and took aim more careful than any in her life. One slight twitch was all it would take.

The breeze brushing at her hair slowed, changing direction. She let out a breath through her mouth, and in the split-second's pause, she let fly, her heart filling her throat.

There was a thud, and a hiss. Kozmotis jerked to his right, turning his head away - and Merida immediately launched into a jog toward him. "Laddie, are ye hurt? Where'd it get ye?"

"I'm fine," Kozmotis drawled, gingerly touching his cheek.

"I'll be the judge o' that," she said as she pulled up to him. Batting his hand away, she took his chin and turned his head for a better look.

Her heart sank - sure enough, the arrow had split his cheek into a thin line. It wasn't long or deep by anyone's standards, but it was enough to arouse a sense of guilt in her stomach.

"Oh, Koz. I hurt ye. I'm sorry—we shouldnae have done—"

Even though his eyes were elsewhere, the rolling was clearly caught. "It's just a scratch. What's your problem?"

"Och, stop bein' so bloody manly! Go see Rapunzel!"

"For this?" Kozmotis scoffed. "Would you?"

Merida made a sound of frustration behind gritted teeth - that wasn't the point, even if it was true! There seemed to be no swaying him, so if he wasn't going to the medical bay, she'd be damned if she didn't help him somehow.

Pulling her hand away, she quickly licked her thumb and then used it to wipe away the small amount of blood seeping from the cut. Over and over she stroked, causing small winces and twitches of the muscle under his cheek.

"Merida."

His hand went up to hers and held it firmly, stopping her from cleaning the blood… but his touch didn't leave her hand. Rather, it lingered, his grip loosening in hesitation.

...and Merida suddenly became, as words failed her, aware of the softness of his grey skin under her
fingers. Conscious of the slow thumping in her ribs, and the shallow depths of her breaths. Keenly aware of the flecks of hazel in amongst the gold of his eyes, and as her gaze flicked down, how his lips were parted.

Most startling of all, through the light-headed haze in her mind, how she seemed to be automatically craning her head up toward him... and he to her.

"Night Fury to Pitch, you there?"

And then the moment ended.

Jerked from her trance, Merida let out a shaky breath and pulled away just as Kozmotis yanked his hand from hers, and for the briefest of seconds, her skin mourned the absence of his touch, and she severely debated punching Hiccup in the face.

"...what, Night Fury?" Kozmotis practically growled his anger.

"Meet me in the armory - need to run something by you. It's important."

Kozmotis yielded an audible sigh, and pinched the bridge of his nose in obvious frustration. "Fine," he groaned. "I'll be there."

"Duty calls, eh?"

Kozmotis looked at her, and for a moment, Merida swore she saw regret flash in his eyes. "In a manner of speaking."

Merida nodded, feeling a surge of shy heat in her cheeks. "Ye should probably—"

"—I should go and see—"

"—what Hiccup's wanting ye fer."

"Indeed."

"A'right."

If the air between them were to grow any more awkward, reality itself would warp the world into a million odd angles. Kozmotis opened his mouth and sucked in a breath, then seemingly reconsidered, before sweeping off to the armory, leaving Merida to stare at the ground in the hope it would swallow her up.

"Yo, Koz?" she found herself calling. Kozmotis turned to look at her over his shoulder. "Make sure ye see Rapunzel. Got it?"

Shaking his head in exasperation, Kozmotis made a dismissive wave and headed on his way. Merida watched him go, wondering why the hell there was a strange pull that never existed before.

It was then that she glanced at the target board, and sharply inhaled a breath.

"Son of a bitch," she murmured.

The arrow was embedded in the perfect centre of the board, dead straight and proud.

A newfound surge of confidence rushed through her, banishing her confusion. Drawing herself upright, she marched over to stand a ways before the first target. She drew and nocked an arrow, and
took aim before steadily walking a path parallel across the targets.

One arrow flew, and then the second. Both slammed into the dead centre of both targets, like her skill had never left her, and with each thud that reached her ears, her confidence grew.

Then came the last one, where the middle was already host to the arrow she shot past Kozmotis. Steeling herself with a deep breath, she nocked her third and final arrow, and took aim. With a long exhalation, her fingertips released the string, the arrow's fletching brushing across her cheek as it was propelled from the bow.

The split-second sound of plastic scraping on plastic reached her ears, and she smiled to herself with vindicated success. *Trueshot,* indeed; the arrow had split the first in two, with its halves dangling helplessly either side.

"I'm back," she murmured to herself. "Eyes up, Merida."

It was odd how her personal victory didn't quite bring the satisfaction she hoped it would. Maybe it was the unattainable that drove her, but now, with three and two-halves of impeccably-aimed arrows to her name, it was no longer unattainable.

Whichever it was, one piece of certainty remained clear - with *Trueshot* in her hand and a quiver of arrows on her back, she was whole again.

---

Elsa gaped, and stared up at Jack from his perch on the barracks roof. "You want me to do *what* now?"

Jack leaned on his staff which had the dual effect of both infuriating and bewildering her. Did he have any idea what he was asking? "I jump from here, you conjure a snow pile. I jump again, you catch me again, and so on. Building your reflexes."

Elsa spread her hands. "As an insane trust exercise? Surely, you can't be serious."

"I am serious, and don't call me Shirley."

Raising an eyebrow, Elsa began to wonder if Jack had any faculties left to abandon him. "I didn't call you Shirley."

"It's a joke—I just quoted—you said 'surely' which sounds like—" Jack hesitated, his mouth opening and closing like an adorable red-cheeked goldfish. "—never mind. You ready?"

"Nope."

"You better be ready—"

"Please don't."

"—'cause I'm about to—"

"Stay right there?"

"*JUMP!*"

Elsa shrieked as Jack leapt from the barracks roof. Panic filling her racing heart, she threw her hands in front of her in a wild guess of where he would land, the words *catch him* screaming in her mind. Jets of ice burst forth to coalesce on the ground below him, and in the blink of an eye, a massive
snow-pillar shot up and caught him.

She remained like that, her arms frozen in an outstretched position, reality sinking in. She had just materialised a pillar of snow.

Jack straightened up and clapped. "Nice job! Knew you could do it."

"You didn't give me a choice!" Elsa yelled, wide-eyed.

"Nope, and neither will Unity. Ready?"

"Will you—damn it, Jack!"

He had already sprung from his perch, forcing Elsa to wildly shoot another pillar into existence.

"Please stop now, you're going to get hurt."

"Nope. This is fun."

"This is not fun! This is very not fun!"

He jumped again, and again, and again, each time saved by a well-timed snow construct. To Elsa's fleeting relief amongst her heart shooting into her throat, he had seemingly chosen not to speed up, since it was already testing her limits of attention to keep him from falling.

However, as time and pillars went on, it was becoming easier. With every successful catch her confidence banished her panic bit by bit. Her mind and movement found a rhythm, an intrinsic pattern to his jumps and her catches - and before long, she was grinning. Conjuring snow to catch him before he had even left the one before.

Elsa was even having fun.

"Hey, guys! I really need your help!"

Elsa jumped at the sudden voice, so focused was she in her task that Hiccup's urgent plea caused her to look away for a second - and that second was enough.

"OOMPH!"

Jack fell face-first to the ground in a crumpled heap, the sound of which sending a heavy flinch through her body. Elsa squeaked with a start, and covered her mouth with her hand as she ran over to his sprawled, groaning form and kneeled beside him.

"Oh my God! Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

'I'm okay, I'm good…" Jack groaned, his wincing voice muffled by the soil. "Luckily the hard… frosty ground broke my fall."

Elsa, her face wracked with guilt and sympathetic pain, put her hands on his back and right arm. "I am so sorry," she said with haste and concern, "I shouldn't have——"

Jack emitted a low, loud groan as he pushed himself to his knees, and with Elsa's assistance, clambered to his feet. His free hand patted the one she had around his arm, which had the effect of antagonising the butterflies in her stomach. "You were fine. You were great." He turned to look over his shoulder, throwing a hearty glare at Hiccup, whose face wore a heavy wince as he stood between two of the pillars Elsa had conjured a few minutes ago. "But we need to work on your sense of
Hiccup scratched at the nape of his neck, his expression radiating awkward guilt. "Sorry, I didn't really know what you were doing…"

"Jumping from snow pillar to snow pillar at a decent height from the ground? Yeah, I can see why that would be confusing."

"Yeah… my bad, dude."

Jack waved it off and shook his head. "Nothing a warm shower, and a massage from a hot woman can't fix," he said, and the way he smirked at Elsa caused her butterflies to rage, her cheeks to flush and her fist to firmly whap into his arm. "Ow! Just the shower, then?"

Folding her arms, Elsa's eyebrows rose and her lips set into a thin line. Did he just call her hot?

"Jeez, tough crowd. So what's the problem, Hic?"

"I actually need to talk to the both of you. It's about Astrid—" he gestured at Elsa, "—I figured you know her better than either of us. I asked Pitch but… yeah. I think he's not happy with me."

"What do you need?" Elsa asked.

"I—uh," Hiccup clasped his hands together and rubbed them with a nervous rhythm, "said something a couple of weeks ago, when we were exploring the camp that seemed to piss her off. I've been trying to talk to her about it since… but she just shuts me down every time."

"What did you say?"

"Eeeeh—I may have made an offhand remark that hit a nerve about how she was… conscripted into the Valkyries."

Elsa hissed a breath, and even Jack covered his face with his hand. "Smooth moves, Hiccup," he drawled. "Guess that explains why she's been stomping around the base for days."

"I don't think it's just that."

Both Jack and Hiccup threw her a curious look, forcing Elsa to look for the cat she'd let out of the bag, and consider carefully how she would proceed. "I don't know for sure, but Astrid rarely talked of her home life and family, and reacted negatively whenever it was mentioned. You see," she took a long breath, "her birthday is in a month's time."

Jack looked bemused. "Well, that's good, right? Presents, celebrations, y'know?"

"Assuming your birthday is even celebrated," Elsa pointed out. "As I said, she rarely talked about it, but… her birthdays may be sources of discomfort for her."

"How come you don't know her that well? I thought, with you being her C.O. and all…"

Elsa made a slow shrug. "Astrid and I… on the field, we were professional. Cordial, sometimes. Outside of it, we shared a contentious, adversarial relationship. You see—" she gestured to Jack, "your team followed you because they chose to, and respected you. Mine followed me because they were ordered to… and Astrid doesn't like orders very much."

"I definitely get that vibe," Jack mused.
"Look, guys," Hiccup cut in, "without getting too far into talking about someone who isn't here - not really comfortable with that, for the record - reason I want to talk to you is that I wanna make something for her."

"I'm sure she'd appreciate the gesture," Elsa smiled. "What do you have in mind?"

"Well, Pitch just gave Merida a bow—"

"He did what now?"

"Focus, Jack," Hiccup snapped. "Elsa has her ice training, Rapunzel has her bay—I want to make Astrid something she can call hers. I wanna make her an axe."

Elsa exchanged a look with Jack, whose expression mimicked her single raised brow and slightly perplexed expression. "But," Jack said slowly, "Bravo doesn't have the kind of equipment to smelt metal into an axe."

"Not a bladed axe," Hiccup vigorously shook his head. "I mean an axe made like Inferno."

The name went right over Elsa's head, and she looked to Jack for clarification. Emitting an 'ohhhh' of comprehension, Jack caught her eye, and quickly explained, "Hiccup's laser sword."

"Laser what?"

"I'll get him to show you later." He looked back to Hiccup. "So, like my esteemed protegé said, what do you need?"

Hiccup scratched at his neck with one hand whilst the other went to his hip. "Well, most of the stuff needed I can scavenge from around the base—from non-essential things, don't worry-" he hastily amended after a look from Jack, "-but power cells aren't easy to come by, right? So I had an idea - why not make the axe in a way that Astrid's own powers can… power it? Convert her vibrations into energy."

"And that's why he's our techie," Jack said.

"Problem is, there's one critical component I need - a dynamo. I had a look around the camp but the only one we have is in the hover jeep."

"So where can we find one?"

Elsa didn't like the way Hiccup's face twisted into a heavy wince, along with his shoulders rising to his ears. "Um… I saw one in one of the scavenger stalls… in Perdition…"

The groan Jack made could have registered on the Richter scale, and Elsa swore she felt a gust of wind impeccably timed with his sigh. "Hic… that's a two day round trip. Not to mention we'd be pushing our luck going a third time."

"And we have no credits," Elsa added.

"They can be pickpocketed," Jack said offhandedly, then shook his head. "Wait, why am I considering this?"

"Look, I wouldn't ask if I wasn't desperate," Hiccup held his hands before him as though to appease Jack, "but I've still got loads to do before this place is shipshape. I'd call it a personal favour if you'd retrieve it for me."
Elsa looked between them, trying to read the situation. Hiccup looked pleading, hopeful, like constructing the axe was the most important thing in the world. As though helping Astrid feel better was his be-all and end-all. In a way, it heartened her. Jack, on the other hand, even looked like he was considering it. Debating running the risk just to help out a friend.

In that moment, Elsa never felt like she was in better company.

Jack let out a long breath, and scratched at the side of his forehead in exasperation. "Fine, I'll go at first light tomorrow. This thing had better be there."

Hiccup practically jumped for excitement. "It will! It will. I think. I hope."

Jack's eyebrows rose.

"It'll be there."

"If you don't mind," Elsa found herself blurting, "I'd like to accompany you."

Both Jack and Hiccup gave her a surprised look. "You what?"

Elsa's cheeks immediately began to burn along with the tips of her ears, and she wished she had never opened her mouth. Clearing her throat, she tried to get out of the hole she'd dug - "Well, that way we can continue my training rather than I wander around the base for two days waiting for you to return. Besides-" she gestured to him, "-you'll need someone to watch your six."

"She has a point," Hiccup added, "you are terrible at watching your six."

The way Jack's lips tugged into a smirk had the effect of both intensifying the blush and arousing a sense of dread. "You sure that's not the only reason?"

"Quite certain," Elsa said far too abruptly.

Jack chuckled to himself. "Alright. I could use the company, to be honest."

Elsa smiled. "Great. I'll go and let Anna know what we'll be doing so she doesn't worry—well, worry more."

Taking the opportunity, Elsa bade her goodbyes before striding away from the two men toward the mess hall, where last she remembered, Anna was devouring a baked potato she had literally baked by hand. It was as she reached the halfway point she realised exactly what she was letting herself in for.

Two days alone with the guy she was, though she denied and would never admit it, crushing on.

Fun.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Guess I'm back. Sort of.
So, yeah. Not sure how people are going to take the whole Pitch and Merida thing, but it was something I wanted to explore within the story (not their canon selves, hell no). Two independent people who have no need for relationships or whatever. It seemed an interesting topic to tackle.

Next chapter is going to turn the story on its head.

Until next time!
Leverage

"Leverage"

Elsa had to admit she looked forward to her training sessions with Jack. Often, they were one of the highlights of her day - a close second to time spent with Anna, naturally - and something that disappointed her when it was over. Through the sessions, she learned more and more about the powers at her disposal; and slowly, but surely, she was becoming comfortable with herself as an abnormal. Happier, even. Realising that her gifts - she even believed them as such - were not a curse or a flaw was both enlightening and freeing at once, and if life was all about discovering who you are as a person, she had made more progress in the last few weeks than she could remember.

Still, she knew she had a long way to go until she was at the level of her peers. Everything seemed like second nature to the others, like using their gifts came so naturally it was intrinsic to their day-to-day life. Anna using her powers to roast a potato in her bare hands whilst chatting away with her friends. Pitch drinking from a mug held by one of his sand-tendrils whilst he read a book. Jack being able to fly.

Of course, Elsa wasn't deluding herself. With time, dedication and practise, she knew she'd get there eventually - but still, there was an element of impatience. It was all so wondrous, so new, so addictive. So, she treasured those little sessions with Jack - little activities that bit by bit, pieced together the fractured puzzle that was Elsa Snowfield.

If only she could keep her mind on the task and not on the kiss they shared in Perdition, fake though it was. Every now and then, her attention would drift back to that moment, prompting her to consciously force her attention back to the present.

Jack had parked the hover jeep a few miles north of the Canadian border, by an abandoned structure called Mercy's Diner. Vocalising a desire to scout the area for anything interesting - the early afternoon meant the most dangerous creatures they were likely to encounter would be belligerent, hungry raccoons - Jack had taken himself off, suggesting that Elsa stay with the jeep and initiate the regularly-scheduled check-in with Bravo. Whether or not it was his intention, Elsa took it as a sign of trust.

And that was something that meant a lot.

Of course, the check-in turned into a full-blown conversation thanks to precisely whom Elsa contacted.

"So, how's your alone time with Frost?"

Elsa rolled her eyes and shook her head, before flopping back against the jeep's passenger seat. She could have contacted Pitch, and exchanged a few words, and left it at that. No, she had to automatically contact Anna - and walked right into that one.

"Have you been making goo-goo eyes at each other? Has he told you he likes you? Have you kissed yet?"

"Shhh!" Elsa sat bolt upright, and wore an expression of utmost concentration. It was a wasted endeavour, since Anna was over a hundred miles away. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Bless her. Anna, to Elsa's amusement, sounded quite concerned. Smirking, Elsa drew
her hand across the sky.

"The winds of a subject change."

Anna's laughter sounded free and downright knowing. "Alright, but let the record show: no denial."

"No confirmation, either. I suppose you'll have to use your imagination," Elsa said, then immediately administered a mental self-slap for walking into that one, too.

"Oh, don't you worry, 'sis. I am. Okay, well - how's your training going?"

A little too close to the previous subject, but Elsa took it nonetheless, and began updating her sister on the morning's session; keen to further build on Elsa's creation of snowflakes and snowballs, Jack had her conjuring basic shapes and objects. Spheres, cuboids, cylinders, cones - she'd picture them in her mind and her fingers would give their existence form. Sure, it was all elementary school shapes and in any other situation she might have felt patronised, but… being able to create those shapes using only her mind, her will, and the moisture in the air? Damn it if it wasn't the most exciting feeling in the world.

Impressed with her progress, Jack had then stepped it up a level toward more complex creations - imitations of the empty salt shakers in the diner, a spatula Jack had procured from the kitchen, and the last one yielding a discovery: Elsa didn't necessarily need to picture a shape in her mind, more that she needed to know what it was and could recognise it if she saw it. Basic identification and recollection.

Hence, the hand-sized crocus made of pure, flawless ice sat on the dashboard. Her mother's favourite flower, and small as it was, her biggest and proudest achievement to date. If she could create something so small and intricate, who knows what she could conjure next? How complex?

How big?

The sky was the limit, and in the faintest corners of her heart not overwhelmed by excitement and a yearning to see where else her gifts could take her, there was a sense of gratitude to her gifts themselves, to the Ghosts, to Anna and to Jack, for giving her the greatest gift of all - possibility.

That part never made it to the conversation. Over an archaic radio earpiece felt too insincere… for Elsa's taste.

"Hey-hey! Sounds like you're making real progress, champ!"

"I'm getting there, I think." Elsa smiled warmly to herself. "Was it the same for your training?"

"Well, kinda. Fire and ice being, like, the complete opposite of each other, it was more about understanding fire and what it does rather than just turning things into a pot roast."

"In what way?" Elsa had an inkling of the answer, but frankly, hearing Anna's voice was what she wanted.

"Fire consumes, right? I mean, you let it go unchecked, and pretty soon shit's burning all up in the place. So my training was about harnessing that. Making it burn what I wanted it to burn, how fierce I wanted it, and how big I wanted it. I mean, the slightest flame can start a firestorm. Like, ice melts, but with fire? All that's left is ash."

The eye of Elsa's mind played host to the memory of watching Anna's Bloom, and wondered in amongst the flicker of guilt how much of the warehouse was left standing. For Anna to go from that,
to an experienced wielder able to enchant the smallest burst of flame to dance over her fingertips only reinforced Elsa's growing confidence.

"But then again, y'know, from the ashes comes new life. You end something and create a new beginning, so my training was kind of about that. Perspective, I guess. That, and... y'know... learning to do everything adults told us not to do as kids - play with fire."

"That's a surprisingly mature and enlightened outlook, Streak. Your wisdom has grown in the years we've been apart."

It struck Elsa how weird it was for the words we've been apart to pass her lips and not garner any form of guilt or regret, but in the days since her heart-to-heart in the presence of Olaf, she had been learning to accept the past. It happened, she confronted it, she was moving on. It had helped that Anna's personal motto was 'eyes forward', a sentiment Elsa considered adopting.

"I blame the little one - speaking of whom, guess who kicked Mommy earlier today?"

Elsa sat bolt upright, eyes widening as her nose took a sharp intake of breath. "You're kidding."

"Nope!" Anna squealed with excitement. "Couple of hours after you left, I felt this fluttering. I was worried something was going wrong, so I went to see Rapunzel, and she told me it was my baby kicking!"

"Oh, that's amazing!" Elsa beamed, and even jigged up and down in her seat. "So early, too!"

"Yep! Turns out you can feel the baby kick as early as the first trimester - it's not a full-on kick, but kinda like this weird flutter. I was, like, 'oh my God, my baby is kicking me! I'm gonna be a Mom!'"

"You're going to be a mother..." Elsa murmured with warmth and joy.

"I'm gonna be a mom!" Anna squealed loudly enough for Elsa to heavily wince and futilely jerk her head away from the earpiece, but when her voice returned once more, it carried the breathless murmur of acute, sobering realisation. "I'm gonna be a mom..."

Though she hadn't the faintest experience of the emotions a mother-to-be would be going through, Elsa could take an educated imagination. The stark knowledge that, upon feeling her baby move for the first time, Anna's perception of it went from a concept to full-blown reality, that she was carrying new life within her. The shock, anticipation and possibly fear of how much her life was going to change over the next months, and change again after that. That everything was more real than it had ever been - and more complicated.

See, Elsa was a realist, and held a more objective standpoint. Anna would be having a baby in tense, unstable circumstances. Danger could rear its head at any moment, a pervasive threat lingered in their lives, creating a situation where they would be forced to hastily vacate the premises without so much as a goodbye or a thank-you card. Not to mention the baby being surrounded by firearms.

Still, the Ghosts weren't idiots, and Elsa had every confidence they would accommodate the baby as best they could. It wasn't ideal, but then again, what was? Elsa wanted peacetime surroundings where the baby would be born, enveloped with love and protection. Two out of three was pretty good.

You hope for the best, and make do with what you get.

So lost was she in thought over the irony that the baby was probably in the safest surroundings they could be, by the time she'd twigged Anna was still talking, she had missed half of the one-sided
conversation.

"—and then there's the birthdays, what can I actually get for—wait... aw, shit!"

Anna sounded so frustrated and abrupt, that Elsa sat bolt upright in the seat, her heart jumping into a race. "What's wrong?"

"I'm a horrible sister, that's what's wrong!"

"Don't be ridiculous—we've talked about this."

"Not that! Dammit, I missed your birthday!"

Elsa blinked at the surreality of it all. Anna was a professional at going on tangents at whiplash speed. She snorted faintly, more out of disbelief than anything, and stared absently at the dashboard whilst murmuring, "I actually thought you were seriously in trouble..."

"I should be! I should know this shit off by heart, not forget my big sister's birthday! Dammit, first I don't do anything for Frost's and now you..."

In spite of Anna's clear distress, Elsa broke into abrupt chuckles, and attempted to steer her sister away from the rabbit hole. The speed at which she could get herself into a state was remarkable, and Elsa was often the one to pull her out of it. For a few moments, it was just like old times.

"Streak - so much has happened over the past few months, even I forgot my birthday. Complicated things have somewhat demanded our attention, you know? So don't feel bad."

"I could have at least got you something."

Elsa thought for a moment. "You did."

"I did?"

"Yes. You and me, together again. I don't need anything else."

Though a part of her cringed at the cheesiness of it all, it was the undeniable truth. As far as she was concerned, no gift could ever come close to being on good terms with her once-estranged sister.

Anna made a strange sound, halfway between an adorable squeak and a frustrated growl. "That's both the sweetest and most annoying thing! I can't get you anything because you don't need it!"

There wasn't much Elsa could say to that, so she elected to remain silent while Anna rambled on over the comms, hypothesising about presents she could conceivably give, ixnaying those suggestions, and reminiscing on past birthdays. Her mind went off elsewhere to do its own thing, where it settled upon something Anna had offhandedly mentioned - Jack's birthday. The fifth of December, sixteen days before hers.

Which also happened to be the day the two teams found themselves on the same side in the battle in the sky for the Valkyries' survival, all those weeks ago. Hell of a birthday present, having your world turned upside down by the arrival of four of your enemies right on your doorstep.

It was then that Elsa was struck with a thought: she could do a little better, surely? More conventional. The eight-strong group had their fill of insanity and surrealism. Maybe something more... normal.

"Oh, Snow Queen? I gotta go."
"Is something the matter?"

"No! Well, kinda. Maybe. Pitch is sparring with Hunter, and you know how they fight. I'd better be on hand in case they get too into it."

"Understood." Elsa chuckled. "Try not to let her break him too much."

"...you've never fought Pitch, have you?"

Elsa offered little more than a laugh and a farewell, mentally counting her blessings she had not engaged Pitch Black on the field of battle. She knew from recordings that he lacked the finesse and acrobatic skill of Jack and Anna, but made up for it with raw, unbridled, surgical aggression. The others fought to dominate and subdue, he fought to kill, and pain was something inconsequential to him. Merida likened her battle with him on the Star to 'fighting a shadow, except, ye know, a shadow doesnae wanna rip ye limb from limb'.

Taking advantage of the quiet and what little time there was until Jack's return, Elsa enclosed her hands together as though protecting a butterfly, and closed her eyes. Her gifts awakened immediately, unfettered by fear and hesitation, a welcome change. She thought of Jack, letting her mind dance between memory and opinion, perception and feeling. The butterflies in her stomach revelled at the chance to flutter without being suppressed by her hesitation and doubt. Ice coalesced inside the space between her hands, a pleasant chill more like the coolness of a breeze on a hot summer's day rather than the bite of a frosty wind.

"Whatcha doing?"

Elsa gave a start. Her eyes snapped open, and she did her best to not let her new creation tumble to the floor and shatter. Head snapping right, her heart in her mouth, she seriously considered whacking Jack upside the head.

"Jack," she gasped somewhat futilely.

He looked down at her with that irritatingly charming lopsided smirk, eyes twinkling. "Perimeter's clear. Nobody here but us trees… if, y'know," he rested his staff across his shoulders and looped his hands across it, "we were trees."

"That's good to hear."

"Yep. So," he nodded at her hands, "whatcha doing?"

"Huh?" Elsa said absently, and followed his eyes. "Oh, well… I—uh—it escaped my attention that your birthday was last month."

Jack's lips closed into a wry line, his eyebrow cocking. "You been talking to Anna?"

"No. Well, yes." Elsa's head tilted to the left and back again. "Rather a long 'check-in', I might add. No, I remembered from your census records. With all that's happened to us, unfortunately it slipped my mind but…"

Her eyes went to the wing mirror; for someone so used to the soldier-like mentality of mission-before-emotion, opening up felt like words smashing against a brick wall. Unless Anna was involved - then the wall would throw up its hands and say, 'fuck this shit I'm out. Don't mind me, I'm-a just get my stuff and leave. 'Scuse me, please'.

What was it she was so nervous of, around Jack?
"I still have nightmares every night," she spoke with a faraway voice, "and though they aren't as... horrific as they used to be, they are enough to—" she inwardly scoffed at the inadequacy of her next word, "—unsettle me. Remind me of the course my life could have taken me. So... I keep that snowflake you made for me on my nightstand to ground me. To remind me of who I am."

She looked back up at him. The wry smirk and cocked brow was nowhere to be seen, replaced by an expression of deep interest and sincere... attention.

"What you did means a lot to me. Anna told me you have nightmares too, so... I thought I would do the same for you."

Her left hand pulled away, revealing her creation: a palm-sized snowflake. She slowly offered it to him. Jack's eyes went down to the gift, and his expression softened into a moved smile.

"It's beautiful..." he murmured, resting the staff against the jeep so he could accept it with his hands.

"This is how I view you." Elsa began describing the intricate patterns and shapes turning the snowflake into far more than a mere snowflake. First, she pointed to the six arms, each one tipped with a sharp-looking cross.

"These points symbolise how you fight with ferocity and fury, but also how you enter battle with honour and nobility. You had both Astrid and I in the palm of your hand, the opportunity to kill us both, yet refused to do it unless it was on the battlefield."

"I remember." Jack scoffed a little. "Seems like a world away. What about this?"

Elsa followed his finger to the intricate filigree between each arm. It was not unlike shattered glass, with spider web-like patterns creating unpredictable shapes, yet all flowing to the edges.

"That is the pain that drives you. The losses you have endured over many years. Friends and family who you grieve for, and carry in your heart wherever you go - and yet, you still move forward. You know death and the bitterness of loss, and as a result value life."

The smile faded once more, replaced by a sombre look. Thoughtful, but with a hint of melancholy. "That's... that's a nice way to put it, yeah. Never heard it described like that." He cleared his throat with a quick loose fist to his mouth, leaving Elsa to ponder if it was out of awkwardness or suppressed emotion. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but... that's a love heart."

Once more Elsa followed his gaze, and half smiled. "That..." her brows rose, "...that means love."

Jack gave her a skeptical, not-following look. "Love?"

"Yes. It's clear to anyone who has eyes the love and care you have for your team, and they for you. You fight together, as one. You would willingly sacrifice yourself for them without hesitation, as would they for you. When they hurt, you hurt. When they bleed, so do you. They laugh, you laugh." Elsa looked away, and a stray thought found its way through her lips before she knew it. "I only hope that love extends to myself and my friends."

"Our friends." Jack smiled, and lightly clapped a hand on her shoulder. "And yes, it does."

Elsa abruptly looked at him in surprise. "It does?"

"Yeah. I know we got off to one hell of a rocky start—" he shrugged and quirked his lips,
acknowledging the light way to describe the animosity, "—but I've spent enough time around you and your friends to know I can trust you. And for what it's worth… I'm glad you're with us."

"Truly?"

"Yeah." Jack leaned against the jeep door, his proximity sending her heart a-flutter, and stared off into space and time. "In the days after the Star, my team was… broken. We'd lost our spirit, our fight, our sense of who we were… I'd inherited a responsibility I didn't think I could handle... and then you came along. You turned our world upside down, made us rethink everything we thought we knew. You reminded us of who we were, what we're supposed to be. You gave us hope, and I don't think I've seen my team any happier than before you dropped in our lives. So, yeah. I'm grateful."

Elsa's hand went up to Jack's that still rested on her shoulder. She looked up at him, smiling, though his eyes were still elsewhere. "I am too. I never thought I'd be in this situation, or right here, but I can't imagine my life any other way."

"Good!" Jack grinned down at her, and pushed himself off the jeep with his hip. "Because that means I'm making the right call."

Elsa frowned and tilted her head. "About what?"

With one hand still clutching the snowflake, Jack dived into the pocket of his pants, and pulled out a small black disc. Twirling it between his fingers, he said, "Now, it's not a formal invitation yet, so it's only an honorary thing for now - initiation, and all - but I know enough about you and your friends to make this an easy decision."

The disc settled between his index and middle fingers, and was offered to her. Curious, Elsa gently took it from him, and gasped as she turned it over.

The malevolent-looking face of the Ghost insignia grinned up at her.

"Are you asking me to—"

"Join? If that's what you want." In the corner of her eyes as she admired the insignia and the meaning behind it, she caught the awkward scratching of Jack's temple. "The pay's pretty shit. There's no dental, and the entire job's pretty much one big-ass occupational hazard—not to mention—"

"I'd love to!" Elsa blurted as she looked up at him. Jack looked back at her, taken off-guard. She blinked, and cleared her throat for a semblance of composure. Opening the door, she slid out of the jeep and stood up straight, saluting at her temple for good measure. "Thank you, sir. I'd… I'd be honoured."

Jack looked like his brain was undergoing the process of rebooting itself. "Right. Okay. Cool. Well, you'll… erm—what is it with people calling me sir—need to report to Anna for a mask when we get back. She'll paint whatever design you want on it, though I hear Rapunzel's a pretty good artist. Oh, and Hiccup will—will stitch the patch on your shirt. And you'll… you'll need to choose a weapon."

The way he seemed to be falling over his words, coupled with the fierce red blossoming across his cheeks and ears, caused a teasing giggle to escape Elsa's lips.

"Have you told the others?" she asked. Jack shook his head.

"Not yet. I wanted you to be the first to know."
"Would it be inappropriate of me to hug you?" The words fell out of Elsa's mouth before she realised, and promptly clapped a hand over her lips, wide-eyed.

Jack narrowed his eyes, and his lips tugged into his trademark half-smirk. "Sorry, what was that?"

Elsa withdrew her hand and went rigid, shaking her head far too quickly to convince anyone. "Nothing."

"You just asked me for a hug."

"No, I didn't."

"Yeah, you did. You said—"

"—absolutely nothing of the sort."

"The answer's yes."

"It would be inappropriate?"

"Yes, you can hug me."

"I can?"

"Yep. So, you gonna hug me, or are we gonna stand here like idiots?"

Elsa let out a nervous laugh, causing the soldier inside to raise an unimpressed eyebrow, and gingerly stepped forward. However, awkwardness and embarrassment filled her movement with hesitation, so she looked less like moving in for a hug and more like she was carrying an obscenely-sized beach ball.

Jack rolled his eyes, and huffed. "Oh, for the love of—c'mere, you."

Before she knew what was happening, Jack had closed the distance enough for their chests to touch, and wrapped his arms around her. Elsa's breath froze in her lungs after a sharp gasp, her heartbeat entering new levels of racing. She hesitantly closed her arms around him, cursing the surprise stiffness in her body.

"That's not a hug. I feel like I'm hugging a wooden post," Jack murmured across her shoulder. "C'mon, Elsa. You can have this. You deserve this."

The breath held in Elsa's chest was let loose in a shaky exhalation, and her arms tightened around him as her chin rested on his shoulder. She could feel herself relax bit by bit, and closed her eyes.

"This feels good," she murmured.

"Yeah, it does."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For believing in me—" she immediately checked herself, "—in us."

Jack patted her on the back, and pulled away - though one of her hands rested on his shoulder whilst the other sat on his waist, her body - though uncomfortably tight in her chest thanks to the sheer
closeness of him - mourned the absence.

"I believe in your love for Anna."

Elsa couldn't speak, at first. Her breaths exhaled from a tightened chest were quiet and ragged, and her heart thumped so hard she could feel it against her ribcage. Had her mind not been filled by a lightheaded haze from gazing into his snowflake-patterned eyes, she would have forced herself to remove her arms. Jack too fell silent, and looked down at her parted lips as she did his.

"I… we…" he murmured absently.

"...we… yes?" she whispered.

She found herself slowly closing the distance, as he mumbled, "We should…"

"Yes… we should…"

He was so close, enough to kiss. His hands hadn't left her waist, and like hell did she want them to move. Even through the disorienting sensation of floating in the air, she felt she was in the perfect place. So close… and what next? Kiss, kiss harder, and make love on the jeep bonnet? Even through the fuzz in her mind, it was an idea she was more than open to. Pull off his shirt, pull down his pants, and then—

A flock of birds darted into the air from the diner roof with a loud, abrupt flutter, alarm calls filling the sky. Jack snapped out of his trance with a start just as Elsa jerked out of hers, and they immediately pulled away from each other as though caught in an embarrassing situation. There was no end of curses thrown at the birds and at herself for falling so quickly under the spell, and an awkward, shameful heat burned in her ears.

"We should—" Jack coughed, and scratched at the nape of his bright pink neck, "—we should probably get moving."

"Yes!" Elsa said far too breathlessly and hastily, rubbing her forearm over and over, "We should—definitely do that. Good idea."

As Jack hurried around to the driver's side door, Elsa wondered if Perdition had any cold showers.

"That's the ninth stall we've been to," Elsa murmured through barely moving lips, taking care to ensure the security camera on the opposite side of the street could not catch her face. "It's starting to get dark - should we start heading home?"

Jack made a subtle gesture with his hand toward a fruit stall, where the owner was busy moving crates of apples back into the storehouse behind him. They navigated through the dwindling crowds, and the three-strong group of militia passed behind them - thankfully, without incident - melting back into the noise of a street's worth if stalls packing away for the day.

"There's one more place we can try," Jack murmured back. "General store at the end of the street. Anything that the stalls won't sell, we'll find there."

"And if we don't?"

"Ey, you's two gonna buy somethin'?"

Elsa threw a glance at the storekeeper, a short, unshaven, irascible-looking man, who regarded them
over his shoulder with annoyance as he hefted another crate around.

"Nah." Jack chuckled at him. "I'm more of a melons guy."

Elsa didn't have the foggiest why, as they turned away from the newly-grumbling stall-owner, she found herself involuntarily glancing down at her chest.

"If we don't," Jack answered, pausing once to lean in and chuckle at a joke only he knew, "then Hiccup will have to make do with flowers."

They weaved through the last of the afternoon crowd toward a store to the right at the end of the street, where the owner was packing away various knick-knacks from a table out front. Obscuring her face as though whispering in his ear, she gave him a funny look. "...flowers… for Astrid?"

Jack snorted quietly. "Yeah. That'd be fun."

"If fun is what you'd call scraping Hiccup off the floor, certainly."

"You should see our bachelor parties."

"Something tells me I'd rather not."

"Shame." Jack nudged her with his elbow. "Only time you can hear Pitch sing. Dude can really nail those falsetto notes."

"Okay, now you're messing with me."

Jack let out a bark of laughter. "You only just realised?"

Elsa nudged him back, sharp and hard enough for him to utter a barely suppressed yelp. Nodding toward the store entrance a few feet away, he muttered, "For that, you get to ask the nice clerk about a dynamo."

Elsa was struck with a moment of anxiety. "You're not coming?"

"Nah." Jack dismissively waved. "I got one more stop to make, plus it looks like the clone guards are using those new automatic rifles. Saw some a few minutes back. I'm going to… relieve one of them from a guard."

He must have noticed the concerned look in Elsa's eye, for he then added, "Relax. You've got the hang of this. You can do it."

"But what if the keeper recognises me?"

"Then you knock him out and steal anything that looks like what Hiccup described this morning," he said with an air of casual indifference, like what he was suggesting was just another Tuesday to him.

Without giving her a chance to protest further, Jack made his farewell and told her to meet him outside the store, before darting off to what looked like a jewelry shop a few doors back on the other side of the street. Shaking her head in exasperation, yet proud of the trust that meant she could work by herself, Elsa turned to the door.

She sucked in a breath. It could go sideways. It could go without a hitch. She wouldn't know until then. Thinning her lips and summoning her reserves of confidence - walking through the nest of vipers known as Perdition did a decent job of sapping her courage - Elsa pushed open the door and stepped inside.
It was unremarkable as far as settlement stores went. Though the owner clearly took great pains to run a tight ship in terms of order and cleanliness, the smell of damp hung in the air like a thin cloud, and patches of mold grew from behind the ugly peach-coloured wallpaper. The lighting was just on the right side of *I-can't-see-shit*, helped by the pleasant glow of the Uni-Com in standby mode, situated in the far corner. To her immediate right was the store counter, with a long set of shabby shelves stretching from the corner to what she assumed to be the storeroom door.

Between the shelves and the counter, stood the clerk. A tall, gangly man, he looked gaunt and pale, dressed in a dirty white shirt, grey pants and a brown leather apron. He regarded Elsa with a warm, welcoming smile, sincere cheeriness vibrating from him like a visible aura.

"Welcome to my humble store," he greeted her in a croaky, yet bright voice. "Not often I get visitors at this time. What can I do for you?"

He hadn't recognised her, to Elsa's initial relief. Still, she knew she shouldn't push her luck and elected to keep her hood up. Everyone in Perdition seemed to be operating in two modes; abrasive and confrontational, or unassuming and quiet. She adopted the latter, figuring if she pulled an Astrid-in-a-mood, it'd make it easier for the clerk to remember her down the line.

"I need a dynamo," she murmured.

There was a light blue pulse in the corner of her eye; she shot a glance at the Uni-Com. It was as inert as it had been a few seconds ago. She mentally shook her head.

"Oh, we have a few of those. Three, in fact. Any particular type?"

"Um," Elsa scratched her cheek with a finger, "one that will convert vibrations into energy?"

The blue hue in the corner of the room pulsed once again.

"Ah, well, to tell you the truth I don't really know which one will do that. I'll just go into the back and get them for you—I reckon you'll know which one you need."

The truth was Elsa didn't have the foggiest which one Hiccup would be after, but the credits Jack pickpocketed and split with her *should* have been enough. The clerk made his way to the back door, humming an upbeat tune as he went, leaving Elsa to regard the Uni-Com with a curious eye.

It had switched itself on.

An unpleasant, paranoid feeling settled in Elsa's mind, but just as her right hand slipped into the pocket of her hooded sweater and laced itself around the stun pistol hidden inside, the clerk returned carrying the three dynamos.

"Here we are!" he announced brightly, placing them on the counter. Elsa looked at him just as the Uni-Com's screen awoke with the words: "CALLING".

"Now, ordinarily these would be five credits each, but as you're my first—well, *only*—customer today, you can have all three for ten."

Elsa felt a surge of gratitude for the clerk's generosity - ten credits was all she had. Offering a thankful smile, her hand unlaced itself from the pistol and pulled out the two five-credit chips next to it, which she placed in the clerk's outstretched hand.

"Fantastic," he said, as Elsa took the dynamos and slipped them into her pocket, where they clinked against the pistol. "It's been a pleasure doing—"
The door opened with a clatter, and heavy footsteps vibrated through the rickety floorboards. Elsa looked over, expecting to find Jack swaggering in, his trademark cheeky smile lighting up the room.

She froze as the gloss black helmets of two clone guards bore down at her, clutching the strange new rifles.

"—I didn't summon any guards?" the clerk said in a bewildered tone.

"No. I did," announced someone behind her.

Eyes widening, Elsa took a sharp breath as her stomach sank to the ground. She felt sick to hear that voice. Never again did she want to hear him again.

"Isn't it interesting how you always run into a familiar face at the store?"

Elsa reacted before she knew it. Her jaw clenched, her hand gripped the stun pistol, and in one fluid motion, whirled around and let fly a bolt.

The torpedo of red passed harmlessly through Hans' blue-hued forehead and disappeared into the wall behind him. The bastard had the gall to smirk, stood with his hands behind his back, while a chill of horror shot down Elsa's spine.

"Come now, Valkyrie Leader. I thought you were more intelligent than to shoot a holographic projection," Hans taunted in that smarmy voice of his.

Elsa's hand shook with the rage building inside her, pushing aside the fear and nausea. "How did you find me?" she snarled.

"Hmm? Oh!" Hans did a semi-shrug. "You see, I had a suspicion you and your friends were alive despite the destruction of the Valhalla, and that you had help from a certain group of terrorists. At first I had no idea where to look - until one Merida Dunbroch decided it would be smart to contact her family. After that, it was a simple matter of writing a program that, upon detecting your voice, would automatically connect the nearest Uni-Com to mine. I baited the hook, so to speak… and look who I caught."

"Fuck you," Elsa spat. "Do you honestly think those two guards can stop me from leaving?"

Hans tilted his head, conceding the point they both knew was firmly Elsa's. "Oh, I have no doubt you could kill them without breaking a sweat. However," he waggled his finger at her, "you'll stay right there, and we'll get to why shortly. First—"

Hans looked over at the clerk, who had gone rigid, his eyes nervously dancing between Hans, Elsa and the two clones, his thin fingers playing agitatedly with each other.

"You there. Your name?"

"R- Robert, sir. Robert Carruthers…" the clerk stammered back.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Robert. May I call you Robert?"

The clerk nodded.

"Excellent. Now, I'm going to ask you a question, and it is very important you answer honestly: do you know who I am?"

He nodded again. "Y-yes, sir."
Elsa looked back at Hans, who briefly wore an expression of disappointment and regret as he huffed out a sigh.

"I was hoping you wouldn't say that." Hans looked behind Elsa to the guards, and with a voice as matter-of-fact as they come, ordered, "Shoot him."

"What?! Elsa shouted, and whirled around, her free hand outstretched. "No!"

It was too late. The rightmost guard took aim at the terrified clerk, and shot an orange bolt straight through his forehead. Time seemed to slow as the clerk's body toppled backwards, and the crumple of his body on the floor reverberated through the store. Not a sound was heard after that, other than Elsa's heart thumping in her ears as it all crashed down on her.

"Fascinating weapons, those. Hot enough to burn through and cauterize flesh. They don't have the elegance of the pulse rifles, but they function perfectly well."

Elsa's head slowly turned toward the counter, and she noticed the clerk's lifeless arm protruding from behind it on the floor. "You didn't need to murder him," she murmured faintly. "He was no threat to you."

"Yes, I did. Knowing who I am is enough."

Elsa rounded on him. "And if it was a child?! Would you have them executed, too?"

"Yes."

Elsa didn't know why she expected any different: Hans was a monster, a sociopathic sadist who had his own brother murdered. Yet, his answer took her off guard, and her lips parted in shock.

Hans looked at the clone guards once again. "Once my business is concluded, you are to dispose of the body - and yourselves - in the next Reaper attack. Clear?"

"Yes, sir," came the two-fold reply.

"I'll release some sort of tip about sedition, or whatever. Now, Snow Queen - shall we begin?"

"Go fuck yourself. You can't order me to do a damn thing."

"Oh, but I can. All I need is leverage."

Elsa stalked up to him, venom and fury radiating from her eyes. "You have nothing. I'm leaving."

She turned away from him and tensed her body, preparing to close the distance. So long as they couldn't get a bead on her with those rifles, and she was up close, she had the advantage.

"Actually, you'll stay here, and listen like a good little soldier."

"Or what?" Elsa spat. She could overpower the left clone, and use his rifle to shoot his friend.

"Or I issue a single order for Perdition's clone contingent to withdraw."

Elsa froze, and that same chill of horror gripped her spine. Without them… Perdition would be defenseless. Hans could wipe it off the face of the earth with a single word.

The worst part? Hans could simply pass it off as the unfortunate but inevitable fall of Perdition.
"I don't think you want that responsibility, Elsa. You already sealed Robert's fate the moment you entered his store."

Elsa's mind frantically searched for a way out. One solution, any solution to the problem of Hans having her right where he wanted her - but as the feeling of strings pulling her limbs returned, she realised - she had no way out.

Her voice, once strong and confident, came out in a mere whisper. "What do you want?"

"Oh, it's simple, really. I want you to kill Frost."

Elsa took a sharp breath, and rounded on him, eyes wide with disbelief. A bark of laughter, almost hysterical, shot from her mouth. "Are you insane? I'm not going to kill him for you! I'm not going to betray—Frost possesses more humanity and decency in his little finger than—"

Hans raised an eyebrow. "Because it's his little finger you're clearly so infatuated with, right? Perhaps you know what he can do with it?"

Much as Elsa hated herself for it, a searing heat blossomed through her cheeks. Had she been playing poker, her emphatic reaction had shown her hand.

She swallowed a lump in her throat, rolled her shoulders, and lifted her chin to regard Hans with the most resolute gaze she could. "No. Do what you must. Kill me. Wipe out the settlement - but I will not murder him."

"Oh, but you will. You see - I never do something like this unless I have an ace in the hole."

Hans looked in the vague direction of something on the wall behind her, ostensibly on his Uni-Com. He raised a hand to grip something invisible, then dragged it before him.

A small, blue-hued rectangle grew between them, roughly the size of a quarter of a Uni-Com screen. Elsa glanced down at a flurry of movement within the box, and noticed two figures moving about around a long table, upon which several accoutrements of scientific nature lay.

"How's this for leverage?"

At first, Elsa didn't recognise the man and woman within the holographic screen. As far as she was concerned, Hans was showing her two random people under a security camera, expecting her to somehow react.

But then the man lifted up an Erlenmeyer flask and scrutinized it, whilst the woman moved to stand at his side to regard it as well - and recognition hit Elsa full force. Her legs trembled, weak, all strength within fading like water down a drain. Her heart froze in her chest along with her breath, her lips parting in shock.

She knew that moustache. She knew that kind, caring, feminine face. Hands that pushed the plunger of a syringe, and a mouth that softly lied that it would all be okay.

She had watched them die.

"...Mama… Papa..."
Whatever world Elsa was in ceased to exist. Suddenly, the walls and the sounds, the clone soldiers and the dearly-departed Robert Carruthers mattered little. Nothing registered on her senses but the intangible screen hovering two feet from her face.

Agdar and Idun Snowfield, scientists and secret philanthropists, loving parents. Believed dead… apparently very much alive.

Elsa’s throat closed in on itself, so she had to swallow extra hard in order to remind it that desert-like dryness was not how throats were supposed to be.

It had to be an illusion. Some kind of program. Clones, maybe - Hans obviously liked using them. Yes, that was it - Hans was trying to deceive her. He did that before, after all - duped her into a path that led to the deaths of hundreds.

"This is a trick," she croaked, refusing to even look at him, keeping her eyes on the two figures within the screen. Her father - if he was even that - drew some of whatever liquid existed inside the flask using a pipette. "You're doing what you did three years ago. I don't believe you."

"Oh, I can assure you this is the real deal," Hans replied a little too confidently for Elsa's liking, "but given our history, I can understand your skepticism. Shall I prove it to you?"

He didn't wait for an answer. One swift hand movement followed by two taps in the air, and he began addressing someone not in either of their vicinities. "Mr and Mrs Snowfield - I have someone here who would very much like to talk to you."

Her father's head snapped to the camera observing them, and his face twisted into venomous anger. "Hans, you son of a bitch, let us go—"

"Papa?" Elsa found herself faintly squeaking in shock. It was his voice.

Agdar was stopped in his tracks. Once enraged, his face fell to a shocked, disbelieving expression, and his eyes darted around the camera. Behind him, Idun staggered backwards, her hands over her mouth. It was looking less and less like a trick.

"Elsa?!" her father called in surprise. "Elsa?! Is that you?"

They were alive. Her parents were alive!

"Elsa, we love you!" Idun cried, causing Elsa to clap a trembling hand to her mouth. "You and Anna, we love you both so much!"

"I love you too!" Elsa said in a voice close to a broken whimper, tears welling and streaming from reddened eyes. "I'm gonna save you, I promise! I'm gonna—"

"Look for the mountains, Elsa! Look for the—"

"Okay, bye-bye." Hans made a brisk waving motion, and Agdar's words were rendered silent - though his lips still furiously moved. "That's enough of that, I think."
Elsa's head slowly shook. Pain, fury, rage and disgust bubbled up like a volcano, barely held back by her resolve. "I'll kill you. I swear. I'll find and I'll kill—"

Hans made a show of inspecting his nails. "Yes, well, not today. Or any day, in fact."

"My parents—you had them all along—you made me into this—" she limply gestured to herself, "-on a lie—"

"Yes, yes, blah blah. Let's not dwell on your failures." Hans dismissively waved, rolling his eyes, further driving the dagger into her heart. "Now isn't the time for self-pity. You have a job to do."

"I'll not do your dirty work for you," Elsa bit back with teeth-gritted vehemence. "You want Frost dead, meet him on the battlefield. See how long you'll last."

"Why would I do that, when I have an inside man—apologies, woman—to do my bidding? No, you're going to do this."

For a fleeting moment, Elsa was proud of her resistance. She had stood and looked evil in the eye, and had said, "No" - but the chill in her spine, the sickening feeling of being manipulated and of having no choice had exponentially grown in her stomach… and when Anna's face swam into her mind's eye, of her expression when Elsa would tell her she sacrificed their parents, her resolve crumbled.

When she saw her mother bury her head into her father's shoulder, her translucent body jerking with sobs as he tightly embraced her, Elsa's love betrayed her.

"Please don't make me do it," she whispered, pleaded, all trace of her stubbornness vanishing.

"Oh, you'll do it…" Hans stroked at his chin with an ungloved hand, "but… I admit to enjoying watching you beg, so… kneel."

Elsa balked. "Kneel?"

Those infernal, sadistic, duplicitous lips curled into a malicious, smug smile. "Yes, Elsa. Bend the knee." He leaned in slightly. "You didn't honestly think you'd stopped working for me, did you?"

Humming a jolly tune under his breath, with one hand clutching a pulse-assault rifle as it swung to and fro with every step, and the other fingerling a small charm bracelet he'd purchased for a ridiculous yet worthy price in the pocket of his hooded sweater, Jack sauntered back toward the general store. The darkness had banished most of Perdition's occupants to their homes, and those still active in the streets hurried to their sentry positions. A few times he'd been stopped by militia, but upon noticing the rifle and a little bit of wordplay from Jack, they'd left him alone save for a pointed 'suggestion' to take his post on the Wall.

Like hell he was going to do that. One Reaper attack was enough, thank you very much.

He looped the bracelet around his fingers one more time. It was in dire need of a clean, and half of its charms were missing, and there was a moment he thought he'd have to leave his left arm behind, but some haggling and his customary pain-in-the-assery had yielded the bracelet for ten credits simply so the stall keeper could get rid of him.

Should be a nice birthday present for Elsa - though he'd have to explain eavesdropping on a private conversation. Hopefully, she'd like it.
Strange, the difference a few weeks made. Never before had he entertained the remotest thought he'd be crushing on Elsa. Sweet, intelligent, kind, fierce Elsa, with beauty that eclipsed the hundreds of sunsets he'd witnessed. The very woman who managed to find her way into his thoughts, who made his heart race and his stomach flutter.

Hopefully she would like the bracelet.

*Hopefully* he wouldn't be tongue-tied like Hiccup in the presence of a beautiful woman.

As his footsteps carried him closer to the general store, however, faint voices from inside pushed aside his rosy thoughts of her. Frowning slightly, he turned his ear in the direction of those voices, and slowed his pace to a creep. Hugging the store's external wall, Jack tried to pick out the voices - one was definitely Elsa's. She sounded defeated, weak, causing his heart to pulse with protective anger. The other one he couldn't make out - it was a male, that was certain. Assertive. Arrogance and smugness dripped from his words like honeyed oil.

Not to mention the chill in the air - biting cold, and *not* by his hand.

Jack edged closer to the dirty window, and peered through from the corner of his eye. There Elsa was, her profile and stature unmistakeable, stood before a blue projection of someone he couldn't recognise through the grimy windows. Movement inside nearest the door caught his eye, and the classic helmet of a clone soldier moved back and forth into view and out again. Elsa was in trouble.

Foregoing his staff, Jack pulled out his nine-millimetre from the pocket of his hooded sweater, and silently crept under the window - but the once indiscernible voices sharpened into clarity. Curious, he raised his head just enough to peer in.

His stomach dropped, and the desire to kick the door in was swiftly replaced by the paralysing urge to watch. Elsa was sinking down to one knee. What the hell?

"There we are," the male spoke. "Is this not simpler? Is this not how it should be?"

Elsa said nothing, and even if she did, the thunderous beating of Jack's heart would have deafened him.

"Now, you know which question you need to ask."

When Elsa next spoke, Jack could have thrown up.

"What are your orders, Supreme Commander?"

Elsa hated herself for saying it. She felt sick to the stomach with humiliation that burned her body, kneeling before the man who had wrecked her life and was still fucking wrecking it!

Hans brought up a translucent blue map, with a red dot in the centre labelled PERDITION, and an uneven red line sprouting off to the left. "Several miles west of Perdition is an abandoned settlement. Reaper attack, I believe. In one week's time, you are to lure Frost there, and you are to kill him."

"How?" Elsa asked in a robotic, empty voice.

Hans merely shrugged. "I don't know. Use your imagination - maybe you could use your feminine wiles. Lure him there with the promise of a romantic, sexual liaison. I'm sure he'd be unable to resist such charms, if he feels about you the way you clearly feel about him."
Hans’ expression darkened, and he leaned down to add in a low growl, "However, let me be clear: I will be watching. If you try to deceive me, I will know. If you in any way deviate from your orders, if I get even the hint that Frost’s death is not genuine, those few words you had with your parents will be the last you ever have, and the next time you see them will be a streamed execution. Once you have killed Frost, and every other member of your ragtag team of ‘revolutionaries’.” he air-quoted the word, "-you will see them again.

"My sister?" Elsa blurted. Hans gave out a tut of false pity.

"Well, never let it be said I am without mercy. She can live - the two of you can share a cell together. Your parents can visit you. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Elsa was bereft of speech as Hans straightened up, his hands moving to hold each other behind his back. "One week, Elsa. Make peace with your demons - because they are about to have company."

He sucked in a breath and prepared to address the Uni-Com, before adding with a smirk, "Oh, and I would strongly advise you not to tell Frost. He may be a good liar, but you aren't. If his death is an act, I'll know."

With that, Hans’ projection and the accompanying screens vanished into the air, and the Uni-Com fell silent. Elsa barely registered the soldiers passing her to grab Robert’s corpse and drag it out of the front door, paid no attention to their heavy bootsteps. It was like she and the world around her were separate, staring at the space Hans’ face once occupied.

She felt helpless. Bereft of direction and purpose save for the one laid out for her. Trapped by her familial love and Hans’ puppetry - and unlike before, she was fully aware of it. No rage or vengeful magma to blind her. Kill Jack, or kill her parents.

Her mind, empty and powerless as it was, strove to find a solution. Kill Jack and there was no guarantee Hans would hold up his end of the deal… no matter whose blood she spilled. Kill her parents, and she would be murdering her own family. Just like Hans.

Either way, someone’s blood would be on her hands; and either way, Anna would hate her for the rest of her life. Anna, whose relationship with whom Elsa had happily and gratefully rekindled, whose relationship Elsa felt slipping through her fingers.

Maybe she could tell Jack, and they could concoct a plan? The pessimist in her scoffed at the idea: in a week's time Hans expected to see Jack's body, or he would execute her parents. With no idea where to look save for a vague clue, and a deadline… whatever plan that could be cooked up was moot.

Hope drifted away like a dream.

"Help me," she whispered to no-one in particular, lost.

"Something up?"

Elsa jumped to her feet and whirled around with a sharp gasp. Her eyes found Jack, leaning against the store's door frame, one of those assault rifles in his hands. His expression was blank, unreadable, cold - as if the night wasn't already unnerving enough.

"Jack…” she breathed. "H-how long have you been there?"

Jack gave the lightest of shrugs, but his lips were still set into a line, and his eyes never left her. "Just got here. Question still stands."
Elsa opened and closed her mouth, a self-conscious heat creeping into her cheeks. "I—uh—dropped my change," she blurted, her mind simultaneously blank and facepalming.

The chilly sensation of eyes peering into her soul set her nerves on edge—Jack didn't even blink nor take his eyes off her once, like he was studying her—so, in a wild effort to deflect his focus, she gestured to the rifle in his hand.

"You managed to get one, then?"

For a few seconds, Jack glanced down at the silver assault rifle in his hand. Without the oppressive presence of the guards or that snake whispering malice into her ears, Elsa finally got a good look; the design was much like the single-shot ER-4 stun rifles, but shorter, with the power cell magazine protruding from the base. Already Elsa envisioned its use for speed and close-quarters combat, rather than the long-ranged battles the ER-4 was designed for.

"Yeah," Jack said, his tone low and unwavering. "I tested it on its previous owner. Pretty vicious."

His eyes found her again, causing her heart to stop beating for a couple of seconds. She couldn't tell if he was joking. She couldn't tell if it was Jack standing there… or Pitch.

"Did you get the dynamo?"

Elsa started, and blinked. "Yes, three, in fact," she nodded. "Hopefully one of them will suit Hiccup's needs."

Jack lifted his chin up and down in acknowledgement, jaw jutting out. For several moments no words left his lips, preferring instead to watch her like a hawk - the sensation of a heavy, oppressive weight only grew, dragging her to the ground.

In the blink of an eye, Jack changed. Back came the charming smirk as he pushed himself off the doorframe, and he clicked his fingers into a thumbs-up. "Awesome. Guess that means we're done here, right?"

Elsa blinked, completely disarmed by his change in demeanour. All trace of his cold, stone-like expression, gone. Yet, his eyes were void of the impish twinkle she'd been finding so hard not to be enchanted by.

Regarding him warily, she allowed her lips to curl in response to his infectious smirk. "Uh… y-yes."

Jack uttered a relieved sigh, coupled with a rather overdramatic sag of his shoulders. It would be amusingly cringeworthy had Elsa not felt like she was dancing on a knife-edge. "Great, 'cause I am so ready to bail from this place. Let's get a move on, I wanna be home by—"

His 'enthusiasm' was cut with merciless timing by a piercing, protracted shrieking that felt like it was clawing at Elsa's very soul - and for a moment, Jack looked concerned.

"You mean now?" she asked, thoroughly unsettled by the Reaper's call. Perdition was about to be busy.

"Yep," Jack answered like it was nothing new. "I figure we got three minutes. Plenty of time to get outta this joint and outrun those little bastards." He leaned closer, and even though he did it from a position of eight feet away, Elsa still flinched. "You're not afraid one of us'll get killed, are you?"

Honestly, if Elsa had to admit it, the quicker she got out of there, the better. Jack's behaviour was setting off an unpleasant sensation in her stomach, and a change of scenery might do them good.
Even if the scenery would be zipping past them at seventy miles an hour, crawling with ravenous little Reapers.

Elsa preferred *that* to the overwhelming feeling of being trapped.

"No," she answered with as much confidence as she could muster.

"Good." Jack stepped inside the room and stood aside. "Ladies first."

In an effort to lighten the mood and pierce the tension, Elsa made an offhand joke as she quickly passed, repeating the remark about Jack getting a good look at her rear.

The silence she received was deafening.

As was the silence between them on the nearly day-long return trip. Twenty-two hours where not a word was spoken between them, save for an instance about sixteen hours into the journey where Elsa caught herself falling asleep at the wheel. She had suggested Jack take over so she could sleep for an hour or two, figuring she would be awake enough for the rest of the drive.

Jack, however, had other ideas.

From the moment they'd set off, Jack had been sat in the rear passenger seat at her four o'clock and hadn't moved since. When she'd made the suggestion to swap driving duties, Jack had given her a calculated look, as though weighing things in his head, and countered with the borderline order for them to pull over. He'd retrieved a coarse, khaki blanket from the trunk and, once Elsa had cranked her seat back to a horizontal position, draped it over her and even tucked her in.

For a few seconds it was like the caring side of Jack had returned - until he caught her looking at him, and up shot the distant expression. She'd mumbled her thanks, unsettled by the air between them, but exhaustion claimed her moments later and she had fallen into a deep sleep.

When she'd awoken two hours later, and instinctively looked around, she'd discovered Jack had remained awake and still in the same seat as before. He'd curtly explained he was keeping watch, but Elsa found herself uncertain - suspicious - about precisely *for what* he was keeping watch.

Maybe, for *whom*.

Eager to resume their journey to return home - and, more importantly, *conversation* - Elsa had a quick bite of a ration bar and a swig of water from her canteen and had started off again. Heavy had been her heart, weighed down with iron shackles by the knowledge of what she had to do. The creeping cognizance that every time she would talk to Astrid, Merida and Rapunzel, they'd be blissfully unaware Elsa was a week away from taking away the guy who took them in. Anna would beam at her, not knowing she only had seven days with her best friend before her *sister* murdered him. Her secret was a ticking time bomb, and when it would go off, it would take with it every bridge she had tirelessly built.

So wrapped up in her damning thoughts had she been, there was one point where she'd noticed the cutest thing Jack had ever done, something that made her fall that little bit more for him. Every now and then she'd glance through the rearview mirror at him, and he was always watching the world go by, lost in thought. A few times Elsa had opened her mouth to ask what he was thinking, but she figured he'd give her little more than a caged response, so she didn't bother.

Four hours away from Camp Bravo, however, and a quick glance yielded a sight that had melted her heart a little - Jack's body had turned so he rested on his left side, his head lolled over on the seat's
headrest, eyes closed in deep slumber. It had then occurred to Elsa that Jack had been awake for a solid forty hours without a single break - whether that be out of the adherence to protocol, or the desire to keep watch over her, as the romantic in Elsa chose to believe - and his body had evidently reached the point where it overrode his desire to stay awake and shut itself down for sleep - though his hands clutched the assault rifle.

Elsa didn't know what had come over her at that moment, maybe it was out of a sincere wish to care for him, or to pretend for just a while that everything was okay between them again, but as gently as she possibly could she had pulled over and leaned over her seat to drape the thin blanket over his sleeping form. He'd murmured something adorable in his sleep as he snuggled into it, garnering a warm smile from her lips - but she checked herself from stroking his head.

Unwilling to push her luck, Elsa had driven on.

The instant their jeep drove through the open gates of Bravo as the sun passed below the horizon, however, Jack snapped awake. Elsa glanced through the rear view mirror at him as he bolted upright, eyes alert and darting around. "What the—"

That, coupled with how the blanket draped over the rifle as he shouldered it to discourage invisible threats, made it almost impossible to suppress a snigger. "We're home," Elsa reassured him.

Jack cast her a quick look at her reflection, his brow furrowing. "Bravo?"

Elsa nodded.

Jack sank back into his seat and cast off the blanket - after a moment of confusion ostensibly as to why it was there - yet his body language still remained in a state of alertness. Elsa had semi-expected him to relax in relief that they had returned to relative safety, but he acted like they were still in Perdition.

Choosing not to pursue his odd behaviour, Elsa took the jeep over the frosted grass toward the mechanic's garage, where, to her surprise, Hiccup, Astrid, Rapunzel and Merida stood waiting. She hadn't expected the welcoming committee when she'd radioed their E.T.A at an hour out.

"Welcome back, you two!" Rapunzel said in bright, sing-song voice that immediately made Elsa cringe. She sounded like Anna whenever Jack was the subject. "How was your vacation?"

Jack was already bounding out of the jeep before it had even stopped moving, and striding toward Astrid. Immediately, the tall blonde's smirk dropped like a stone - though Elsa could only see the back of Jack's head, his expression must have been enough to make even Astrid slightly flinch. He lifted up the pulse assault rifle and roughly pushed it into her hands.

"This is Hoffertech. You and Hiccup are gonna take this apart and find out how it works - I want a report as soon as you can."

Astrid stiffened, and shot an annoyed glance at the brunette - who, like the others, was watching Jack with an anxious look. Not that Jack even noticed, as he was already turning toward the medical bay.

"With all due respect, sir," Astrid began in a ill-hidden tone of petulance, "I can do this alone—"

Jack rounded on her, and as Elsa was getting out of the car, she got a good look at his expression as he turned. For the first time… Elsa pitied Astrid.

"Did I fucking stutter?" Jack barked, causing all parties to jump slightly. Astrid blinked, and stiffened. "Was there any part that implied negotiation?"
"No, sir."

"Good," Jack maintained his admittedly scary tone, and pointed at Hiccup whilst keeping his eyes fixed on Astrid. "Whatever's going on between you and Hiccup, fucking sort it out. You wanna act like a sulky kid, go back to high school. You wanna be a Ghost, you get off your ass."

It was all Astrid could do to nod. Elsa remembered how, in the engine room of the Hammer, Astrid was the epitome of disobedience and alpha-female… or the attempt at such. Now, she was clearly submitting to Jack's authority, far from the dominant presence.

"Good." He turned his head and looked at Rapunzel. "You're with me. I have some questions, and you're the only one qualified to answer them."

"Uh—yessir!"

Without another word, Jack strode off toward the infirmary building. Rapunzel glanced at each of them in turn, before murmuring something that sounded like 'angry Jack', before hurrying off after him, leaving Elsa, Astrid, Merida and Hiccup to stare after them in bewilderment.

Hiccup was the first to speak. "...what just happened?"

"I think a storm jus' rolled over us," Merida said blankly. "I've never seen Jack so assertive before. That was—"

"—surprisingly arousing," Astrid said, eyes on the retreating figures, her expression as though she was still getting both barrels from Jack. Three pairs of eyes gave her a bemused look. Cottoning on, Astrid looked between them like she had been a world away. "...what? It was! I mean—"

Whatever was next to be said was left unspoken, as the awkward silence proved too much for Astrid. Muttering something about hacking apart a rifle, she hastily took her flushed self off inside the mechanic's workshop.

"Note to self, be more alpha," Hiccup muttered. "Last time I saw Jack like that, he had Pitch up against a wall."

Merida gave off a dismissive yet nervous laugh, which was cut short the moment she caught Hiccup's perfectly serious expression. "...ye're kiddin' right?"

"Wish I was." Hiccup cast a suspicious look at Elsa, bringing home the moment and question she was hoping to avoid for a completely different reason. "What happened out there?"

"Nothing," Elsa answered brusquely. She reached into the pocket of her hooded sweater to retrieve Hiccup's perfectly serious expression. "...Nothing," Elsa answered brusquely. She reached into the pocket of her hooded sweater to retrieve the dynamos, and handed them off to him. "Here."

"Uh, thanks," Hiccup said slowly, one eye narrowed at her as he took the dynamos and stuffed them into the pocket of his pants. "That's not an answer, by the way."

Elsa huffed as though annoyed by the line of questioning - which she was - yet her mind raced for an answer. A lie, convincing enough to throw off a technological genius and a highly-suspicious archer. If they found out, Jack would - and everything as she knew it would fall apart.

"He hadn't slept since we left, if you must know," she fired back.

Hiccup leaned his head back with an expression of dawning understanding. "Ah. Yeah, that'd about do it. Tired Jack is cranky Jack."
Elsa looked off at the retreating figures to hide her expression of relief. She didn't know too much about Hiccup but knew from observation over the past few weeks that he could be incredibly persistent.

However, Merida didn't buy what she was selling. As soon as her inimitable Scottish accent graced Elsa's ears, her heart sank like a stone - yet also caused something to snap within her. Perhaps it was the lingering tension over the last twenty four hours, or the crippling weight of Hans' strings pushing her down.

"Come off it, lassie." Merida's voice held that playful, teasing quality that ordinarily would simply exasperate Elsa… only it pissed her the fuck off. "What really happened?"

Elsa closed her eyes and balled her hands into fists, endeavouring with all her remaining energy to push down the bile-like rage bubbling within. Merida was, without a doubt, the last person she wanted to be around. After all, it was her fault Elsa was in that mess.

"Did he make a move, and ye rejected him?"

Elsa whirled around, all control lost. Her face, twisted into pure fury, threw down upon Merida with every inch of emotion she could no longer suppress, and Merida's smirk dropped like an anvil.

"You just had to do it, didn't you?! You just had to make that call!"

Merida recoiled, looking like she'd been slapped in the face. Her mouth opened and closed, bereft of speech, and her eyes cast uncertain side-glances at Hiccup - who himself stared open-mouthed at Elsa.

"W-what are ye talkin' about?"

"You heard me," Elsa snarled.

A small voice in her head that sounded dangerously close to a manipulative bastard reminded her of her need for secrecy. Puffing out a snort through her nose, Elsa turned and made for the barracks, unsure of whether to cry in a corner or completely demolish her quarters in a rage.

As soon as she'd heard Jack's voice over the radio, ordering both her and Kozmotis into the camp commander's office he hadn't yet fully utilised - Merida knew what it was about. Word had evidently reached Jack's ears of Elsa's outburst, and he wanted to know why.

Which meant she would have to tell him.

Merida's hand hovered over the door, feeling an unfamiliar and unwelcome sensation crawl down her spine and twist her gut. What would he say? What would he do?

She didn't want to think about it, yet her mind punished her with images of her being kicked out of the camp. Told to find her own way.

Did she regret calling her family? Hell no. Talking to her parents gave her a newfound strength and purpose, a goal to return to them one way.

Did she regret what was about to happen?

Maybe.

Figuring there was no need for waiting - and if she had to face the music so be it, as Merida
Dunbroch never shied away from responsibility - she pushed open the door.

Inside stood Kozmotis, who, to Merida's initial surprise, stood bolt upright and at attention. He gave the bare acknowledgement of her arrival in the form of a slight turn of the head.

Jack, however, would have been the epitome of relaxed. Casual, even, with his feet up on his desk and his arms folded as if settling in for a nap. For the first few seconds Merida felt a slight wash of relief - until she caught his expression: humourless, dark, stern.

Jack signalled with his eyes to the door; though Merida felt her heart sink to the floor she closed it behind her and stood at attention. For a time, Jack was silent, his glare switching from Merida to Kozmotis and back again, the only sounds she heard being the loud breathing through his nose and the slow thumping of her pulse in her ears.

He opened his mouth, causing her heart to jolt, and took a breath. "I'm going to ask you some questions, and you are going to answer them with 'yes, sir', or 'no, sir'. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," was Merida's reply as she stared straight ahead at what looked like an old, worn paper calendar dated 2018. Kozmotis' reply omitted a critical element, however, one Jack caught without hesitation.

"What was that?"

"Yes, sir," Kozmotis amended with a slight sneer.

Jack's eyes lingered on Kozmotis for a spell, before returning to Merida. Exhaling loudly through his nose, he stretched back to allow access to his pocket, and produced a small black disc. Lifting his feet off the desk, he placed the disc upon it and slowly slid it toward her, speaking no words, before turning it over. Merida's eyes flicked down to it and back up again, a twinge registering in her chest. The Ghost insignia.

Jack then returned to his prior position, complete with his feet back on the desk, and folded his arms before breaking the silence that was fast becoming unbearable.

"When you two went down to Perdition, something happened, didn't it?"

"Yes, sir," was Merida's reply.

"So when I asked you, when you came back, if anything had happened I should know about, you lied to me, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

Jack unfolded one arm so as to gesture for her to speak, but Kozmotis seemed to find it prudent to interject, "It was my idea, so if you want to punish—"

Jack's head snapped to Kozmotis, his glare darkening. "I think Merida is grown-up enough to speak for herself, don't you?"

He turned his eyes back, and gestured for her to speak. "This is the part where you make me not want to kick you out."

Merida cast a quick look at Kozmotis, and in amongst the feeling of being in deep fucking shit, was faintly amused at the expression of ill-hidden chagrin on his face. Perhaps he was so used to Jack's
laid-back style of command that actual military discipline was thoroughly unpleasant.

Turning her eyes back to the calendar, she proceeded to explain the events all the way from the shocking information on how she would outlive her entire family, her intent to go to Perdition alone despite Kozmotis' insistence on accompanying her, and the events surrounding her call. She left out not a single thing, even opening her heart to her fear of never seeing her family again driving her to make that one call. How she even sought comfort in the arms of Kozmotis, she was that unsteady, something that garnered a flash of surprise in Jack's cold expression.

Jack studied her for a short time once she'd finished, and Merida yearned to know what was going on in that brain of his.

She was about to find out.

"When Elsa and I were in Perdition, we split up. Elsa went to get the dynamos, but me? I wanted one of those new rifles. So, I saw two bozos. Easy marks. Only, I'm close enough to overhear them, and what do they say? That the Inquisitors have been in town, questioning everyone on the whereabouts of a fugitive, a traitor to the regime that made a call from one of the bars."

Jack frowned, theatrically so, and made a show of resting his head against his hand. "I thought to myself: who would do something like that? When? But then I remembered how you and Pitch volunteered to gather food from Perdition. How you two were the only ones who could have done it. This," he gestured between them, "was to see if I was right - and I was."

Merida remained silent as Jack continued, reflecting on the oddest, most peculiar part of her being chewed out - that she wasn't being chewed out. Not once had Jack raised his voice, nor had the crimson shades of fury adorned his cheeks. Indeed, the only person he had been clearly irked with was Kozmotis.

"You miss your folks. I get it. You wanted to see them one last time in case the worst happened, and so they knew you were alive. I get it. What we do - it's hard. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves the world ain't so shit, and there are still people who love us."

It was then that Merida realised, in herself, why it was so peculiar that Jack hadn't exploded at her, and that his even, quiet tone of voice was making her wish he would.

He wasn't angry. No, it was worse.

"We may make Unity look stupid, but Unity is not stupid. They might not have directly connected that it was you who made the call, on account of our little Uni-Com trick, but any idiot can see a two hour call at three in the morning to a specific person and put two-and-two together. You were reckless, careless, irresponsible, and because of your little stunt, we can never set foot in Perdition again. Thanks to you two, Unity has a ballpark idea of where to start looking - and the only thing keeping them from storming Canada is a shit-ton of Reapers - and sooner or later, not even that is gonna work. You put the entire team, their families and yours in danger."

Merida chanced a look at him, out of respect - he looked weary. Resigned.

Jack pointed at something before her, though Merida didn't need to follow his direction to know he was pointing at the patch.

"Do you know what that means? It means 'trust'. Whoever wears that tells me I can trust them. That I know they've got my back, and my team's back. I can trust them with my life, and the lives of my friends - and you two broke that trust. I'm trying not to see you both as walking security risks."
"We didnae mean for it tae happen, sir," Merida found herself blurting. Maybe out of pride, or the hope that Jack knew he could still trust her.

"But you could have come to me first. You should have come to me first, and I would have helped. I forgave your first fuck-up in Perdition on account of you still being stuck in Valkyrie-mode, and the position that asshole put you in by groping you without your consent - but this time you knowingly went behind my back to make that call, and now we have to deal with the consequences."

Jack unfurled his legs from the table, and stood with his hands in his pockets. He took a long, studying look at Kozmotis, as though considering his words.

"I'm surprised at you the most, Pitch. You and I—we're practically brothers. Fought together. Planned to die together if we were ever stuck with no way out. Hell, you taught me how to dissociate myself—my mind—if I was ever caught and tortured, and Anna had to go full-on fire-mode to stop us beating the shit out of each other because you thought I'd betrayed the team by sleeping with Astrid. Yet, you go ahead and pull this?" Jack looked away, and a bitter, humourless chuckle found its way into the room. "You know the worst part? If you had told me what you'd both done as soon as you came back, I'd be pissed—but I'd have understood because you two would have given me the goddamn respect of being honest. But no—I had to find out from two morons in Perdition that two of my team lied to me and everyone else. That's what hurts the most. I understand why Red pulled this shit, but I couldn't work out why you would… but looking at the two of you now, I see why."

Jack pointed again at the patch, his eyes travelling back to Merida. "You can take that with you. I'm gonna be offsite for four days from tomorrow morning, to persuade a friend to be our contact in case Unity ever makes a move on us. I want you to look at that, and have a good, long think about whether that's what you really want - because this is your second strike. One more, and you're off the team. I can't have people risking the lives of my friends—or did you forget Anna has a baby on the way?"

Merida's heart clenched.

"Starting tomorrow, you're both on watch for the next week. Separate watch. You're on days, Pitch takes nights. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," came the two-strong reply.

"Good." He gestured with his eyes to the door. "This is the part where you get the hell out."

Merida gave him a quick nod and a salute, before picking up the patch and swiftly leaving the room, Kozmotis bringing up the rear. The door clicked closed behind her, and there was a rush of air as Kozmotis swept past her towards his room in the barracks. Merida watched him as he went down the dimly lit corridor, thankful for his presence both in the bar and in Jack's office, yet regretful that he caught hell as much as she did - if not more so.

"How are you?"

Merida didn't even start upon hearing Rapunzel's voice. No, the feeling of embarrassment and shame overwhelmed most other reactions. She looked down at the patch in her right hand, and stroked it between her thumb and forefinger. "Not great, lassie."

"Well," Rapunzel began in that cheery voice of hers that, rather than uplift her, did nothing of the sort. "I didn't hear shouting and screaming. That's good, right?"
"No," said Merida, gazing at the mischievous grin of the Ghost insignia, "it's worse. Ye remember growin' up, right?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, d'ye remember as a kid, that look yer parents gave ye, the voice they used when ye really fucked up? When ye wanted tha earth ta swallow ye up?"

Rapunzel emitted a long sigh through her nose, and when she spoke, she was solemn and muted. "Yeah. When they were way past angry."

Merida nodded slowly. "That's how Jack looked at me, like he was disappointed in me."

"Red… I'm sure he's—"

"I need tae get some sleep," Merida cut her off, turning to leave for her room. "I'm on first watch tomorrow."

---

To a passerby, one could be forgiven for presuming Elsa was choosing which firearm she would be using for her - now short-lived - career as a Ghost, by the way she stood and gazed at the weapons hung on the racks surrounding her in the armory. In reality, she had already chosen her firearm a while ago - the Styer AUG, which she had tentatively named Hailstorm.

No, her thoughtful gazing was attributed to only one weapon, hung halfway up the rearmost wall - the katana. Elsa had trained with a sword from practically the moment she had set foot in the Valkyrie Quarter, learning the reach of a blade, the various techniques, and which blade lent itself to either speed and precision or brute force. Using a sword was as natural to her as breathing, an extension of her arm.

She reached up to unhook the katana from the wall, holding it in her hands, and gently unsheathed the blade. The metal glimmered under the light, like it had barely been dulled by its years in isolation. Elsa leaned the sheath against the wall, and admired the relative lightness of the weapon, remarking how her body automatically adapted to wielding a blade once again. She held the handle close to her face to point directly ahead of her, not unlike the moments before her clash with Beauty, and began fluidly cutting through the air as though slicing her enemies, her feet matching each slash like a dance routine unforgotten. She imagined parrying, blocking and dodging strikes from all angles, multiple threats with the face of Hans all vying for her blood… and all cut down by her blade.

Yet, it wasn't right. Sure, the katana was an elegant weapon, and would be a terror in the hands of someone else… but for Elsa, it didn't feel like her. Merida had complained of her inability to bond with Longtooth, and Elsa found herself sympathising. She needed something, else. Something personal.

It was when, as she sighed whilst returning the katana to its sheath and hooking it back onto the rack that an idea graced her mind: what if she made her own blade? A sword of pure ice, an extension of herself, her spirit and her will. Something she could call her own. Elsa looked down at her hands; could she do it? It was one thing to create a snowflake and a crocus, but… a functional, usable sword?

Only one way to find out.

Elsa enclosed her hand as though gripping an imaginary hilt, and closed her eyes to picture in her mind her ideal blade. It had to be of medium length and width like Frostpiercer, with a hilt long enough for two hands to wield it yet agile enough to only need one, and narrow enough to allow her
customary movements of her wrists. The crossguard had to be just enough to prevent her hand from slipping onto the cutting edge, but not too wide as to affect balance.

And the blade itself? *Frostpiercer* and the *katana* had something in common - they were single-edged. Elsa often lamented it, believing in adaptability in combat and not having to think about whether the sword was held correctly in the heat of battle. Hitting an enemy with the blunt edge would be a fatal mistake.

Whilst at the mercy of her thoughts, her powers had been humming and vibrating inside her like an organic machine, called into action by her mind. The chill of solid ice kissed at the inside of her hand, a smooth, cylindrical shape within her grip. Elsa felt the warmth progressively vanish from the air as her powers consumed it to carry out her will, a biting cold in which she felt more at home than any other climate. Seconds passed with the temperature falling further, and the object in her hand gaining weight.

And like that, her powers fell silent.

Elsa opened her eyes, and gazed down at her creation - or, at least, a wild guess at a sword - with a restrained excitement undimmed by the end result. It was medium length, just as she wanted, with a blade that featured a double edge. The crossguard was an inch or so wider than the blade itself, and the hilt was the perfect length.

However, as a first attempt, it showed. The blade was a little heavy as she slowly whirled it around her person, and even under the dim light looked as blunt as a child's toy sword. The hilt and crossguard was little more than a simple rectangle with a cylinder stuck to it, and were she to use it now, her foe would suffer little more than a slight bruise and a bad mood.

Did it matter? No. For she had created a sword of *pure, blue-tinted ice.*

She would practice with it. She would refine it. She would harden and sharpen it, balance it and adorn it with detail until it was perfect - for she had proven it could be done.

And when her blade was ready for war, she would name it *Coldheart.*

It seemed apt, for what she had to do.
"Red Alert"

The acrid taste of smoke burns her throat, but the adrenaline in her veins forces her to gulp for air. Heat tickles at her cheeks, reminding her of the fierce, amber flames ravaging the buildings around her. Eyes, once sharp, reward her with blurred sight, and her ears alert her to nothing but the crackle of the base as the dragonfire consumes it.

Pitch Black was the first to fall, being the greatest threat. A shadow that struck with ferocity and speed, but one laid low by the piercing of his heart. She remembers the manic, almost psychotic laughter on his lips, still chilling her to the bone. The look in his eyes in the moments before life left them, two golden circles that said, "I was right about you."

Her fingertips claw into sundered earth, as she clutches at the wound in her side, sucking in gulp after gulp of air. The excruciating pain tells her of a likely punctured lung courtesy of a combat blade, a last attempt by Astrid to take her down with her. Enraged by the fall of Hiccup, Toothless and Stormfly, the strong woman had been brutal and vicious, but wild and predictable.

Merida fell not long before that, a victim of being unable to bring her arrows to bear before the distance was closed upon her… but Rapunzel's terrified pleading for life, for mercy, would forever haunt her heart.

She apologised, every time, as the light left their eyes. Begged for their forgiveness. Said she had no choice, that though she yearned for the sweet escape of death from the shadows driving her, they would not let her die.

Through the pain, the haze and the noise, she hears an anguished cry, a panicked and confused shriek. She staggers to her feet.

"You killed them!" The accusation rings out, with heart-piercing clarity. "You murdered them all!"

The woman turns, swaying on her feet from the pain and exhaustion. She swallows thorns and glass, throat dry like the desert. The voice belongs to another, one who escaped the massacre. Her sister.

"You betrayed us!" she shrieks, mania in her eyes, arms spread as though demanding reason. There is none. "You fucking stabbed us in the back!"

"Anna…" is all the woman can croak. "Wait…"

Anna does not wait. She does not hesitate. Rage is in her eyes, vengeance in her face, and death on her lips. Fire blossoms upon her hands, bolstered and fuelled by that which consumes their home, fire that spreads over her body until she herself is alight, eyes burning bright. Her sister, the goddess of flame and fury.

Anna's arms surge forward, and the flames obey. Survival instincts kick in once more, instincts that refused to allow her the escape of death each time, and ice cascades forth from her outstretched hands. Power hums through her body, unimaginable power that slams its icy force into the stream of fire, birthing a torrent of hissing steam that scalds the air and veils the ground.

For a time, they are equal.

Until they are not.
For while her mastery of ice, wind and snow diminishes, Anna's rage and power grows, and so too do her flames. She burns brighter than the sun as she advances toward her, her fire searing the sky and scorching the earth. Soon, the world around them is ash, and the stream of flame pushes back the ice. She falls to her knees, desperation fuelling her winter power, weakness claiming her limbs as the meeting of fire and ice closes in on her hands.

As her fingertips feel the searing touch, she hears her sister's voice. "This is for Jack."

Her ice gives out.

The flames engulf her, and though she wants to scream... she smiles.

Her way out, at last.

Elsa's eyes snapped open with a start as she gasped a sharp breath. Pulse wildly beating, she bolted up in her bed, sucking in lungful after lungful of air. Sweat coated her skin - an initial peculiarity that since her rebirth as an ice-wielding abnormal, she could actually sweat - and her left hand trembled as she ran her fingers through her hair. She grasped with a scrambling hand over her nightstand, fingers hastily searching for that which would ground her, and when her fingertips met ice, she brought it to her chest and gripped it there as tight as she could.

Second night. Same nightmare. One by one she would pick off the Ghosts, and then awaken just as a vengeful Anna's fire claimed her. It always seemed so real, down to the prickle of heat on her cheeks and the white-hot pain of Astrid's knife piercing her chest, that it took a while for even her snowflake to remind her it was only a nightmare.

Two days had passed since Perdition, each nightmare a reminder she had only five days left before they became a plausible reality.

She had tried to tell Jack, of course. She had intended to come clean after breakfast, to pull him aside and pour her heart out. However, Jack hadn't stuck around long enough for her to do so; he had walked into the mess hall, grabbed what he could, and left. Anna had brightly asked if he wanted to join them at the table, but he had brusquely declined and left the hall - though the rest of the table found it curious he'd cast a distant glance at Elsa.

"What's with him?" Astrid had wondered out loud.

Thirty seconds after that, he'd already taken to the air, leaving instructions that Anna was in charge until his return, and that he would radio in at the usual times.

Return from where? Elsa did not know - but attempts to talk to him via the radio were fruitless. Anna had said it was a thing with him.

Then again, in a way that made her feel more loathful of herself, was that not fortunate? To distance himself from her, possibly in the hopes she would do the same, so when the time came it would be easier?

Hell, Elsa was the queen of distancing herself. From her sister, from her problems… from her life. It was one of the things she missed about being a Valkyrie… though that in and of itself was her escape from the shitshow her life was at that point.

Maybe it was the depression her father talked about - only now, it was no longer locked in her family
Heart slowing to a comfortable, calm rate, she let her hand fall from her hair onto her lap. Maybe it had never truly left her, after all. Maybe the dark hole had stowed away in a small corner of her mind to remind her, one day, that the past was not always in the past. Eating was something suddenly requiring effort, and she had to force herself to practise with Hailstorm and Coldheart. Sleep was difficult to achieve, yet for two mornings on the trot she had to summon the will to get out of bed. It was eerily similar to the Elsa trapped in her room, down to the conscious choice to distance herself from her friends, but the yearning to be with them.

The door of her quarters treated her to several thuds, jerking her from her thoughts of how the Elsa of the past seemed to be returning to reclaim her skin. Elsa eyed the door handle as she stiffened, expecting Anna's usual disregard for privacy.

"Yes?"

"You're late for your scheduled training session."

Elsa blinked and cocked her head, frowning in confusion. "Pitch?"

His response was curt, and a little irked. "Were you expecting someone else?"

"Well, yes," Elsa said, the slight increase in pitch of her voice speaking of her bemusement. "My sessions are with Jack, and he hasn't returned."

"You'll be pleased to learn he has asked someone to teach you in his stead, then."

"Hunh." That was news to Elsa. As far as she assumed, their sessions had been postponed. "Who?"

"Me."

Elsa blinked, and her head recoiled as she almost uttered a guttural 'whaaaaa—?' of complete dumbfounded surprise. She and Pitch actively avoided each other, sharing barely a word since the blood-smearing incident in Des Moines. Pitch pretended she was invisible, and it was relatively straightforward for Elsa to reciprocate.

"...you?"

"Snow Queen, I have been awake and on my feet for fifteen hours. I would much rather be asleep than entertaining a conversation with a door and the airhead behind it, yet here I am. My patience and tolerance for idiocy is much lower, so when you're quite finished, I will be in the mess hall. Do be punctual."

And with that, Elsa heard his footsteps - more like stomps - move away from the door and recede down the hall, depriving her of opening the door and punching him for his rudeness. She scowled and harrumphed, briefly considering staying in her room as a passive-aggressive fuck you to him… but curiosity got the better of her. Plus, she reckoned it wasn't like refusing to meet him would affect him in the slightest, in fact he'd probably prefer it.

So, to indulge her curiosity and out of the perverse pleasure of mildly inconveniencing him, Elsa placed the snowflake back on her nightstand with a sigh, swung her legs out of bed and proceeded to put on her military fatigues.

At the very least, it should be interesting.
When Elsa pushed open the door to the mess hall, the monochrome colours and silver units gleaming in the natural morning light pouring in through the high-mounted windows, Pitch was sat askew on the stool at the furthest end of one of the long tables, a mug of something in his left hand. Hovering over his right palm was a wispy puff of black sand that swirled in a lazy circle as he gazed upon it. Against the white table surface, he stuck out like a sore thumb - perhaps that was his intent.

"Anna made a pot of something that can be loosely called coffee," he said, gesturing with the mug to the black liquid inside a medium-sized pot. "Though it tastes more like boiled dirt. Apparently decades-old instant coffee doesn't age well."

Elsa remained silent as she walked over to take the stool opposite him, and poured herself a mugful. Raising the steaming liquid to her lips, she took a careful sip and immediately pulled a face. She didn't know whether it would wake her up or kill her, judging by the bitter, horrid taste.

"I think, for the first time, we agree on something," she mused, eyeing the drink with a suspicious look.

Pitch quietly snorted, and his hand abruptly clenched away the wisp of sand. "Wonders never cease."

Elsa looked at him through her eyebrows; he was tired, and it showed. The grey around his eyes had given way to a darker shade, reminiscent of golden spheres in the night, and he slouched slightly rather than his usual bolt-upright posture.

"Forgive an airhead for asking," she enunciated with a sour tone, "but I'm not following what this has to do with my powers training?"

Pitch gave her a side look. "This session isn't just about your powers, but about you learning to be a Ghost."

Elsa made to take another sip, but thought better of it. "So you heard about that?"

"Yes." Pitch took a deep swig, leading Elsa to question the integrity of his taste buds and admire his constitution. "Not the call I would have made, yet we all must face the consequences of our decisions."

"Then it is fortunate the decision was not yours to make." Elsa raised a brow.

"Indeed. I would have thought a week's patrol duty was enough punishment, but Jack feels you would benefit from my guidance, so here we are."

"What could I learn from you?" Elsa was unable to hide the snark from her voice - but Pitch seemed unfazed.

"Ask yourself that question when this session is concluded." Pitch rested the mug on the table, leaning forward slightly. He entwined his fingers together, and regarded her with a studious gaze. "Let's try a simple mental exercise. Think about every member of our team, both on base and off. Hypothesise, for a moment, that you are on opposite sides of the battlefield to them."

Elsa blinked, and a thoroughly unpleasant sensation clawed at her gut. She lifted her chin, and nodded in an effort to compose herself.

"How would you defeat them?"

"Everyone?" she asked.
Pitch slowly nodded.

Elsa looked away and lost herself in thought, tapping into the recesses of her mind that governed her tactics, strategies and analyses. "Astrid is, physically, the strongest of us, yet she relies too heavily upon her raw strength and power. I would use it against her, wear her down until she gives me an opening."

Pitch cocked his head back and forth. "Accurate, but anyone with a semblance of tactical knowledge could make that obvious assessment. Weakness in combat is not what I meant."

"Then what?"

"I presume you've heard of the term Achilles' Heel?"

"Yes." Who hadn't?

"Knowing Unity's stance on history, you won't know of its origin, so I'll give you a crash course; in Greek mythology, there was a demigod called Achilles. Thanks to being bathed in the River Styx, he was invulnerable to all, except for one part."

"His heel."

"Precisely. His mother Thetis submerged all of his body but his heel, so though he was unparalleled and invincible in battle, all it took was one arrow to his heel to bring him down. One weak spot, and he was nothing."

Elsa shifted on her stool. Pitch leaned back until he was upright, his eyes never leaving hers as he reached for his mug and took a sip before continuing.

"You could be the strongest, the fastest, the most technically skilled abnormal on earth… but if all it takes for your enemy to shut you down is a single word, one remark, or one sentence… you are nothing but a liability."

Elsa raised a brow, and drawled, "Are you speaking rhetorically, or…?"

"Not to inflate your ego, Snow Queen, but my opinion of you is not that high," he answered tonelessly. "So, with all that in mind - I ask again: what are their weaknesses?"

Elsa's insides twisted a little at the prospect of not only talking behind the backs of her friends, but also revealing potentially sensitive information to Pitch. Her face was ill-equipped to hide her discomfort, however, something Pitch readily picked up on. He rolled his eyes and impatiently huffed.

"If you're concerned about what I might do with what you say, rest assured I have already assessed and evaluated your vulnerabilities, and those of your friends. You cannot tell me what I already know."

"How comforting," Elsa said in a slow, deadpan voice. "I presume you've already made plans to exploit those vulnerabilities should the time come?"

"You're smarter than you look," Pitch's lips tugged at one side. "Now, your answer?"

Elsa sighed, and rested the mug on the table so she could fold her arms. She looked off to the side, and summoned the courage to delve into territory she felt she shouldn't go - the personal lives of her friends.
"Rapunzel is hopeful. She is bright, positive, always wanting to see the good in people."

"But?"

"She is naive, especially for one who has done what we have done. She allowed herself to fall for Flynn Rider in a worryingly short time, like it was some fairytale romance, and were she to be confronted—actually confronted—with the darkness in the world, it would crush her."

"And how would you do that?"

Elsa looked up at him, caught off-guard. "Excuse me?"

Pitch leaned forward and laced his fingers together. "How would you break Rapunzel, if you had to?"

"I…" Elsa stared at him, momentarily lost for words. "I… I would make her undergo a reality check. She tries not to think about it but she is as much of a killer as the rest of us. I would remind her of that. Attack her positivity."

Pitch uttered a 'hmm' as he stroked at his short beard in thought. "Interesting. Astrid?"

"Astrid…" Elsa began in a small voice. "Astrid radiates confidence, self-assuredness and strength… but it is a facade. Inside, she is a lonely woman who will clam up or walk away whenever positive talk of family comes up. She wants the world to believe she is bulletproof so it will not see how vulnerable she is, so her facade is a house of cards that will, eventually, fall down."

Pitch nodded sagely. "I have heard she reacts negatively to authority, yet she seems to flourish under Jack's command. Perhaps it is a positive figure of authority she craves - so her weak spot would be her parents. Attack the overwhelming need she has for her parents' love, and she will crumble."

And so on it went. Not one member of the team escaped Elsa's analysis, save for Anna, who Elsa point blank refused to discuss. Jack and his doubt over his leadership skills. Hiccup and his over-reliance on Toothless. Merida's was as glaringly obvious as Astrid's, the very people she'd gotten into hot water with Jack for: her family. Elsa found it both amusing and ironic that those who professed to be fearless and strong were the ones most vulnerable.

Yet, with each one analysed and discussed, Elsa couldn't escape the increasing sensation of how wrong it felt to plan how she would cripple the team without firing a shot. It resonated horribly with her nightmare, the growing fear that rather than a loyal member of the Ghosts, she was their greatest threat.

"Now," Pitch said, drawing his laced fingers together under his chin, his body language daring her. "What about me?"

Elsa grew uncomfortable under his gaze, and shifted on the stool as she tried to hold his eyes. "You?"

"Yes." Pitch didn't even blink. "What are my weaknesses?"

Elsa's lips parted and closed over and over, her mind working, searching for an answer. She knew admittedly little about him, and Merida refused to give away anything even under Rapunzel's prodding. Pitch was a closed book to her, and as the seconds went by, she realised: she couldn't think of a damned thing.

"I… I don't know."
"That's because I no longer have any."

Elsa scoffed. So much for *Achilles' Heel.* "Surely you must have one."

"I don't, because I have confronted and dealt with every one of them." He unfurled a hand so as to take a mouthful of his coffee. "If you were to use my parents, I would respond that I killed them both —"

Elsa's eyes widened.

"—in self-defense, if the technicality matters to you. If you were to attack me via my friends, I would counter that I functioned perfectly well without them for years, and I can do so again."

"And what about the people you've killed?" Elsa found herself blurting, as though hoping the accusation would catch him off guard. She'd heard stories of countless Archons and human soldiers murdered by a shadow in the night. She considered herself responsible for the deaths on the *Star,* and still carried the weight of guilt, but did he?

"If you are asking me whether I regretted any of the people I've killed, the answer is: not for one second."

"Why?"

"Because I know myself, Snow Queen. I know my past, I know the horrors and trials I have gone through, and I do not shy away from them - I own them. I know what I have done was for the good of our kind - and as long as that is my cause, then my cause is just."

For a while, Elsa remained silent, her mind turning over his words in her thoughts. She wondered how many people used a variance of those words to justify their swathes of destruction - yet they seemed to work for him. Pitch always struck her, more so in the months since the teams linked, as someone who was supremely aware of himself as a person, and his place in the world. He did not doubt, he did not second-guess. He always seemed to move with a purpose in mind, the personification of forward momentum.

"I suppose there is only one left."

Jarred from her thoughts, Elsa looked at him. "Me."

Pitch's lips twitched - probably as close to a smile as he was ever likely to express. "You."

Elsa raised the mug to her lips whilst her eyes descended to the empty space between them. Her breaths came slow and steady, fuel for her mind to work. "I suppose… I suppose I let people control me too easily. First it was my parents… then Hans…"

Elsa leaned on the table by her forearms, clutching the warm, steel mug as though it would comfort and anchor her. "Honestly… I never really thought about it."

Pitch tilted his head in that *point-acknowledged* way. "It is easy to discern vulnerabilities in others, but difficult to look within oneself with an objective eye. However, I would wager your vulnerabilities run deeper than that."

Elsa looked at him, interested yet wary. "How so?"

"Are you sure you wish to open that door, Snow Queen?" Pitch leaned forward a little. "You may not like what lies behind."
Elsa felt a small pang of fear in her heart, thanks to the ominous tone with which Pitch delivered his warning. Brushing it off as his attempt to intimidate her, she nodded once.

"Fine," he said. "I know enough about you to know that for years, you've submitted to someone else's control. In the beginning, you acquiesced to your parents' misguided direction. For three years, your life is not your own. Every move you made is monitored. Your parents are murdered, and your rage, your lust for vengeance drives you to the arms of the military. There, you eat when you are told to eat, sleep when they allow it, go where they order you to go—once again, your life is dictated for you, but not by you. It has become normal, for you. Comforting. Safe."

Elsa looked away. She hadn't thought of it in such a way, yet his words struck more chords than she thought she had.

Pitch took a swig before continuing, downing the rest of his mug. "Then, on one fateful day, by happenstance your paths cross with ours, and for the first time in a long time, there is no figure of authority to govern your life. You are on your own, forced to make your own decisions. No-one to tell you if what you're doing is right... or wrong."

He decanted himself some more coffee, and in amongst the eerie sensation of her soul being bared, Elsa decided Pitch had no internal digestion system to speak of.

"Then the guilt sets in, the regret, the realisation that for the first time in nearly a decade, you have to take responsibility for yourself. For your actions. For your past. You realise that everything you had been told to believe was wrong, and you've caused so much death and pain on a lie you bought because someone in power told it to you.

"You face a dilemma: you want to atone for your actions, to make right your past, but you don't know how. You don't know if you can. You doubt yourself, your abilities, whether you can stand up and be measured against your peers. You second-guess the decisions you make, because you are making them. You question your place on the team, wondering if you are here not out of respect or because you deserve it, but out of pity. You question yourself so much, that while everyone moves forward, your doubts keep you frozen in the past."

Elsa, her eyes boring holes into the table, took a deep draught of her boiled dirt. Suddenly, it didn't taste so bad anymore.

"So I would say that your vulnerability is not your family, or your friends. Your greatest weakness is yourself."

Elsa glanced up at him just as he conjured another wisp of sand and let it dance around his fingers. "Of course, this is merely my opinion for you to discard as you wish - but judging by how the temperature in this room has dropped two degrees, I am quite close to the mark."

"I've been told this before..." Elsa briefly let go of the mug to scratch her temple, "just not like that."

"By people who care about you, so they sugar coat their words." Pitch leaned back a little and folded his arms, his eyebrows furrowing as his expression went deadpan. "I do not care about your feelings, Snow Queen, but your ability to work as part of this team and to not fall apart or lose control and get us all killed - because if your enemies cannot bring you down with weapons, they will not hesitate to do so with words. Sometimes we need a kick up the arse... and you, my dear Snow Queen, need a size ten."

Elsa snorted, and rolled her eyes. "How eloquent."
Pitch's brow rose and fell. "Indeed." He leaned forward, golden eyes zoning into hers. "Tell me, why are you here?"

Elsa's lips set into a grim line. "To bring down Unity… and Larsen."

His head slowly shook, though his eyes never left hers. "No, that is your vengeance talking. Try again."

"To…" Elsa blinked, thoroughly disarmed by the comment. "To protect my sister."

"No." Pitch leaned forward, and one hand unfurled to point a finger down on the table. "You are defining and validating your existence and significance by another person, when Anna is Anna, and you are you. Try again - and look deeper inside. What do you want?"

Elsa let out a long breath. Those were the answers first in her mind, ones she knew to be true. She did want to punish Hans for his crimes against her and her family. She did want to be around for her sister the way she hadn't been for six years, and be the elder sibling she should have been. She wanted those things…

...but what if Pitch was on to something? The back of her mind became host to an odd prickling, a weird sensation of dawning understanding - what if she put herself first, for a change?

"...to be free," she murmured, gazing distantly at the table whilst her heart spoke. "Free from those who would seek to control me. Free from fear, from the past that keeps haunting me."

"Now that is more like it."

"How?"

"How what?"

"How do I… how would you suggest I do that?"

Pitch made a light shrug. "Well, watching every historical item I had collected sink to the bottom of the Atlantic has afforded me a certain enlightening perspective: while they may be lost to me, I am still alive. So, I would suggest: let the past die. Kill it if that's what it takes. That's the only way to become what you were meant to be." Pitch took a deep, thoughtful breath.

Elsa frowned and looked away. It almost sounded like, though he did not know it, he was advocating letting Hans execute her parents. She chewed at her lip, blinking away the dull ache behind her eyes.

Pitch uttered a sigh that sounded suspiciously like an irritated huff. "If I was a man who cares, I would say: cast off the shackles of your past. Tear down the walls, free yourself of what has come before, and rise. Rise, like the proverbial phoenix."

Elsa remained silent, considering his surprisingly poetic words.

"Fortunately for me, I am not a man who cares whether you'll consider my opinion or disregard it - but remember, your course ahead is for you to chart, and you alone. Not Anna, not Jack, not Larsen… and certainly not me."

The stool groaned as Pitch pushed himself up, and downed the rest of his coffee. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've wasted enough valuable time I could have dedicated to sleeping."
A faint breeze followed him as air rushed to occupy the space he'd previously taken, and his dark profile receded from her peripheral vision. Dwelling in thought, Elsa did not immediately register his movement until he was halfway to the exit, when, as though the name escaped her lips before she knew it, she called out.

"Merida."

Elsa's head swiveled to regard his retreating figure. Pitch had ceased his steps, his head turned over his shoulder, though his eyes looked elsewhere.

"What of her?"

"You said you had no weaknesses. You were wrong. She is the crack in your armor."

Pitch gave no further comment or acknowledgement, choosing instead to continue out of the mess hall. Elsa watched as the door swung shut, filling the cavernous room with a loud slam, and pondered on what had come before.

Perhaps he was right. Perhaps the entire conversation could be condensed down to a single question, one sitting in her mind as she turned back and rested her finger across her upper lip.

Why did Jack want the talk to happen, anyway?

---

With the sun beginning to set behind him, casting the base in an ethereal golden hue, Hiccup paused in front of the workshop's corrugated metal gate, a sudden doubt freezing his muscles. Toothless gave him a gentle nudge against his leg, a silent query as to his abrupt hesitance. He threw the dragon a quick glance, and then looked back weapon in his hands, the unfinished prototype axe that was to be his gift for Astrid.

He slowly rotated it, eyes checking for any small errors or misaligned components. It wasn't complete by any stretch of the imagination, a metal frame composed of two 'C' shaped brackets welded together and criss-crossed with various wires and filaments, attached to a simple metal broom handle. In theory, it should work: Astrid's vibrations should be converted by the dynamo in the handle into energy that should be transmitted through the focal emitters at the tip of each 'C'.

The problem was that there was a hell of a lot of 'shoulds' involved, even for an abnormally-gifted engineer such as himself, and the only way to know it would work for sure was for Astrid to physically test it. So, if rather than the appearance of two beams of light, the whole damn thing fell apart, Hiccup would look like quite the idiot.

When you were hoping to impress a woman like Astrid Hofferson, looking an idiot was not high on your list.

"I dunno, bud," he said. "Think she'll like it?"

Toothless gave him the quintessential Toothless look of, "What are you asking me for?"

Hiccup caught his buddy's expression, and let out a self-effacing chuckle. "Right. Won't know unless I show her."

Letting out an anxious breath, he knelt down and yanked up the corrugated door by the handle, taking care not to bump the axe against anything, and ducked inside.
Sat at one of the workshop tables in the far corner, hunched over something Hiccup couldn't quite make out, Astrid gave no indication she was aware of his entrance, despite there being no way she hadn't heard the door opening and sliding shut.

Hiccup quickly glanced at the table's surface as he walked further into the workshop, and it became crystal clear what Astrid was working on. Strewn across the table, in several bits and components under the only light in the place, was the totally disassembled automatic pulse rifle Jack wanted figuring out. It looked like Astrid was in the process of putting it back together.

"Busy. What do you want?"

"I… uh," Hiccup hesitated, "thought we were both supposed to do that?"

Astrid didn't even look up, or turn, but carried on with her task. "You were doing whatever it is you were doing, flyboy, so I got on with it. Besides, I work better alone."

Hiccup twisted his lip, trying to ignore the stinging sensation in his chest. He looked over his shoulder to find Toothless, hoping for a little emotional support, only to find him licking his armpit. Useless reptile.

"So…” Hiccup scratched at the back of his head, "found anything interesting?"

"Hoo boy." Astrid's voice, for the first time, conveyed something other than irritably cold, which heartened Hiccup a little. "If I didn't know better, I'd say Hoffertech is losing its touch. Power distribution's all outta whack; fire this thing on full auto and it'll blow up, taking you and whoever's near you with it. Have to shoot in bursts, but even then, you'll risk overheating the drive coils. Not to mention an EMP will make this thing its bitch for thirty seconds. Military probably leaned hard on Hoffertech, so production got rushed, and the end result is this. I wouldn't use it as a prototype, personally."

Hiccup let out a nervous chuckle. "So, we don't need to worry?"

"Didn't say that." Astrid leaned over to screw in a wire to the magazine receptacle. "This thing fires bolts of superheated plasma, so if it doesn't kill you, you're gonna burn."

Hiccup winced, and cleared his throat. "Nice. Thank you for the mental image."

"Yuh-huh." Astrid sounded positively unmoved. "So, whaddya want?"

"Well, I know you've not been happy lately, and—"

"The point, flyboy. Get to it."

"—I know it's your birthday in less than a month, so I—"

The clatter of a screwdriver falling to the floor echoed through the workshop with a remarkably loud bite, stilling the words in Hiccup's throat. All of a sudden, Astrid's body tensed, and though she was not directly looking at him, he felt himself shrink inside.

"Who told you?"

Hiccup cast a quick glance at Toothless, who puffed out his chest and sat in a rather majestic way. The silent meaning was clear: be more alpha.

"Does it matter?"
The scrape of a chair reached his ears. Astrid rose to her feet, and turned to face him - though her glare could burn trees, he stiffened and held her gaze.

"Yes, it does. Because it's private."

The two stood there for a time, with Astrid burning a hole in his skull, and Hiccup valiantly standing his ground - until he gave it. "Look," he said with a sigh, scratching at his forehead, "I understand. I just wanted to… I guess birthdays are pretty much the worst days of the year for you so—"

He held up the axe toward her.

"—I just wanted to make this one a happy occasion, for a change."

Astrid's eyes went down to the offered weapon, and her fierce scowl softened into a frown.

"What is it?"

Hiccup gently waved it toward her. "It's an early birthday present."

Astrid looked back at him with a confused expression, and slowly walked up to him. She took the gift with both hands, her eyes tracing over the exposed wiring in the head.

"It looks like an axe."

Hiccup shrugged. "'Cause it is. I mean, it's not finished yet—I still need to weld a protective case over the head, and make sure it'll stand up to combat but—"

"This won't do much in battle, Hiccup."

That was the moment he smiled, a mischievous, just-you-wait smirk right out of Jack's book. "Not at the moment, but if you were to, say, channel your vibrations into the handle…?"

He left the sentence hanging. Astrid gave him a what-are-you-up-to-flyboy narrowing of one eye, so he encouraged her. "Go on. I need to see if it works, after all."

Astrid looked between him and the axe in her hands, before shrugging with a resigned sigh. "Alright, but if this—"

She immediately shrieked as, with a sudden burst of light, vivid sparking blue energy arced from the topmost emitters to the bottom ones. Hiccup beamed at the expression of sheer wonder on her sapphire-hued face as she stared, wide-eyed. Unlike Inferno, the axe gave off a pleasant but quiet hum thatoudened slightly as she carefully waved it from side to side.

"Holy shit…" she breathed. "This is… incredible."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far, I mean it's mostly made from scavenged bits and pieces, and it still needs to be finished—but now we know it works, and—"

Astrid seemed to be too lost in the arcing energy to hear him. Reckoning it was a good idea to quit while he was ahead, he nodded to himself and turned to leave.

"Hiccup."

His head swiveled around, followed by the rest of his body. The blue arcs promptly vanished with a subtle shht, ostensibly thanks to the ceasing of her vibrations. She strode over to carefully rest the axe against the wall, before marching up to him. Hiccup's smile wavered, anticipating another volley of
harsh words and, when she grabbed him by the shirt, a punch.

Until she kissed him.

Hiccup staggered back slightly, thoroughly taken off guard by the sudden crashing of her lips upon his. Before long, instincts kicked in through the haze in his mind, and he melted into her aggressive kiss. Astrid moaned a little into his mouth as her hands wandered south, while Hiccup's fingers found the space behind her ears.

Heart racing, all he could hear was his own pulse, and his thoughts of: "Holy shit. We're kissing. She's actually kissing me!"

Astrid's hands then descended further, hungrily grasping at the button of his pants - which was when the sensations of storming butterflies in his stomach took on an unpleasant turn. Fear tickled at his heart, and an inescapable urge to back away.

"Astrid," he managed against her voracious kiss, "what are you doing?"

She chuckled with a lascivious tone. "What do you think, flyboy?"

"No, stop, this is—" his hands went to grasp at her wrists, "—why are you—"

Astrid gave up with the button and attempted to yank his pants down by the hem. "Don't tell me you haven't fantasised about fucking me," she husked, pulling back. She had a look in her eye that only intensified his discomfort.

"Well, yeah, but—" he stalled as a giggle left her lips, "—not like—"

"Then lemme see the big boy—"

Hiccup stepped back. She surged forward, and her black tank top went off quicker then he ever thought a woman could remove one, and was tossed behind her. "Astrid, wait—"

"—cause I wanna thank you—"

"Whoa, will you just—"

"—jeez, these pants are—"

"Astrid, stop!"

Silence slammed down between them, following Hiccup's yell. She froze, her eyes wide and her face in shock, and it took a few moments for Hiccup to realise her hands were no longer trying to yank down his pants, but were held well away from him by his grip on her wrists. Loud, sharp breaths shot through his nose as he stared at her.

"What the hell are you doing?" he hissed.

Astrid blinked, and when she spoke, her voice had lost all of its hungry lust, replaced with a quiet, small tone. "I… I wanted to say thanks—I just thought—don't you want to have sex with me?"

"No!"

As soon as the word left Hiccup's mouth, he regretted it. He did want the horizontal tango with Astrid - hell, he'd been feeling the animal instincts for a while, and an inability to get her out of his head… with and without clothing.
Once he saw the deeply hurt expression on her face, the humiliation and shame in her eyes, he wished he’d never opened his mouth.

"Astrid, I—"

Her eyes began to shimmer. His heart felt a knife through its chambers. She wrenched her arms from his hands, and stepped back, one forearm covering her breasts in embarrassment. "I can't believe—" She uttered a bitter scoff through a twisted smile as she looked away, and turned from him to pick up her discarded top. "I'm such a fool."

"No, you're not. Astrid, I didn't mean…"

"I thought you liked me." She roughly yanked on her tank top. "I thought—"

"But I do, Astrid!"

"Then why do I feel like such an idiot?"

Hiccup stepped forward, and reached for her shoulder. "You're not an idiot."

She jerked her shoulder away, whirling around. "Then why?" she snapped, though Hiccup heard no anger in her voice, only pain, and a plea to understand in her shimmering eyes. "Am I unattractive? Do you find me repulsive… is it—"

There was a pause, her face going blank, as though something was dawning on her.

"It's because I slept with Jack, isn't it?"

"What?! No!"

She shook her head, like it was all so clear to her. "I'm used goods. I've been with too many people… and you don't want sloppy seconds," she murmured, her voice small and faraway. Hiccup's heart broke to hear her so lost, so far from her usual self.

"C'mon, Astrid. That's not—"

"I think you should leave." Her hands clutched protectively at her chest, and her eyes found the floor. "Thanks for the axe… but you can have it back."

"Wait…"

"Just go."

Hiccup opened his mouth to argue, to make her see it wasn't her who was the reason he was reluctant to have sex, but the finality in her tone told him there was no point. He let out a resigned sigh, heart heavy, and moved past her toward the axe, wishing he'd never made the damned thing.

The workshop was suddenly bathed in a deep blood red. Hiccup froze, bent over and mid-reach, and looked up at the lights in each corner of the ceiling responsible for the colour change.

"What's going on?" Astrid asked, voice void of its earlier hurt, filled with unease.

Hiccup recognised it instantly; it was one of the first things he fixed after their arrival, weeks ago. "Someone's hit the red alert. Something's wrong."

"I have a bad feeling about—" Astrid began but was cut short by an announcement she ostensibly
received as well as Hiccup, judging by how she abruptly turned her head toward her right ear.

"All personnel, this is Acting Captain Streak."

"Acting Captain?" Astrid mouthed. Hiccup merely shrugged.

"This is not a drill. Barricade or lock all doors and windows where you are, and remain there until further instructions. Reapers have been sighted inbound, numbering in the hundreds, and they'll hit the base in three minutes."

"Oh God," Hiccup breathed. "That's not good. Think they know we're here?"

Astrid shook her head. "No. If they did, Anna would call to scramble an evac."

"If we're lucky, they'll pass right through. Just sit tight, think happy thoughts, and above all - be quiet. Don't. Make. A. Sound."

Hiccup and Astrid shared a worried look, and the fear that had been twisting his stomach grew to grip his heart and shoot up his spine.

"Good luck."

TO BE CONTINUED.
Toothless didn't like the idea one bit, and Hiccup couldn't blame him. After all, who would? He was about to abandon his bipedal friend, and Hiccup was about to part company with probably his best protection. The look of worry in his big, green, wide eyes plus the furtive glances back into the workshop only strengthened Hiccup's own concern as he lifted up the corrugated metal gate.

"I know, but Stormfly needs you. Astrid sent her out to stretch her wings, but if she should come back and see all those Reapers? All hell could break loose."

"But what about you?" said the scaled frown and high-pitched yowls.

Hiccup gave him his best smile of reassurance, and scratched at the top of Toothless' head. The cool, black scales felt smooth, calmingly so, under his fingertips. "I'll be fine. You just keep Stormfly away from the camp, and come back when it's safe. No buts - go look after her."

Toothless huffed, but sagged under the weight of Hiccup's request. Grumbling something dragonlike and most likely rude, his spread his wings and shot into the air with alarming silence, melting into the darkness of the night sky. Hiccup gazed at the point his eyes could last make out his friend, before chilling shrieks rode the air from the depths of the forest. Heart heavy, he slid the gate shut with a long sigh, and turned back into the workshop, bathed in the red light of the silent alarm.

Astrid had, with the aid of a hook on an extension pole, closed all but one of the windows just below the ceiling, and was in the process of pulling the last one shut. He couldn't help but admire her physique as she stretched; toned arms and an impressively taut stomach that peeked out as her tank top rode up. To deny the physical attraction would be disingenuous and deluding himself; Astrid was hot. More than that, she had a fire and self-confidence that only intensified her attractiveness, and a willingness to get her hands dirty.

She was also flawed, deeply flawed. The kind of vulnerability that begets the need to know more, to help.

It was just a shame their interactions often ended in disaster.

"That one won't close properly," he called out with care as to not be too loud, as she tried over and over with frustration to yank it shut. "It's on my to-fix list."

"Maybe you should bump it up," Astrid responded with a cool tone, yanking it as closed as possible. Hiccup's reply was a degree more sour than he liked. "Maybe I will."

"Fine." Astrid rested the pole in the corner and took herself off to the opposite corner to the table, where the red mechanic's tool cabinet sat flush against the wall. She plucked a wrench from the surface and slid down the wall behind her, and proceeded to stare off into space whilst sliding the steel tool between her fingers, elbows resting on her knees. Looking away, Hiccup sighed and scratched his head, resigning himself to a long night.

Sliding his hands into the pockets of his fatigues, he began to slowly make his way toward her in a lazy saunter, jaw gently moving left and right as he considered however long it would take for the Reapers to pass through the base. He was used to silence, sometimes preferring it, but that was with the background noise of life on an aircraft carrier, not an awkward quiet punctuated by the scrabbling
of little killers.

He reached the wall upon which Astrid rested her back, and lowered himself down on crossed legs. Carefully, he began to unlace his boots, much to the woman's puzzlement as she threw his activity a quick glance.

"Getting comfy?" she asked.

Hiccup shrugged and quirked his lips. The first boot came off. "Figured if we need to move around, barefoot is quieter than heavy boots."

Astrid let out a 'hunh' as though she hadn't thought of that, and it wasn't long before she was doing the same.

The muffled shrieks of the Reaper swarm grew closer, garnering a concerned glance up at the windows. He figured they were inside the boundary fence by now. Couple more minutes and they'd be inside the base proper.

"Is this how it's gonna be with us?" Hiccup asked, lowering his voice to barely shy of a whisper.

Astrid's first boot came off with gusto. "How what's gonna be?"

"You and me. We get on fine, we get on great. Then I—"

The shrieks and chatters rang out even closer, like they were just the other side of the wall. Worse still, the metal roofing regaled them with metallic scrambling and scratching, and Hiccup's heart shot in the same direction as his eyes: up. He scrutinized every point of the ceiling, following the sounds of claws against iron and the high-pitched rawks.

"—I say something you don't like," he continued, voice dropping to a wary hiss, "and you shut down on me!"

Astrid gaped at him, and responded with her own fierce whisper. "We're talking about this now?!!"

"Why not? Being stuck in here means you can't run away from this—and if the shit hits the fan, I want you to know exactly how I feel!"

"The shit'll hit the fan if they hear you!" Astrid hissed through gritted teeth, gesturing wildly at the ceiling.

"You kidding me? Between their creepy shrieks and the racket they're making on the roof, they won't hear us."

Astrid's eyebrows rose at perfect opposition to her unimpressed look. "Uh-huh. Well, if one of them hears us and we end up as the main course, that's on you."

"Fine." Hiccup folded his arms, glaring with the newfound strength he'd derived from quite simply having had enough. "It's worth the risk."

"Get on with it then, flyboy," Astrid made a dismissive wave, "if it's so damn important you talk."

"It is, because I don't get you, Astrid Hofferson. You're hot, then you're cold. You're friendly, and then hostile. Flirting just before you become a goddamn rock. I never know which way you're gonna jump, and I'm walking on fricking eggshells 'cause I'm too scared of saying something that'll make you shut down."
Astrid scoffed and rolled her eyes.

"Case in point, tonight. Hell, _before_ tonight. First you're all buddy-buddy when we're testing your shotgun, then you go off in a mood 'cause I put my foot in my mouth. Tonight, you're hostile and abrasive, then you're trying to jump my bones just 'cause I gave you a birthday present. I never know where I stand with you."

Astrid sniffed into a huff, but the whisper from her lips was cracked as she gazed distantly at the wrench in her hands. "If I'm such a handful, maybe you should just cut your losses and walk away."

"I'm not gonna do that."

Astrid's head lolled back against the wall, and still she looked straight ahead. Hiccup was fairly certain that was her intent. "Why not?"

"Because I _like_ you, Astrid." Hiccup shuffled on the spot to the left. "I really like you. You, with your brash confidence and your badass go-get-'em attitude. You, with your vulnerabilities and your pain. You act all bulletproof because you don't want the world to see you bleed, but you don't have to, anymore. Not around us. Not around _me_. And I _am_ not going to walk away, because you're always on my goddamn mind. So you can push and push, but I'm still gonna be here."

Astrid snorted. "And yet I was the one humiliated, with my tits out, thinking you wanted to fuck me."

"Trust me, I do. Like I said, I can't stop thinking about you and _most_ of those thoughts I can't repeat around young ears. Point is, there is so much more I like about you than your admittedly really fucking hot—"

"Shut up."

At first, Hiccup thought he'd either touched a nerve or triggered an embarrassed blush. "No, I'm not finish—"

"Seriously, Hic, shut the fuck up," she hissed, stiffening forward, frowning, her hand telling him he should do just that. Her eyes darted to and fro across the ceiling, and the wrench was suddenly gripped like a weapon. She silently rose to her feet and stalked forward, eyes tracking something across the roof.

That was the moment Hiccup heard it, too. The cacophony of claw scrabbles and scratches had mostly moved across in a left-right direction, with some occasionally lingering before moving on - however, one set of scrapes moved independently of the group. Backwards.

Two seconds later, Hiccup's heart shot into his mouth as he heard the sound of fingernails on glass. Quickly glancing at Astrid, who was eyeing the faulty window with as much anxiety as he was, he heard a slight squeaking of the frame.

Astrid let out the quietest gasp, as then came the fingers. Long, thin, gangly digits that hooked under the window and craned it open, exposing the workshop to the night air and the chillingly sharper shrieks and _rawks_ of the swarm.
Hiccup cast another quick glance at Astrid, who caught his eye. He gestured at himself and then at the window hook. Astrid nodded once, and pointed at the axe propped up against the wall on the opposite side of the room. Acknowledging her, Hiccup silently crept to the wall upon which the faulty window was mounted. Eyes fixed upon the newly-created entry through the left corner of his vision, he sidestepped along the wall whilst desperately trying to calm his heart, aware of his own short and silent breaths.

In a flash, a shape leaped down from the window, and gracefully landed on lithe, thin limbs. Even in the oppressive red light, its form was unmistakably Reaper-ish - though the crimson hue did well to amplify its menace. Hiccup stared at its back in taut anxiety, suppressing a violent gasp.

The Reaper lifted up its head and sniffed at the air in between tongue-clicks and quiet hawks, searching for something its sightless eyes could not see. It turned in the paralysed Hiccup's direction, treating him to a glorious view of its twisted visage: razor-sharp teeth exposed in a lipless mouth, and half of its nose chewed off. Its jaw snapped open and closed a few times, and its cocked head jerked in an unpredictable manner. Hiccup could taste the rancid scent of the spindly creature, and prayed his gag reflex was as ironclad as the Fairy.

Movement caught his eye from the other side of the room; Astrid was backing away from the vile creature, her eyes wide with nerves. It was then that Hiccup realised - she had never seen a Reaper before, nor had any of the ex-Valkyries. Hiccup had seen them once or twice - though not as closely as Jack - and knew enough about them to know what to do… but Astrid didn't have that luxury. She had heard stories, nothing more.

Which was why her face morphed into unmitigated panic when her shoulder brushed against one of the chains suspended from the ceiling, causing a light clinking that sounded more like a crash of metal. Alerted, the Reaper let out a sharp hiss and jerked its head toward her, renewing its echolocation clicks. It slowly stalked toward her as she silently backed away.

It hadn't zeroed in on her yet, to the light relief in amongst Hiccup's anxiety… but it was only a matter of time. One shriek, one call would be all it took to stir the swarm into a frenzy and bring them all down on their heads.

Hiccup's head darted to the window hook - if he could reach it, he could distract the creature. Pull it away from Astrid - maybe kill it before it could alert the others. Possessing silence at odds with his thunderous heartbeat, he stealthily crept along the wall, eyes fixed upon the Reaper as it stalked on all fours toward Astrid. It snapped its teeth together in a chitter-chatter, and Hiccup prayed Astrid would not make any sudden noises - though it was wholly blind, its hearing was on point.

He stretched his hand out to the pole, grasping the worn wood in his left hand, and just as it got close enough to smell her, he scraped the end of the pole on the ground.

It was enough. The Reaper whirled around, cocking its head at the new noise. "That's it," Hiccup thought, "come over here, you little bastard."

The Reaper crept toward him inch by inch like a curious cat, clicks and quiet rawks leaving its bared mouth. Hiccup grasped the pole with both hands, tight enough to pale his knuckles, and formed a strike plan in his mind - a quick jab to its throat to prevent it from shrieking an alarm call… and probably use the pole to strangle it. Not the way Hiccup would choose to take a life, but…

The Reaper stalked closer to him, and quicker. Its throat let out a low snarl - it knew something was afoot. Many had underestimated their intelligence, and had paid the price. It dropped to the floor and tensed its legs, and horror struck Hiccup's rapid heart as its chest grew with a deep breath.
"Shit..."

Movement behind it caught Hiccup's eye. The scrape of a foot sliding across the floor, and the Reaper whirled around.

A flash of brilliant blue cut across Hiccup's vision.

The Reaper's head tumbled from its shoulders, visible smoke emanating from the point its neck should have been. It hit the floor with a sickening but quiet thud, followed soon after by the rest of its lifeless body.

Astrid stood over its dead form, her left foot forward and her right arm held away from her body at the end of a swing, crackling energy glowing vibrantly from the axe in her hand. Her chest heaved with deep, quick breaths, eyes staring at the crumpled Reaper as though not quite perceiving it.

Until she spoke, in a voice loud enough for Hiccup to hear but quiet so as to not alert any other visitors, drawing Hiccup back to the fact she was still very much in the moment.

"Close the window, and don't speak for the rest of tonight."

Ordinarily Hiccup would argue, but after the impromptu gatecrash, he was only too happy to oblige. Luck was on their side - but it had a habit of running out.

If the phrase was 'food for thought', then Hiccup had left her with a fucking banquet. Only, the problem for Astrid was that said banquet was taking place in the messiest mental dining room in existence.

To his credit, he had complied with her -admittedly blunt - request to remain silent for the rest of the night, and the racket made by the passing swarm had made it impossible to hear her own thoughts.

The problem came when, the following morning, Anna radioed in for a soundoff to check everyone was okay. There was no limit to Astrid's relief that there were no casualties, but once the order to stand down came in, Hiccup had taken the axe and left without a word.

Part of Astrid went with him - or so it felt.

Of course, she had a few hours' reprieve when Stormfly returned and practically tackled her to the workshop floor, the way a beloved pet does with its master when they've been gone for too long - the situation of a passing swarm of death being the difference, other than the obvious. Stormfly stuck to her like glue as though fearing another situation where they would be parted, and Astrid was grateful for the company.

Until the workshop's confines began to feel like they were closing in around her. So, for a little freedom, fresh air and the clearing of her head, a walk around the base was just the thing. After all, she had been awake for twenty-four hours straight, but it wasn't like her mind was going to allow her the comfort of sleep just yet.

Stormfly hovering low overhead, Astrid walked the inner perimeter in silence, her head bowed and lost in thought. Had she totally misread Hiccup's intentions? What if he was truly being a decent guy, a thoughtful guy who gave her a gift not for the reward of sex, but for the pleasure of brightening her life just that little bit? What if he wasn't like all those other men, with one thing on their minds?

What if she was the problem?
It was as she rounded the back of the barracks that a mixture of sounds caught her attention, a soft thudding melded with feminine grunts and frost-crunch bootsteps. She frowned in curiosity and followed the sounds around the corner.

Elsa was, it seemed, in the middle of a practice session on her own. Four basic-looking and limbless snowmen stood at irregular positions before her, with no visual characteristics other than a powdery sphere on a weird oval. In her right hand was a sword which looked to be made of ice, by Astrid's guess, which Elsa held behind her in a reverse grip, her left hand held before her. As Astrid watched, Elsa pivoted on her left foot and slowly spun off the ground to bring the sword down on the first snowman, cleaving it in two. The sword was tossed into her left as she glided across the grass, which summarily decapitated the second snowman, before Elsa elegantly 'danced' over to the third to slice it in a diagonal, two-handed strike from behind, followed by a quick revolution and quicker slash to horizontally bisect the fourth. One strike that fluidly led into another, creating the illusion of one long attack. Astrid wasn't much for elegance in combat, preferring overwhelming aggression and strength, but she could appreciate the efficiency of Elsa's style.

Elsa stood down with her back to Astrid, and with her head bowed, made her way back to her starting point. With one hand lifting up, she caused the sprawling mess of snow to move by itself, crawling like shifting sands back to whence it came - and within moments, the four snowmen had returned. Astrid wondered how many times that had happened.

Elsa whirled her sword around her body before bringing it head-height, parallel to her face, pointing it at her immobile prey. Classic Snow Queen stance.

"Nice sword," Astrid called out.

Elsa turned with a start, and recognition dawned on her face. "Oh. Hello, Astrid," she said. "How… long have you been there?"

Astrid shrugged, her hands pocketed. "Not long."

Elsa slowly nodded. "Right…"

Astrid opened her mouth, but found her brain was uncooperative in her hope to find something to talk about, so closed it again behind an awkward smile. Elsa returned it with politeness, yet it was clearly forced, and an uncomfortable quiet descended between the two as Astrid looked around in search of something to say, whilst Elsa became interested in her boots.

"So, uh…" her erstwhile leader began, "what can I do for you?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing…" Astrid's eyes went to the blade in Elsa's hand. "Mind if I…?"

Cursing her inability to not leave the sentence hanging, Astrid gestured with her head toward the sword. Elsa followed her direction. "Oh! Of course." She offered the blade handle-first. "Careful, it's cold."

"Thanks," Astrid said as she took the sword, and admired it. Medium length with a clearly razor-sharp edge, the flat of the blade decorated with elegant filigree, and a stylish crossguard.

Not to mention bitterly cold to the touch.

"You wield it better than Frostpiercer."

"Thank you," Elsa scratched at her neck before holding her hands behind her. "I… made it myself."
Astrid looked up at her through her eyebrows. "Really?"

"Yes." The smile returned for a split second before retreating to a thin line. "The first incarnation was exceedingly basic and slow to materialise, so I have practised as much as I can. Now it is almost combat ready, and I can summon it in less than ten seconds."

A short chuckle escaped Astrid's lips. "You really have changed."

"Excuse me?" Elsa's response was on the defensive side, yet another thing reinforcing Astrid's growing notion that something was wrong with herself.

"Sorry. I mean… you aren't a hardass bitch like you were as a Valkyrie, and you aren't all girly like you were when we went to Perdition."

Elsa folded her arms. "Is there something wrong with being 'girly'?"

Astrid's eyes widened a little, and she shook her head. "No! No, I mean… what I'm saying is..." she sighed, giving up on the idea of controlling her words, "there's something different about you. Like, you're more focused. Certain. Like you've got a purpose. Confident—I guess that's what I mean."

"Oh." Elsa's face adopted a puzzled frown, like Astrid had taken her so off-guard, cognitive thought had failed her. "Well, thank you. I think."

"No, uh, no problem." Astrid handed the sword back, feeling a distinct sensation of overstaying her welcome. "Can I ask… what brought it on? I mean, if it's personal—"

"No, it's fine." Elsa took the sword, and before Astrid's very eyes, dematerialised it into twinkling stars of snowy matter. "I had a talk with someone who... let's just say left me with something to think about. Perspective, I suppose."

"Huh." Astrid's eyebrows rose, and suddenly the tickle of curiosity took over her heart. "Who?"

"You must be joking."

Astrid wished she was. When Elsa said it was Pitch fucking Black of all people, Astrid thought she was joking - especially since the last interaction Elsa had with Pitch involved her hands and the blood of a dead teenage abnormal. No, Elsa was being perfectly serious - so, ostensibly, was Astrid when she knocked on Pitch's door.

That being said, Elsa strongly suggested waiting until it was time for Pitch to take over patrol duties from Merida.

"I'm not. You helped Elsa, now I'm asking if you'll help me."

Pitch, with one hand on the doorframe and the other on the inner door handle, looked at her like she'd grown a second head. "I didn't 'help' Snow Queen. I provided guidance and left her to make her own decisions."

Astrid straightened up, and lifted her chin. "Fine. I want you to give me some guidance. I... need perspective."

Pitch folded his arms, glaring at her. "And what makes you think I'll oblige?"

"Because the last two times we were this close, you dislocated my arm and I nearly killed you. We don't like each other, but now, after all that, I'm the one knocking on your door." Astrid's jaw
clenched a little, and she flexed her fingers. "I wouldn't be here if I thought I could do it on my own."

"And why can't you?"

"Because I think I'm the problem."

Pitch's glare seemed to soften a sizeable margin, and he took a deep, thoughtful breath. "It must have taken a lot for you to be here."

It was on the tip of her tongue to snap back that she didn't need help and was perfectly capable of going it alone, but remembered precisely why she had knocked on his door in the first place. Her mouth clamped shut, and she nodded.

"Fine," Pitch said. "Arm yourself, and meet me at the entrance to the camp. We will talk there."

Astrid blinked. "Wait, I'm on watch with you?"

"Hardly," Pitch scoffed, "but being on watch can be tedious. I could use a little distraction."

He closed the door before Astrid could whack him for calling her problems a distraction.

"Punctual. Good," said Pitch as Astrid approached him, Hansbuster in hand and full-gear worn. "but where is your friend?"

Astrid thumbed upwards to the royal blue sky, the sun having long set and given way to the starlit canvas of night. "Got her circling the base. Figured with you being distracted, you could use the extra eyes."

Pitch's eyebrows rose, and his lower lip jutted out. "I'm impressed. Perhaps there are brains behind brawn, after all."

Astrid rolled her eyes. "You know, you can be a real asshole sometimes."

"Takes one to know one," Pitch snarked back, before uttering a chuckle as he turned away and began his patrol, rifle tucked into his hands. "Though I am wondering when it was suddenly decided I was the camp counselor."

Astrid caught up to walk beside him, oddly aware of his height advantage. "Maybe because underneath all that, you're actually a big teddy bear?"

She glanced up at him just as he caught it with a sidelong look of 'seriously?', and a beat followed… before she cracked up in laughter. "Yeah, no. You're an asshole outside and an asshole inside."

"And yet you seek my particular help."

"Myeah, well, sometimes you need the cold, hard truth from—"

"An asshole. I get it." Pitch adjusted the strap of his rifle. "So, tell me - what seems to be your problem?"

"I…” Astrid hesitated, realising just how goddamn hard it was to talk about it, let alone reach for help. "I'm scared I'll mess things up with Hiccup. Think I'll push him away… and lose my chance."

Pitch screeched to a halt, abruptly enough for Astrid to overshoot him by a few steps. As she looked
back, he regarded her with his third expression of 'you must be joking' of the night. "Okay. Go away."

Astrid spread a hand. "What?"

"I am many things but I am not an agony aunt for matters of the heart. Find someone who cares about the trivialities of love," he said, glaring.

"It's not—!" Astrid blurted, but found herself stopping short of the word 'love'. "I came to you not 'cause of romance advice, but because I think I'm the problem. I want…" she sighed, and the defensive quality to her voice gave way to one of resignation, "... I need to understand. Last night something happened, and… I wanna know where I went wrong so I can fix it. Fix me."

Pitch studied her for a few moments, ostensibly considering her words and whether or not he should spend time helping her. "Fine," he said. "But you will need to be completely transparent, otherwise this will be a waste of time."

Pitch moved on his patrol path, and Astrid fell in step beside him. "I can do that."

"Good. Now, let's not dilly-dally. What happened last night?"

And so Astrid filled him in on all that occurred, all that was said, from the moment Hiccup entered the workshop to the moment he left. Pitch seemed unfazed by the Reaper visitor, which didn't surprise Astrid in the least - but the response that followed the end of her storytelling made up for that.

"Well, what did you think was going to happen?"

"I don't know!" Astrid threw a hand into the air. "Not that, at least!"

"Viking," he rubbed at the bridge of his nose, "the fact that you slept with Jack within hours of meeting him, and tried to sleep with Hiccup in return for the gift tells me you have a frivolous, devil-may-care attitude to sex. Hiccup does not. Hiccup is a romantic. He is not pragmatic like Jack or myself. He is what could loosely be defined as a gentleman."

Astrid opened her mouth to speak, but Pitch cut across her like a blade through air.

"However, I'm trying to understand why you didn't reach this conclusion yourself. You are not stupid. Hot-headed, myopic and occasionally moronic, but not stupid."

"Because I honestly didn't think I was doing anything wrong!"

"How in the world could you—Viking, you practically forced yourself on him."

"I didn't… I didn't mean…"

Astrid didn't know where it was the blunt honesty which was robbing her of her ability to speak coherently, or the unpleasant tightness of guilt constricting her chest, knowing he was right, but straight sentences eluded her.

"Oh, crap. I did, didn't I?" she murmured faintly.

"Yes, you did." Pitch's voice had lost none of its impetus, nor its firm scolding. "However, appalled as I am to be objective in this matter, your behaviour then is at odds with your reaction when you realised there was a child on board the Star. Clearly, you know right from wrong and have a decency
about you - so your trivial attitude to sex must have a cause."

"Like what?"

"I don't know - but often we can trace our adult behaviours to our childhood. What we learn in infancy affects our growth - so, with that in mind, what happened to you when you were young?"

Astrid immediately tensed, and the hand around the handle of her shotgun tightened. Her jaw clenched, and hot anger blossomed through her body like a forest fire.

"I don't want to talk about that," she grumbled through gritted teeth.

"Then I cannot help you. Goodbye."

"Seriously?" Astrid abruptly halted. "I refuse to talk about one thing and you stop helping?"

Pitch continued walking, not even turning around. "I told you: complete transparency. If you aren't willing to uphold that, then there is nothing more to discuss."

"W-what?" Astrid spread her arms, gaping after him. "Wait—just hang on—"

Pitch didn't wait.

Astrid let out a loud sigh, and her shoulders sagged. "Fine. You win."

"There are no winners, here, Viking. Only victims," Pitch said over his shoulder.

"You say that like you have experience," Astrid said as she jogged to catch up with him.

"I might, not that I'd tell you. So - transparency."

Astrid let out a long sigh through her nose as she fell in step beside him. They'd already completed a third of Pitch's patrol around the camp. "I... bear with me, 'cause this is hard. I've... I've never talked about this with anyone. Not even my battle-sisters."

Pitch muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "battle-sisters, how quaint," under his breath, but Astrid let it slide.

"I'm guessing you're aware of the Compatibility Index?"

"Yes. Relationship matchmaking but on a fascist level. The meddlesome best friend setting you up on a blind date," he let out a short, cynical chuckle, "only the friend has guns and law behind them."

"Yeah." Astrid had a bitter chortle of her own. "Well, I hear sometimes you get lucky and you find the right person, or you learn to love them. Well... that didn't happen with my parents."

Pitch looked at her. "They were not compatible?"

"Oh, they were. My nanny Helga said they were ninety-five percent or something... but... it's one of the reasons I think the Index is a thick slice of bullshit because they hated each other." Astrid made a gesture of moving her hand from one position to another. "How can two people be that compatible if they can't even be in the same room?"

"Unity lies."

"Shyeah," Astrid snorted. She adjusted the strap of her shotgun to a more comfortable position.
"Well, take that, and add the law that each family must have one child. Rebuilding the population. Imagine a house where two people who hate each other were forced by law to have a child. One you don't even want."

Through the corner of her eye, she noticed Pitch's head as it turned toward her.

"You were that child."

Astrid's eyebrows rose as she slowly nodded, folding her lips to pop the 'P'. "Yep. I was the child. I wasn't an accident, I wasn't a happy result. I was unwanted. My parents... the only time I was physically close to them was when I was born... twenty three years ago. Like I said, they couldn't be in the same room as each other, and they definitely wanted nothing to do with me. To them, I wasn't born of love... I was born out of resentment and reluctant obedience."

"What was it like growing up?"

"Lonely." She looked down at the mightily interesting grass. "They didn't praise me if I was good, they didn't punish me if I did something bad - and trust me, I was horrible sometimes just to get their attention. I came home with glowing report cards, they didn't bat an eye. I came home with a detention card 'cause I started a fight, they didn't care. They didn't hug me, didn't smile at me... they didn't love me. I was just another piece of furniture to them. Invisible. Only time they ever got emotional was when they'd argue - and they did it a lot. Sometimes in front of me. I heard it all. Imagine growing up feeling—knowing—your parents thought you should never have been born in the first place. That you were a mistake... one they have to live with."

Pitch said nothing, save for a long sigh and an awkward clearing of his throat.

"Course, there's me." Astrid shrugged, attempting to distract herself from the burning in her eyes and the painful swelling in her throat. "Desperate for love, for their love. So, when I was six, I actually saw it from them."

"But not for you."

"No." Astrid's throat threatened to close up on her, and rob her of her ability to speak - but the strange desire to keep going pushed through the block. "I used to ask Helga, 'Why are Mommy and Daddy so mean to me and each other, but when Daddy's work friend or Mommy's army friend come to the house, they are nice to them? Is it because they bring presents?' Helga never could answer that."

"They were cheating on each other."

"Shyeah. They were, they knew each other was doing it, and they didn't care. Hell, they did it while I was in the house. Walked in on them a few times - they got pretty mad and yelled at Helga for letting me do that. Course, at that age, I didn't really understand what they were doing - but when I got older I figured out what exactly they were doing and... and..."

It was a strange sensation to have one's entire cognitive process suddenly grind to a halt, like hitting a wall. Only, the wall was between her and the truth she'd been seeking all those years. A wall with a door, and behind that door was clarity she already possessed but was too chaotic to put into order.

Pitch inhaled and let out a deep breath. "Would you like me to save you the discomfort of continuing, and condense your moment of clarity into a too-long-didn't-listen version?"

"Any other situation I'd say no, but..." Astrid's mouth opened and closed as her breath caught, and she consciously moved her index finger from the trigger after noticing how hard she'd been
Astrid bowed her head. "Explains why whenever I slept with someone… the feeling was only temporary. They got what they wanted, but… the emptiness always came back to me. Always."

"Because you were looking for something from them you were never going to find - affection. You thought you were using them to dull the pain of your childhood… but in reality, you were the one being used."

Astrid tilted her head, though the bitter pain in her heart rendered it difficult to hide the crack in her voice. "Along comes Jack, who cares enough to not kill me when he had the chance…"

"...and then Hiccup, who completely dismantles everything you thought you knew about men. He presents you with a gift, and because you are attracted to him, you attempt to return his kindness the only way you know how."

"By fucking his brains out," she said with an alarming plainness that, inside, startled her.

Pitch snorted, slowly shaking his head. "Vulgar way of putting it, but yes. However, Hiccup treats sex as sacred, as a deep romantic connection between two people. Your attitudes are at odds, so when you attempt to initiate—"

"I scare him." Astrid put a hand to her forehead and wiped it down her face, grimacing with the physical pain of embarrassment. "God, I'm such a fucking idiot."

"No. You are simply a product of your upbringing. While it was wrong of you to behave in such a way, it was understandable given your childhood. So, to a degree, you are not responsible."

Astrid stared at him, dumbfounded. "I… never thought you'd actually say that - I thought you were gonna rip my head off, or something."

Pitch inhaled and exhaled a loud, uncomfortably piercing breath through his nose, and paused for a moment.

"A tumultuous childhood is something we have in common, so I can relate more readily than most, and can appreciate the damage it can cause."

"Can I ask what happened?"

"No," Pitch said with a curt bite, "but let's just say my father's hobby was beating me to a pulp, murdering old men, beating my mother to the point her spirit was broken, and me killing them both —" he caught Astrid's shocked gape, "—in self defense, if the distinction matters to you as well."

Astrid tilted her head back and forth, her brow rising and falling as she looked past him into space. "After that… not really. Heh, look at us, both fucked up by our parents."

"Speak for yourself." Pitch lifted his chin, and matter-of-factness was the order of the night in his voice. "I am who I am by my own design. I confronted and accepted what happened to me, and moved forward. You should do the same - or it will forever be your Achilles' Heel."
"Ach-what-now?"

Pitch let out an exasperated groan. "I'm surrounded by uncultured philistines…"

"Hey!" Astrid said, though couldn't help smirking. "Who are you calling a phili-whatsit?"

"Oh, for God's sake."
The Space Between Us

Chapter Notes

I don't normally encourage listening to the inspiring music for a chapter, 'cause if you're interested, then it's there. If not, then you can just skip it. However, I would heartily recommend listening to the inspiring theme for the latter half of this chapter, which also doubles as Elsa's Theme: "Inner Light", Destiny 2 OST.

"The Space Between Us"

It was odd how Elsa could feel him coming, or feel the wind, at least. The sudden change in wind direction as she had been practising with Coldheart was enough to prickle at her senses and synapses, alerting her to a change in circumstance. It felt akin to what others had flippantly called a sixth sense, yet it felt so much more tangible.

Of course, Jack having radioed ahead his E.T.A of five minutes was more of a heads up, but still.

So, in the company of Anna and Hiccup, Elsa gazed up at the blanket of pure white cloud in search of the smallest speck of black that would herald his final approach, wondering just how long five minutes actually was. Anna punctuated the silence with a regular popping of her lips, and in the corner of Elsa's eyes, her younger sister jiggled up and down on her heels. Hiccup, on the other hand, displayed remarkable patience with both waiting and tolerating Anna's incessant fidgeting, yielding neither word nor movement. Perhaps, after many years, he'd learned to tune it out.

"Anyone see him?" Anna asked, for what felt like the twentieth time.

"Nope," was Hiccup's twentieth reply, even flatter than the last.

Elsa considered it a mercy she was used to Anna, otherwise her restlessness would have driven her to distraction - especially when Anna began clicking her tongue in an irregular rhythm.

"Any sign?"

"Nope."

Anna let out a huff, her shoulders sagging. "Jeez. How long is he gonna take?"

"Long enough to be laughing at the three of us staring pointlessly at the sky," Elsa mused.

Hiccup chuckled. "Sounds exactly like Jack."

Elsa allowed herself a brief turn up of her lips before returning her attention to scouring the sky once again.

"I think I see him."

"Where?"
"There," Anna pointed.

Elsa picked out the dark shape amongst the fluffy white, and let out an unimpressed snort. "That's a bird."

"Really?" Anna cocked her head.

"Yes, unless Jack had grown wings and neglected to inform us."

"Huh. So it is."

The three went back to watching the sky, undergoing the longest period of quiet since they'd started. Anna was growing more bored by the second, and Elsa started to entertain the thought it was either one hilarious prank, or Jack had run into trouble.

"Huh. If you squint, that cloud looks like a dog's butt."

Anna shrieked and nearly left the ground in fright, and even Elsa reacted with a start. Whirling around, she came face-to-face with the smirking Jack, arms hooked around his staff on his shoulders, looking thoroughly pleased with himself

"Goddammit, Jack!" Anna clutched over her heart. "Way to scare the pregnant lady!"

"Couldn't resist. Sorry."

"How did you even do that?"

It worried Elsa how unfazed Hiccup sounded, like he'd been expecting it all along.

"Well, you know the proximity sensor to the north, the one that's been spotty since we moved in?"

Hiccup gave a dawning, "Oh. That one."

"Yeah." Jack's eyebrows rose over a pointed look. "That one."

"...I'll get right on that."

"That'd be good. After you're done, come to my office—can't believe I'm saying that like some school principal—" he muttered under his breath, "—I've got a mission for you."

Hiccup nodded his acknowledgement, and bade a quick goodbye to Anna and Elsa before scurrying to the workshop.

"What's the mission?"

Jack looked at Anna, and winked. "Need to know."

"O...kay," Anna narrowed her eyes. "Do we have a new contact?"

"Yep." Jack swung his staff from his shoulders and planted it in the ground. "Gave them an earpiece and a code phrase: starlight. They'll radio in if we need to know anything."

"Do anything else while you were there?"

"Need to know."

"What aren't you telling me?"
"Classified."

"We don't classify anything." Anna's demeanour went from playful skepticism to outright suspicion in less than a second. Elsa couldn't help but share her unease - Jack wasn't usually cagey, but open with many things ... though it was rich coming from her.

"We do now," Jack said, thinning his lips and raising his eyebrows as a silent, strong suggestion to drop the interrogation.

Anna frowned and pouted, folding her arms amid a quiet huff. "You know, you've acted real strange since you came back from Perdition."

Elsa looked between them, the inside of her lip finding its way between her teeth. "Have I?" Jack said, an air of indifference riding his words. "I hadn't noticed."

"Yeah, well I have. You go from friendly to cold with Elsa—"

"I'm right here, you know."

"—in the space of a day, you avoid us at breakfast, you go off on some secret mission which I'm sure there's more to than a simple case of intel gathering, and you refuse to tell me as your best friend and X.O anything about it."

Jack shrugged. "Welp, guess you'll just have to trust me."

Anna opened her mouth and sucked in a breath to protest some more, but Elsa quickly cut her off, sensing no end to the line of questioning. "Jack, I need to talk to you—" she cast a glance at her sister, "—in private. It's important."

Anna gave her a look as if to say, "What, you too?"

Jack studied her for a moment, visibly considering his options, before nodding. "Sure," he said, "but after Anna gets me up to speed on what's happened while I've been out of town. I wanna hear about how she led the team through a Reaper swarm."

Elsa knew Anna didn't lead them through the swarm, and she suspected Jack did, too. However, it had the clearly intended effect of distracting Anna, who, with a brightening face, began regaling him with tales of the ins and outs of camp life in the four day he'd been away as they walked off to the main barracks.

Elsa watched them leave with a heavy heart and a stomach that felt like it was about to twist itself apart. When she did tell him, and she would, it would be the truth to set her free.

Free, and alone.

Laughter could be heard through the door to Jack's office as Elsa approached, clenching and relaxing her hands. Though she did not relish the outcome of the upcoming conversation, she knew it had to be done. It was the right thing to do. Hans sought to have her under his control once more, and by coming clean, she could claim back some of her freedom. A choice made for and by herself, something oddly intoxicating.

It was nice to hear her sister in fits of giggles, however, and Jack's laughter had a conflicting effect of uplifting her heart that little bit. Still, there was no more use in prolonging the inevitable.
She raised her knuckles to the door, and took a moment to prepare herself before knocking.

Jack called through. "Door's open. Party's in full swing!"

Elsa blinked, cocking an eyebrow. She twisted the knob and pushed open the steel door, to find Jack half-sitting on his desk with his legs planted on the floor, arms folded, with a dazzling grin lighting up his face, whilst Anna gestured animatedly along to whatever conversation had been going on. Both occupants greeted Elsa's entry with their eyes, and though Jack's grin relaxed to a lipped smile, it was as warm and genuine as it used to be - as though he was happy to see her. An image she froze in her mind and locked away for future, cold nights of isolation.

"Oh, hey, 'sis!"

Elsa forced a smile through her grim expression and offered a lame nod at her sister. "Hello, Anna. I —uh—"

She gave Jack a pointed look.

"Oh!" Jack's face morphed into comprehension, and clicked his fingers. "Right. Private talk."

"Can't I stay?" Anna grinned with a look of mischief that disquieted Elsa more than anything. "I promise I won't tell anyone."

"No." Jack shook his head. "You're no good at discretion."

Anna pouted and whined, "I can be?"

Jack cocked an eyebrow and gave her the deadpan-est of deadpan expressions, were it even possible. "Telegram, telephone—"

"—tell Anna, I know…” she sighed, shoulders dropping like she'd been told she wasn't allowed more chocolate. Huffing, she sulked her way to the door. Elsa stood aside to let her pass, mouthing an apology as she did so, and closed the door behind her.

"Sorry. You want the news out fast—"

"—ask Anna to keep it to herself," Elsa smiled, "I know it all too well."

Jack chuckled. "Hoo boy. That's why we have a 'classified above Anna' clearance level."

Elsa gave him a funny look. "Really?"

"Nah," Jack waved it off, "but we really should. Anyhoo. What's on your mind?"

There it was. The moment of reality crashing down, and chasing away the fleeting feeling of lighthearted camaraderie, the momentary delusion that all was right with the world. The uplifted buoyancy of her heart gave way to a sudden iron-heavy weight, and the breath she took felt like she had to summon her last reserves of will to even breathe.

"You talked to Anna of trust… and I trust you, so… I hope you will not hate me for what I'm about to—"

Jack held up a hand. "Hold that thought."

Momentarily taken off guard, Elsa's mouth snapped shut. Jack pushed himself off the table, and moved past her to lace his hands around the doorknob. He gazed distantly at the door, mouth
hanging open as though something had struck his mind.

"Hey, when did New Arendelle win the hoverball championship?"

Elsa blinked and recoiled a little; she knew Jack was the master of tangents, but that was something random even for him. Tilting her head an inch, she answered, "They won in 2060."

Jack frowned. "Huh. Always thought it was 2061."

Under Elsa's bemusement, he then immediately and sharply pulled open the door - Elsa moved just in time to avoid Anna, as she stumbled and nearly fell through. The strawberry-blond immediately straightened up and awkwardly began gesturing at the door.

"Sorry! Was just checking—y'know—the door. Making sure it doesn't—uh—need fixing."

"And does it?" Jack said with a wry smile on the left half of his lips.

"Nope! Nope, it's all, um, all shipshape." Anna smiled, nodding far too vigorously. "All good. I'll just, uh—" she gestured at the open doorway, "—I'll go see how Pitch is doing."

"You do that," Jack winked.

Anna looked sheepishly between them before offering a gawky wave, and hastily left the room. Jack shook his head, muttering, "Every damn time," before closing the door and addressing Elsa once more with a suspicious side-eye. "You sure it wasn't 2061?"

Elsa nodded, though her mind automatically searched her memories for corroboration. "Yes. Milsen made the winning pass in 2060, beating New Corona by thirty-six to thirty-five, but was benched in 2061 due to an illegal tackle. Dozer replaced him."

Jack raised his eyebrows and jutted out his bottom lip. "Ah. Dozer the snoozer."

He yanked open the door once again, and though Anna didn't fall through, she gave up all pretence of innocence.

"Oh, come on!" she whined, throwing her hands up in the air. "Is it really that secret?"

"Yes, it is," Elsa said, intervening before Jack could open his mouth, "and in any other situation I
would happily tell you. This time… I cannot. I am sorry, but please respect that.

"I know," Anna sighed, looking genuinely despondent. It was enough to send a twinge through Elsa's heart. "It's just… I don't want to feel like things are being kept from me."

"I get it." Jack slowly shrugged. "Thing is, Elsa asked for privacy. As a C.O., I've gotta respect that request. Besides, it's probably Elsa declaring her undying love for me, or something."

Elsa shot him a glare, and resented the sensation of heat blossoming in her cheeks. "Jack wishes it was that."

Jack clasped a hand over his heart, feigning a mortal wound to his pride. "Oh, my heart is broken. To the friend zone with me."

Opening her mouth, Elsa was about to issue a biting retort when a fourth member of the unit made their appearance behind Anna. Emerald green eyes and a brunette bob, surrounding a look of knowing and a wink at Jack.

"Alright, Anna," Rapunzel announced loudly, placing a hand around her upper arm, "it's time for your physical."

Anna's head whipped between them, surprise and confusion written across her face. "What?! But I had one yesterday!"

Rapunzel put on her best impression of a stern school principal. "And now you're having another one. C'mon. Doctor's orders."

"But, b-but," Anna protested, unwillingly guided away by the medic, "but I don't wanna—"

Anna's lamentations fell on deaf ears as she was firmly led away from the doorway, complaining every step of the way. Jack chuckled to himself as he closed the door to the dwindling mutters, shaking his head with amused exasperation.

"Sorry about that."

"It's quite alright. In fact, Anna is the last person I want to hear this."

"Mmm." Jack returned to his original position of leaning against the table with his arms folded, and regarded her with a watchful expression. "It sounds pretty grim."

Elsa quietly snorted as if to say you don't know the half of it, and quickly composed herself. "I… hope you won't think less of me after what you're about to hear."

"I doubt that."

The manner in which he delivered his remark disarmed Elsa, causing her to wonder whether he did think highly of her and thus his opinion would not falter, or he truly didn't hold her in high regard and there was no way he could think less of her. Pushing aside her consternation and the mild stinging sensation in her heart, she inhaled a breath and began to open a door she despised walking through.

"When we went to Perdition for Hiccup's dynamos, you saw me on my knees in the general store, and you asked me if anything was wrong. I… I lied to you."

Jack looked unfazed. His expression didn't budge. "Uh-huh."
"I…” Elsa found herself momentarily hesitant. "I was ambushed by a program Hans had set up to connect his Uni-Com to any that picked up my voice. He threatened devastation upon Perdition if I did not listen to what he had to say."

"Okay."

"He… he told me that if I didn't do as he ordered me, he was… he has my parents, Jack. They are alive. They are alive, he has them, and… and… he'd execute them if I didn't follow his order, and…"

That time, Jack's face flickered with the smallest of frowns and the slightest of nods, and his eyes lost their light as they descended to her shoulders, but inward. If she didn't know any better, it was like she'd just confirmed a suspicion.

"...and what?" he asked.

"He said that I was to…” Elsa closed her eyes, and inhaled another breath. Crunch time. "I was to kill you."

Silence fell in the room, one that Elsa expected. There it was, the truth of all things. True, the confession freed the weight from her shoulders, but left behind the guilt of knowing that whatever she shared with Jack had been broken.

She opened her eyes just in time for the most puzzling reaction of all - none. He didn't flinch, didn't blink. Not a scowl nor a frown crossed his face.

"Okay."

Elsa blinked, gaping. "Okay? Okay?! Did you listen to a word I said? Hans wants me to murder you!"

"You said that."

"Jack…” Elsa struggled to speak out of sheer bewilderment, throwing her hands into the air. She sputtered, "For once, can you not be so cavalier? I just told you all this—and you just—how can you —"

Elsa hadn't noticed the rise in volume and pitch of her voice as she spoke, frustration and confusion riding her speech. "How can you just stand there and say 'okay'? How are you so laid back and calm —you should be furious, you should be disappointed, hate me, you—"

It clicked. Elsa's face dropped as realisation set in. He should have been going ballistic, but he was as moved as a glacier.

"...you already know…”

"Yep," Jack said, popping the P.

"All this time, while I've been working up the courage to tell you," she said softly, and took a step toward him, "and you knew."

"Yep."

"...how long?"

Jack scratched the side of his nose, and shrugged. "All along. Overheard you and that dickhead talk in the store."
Elsa snorted a bitter sound. The name bequeathed to Hans seemed wholly insufficient. "I suppose that explains your behaviour since then."

Jack scratched at the nape of his neck. "Yeah, well, kinda hard to not be pissed when you find out the girl you got a crush on is gonna kill you someday."

Elsa's breath caught, her heart skipping a beat. She stared at him with eyes agape, and judging by the fierce red adorning his cheeks and the widening of his own eyes, Jack had realised exactly what he'd said. Wincing, he scratched at the nape of his neck and added, "That… was not how I pictured telling you."

"I suppose this isn't the ideal time to tell you the feeling is mutual," she murmured, figuring that if all cards were to be on the table, she needn't hold back.

"Awkward…" Jack said in a sing-song voice.

"Why am I still here?"

Jack blankly looked at her like she'd just stirred him from a distracting reverie. "Come again?"

Elsa took another step. "You knew all this time. You knew what Hans is forcing me to do… and you have said and done nothing. You could have told the team what you'd learned, told… told Anna. You could have killed me to save yourself… but we are here," she gestured between them, "having this conversation. Why?"

Jack turned up his lower lip, and shrugged. "Few reasons, really. S'why I was silent on the way back, figuring things out. For a start, I saw you kneeling to him - and I know enough about you to know that you'd never kneel to him."

"Over his cold, dead corpse, maybe, Elsa mused."

"Second, I also know you've busted your ass to finally have a relationship with Anna, and there's no way in hell you'd do anything to screw that up… unless someone had something over you." Jack stroked at his chin with his right hand and looked off in thought. "Couldn't figure what that something was until you told me, but now it makes sense. You find out your parents were alive all this time, and now you're stuck between a rock and a hard place - and we both know Hans won't keep his word."

"I think Hans is incapable of integrity," Elsa murmured. She let a breath out through her nose. It felt… liberating. "What would you have me do?"

Jack gave her a funny look, and gestured to himself whilst his brow rose. "Me? I'm not the one who should make that call."

Elsa involuntarily stepped closer, enough to feel that odd magnetic pull. Close enough that she could touch him with little effort. "I'm asking you, as my commanding officer, and as my… my friend. What do I do?"

Jack looked aside, and shrugged as he tilted his head. "I would say… do it. See it through to the end."

Elsa recoiled backwards, uttering a deep gasp. Her eyes widened to their limit, and the rosy colour once filling her cheeks gave way in an instant. "No," she whispered, shaking her head. He had to be joking. He had to be. "No, no-no-no. I… I won't do it. I won't kill you."
"Elsa—"

"I won't do it!" she shouted, feeling her heart about to twist itself apart. "I refuse! You can't tell me to—"

She surged forward, and grabbed his hand with both of hers. She implored him with her eyes, beseeched him. "Order me not to! Order me not to do it, and come what may I will follow that order!"

She knew it was cheap. Maybe in her shock and straw-grasping it made sense, absolving herself of responsibility and pushing it onto Jack, but she saw no other way out of the dilemma.

Jack, however, was immovable. "No."

"W-why not?"

Jack let out a sigh, and rested his hand over hers. "Because that's how it's gotta be. Your family, or me. The life of one to save two. There's no decision-making process, here."

"Yes, there is," Elsa said quietly. "I choose the third option: to hell with Hans."

"Then you'll have to explain to Anna how her parents have been alive all along, that you'd known for a week and not told her, and that you'd sacrificed them for me without considering her feelings, or even debating rescuing them."

"She'll never forgive me if I kill you."

"She'll never forgive you if you don't." Jack patted her hand, before pulling away from her grip and moving out of her reach to behind his desk. "We all do what we have to do, even if it sucks… but life has a funny way of throwing a curveball."

Elsa shook her head in despair, staring at him like he was fading from her sight. "How are you so calm about it? About your death?"

"Oh, I don't wanna die." Jack picked up the collapsed staff from his desk and tossed it up and down with one hand. "But the end comes for us one way or another, for some, sooner than others. This way you can maybe rescue your folks."

"I just… I can't believe—"

Knocking at the door cut her sentence in two, and the rest of her words died in her throat. "Yo," Jack called out. "Wassup?"

"It's me," came Hiccup's voice from the other side. "You wanted to see me after I fixed the doodad."

"Right, yeah."

Don't say it. Don't end it here. We're not done. We can't end it like this.

"Come on in."

Elsa's hopes dwindled, and the anxiety of Jack halting the conversation vanished behind a feeling of deep resignation. The door clicked open behind her, and Hiccup's shaggy brunette head poked through.

"Oh… am I interrupting something?"
Elsa opened her mouth to declare that he fucking well was, that she was going to change Jack's mind even if she had to beat some sense into him, but Jack seemed to anticipate it and jumped ahead.

"Nah. Elsa and I have said all we need to say. Don't forget—" he pointed at her, "meet me at the gates for training tomorrow, same time as normal."

Elsa closed her mouth, willing her heart to cease its agony, and nodded at him - Jack's tone left no room for argument, and there was no way she'd discuss it all in front of Hiccup. She gave a brief farewell to Hiccup, before moving past him and taking her leave.

Returning to her quarters, she wondered if the heaviness in her chest would ever leave, like iron claws dragging her down. She turned to look over her shoulder at the door to his office, and discovered a sensation at odds with the sombre, grim cloud in her heart.

In there was a man who knew he was to die, and what he would die for. Who he would die for. He faced the despicable turn of events that would culminate in his end with dignity, for even the smallest chance of Elsa's family being together again. For that, he had her undying respect and loyalty.

She wondered if, were the roles reversed, she would do the same.

Her heart spoke its answer.

Was it love she was feeling, or merely a deep bond between them?

She wished she had more time to find out.

Astrid tapped on the door to Hiccup's quarters, an apprehension riding on her movements, her thoughts and her breaths - a brief check into the workshop had yielded no shaggy-haired dragon rider, and Merida had informed her of passing him as he went to his quarters. Hence, her visit.

Hiccup's voice called through for her to enter, and with a deep breath to psyche herself up, she opened the door and poked her head through.

The quarters were as spartan as they came, whatever that phrase meant. There was a bed identical to Astrid's, with an undoubtedly as tough mattress and coarse green bedding, fully made and barely slept in. The right side of the room offered a steel grey locker and similarly designed desk, and a small window sat two thirds of the way up the opposite wall.

The tenant himself was busy pulling a black T-shirt over himself with his back to her, and for the briefest of moments Astrid felt a flutter of appreciation at the sight of his back muscles as they contracted and relaxed in accordance. Sensing her gaze, Hiccup looked over his shoulder, and did a quick double take before yanking down the shirt.

"Astrid! Hey, Astrid—hi, hi Astrid..."

"Hey, uh, you got a minute?"

Hiccup spread his hands before clapping them against his thighs, puffing out his cheeks for a moment. "Um, I have to jet in about ten minutes, but I'll always have time for you. Hope you don't mind if I—"

He thumbed back to the locker behind him.

"Oh! No, go for it. Where are you going?"
"It's weird." He turned, and the scraping sound of the locker opening filled the room. "Jack called me into his office, said he had a mission for me. Asked me if we had any parachutes, and if not, whether I could make some."

"That's… weird."

"I know, right?" Hiccup pulled out his mask from the locker's top shelf and tossed it onto the bed. "I told him we don't have any parachutes, and I didn't have the stuff to make any. Y'know, the packs, harnesses, silk and stuff. I said I could maybe make some rudimentary wingsuit harnesses, but I'd need the fabric to do it."

"And?"

Hiccup pulled out a black military fatigue jacket and hastily slipped it on. "Put it this way: I've gotta hit an abandoned mall far to the southeast, gather what I need and get back to make three budget wingsuit harnesses in three days."

Astrid's face twisted into a frown. "Why'd Jack want that?"

"Dunno, but Jack doesn't do anything unless there's a reason behind it. Method to madness, and all that. If I know Jack, he's planning something. So, what's on your mind?"

Astrid rested her hands on her hips and awkwardly shifted her weight onto her right foot. "I… uh… wanted to say sorry about what happened that night. When I—uh—tried to make you do something you didn't wanna do."

Hiccup cast her a long gaze over his shoulder, and his prior rushed expression softened. "Don't sweat it. You don't have to—"

"Hiccup—" she raised a hand and clenched it into a fist, holding back a frustrated snap, "—don't do that. Don't… make out that it's nothing. I need to learn from this, so I can break the cycle."

Hiccup considered her for a moment, before nodding. "I understand… but why do you say that?"

Astrid pocketed her hands and shrugged, yet it was out of resignation. She gazed at him, vulnerable, open. "Say there's a girl. She's a hot mess. Screwed up as a kid, and somehow got her wires crossed in her mind. Misreads everything, flies off the handle when she really should be talking. Sleeps with guys to fill this empty hole in her heart that'll never be filled. Thinks that people are all the same, that they're all out to hurt her in the end… because who could love a girl like her?"

"Astrid—"

"But then she meets these people, people just like her. She sees the way her life is going, and the way it could go. Sees them be the best they could be. Even under all this hate and darkness, they don't falter… and she realises who she could be. She could be better."

Astrid took a step forward, and her hands left her pockets only to wring and fiddle with themselves.

"Along the way she meets this guy who's not like anyone she's ever met. He's funny, smart… a huge dork—" Hiccup raised an eyebrow, forcing her to hastily add, "—chicks dig that! And… no matter what walls she puts up, he knocks 'em down. Whatever she tries to hide, he sees. The emotions she wants to quash, he makes her feel. And the more he does it, the more he treats her with respect, the more she realises… she's actually worth more than she thought."

Astrid slowly rubbed her hands together, and began a short pace between Hiccup's bed and the wall.
Her voice cracking, her throat tight, her emotions on full display... it was liberating.

"Only, she's scared. She's trying to be better, trying to fix herself, but she's scared she'll fall back on the girl she used to be. She's a work in progress, she's learning, but..."

"Just to be clear," Hiccup saw the drifting off of her sentence as an opportunity to jump in, "this girl is you, right?"

Astrid gave him her best, "Who do you think, flyboy?" expression.

"Right. Sorry."

"What I'm trying to say is... it might take some time for me to figure myself out, but..." Astrid immediately ceased her pacing and stood two feet in front of him. "I like you. I really like you, and... if you're willing, I wanna see where this thing between us goes. See if this thing I'm feeling is... what I've been searching for all along. I might screw up here and there, I might have my crazy moments but... if you like me as much as you say you do, if... remember when you said you hadn't slept with anyone, because you were waiting for the right woman?"

"Yeah, but that was..." he gaped at her, "you remember that?"

"I do... and what I'm trying to tell you is..." she reached to brush her fingertips against the palm of Hiccup's left hand, that had been dangling somewhat helplessly at his side, "with time and patience, I wanna be that woman."

Hiccup's lips upturned into the warmest, most sympathetic smile, drawing lines of genial cheer by his eyes. His fingers found their way between hers and entwined their hands together. "I want you to be the best you can be. No matter how long it takes or how hard it could be for you, I'll be right beside you."

It was an odd sensation, feeling one's heart explode. Experiencing such warmth and security she felt she could wrap it around herself and live inside it forever, free and safe.

Was it love, or the beginnings of it?

If it was, Astrid was sure as hell going to pursue it.

They gazed into each other's eyes for some time, aquamarine melting into emerald, sky with sea, and Astrid lived in that moment where nothing else mattered and the world just passed by.

Of course, with the sudden widening of Hiccup's eyes and the mildly aghast expression, she was reminded that nothing lasts forever. "Shit. I gotta get going," Hiccup said, his words practically falling over each other. "Listen, uh, thanks for coming to talk. Glad to know where we stand."

Astrid gave his hand a little squeeze and was the first to pull out of their small embrace, though she mourned the absence of his touch. It was like holding calloused pleasure. "No worries."

Hiccup grabbed his mask and dived past her to the door, saying a quick 'see you later', as he did, but Astrid discovered to her surprise she wasn't ready to let him go. Not just yet.

"Hey, flyboy!"

Hiccup froze in the doorway, one foot in the hall. He looked back at her with a rushed, puzzled gaze. Astrid turned and marched up to him, before grabbing him by the jacket and capturing his lips with hers in a slow, passionate kiss. It took a few moments for Hiccup to realise what was happening,
judging by the initial hesitation, but soon he mirrored her kiss - even going as far as to place his hand on the side of her head.

As for Astrid? Well, the temptation to jump his bones was there, but she ignored it. Lips tingling, she pulled away with a gasp, and lightly panted as she gazed into his widened eyes.

"That was—wow..." he breathed.

"One for the road," she murmured. "Now get going, flyboy. You've got clothes to sew."

Hiccup fell over his words as he murmured his understanding, and Astrid had to suppress a giggle as his dart away carried all the swaying hallmarks of a daze. She watched him disappear down the corridor, smiling to herself.

Life was finally looking up.

Long walks were a funny thing, Elsa had once mused in her youth. The distance between the starting point and the destination was a fixed point in length… but it was the **perception** of the walk that defined how long it felt. Often, it was the company and the atmosphere that affected the awareness of the passage of time.

The two mile walk to a moderately sized clearing northwest of the base felt like the longest walk in Elsa's life, an odd notion considering the inherent movement upgrade she had received upon blooming. That wasn't to say being in Jack's company was **bad**, per se, more that the silence that had hung over and between them had the effect of slowing down time. It was an awkward, tense quiet, filled with unsaid words and the crunch of snow and frozen twigs under their boots. Jack had made it crystal clear he did not want to revisit the topic from earlier, even going as far as to walk several feet ahead of her. As far as he was concerned, in three days he was to be taken to an abandoned settlement, and killed.

It led Elsa to a state of numbness, walking at the cusp of nihilism. Her choices were between shit, and shit, and the end result was always going to be the potential end of her sisterly relationship. Sure, they could work through it and be on cordial terms, but it would **never** be as it was. So, what was the fucking point?

There was **one** aspect to the journey she hadn't anticipated, one that she would forever commit to her memory since she had only ever seen them in the holo-zoos: wolves. Halfway into their walk, she'd spotted movement at their three o'clock, moving parallel with them. Patient vigilance had yielded the breathtaking sight of two adult wolves, the slate-grey one larger than the other, snowy one, and two cubs in tow. The assumed-to-be father and mother wolves had watched Elsa and Jack move with a curious eye, interested in their journey whilst keeping a careful distance. They had followed them to the edge of the clearing before taking their little ones elsewhere, and Elsa found it beautiful to see such animals in their natural habitat, rather than translucent and blue-hued.

It was another thing for which she counted herself lucky - she was likely the first to see a family of wild wolves in decades.

Still, such a moment was fleeting, if a welcome dissociation from reality.

Elsa followed him to a patch of ground at the eastern edge of the clearing, untouched by the inch-thick layer of snow thanks to the majestic tree overhead. Jack found a spot at the base of the tree, and leaned his staff against it before turning and descending to cross his legs on the floor, facing her, and gestured to the ground six feet from him.
"I mean, you can stand, but it'll get boring after a while."

Elsa looked at the ground around her, though at nothing in particular, before adopting the same posture - though, Jack's elbows rested on his knees whereas Elsa's hands laid on hers, back straight and proud.

She watched him impassively as he sniffed, and wiped across his upper lip as though the action was somehow necessary, before speaking. "Brought you here because for what we're about to do, you're gonna need space."

It hadn't escaped Elsa's notice that they were well away from anyone that could be hurt, too.

Jack gestured around him, his eyes never leaving hers. "Take a look around. What do you see?"

Elsa shifted her weight onto her right buttock and back again, trying to dislodge the pressure of her holstered stun pistol against her thigh. "Snow."

"And?"

"Trees."

"Okay. What's between all that? What's filling the spaces?"

Elsa tilted her head. "Nothing. It's just empty space."

Jack shook his head with a wry smile, as though she'd fallen into a trap. "Try again."

Elsa looked around once more, perceiving nothing but the space between the trees. It wasn't until she inhaled a breath that it clicked in her mind. "Air."

"Exactly." Jack pointed at her in confirmation. "Air. It surrounds us, flows through us, and without it, life would not exist. The world would end."

"Okay."

"So, with that in mind, I want you to close your eyes. Clear your mind of everything. Focus on the moment, the here and now, so you can centre yourself."

Elsa did as asked, drawing a veil of black over her eyes. Aside were cast the worries of what was to come. Compartmentalized was the knowledge that their feelings were shared.

"What can you feel?"

"The snow," Elsa answered without hesitation. It was so strange how, once her mind had been cleared, she could sense it so acutely and clearly. "I can feel all of it, every single flake around me, above me, like it's a part of me."

"And how does it feel? I mean, to you?"

Elsa tilted her head slightly. "Soft, but… heavy. Like a thick comforter."

"Good. What else?"

She took a deep breath through her nose, letting it flow gently from her mouth. "The ice in amongst the snow, and the icicles from the branches. They feel… tough. Hard."
"Mmmhm. Now, look beyond all that. Reach out with your feelings, try to go between the ice and the snow. Is there anything that feels different?"

Elsa frowned, and tried to reach out as suggested. Her mind walked through the soft and the hard, the tough and the powder, searching. She could feel something in amongst it all, something just out of reach, moving in the spaces between. One moment it was there, and slipping away the next - like currents of water flowing in myriad ways.

"I think I feel something," she whispered, tilting her head and moving it an inch to the right. "It's hard, but… it's there."

"What does it feel like?"

"Like… freedom." Elsa smiled a little, like the sensations coursing through her were physically uplifting. "It feels like freedom. An overwhelming urge to never stop moving, like dancing in the sky. To be everywhere at once, for if it were to be still, it would cease to exist."

"That's… really poetic," Jack said, a perceptible hint of awe to his voice. "Open your eyes."

Slowly, Elsa drew back the veil ofdark, and the bright light of the world filled her vision, chasing away the shadows. Closing herself off for those minutes had blurred her sight, so she blinked away the haze… and gasped.

Flakes upon flakes of snow danced upon an imperceptible breeze, gently floating around and between them. They bobbed and dipped, riding the invisible air currents in a lazy circle, with some kissing the ground in a sweet caress whilst others soared to the lowest branches of the overhead tree. Elsa slowly held out a hand, watching as one flake skimmed the surface of her palm before taking flight once more.

"What… what is this?"

"This is snow." Jack said, earning him a mild glare. Impish half-smirk present, he glanced up at the ballet of winter. "This… is beautiful, and this, this is you."

"Me?"

"Yep." Jack drew a slow, horizontal circle. "All this is you."

"How am I—"

It clicked almost as soon as she asked the question. Jack talking about air. The feeling of freedom, and the urge to move. The graceful ebb and flow of currents in the space between.

"The wind…"

"Yep."

"I can control the wind…"

"No."

Elsa looked at him, taken off-guard by his blunt denial, causing him to wince slightly and tilt his head back and forth as a visual concession. "Lemme rephrase that - we don't control the wind any more than we control the sun from rising or the tide from coming in - because it's not ours to control."

"Then how—"
Jack leaned forward, and gestured with his hands. "The wind is a part of nature, or Mother Nature as I like to think of her. The grass, the trees, the bugs, the wind, the animals, the seasons... all part of one huge interconnected system. We just borrow the wind, kinda tap into it. We want to do something, and most of the time it'll help us out."

"You talk about it like it is sentient."

Jack shrugged and cocked his head with a raised brow. "S'cause it kinda is. See, the wind is a force of nature, beholden to no-one but nature. Which means when the weather is calm or not too bad, it'll work for you... but if there's a storm, a tornado or a hurricane? Don't try and control it, because it'll slap your ass down faster than Anna can eat a bar of chocolate - unless you are the one creating the storm."

Elsa pursed her lips and raised a single eyebrow as a silent, "quit being cryptic" rebuke.

"Remember what I said about your powers reflecting your emotional state?"

Elsa nodded. She'd already experienced numerous situations illustrating his explanation, the most recent being the conversation with Pitch.

"With the power of the wind as your ally, you'll be able to consciously create the lightest breeze to the most brutal snowstorm. I'm talking 'whiteout' level. If you hurt, the wind hurts with you. If you are angry, the wind's rage will be yours. Thing is, it's important to recognise when the storm is yours, or when it belongs to Mother Nature."

"How?"

"Easy. The storm will feel like yours, or you're majorly pissed off. If it's neither of those, then it's a natural occurrence and you should wait until it passes, because no matter how hard you try, the wind will not listen to you."

Elsa slowly nodded her understanding. "So we can harness it and use it, but we must respect the wind and not regard it as a tool."

Jack clapped his hands together and pointed both index fingers at her. "Nailed it. Think of it like the sea; you can swim in it, sail on it, but in the end, the sea does what it wants and we have to adapt to that."

Elsa's attention drifted to the floating flakes as she processed it all. It was her ally, but could also be her enemy. Possessed of such grace and lightness, yet capable of savage destruction and ruthless rage. It was amoral - but not in the negative sense, more that the wind had no concept of morality.

It was a force of nature, not a tool, nor a toy.

"So, howsabout I stop waffling and we get to the fun stuff?"

Elsa's eyes found him, and she smiled. "I'd like that."

Jack beamed at her. "Great. Follow me."

Quick as a flash he jumped to his feet and briskly walked into the middle of the clearing, his staff leaving circular imprints with each step of his left boot. Elsa watched him with a sombre heart; she would miss those sights. Jack, framed by the beauty of winter, the white powder adorning the brown, gnarled trees.
She would miss him dearly.

"Well, c'mon!" Jack called over his shoulder, stirring her from her thoughts. "Let's get this moving!"

Letting out a slow breath through her nose, Elsa rocked onto her right thigh and pushed herself up with her hand, feeling the frosted twigs and cold, dead leaves under her fingertips. Her limbs were heavy, not with fatigue, but reluctance. She traced his steps with hers, listening to the sound of snow crunching under her boots, until she stood at his side.

"Okay. Move the snow."

Elsa shot him a side look, and frowned. "To where?"

"Anywhere. Pick any patch of snow, and let the wind be your hands."

Let the wind be your hands. Elsa wondered if he'd been around Rapunzel for too long. Rolling back her shoulders, she briefly retreated into her mind, summoning the memory that lived between rage and serenity, the point of absolute focus. It had been easier to do when she was creating Coldheart and her snowmen, than it was in that moment. Her heart called to the wind, visualising the currents of the breeze lifting up the flakes of snow, and made a motion with her hands as though elevating it herself.

To her surprise, a light wind rushed around her in a lazy circle, tickling her forehead with her bangs. She could feel its soft caress moving through her, between her legs and the space between her arms, though her fingertips and over her face. It gave her the uncanny sensation she was being judged.

The next moment, the wind vanished, and the air was as still as could be. It was as though she was deemed unworthy.

"Try again," Jack murmured. "Sometimes Zephyr can be fickle."

Elsa gave him a funny look. "...Zephyr?"

Jack shrugged. "Meh. Easier to think of the wind as a being, so, I came up with a name."

"Just now?"

Jack tilted his head and back with another light shrug. "Myeah, pretty much."

Elsa blinked and shook her head slightly. From a scientific perspective, the idea of the wind being sentient was surreal… but she was then reminded that she herself, and others like her were a product of science and a walking middle finger to its laws.

Summoning another breath, she tried once more. She pictured what she wanted, a stream of snow meandering through the air from one patch to another. She’d done it before; how else did Olaf come to be?

That time, 'Zephyr' skipped the appraisal phase and went straight to being uncooperative. Nary even a breeze passed Elsa’s cheeks.

She let out a deflated huff, and rested one hand on her hip whilst the fingers of her other hand scratched at the side of her head.

"It's okay," Jack murmured, and Elsa sensed him move closer. "We'll try again tomorrow. Probably a lot on your mind. Want to go practise your other abilities back in camp?"
Elsa didn't answer. She gazed down at the snow, feeling an annoyingly timed breeze ghost over her cheeks, listening to the distant sound of the wind rustling the tree branches. Something was missing, there had to be more. Her mind worked, piecing together clues and information, thoughts and images, feelings and words.

Her heart hit her with an almighty thump. It was so simple.

"No," she answered firmly.

"Mmkay, well—"

"I mean… when you first flew, you wanted—needed—to get home as fast as you could, right?"

"Yeah…" said Jack from behind her.

"I think I understand what I need to do. The wind isn't the problem; I am. I'm approaching this from the wrong place. The wind and I share something, share the same desire, the same need."

She turned slightly to look at him. Jack regarded her with patient interest, his head cocked.

"The need to be free," she whispered.

Elsa turned back. It all made sense. The emotions she felt when reaching out to the wind, Jack's ability to fly. Her own desire to be free of torment, of her past, of control.

She took those emotions, her words to Pitch, her desire for freedom. She channelled them all into her being, until they became her, and with her hands slowly lifting up, she let them all go.

Zephyr responded.

The wind rushed around her, whipping her braid and her bangs. A firm breeze that scooped up the snow in the clearing flake by flake, glittering star by star, filling the air with the rustle of powder against powder. The breeze strengthened into a constant wind, circling widely around her, and before long, the entire clearing's worth of snow was travelling in countless separate streams, all moving with each other in their own little currents.

Beaming with glee, each breath a gasp of joy, Elsa stretched out her hands to the surrounding treeline. She mimicked the flow of the wind, vicariously sweeping across the trees. She could feel the wind race through the branches, and watched with awe how the powdery snow was gently lifted into the wind's swirling embrace. Elsa slowly spun with the lazy vortex, revelling in the sheer freedom of it all, and the beauty of millions upon millions of tiny flakes glittering in the morning sun. Brimming with energy and victorious confidence, she slowly brought her hands together above her head - responding perfectly, the cyclone of winter narrowed and condensed in the sky above into a single, frantic whirlpool of snowy diamonds.

The clearing, and the surrounding treeline, was void of snow.

Elsa made an abrupt parting motion with her hands, deciding the show had reached its end. Responding to her will, the swirling sphere of snow exploded into a huge cloud of glittering stars that lazily descended the air, falling at a speed vastly slower than the frenetic pace at which they were carried by the wind. Elsa's heart sang with admiration, watching what felt like the first snowfall of winter.

"I did this," Elsa murmured, scarcely believing it. "I harnessed the wind."
"Yeah, you did." Jack sidled up to her. She glanced at him, and smiled at the look of sheer awe on his face. "That was incredible to watch."

"Thank you," she said softly. Jack gave her a side look. "For helping me unlock these abilities."

Jack smiled at her, and nudged her arm. "My pleasure. Good way to end our final training session, huh?"

Elsa's smile dropped so quickly, it might as well have been attached to lead weights. There it was - one welcome break from reality, and now she was bang smack in the middle of it. She looked away from him, and tried her hardest to immerse herself in the snowy stars.

Jack seemed to sense her discomfort. "That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?" Elsa snapped, glaring. "What was your meaning, other than to… this was the last meaningful moment I could have with you, and you said that."

"I'm sorry," Jack murmured, eyes crestfallen. "What I meant was… this is the last session, because there's nothing else for me to teach you."

Elsa frowned, turned to face him, and whispered, "What?"

Jack planted his staff into the ground with a hard thump, and rested both of his hands on the tip. His face told a solemn, serious tale as he lost himself in the drifting snowfall. "I'm the most powerful abnormal in the team, straight up. Ask anyone. Probably even the world. You name it, I've done it. Snow days, blizzards so thick you're blind, gale force winds that'll yank a man off his feet. In terms of power, I'm the strongest. Or… I was."

His eyes found hers. "Until you."

"I'm not as strong as you," Elsa shook her head.

"Not yet, but you have the potential to be my equal. You will be as powerful as I am, maybe even more." Jack shifted his feet, and gazed at the snowfall. "These sessions were about teaching you the foundations, and it was up to you to build on them with practice, and learning what works for you. You created your own sword, you can conjure snowmen, you just—" he gestured around him, "—created a light blizzard on your first real try. There's nothing more I can teach you that you won't learn yourself… which is good."

"Why?"

"Because I need to know my successor is going to be up to leading the team, both in mind and in power."

Elsa gaped at him, her mind suddenly spinning. Faint was not a word nor a sensation with which she was acquainted, but it sure as hell fit the bill. "...m-me?"

"Who else?" Jack shrugged. "Anna's pregnant, and she's too hot-headed. Hiccup is too much of a free spirit, and if he ever lost Toothless, it'd break him. Pitch doesn't want to lead. Elsa, you're the only one with the strength, and you've got leadership experience. I needed to be sure you're up to it, which is why I had Pitch talk to you. From what he told me, once you've confronted your past, you'll be unstoppable."

Elsa shook her head hard enough for her neck to express its annoyance. "That's... for a start, Jack, we both know they'll never follow me. Not after you. Not after they find out I'm supposed to do."
"They will, in time. They'll understand."

Elsa stepped toward him and jabbed a finger into his chest. "Furthermore, it's not going to happen. I will not be your successor, because you are not going to die. I refuse to do it."

"Elsa—"

"If you are asking me to be your second in command, I will happily and respectfully accept, but you will be alive for that—"

"Elsa—"

"What?!"

Jack dropped his staff, and cupped her face in his hands. Fingers calloused with battle and work held her cheeks with all the gentle touch of a leaf on water. He stared into her eyes, blue ice meeting blue ice, and Elsa felt herself drowning in the snowflakes around his pupils.

He asked her, with all the seriousness in the world, "Do you trust me?"

"Yes…” Elsa whispered.

Jack dipped his head a little, looking at her through his raised eyebrows. "Then trust me. Take me to the settlement in a few days, and pull the trigger. See this through to the end."

Elsa didn't know why she did what she did next. Maybe it was the knowledge she might not get another chance. Maybe it was a bittersweet memory for her to hold onto. All she knew was that the magnetic pull became too hard to resist, and the air filled with electricity so strong it could power the world. Her breathing ragged, she threw caution to the now-whirling wind, and surged forward.

Their lips crashed together in a passionate kiss. Softness met softness, their jaws moving as one. Jack's hands found her hair, and Elsa grasped at his shirt to pull him closer to her and keep him. Moans left her throat into his mouth, and the lightheaded haze banished all cognisant thought. It was a tragic, desperate kiss, a wordless sign of her need. Full of hope and resignation, the joy of acting on her feelings and the grief of acting too late.

The need for oxygen grew too much to ignore, no matter how hard she tried to hold onto the moment. Gasping for breath, Elsa pulled away, panting. She gazed into his eyes, close enough to see her reflection. No words were shared, none that could be. She closed her eyes, and rested her forehead against his, holding his shirt so tightly it was as though letting go would let him disappear.

A single tear slipped down her right cheek.

Kisses were not meant to hurt.
Jack’s hand froze over the handle to the hover jeep's passenger-side door. His heart beat a painful punch in his chest, and his stomach sank to his feet. Dread weighed his soul at the knowledge of a conversation he was hoping not to have, yet expected all the same.

All because she called out his name.

He shot a look up at Elsa, stood by the driver's side door, who returned it with anxious eyes. He caught the worried twist of her lip just before he looked over his shoulder at Anna, standing several feet away with her arms folded and a furrow in her brow as she stared right back at him.

He glanced at the early afternoon sun, its dazzling light turning the snowy tree tops into peaks of glittering diamonds. "Gimme a minute," he murmured loud enough for Elsa to hear, and made his way the small distance to meet Anna, reluctance in his wake.

"What's up?" he said as he came to a stop before her. She glanced past him at her sister before meeting his eyes again, and Jack could see the loud breath escape her nose in a wisp of vapor.

She opened her mouth and sucked in the cold winter air, visibly considering her words.

"You and me, we're best friends, right?"

Jack nodded. "Right."

"We've spilled blood together. We've bled together. Fought together. Right?"

"Right…" Jack dragged out the vowel.

"The only one who's seen more of me than you is Kristoff, and the only one who knows more about me than you is Elsa, right?"

"Anna, you mind getting to—"

"So, we're honest with each other, right? We trust each other?"

Jack sighed, and rested his hands on his hips as he adjusted his feet. "Yes, we are and do."

"So," Anna rested her weight on her right hip, slightly rocking back and forth on it, "knowing that, I want an honest answer as our friendship is all about that: what the hell's going on?"

Jack blinked, and offered a consolatory shrug. "I don't know what you're—"

Anna's head leaned forward, and she glared at him through raised eyebrows. "You don't know, huh?" She lifted a finger and roughly poked his shoulder. "Well, lemme tell you what I know. I know you've been acting cagey these past few days. I know you go off to Perdition, getting on real well with my sister, but you're hostile and cold to her when you get back. You refused to even be in the same room."
Jack opened his mouth, and then snapped it shut, thinking better of it.

"I know you went off on some secret trip somewhere, and I'm pretty sure you went to get something, since you keep tapping the breast pocket of your vest when you think we're not looking."

"Maybe I just like the feel of my own nipple."

"I'm not done, Jack." Anna stepped forward, and the fire of her gaze never left its lock on his eyes. "You're buddy-buddy again with Elsa, but after you go off to the forest, you're not talking to each other. You ask Hiccup to do something with a stun pistol, but when I ask him, he says it's a routine maintenance check. Thing is? You haven't ordered him to check anyone else's. Just yours. And that's without going into this whole wingsuit thing you've got him doing."

"I was getting to—"

"And to top it off, just five minutes ago you pull Astrid aside and talk all hush-hush with her before she disappears into the workshop—" Anna unfurled a hand to gesture in the general direction of the building in question, "—and when I ask her, she says it's a routine patrol. Her patrol's not until tomorrow, Jack!"

"Maybe she got antsy and wanted to bring it forward—"

"—or maybe there's something going in you're not telling me about. Something to do with my best friend and my sister, which means I have a right to know about it. So I'm gonna ask again, one last time. No more lies, no more question-dodges. What are you not telling me?"

Under Anna's gaze, Jack began to flounder. Breath after breath was taken and exhaled, as responses were mentally suggested, considered, and then promptly vetoed, and his eyes blinked over and over. Half of him wanted to lay everything out for her, but the other half demanded secrecy and discretion. He inhaled another breath, but let it out in one long sigh, and held his left hip as he stroked at his jaw, since one of the halves won out.

"Alright, you win," he let out a defeated exhale. "You're right. I can't lie to you. I won't. If I tell you, it'll be the truth."

"Good. So—"

"Which means I can't tell you."

Anna gaped, a second before she threw her hands up with an abrupt growl. "You can't—were you listening to a word I just said?!"

"I was," Jack took a step forward, "and if it was any other thing, you'd be the first to know."

"But Elsa knows?! It's all right for her?"

"Elsa..." Jack paused, finding himself in the peculiarity of having to choose his words with the care of bomb disposal, "Elsa is in the dark, too. It's better that way."

Anna was at a visible loss. "For who?"

Jack's words left his mouth in a quiet breath. "For her. For you. For... pretty much everyone."

"Why? You know I hate being shut out, so why?"

Jack opened his mouth, but the glance his eyes involuntarily made to her abdomen was a clear
sign... one she did not miss.

Anna rapidly shook her head and even more vigorously waved her hands. "Oh, no. No. You do not get to justify your... your... your need-to-know shit by using Aiden!"

"...Aiden?"

"Yeah," she snapped, "Aiden if it's a boy, Aeryn if a girl. Don't change the subject."

Jack quickly glanced over his shoulder. Elsa stared back at him, worry written over her features in a deep frown. Time was beginning to be their enemy. "Look," he said, turning back, and resting his hands on Anna's shoulders as he spoke with as calm and reassuring a voice as he could muster, "you're already under enough stress as it is, and you knowing would put you under even more. I know I haven't been open with you, and I should have been. I'm sorry. But... I need you to trust me. I need you to believe in me, that I've got this. Okay?"

Anna's glare softened, and he could feel her shoulders sag under his hands. She let out a defeated sigh, and her head slowly shook as her eyes fell to his chest. "It never used to be like this..."

"I know." Jack pulled her toward him. She rested her forehead against his chest, and he felt her hands snake around him to return the hug as he held the back of her head, stroking as he leaned his chin on her scalp. She felt warm, almost unbearably so. "But things are different, now. People keep calling me 'Cap'. I've got to play by a different set of rules."

Anna snorted into the tough fabric of his vest. "You hate rules."

Jack chuckled. "Yeah, well, no-one told me I'd have to get over that when I inherited command. Something-something-lead by example, or whatever."

"It's changed you."

Jack frowned and pulled back a little. "You think so?"

"Yeah." Anna sniffed. "I mean, it's a good change, and it kinda had to happen so you could grow into this leadership role..."

Jack sensed a 'but' and prompted accordingly.

"...but I kinda miss the old you. When you had a joke for every situation, when I had to check every door frame and still got caught out by a bucket of snow. Now you're all serious and grown-up and stuff."

Jack gently pulled her off him, and pouted as he gazed into her worried eyes. "Hey, now, milady. I might take that personally. That Jack's still around, he's just... there's more important things than pranking right now."

Anna blinked, and a blank expression washed over her face. "I cannot believe you just said that."

Jack rarely felt the sensation of a chill in his spine, or of someone walking over his figurative grave, but nevertheless he shivered. "Yeah," he murmured, mildly horrified, "That was... weird."

Anna let go of him, and cradled her chest. "Look," she sighed, "you're not gonna tell me. I'm not fine with that, I've just got this really bad feeling and... and it won't go away. Just... promise me you'll both be safe."
"Anna…"

"Promise me, Jack," she implored him, eyes beseeching. "My baby already lost their father. They can't lose their godparents, too."

Jack felt his heart sink. It was a promise he knew he had to break. To do so would be a lie, and it would be the first one he had ever told her. The only one, granted, but that one was enough.

Unfortunate was it that he had no other choice, but when the words left his lips, a small part of his soul splintered and left with them.

"I promise."

Anna nodded, but there was something in the way she looked off to the side in thought that made Jack wonder if she even believed it. Part of him felt an odd sense of relief.

"I need you to promise me something, firecracker."

Her eyes met his. "What?"

Jack took a breath, and the tightness in his chest pulsed at the prospect of dancing through another minefield of words. "Tomorrow… you're gonna learn something. It'll be big, it'll be… it'll feel like the rug's been pulled under your feet. When that happens… I want you to promise me you'll do one thing."

"You're scaring me, Jack."

"Breathe, Anna. Promise me you'll breathe. Promise me you'll take long breaths in, hold them, and long breaths out. Can you do that?"

"Jack, I—"

Jack took her hands and held them. Even with the difference in body temperature, her skin felt so hot it could burn. "Can you do that?"

Anna's eyebrow rose, and her voice elevated in pitch. "Okay, I promise to breathe. All right?"


Sensing every minute was time he did not have, Jack pulled her into the tightest, warmest hug he could muster. Though it lasted not nearly as long as he would have liked, he remained in the arms of his closest friend for as long as the forces of destiny would allow, before tearing himself away and returning to the jeep, chancing not one look back.

As for Anna? Well, women were often better at sensing things than men… and she couldn't shake the oddest feeling that the hug she shared with her best friend was not an unspoken see you later, catch you on the flip side, or see you soon.

It felt like "Goodbye."

"What did my sister want?"

Considering they had been on the road for hours, with the sun trailing low in the sky in its perpetual defeat to the fall of night, neither party had spoken a word to each other. At first, the silence had been oppressive and grating, but time and distance had lessened the weight of wordlessness. In fact, as he
sat in the front passenger seat and watched the world go by with a thoughtful eye, he found comfort in the loud hum of the jeep's engine being the only sound to grace his ears.

So, he could be forgiven for being miles away when Elsa first spoke.

"Jack."

His arm resting on the doorframe, having lowered the window so his hand could dance over the air currents passing by, he uttered little more than a blank, "Hmm?"

"What did Anna want?"

Jack glanced at her and back again, reality quickly returning to him. "Oh. She, she—um—" he straightened up in his seat and adjusted his position, "she knows something's up. Wanted me to tell her."

Elsa's eyes found his, through the corner of his vision. Ordinarily that would be a concern, but the road was straight enough, and the jeep's repulsors automatically compensated for potholes and bumps. "And did you?"

"No."

"Maybe you should have."

Jack pulled a breath through his nose and let it fly. "Do you want a seventeen-hundred pound dragon to drop outta the sky in front of us, with orders to escort us back to base or drag us back so she can kick our asses?"

As she looked away, back at the road ahead, Elsa said, "Not particularly."

"Didn't think so."

"That being?"

Jack turned to closely regard her. "Are we gonna talk about what happened in the forest?"

Elsa blinked. Her right hand adjusted its place on the wheel, and she wriggled slightly in her seat as though seeking greater comfort. She further made a point of checking the mirrors, as though expecting the road to not be as empty as it was. "You taught me to harness the wind."

Jack thinned his lips and raised an eyebrow. "Unluckily for you, your powers don't run on smartass. Try again."

"W-what?" Elsa did several double takes, her expression becoming more and more mortified as the
seconds went by. "No, wait! That's not what I—"

"Meant?" Jack scoffed, and shook his head as he shot a sour look at the overgrown wheat fields they were passing. "Funny thing about blunt honesty - you say what you mean."

"Better than hiding the truth behind lie after lie!" Elsa snapped back.

Jack outwardly gaped at her, borderline scandalized. "That's rich coming from you!"

That time, Elsa fully took her eyes off the road and fixed him with a furious glare that would have made ordinary men shrink in their seats. Thankfully, knowledge of the impending time and location of his end rendered him somewhat immune; angering someone he liked paled in comparison to his soon-to-be death.

"At least I told you the truth!" she shouted. "At least I did it of my own volition!"

Jack uttered a snarl and jerked his sight away from her, his teeth clamped tight enough for his gums to signal their acute displeasure. It was then that he saw a rocky outcropping overlooking a wide ditch between the wheat fields - and the vivid golden glow of the sun kissing the horizon just beyond.

Death or no death; tradition demanded adherence.

"Pull over."

Whether it was the sharp bite to his tone or not Jack could only guess, but Elsa's response softened by a wide margin. From antagonised to confused in a moment. "What?"

"Pull over," he repeated. "There's something I have to do. For me."

Elsa, though her puzzlement was tangible, obliged. Jack felt the jeep undertake a gentle swerve to the edge of the beaten road, and an even gentler slow to a stop. "Have you changed your mind about what's going to happen?"

"Absolutely not," Jack declared flatly. "But this is... this something I've done every day since I became a Ghost. No way am I gonna break tradition on account of getting a new pair of wings and a halo."

He pulled on the handle and lifted one leg out of the jeep, before pausing to add, "Or a pair of horns and a tail, depending on who you ask."

Without further ado, Jack left the jeep and closed the door behind him before making his way through the field, a short distance from the parked jeep. He heard the opening and closing of another door behind him, the dull clunk coasting through the air, and uttered a hum as he smiled to himself. He walked with his arms outstretched at waist height to feel the tickle of the wheat against his palms, a sensation oddly soothing and grounding.

Moments passed until his boots found rock, and a quick scurry up the small outcrop yielded a glorious view of another untended wheat field, the heads of thousands of plants swaying lazily in the evening breeze. Unclipping his thigh holster and dropping it to the ground, he descended to the hard surface and arched his legs. Resting his elbows on his kneecaps, and linking his hands together, he felt a sense of admiration at the golden shimmer of the weaving wheat, as though it radiated its own light. The sun itself kissed the horizon, painting the sky a blood red, and though his heart beat a rhythm of pain and fear, he knew he could be nowhere else for one last sunset.
"It's beautiful," came Elsa's soft voice from a few feet behind him. "Do you do this often?"

Jack's smile never left his lips as he slowly nodded, taking in the transition of gold to crimson, crimson to purple. "Every night. Used to climb up on top of my shack with my sister and watch the sun go down, and when I became a Ghost, I knew every day could be my last. So, when I was on the Star, I'd sit on the deck and just watch the sun set. Kind of a way to be thankful for every day I get, and to keep Emma close. Tradition, y'know?"

"I understand," Elsa said, though there was a vague sensation in the air which felt a lot like hesitation. "May… may I join you?"

"Honestly?" Jack chuckled, "I was about to ask you the same thing."

He patted at the space to his right after moving his disconnected holster aside, prompting Elsa to question, "Why did you take off your sidearm?"

Jack shrugged and tossed it behind him. "Dunno. I guess… I guess I wanna feel like an ordinary guy for once, and not a trained soldier."

Elsa uttered a hum of *didn't-think-of-that*, before doing exactly as he hoped and removing hers. Jack listened out with his full attention, and relief spread through his chest at the sound of fabric hitting fabric. Chancing a glance over his shoulder, he noticed that her holster was sprawled over his.

Good.

The scrape of boots upon rock reached his ears as Elsa lowered herself to sit beside him with her legs tucked to the side, one hand supporting her weight. For a few moments, they sat in silence to observe the horizon's consuming of their solar system's only star.

"When we kissed in the forest…" Elsa began slowly, "I kissed you because I wanted to. I had wanted to for a while and… I felt I might never get the chance after then."

"But?"

"But I shouldn't have done it." Elsa's head dipped, and she stroked at the material of her arctic camouflage pants with her index finger. "I made things even harder than I thought they could be. I had let myself have one good thing, just one… and in a few hours, I'll never have it again. It hurts - not to mention what it must be like for you…"

Jack tilted his head. She had a point, and it spoke to the small part of him that wished the kiss had never happened, but… "Well, as I recall, I wasn't exactly beating you back with my staff."

"No," Elsa chuckled. "No, you weren't."

She turned to look at him.

"Did… did you mind that I kissed you?"


Even with the veil of night conquering the sky, Jack easily picked out the light blush adorning her cheeks behind her shy smile. "I did, too. You're a remarkable kisser."

Jack nudged her supporting arm with his elbow. "Right backatcha, Snowflake."

Elsa's head ducked as a faint titter could be heard in the close proximity between them, before she
slowly shook her head.

"I won't do it. I'm going to look Hans in the eye, and tell him to go fuck himself. He wants to kill you, he'll have to go through me... or I'll go through him."

Jack let out a bark of humour, rocking back as he did so. "As awesome as that would be to see, you can't."

"Why not?" She looked up at him, brows tightly knitted. "It's my choice."

"Because..." Jack found himself frowning, feeling a niggle of frustration in his chest at the thought of having to conjure up yet another cryptic answer. "Because life... life is all one big stage production, and we've all got our parts to act. And you... you're the starring role."

Elsa scoffed. "If that was meant to comfort me, you amazingly failed."

"Wasn't supposed to, but I'm gonna need you, when the time comes—I'm counting on you to take the shot." He released his hands, and his left fingers sought to stroke at her left cheek. "I know it's hard, and you'll feel like the worst person in the world for a while... but I promise you this: it'll work out."

"I wish I had your optimism." Elsa's head lolled onto his shoulder Jack watched her eyes return to the sunset's remnants, and gently rested his head upon hers. "As far as I know, in a few hours we will arrive at an abandoned settlement where, presumably in front of Hans and whoever else may be there, I am to murder my sister's best friend, my commanding officer, my friend and my crush. Positivity is a lost cause on me, I'm afraid."

"Don't dwell too much on it," Jack offered, though suspected it was redundant. "Just... try to enjoy what time we have together."

Elsa took an audible breath, letting it out in a long, thoughtful sigh. "I must admit... I find myself contemplating repeating a mistake."

"What mis—" But when Jack caught sight of how her eyes flicked down to his lips, his eyebrows rose in comprehension. "Oh. Okay. You sure?"

"Not really." Her eyes, though forlorn, gazed distantly through his face. "Though if it is to be our last meaningful moment together, I'd like to make it something to hold onto."

"Well, if you're certain—"

Elsa's head was slowly approaching him as she murmurer, "Less so by the second."

"I guess I should stop talking," Jack breathed, smirking as he slowly closed the distance.

"Shut up and kiss me before I change my mind," she whispered.

Jack closed his eyes as he claimed the final inch, capturing her lips. Soft, but firm, they moved in unison against his, sending excited tingles through his mouth, his cheeks - hell, his entire body. She moaned quietly into his mouth, and as he ran his right fingers through her hair, he felt her hand tenderly caress his left cheek.

Slowly but intimately they enjoyed each other's lips, seeking more but staying in control. Just enough to not ruin or cheapen the moment.
Elsa was the first to retreat, and the hand once brushing against his cheek went to rest upon his heart as their foreheads gently connected.

"We should go," Jack breathed.

Her voice cracking, Elsa whispered, "I'm so sorry."

Jack let out a faint snort. "Don't be. It'll all be okay."

She looked up at him, their eyes inches from each other. "How?"

Jack winked at her. "Let's just say my surrogate mom once called me Loki."

Taking her momentary, visible confusion as an opportunity, Jack heaved himself to his feet and made his way to the discarded thigh holsters. Kneeling down with his back to her, he picked up her holster with his left hand and grasped his from under it with his right. Straightening up, he turned and offered the holster with its straps dangling from his right hand. "Figured this was the best way. Red setting. Quick and painless."

Elsa's eyes went to the holster as she took it with reluctance written in her frown. "It will be the second time I take someone's life with that gun. Someone who did not deserve death."

"Sleeping Beauty?"

Elsa nodded, sniffing as she strapped the holster to her thigh.

"Won't be like that. I promise."

"You're right," Elsa said, a strange, mild hostility reaching Jack's ears. "I didn't murder her."

Elsa swept past him quickly enough for Jack to feel a light rush of air following in her wake. His heart pulsed with immense guilt, watching her back as she strode to the jeep; it was a terrible, terrible act she had to undertake. What she was feeling, Jack could only imagine.

There was no other way.

---

Hans was true to his word about one thing, at least. The settlement was abandoned, and had been for many years, judging by the thick rust layers upon the corrugated metal walls of each dwelling, time and the elements consuming them. Had the moonlight been the only source of illumination beaming down on them, Elsa might have been of the opinion the small settlement retained a ghostly, ethereal presence speaking of inhabitants once alive. Talking. Laughing. Breathing. Life conquered by silence and darkness.

The presence of miniature artificial fusion lamps dotted around the settlement, however, did away with that opinion. Signs that no matter how much she did, how much she refused, screamed and cried, her destiny still arrived.

Jack at her side, Elsa's steps unwillingly carried her closer to the settlement boundary, her heart numbing itself for protection and her mind filling its eye with pictures of Anna, of Jack's impending doom and the laughing, evil face of Hans. The pistol brushed against her thigh with each step, further reminding her of hate. She hated Hans. She bore some for Jack - how could he put her in this position?

Sure, she could have sacrificed her parents, and the price to pay would have been her self-respect
and a guilty conscience, but Jack would be alive. Anna would have understood. It would have been a bargain.

Besides, time and distance had helped her to reach a moment of clarity on the journey to the ghost town - Agdar and Idun Snowfield stopped being her parents a long time ago. One could argue the moment they locked her in her room was when they ceased being parents and became benevolent prison guards.

She was only doing it for Anna, whose love and attachment to them still held strong.

"Guy's a full-tilt diva."

Elsa looked at him. Jack wore an expression of amused disdain upon his face, snorting into chuckles every now and then. "I'm sorry?"

"I clocked at least three good places for an ambush just in the last half hour. High ground, cover. Hans could have had us boxed in and taken us out whenever he wanted - s'what I would have done." Jack scratched at his nose and shrugged. "Dead town, middle of the night, spooky little lamps? Dude's all about the show."

"People see what he wants them to see." Elsa's boots dug into the dry earth as they walked. "His brothers saw vulnerability. Henrik Larsen saw family. I… I saw integrity. Hans is adept at hiding his true nature behind a shifting facade."

"Guess that's how he got where he is."

"And how he intends to go further." Elsa gave Jack a you'll see look. "I don't think he'll stop there. He'll put on a show to convince his peers of his trustworthiness… and when the time is right, he'll reveal himself."

"And this is, what, a part of his plan?"

Elsa tilted her head to the side and back. "Yes, and no. He is aware of the existence of the Ghosts, or we would not be here. You are the greatest threat to—"

"We are."

"—his plan, so this is a tactical move. Blackmailing me… he's indulging himself. He wants to see me bleed."

"And will you?" Jack looked at her, eyes radiating concern born of two empathic hearts.

"I fear I will, because I am not like him." Elsa's hand unconsiously reached for his - and to the skipping of her heart, his fingers reciprocated by snaking themselves between hers. "I hid my true self for years, and it brought me nothing but misery. I will not hide again."

"For what it's worth," Jack squeezed her hand, "you're stronger than he is. Than I am."

"I am," Elsa nodded. "But you and I… we are strong."

Jack offered her a half-smile on the left corner of his lips just as they crossed the boundary, before a sudden movement from inside the settlement caught their eyes.

Emerging from the darkened doorway of a defunct general store, the tell-tale trench coat swaying with every step he took, a clone Alpha walked rigidly into the middle of the dusty street. Elsa and
Jack came to a halt, her heart skipping a dreadful beat as the soldier silently approached them. One quick glance told her he was unarmed, yet in his right hand was a silver disc approximately the size of a dinner plate. Elsa caught the backward movement of Jack’s right side, reckoning he was moving for his holster.

The clone seemed unfazed, however; stopping ten feet from them, he placed the disc upon the floor and tapped three buttons with gloved hands before retreating a foot away from it to stand at ease. Quiet humming from the disc drew their attention, preceding a spark of blue light that beamed upwards in a vertical cone.

Blue light, and the translucent image of Hans Larsen. He stood with his hands behind his back, smirking at them with an infernally victorious expression.

"So, you came," he said in an ethereal, almost digital voice. "I must admit I was anticipating drawing up execution orders for two."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Elsa said with lip-curled contempt.

Hans scoffed. "Hardly. Tonight is what you'd call a win-win for me."

Intangible blue eyes met solid aquamarines. Elsa glanced at Jack out of the corner of her vision; his face was amused, with slight confusion. "So, this is the infamous Frost. Pleasure to finally meet you —well, vicariously, at least."

Jack looked at Elsa, and gestured lamely at the projection. "This is Supreme Commander Larsen? Thought he'd be taller."

He wasn't wrong. In amongst the simmering rage, stomach-churning nausea and chilling dread was the faintest amusement that Jack towered over Hans by a full head.

"And I thought you'd be smarter," Hans retorted. Elsa didn't miss the mild bristle to his tone. "You should have known better than to shelter Elsa and her fugitive friends, especially since it wasn't too long ago they were after your blood. She is an albatross, Captain Frost."

"Way I remember it," Jack turned his gaze back to Hans, but there was an element to his expression that made Elsa think he was intentionally appearing to be bored, "an albatross was a good omen, 'til some idiot killed it. Well, in your case, tried to."

"Impressive," Hans blinked, looking genuinely surprised. "You are aware of the myth."

"I read a book." Jack caught Elsa's ill-disguised bemusement, and spread his free hand as he shrugged. "...what?"

"Be that as it may," Hans jumped in, "the moment you decided to shelter Elsa and her friends, you set events in motion that would inextricably lead you here, where you are to die. You sealed your—"

"Y'know," Jack groaned, rolling his eyes as he scratched his temple. "Fun and entertaining as your villainous monologue could have been, you're kinda missing the curly mustache. So can we get to the main event? I've got Gandalf the White shit to pull, and time is money."

"Captain," Hans tilted his head, smiling in bemusement, "you must know… you can't antagonise me —"

"Please, spend ten minutes with him," Elsa muttered, loud enough for Jack to give her a sarcastic frown of "...really?"
"—and your attempts at wit and glib remarks are merely delaying the inevitable. Now, as you're so eager to meet your end, let's get on with it, shall we?"

Hans looked at Elsa, and she was ashamed to feel part of herself shrink under his gaze. "Kill him."

"No," she snarled hoarsely.

"Kill him, or your parents die."

Elsa vigorously shook her head. "I don't care. I won't do it."

Jack turned toward her, blocking her from Hans' sight. "Elsa…"

"No, Jack," she whined through gritted teeth and barely moving lips, "No, no—no—"

"Look at me."

She looked everywhere but at his face. Her body weakened, like bone and muscle, resolve and sinew was becoming putty. "No, no, I can't—I won't—"

"Look at me—"

The stubborn soldier inside her retreated as her hopelessness grew, and a pleading little girl took centre stage. "Please don't make me do it, please don't—"

"Look at me."

There was something in his voice, in the way he spoke. It was a firm yet gentle tone, the vocal equivalent of a strong hand to hold but tender enough to comfort. With tears streaming from reddened eyes she looked into his, wrinkled from a smile of reassurance. So lost was she that she had not noticed he had guided her hand around her stun pistol and lifted it from its holster until it was pressed against his chest, and took in a shaky gasp at the realisation. She saw his hand move across his chest for a few moments before it reached up to stroke at her left cheek, one thumb futilely wiping away her tears. Her throat closed in on itself. She couldn't speak.

Couldn't think.

 Couldn't breathe.

Her trigger finger felt the pressure of a thumb. Her arms trembled.

"It's gonna be okay," he murmured. "I got this."

The pressure on her finger abruptly increased.

Red light blossomed in her eyes.

Jack's body went limp.

---

**Furiyan**

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Well, now. What a chapter to come back to.

I feel I must explain myself and my absence over the past two months, in the event that my profile amendment was missed.

On the 27th May, after a long, long battle with depression, my half-brother took his own life, leaving behind a mother, father, brother, several nieces and nephews, and myself. To say it was a shock would be an understatement, and as someone who is used to compartmentalising emotions to function as a carer (i.e. sometimes I have to be the rock), I found myself unable to grieve properly for a time. Emotions came at me in a chaotic manner, and I found I couldn't deal with them, so I made the decision to take a step back from all aspects of my life that were not necessary to my recovery and the grieving process.

This included writing.

However, over the past week I found myself thinking more and more about the story, and feeling the motivation to return to writing. Perhaps it's an aid to the process, or simply that I feel mentally, spiritually and emotionally ready to re-enter the world of OGaV. Either way, I am back.

And with a bang, it seems.

In any case, I would like to thank you all for reading, and to thank several people for their support during my difficult time. Two of whom are strangers, in a sense, yet felt compelled to offer their condolences and sympathies. For that, I am immensely grateful and heartened. I would also like to extend my thanks to you, the reader, for sticking with this story if you are still here. Writing a story that no-one will read is like speaking words no-one will hear, and eventually one stops talking. To know I still have readers... I feel honored. Privileged, even - and I dislike using that word as a result of its overuse in today's media.

I sincerely hope you all find this chapter enjoyable, though it may be bittersweet. I can assure you, though... I got this.

Love and light,

Furiyan
Anna paced back and forth outside the workshop, her hands fiddling with her left braid. For what felt like the millionth time she called out over the radio through her earpiece, her stomach turning with worry every time she received nothing but silence and static. Something was wrong. She knew it.

So wrapped up in her fretting was she, when a hand rested upon her shoulder, she almost took it by the wrist and flipped them over. Instead, a quiet squeak broke the air as she jumped in surprise. Judging by the start Hiccup had as she whirled around, he'd been expecting an entirely different reaction.

"Oh!" Anna held a hand over her racing heart. "Hey. Sorry. You just—"

"Made you jump?" Hiccup cringed slightly as she nodded. "My bad."

Anna waved it off. "No, no, it's okay. What's up?"

"Came to ask you that same thing. You're still awake." Hiccup gestured at her belly - which had developed into a slight bulge. "Not a good thing."

Anna looked down at her abdomen, before letting out a sigh. "I know," she said softly, "I just… I wanted to hear them over the comms before I went to sleep, so I knew they were okay. It's just… I can't raise them."

"Forgotten what day it is?"

Anna looked up at him, her momentary blank expression morphing into a not-following frown. She eyed him, searching for any form of a visual clue since her mind was still confused between its aching for rest and desire to confirm the safety of her sister and best friend, and was thus spectacularly unhelpful.

Until it clicked.

"Shit!" she snapped.

Hiccup offered her a half-smile of sympathy. "Ayup."

"Fucking great." Anna threw her hands into the air, casting outwards a groan of frustration. "Of all the fucking times for Unity to do its bullshit maintenance, it's tonight."

The abnormals on the Star, mainly the militarized Spirits, Furies and Ghosts, always had one day where no operations were undergone or authorized under any circumstances - Jack had always affectionately called it a snow day. Reason being; Unity would, once a year, conduct maintenance and software updates on its national communications system. Of course, since the abnormals' radio network piggybacked on Unity's system, the maintenance effectively shut down abnormal communications for a day.

"It's the same day every year," Hiccup gently reminded her, though Anna wanted to thump him in the shoulder for being so infernally right. "I knew about it. I thought everyone did."

"Well, maybe sometimes we need a reminder, 'cause—"

Anna broke off, like someone had reached into her mind and severed the connection between brain
and mouth. Her eyes involuntarily went to the main gate, in the direction Jack and Elsa had disappeared earlier that day.

"You okay, chief?"

Anna looked back at him, lost for words. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, her stomach went through one hell of a clench, and it was like a part of her had vanished.

"Yeah," she said in a breath, blinking, "I… I just had this weird feeling…"

"Breathe"

It had happened so fast, Elsa barely had time to register it. She had felt Jack's thumb squeeze her trigger finger, before a flash of red light had lit up the bottom of her sight. One moment, Jack was smiling reassuringly at her; the next, he was limp.

In the breadth of a second that felt like an eternity, Elsa was no longer a part of the world. Her heart had stopped, her soul had vanished, and all sounds were conquered by silence. It was like someone had pulled her out of her body, out of phase with time and reality.

All that ceased when Jack's body fell against her, and like the crash of water upon her ears, reality came down on her… hard.

The pistol tumbled from her fingers as she took a sharp gasp. She cradled Jack's head in the crook of her left arm and grasped his torso with her right, and let his dead weight pull her to the floor.

"No, no—no—nononono!" she babbled in a panic. Her right hand searched his body for signs of life; from his chest to his neck, to his face. His skin was still cold. "Come back, please come back!"

Her lips split into a grimace as she shook him. Her eyes welled with rivers as she hit his chest.

It was no use. Elsa bent down and sobbed into his neck, holding Jack's body against her. She rocked back and forth, spilling her grief into his neck.

It was done. She killed him.

The crunch of boots on dry ground cut through her cries like a knife through butter. Elsa's eyes snapped open. Instinct kicked in, and her hand dashed to the discarded stun pistol and brought it to bear upon the unwelcome visitor, teeth clenched and aim most unsteady.

"I'll kill you if you touch him," she spat.
The Alpha stopped in step, and looked to the holographic form of Hans for reassurance. "Now, now, Snow Queen," he said to her with a faux-sympathy that made her stomach violently turn, "He has to check the body - and I can assure you, he can do it without touching."

The body. The body. Hans put it so bluntly, so clinically, it felt like a further punch to her gut. Jack was more than just a body. He was…

He was.

Elsa's aim faltered, and her gun hand flopped down upon Jack's hip. Her protective fury abated as she gazed down upon his peaceful countenance, void of life and cheekiness. The Alpha kneeled down and produced a small rectangular device from his belt, and pointed it at Jack's body. Two button presses later, and then one protracted, high-pitched tone. Elsa screwed her eyes shut and pressed her mouth against his forehead, feeling the tickle of his hair against her lips. Sobs choked in her throat.

"Well, I'd say we're done here," came Hans' voice, filling her with hot rage and anguish. "You held up your end of the bargain. I suppose you should be commended for that."

The Alpha rose to his feet and wordlessly returned to his original position, pocketing the device. "Give her the time she needs to grieve," Hans quietly said to him. "She'll need to work out how she'll be confessing her sins, of course. After that, collect the body and bring it to New Arendelle."

"What, so you can parade him on every street corner like some sick display of your cowardice?" Elsa snarled.

"Good gracious, no." Hans laughed. "No, we've moved beyond such uncivilized behaviour. As proof, since you seem to be fond of Perdition, you can collect your parents there in twenty-four hours."

"You're full of shit."

"And you are finally catching on." Hans said, "though I don't know why you're so despondent. You've finally achieved what you set out to achieve. Frost is dead. Your mission is complete."

"You don't understand," Elsa hissed, but as she released the pistol to stroke Jack's hair, her voice softened, "you'll never understand."

"Perhaps not. I neither comprehend nor have time for the fallacies of love."

Elsa looked up at him, reddened eyes widening slightly. "Come now," Hans added, "your entire affect speaks more of love than of two people who simply care for one another. I suppose you've never truly experienced it to know what it feels like - and, sadly, you never will."

Elsa's eyes fell, and returned to Jack's countenance. Even in death, he was astonishingly beautiful. Was Hans right?

"In any case, I believe I have stayed up well past my bedtime. Duty waits for no man—"

"I'm taking him."

"What?"

Elsa looked up at him, defiance in her eyes and challenge on her lips. "I'm taking him with me."
Hans stared at her for a few seconds, before a derisive snort shot from his nose. "No, you won't."

"Try and stop me," Elsa said as she made a motion to rise.

"Okay." Hans said in a higher pitch, and stroked his chin with a gloved hand. "Let's play this out. You attempt to leave with the body. I issue one word, and the other Alphas I have hidden in this place open fire. You join your love in death. For weeks, your sister knows only that you and Captain Frost disappeared without a trace. She is worried, unstable, scared ...and hopeful you will return one day. Except, by happenstance she finds out you killed him, under my order and whilst still a member of Unity's special forces. She realises you betrayed Frost, and betrayed her."

"That's a lie!" Elsa shrieked.

"Of course it is, but without anyone to tell her the truth, she will believe, and spend the rest of her days cursing your name and hating your memory. Now, which would you rather her know; my lie, or your truth?"

Elsa sucked in a breath to howl her rage, vent her considerable fury at him. Again. He'd done it again. Trapped her like a piece on a board with no moves left. Strung rope around her hands and tied them. The one choice she had, and it was an illusion. Her volcanic anger spilled forth in a scream of pure savagery; grabbing the pistol from atop Jack's hip, she let fly bolt after bolt straight through Hans' forehead. Naturally, the only damage being a slight distortion of his matrix as the energy darts passed harmlessly through.

"One day," she hissed hoarsely, "one day I'll hunt you down and put you in the ground."

"Now now," Hans smirked. "Remember what happened the last time you embarked on a quest for revenge. How many people died, again?"

Without giving her time to retort, Hans' laughter carried his image away, leaving naught but empty space where his vile person had been. Elsa's mouth let out a shaky whimper of powerlessness, her rage quickly abating to leave only pain and grief. As though guided, she dropped the pistol beside her and let her eyes slowly travel to rest once more upon Jack's face, wanting to take in every single detail she could before he disappeared from her life entirely.

For what felt like forever, long enough for the Alpha to retreat into the general store from which he'd emerged several minutes prior, Elsa sat with Jack's lifeless body on her lap, gazing upon him. She would stroke at his hair, feel where skin met scalp. She'd smile to herself in spite of her sadness, lamenting what could have been and what was to be.

She saw it all play out in her mind. She would return. Anna would immediately subject her to a barrage of questions, with one being the critical point - where was Jack? Elsa would tell her. Anna would disbelieve it at first, regarding it as some sort of prank… until she didn't. She would scream, she would shout, she would ignite. Elsa would be taken away, and probably be confined to quarters while they worked out what to do.

Pitch Black would see that justice was meted out.

As she leaned down to press a kiss to Jack's forehead, smiling against his skin, she noted how at peace she was with that.

"I'll see you soon, my dashing prince."

What the fuck.
What the *fuck*.

**WHAT THE FUCK.**

From her perch of a hill overlooking the spooky, creepy settlement, with her body hugging the hard, grassy soil, Astrid had a front row seat to whatever the *fuck* just happened. Her eyes hadn't moved past the state of '*popping' behind her new Ghost goggles, zoomed in, and her mouth hung open behind her mask.

She'd seen it all. Seen enough to want the whole situation to be a goddamn nightmare, and to wake up in a world where Jack and Elsa didn't meet with Hans Larsen, where Elsa didn't shoot Jack, and where one of those mindless Alphas wasn't kneeling by the body. The bitter winter air biting at her exposed hands and forehead, however, was a sharp reminder of how it was all too real.

Stormfly had, several times, attempted to race down the hill and defend Jack, but words racing through Astrid's mind had led the young woman to stop her friend every time.

*(Let it play out. Don't interfere.)*

*(Let it play out. Don't interfere.)*

She felt so powerless, so *weak*, like a goddamn harmless voyeur, watching her commanding officer fall. How was she expected to do nothing?! Astrid Hofferson did not 'do nothing'.

She took a sharp intake of breath as several bolts of red sailed uselessly through Larsen's holographic head, and watched him disappear into the night. Protective fury coursed through her veins as she observed Elsa tenderly stroke and kiss Jack's head - how *dare* she. After all he'd done for her, for *all* of them.

It wasn't right.

It *wasn't* right.

That was the thing.

None of it made any sense. Not the words rooting her to the ground, nor the act of Elsa murdering Jack. None of it felt right - or indeed, as right as it should have felt, given the circumstances. Something else was at play, and Astrid *knew* it.

She watched Elsa rise to her feet, gently lay Jack upon the earth, and slowly walk away toward the jeep Astrid had seen them park outside the boundary. Heart thundering in her chest, she moved her right hand over to the space between her and Stormfly, and laced her fingers around the cold metal handle of *Whisper*, her newly-crowned axe. Two specks of light blinked to life in the distance, white orbs morphing into red as the jeep turned around and headed off.

Minutes passed like slow breaths, as Astrid laid in wait, unseen.

*(Let it play out. Don't interfere.)*
Movement from within the settlement caught her eye. Astrid watched, alert and vigilant, as the original Alpha emerged from the store once again, but with six of his kin appearing from the other buildings surrounding Jack. Her hand clenched around Whisper's handle, the air host to a faint shhht as her powers charged its blade.

(Let it play out. Don't interfere…)

Astrid scrambled to her feet and climbed aboard Stormfly, whose lizard-like body was tensed and ready for war. Battle-drums became the rhythm of her heart, and with an abrupt tap of her heel against Stormfly's body, her closest friend carried them at blinding speed down the hill.

(...but I need you to promise me that you'll do something for me.)

(What?)

The outer buildings raced past her as she closed in on her prey. She clenched her teeth at the sight of four of the Alphas making a motion to pick Jack up by his limbs. In one fluid motion, Astrid swung her right leg over Stormfly's back, and hit the ground running, Whisper held at the ready. From her lips came a battle cry that tore the air and startled her enemies, bloodlust in her throat and vengeance in her eyes.

(Bring me home.)

The closest Alpha's head snapped to face her…

(I promise.)

...before Whisper severed it at the neck.

To their credit and Astrid's begrudging modicum of respect, the other six Alphas reacted before the headless body of the first one even hit the ground, fumbling for their sidearms. The first to draw his pistol met his end with several of Stormfly's tail-spines embedding themselves in his chest, whilst another let out a muffled scream as Stormfly's jaws locked around his head and shoulders, her teeth piercing skin and bone. From the corner of her eyes as Astrid moved to stand over Jack's body, she saw the unfortunate Alpha be lifted by Stormfly's bloodstained teeth and superior strength, and subsequently violently shaken about like a grotesque chew toy.
One of the four leveled his pistol at Astrid's head. Roaring, she used her impressive speed to weave to the side as bolts flew toward her, masking the sound of Whisper's deactivation and then activation as she tossed it from her left hand to her right. Her newly free hand lashed out and grasped him by the wrist, before she brought Whisper down above his elbow in a long, blue arc. Tossing the newly-severed arm aside with a dismissive throw, she slammed her boot into the screeching Alpha's chest, feeling the dull crack of bone under her soles as he was flung back several feet across the ground.

The remaining three Alphas scrambled to find safety and cover; one managed to get a respectable distance before he was swiftly run down and incinerated by Stormfly, his screams of agony falling on deaf ears. The second tried to dart past Astrid - who punished his mistake by lashing her hand out, grasping him by the throat and dangling him half a foot off the ground. Gurgles spilled forth from behind the Alpha's helmet, his hands frantically clawing at Astrid's wrist while her effortless grip crushed his throat, and for good measure, she let her powers over vibrations wreak havoc inside his neck. She could almost feel his blood vessels rupture and bone crumble, in the mere seconds it took for him to go limp in her hand.

Which left only one.

Astrid followed the final Alpha's frenzied footsteps, her eyes falling on his back as he sprinted away. With a contemptuous growl, she tossed aside her victim like an item of clothing, deactivated Whisper before leaving it in Stormfly's care, and launched herself after him.

It only took a few seconds before she was upon him.

Astrid grabbed the Alpha by the collars of both his trench coat and his black fatigues, yanking him with a choke to a complete halt. Her right hand found his belt under his coat, and with a little effort, lifted him high above her head. The Alpha thrashed uselessly, trying to dislodge her grip and footing - but he was nothing more than the wind blowing on the mountain.

Astrid? She was the goddamn mountain.

"This is for Jack," she hissed through gritted teeth, and brought the Alpha down hard upon her knee. It was as though she could feel the pitiable soldier's spine crack against her kneecap, feel the vertebra be slammed out of position. She heard him let out a shriek of agony at the impact, satisfied by the damage she wrought. She pushed him to the ground with disgust, dust and dirt kicked up by his abrupt landing. Rising to her feet, she eyed the groaning Alpha with contempt, and pulled the nine-millimetre from her belt holster.

"This is for me," she muttered… and a sharp crack heralded a bullet in his head.

Silence once again descended upon the settlement, like a blanket of quiet that closed off the night's violence. Astrid's chest heaved, filling her lungs with the cold night air, a welcome companion and balancing force against the sheer adrenaline rushing through her veins. In an odd sense incongruent to the moment, she became acutely aware of the absence of the guilt that normally rode shotgun with her anger as a Valkyrie, the part of her that liked to remind her it was all wrong. Rather, she felt cathartic. For once and the first time since she could remember, her raw fury, her vengeance, her unbridled rage had been unleashed upon those who had deserved it. It didn't feel good, nor right. It felt justified.

However, her volcanic anger vanished at a remarkable speed when she looked back at the carnage, and saw the one body that should never have been there. Hell, even Stormfly mourned, nuzzling Jack's lifeless arm whilst a series of whines escaped her.
Her scowl retreating as sadness overcame her features, her heart slowing to a sombre pulse, Astrid started the reluctant walk back to where Stormfly stood guard over Jack. It didn't feel right. None of it did. Elsa had too much to lose, and she was far removed from the heartless bitch she was as a Valkyrie. She wouldn't murder Jack, knowing what it would cost her.

Hans was at play, she reckoned as she drew up amongst the bodies, and picked Whisper up to slide its handle under her belt at her back. Whatever took place, he was at the centre of it all.

"Oh, Jack," she whispered. "What did you let them do to you?"

Astrid cast a mournful eye over Jack, before descending to her knees and sliding her arms under his back and in the crook of his knees. In one motion, she lifted him up and carried him in her arms. He was light, surprisingly so, even in death. Stormfly flattened herself to the ground as much as possible, enabling - though not without difficulty - Astrid to mount her with her hands otherwise occupied. She felt herself be lifted as Stormfly's iron-like muscular legs rose her scaled body, and held Jack close to her whilst gripping Stormfly's cranial spines to steady herself.

One thing was for sure, though - with the comms being down, the flight was going to be a lonely one.

"C'mon," she murmured, just before Stormfly gently took to the air. "Ride with me awhile. I'll bring you home… just like I promised."

---

Dawn had long broken, and the sun was well on its way to the midday point when Hiccup had banged on the door to Anna's quarters, shouting that Toothless had spotted a vehicle on its way to the camp. Since the comms were still down and likely to remain as such for the next few hours, Anna had asked Toothless to circle the base, acting as their eyes and ears - and that request had paid off. Anna had rushed out of the barracks into the field between the gate and the command centre, waiting impatiently on her tippy-toes for the vehicle to pass through the gates Merida had opened, her eyes anxiously searching the jeep for signs of life.

Which was when she spotted a familiar platinum-blonde French braid worn by the driver, and let out a breath of relief. One quick scan, however, yielded no Jack in any form. Probably pulling the same stunt he had done a few days ago, no doubt. Grinning, she threw Elsa a hearty wave… only for her sister to ignore it.

Pushing aside the slight deflation and putting it down to travel fatigue, Anna waited as Elsa drove up the beaten path toward her, with Merida closing the gate behind them. "She doesn't look happy," Hiccup noted from behind Anna's right shoulder.

He wasn't wrong. As Elsa made a wide turn to park the jeep ten feet from them, Anna couldn't help but notice the cloud of sadness upon her sister's face. Such an expression did little to assuage the ominous sensation in Anna's gut that had been there ever since they'd left the previous afternoon.

Elsa switched off the engine, cutting the jeep's humming to an abrupt end. Anna watched, now uncertain, as she got out and closed the door behind her. "Hey, 'sis!" she greeted her in a bright voice. "Where's Jack?"

It was then that Elsa finally looked at her, and the solemn quality in her eyes struck Anna full force. Elsa then began to further add to her odd behaviour by unstrapping her thigh holster, and handing it to Merida, along with her freshly undone utility belt.

"I'm so sorry, Anna," Elsa said in a quiet voice.
"Sorry for—Elsa, what's—"

Anna's words died in her throat. Comprehension dawned within, turning her insides to lead. Elsa's expression. Merida, clutching Elsa's weapons and glancing worriedly between them. The dead silence… and Jack's absence.

"No, no-no-no. This is a trick, right? Jack's pranking me again, right?" Anna's voice left her throat amid nervous laughter. She called to the sky, "Alright, you've had your fun! Time to come out now!"

"He's with me!"

Anna's head whirled to meet the owner of the voice: Astrid, her reply nearly drowned out by the sound of Stormfly's wings as she touched down near the jeep. "Oh, thank God," Anna said breathlessly as she jogged over, faintly aware of something in her arms. "Finally, someone can tell me—"

It was when Stormfly's left wing lowered as she crouched, and when Astrid slid off her back that Anna saw precisely what Astrid was carrying - or whom.

"Oh fuck," Merida blurted in shock, her free hand covering her mouth as her gasp joined Hiccup's. "Oh God, no—" Anna rushed the last few feet, her hands reaching out to Jack's body. "No—no, no. This has to be a joke—"

She shook at Jack's chest, before her fingers sought his wrist and his neck, only to find no response. Not a single pulse. Her ear went to his mouth, but the absence of the faintest breath crushed her heart.

"—no, please, God, no! Wake up!" she shook him. "Wake up!"

"Anna…"

"Jokes over, you asshole!" Anna cried in growing hysteria, tears welling and streaming down her cheeks. "Don't do this—don't you dare do this—"

"Anna."

She looked up at Astrid, whose eyes were pools of solemn truth and reluctant fact. The answer Anna sought would not be found there. "He's gone."

"B-but h-how?" she choked, pleading in her gaze that it was not so. "How d-did he—what h-happened—who—"

Astrid's eyes, however, slowly travelled to her left, though her expression betrayed nothing but sadness. Anna whirled around, following her sight—

"No…"

—to find Elsa, the colour drained from her face, her widened eyes fixed in shock upon Astrid like she'd been caught in some sort of sordid act.

In the most horrible, gut-wrenching way, the penny dropped in Anna's mind.

"Elsa, tell me it's not true. Please, please tell me it's not true." Anna practically ran to her sister. "Please tell me it's not true!"
Elsa's eyes found hers, reddened and spilling forth tears. Her teeth bit into her lip in a failing attempt to hold back an anguished grimace.

Her head slowly shook.

"I can't..." she whispered, voice broken.

Anna let out an inhuman sound of grief as her body suddenly became as weak as paper, eyes popping as she stared at Elsa in horror. Her hands clasped around her mouth as her head violently shook. Hysteria overcame her body, drawing and crushing her lungs over and over as air was gulped in and forced out.

"She's hyperventilatin'!" Anna vaguely made out Merida's panicked voice. "Hiccup—"

"Got it!" came the distant reply.

Lightheadedness clouded her mind, dulling her vision and muddying her ears. Her legs gave out, her hands being the only thing preventing her crashing to the ground. With each exhalation came an anguished cry, as though her body yearned to weep but the chaos of her breathing would not let it.

Hands grasped at her arms; instinctively she fought them off, as though reacting to a threat. Calloused, well-worn hands.

"Anna, it's me! It's Hiccup! Breathe, okay? I need you to breathe—"

Anna's head darted up, and with unfocused eyes she stared at the shaggy brown blur kneeling over her. Lungfuls of air were gulped down. "She—she—"

"I know, but we'll cross that bridge later. Now, you need to breathe."

Breathe. The word hung in her oxygen-addled mind. Breathe. Cogs began to turn, and a singular, scratchy voice spoke within the recesses of her memory.

(I'll feel like the rug's been pulled from under your feet. When that happens, I want you to promise me you'll do one thing.)

That was what he said.

(Breathe, Anna.)

Breathe.

Her strength of will punched through the hysterical daze, forcing her lungs to slow down. Her mind issued command after command, and with considerable conscious effort, she pulled in deep, long breaths through her nose, waited a second, and let them out in long exhalations. Over and over were lungfuls of oxygen sucked in and blown out, and she felt the fog of hyperventilation subside, clearing her eyes and sharpening her mind.
"That's it," Hiccup encouraged her, "in and out."

"Red…" she wheezed.

"Aye?"

"Take…" she found herself having to weave her words in between her calming breaths, "...take my… sister

… confine her to… her quarters. None of this makes… any sense… but I'm in no… state for… answers."

"Aye." was her reply. "C'mon, lassie. Let's go."

"Wait…" Anna struggled to her feet, holding onto Hiccup's arm for assistance. She glared at her sister. "I wanna know… one thing. Why?"

Elsa, with her back to her and her left arm gripped tightly by Merida, turned her head over her shoulder, though her eyes distantly looked down. What Anna next heard did more to confuse her than anything else in her life.

"Because he asked me to."

Anna's head slowly shook in complete bemusement, watching as Merida continued with Elsa on their journey to the barracks. Jack asked her to kill him? Why the hell would he do that?

None of it made any sense, and it was that notion in addition to a heavy smack of guilty comprehension at what she had just ordered, that made her shriek in frustration, whirl around and hurl a fireball at the workshop wall. Upon impact, the flames burst like a firework, leaving a patch of amber on the wall and igniting the grass below it.

"Whoa, firecracker! Easy on my wall there!" Hiccup said, holding his hands up as a peacemaking gesture.

"Fuck the wall!" Anna cried. "Do you have any idea where I've just ordered my sister to be?"

"Um… confined to quarters?"

"Yes!" Anna clasped her hands to her head. "Locked in her room, just like before! Just like my parents did—I just went and did the exact same thing that I hated. I just…"

(Breathe.)

"I just…"

(Breathe.)

When she next spoke, quiet and small was her voice. She cuddled her chest for protection.
"She'll be locked in her quarters, alone, with all these thoughts and feelings. Knowing what's happened—her heart breaking for me, mine for her and for Jack… alone with all of that. And I put her there."

"Yeah, well, there's a difference."

Anna looked up. Though Hiccup's voice still possessed his soft, reasoned quality that they'd all come to know and love, there was the tangible cracking in his nasal lilt, and an oddly stern edge. Maybe he had been more affected than he was letting on.

"What?"

"For starters, with Jack…" he trailed though unwilling to even concede the term, "and with Elsa effectively stripped of command on account of…"

Anna frowned a little. Hiccup looked off into space, his expression one of determination, as though forcing the words out was requiring all his strength. She could even see his eyes shimmer, and his hands gestured weakly as he talked.

"It means you're in command. Ghost protocol dictates that if one of us commits a crime, a serious crime, which this pretty much qualifies… they have to be confined to a secure location. That's protocol, that's law. Elsa… she… Jack's gone, and it looks like she did it. You are bound by the rules, no matter who committed the crime. Since Bravo doesn't have a holding cell, a brig or whatever… her quarters is the only place secure enough. Don't…"

Hiccup screwed his eyes shut, and clenched his hands into fists.

"Don't hate yourself for doing what a leader is supposed to do."

Anna sniffed, and nodded. It was not comforting, however. Far from it. Hard calls were the ones Kristoff had to make, and then Jack after him. Up until then, Anna hadn't had to consider the moral implications of her decisions, or the hidden anxiety that the path chosen was the wrong one. Her first act as Ghost Leader was to consign her own sister to a pseudo-jail cell, and sift through the possibilities of a betrayal.

"He's right, you know…" said someone she'd completely forgotten was there.

Anna reacted with a start - Astrid had been standing there with Jack in her arms all along. She immediately admonished herself for her distraction. "Sorry, Astrid. I… uh…"

"It's cool. I understand. What do you need me to do?"

Anna looked down at the body of Jack in her arms. He looked so peaceful, so serene… she never wanted to see him like that. In amongst the welling grief and heartbreaking anguish barely held back by the clinging to duty, she bore respect to Astrid. The tall warrior had been patient, silent, waiting with her precious cargo for orders.

"Take him to the infirmary," she murmured. "Maybe… maybe Rapunzel can work out something…"

"And me?"

Anna turned to Hiccup, whose face told a tale of need. As though he needed to do something, anything.

"Take Toothless and go get Pitch and Rapunzel. They need to know."
Astrid and Hiccup both acknowledged what was asked of them, and set off in separate directions, leaving Anna alone in the field. For a few moment she stood, staring at nothing, bereft of purpose.

"I'm sorry, honey," she whispered, stroking her abdomen. "Mommy… needs to find somewhere to cry."

Quiet was the infirmary. Silent was the air within the four white walls surrounding Astrid, and the body of Jack laid upon the infirmary bed. After the chaos of fifteen minutes ago, despite her usual preference for activity and noise, Astrid welcomed the subdued atmosphere. It gave her time to think, to process the day's events in her mind as she distantly stared at the wall by the door directly across from her. Time to come to terms with everything she'd seen and heard.

Merida had done as ordered, and confined Elsa to her quarters. Given Elsa's experiences prior to being a Valkyrie, Astrid had wondered for a few moments precisely why that was Anna's first order, until she realised that the Ghosts likely had a protocol in place for such an event - unlikely as it was - and with Jack dead and Elsa effectively imprisoned, Anna was the ranking officer and had to abide by such protocols. Anna's emotional outburst confirmed as much.

Following that, once she had regained her senses and her focus, Anna had then ordered Hiccup to find Kozmotis and Rapunzel, who'd left on patrol an hour prior to the catastrophic event. With the comms still being down, the only way to alert them was the old-fashioned way.

Which left Astrid, who was asked to bring Jack to the infirmary for Rapunzel to assess and give them an ironclad post-mortem result. Astrid figured it was more a case of Anna entertaining the distant hope Rapunzel could bring him back, but let it remain unsaid.

Astrid, alone with Jack, her elbows on her knees as she sat hunched on a chair, turned over her thoughts in her mind whilst her hands fiddled with themselves. A strange tightness, a kind of blockage sat between her lungs and her throat, feeling less like a lump and more like a discordant pile-up of words all attempting to spill forth, but crashing together while the brain worked out how best to speak.

So, with the empty space in the room her witness, and Jack her confidante, she elected to let her heart guide her words.

"Y'know, when I realised who you really were after we'd fucked, and what you'd done… I hated you. You used me and my body to get information. Made me feel like a piece of meat… and for the longest time, I wanted to kill you just for that."

She sniffed, and took a moment to wipe a thumb under her nose.

"But then I found myself staring down the barrels of Unity's guns, saw the way my life was going to end… the life I'd led… and you came through for me. For us. You got us out of that. Showed us mercy. Gave us asylum, a roof over our heads… you gave me a family—and then I realised… though I hated you for using me, I hated myself more for allowing myself to be used. All those men I slept with, I thought I was using them. That I was the one in control… but it wasn't until I came here, until I met this really great guy that I was finally in a position to see the truth of everything. The truth of me. Who I could truly be. For that, I will always be grateful."

An errant tear slid down Astrid's right cheek, one quickly brushed away. With that same hand, she delved into the pocket of her camouflage pants and pulled out a rigid fabric disc - the Ghost insignia Jack gave her the night before. She held it between her finger and thumb as she stared at it with a mix of mournful regret and solemn resolve, the insignia's malevolent smirk beaming back at her.
"You gave me this patch for the same reason you asked me to follow you last night, and counted on me to bring you home: you trusted me. You saw in me something worth that trust - the potential to learn to love myself. Respect myself. You and your team showed me what I really wanted all those years - to be loved and accepted, and to know that I'm worth more than I ever thought. You gave me this because you believed in me."

Astrid's eyes found Jack, and a frown of resolute strength overcame her countenance. She reached for his hand, feeling his ice cold skin under her fingers, and squeezed.

"So for that, I'm gonna wear this. I'm gonna rally. I'm gonna fight. I'm gonna tear down this shitty system brick by goddamn brick and I won't goddamn stop until there's nothing left - for you - because I'm gonna do you proud."

She knew it was more out of self-affirmation than anything, that she had said such things to his body knowing he couldn't respond, but the silence she received still carried a sting of disappointment with it nonetheless.

The door burst open with a clatter, bouncing off the wall hard enough to make even Astrid jump in fright. Jerking her hand away, she leapt to her feet in time to see Rapunzel stride into the room.

"What's going on?" Astrid asked the obvious.

Rapunzel said nothing. Wearing a determined frown, she unzipped her utility vest whilst casting away what looked like an MP5 onto another chair in the corner by the door.

"Since when did you—"

"Since I realised Reapers won't care about my oath," Rapunzel answered in a clipped rhythm as she slipped out of her vest. Lips thinned in an uncharacteristically serious expression, she nodded at Jack. "How was he killed?"

"Elsa shot him point blank with a stun pistol."

"Kill setting?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Shut up a second. I have a hunch and I need to focus."

Unused to assertiveness being a part of Rapunzel's personality repertoire, Astrid's mouth obediently slammed shut. The infirmary had quickly become Rapunzel's domain and within its walls her word was law. If she told someone to shut up, they shut up.

Rapunzel pulled out what looked like a five foot steel rod with wheels at the bottom from the corner at Jack's left, which had a large white box with a screen fixed three quarters of the way up the rod. Yanking open the top drawer of the unit next to Jack's bed, she produced and put on a pair of latex gloves, and then pulled another packet of what looked like small discs attached to a long wire by several thinner wires. Ripping open the packet, she connected the thicker wire to the white box before peeling off film covers from the discs.

"Rip off his shirt."

Astrid blanched. "W-what?"

"I don't have time to find scissors. Rip off his shirt."
Lifting her arms and leaning over him, Astrid hesitated a moment before obeying. Unzipping his vest, she then reminded herself of a familiar image by taking hold of his shirt by the collar and, with surprisingly little exertion, tore it from top to bottom. Rapunzel immediately slapped the discs against his chest in oddly specific places, before thumbing a button on the white box.

It was when a green, solid line drew across the screen, accompanied by a protracted, high pitched tone that Astrid clocked the machine's purpose.

"That's one of those heart monitors."

"Yeah," Rapunzel responded, her eyes zeroed in on the green line, resting her right forearm on top of the box whilst her left hand found her hip, "Anna taught me how to use it. Little more hands-on than the scanners we use nowadays."

"But—"

Rapunzel held up a hand. Astrid immediately fell silent, though questioned why the brunette was scrutinizing the screen so hard. She opened and closed her mouth, wondering if it was worth the potential snap.

"Rapunzel, there's no point, he's—"

**BEEP.**

Astrid heard it. The tone was faint, and disappeared almost as soon as it came, but it was there - along with the smallest of peaks along the heart rate line.

"He's not dead," Rapunzel announced sharply. "I knew it. I fucking knew it."

Astrid was at a loss for words. She glanced at Jack, and then back at Rapunzel over and over. "But… how?"

Rapunzel turned to face her, and fixed her with a look that intimidated even the headstrong blonde. "I need you to answer me accurately - how long ago did Elsa shoot Jack?"

"I… Uh…"

Rapunzel repeated herself in far more stern and loud a voice. "How long, Astrid?"

"I'm thinking!" Astrid bit back, screwing her eyes shut, and hovering her hands near her temples as though it helped conjure the answer. "Uh—twelve hours, give or take an hour!"

She opened her eyes just in time to see Rapunzel's widen in tangible panic, as well as hear a horrified gasp. "Twelve hours!?" she screeched. "Fucking—Jack, you idiot!"

"What?! W-what's wrong?!"

Rapunzel immediately launched into a frenzied search of the unit next to Jack's bed. "I don't have time to explain what I don't have time to explain, but Jack took something. The longer he's like this—adrenaline, where are you, for fuck's sake—the more of him we lose!"

"Rapunzel, you're not—"

"Get with the program, Astrid!" Rapunzel snapped. "If we don't bring him out of this, he dies for real!"
Astrid’s heart froze for a couple of beats as her jaw went slack, and the colour drained from her face. Yet, seeing the way Rapunzel had immediately leaped into action with confidence and complete control spoke to her own resolve and determination, summoning an ironclad will and desire to help that banished her shock.

"What do you need me to do?"

"Got it!" Rapunzel announced triumphantly, bringing out a small vial and what looked like a syringe in a packet. "First, you can tell me his weight."

"I thought you knew that? And how should I know?"

"Firstly, trying to get Jack to do a physical is like trying to get Pitch to be nice," Rapunzel retorted. "Secondly, I haven't been astride him or had him on top of me. You two? Fucked each other's brains out. So, between the two of us, you've got the better idea of his weight. Any other stupid questions?"

Astrid winced. "Ouch."

Rapunzel ripped open the packaging, took the syringe, and immediately pierced the lid of the vial. "Sorry, but I don't have the time or patience for sugar-coating right now. Weight?"

"Uh…” Astrid felt the very real fear of fucking up her answer, and making the situation ten times worse. "Hundred seventy pounds, I guess?"

Rapunzel looked off to the side, her head subtly dancing left and right. "Add a little extra for abnormal physiology… yeah, that should work."

She began to steadily pull the plunger of the syringe, filling it with clear liquid. "Once I inject the adrenaline, we'll need to get his heart going. Problem is, heart stimulators are used for this next part, but we don't have any. So we're gonna have to get creative."

"Want me to get Red?"

Rapunzel shook her head as the syringe continued to fill under her vigilant eye. "Restarting the heart by electric defibrillation only works in the holomovies. If you believe that, I don't know what to tell you."

"So," Astrid shrugged. "What, then?"

Rapunzel glanced at her, and then again. The third time, she looked at Astrid's hands. "You."

"...me?"

"You can make your vibrations fast and high enough to shatter glass, right?"

"Um, yeah?"

"Can you do the opposite—like, slow, strong pulses?"

Astrid looked down at her hands. She'd never tried such a thing - though it wasn't like she had much of a choice. "I… think so?"

"Think so, or yes? Which is it?"

"Yes." Astrid declared. "I can do it."
"Good." Rapunzel pulled the syringe out of the vial. "Because there's some verbal shit-kicking to be done, and I can't do that to a corpse."

"Something tells me you'll have to take a number and get in line," Astrid said, wondering if she should be on the same continent when, or if, Jack recovered. "So, what do I do?"

Rapunzel leaned over Jack's left arm. The needle pierced a vein in his wrist. "I'm gonna inject this adrenaline into his blood. While I do that, I need you to do slow, concentrated pulses over his heart. Top left, bottom left, bottom right, top right. In that order."

"What if I break his ribs?"

"Between fractured ribs and death, I'm pretty sure Jack would choose the first one. Ready?"

Astrid rested her hand over his heart. His skin felt cold, almost clammy to the touch. "Ready."

"Go."

As soon as Rapunzel began to slowly administer the adrenaline, Astrid focused all of her mind and will on slowing her powers to a crawl. She closed her eyes, repeating Rapunzel's directions over and over in her mind - top left, bottom left, bottom right, top right - and was quietly astonished to discover her powers reacted and adapted accordingly. She could feel the slow pulse going through his skin, in a repetitive but ordered rhythm, and hope began to blossom within her. In a way that surprised her the most, maybe due to her absolute focus, she could feel his blood begin to move through his veins.

How weird it felt that not twelve hours ago, she was using her powers to turn a man's neck into jelly and dust. Now she was using them to save the life of someone she cared about.

Rapunzel emptied the syringe into Jack, before sliding it out and sealing the injection point with her powers. Slamming the syringe into a yellow trash receptacle nestled on the wall behind her, she went over to her utility vest and plucked a thin flashlight from the breast pocket. She then leaned over Jack's face, teased open his eyelids and shone the flashlight into his eyes.

"They're constricting," she noted out loud. "Stop a second."

Astrid obeyed, ceasing her pulses and pulling her hand away - though kept her palm a few inches above his heart in case. Rapunzel pressed two fingers to his neck, and focused intently on his left leg.

"I feel something, but it's faint. Do it again, for a—"

Not waiting for her to finish, Astrid was about to press her hand against his chest when she felt something grab her wrist with surprising strength. She yelped, jerking back just in time for Jack to violently arch his body practically off the bed with a sharp, hoarse gasp, his eyes popping in his skull.

"Jack!" she called.

Jack's eyes, though unfocused and wild, found her. He blinked over and over, as though seeing but not seeing. "Ast-rid?" he croaked.

She nodded fiercely, but what came over her added to the mental list of things that surprised her that night. Yanking him up by the grip he had on her arm, she threw her arms around him and embraced him in a hug - though consciously tried not to be too tight.
"You're okay, dude. You're okay," she whispered into his shoulder.

"Welcome back, you stupid idiot," Rapunzel said to him, though Astrid detected relief and borderline amusement in amongst her stern rebuke.

"W-where am I?" Jack choked, his chest heaving in Astrid's arms.

"You're in Bravo's infirmary," Rapunzel answered. "Technically you should be six feet under, were it not for Astrid here."

"Bravo… infirmary…" Jack repeated breathlessly. "It… worked. You… brought me home…"

Astrid felt his arms encircle her, garnering one hell of a smile. Even though his hug was weak, it still meant so much.

"Thank you…"

She squeezed him a little. "I promised, didn't I? I always keep my promises."

"Alright, alright. Break it up, you two." Astrid could feel the wafting of air on the exposed skin of her arms as Rapunzel made a sweeping motion. "Medical professional needs space, here."

Astrid pulled away and stood at the edge of his bed, leaning on it with her hands. Rapunzel sat upon the other side, and fixed Jack with a studious look. "How are you feeling?"

Jack scratched at the nape of his neck as he looked down. "Like I've been asleep for—hey, my shirt!"

"Call it the price for saving your stupid ass. Who am I?"

"Rapunzel Corona, callsign 'Blondie'. Unit medic. Ghost."

Rapunzel nodded at Astrid. "And her?"

"Astrid Hofferson, Ghost, callsign 'Viking'. Dragon rider, weapons specialist, mechanic and all-around badass."

"I'd say he's fine," Astrid quipped.

Rapunzel gave Astrid a look, and proceeded to roll her eyes. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Jack looked off to the side, recollection furrowing his brow. He took a gentle breath. "Settlement west of Perdition. Hans blackmailed Elsa into shooting me. She didn't want to… so I made her do it."

"I knew it," Astrid breathed. "I knew it wasn't on the level. Elsa would never—"

"Where is she?" Jack blurted, looking between them in concern. "Where's Elsa?"

"She's confined to quarters," Rapunzel answered soberly.

"Get her out. She's innocent."

"You don't get to make that call."

Jack glared at her. "Why not?"
Rapunzel leaned toward him, matching him glare for glare. "Because until I'm otherwise satisfied, you're unfit for command. I know you made Elsa your X.O, but since she is where she is, Anna is the ranking officer. You're grounded, Frosty."

"Oh." Jack's shoulders flopped, conceding both victory and space to Rapunzel. "Right."

"Speaking of Anna," Astrid jumped in, "I'll go tell her the news. Pretty sure she's gonna want first dibs at beating your ass."

"Great," Jack groaned. "Maybe I should have stayed dead."

Astrid smirked at him, and gently slapped his leg before pushing herself up. "After we're through with you, you just might be."

She went to the door and opened it, before pausing a moment. Turning back, she regarded Jack over her shoulder. "Say... when you were—y'know—do you remember hearing anything? Hearing anyone speak?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Astrid, I was—like—ninety-nine point nine percent dead. Anna could have gone into labour right next to me and I wouldn't have heard shit."

Astrid nodded awkwardly. "Right. Just checking."

"But if he did hear someone talking to him," Rapunzel interjected, causing Astrid to consider punching the knowing smirk off her face. "Would that someone have meant what they said?"

"Every goddamn word," Astrid found herself blurting, to her internal horror, causing her cheeks to flush an embarrassed pink. She offered Jack an awkward smile before adding, "Good to have you back, Cap."

"Debatable," Jack quipped as Astrid quickly left the room.

It took about half a second after the infirmary door opening, in Jack's estimation, for Anna to be alternating between squeezing the life out of him with a tight, sobbing hug, and slapping any part of his body she could reach in frustration.

"Don't!" One slap. "Ever!" Two. "Do!" Three. "That!" Four. "To me!" Five. "Again!" Six, and then one extra for good measure was Jack's personal favourite and new record in terms of physical abuse from Anna. By the end of it, his right leg was begging for mercy.


Nope. Now a new record.

"Don't look at me," Rapunzel said, upon catching Jack's look of helplessness. "After what you pulled, you deserve it."

"How did you pull off a Gandalf, anyway?" Hiccup added from the door frame, sidling aside for Astrid to re-enter the room. "This I gotta hear."

"Not until I get ma turn," Merida quickly butted in, lightly punching the palm of her hand; her relieved half-smile undermined the threatening body language in Jack's mind, though.

Hopefully.
Maybe?

No. He was a dead man.

"I'll tell you all everything," he wheezed under Anna's constricting embrace, "when Elsa is here. If anyone has as much a right to know, it's her."

Anna pulled away and glared at him. "This better not be a way for you to dodge shit."

"I'm not exactly capable of going anywhere, am I?" Jack gave her a funny look. "Rapunzel's got me here for twenty-four hours."

"At least," Rapunzel added.

"Fine." Anna sniffed, and proceeded to wipe away the tears from her stained cheeks, and brush the back of her hand under her nose. Rapunzel, her lip curling in disdain, quickly offered her a tissue. "But when she's here, your ass better come clean."

"It will. Jedi's honour," Jack smirked, holding up his left hand and parting his four fingers in a V shape.

"That's not—" Anna blinked at him, incredulity washing over her features. "Vulcans aren't—Red, you mind getting Elsa here before I turn Jack into a kabob?"

"Gave the keys to Hiccup."

"Huh?" Hiccup looked blankly at her, before comprehension dawned. "Oh! Right."

Jack watched as he immediately began a search of his pockets and belt as he turned to leave, but a cloud of confusion nestled itself in Jack's mind when the brown-haired man hesitated in the doorway.

"You sure?"

Merida nodded slowly and pointedly. "Aye. I'm sure."

"Well, they're not on me, so you must be—"

Merida's face turned stormy. "Finish that sentence with 'wrong' an' Jack won't be tha only one in tha infirmary."

"Guys," Astrid jumped in, "One of you has gotta have—"

"Wait." Rapunzel rose from the bed, and looked at each and every one of them in turn. The iron weight of dread settling in Jack's gut intensified at the look of worry on the brunette's countenance.

"Where's Pitch?"
Merida had been out of the door faster than Rapunzel could utter another syllable. With the air rushing past her face, sending her wild red locks into a frenzy, she'd sprinted from the infirmary straight to the most likely place Kozmotis would have gone, upon learning of Jack's 'death' and not of his subsequent 'resurrection'. Her heart thudding with the alien and uncomfortable sensation of chilling fear, she'd prayed she wasn't too late.

So, then, when she burst through the main doors of the barracks and sprinted straight to Elsa's room, the sight with which she was greeted was surprising enough to render her speechless - a rarity, if one ever asked her mother.

Kozmotis, sat in one of the steel chairs usually located in each of the rooms, didn't even look up from the pages of a red-covered book in his hands. "It's about time," he sighed, not caring to hide his impatience.

Merida blinked, her expression rendered wholly blank. "...Koz?"

Kozmotis turned a page. "Clearly."

"Yer… reading a book?"

The answer that she received, if sarcasm could ever be condensed, would liquify steel. "As ever, your powers of observation befit your keen eye."

Had she not been so utterly bewildered, Merida would have punched him. No, her brain was still in the process of rebooting itself.

"Given your current reaction and your uncharacteristic lack of speech, I presume you expected something different," Kozmotis said, bringing his left ankle to rest across his right knee.

"Well… y-yeah," Merida slowly took a step forward.

"Let me guess." Kozmotis closed the book and rested it upon his thigh, before regarding her coolly through the corners of his eyes. "You were anticipating screams, blood sprayed on the walls, possibly a dismembered limb?"

Merida opened her mouth to deny it, but tilted her head to the side and back. "Um… somethin' like that."

Kozmotis snorted. He returned his attention to opening his book. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"Oh, no. No, I ain't… disappointed. Relieved, actually. Is she…?"

"Alive?" Kozmotis let out a quiet chuckle, though the thin line of his lips did not reflect the humour. "Yes."

Merida took another tentative step forward. "Alive an'… unharmed?"

"Yes."

Merida let out a most obvious - and likely to Kozmotis, insulting - sigh of relief. However, if he was
in any way offended, his expression did not betray it.

"And ye never thought o'—"

"Yes."

"As in: yes, I never thought o' it, or yes, I thought o' it?"

Turning a page back and forth, Kozmortis said, "Welcome to the contradictions and irritations of the English language. Please leave your sanity at the door, and don't forget your complimentary headache medicine."

"Now yer just takin' the piss."

"Yes."

Merida threw her hands in the air with frustration, and fought hard to keep her voice at an angry hiss. "Goddamnit Pitch! Did ye want ta kill Elsa or not?!"

Kozmortis closed the book once again, that time following it up with sliding it into the thigh pocket of his camouflage pants. He rose to his feet with all the grace of an unfurling cobra, and the hand obscured by his body reached for something on his right thigh. Merida's heart stalled when she saw the silvery glimmer of a stun pistol.

"I thought about it," he murmured, gazing down at the weapon, studying it. "When I stole the keys from Hiccup, I intended it. I even took her pistol, thinking how poetic it would be for Snow Queen to die by the same weapon she used on Jack. I came here to end her… but when I reached her door… I found I could go no further."

Kozmortis turned, and leaned down to place the pistol upon the chair, switching it off with his thumb as he did so. Straightening up, he regarded her with an undefinable look - but when he glanced down at her right hand, Merida felt a prick of shame: she'd curled her hand around her nine-mil and had done ever since she saw the pistol in his hand.

"I am a survivalist, Merida. The only reason I have been alive for as long as I have is because I relied on no-one but myself. I formed no attachments; to do so would be a weakness that others could exploit. So it was fairly easy, when I anticipated the reactions of the team, to consider the inevitable damage a small price to pay for avenging the only person in the world I could consider a brother. Imagine my surprise, then, when the face that stopped me in my tracks, that caused me to doubt my resolve… was yours."

Merida took a step back in mild shock. Her stomach did a gentle leap, and her hand darted away from her pistol. "Mine?"

"Yes. I discovered my own vengeance paled in comparison to the destruction of our friendship. The more I thought, the more I doubted."

Blushing wasn't exactly high on Merida's list of bodily reactions, but it seemed even her body did not possess the concept of the word 'priority'. Still, Kozmortis' explanation filled her with an odd cross between flattery and unease - Kozmortis cared little enough for what the rest of the team thought of him to proceed with his retribution, but she gave him pause. It was a compliment, she supposed, in Kozmortis' own warped, dark way.

"So then I found myself standing for several minutes like an idiot in front of a door - and I do so despise a lack of purpose. Therefore, I designated myself the guard of Snow Queen's quarters,
obtained a book and a chair from my room, and have been here ever since."

"Well… erm, thanks, I guess?" Merida scratched at the back of her head, thoroughly taken off guard by the series of events. "I guess it's good ye didnae go through with it after all, considerin' Jack's alive."

Kozmotis tilted his head, and frowned as he held his hands behind his back. "He is?"

"Aye. Turns out… well, he's gonna tell us all about it soon as I get Elsa tae the infirmary."

His eyebrows rising, Kozmotis uttered a hum of amusement. "A curious turn of events, yet not surprising."

"Yeah… ye don't seem fazed in thae slightest," Merida said, raising a suspicious eyebrow.

"My dear Hunter," Kozmotis half-smiled, which had the weird effect of a flutter in her stomach, "the day that Jack's antics surprise me will be a dark day indeed."

He set off, taking the opportunity to press the keys into Merida's left hand as he walked past her. Merida followed his movement with her head, turning with him. "Wait, ye're not comin' with?"

"No. I have a great deal of thinking to do concerning my apparent crisis of conscience. Do inform me as to the details… oh, and Merida?"

"Aye?"

Kozmotis looked over his shoulder, the left corner of his lips tugging up into a malevolent smirk. "Give Jack my regards, and tell him that when he so carelessly wishes to next meet his maker, I would be happy to arrange it for him. One cannot half-ass it, after all."

Even with Kozmotis' propensity for using ten words when only a few would do, Merida caught his meaning loud and clear. With no further repartee, Kozmotis continued on his way to his quarters several doors down, and it wasn't until she heard the steel clunk of his door closing that she allowed herself the opportunity to move. Sure, she liked him, and the near-kiss before was a screaming sign there was more to it than simple cordiality, but Kozmotis was a thunderstorm.

Striding the few steps to Elsa's door, she slid the key into the lock, turned it, and opened her door with no small amount of haste.

Sat on her bed in a cross-legged posture, Elsa immediately looked up with an expression of resolute resignation that quickly morphed into genuine surprise.

"...Merida?"

Leaning her shoulder on the doorframe, Merida raised a brow and a half-smile. "Expectin' someone tall, dark and handsome?"

It occurred to her in a moment of awkward internal cringing that those words had indeed left her mouth.

Elsa blinked, confusion written in her frown. "Uh, well, yes - though I wouldn't describe him like that."

"Sorry tae disappoint ye, 'cause I got news. First off, ye're free. We all had a hunch there was more tae what happened than a simple case o' betrayal, but without any proof we had tae do what we did."
Elsa folded her arms, giving her an unimpressed look. "You could have just asked me."

"Aye. Life's full o' coulda-woulda-shouldas when yer sittin' cosy at the sidelines or lookin' back wi' twenty-twenty hindsight. S'different when yer part of the situation - 'sides, would ye have preferred bein' questioned when everyone's likely tae go half-cocked, or when they've had time tae calm down an' use their brains?"

Elsa raised an eyebrow, and tilted her head. "Point taken."

"O' course. I'm an archer - makin' people take tha point is kinda ma thing." She took a step inside, and held her hands in front of her. "Fer what it's worth, though - I'm sorry we didnae come sooner. Ye deserved at least that."

Elsa studied her for a few moments, her eyes closing and opening again. "Apology accepted."

"Cool. Now fer the other bit o' good news - I have it on good authority we owe ye another apology, as yer innocent." Merida half-smiled. "That authority bein' Jack."

"That being…"

It could be called self-indulgence, but the pleasure Merida derived from watching the meaning dawn upon Elsa's face like the first breath of sunlight on the horizon was lovely. As though bringing someone half of the good news, and letting them extrapolate the other half.

"He's… he's alive? He's—"

The expression of relief slowly morphed into something Merida didn't expect, though that was becoming something of a theme that day. Elsa's brow furrowed into an anxious frown, and her distant yes moved away to several invisible spots on the floor.

"Excuse me," she said, before quickly darting up and almost knocking Merida over as she hurried out of the room. Flattening herself so that the door frame pressed uncomfortably into her spine, Merida watched Elsa dart down the hall in bewilderment.

"In yer way, was I?" She shook her head in exasperation, and rested her eyes on the open door. "Hey, door with which I feel an odd kinship. How're ye doin'? Me? Oh, I'm fine."

She set off down the hall, following Elsa's receding footsteps. Needless to say, her grumbling didn't stop once. "Couldnae be better, really. World's gone topsy-turvy an' I feel like tha only sane person in this whole camp."

To say Elsa's state of being could be described as *emotionally chaotic* would be the understatement of the century. Relief was the overwhelming feeling, but in with it was a raging river of anxiety that quickened her heart and churned her stomach - throw that in with the furious strides she took, and her pulse had never been faster. Toss in a healthy dollop of anger she couldn't quite place, and the finished meal was an emotional whirlwind barely encased within her corporeal body.

Relief, however, was the guiding force and emotion controlling her limbs, so when she threw open the infirmary door - causing Hiccup to yelp in surprise and dart out of the way - her first instinct as she rested her eyes upon him, sat up in bed with his face lighting up as soon as he saw her, was to stride past the other occupants of the room and throw her arms around him.

Squeezing him tight enough to suffocate, she murmured in his ear, "I thought I'd lost you…"
"I'm sorry, Elsa," he whispered back, his arms curling around her to return her embrace. "I'm so sorry I put you through all that."

"I held you in my arms—the scanner said—Hans thinks—"

It was then that the anxiety pushed aside the relief like a hoverball player muscling aside his opponent, turning her worry into a great panic. She pulled away, grabbed him by the remains of his shirt, and violently shook him. "Do you have any idea what you've done?" she cried. "Do you even know what you—"

"Hey, whoa there!" Rapunzel darted between them, stretching her arms and pushing the two apart with the backs of her hands. "No more violence in my infirmary, okay? Next person to lift a hand for anything other than a question gets a free ticket out the door, stamped with my boot up their ass!"

Anna stood up. "What, so you can be upset, but my sister can't be pissed with the guy who—"

"Honey," Rapunzel cut her off with a mighty glare, and there was a tone to her voice that shut the entire room down, and even turned the otherwise stubborn Anna into a silent, scolded child. "You've never seen me upset, and the day you do, I guarantee you'll see something new. Here's my rule for the infirmary, effective immediately…"

She looked around the room. "This place is now hallowed ground. I see or hear of any more violence within these walls, nothing will save you from me. Is that clear?"

Murmurs of quiet assent flitted around the room, though Elsa caught with perfect clarity Merida's whispered comment to Astrid as she sidled into the room. "Didnae say that when Anna was hitting him…"

Rapunzel shut her up with a stern glower, save for a mumbled apology. "First and last time. Y'all wanna beat each other up, do it outside. In here's off limits."

Elsa felt a hand enclose around hers. Her gaze darted away from Rapunzel onto the gentle touch, and then to the owner - Jack.

"What have you done?" she breathed. "My parents—"

"Hey, whoa. Back it up." Anna leaned toward them, eyes fixed on Elsa. "You just said parents."

"Anna—"

"No, Jack. What the hell is going on?"

"Maybe if you don't get all up in his face, he'll tell you," Astrid snarked.

Anna straightened up. "Yeah? And maybe you should—"

It happened before Elsa knew it. The feelings and emotions raging within her tapped into the agitated buzz of her powers, reaching a zenith. A blast of cold air rushed out around her, and a chorus of yelps and audible shivers filled her hearing.

"If you are all quite finished," Elsa hissed, thoroughly done with the bickering and the intensifying effect it had on her anxiety, "I'm sure Jack will be able to explain precisely how he apparently learned how to come back from the dead."

Jack held up a finger. "Technically I was never dead."
Elsa gave him a deadly look, causing his pale complexion to defy reality and drain itself further, and utter a nervous cough.

"O-okay," he coughed again. "You remember a week or so ago when Elsa and I went to get the dynamos?"

"Yeah," said Hiccup from the corner, leaning against the wall with his arms folded. "I also remember the two of you being mighty pissed off."

"Well," Jack began, "there's a reason for that. When I went to get one of those rifles—"

"Hans ambushed me," Elsa cut in.

Gasp filled the room, with a few murmurs of their enemy's name filtering through the sound. As Elsa moved around to perch on the edge of the bed, she caught sight of Merida's downcast, guilty face.

"How?" Rapunzel said, worriedly eyeing the occupants of the room. "Was he there, in Perdition?"

"No," Elsa shook her head. "No, he had released a program into the nationwide Uni-Com software that would automatically connect his Uni-Com with any nearby myself upon detecting my voice."

Astrid unfurled her arms and gestured lamely at her. "But how would he know to do that?"

"It was—"

"—something we couldn't anticipate," Elsa cut Merida, glancing a pointed shush in her direction. "I can only assume that Hans figured out we were still alive, and cast a wide net."

"Or because someone started a bar fight," Rapunzel added, looking at Merida.

"Yeah. Thanks fer remindin' me, lass."

"Point is," Jack interjected, exchanging a knowing look with Elsa, "he took a long shot, and it paid off. Elsa got caught by accident, plain and simple."

"So how does that lead to…" Hiccup waved in Jack's direction as though the gesture would fill in the blanks.

"Hans blackmailed me into listening to him, threatening to withdraw the garrison from Perdition if I did not comply." Elsa snorted quietly. "He believed my conscience was already weighed down with the Purge, so I would have no choice. And he was right."

"You made the right call," Jack said as he reassuringly stroked her hand. "Innocent men, women and kids are still alive 'cause of that."

She knew he was just trying to comfort her, and half of her appreciated the sentiment. The other half, however, wanted to recoil at his touch.

"In any case, Hans' intent was to force me to assassinate Jack. A week from then, I was to take him to an abandoned settlement near Perdition, and kill him."

"Sonofabitch," Astrid hissed. "That's why he was there, why those Alphas were there. He wanted to watch."

"Precisely. Of course, I told him he should go fuck himself, but he had an ace in the hole. One… one
I didn't expect."

Anna leaned forward in her chair, breathless. "What was it?"

Elsa turned to give her a sober look. Anna had experienced too many life-changing events in the past six months alone, and there Elsa was, about to drop yet another bombshell on her.

"Not it, Anna. Them." Elsa inhaled a deep breath, letting it out in a resolute sigh. "He has Mama and Papa."

Whispers of 'Oh, my God," and sounds of shock floated through the room, though Anna's reaction was far more muted. Blank was her expression, like the revelation had caused a major halt in her mental process.

"I'm sorry—what? Run that by me again—" her voice broke into faint, mirthless laughter, abrupt enough to take Elsa off guard. "You just said Hans has Mama and Papa. They're dead, aren't they? I mean—this is a joke, right?"

"Anna," Elsa began, but her sister cut her off. The onset of near-hysterical rambling was holding sway.

"I mean—Kristoff told me they were—they can't be—Hans is playing us, don't you see? He's fucking with us—"

"Anna," Jack attempted, but to no avail. Anna rose from her seat, looking between them, her face a tale of a tenuous grip on reality - like she was trying to convince them of the truth.

"This isn't right. It's another trick, see? Hans is lying. He's always lying. Mama and Papa are gone, we—"

"They are alive, Anna." Elsa managed to cut in. "They are alive. I saw them."

"But how do you know?" Anna's eyes were popping, and Elsa could clearly see the welling of tears in her aquamarine blues. Truth was visibly taking hold in her sister's mind, and Elsa's heart clenched to see Anna in such a helpless, childlike way. "Hans likes his holograms, maybe he just—"

It occurred to Elsa, or rather reinforced, precisely how much Anna had changed over the years. Before Elsa was hidden away in her room an eternity ago, Anna loved change. New situations, new smells, anything that broke up the norm... she was right there in the middle, reveling in it. Death, war and loss had changed her from the sister excited by something new to the sister terrified by it. Losing her home twice over, watching her friends die around her and finding herself grieving her husband had evolved her into a creature to whom change meant nothing good. Change meant people died.

In the split second she watched reality and truth break through her resistance, Elsa cursed the world they lived in. The world that had taken the once exuberant, excitable, curious Anna and forged her into a weapon of flame, of suspicion and conservative wariness.

"I talked to them, Anna," Elsa said, putting the final nail in the casket of Anna's tenuous grip on the norm. "I talked to them, and they responded."

Anna let out a broken whimper, her hand covering her mouth. Her legs visibly gave way, and she collapsed back onto her chair. Within the space of a second, Elsa rushed around the bed to her sister's side and threw her arms around her, holding her tightly in a comforting embrace. Anna responded by clawing tightly at Elsa's arms, and Elsa felt her chest heave with deep, shocked breaths.
"They're alive…" she uttered in a broken whisper.

"I had overheard most of what was going on, and I figured Hans had some sort of leverage," Jack said, his glance at Elsa a silent suggestion he should take it from there, one to which Elsa responded with a subtle nod, "but I didn't put together what the leverage was until later."

"Was that why you were so pissed when you got back?" Astrid asked.

"That, and a few other things." Jack scratched at the nape of his neck. "Sorry I went off on you."

Astrid merely shrugged. "Water, bridge."

"She said it was arousing," Hiccup snarked quietly, earning him a yelp-inducing fist to his arm.

"Point is, Hans is the kind of guy who didn't get where he is without planning for all eventualities. He was forcing Elsa to make a choice; either kill me, shatter the team and her parents live; or don't kill me, shatter the team and let her parents die. Either way, Elsa loses and he wins. We needed a third option… and one he wasn't gonna see coming. I needed to give him what he wanted."

Jack looked at Rapunzel. "Which is why I came to you."

"You seem pretty angry," Rapunzel remarked, eyeing Jack with visible worry as he closed the infirmary door behind them. "Did something bad happen?"

Jack gave her a solemn look, his prior anger vanishing behind a weight of profound concern. "I can't really get into it. Not yet, anyway."

Rapunzel slowly rubbed her hands. "Alright—well, is it something I can help with?"

"Yeah, actually. How's your medical know-how?"

Rapunzel gave him a funny look, and folded her arms as she rested her weight on her left hip. "You're asking the person who's been a Valkyrie medic for three years, did brief stints in the main city hospitals and several settlements, and who was raised by the family in charge of Unity's medicine and healthcare system?"

Jack blinked, immediately chastising himself for his stupidity. "Right. Yeah. Stupid question."

"Yeah. Safe to say I've got a passing familiarity. Right. Yeah. Stupid question."

Jack stroked at his chin, feeling the light stubble of new growth. "After my bloom, when I woke up in the settlement hospital… I heard two docs talking. One of them asked if I'd been given Tardioxin on the way there to keep me alive. What is it?"

Rapunzel's eyebrows reached her hairline as she let out a long whistle. "Oof, that's heavy stuff. Heavily controlled, and meticulous records are kept of its use or storage. Why?"

"Doesn't matter why. What is it, and where can I get it?"

Astrid was the first to ask, "What's Tardioxin?"

Jack gave a silent look as a prompt to Rapunzel, who caught his glance and sighed. "Tardioxin is… it's a drug, inspired by tardigrades and the cryptobiosis they can undergo. What it does is slows the
body's metabolism and biological process to something like less than one percent. Heart rate drops to almost non-existent, oxygen metabolism… basically it takes you to the brink of death and keeps you there."

"Yikes," Hiccup gulped. "Scary."

"Well, it was designed for if anyone was mortally injured way outside a settlement's boundary, and either the distance or the severity of their wounds made it impossible to get them back to the regeneration wards without certain death. Tardioxin enables search parties to retrieve these people and bring them back so their lives can be saved. Mom and Dad call it *bottled-time.*"

"Which was perfect for my needs." Jack shifted uncomfortably in the bed. "Rapunzel told me every settlement hospital has some, so after I ordered her to keep our conversation to herself… I went to call in a favour from an old friend in zone twenty-six…"

---

*Jack held up the capped syringe of clear liquid to the light, perusing the numbers and lines etched into the plastic, feeling the smooth surface and myriad indentations under his fingertips.*

"Will it work?"

*Edward Mortensen, the settlement's Archon and newfound ally of the Ghosts, pursed his lips as he nodded, his hands holding each other behind his back. "It has been measured to account for your body mass, so I see no reason it should not. Just remember what this is used for."*

*Jack carefully put the syringe inside the breast pocket of his utility jacket, and enclosed it with the flap. "I'm counting on it."*

"Indeed." Edward shifted on his feet, and glanced down at the floor before asking, "If I may be so bold… why are you doing this, putting yourself at such risk? This drug… it is not to be taken lightly."

Jack looked up at him, then glanced out of the medical hut's window into the darkened street. Elara had gone home about thirty minutes prior, but he could still feel the small, tight hug she gave him the moment she saw him land. It was those moments he lived for.

"Someone I care about is in deep trouble. Kind of trouble that gets people killed. Times like that… you do what you have to do to help them out."

*Mortensen's voice came back with a knowing, sage-like wisdom... and an amused lilt. "They must truly be important to you."*

*Jack, his eyes still on the darkened street, absently touched the bulge where the syringe sat.*

"More than she knows, Ed. More than she knows."

"Awww," Rapunzel quietly cooed, though Jack barely paid it heed. The expression worn by Elsa, lips parted and eyes slightly widened as he caught her look, was enough to make him cringe inside - he truly *had* repeated Mortensen's words verbatim.

Anna's face, however, was hidden from him in Elsa's arms.

"So that's why you disappeared for four days," Hiccup said. "Was the story about giving him an earpiece a slice of bullsh*t, or—"
There was a faint, uncharacteristic tone of accusation to Hiccup's voice that triggered something within Jack, enough for a defensive retort. "How 'bout you call him when the comms are back, if you want proof?"

"That doesn't explain what I saw," Astrid said, throwing Hiccup a reprimanding glance. "I saw Elsa shoot you with the kill setting. Tardioxin or not, that should have ended you."

Jack looked pointedly at Hiccup, whose face dawned with realisation. "Ah," he said. "I can explain that part…"

Hiccup held the finished final wingsuit harness before him like a tailor inspecting their work. It was a rudimentary, improvised affair with several straps for the arms and thighs, connected by a long T-shaped piece of heavy-duty strapping, forming a skeletal suit. Black silk stretched between the underarms to the waist, and between the two pairs of leg straps. He jutted out his lower lip and nodded - the first two had been tested by himself via 'falling with style' from Toothless' back and had passed, so the last one should follow suit. Still, he was loathed to let anyone else try it without him testing it first… whatever Jack's plans had in store for it.

The corrugated door to the workshop lifted with a heavy clatter. Hiccup glanced over his shoulder with a start, and rose his eyebrows at the new arrival.

"Jack," he greeted. "What brings you here?"

Jack's face told a serious tale as he checked behind him, before lowering the door. As soon as he turned back to face Hiccup, though, he nodded at the harness. "That what I think it is?"

Hiccup looked at the complex harness in his hands, and nodded with a proud smile. "Yep. I wouldn't use it on a permanent basis, but it'll work for a few skydives. What did you need 'em for, anyway?"

The question was dodged with a dismissive wave and a shake of the head. "Tell you in a couple of days… hopefully."

"What does that mean, 'hopefully'?" Hiccup cast him a glance, before turning to place the harness - delicately - on the workshop table. He dusted off his hands, and folded his arms as he turned back to face Jack, a concerned-yet-suspicious frown on his countenance. "You've been real weird since you and Elsa came back from Perdition."

"Can't talk about it," Jack said, stiff in his posture and stern in his gaze. "Above your pay grade. Like I said, tell you in a couple of days - but right now, I've got something important for you to do."

"Like what?"

Jack pulled his stun pistol out of his holster, pulled out the energy cell supplying the ammunition, and handed both to him. "Can you throttle the power of this? Reduce the energy discharge somehow?"

Hiccup hesitantly took the pistol and its accompanying rectangular energy cell, glancing between it and its owner in puzzlement. "Um, yeah, I think so? But… Astrid knows more about this tech than I do. Why don't you ask her?"

"Compartmentalisation, Hic. If I wanted Astrid to do it, I wouldn't be here, right now. Besides, she's gonna be busy soon."

"What's that supposed to—"
"Enough with the questions, Night Fury—" Jack stopped his snap short, seemingly forcing it back down with a furious clenching of his fist. "Can you do it?"

"I think so… but I don't understand why. If I do it, the red bolts won't kill. Agonising pain, sure, and the target will probably want to die, but that's all."

Jack looked distantly off to the side, his brow furrowed in thought as though Hiccup's answer had given him pause. After a few silent moments, he nodded to himself. "It's worth it. How long?"

Hiccup shrugged. "Two hours, maybe?"

"You've got one. Elsa and I are leaving in a few hours, and I'll need it ready before then."

Hiccup's head tilted. "Leaving for where?"

Jack's eyes found his, and his response amounted to little than a raised eyebrow. "Right. No questions."

"Yeah." Jack said with a tone of finality. "I need to go meditate - if anyone asks, say it's a routine maintenance check."

Hiccup let out a long breath, and his stomach - which had, up until then, prickled with unease - churned with full-on consternation. "You mean you want me to lie."

"Yeah." Jack turned away, and headed for the corrugated door. "World's not just black and white anymore, Hic. There are shades of grey between… and you'll find that's where we are. Where we've always been."

"How painful was it?" Astrid asked. "I know you can mess with the pistols, but I've never done it."

"It wasn't pleasant," Jack murmured, cursing his mind for reliving the memory. The reality was that being hit by the augmented pistol, even with its power reduced to less than fifty percent potency, was like someone had set his insides on fire. He'd been stabbed, his bones broken, had the shit kicked out of him by Kozmotis and Elsa, and had his back sliced open - but the pain of the tampered pistol felt like the worst of them all. "Elsa and I had stopped to look at the sunset - and when she wasn't looking, I switched the pistols."

"So that was how you fooled the scanners," Elsa said in a quiet voice. "How you fooled Hans. How you… fooled me."

"Fooled all of us," Anna added with a murmur, though Jack didn't miss the vehemence.

"Yeah." Jack ignored the ill-hidden bite to her tone. "Ten seconds before the shot, I injected the syringe in my thigh - lemme just specify, I pressed on Elsa's finger. She didn't pull the trigger."

"Yes, I think we've established that," Hiccup said in a clipped manner. "I think we've also established she was raked over the coals when she shouldn't have been."

Merida shot him a wide-eyed, incredulous look. "I'm sorry—what?"

"We treated Elsa like a criminal for something she didn't—"

Merida straightened bolt upright. "And did we know the whole story back then?"
Hiccup threw her a glare, but his mouth remained closed.

"No, carry on, Mr All Seeing Hindsight! Tell us how we should've acted, not knowing then what we know now!"

"Guys—can we not?" Jack held up his hands as an attempt to make peace.

"Indeed. I'd like to know why Astrid was there," Elsa drawled, her voice low.

"Well, I'd planned how it was gonna happen—I just didn't know how I was gonna get back. Way you've all described him, I reckoned Hans wouldn't let Elsa take me home." Jack looked at Astrid. "Which is why I came to you…"

It was easy enough to find her. Stormfly gave off a distinctive sound of pleasure and contentment when scratched, he knew from observation, so locating Astrid was a simple case of following the satisfied squawks. Sure enough, trailing the sonic breadcrumbs led him to the patch of ground behind the workshop, where Stormfly was laid on her side with her leg frantically waggling at the air whilst Astrid scratched vigorously at her spine and crown. It was an odd sight, seeing the proud warrior cooing over her dragon like a pet cat.

Of course, he'd never say that out loud.

"Yo, Astrid," he called out. "You got a minute?"

Astrid looked up with a start, as did Stormfly. The latter darted to her feet and shook herself, before trotting away a little too quickly. Maybe she considered being caught in such a position a highly embarrassing affair.

Astrid did a double take between them, before shrugging in mild exasperation and dusting off her hands with a huff. "Guess I do now. What do you need?"

"Well, first thing is I wanna give you something."

Astrid paused, and gave him a wary eye. "You do realise Hiccup and I are a thing?"

Jack rolled his eyes, and rested his hands on his hips. "Mind out of the gutter, Viking. Yes I do, and it took you long enough."

"Mmkay. What is it?"

Jack delved into the pocket of his camouflage pants, and pulled out the fabric disc that could only be the Ghost patch. "I wanted to offer you a full place on the team. I know a few of you are used to ranks, so this carries the rank of Sergeant."

"...for me?" Her eyes went down to the patch, like she didn't dare believe it. "You want me… on the team?"

Jack twirled the patch between his fingers like a pencil, before offering it to her. "Well, Anna thinks you're okay. Hiccup thinks you're amazing, and Pitch… well, let's just say his criticism was constructive. Means he doesn't hate you. Way I figure it, you joining could only be a good thing."

"I… don't know what to say." Astrid gently took the patch, and gazed down upon it as she stroked it with her thumb. "Thank you."

"However - that patch carries with it your first mission as a Ghost, if you're up to it."
Astrid looked up, eyes slightly widened. "Mission?"

"Yeah. For you, and you alone. No-one else can know about it, so if anyone asks, you'll be taking your patrol early. Understand?"

Astrid stiffened, and her once disbelieving expression morphed into serious attention. "Got it. What do you need me to do?"

It occurred to Jack, the difference between Astrid and Hiccup. The latter questioned and probed, uncomfortable with lying and hiding the truth, even if the situation demanded it. Astrid, however, showed no compunction about it - if a mission called for absolute secrecy, she understood the gravity of it. It further occurred to him the difference between the Ghosts and the ex-Valkyries: one was pseudo-military, the other was actual military.

"Elsa and I will be heading out soon. I need you to take Stormfly… and tail us."

Astrid blinked. "Come again?"

"Take Stormfly and follow us. Stay high as you can, and make damn sure you're not spotted. Everything depends on you being out of sight."

Astrid's countenance cut into a perplexed frown, her eyes radiating concern. "Why?"

"Because…" Jack sighed, his heart heavy. "Because when we get where we're going and you take up position out of visual range… you'll get a front row seat for something that's not going to make sense. What you'll see… it'll make you want to charge in screaming. Whatever you do, don't do that. Wait. Let it play out. Don't interfere."

"You know I'm not the kind of person who does that."

Jack shrugged. "Well, I guess you're about to find something new about yourself - but I need you to promise me that you'll do something for me."

Astrid stepped forward, eyes expectant. "What?"

Jack looked at her, and in his eyes he poured the gravity of his request, his hope and his faith. He willed her to see the crucial, the vital and the grave, but to simply accept it as such rather than question. For now, at least. "Bring me home. Whatever it takes, however many bad guys you've gotta kill… bring me home."

Astrid slowly nodded. "I promise."

"Once Astrid got me back, I figured—hoped—Rapunzel would remember our conversation. That she'd realise what was happening, and bring me back." Jack scratched at his temple. "And I was right."

"No."

Jack's eyes, and those of the room, turned to Anna, whose gaze spoke of nothing but stern, furious fire.

"You were lucky."

For the first time since the tale began, Jack found himself both speechless at the harsh tone, and quailing under her storm. "I… guess I was, I mean—"
"And you were stupid."

Anna rose from her chair, unfurling herself from Elsa's comfort like slipping off a cloak. She advanced the two steps to his bed, and gripped the metal bar rests with white knuckles.

"Did you even stop to think what would have happened if your plan went sideways?" She tilted her head slightly, ensuring he had nowhere else to look. "Do you have any idea what you did to us?"

"I…"

"We thought you were dead, Jack! We thought we'd lost you—and we thought my sister had murdered you!" Anna threw a hand into the air, prompting Rapunzel to rise from her chair. "I had to lock Elsa away, Jack! You knew what that did to her, and your plan, your scheme meant I had to lock her in her room!"

"Anna…"

"Did you think of a contingency plan, in case you really did die? I mean—we've been sitting here, listening to you explain it all—but what if you died? How would we know the truth if you weren't here to tell us?"

Jack looked down, his face downcast. Guilt made its presence felt amongst the torrent of emotions flowing through him, guilt that carried with it the acute awareness she was right. Sure, the team would have had clues - but with nothing concrete to go on? The ramifications were dire.

"I'm sorry…" he murmured. "I didn't think. Maybe I trusted you all to figure it—"

Anna let out a bark of laughter, and launched into a blistering verbal tirade. "Trust? That's rich, coming from you. Hell, I'm glad Astrid kept her promise, and I know I kept mine—but you sure as hell broke yours. You lied to my face. You lied to Elsa. You had Hiccup, Rapunzel and Astrid lie to everyone… you just—what would your family think?"

Jack blinked. "Huh?"

"Don't play dumb with me. Sarah and Emma. Your mom and sister. What do you think they'd say if —"

"Anna, the hell do you mean?" Jack volleyed back, his voice rising in concert with hers. His heart clenched, as though someone had gripped it in their hand and squeezed. "Neve is my mom—"

"No she's—"

"Anna, I have no idea what you're talking—"

"Everybody out. Now."

Rapunzel's voice, uncompromising in her loud bark, silenced the entire room in an instant. Even Merida and Astrid flinched, and Anna looked at her in pure surprise. The good doctor's face, however, conveyed nothing but a demand for obedience.

"I said now!"

Hiccup couldn't have left faster if he tried. Astrid and Merida followed suit, with Elsa bringing up the rear. As Anna reached the door, however, she looked back at him.

"We'll finish this later—"
"Anna," Rapunzel yelled and marched at her, "one more word from you, and so help me, you'll see what very upset looks like!"

The strawberry blonde threw her hands into the air as a non-verbal 'okay, okay! I'm going!' before fully exiting the room, with the slam of the door being Rapunzel's final word on the matter. She turned to face him, and the stony expression softened into ill-hidden concern.

"What is she talking about?" Jack whispered. "What's... wrong with me?"

"What the hell was that back there?"

They had barely exited the infirmary corridor and gone out into the early evening air before someone wanted to continue the argument, it seemed. Elsa turned at the harsh sound of Merida's voice, her accent even thicker in her evident anger. The flame-haired woman's eyes remained fixed upon Anna, her left hand gesturing back at the door they'd previously left.

Anna prickled, and rounded on her. "Excuse me?"

"Ye heard me, little missy. The hell's yer problem?!"

Elsa knew from experience that Merida rarely backed down from a challenge, and even if she did, it was because rank was involved. However, with the Ghost hierarchy less... defined than its Valkyrie counterpart, Merida was free to let loose.

"My problem? I'm sorry—were you even listening back there?"

"Oh, I heard plenty, lassie. Pretty sure between tha two o' us, I was tha only one listening!"

Elsa turned to her sister, and touched her left arm. "Anna, don't antagonise her further—"

Her younger sister, however, would have none of it. She moved forward, her arm slipping away from Elsa's fingers. "Really? So you heard Jack say he lied to us all, right? How he had three of us hide the truth from each other, how he promised to my face he would come back safe knowing he would break that promise?"

Merida snorted, her lips half curling into a bitter smile. "So that's all ye heard?"

"Yeah." Anna advanced, leading with her right foot and jabbing her finger at the ground. "I also know what he put Elsa through. He had her shoot him knowing what it would do to her. Knowing what would happen when she came back to us."

"Ghost protocol dictates any Ghost suspected or proven to commit a crime must be confined to jail, or the brig—in this case, Elsa's room." Hiccup moved to stand near Anna, folding his arms. "Jack knew that—hell, I knew that, and I'm not even a leader."

"Exactly," Anna said, pointing at Hiccup. "My sister was locked away in her room for three goddamn fucking years. Jack knew it, because I told him, and Elsa told him what it did to her. So he did what he did, knowing I would have to follow protocol."

"Like you follow protocol," Astrid snorted, flanking Merida, directly opposite Hiccup. Battle lines were being drawn right before Elsa's eyes.

"Wanna expand on that, Lady Punchalot?" Anna started on Astrid. The latter, however, remained uncharacteristically composed - the last time Elsa was openly antagonising Astrid, the taller blonde
had been about two seconds from striking a superior officer.

Hiccup jumped in. "If Anna can't follow the rules when she's in command—"

"Which I was."

"—how can she expect the rest of us to do the same?"

"Don't give me that bullshit, flyboy." Astrid glared at Hiccup. "You had a problem with Jack's orders, you could have said something to anyone at any time. You kept your mouth shut for a reason. Merida, Rapunzel, Elsa and I didn't have that luxury when we were Valkyries—but you do."

Hiccup spread his hands and held them up, his expression incredulous. "Why are you railing at me? I haven't done anything wrong! And don't forget—you did it too!"

"And neither has Jack. But, fair point."

Anna scoffed. "Oh, that's right. Astrid gets a shiny new patch, and all of a sudden she's Jack's bodyguard."

That time, Astrid did react. Her face turned stormy, and Elsa could hear a high pitched vibration emanating from her hands. "Kid, if it wasn't for you being pregnant, and for your sister—whom I have a good amount of respect for, unlike you—I would knock you the fuck out."

"Kid? Really?"

"For fuck's sake," Elsa cried out. "Can we stop?"

"Yeah, I think Princess here is missing the bigger picture," Merida said, resting her hands on her hips, sass in the raising of her brow and challenge in her eyes.

"Oh, really? Do tell."

"I think yer forgettin' why Jack did what he did 'cause yer too focused on what he did and what happened afterward."

"You know," came a smooth English voice, laced with amusement and sarcasm, "if you argue any louder, our friendly neighbourhood Reapers won't care if it is daytime."

Elsa's eyes went to the source of the voice and the new arrival to the 'debate'. Pitch walked over the grass up to the group from the barracks, his hands behind his back, lips set into a line and his black eyebrows set halfway up his grey forehead.

"Oh, good!" Anna said, clapping her hands together. "Finally, someone with common sense."

"Clearly." Pitch took position between the two battle lines but set a few feet back, like a deadly mediator.

"Anna thinks—"

"I know very well what Anna and Merida think, Hiccup. I could hear you all the way from the barracks, so I came out to put an end to this discussion. As far as I can tell, you are all children, arguing over who is right—"

"I'm sorry—did ye just call me a—"
"—when none of you have sought the voice belonging to whom this concerns the most."

Pitch unfurled a hand toward Elsa, whose feeling of being put on the spot intensified tenfold when an abrupt silence descended like a hammer.

"We have, Koz," Anna began, but Pitch had none of it.

"No, Anna. You have been primarily concerned with Jack's behaviour and how it has hurt you, and tangentially referred to Elsa. Merida has not been able to clearly state her point, though I suspect she is more on your sister's side than you. Now, if you've all finished squabbling like overtired toddlers, I would like to hear Elsa's point of view."

"That…" Elsa began, inhaling a breath as she looked distantly into the darkening sky. She tried to form the words in her mind, to define the feelings coursing through her. Her brow furrowed as thoughts took shape and dissipated, as images sharpened and blurred. So many ideas, so many beliefs made themselves known yet remained just out of reach - except one.

It was not the time, nor the place… nor the audience.

"That is something I must discuss with Jack, as he is the only other person directly affected by the events at hand."

She glanced at Pitch, though it was more out of a gauging of his reaction than anything else. He looked off to the side, and tilted his head. "If that's your choice."

"It is."

Anna moved closer, and stroked her shoulder. "You can tell me."

Elsa turned to meet her, and regarded the hopeful face of her sister with a solemn, almost regretful expression. "I can't. Not yet."

Anna flinched ever so slightly, before letting out a quick breath through her nose. A sad look crossed her eyes as they sought elsewhere. "You too, huh?"

Elsa bristled, and drew herself to her full height. She opened her mouth to remind Anna that, while she was letting that one slide, she would not tolerate any further comments in that vein - but Merida got there first.

"Yer just a big kid, ain'tcha?"

Anna's eyes popped, and she whirled around to Merida, indignant fury clouding her countenance. "The fuck you say to me?"

"Ye fuckin' heard, ye mollycoddled princess. Yer a big kid whose got no business bein' in this situation. Yer stuck on how hurt ye are, how it's all so bad, an' yer throwin' down that hurt on anyone ye can."

"Merida…" Elsa groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Tell ye what—how's about ye throw down yer hurt on the one person who started all o' this! Ye want someone ta blame?!"


"Then look nae further."
Elsa sighed in resignation, covering her face with the palm of her left hand. That was the exact moment she wanted to avoid, the reason she covered for Merida in the infirmary—and, she suspected, why Jack did the same.

"What are you saying, Red?" Astrid breathed.

"I'm sayin' it's my fault Elsa got ambushed."

Gasps tore the air... yet when Elsa tossed Pitch a glance by accident, she noticed a peculiarity - his reaction was neutral. Rather, he regarded Merida with an undefinable look.

"How—why?" Hiccup said.

"One word, laddie: family. I made a call ta ma folks when Pitch an' I went ta Perdition. I was terrified o' the idea o' dyin' an' not seein' them again - so I just wanted ta see them—talk ta them one last time. I had a moment o' weakness, an' I thought I covered ma tracks—but if I knew what was gonna happen ta Elsa, I'd never have done it!"

Astrid slowly shook her head. "That was... stupid of you."

"Oh, gee, ye think? I did it 'cause I love my family. Because there's nothin' more important ta me than them." Merida's eyes were wide, almost popping, allowing Elsa to clearly see the shimmer of welled tears. "I screwed up so hard an' I wish I could go back an' fix it, but I can't. So if ye want someone ta hate, then hate me. I deserve it way more than tha shit yer givin' Jack."

"Did you know about this?" Anna hissed, though it was clear to Elsa who she was addressing. Only one other person had been punished alongside Merida, after all.

"Yes," Pitch answered with all the calmness of a still lake. "I even helped her mask the call, for all the good it did."

Anna threw her hands into the air, before lacing her fingers behind her head and pacing to and fro. Merida stood her ground, awaiting whatever was to come her way.

"Of all the—you are the last person I'd expect to pull that," Anna said, her voice low, her back to him. "And the last person I'd expect to hide the truth."

Pitch snorted, unrepentant. "There's a great deal you don't know about me, and a great deal less I'd care to indulge you."

"No kidding." Anna turned, and regarded him sternly, her hands on her hips. "Why?"

"My reasons are my business, and not yours. Privacy, Anna, is a concept to which you have always been unfamiliar."

Much as Elsa would hate to admit it, Pitch was right on the money. Personal boundaries were not Anna's strong suit.

Hiccup gestured toward him, his other hand finding his pocket. "Yeah, but this is more than just privacy, Koz. This is the team's safety we're talking about. What Merida did... she put the team's security at risk."

"A security risk Jack just closed—or is tryin' ta." Merida folded her arms. "Ye two're just so stuck on one bad thing, yer missin' tha bigger picture."
"Enlighten us," Anna snapped. "Show us what we should see in this mess you made."

"When I called my parents, I thought I was doin' it fer them. I thought I was doin' a good thing, lettin' my folks know I was okay. That it was gonna be okay—but I was wrong. I wasnae doin' it fer them, I was doin' it fer me. I was selfish. I put ma own needs ahead o' the team's—and Elsa paid the price."

Merida gestured back at the infirmary, yet her gaze remained fixed on Anna.

"Jack dinnae do it fer himself. He did it fer the team. He did it fer you," she pointed at Anna, and then at Elsa, "but especially for you."

Elsa's heart skipped a beat. Even Anna's gaze and aggressive stance faltered.

"He did it so ye'd have a shot at gettin' yer family back. I'll bet ye my bow on it. He put tha team through hell, but he did it ta close that hell back up—because we protect our family, no matter what."

"Are you all done?"

Six pairs of eyes immediately whirled around behind Merida, where Rapunzel stood in the open doorway to the infirmary building, her expression deeply unimpressed, her eyes irritably questioning as she looked between them.

"Seriously, are you all done?"

"How long have you been there?" Astrid asked, glancing behind her. "Where's Jack? Is he okay?"

"How long? Few minutes. Before then I was doing my job—you know, ensuring the physical and mental health of my team while the rest of you stopped being soldiers and acted like teenagers." Rapunzel glared at each of them in turn. "And don't tell me you all suddenly care."

"We do, Rapunzel," Elsa said, attempting to convey as much calm and reassurance in her voice as she could. There had been enough arguing that day—she was keen to put a stop to it as soon as possible. "How is he?"

"You want the good news or the bad news? Y'know, I'll start with the good news—'cause when you all hear the rest, you're all gonna look like idiots and I wanna see your faces when you do."

Astrid began, "Punzie, there's no need to be so aggressive—"

"No, there is, because while I've been trying to do my job, all Jack and I have had to listen to was your voices arguing and bitching, and I am fucking done listening to it. So you're all going to shut up and pay attention."

Rapunzel folded her arms, and descended the single step of the medical building, then stood with her feet apart like the guardian of the infirmary. "Good news is that physically, Jack's a picture of health. Still got his powers, still got his strength—he's one hundred percent there. Still the same old Jack we know and love, it seems."

"And the bad?"

"Tardioxin… you're only supposed to be under its effects for an hour. Two, tops. Look—you gotta understand the mind processes things fast, so fast. If I want to punch Merida in the nose, my mind works out which arm to use, how much force, where Merida is in relation to my position, how high I've gotta swing. All that occurs in, like, a fraction of a second."

Rapunzel let out a grave sigh, and rested her hands on her hips. Her head ducked down for a moment, and whatever anger was in her voice, her eyes, her entire being seemed to vanish.
"When Tardioxin is in your system… yeah, everything's slowed down, but not stopped. The mind's still working, even at less than a percent. So then the mind looks at the body after a while, looks at how the heart isn't beating, how the lungs aren't inflating… and it's tricked into thinking the body's dying." Rapunzel tapped her temple a few times. "So then it starts switching off the lights up here. I mean—the body's checking out, so it's gonna shut down parts to conserve itself, right? So the longer Tardioxin's in the system, the worse it gets. The brain starts shutting down in order of least essential to most, until, eventually, brain death."

Elsa took several steps toward her, concern written on her countenance and shining in her eyes. "Is that what happened to him?"

Rapunzel's expression was grave, solemn, almost grieving. "You gotta understand, Tardioxin was never tested on abbies. Far as Unity's concerned, who cares if an abnormal dies? My guess is our inherent superhuman biology means we can withstand Tardioxin's effects for longer than ordinary humans, but…"

"What happened?"

"Humans can only tolerate it for two hours at most. Jack had it in his system for over twelve hours. Twelve. Even if our bodies are tougher, they're not invulnerable—and eventually, something's gotta give. And for Jack, it did."

Rapunzel sniffed, and gulped down something that sounded to Elsa suspiciously like a lump in her throat, given how her voice cracked when she next spoke.

"Overexposure to the effects of Tardioxin has left Jack with a form of retrograde amnesia. He can't remember anything before finding himself in a wiped-out settlement with dead bodies all around him. Places, names, people—it's all gone."

"Oh, fuck," Merida murmured. "That's why he was so confused by Anna talkin' about his family. He doesnae remember them."

"No. Far as his mind is concerned… they don't exist anymore. First fifteen years of his life…" Rapunzel clicked her fingers, "...like they never happened."

Elsa felt her heart clench with a sharp ache. "Will his memories ever return?"

Rapunzel shook her head. "No. The damage is irreversible. Permanent. He will have this amnesia… for the rest of his life."
"The Pale Moonlight"

"I don't understand," Astrid said to Rapunzel, her brow furrowed. "Jack's talked about his family before, surely?"

"Yeah, he's talked about them to me," Anna said, nodding in agreement for the first time since the argument began.

"And to me," Elsa added.

Rapunzel let out a breath, nodding as she ran the fingers of her right hand through her hair. "Without proper equipment, all I can go on is observation and his own recollection. So, yeah, he'll remember those conversations he had with you, but he won't have the memories from which he drew to talk about them. It's like… telling someone you travelled from New Corona to New Arendelle a few years ago, but a year later, you don't remember ever making the journey - and the only one who knows is the person you told."

"I cannæe even imagine what it's like ta not remember yer family," Merida said in a soft, uncomprehending voice.

"Hopefully you never will," Rapunzel said abruptly, her voice rendered gentle by the weaving of a long exhalation.

Anna took a step forward so she was right beside Elsa, her hands cradling her chest. "What does that mean for Jack, in terms of him being the leader?"

Rapunzel shrugged, her face telling a tale of who knows? "His memories after then seem to be intact. He remembers being found by someone called Firework, and everything up to now. My current medical opinion is that since those memories haven't been compromised, and his brain seems otherwise undamaged, there's no reason he should be mentally unfit for command - but I'm gonna keep an eye on him for a week to make sure, as well as have him overnight in the infirmary for observation in case I've missed something."

Elsa's eyes drifted to the door to the infirmary building. "Is he allowed visitors?"

"One visitor, and I'll be in the hallway. Soon as I feel his environment isn't conducive to his recovery, I'll intervene." Rapunzel rested her hands on her hips. "My priority is the wellbeing of my patient, not someone else's feelings."

"I'll go," Elsa said. "Jack and I have a great deal to talk about."

"I'll come, too."

Anna made to move past Rapunzel to the infirmary doors, but was blocked by the good doctor herself. "I said one visitor. Elsa can go, but you can't."

Stiffening, Anna folded her arms and tossed Rapunzel a glare. "I'm the ranking officer until Jack is released, so I'll be going for Elsa's support. My authority supersedes yours."

"Actually it doesn't."
Elsa’s eyes, and those of everyone around her immediately transitioned to Hiccup, who looked at each and every one of them in turn. “In matters of a clear medical nature, the chief medical officer’s authority overrides all ranks, including a team leader’s. Especially if a member of the team is a patient.”

“But Anna’s a medical officer, too,” Astrid pointed out.

Hiccup scratched his head, and shrugged. “Yeah, but when command of the team landed on her, even if it is temporary, it shifted control over medical matters to Rapunzel. Plus, Rapunzel is the one with an active patient, not Anna. Until Jack resumes command, Rapunzel is the chief medical officer. You can’t override her authority on this one.”

Elsa glanced between Anna and Rapunzel, before resting her gaze upon Hiccup. “And if she tries?”

“Then Rapunzel has the power to force me to step down from command, and as an absolute last resort, put me in the brig.” Anna quirked her lips, and spread her hands with a slow shrug, her voice soft and defeated. “In all this… excitement, I forgot.”

Rapunzel nodded. “Just like it was when we were Valkyries. Article Five. If the medic or closest equivalent believes the health and recovery of their patient is being undermined, they have the authority to prevent it.”

Anna nodded, glancing once at Pitch. “When you took that hit to the head, I told Jack we were going nowhere for twenty four hours. If he’d tried to overrule me on that, I would have had the authority to relieve him of command if he didn’t back down.”

Rapunzel looked at Anna. “Look, I know what Jack did. I can only imagine what effect it’s had on the both of you, and whenever you want, I’m free to talk. I just know what I saw back there and out here, and right now, I think it’s best you stand down.”

“If I can’t follow the rules, why should anyone else, right?” Anna tossed a quick, pointed look at Hiccup, and then at Elsa. “Even if they stink. Just ‘cause I regret following one doesn’t mean I can ignore the other.”

Elsa smiled at her sister, and reassuringly stroked her back, which caused the younger sibling to add, “Just… make sure he knows how it made you feel, okay?”

“He already apologised, Anna—”

“Oh, fer fuck’s sake.”

Elsa instantly bristled at Merida’s tone, throwing the redhead a mighty glare. “Watch your tone, Dunbroch,” she said in an icy voice.

“No,” Merida replied, returning Elsa’s arctic glower with a scowl as fiery as anything Anna could manifest. “I’ll do nae such thing, ‘cause far as I can tell, yer sister’s just out tae punish him, and I’m done playin’ dodge-tha-ego. I’m goin’ on watch.”

Astrid frowned, looking at her like she’d grown another head. “But your watch doesn’t start for two hours?”

“Better that than stay here an’ say somethin’ unkind.” Merida stalked off, moving behind Rapunzel on her way to the barracks. “Princess here’s really pissed me off.”

“Fuck knows what Red’s definition of ‘unkind’ is,” Hiccup shuddered.
"I don't blame her," Pitch interjected, "and for the same reason, I'll take my leave and join her."

"Of all of us, I thought you'd be the most furious with him," Elsa said.

Pitch's golden gaze slowly traced over each member of the team, his head turning like the laziest of owls, before coming to rest on Elsa's eyes. It gave her the most unpleasant sensation of being under a spotlight. "I am displeased, not that it is any of your concern. However, you are an intelligent person. I trust you'll look at all perspectives before making your judgement. You are the elder sister, after all - Anna should be looking to you for an example of maturity. Heaven knows she needs one."

With no further word, Pitch turned away from them with all the grace and elegance Elsa had come to expect from him, and swept away toward the barracks like a gliding shadow.

"One of these days, I'm gonna punch him in the head," Anna hissed, glowering at his retreating form.

"Please do," Hiccup chuckled. "Incidentally and on a completely unrelated topic, remind me to be in another country in nine month's time."

"I could totally kick his ass," Anna grumbled.

"Sure. Pull the other leg, it has bells on," Hiccup scoffed. "Only two people have defeated Pitch in combat; one was a draw, the other was an ambush."

Astrid gave him a sour look. "Really?"

Hiccup returned her expression with an open mouth, and closed it again in bemusement. Sensing the opportunity to leave, especially when Anna reminded Hiccup she knew Pitch's combat style and thus could counter it, Elsa gave Rapunzel a respectful nod before moving past her toward the infirmary building. She paused, however, when she was right by the medic's side, their faces in opposite directions.

"Did he know?" she said, her voice loud enough for Rapunzel to hear yet too quiet for the rest of the team. "When you told him about Tardioxin… did he know the risks?"

In the corner of her vision, Rapunzel nodded gravely. She turned her head slightly toward Elsa as she murmured, "Yeah. I told him everything, and if this Mortensen guy's worth his salt, he'll have told Jack, too."

Elsa slowly nodded her acknowledgement, and felt a strange dual sensation of her heart sinking, yet simmering with frustration. "So he knew what it could have done to his memory."

"Put it this way, he took it knowing there was a good chance that, if he woke up, he might not have been able to remember his name, where he is, or recognise any of us. He could have lost everything." Rapunzel looked Elsa in the eye, both as a warning and with an imploring glint. "Remember that when you want to tear him a new one. Go easy on him - speaking as your friend and his doctor - because even if I don't want to kick you out, I will. He's confused, he's hurting… the physical trauma I can heal, but the mental?"

Rapunzel tapped her temple, and her expression became grave. "I can't heal that."

"Duly noted. Thank you, Rapunzel." Elsa made another attempt to leave, before pausing once again to add, "For all you've done."

"It's my job," Rapunzel whispered back, but looked pleased with Elsa's comment. "No matter what
happens, I'll always do my job. I'm a professional."

Elsa placed a hand on Rapunzel's shoulder. "We could all learn from your example," she said, before finally setting off for the infirmary.

She wondered what she was going to say to him. How she would vocalise the pain, the guilt, the anger, the love, the grief and the empathy she'd barely kept in check whilst everyone else threw down theirs.

There had been too much darkness that day.

Merida slammed the steel door of her full-size locker shut, her other hand gripping the collar of her utility vest so tightly she was in danger of turning the garment into an electrical fire. Her cheeks, neck - hell, her entire body burned with vexed fury that furrowed her brow into a scowl.

Grumbling to herself, Merida put on the utility vest and zipped it up with gusto, nearly ripping the zipper off in the process. She snatched up her fully-laden quiver and slung it over her back, before grabbing Trueshot and making for the door.

Which was when a figure in her doorway stopped her in her tracks.

"...Koz?"

Suited up and ready for patrol, with Emily Jane in his hands, Kozmotis gave her a slow nod before stepping aside. "None other."

Merida stepped outside her room and stood on the opposite side of the doorway, regarding him with a bemused frown. "Not that I'm complainin', but… what're ye doin' here?"

"I thought you'd appreciate the company," he responded plainly.

Merida snorted, before turning away and making for the barracks exit down the hall. "I'm nae tha best company, right now."

"So it would seem," came his voice, punctuated by the slow rhythm of his boots behind her. "Which is why I'm here."

Merida paused in step. She let out a long breath, one she hadn't realised her anger had held for a short while, and turned to look at him over her shoulder with a brief smile. "Cheers, laddie."

"My pleasure." Kozmotis pulled up alongside her, and they resumed their journey to the exit - albeit with less of a frustrated pace. "You still seem infuriated."

Merida scoffed, and shook her head. "That obvious, huh?"

"To me, the team, and the greater Canadian Reaper population?" Kozmotis fell silent for a moment as he reached to open the exit, and stood aside. "Yes."

Merida made a fleeting note of the action as she went through, chalking it up to the category called Chivalry she never thought Kozmotis would be under. "Princess Anna's just pissed me right off, is all."

The door closed behind her just before Kozmotis' question of, "Why?"

"She's actin' like a fucking kid playin' soldiers. She's so hung up on Jack nae tellin' her shit -"
newsflash, kiddo, sometimes yer gonna be outta the loop - that she cannae see how fucking lucky she is."

"In what way?"

Merida let out a bark of incredulous laughter as they walked in the direction of the camp gate, the cold winter air kissing at her skin and turning her mirth into vapor. "Rapunzel, Astrid and me, we might nae see our family again. We might die 'fore it happens. I mean, Astrid may not care, an' she probably has her reasons, but Punzie an' I do. If it's affectin' her, she's nae showin' it. Anna just found out her parents are alive, and I'm dead sure we've been given an opportunity to rescue 'em… but all Anna cares about is all the bad stuff. That he broke a promise an' that it coulda gone wrong. Clearly she's never made an omelette."

"Omelette?" Kozmotis echoed.

Merida glanced at him. "Y'know. Eggs, omelette? Cannae break—"

"I understand now."

"It's just…" Merida relaxed and tightened the fingers around Trueshot's grip over and over as she let out another breath, trying to put words to feelings in her mind. "Few months ago, the girls and I… we were up shit creek without a paddle. No ship, nowhere ta go, no friends… an' he took us in. We massacred yer extended family, sank yer home, brought yer world down around ye… an' even though he didnae know we were abbies, he still took us in. Even though half of ye quite rightly hated us. Ye all taught us how tae survive as outcasts. That's a debt I can nae repay."

Kozmotis pulled the chain-link gate across and waited for her to pass, as he did earlier. "Is that why you defended Jack? You believe you owe him a debt?"

"No." Merida paused, waiting for Kozmotis to close the gate again and catch up to her. "Jack put himself in a position where, at best, he could have lost his mind; at worst, lost his life. Why? Because he gives a shit. He saw the trouble Elsa was in, saw the chance ta save their family, an' considered his mind an' life a small price ta pay fer that chance. Tha's not lies. Tha's not manipulation."

Merida stopped, and stared directly into Kozmotis' eyes. "That's love." Looking away, she added, "Fer her, fer Anna, fer us… that's why I defended him."

Kozmotis uttered a thoughtful hum, and took a few moments before speaking. "I must admit, I am finding it difficult to imagine what it's like to know that as the sole survivor of a Reaper massacre, you are the only one in the world who knew what your family looked like… their voices, the sound of their laughter, and now the only proof they ever existed is a pair of names on a doctored census. As someone who treasures history, to find it has been erased… I find it an uncomfortable concept."

"I hafta admit something too," Merida said, wondering precisely how to articulate her thoughts without tarnishing the moment between them, "I'm surprised yer so balanced about it. I figured ye'd side with Anna."

"Half of me does."

Merida looked up at him through the corner of her eyes, and immediately wondered if she should have opened her mouth. Astrid and Hiccup were on opposing sides of the internal conflict, and the former wasn't exactly known for easily changing her mind. She felt a sense of unease - would it be the same between Kozmotis and herself?

"For one thing, Larsen's blackmail of Elsa meant she was a danger to the entire team, and therefore
the team should have been made aware. Jack, and indeed Elsa herself, should have informed us - but they hid the truth. A lie by omission is still a lie."

"S'not exactly somethin' easy ta drop in polite conversation," Merida pointed out with a tilt of her head. "I mean, 'hey guys, how's it goin'? Oh, by the way, Hans wants me ta kill yer C.O.'"

"Be flippant if you must, but we had a right to know. In addition, if Jack's plan had gone wrong, the consequences could have torn the team apart. Instead of Jack currently being somewhat of an outcast, it would be Elsa - and there was a good chance he would be in no mental state to clear the air. These are risks and possible ramifications we didn't know about until after the fact."

"So that justifies tha level of shit bein' tossed at him?"

"Maybe not, but this is where the other half is not unsympathetic to Jack, for two reasons."

"And they are?"

"One is that while I dislike deceit and lies, I especially hold a dim view of hypocrisy. You see, I was in the infirmary hallway when Jack was explaining his plan, and had left for the barracks shortly after Anna told him he was lucky. During that time, a certain fact stood out to me, and I wanted to see if anyone else had noticed - which they had not."

Merida watched him closely. "Oh?"

"Elsa lied to her sister as well. She knew since Perdition what she was being forced to do, and she said nothing."

"Jack probably ordered her not ta," Merida offered, lightly shrugging.

"True," Kozmotis tilted his head, conceding that, "but like Rapunzel, Hiccup and Astrid, she could have said something at any time, if we follow Anna's logic. Especially given the gravity of her secret."

"So Elsa's the hypocrite?"

Kozmotis shook his head, and scratched at his beard. "No, Anna is. By rights, since Elsa lied by omission and kept her sister in the dark just like Jack did, she should share in Anna's wrath - yet she has not. Ergo, Anna is being hypocritical by sparing her sister from the diatribe directed toward Jack. For all Elsa knew, she was to murder her sister's best friend and the godfather to her sister's child - I don't know about you, but if that was kept from me, I would be enraged."

"But ye were."

"Indeed - and as I recall, it was you who stopped me." Kozmotis let out a low chuckle. "As for the second reason, Jack and I share something in common - we have both put ourselves in harm's way for someone else. The only difference is I formed intent in the moment - Jack had a week to think about it and to call it off if necessary, yet he went ahead with it."

"Don't remind me," Merida groaned, wincing heavily as the memory of the barfight, of Kozmotis' stunned body in her arms and the blood on his face appeared in her mind. "I still regret what happened."

"I don't," Kozmotis said abruptly and as blunt as ever, "and were I able to, I would not change a thing."
That made Merida stop in her tracks so suddenly that Kozmotis went a few steps further before he noticed. Her eyes on the back of his head, she watched him hesitate and turn around, feeling her heart repeat the same thumping it had done over a week ago.

Wearing a puzzled frown, Kozmotis cocked his head. "What's the matter?"

"Do ye really mean that?"

Kozmotis blinked, and the most fleeting expression of mild irritation crossed his grey features. "Of course. What do you take me for?"

Something in Merida snapped. Her heart skipped a beat, and the butterflies in her stomach that up until that moment had quietly fluttered intensified into a full-blown swarm. "Don't say things like that, laddie."

"Why not?"

"Because it makes me want ta do this."

Merida closed the distance between them in a short stride, and with her free hand, grabbed him by the collar of his vest and pulled him down to capture his lips in a hard, bruising kiss. Her eyes closed, she felt him stiffen against her mouth as though unsure of what to do, but as her lips began to move, his echoed hers.

He was surprisingly good, she noted in her pleasure-addled, foggy mind. Better than she expected from someone who, to her knowledge, had never been with anyone.

She felt a hand gently caress her cheek, causing a light moan to escape her throat and betray her hidden satisfaction. Instinctively, her body found his, moulding against his taller frame like it was meant to be there. It was an odd sensation, feeling one's heart punch against one's ribcage so hard it hurt.

Kozmotis was the first to pull away, however, cutting short her enjoyment with such finality she couldn't help but let out an annoyed, quiet growl. On the other hand, the area around her lips appreciated the freedom from his coarse beard.

"What was that for?" he breathed, their eyes less than six inches apart.

"Been wantin' ta do that since the target range," Merida murmured, smiling away her breathlessness. "Seemed a good a time as any."

"This changes things… between us," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I know." Merida let her hand glide up to stroke at the side of his face, feeling the contours of his chiselled, sharp bones under her fingertips. "But I'm game. Are you?"

Kozmotis didn't respond at first. His golden eyes glanced between hers, his brow dipping and returning to a relaxed line over and over. Though it was but a few moments, it felt long enough for a small cloud of anxiety to settle in her gut - had she made a mistake? Had she taken them through a door they should never have gone through?

Such thoughts vanished from her mind when Kozmotis gave her his answer. He surged forward, claiming her lips in a hard, yet passionate kiss that pulled yet another moan from her throat - the potency of which even she was surprised at. The instant his hand held the back of her head as he fed, a violent shiver coursed through her entire body, causing Trueshot to tumble from her right hand and...
land on the ground with a grassy thump. Barely aware, she ran her newly free hand across his side and pulled him flush against her, feeling his body against hers whilst they availed themselves of each other's numbing lips.

It was when she felt the dual sensation of something pressing against her, and her own involuntary reaction in response, however, that Merida was the one to break free from the kiss with a gasp of air. Her lips reddened, cheeks flushed the same shade as her hair, and panting for breath, she gazed up at him - yet their bodies were still near-entwined.

"Did I go too far?" Kozmotis asked.

Merida shook her head with vigor. "No, ye were just perfect - but if we go on any longer, I might go too far."

"In what..." Kozmotis' face went blank, and Merida could even spot an adorable shade of pink in its attempt to break through his grey skin. "...oh."

"Yeah," Merida snorted. "Tha naked, public, screaming-in-tha-woods kind of 'too far'."

"You think you'd be screaming?" The bastard actually half-smiled.

"Judging from what I felt an' how I'm pretty turned on—it's a distinct possibility." Merida quickly backed away and dropped down to pick Trueshot up, and held it close to her almost as a barrier from her own desires. She gave him a bashful, pointed smile. "We should get this patrol over with so I can have a cold shower... or three."

Elsa gently pushed the door to Jack's infirmary room open, and peered inside. The light in the ceiling was still as bright as it had been, giving the clinical white walls a new level of radiance. The heart monitor by the bed gave out a comforting rhythm of pips, and a regular peak along the green lines. It smelled just as clean as it had done when they left, but the silence within aside from the monitor's constant reminder was jarring. Voices, and then heated arguing had filled the room not thirty minutes prior, replaced by naught but an uncomfortable quiet.

Jack himself was laid in his bed, the tattered remains of his shirt haphazardly covering the sensors attached to his chest. Elsa watched him as he stared at the ceiling, his eyes moving to and fro, looking inward rather than out. His face was etched into a frown, but there was a strange feeling of loss and confusion in Elsa's heart as she observed him.

His eyes suddenly found her, and Elsa's breath caught. He said in a cracked, hoarse voice, "I didn't think I'd get visitors."

Elsa stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. "Rapunzel was kind enough to allow me."

Jack let out a quiet snort, and his gaze returned to the ceiling. "You look grim. Who died?"

Elsa folded her arms and gave him a reprimanding look. "I don't think this is an apt time to joke."

Jack let out a burst of bitter chuckles that went through Elsa like metal scraping metal. "Why not? I nearly died, my team's at each other's throats—oh, and I've lost about fifteen years' worth of memories. Perfect time to joke."

"Is this how you deal with tragedy?" Elsa said, her voice dancing on the border of disapproval and empathy, "You make light of it?"
"Tragedy? Some would call it karma. Got what I deserved for lying to the team and putting you through hell, didn't I?"

"Don't self-pity, Jack. It's unbecoming of you."

"And you'd know?" Jack bit back in a sour tone.

Elsa moved to the end of the bed, and leaned on the white metal footrest with her hands. "Yes, I would - or did you forget the events of the past three years and the role I played in them?"

His eyes found hers, and the flinch sent a prick of self-admonishment through her heart. She cursed her word choice. "Oh, I should have thought—" she began, wincing. "I didn't mean—"

Jack looked away, but the stung expression remained, if under an attempt to be concealed. "It's fine."

"No, it's not fine," Elsa said in a brusque, loud voice. "None of it is fine. This whole situation is…” her right hand gestured aimlessly as she searched for the most appropriate term - and failed miserably, "...very not fine!"

"Guess you illustrated the diversity of the word," Jack snarked.

"Shut up."

"Shutting up."

"I'm serious, because I have a great deal to say, and you need to hear it."

Jack studied her for a few moments, before digging his hands into the mattress in order to push himself up the bed, taking care to replace the remains of his shirt over his chest when they slid aside. Elsa took the chair she'd sat on when she held Anna in her arms, and pulled it closer to the end of the bed. Tugging her pants up by the knee, she crossed her legs and entwined her fingers over her thighs, before inhaling a lungful of air in preparation for what she anticipated was to be a long talk.

"When I bloomed - the first time - I was terrified. I was confused. Something unnatural was happening to me. So, I reached out to the only person at that precise moment who could help, who could be my rock - my boyfriend, Dylan. I hoped for reassurance, for compassion… but he looked at me with fear. Like I was a monster, something to be avoided. Like I was wrong."

Elsa looked down for a moment, and scratched at the side of her nose. "Today, when I returned to the camp and it was revealed what had happened… I received those same looks. Horror, fear, betrayal. Anna looked at me the same way she did when I found out her husband died in the Purge… that I was responsible. For the second time, I had torn her world apart. All that time you'd tried to convince me I wasn't a monster, that I was a person… for nothing. Do you know what that feels like—to know you might have destroyed the relationship you had tried so hard to rebuild?"

Jack tilted his head and opened his mouth, but seemingly thought better of it, and shook his head.

"The worst part is you <i>knew</i> what would happen. You knew Anna would have to make that terrible decision to incarcerate me, even temporarily. You knew there would be some time where I truly believed I killed you—and the team would, too." Elsa rubbed at her forehead, and then temporarily covered her mouth with loose fingers, her eyes distantly resting on the heart monitor display. "And even if you didn't—that would mean you didn't think about the consequences."

"I did."
"I believe you," Elsa said, her eyes finding him. "But then that means you knew what would happen if it went wrong. If you had either died in that settlement, or the Tardioxin had claimed too much, and you had been too far gone when Rapunzel and Astrid brought you back. You were the only one who knew the truth—and that truth could have been lost forever. Incarceration could have been my permanent reality, and even if the team put together what you were trying to do via Rapunzel, Astrid and Hiccup, and my own confession—it would not have mattered. You would either be dead or lost. The team would have fallen apart. I would likely have lost my parents, my sister, my friends and you. You gambled with more than your own life… you gambled with all of our lives. That's something very hard to forgive."

"I don't expect your forgiveness, or anyone else's." Jack did a slow shrug. "You're right on one thing, though. I should have made a backup plan. Maybe left a message on my iPod, or left Anna a letter for when we were too far for her to interfere."

"There is no maybe about it, Jack. You should have."

"Yeah, there's a lot of that. Could have done this, should've done that. Fine for everyone to second guess and analyse after the fact." Jack let out a breath, and stared off at the ceiling. "It's fine to armchair-theorise from a place of complete safety, but the what-ifs and the maybes don't matter compared to the what-is. And the what-is is that it worked."

"And that I went through shit, Jack." Elsa glared at him. "Or did you miss that part?"

Jack looked at her, only for his gaze to fall to the bed. "No. That part… that part I wished never happened."

His brow then furrowed, and his shoulders drew back. He lifted his head, and then looked back at her with his head tilted. "What do you want from me, Elsa? Do you want an apology? You're not gonna get one."

Elsa bristled. "Excuse me?"

Jack held up a hand. "Actually, no, you deserve one. I'm sorry you had to go through that. I'm sorry for what happened to you. I'm sorry it was you who got ambushed, and had to do it. I'm so sorry for all the pain I've caused you… but I'm not gonna apologise for the rest."

Elsa leaned forward, burning him with her eyes. "Why not?"

"Because a wise man on this team once told me: never apologise for doing the right thing." Jack held her gaze, resolve meeting her fire with stone. "I stand by what I did and why I did it. You can hate me, you can all hate me—but that won't change my mind."

Elsa found herself bereft of words. She didn't expect a grovelling mess of a man, begging at her feet for forgiveness, but did not expect that.

"You remember the Battle of the Depot?"

"Yes."

"The only reason my team and I survived that was because Harvester ordered Scout Team Red to stay behind and slow you down. He knew what would happen to them. He knew they were no match for you—but they stayed. He made the hard call, and sacrificed four people to save five. He knew Flynn would hate him for it—and he was right, but he stood by it. I never knew what it meant to make the hard call until a week ago."
Jack reached for a clear plastic cup of water sitting on the nightstand at his right, and took a sip. "When we were driving back from Perdition, I was running through all sorts of scenarios in my mind—I know, right? Jack Overland actually uses his brain. Anyway, no matter which way I looked, you were always gonna lose. If I didn't let you do it, you lose your parents and your sister. If I let you kill me, you lose your parents, and your sister, and me—'cause let's face it, Hans has your folks for a reason. He's not gonna let them go. Not unless we take them. So I thought about letting you make the call—only, tell me if I'm wrong: you wouldn't do it. You'd sacrifice your parents and possibly your relationship with Anna. Right?"

Elsa opened her mouth to protest otherwise, but found no words. He was right, infuriating as it was. She would have refused to let Hans win, refused to kill Jack - and accepted the consequences. Besides, up until a week ago she was under the impression her parents were dead—giving Hans the middle finger would have made it reality. Closing her mouth, she looked away, frowning at the wall.

"Here's the thing—I'm not worth that. One life to save two and the relationship with a third? There's no decision-making process. Thing is, I don't really wanna die, and if I do, everything you have with Anna goes to hell so…I took the decision out of your hands. And I don't regret it."

"Why didn't you tell me what you were planning to do? Why didn't you tell Anna?"

"Anna would have stopped us, and I couldn't let that happen. Too much at stake. As for you… if I told you what I was planning, you'd have acted differently. Way you've described Hans, the guy knows how to read people, and he'd know if you were faking it. He was looking for real grief, real tears. You said it yourself - he wanted to see you bleed. Only way he'd see that is if you actually thought you'd done it—because if he thought for a second he was being tricked, he'd've had us both killed. There'd be no-one to tell the real truth."

Elsa found herself nodding, at least internally. Hans' words repeated themselves in her mind: with them both dead, Anna would have no choice but to believe Hans' lie spread all over the Media Stream. They would have died for nothing.

"I must admit," she said, wiping under her nose after a sniff, "there is a small part of me that wonders if there is a difference between you and Hans. It says to me you have both lied and manipulated, said one thing but mean another."

"Don't compare me to—" Jack growled.

Elsa held up a hand. "I'm not finished, Jack, because that wise man who gave you that piece of advice was, I'm guessing, the same man who reminded me I should look at all perspectives before I make a judgement."

Jack closed his mouth, but there was a deep anger, a palpable offense in his eyes. After all, she had just associated him with the man who organised the destruction of their home and the deaths of three hundred of his friends.

"Hans did what he did for himself. Everything he has done, every word he has spoken was for his benefit. He said so himself—he will lie, cheat and kill anyone to get what he wants, and he has gained so much."

Elsa scraped her chair forward until she was halfway up the bed, and rested her hand on the mattress. Jack glanced down at her hand, frowning in confusion at the movement. "You are the opposite. You lied, and manipulated, but it wasn't for your own gains. You saw my choices, saw how shitty my options were, and decided to create one that was the least shitty of them all. You created a way out—even if that path was through fire and pain. Because of that, I still have my sister's love. I have a
chance at my family being whole again. The damage… can be repaired. Hans no longer has access to us—we have gained so much, and yet… the only person who has lost is you."

Jack looked down, his brow furrowing further in evident internal pain.

"For that, I feel I owe you an apology," she said, her prior anger calming into a simmering heat. "Since I've been here, I have only talked about myself—I never once asked how you were."

Jack shook his head and averted his eyes to the opposite side of the room. "It doesn't matter."

It occurred to Elsa how he hadn't smiled once, something that sent a prang through her soul. She reached for his hand, almost doubling over to do so. Taking his fingers in hers, she held them tightly, and Jack's head swivelled to eye the contact with a frowning confusion, like it was a gesture he had not anticipated. "It matters to me," she said with sincerity. "Because even after all that's happened, I still care about you."

Jack looked up at her, and his brow relaxed until the faintest knitting remained. He studied her for a few moments, as though questioning her earnestness, wondering why she was being that way with him. It was then that Elsa could see the confusion Rapunzel talked about behind his eyes.

"Like I'm incomplete," he murmured.

"Because of your amnesia?" Elsa asked. Jack slowly nodded, and his lower lip curled inward as a swallow made its way down his throat.

"I've been trying… to remember. It's like my mind is a palace, and I can go anywhere I want, revisit any place I want… but now there's this door. I open it… and there's nothing. Just empty space, a void. It feels like… someone reached into my mind and took something I'll never get back." Staring at their hands, but through them, Jack sniffed and immediately wiped at his nose with a finger… but the action caused a tear to slip from his left eye. "I know I've talked about my family to Anna, to you… but I can't remember them. Their faces, their hair, their voices… it's all lost to me. And I'll never know. I don't have anyone else. My real family's gone, my surrogate mom's gone. It's all gone. I'm alone."

Elsa squeezed his hand, and leaned to the side so the movement would attract his gaze. "No, you're not. You still have us."

Jack let out another bark of bitter laughter, but it was etched with pain than cynicism. "Sure. Anna hates me, you probably do. Everything's different, now. I'm not the same Jack to them I was a week ago. I lied to them, manipulated them—the most damning part? I can live with that. I mean, sure, it hurts and I wish I'd never had to, but… I can live with it. I paid a price for what I did, to help you because I…" he hesitated, leaving Elsa to wonder if there was but one word he was about to say, "I'm the only one who should take responsibility for losing my memories. No-one else. Not you, not Rapunzel, not anyone. I mean—this is a victory, right? And all it took was some Tardioxin, a tampered pistol, the team's respect, and the memories of one Ghost leader."

Jack's lips curled into a smile on one side, but it was hollow. "I don't know about you, but some would call that a bargain."

"The team might—"

"If it's all the same to you," Jack interrupted, pulling his hand from hers so he could shuffle down the bed, "I just wanna be alone for a while before Rapunzel does her next round of checks. I have a lot to think about—" he winced slightly as he laid down, "—have to plan our next move."
Though Elsa's fingers mourned the absence of his touch, there was a finality with which he spoke and moved that told her the conversation was over. What needed to be said had been said, and no more. Elsa nodded to herself, before rising from her chair and making her way to the door. Her hand gently grasped the cold handle, before a thought struck her mind. She turned just enough to look at him without doing so over her shoulder - his eyes had once again found the ceiling, losing himself within his mind.

"I don't hate you."

Jack's eyes flicked down to her, his hands laced across his chest.

"I'm confused, I'm hurt, I'm angry and I feel deceived and betrayed… but I don't hate you. I know what you've done for me, and I appreciate you thought it was best at the time, but the road to sedition is paved with good intentions, and my life so far has been a case of one good intention after another. I just… need time to work out how I feel about you."

Elsa turned and twisted the handle when Jack's voice cut through the room.

"Hell."

Elsa looked over her shoulder. "I'm sorry?"

"The saying is: the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

"Then I'll use that, presuming the meaning is the same."

"Not really. Hell's worse." Jack's eyes found the ceiling. "I should know—I'm already there."

"I wonder what Rapunzel wants us to meet up for," Anna mused to Elsa as they approached the mess hall, the winter air coolly brushing against Elsa's skin whilst the afternoon sunlight shone pleasantly down upon the base, like the sky itself was blessing them.

"It did seem important," Elsa replied, her hands clasped behind her back.

"Wonder if it's about Jack." Anna scratched at her upper arm. "I meant to ask: did you two talk yesterday?"

"We did." Elsa inhaled a lungful of the cold January air. "We understand each other."

"Good, 'cause I'm not sure I believe what Merida's been saying about why. She thinks he loves you—you don't do that to someone you say you love. I should know—Kristoff kept me off the front lines for every battle. He knew I wanted to fight, but manipulated it so I wasn't able to."

Elsa remained silent, for a burning desire to defend Jack blossomed within her heart. Nevertheless, her hands balled into fists behind her back.

"Then there's the whole who he did it for thing," Anna continued, oblivious. "I mean, she says he did it for you, but he also did it for me and for the team. So how could it have been out of love if it wasn't just for—"

Elsa snapped. Halting in step, she whirled around and gripped Anna by her left upper arm, a stony glare radiating from her eyes.

"You've never been in command before, have you?"
Anna, her eyes wide like a deer in a hover car's headlights, shook her head.

"I thought not, because it shows. That's twice you've spoken ill of people who are not here to defend themselves, one of whom is dead—that same person you profess to love. In fact, grief for that man caused you to lash out at me. If your husband was here and heard you talking about him in such a way—how do you think he would feel?"

Guilt crossed Anna's face like a slap to the cheek. Her eyes fell, and a look of shame filled her eyes.

"Precisely. Now—just because you may or may not feel something for someone does not mean you act to the exclusion of everyone else—especially if that 'everyone' happens to be a team of men and women who entrust you with their lives. Whatever may or may not exist between Jack and I is nothing to do with anyone else, and furthermore, I will hear no more discussion on this topic. Is that in any way unclear?"

Anna looked up at her, startled, like she had not expected Elsa to unleash such a stern tirade in her direction. Perhaps she had been expecting Elsa to completely side with her - regardless, she indicated her acknowledgement with a nod.

"Good." Elsa softened her voice by a wide margin, and allowed her face to relax into an empathic, caring frown, moving her hand to rest on Anna's shoulder. "You are my sister and I love you, but you are old and experienced enough to know by now to recognise when there is business you are not entitled to know, and when to shut the fuck up."

"I hear you," Anna murmured. Still, she looked like a scolded child. "Sorry."

"Good. Now, let's find out why Rapunzel wants to see us."

Elsa resumed their journey, with Anna following a few steps behind her. Reaching the mess hall doors, she grasped the handle bar and pulled one of the glass doors aside, holding it open with her outstretched fingertips for Anna to pass through.

They were not the only ones called, it seemed. Inside, at the long centre table, sat Astrid and Hiccup at one side, and Merida and Pitch at the other. Both sides seemed engaged in animated discussion with each other - or rather, Merida and Astrid chatting away with Hiccup occasionally interjecting, and Pitch remaining silent as ever.

Though she did ponder why Pitch had suddenly shaved; little more than a razor-sharp encirclement of his mouth with a small peak under his chin remained of the original beard.

The moment his golden eyes flicked up to their arrival, and alerted the group to Elsa and Anna's presence, however, the talking ceased and the atmosphere took a nosedive. Hiccup and Astrid greeted them with a wave and a nod respectively, but Merida's face dropped from a cheery smile to a sour scowl - and it took a few moments for Elsa to realise the redhead wasn't looking at her, but Anna.

"You got the call too, huh?" Hiccup said.

"Yes." Elsa made her way into the mess hall, and took a seat by Astrid. "It seemed fairly urgent."

"Anyone know what it's about?" Anna asked as she sat down next to Elsa.

The moment she did, however, Merida stood up and left her place, choosing to perch on one of the parallel tables with her feet up on the closest stool. The movement was not missed by anyone in the room, not least by Anna, who looked like she didn't quite know how to react. Pitch chose to rise as
well, though without the standoffish look, and stood next to Merida with his arms folded.

"No, I—uh…” Hiccup glanced between the newly split members of the group, taken off guard by the movement. "We've not heard anything."

"That's because even I don't know what it's about."

Elsa's eyes, and those of the assembled team immediately went to the door, where Rapunzel stood with her arm outstretched to keep it open much like Elsa did. Her bob dipped on the right side as she nodded to the door.

"But he does."

In walked Jack, his arrival heralded by the sound of metal lightly impacting the concrete floor, dressed in his camouflage pants and a brand new, black shirt. It took a second for Elsa to recognise the reason for the clinking noise; Jack was leaning a little on his extended staff, using it for both support and pace. Rapunzel let the door gently shut behind him, and closely followed him as he walked between the two tables. He kept his eyes to the floor as Elsa watched, but as he drew between them, he wobbled and fell against his staff. He gripped it tightly to avoid falling to the floor, and Rapunzel surged forward to catch him.

"I'm fine," he said in a brisk tone, "but thanks."

Rapunzel reluctantly stepped back, though remained within arm's reach of him. Jack pulled himself straight, before taking a breath and resuming his rhythmic tapping.

"You okay, chief?" Hiccup asked, worry in his voice.

"Another side effect of the Tardioxin," Jack answered. "Gives you sea legs for a day or so. Plus, y'know, being stuck in a bed for twenty-four hours and not getting any sleep last night."

Elsa watched, concern in her gut as Jack made his way to the head of the table and leaned against the long steel and glass unit of the food dispensary, and grasped his staff to keep him upright. Still he refused to look anyone in the eye.

"You sure you should be out of your bed?" Astrid asked, her left eyebrow raised.

"Rapunzel and I had a deal—if I could make it to here, unaided by her and without falling over, I could have my command back." Jack curled half a smile, though Elsa saw no positivity in it. "Looks like I won."

"You're still getting your physicals, though," Rapunzel pointed out with a small measure of sternness.

"Yeah, yeah." Jack waved it off, but the action caused him to wobble slightly. "Okay. Make like there's a T-Rex, and don't make sudden moves, Jacky-boy. Got it."

"So why are we here?" Merida asked. "An' what does that mean fer who's doin' what?"

"Ranks are back to normal, but after we all leave this room, I'm gonna lead from base. Anything concerning operations offbase will be coordinated with Elsa as the X.O for the next week—and about the medical thing, I'll leave that to Anna and Rapunzel to discuss who's gonna be the Chief Medical Officer."

Jack shifted slightly, but kept his grip on his staff. Gazing distantly at the empty space on the table
before him, he inhaled a breath through his nose, and let it out in one long exhalation the same way.

"As for the other thing, well, here goes." Jack straightened up as best he could, and looked at each of them in turn. "We took a hit. We're hurting. Trust has been shaken, and we're already divided. Hans knew he couldn't come at us from the front, so he came at us sideways. Figured if he couldn't take us down the old-fashioned way, he'd make us do it ourselves. I look around... and he almost succeeded."

"That wasn't Hans," Anna interrupted. "Your actions caused this."

"Which wouldnae have happened if Hans hadn't done what he did ta Elsa," Merida snapped. "Or if you hadn't made the call."

"Do we really have to do this—"

"ENOUGH!"

Jack's shout silenced the brewing argument like a bomb on a field, though when the startled feeling began to wash away from Elsa's chest, she noticed even the act of shouting seemed to take its toll on him. He swayed slightly, visibly attempting to recover his strength as his eyes closed, taking in deep breaths through his mouth.

"You all may hate me for it. You probably don't respect me as much as you did—but I don't care. If I didn't do what I did, this would be the best case scenario. Worst case, you'd actually be trying to hurt each other. Right now, Hans wants us to tear ourselves apart from the inside, so you've got to ask yourselves: do we carry on down this road and let him win, or do we act like adults, talk out our differences and never let this happen again? Because I need to know now."

"Why?" Elsa asked as she cast a look around the room. Each face fell slightly, nodding subtly to themselves—and even Anna showed her begrudging agreement.

"So I know if I'm doing this next part alone."

Jack adjusted his position, enabling him to stand straighter than before. "Elsa said something yesterday that stuck in my mind—"

"Hopefully not the only thing," Anna muttered, earning her an elbow to the arm and a we-talked-about-this-now-shut-it look from Elsa.

"—so she'll be able to tell me if I wrong: Hans doesn't do anything unless it benefits him in some way. Right?"

Jack's eyes rested on her, and she nodded. "Right. Everything he's done, every plan he's made has had a purpose, a phase in a scheme that ultimately helps him."

"Exactly. Which tells me he has your parents for a reason—one we don't know yet. The ambush, blackmailing Elsa—it was just him taking advantage of an opportunity. He didn't know Elsa would be near a Uni-Com, didn't know Red would make the call. He just happened to have your parents at the time, and saw a way to take us out. Thing is—by doing that, he just revealed his hand."

Jack opened his mouth to speak further, but a hoarse cough barged its way through his throat. He reached for the canteen at his belt, and took a deep swig before continuing.

"It got me thinking—why is he being so sneaky about it all?" Jack slid the canteen back into its
holster. "He's the Supreme Commander, he doesn't need to rig up a program to connect Uni-Coms, or use parents to threaten their daughter into assassinating a Ghost. He's in control of the entirety of Unity's armed forces, with all this technology at his fingertips. So why did he come at us sideways? Why be so clandestine about it—what has he got to hide, and from whom?"

Elsa's brow rose as her lips parted, her face going blank with understanding. "He's the only one who knows we're alive…"

"That's what I think." Jack nodded at her. "He knows, but no-one else does. Not even his boss, the goddamn Unifier. Big guy finds out? Hans is screwed. All his planning—for nothing. Then that got me thinking—what else is being kept from the Unifier? What if he doesn't even know your parents are alive?"

Elsa snorted, slowly shaking her head. The pieces were falling into place, her wavelength running parallel to Jack's. "It all makes sense, now."

Anna looked at her, frowning. "What does?"

Elsa glanced at her sister, before adjusting her position on her stool so she could gesture with her hands. "If the Unifier was complicit with whatever reason Hans has my parents, he wouldn't have needed to fake their deaths. He could have trumped up an allegation of sedition and had them taken away, not shot by clones of the Ghosts. No-one would question it. Not even the Inquisitors."

Elsa looked at Jack. "Hans didn't just want to convince me. He wanted to convince the Unifier—the whole population—that they were dead."

"Bingo. So then what's Hans' endgame? Your parents, the Valkyries, the Purge—all phases in one big plan. So what's his angle?"

"He wants the top job." Astrid glared at the empty space on the table. "He wants the Unifier's job. Absolute power."

"That's my thought," Jack said, nodding at Astrid. "Whatever reason he has the Snowfields for, it's for that. And that makes this next part extra important—as if them being Elsa and Anna's parents unfairly imprisoned by a sadistic psychopath isn't enough of a reason."

Pitch was the first to ask, "What part?"

"The part where I rescue the Snowfields. And I'll do it alone, if I have to."

Astrid burst into laughter, and pushed herself up from the table. Jack tossed her a bemused frown as she held up a finger and disapprovingly wagged it. "Oh-ho-ho-no. You're not doing it alone, Cap. I got your back."

"Me too," Merida said, rising to her feet - but not before shooting Anna a look of I-told-you-so. "Ye think ye're doin' it without me, ye've got another thing comin'. I've been itchin' fer some payback."

"Far be it for me to miss a fight," Kozmotis added. "I'm with you."

"Same here," Hiccup added, joining the others in standing. "Toothless and I will be there."

"Someone needs to be there to patch all of you up," Rapunzel chimed in. "I'm your gal."

Elsa found herself the recipient of several gazes, giving her the distinct impression of being on the spot - redundant as it was. With a smile and an amused snort, she said, "As if it was ever in doubt."
She pushed herself to her feet, feathering her fingertips across the table. "You will not be alone, Jack. I will not miss this chance to save our parents - not when we have gone through what we have for that chance. I'll be at your side."

Elsa found her sight travelling to the only person in the room not standing, the only voice unheard. Anna sat with her eyes burning a hole in the table, her fingers entwined together. Her mouth slightly parted as her brow dipped, and Elsa heard an audible intake of breath.

"Lot's happened these past few days. Lot of lies, lot of stuff I'm not sure I can forgive. Lot of hurt."

"...and a lot of shut the fuck up," Merida said under her breath.

"But that—" Anna shot a dirty look at Merida, "—doesn't change what's at stake. Doesn't change that my baby can have their grandparents, doesn't change the fact that we're still a team."

Carefully she rose, ensuring her abdomen did not touch the table edge. "You can count on me."

If Jack was relieved, he didn't show it. The surprise, however, was visible - as though he didn't expect the team to rally as they did. "Okay, well—I guess this makes it easier. Thank you—all of you."

"So we're happy, now?" Astrid looked around, half a smile etched on her lips. "Bunch of idiots, all standing up."

Elsa dipped her head and smiled, remembering the last time Astrid said those words. She wondered if Jack felt as heartened as she did back then.

"Look who's talkin'," Merida snarked with a smirk, earning her a sneer and the pulling of a face courtesy of the taller blonde.

"Way I figure it," Jack brought the topic back, "Hans has got 'em holed up somewhere secret, somewhere out of the way. Probably off the grid—won't show up on Unity's records. That's our first clue. Second one is that wherever it is, there will still be a human presence there. Gotta have guards—and guards have to eat, right? Which means supplies, and that means traffic."

"My father managed to give us another clue," Elsa interjected, looking at each of them in turn, "before Hans cut the call. He said to look for the mountains—so wherever they are, it's within visual range of some mountains."

"So that's where Hiccup and Astrid come in." Jack unfurled one finger from his staff and pointed at them, before curling it back again. "You two will take a map and enough supplies for several days, and look for this place. Two eyes are better than one, and you'll have each other if things get hairy—but don't get caught. Shit gets hot, you run."

"So we're looking for a secret place near some mountains," Hiccup raised an eyebrow. "It's a big country, Jack. Not much to go on."

"That's where you'll coordinate with Merida and Koz."

"Koz?" Rapunzel whispered, causing the man in question to shoot her a cold look.

"You two are going back to Perdition."

"I'm sorry—what?" Merida gaped, bewildered. "You said—"
"Yeah, I know. But Hiccup's right—even with Mr. Snowfield's clue, it's a needle in a haystack. So what you'll do is get in to Perdition. Wait until nightfall, and then break into the Archon's office. Use his Uni-Com—each Archon's Uni-Com is connected—and you should be able to access a list of supply convoy routes. Look for anything out of place, like one settlement receiving more food than they should, or routes that don't lead anywhere. You find anything suspicious, you relay it to Hiccup and Astrid, and they'll take it from there."

"If it helps," Rapunzel added, "use Tardioxin as a search parameter. Like I told Jack; it's heavily regulated, recorded and monitored. If one place is getting more than it should, that's a sign something's not on the level."

"Right," Pitch, or rather 'Koz', said. "When do we leave?"

"Soon as you can. Take the jeep and whatever else you'll need—and try not to cause a scene, okay?"

"What about the rest of us?" Rapunzel asked.

"Well, Hans thinks I'm dead, and Elsa's either dead or imprisoned. We've got to keep up that impression, so Elsa and I will stay here." Jack tilted his head toward Rapunzel, "Doctor Strange here's not letting me out of her sight—"

"Nope. Wait… what did you—"

"—so she's staying too. As for Anna—it's up to you, but it'd be great if you could do a weapons and kit inventory, check the Fairy's systems are ship-shape, maybe paint the masks of whoever needs 'em."

Anna nodded. "Right."

"I've also gotta remind you all that time's not on our side. Even if the Snowfields are part of Hans' plan, we don't know how close he is to completing whatever it is he needs them for. Soon as they're no longer useful, he'll have them taken out. We have seven days to work with, because come what may…"

Jack looked at each of them, and paused—whether for dramatic emphasis or not, Elsa didn't know, but it had the desired effect.

"...on the eighth day, the Ghosts are going to war."
Schism

"Schism"

Jack knew why he did it.

Hell, it'd be obvious to anyone.

The daylight had begun its inexorable descent into the embrace of night, like an astral being slowly drawing the darkened blinds of space down over the sky. From baby blue to golden amber, from golden amber to blood red, and blood red to midnight blue. It was a comforting consistency, a soothing regularity. Ordinarily, Jack eschewed repetition - but the trustworthy quality of the sunrise and the sunset offered the conscious awareness of time, of how precious it was and how every day was a victory over death. His time was not borrowed, but earned.

A constant reminder of what it was to be alive.

He'd clambered up onto the barracks, the tallest structure in the camp - which wasn't saying much since the camp itself was designed to be hidden, ergo the surrounding treeline dwarfed the man made buildings. From there, he'd attempted to follow his tradition of watching the sun begin to set, as he had done every evening. Only, that particular instance did not engender within him a sense of peace and gratitude, but a hollow emptiness and an almost nihilistic frustration, something altogether unexpected yet not.

With the trees as tall as they were, they carved the horizon between them almost to halfway up the sky, robbing him of the natural splendour usually afforded by the Earth's simple rotation. It was like the sky was bleeding, rivulets of crimson and gold seeping forth from wounds sustained by black daggers of wood, leaf and shadow.

Put simply, he couldn't see shit - and it only widened the chasm between life on land and life at sea. Nothing obscured the sunset upon the Atlantic, nothing blocked the shimmering treasure of light reflected by the water's surface. He missed the Guardian Star. Missed the life he had, where times were ironically simpler. Less responsibility, happier life. Though they still enjoyed a measure of freedom, it felt like Canada was a prison. For the first time since assuming command, Jack doubted his decision.

Then there was the tradition itself. It was unsettling, knowing he had told his friends the reason for his regular sunset-watching yet not being able to remember a damn thing about why, or who. So, being a guy with straws at which to clutch, he'd entertained the hope that sticking to tradition would jar something into his recollection. A face, a smile… a word… a voice. Anything.

To his quiet despair, the futility of willing the trees to allow him a clear view equalled the futility of hoping against Rapunzel's medical diagnosis. She was right. He remembered nothing. It was just a sunset, and nothing more. Simply empty space, vibrant colours, and a growing resignation.

Jack tapped his fingers against his staff, one by one, gazing at the last vestiges of gold peeking through the trees, each tap a rhythm of pointlessness and acceptance. Rapunzel was right, though he railed against admitting it. Sarah and Emma Overland no longer existed, and their last remaining connection to the living world had severed that tie to save another. He wondered what they would have said if he asked - would they have given him their blessing, or denounced him for his betrayal of their memory?
What would you have said, if the price to save two strangers was to forget you?

How would you have looked at me, if I told you the only way to stem the bleeding was to turn my back on you forever?

Questions to which he had no answer, and never would. Perhaps that was the most bitter of pills to swallow.

Time marched on, and by his estimation, only about half an hour remained of daylight before the camp had to fall silent. They could be as loud as they wanted in the day, but the night was honest and only concealed the world from sight. Voices carried in the air for a remarkable distance, and Reapers needed only an unfamiliar sound before swarming to investigate. Luck had been on their side as far as passing swarms were concerned, but luck had a habit of running out.

Emitting a long exhalation through his nose, Jack shifted his weight onto his left hip, and curled his feet under him so as to push himself up by his left hand. Mercifully the Tardioxin's effects had all but vanished in the the forty-eight hours since the meeting in the command room, so for all intents and purposes, he was back to fighting shape. He carefully made his way across the roof of the barracks toward the ladder he'd clambered up prior, his mind heavy and heart sober.

Which was when Anna's head popped up from below the roof's edge.

"Oh!" she blurted, giving a little start upon seeing him so close to the laddertop. "Jack, uh, hey."

"Anna?" Jack frowned. He looked around him, wondering if anyone else had managed to sneak up to the roof and whether it was them Anna was coming to see. "What are you doing up here?"

"I—uh—well, sun's setting, so I figured you'd be up here."

"Should you really be climbing, y'know, with—"

Anna closed her lips and gave him an unimpressed look, complete with a cocked eyebrow. "I'm still in the first trimester just about, so as long as I'm careful, it'll be fine. Gotta take it easy in a couple of weeks, but 'til then, gimme a break."

She climbed up another rung until her upper body came into view, and extended her right arm out to him. Unsure of what to do, Jack cast a puzzled glance at her hand. Anna let out a huff, and wiggled the offered limb.

"Doesn't mean you can't help a mama out, y'know?"

"Oh!" Jack shook his head in the hope of returning some semblance of cognitive processing. "Right."

He grasped her by the forearm, and tensed himself so as to enable Anna to pull herself up onto the roof. She let out a few breaths of exertion - probably out of habit - and proceeded to brush off some imaginary dust from her combat clothes.

"So…" Jack began. "What's the matter?"

Anna instantly stopped dusting herself off, and blankly looked up at him. "Right. Yeah. Um… we need to talk."

There was a moment where a part of Jack twinged with soft anger, an unimpressed vexation that pulsed from his heart like a sonar blip. He snorted, feeling his prior bemusement vanish. "You've
been ignoring me for two days, Anna."

She winced. "I know…"

"I've tried to talk to you but you pretend I'm either invisible, or you just walk out."

"I know." Anna sighed, her shoulders sagging. She raised a hand to her forehead and gently stroked, and her other hand rested upon her left hip as she looked away. "I know. I haven't been fair, and that's… that's on me."

"Why?" It was a silly question, a voice in his head pointed out, but still he wanted to hear the answer.

"I was angry, Jack. Angrier than I've ever been. Not to mention this sense of guilt over what happened to you, whether I should be pissed at you, if I have the right—not to mention hormones and all that shit. I needed distance, Jack."

"You could have just told me—"

Anna folded her arms. "Pot, kettle. You're not exactly in the best place to judge."

Jack closed his eyes and turned away, roughly running a hand down his face. "And we're back to that."

"We never left, Jack," she said behind him. "You might have Astrid and Red in your corner, but don't forget, any blame for my behaviour can also be laid at Red's feet. She hasn't exactly been Miss Mature of the Year."

"And you have?" Jack whirled around. "Last I checked, pretending someone doesn't exist is something out of high school—"

"Yeah, and like I said, that's on me."

"—so if you're here just to bitch about Red, then do what you've been doing and leave me alone."

"I'm here because I wanted to apologise, you asshole!"

"You…" Jack's mouth opened and closed, her response claiming his ability to speak. "...apologise?"

"Yeah." Anna cradled her chest, yet with a tension normally associated with the folding of the arms. "First, I wanted to say sorry for ignoring you. Koz was right—I should be looking to Elsa as an example, and shutting you out is not what a mature person would do."

"Okay…"

Anna took a quick breath, and let it out in a sigh as she began to slowly pace the roof. "I've not been the most fair person for a while. I've been spending way more time with you than my own sister… at first, I figured it was because she's only been back in my life for a few months, but you and I have been friends for years. Battle, war… it creates bonds, y'know?"

"I do."

Anna turned, and leisurely retraced her steps. "But in the past couple of days, I realised… that hasn't been fair on her. Elsa's been waiting quietly in the background. Watching us. Wishing. She put so much into being in my life, and… I haven't exactly done the same. I know she wouldn't say it, and she might not feel it, but… to her, she lost her place to you. When I chose you over her."
"I never wanted—what?"

"During the Purge, we talked in the mess hall after you left. She asked me—practically begged me—to come with her. Even after all that happened, all the lives she’d taken, our home being ripped apart, in that moment, all she wanted was to have me back. Part of me wanted to go but… in the end, I chose you. I chose my life as a Ghost. I turned my back on her. I can't imagine what that felt like."

"You didn't really have a choice…"

"That's what's so fucked up. I didn't—but to her, I abandoned her. I won't do that again, not now, not after what you did."

"Anna, I did it because—"

"I know why you did it, Jack. I haven't exactly been resting on my ass the past two days. Doing a lot of thinking. I appreciate why you did it, and for who, but—"

"Then why are you—"

Anna halted, and rounded on him, her eyes wide and her expression inflamed. "She is my sister, Jack! My sister! She's been through hell already! She thought she lost our parents, thought I was gone—finds out I'm alive only for me to walk away from her. She's got the weight of thirty deaths resting on her shoulders, been betrayed, forced to almost kill you and then—"

Anna turned away, and clenched her right hand into a fist. She gently shook it, as though the act would help her control her visible anger. Her head dipped, and though her breathing had quietened from its loud, seething rhythm, Jack could still feel the heat radiate from her body.

"Elsa is stronger than I am. Always has been. She's been through so much I'm amazed she's still standing, and she keeps going. She shouldn't have to. She's already been through so much, and you put her through more." Anna turned, and regarded him with an imploring, solemn look. "That's why I was—still am—furious with you. You knew what would happen, and you put her through hell anyway. You hurt her, hurt me. Not to mention the lies and the broken promises."

Jack said in a quiet, small voice. "I talked about this with her. I had no choice."

"Yeah, I know. She told me you took responsibility for it, and that I can respect. But I didn't have a choice on the Star, and yet I said what I said and did what I did. Just because you have to do something… it doesn't make it right." Anna took in a long breath, and her arms cradled her chest once again. To Jack's surprise, she took a few steps toward him, her head dipping down. "Which leads me to the other person I haven't been fair on... you."

Jack frowned, recoiling slightly. "Me?"

"Yeah." Anna looked up at him. "I miss you, Jack."

Blinking, Jack gave her a cocked eyebrow and a funny look. "I'm right here."

Anna shook her head. "Not what I meant. I miss the old Jack. The Jack who, even though I checked every doorway religiously, always caught me with a bucket of snow. Who taught me to harness my powers, who always had a joke, who made everyone around him happy just by being there. Who saw me naked, and didn't tell a soul. The Jack who didn't have the weight of the world on his shoulders. I miss that Jack, that life."

"Things are different now, Anna. I can't just—"
"I know," she sighed. "I know you've had to grow into this leadership role. I know you've had to focus on other things than pranks, it's just… I regret encouraging you to take up the position all those months ago. I wish Kristoff never made you his X.O.. I wish… Elsa said it showed that I didn't know what command was like, and she was right. I don't ever want to lead if it means giving up what makes me me, because the old Jack would have never done what you did."

Something inside Jack piqued at her words. Whether it was the tone, the implication or - though she did admit as such - the unfairness of it all, he didn't know.

"You do remember Kristoff sacrificed four people to save your ass—to save all our asses. He hadn't done that? You wouldn't be here right now, saying that to me. We probably wouldn't even be breathing."

"He also made damn sure I was never in any danger while the rest of us risked our lives." Anna rested a hand on her hip whilst the other scratched at her forehead. "But I get it. I can't complain about hard calls when I've benefited from them."

"Twice."

"Yeah. Point is… I've been holding you to an unfair standard. I've been comparing you to who you used to be, and probably someone you won't be again. The problem is… that Jack was my best friend. You… I'm sorry, I can't help it—I don't trust you. Not anymore. Not as much as I used to."

Jack stepped back, his face falling in shock. Her words felt like a dagger to his heart and a slap to his face, and a ragged breath escaped his lips. Anna saw his reaction and quickly amended, "I mean: I trust you as my leader. As my child's godfather. I trust you to keep me and everyone safe, but… I don't trust you with me. With knowing me as intimately as you used to."

Jack couldn't respond. His breath stolen, he looked away, his heart pulsing with pain and his throat aching. He turned, running a hand through his hair - why did it hurt so much? He knew it might happen. He knew Anna would react badly… but knowing something and then experiencing it were completely different concepts. He knew part of the price would be damage to his friendship with Anna - but he didn't anticipate just how much damage.

Thoughts and images ran through his mind at a million miles an hour. Anna laughing at a cheesy joke he'd told. Anna proudly displaying control over her flames during their final training session. Anna's shriek of shock and hurried covering of her body when he accidentally caught her. Sparring. High-fiving. Walking through a blizzard just to be with him.

Best friends.

"I just… we can't be as close as we were before. Not until it stops hurting to be around you. I'm sorry, Jack."

Jack turned away, barely conscious of the light snowfall that had spontaneously appeared around him, but acutely aware of what he could do if he let his emotions and his powers reach too much together. He clamped his eyes shut, balling his hands into fists, willing logic and acceptance to overcome pain and anger… and to hide the tears threatening to fall.

He took a breath, a long, resolute breath, and let it out in one long exhalation, praying it would not betray his pain. "If that's what you want," he said, and found himself started by the flat, cold tone. "Just answer me one question."

Anna, who had turned away and was heading for the ladder, turned and looked over her shoulder
"How far would you go to protect those you care about?"

Anna's head lifted a little, and her lips parted just as Jack heard an audible intake of breath. Reluctant to hear, or even see the answer, Jack turned away just in time for the last vestiges of sunlight to die behind the trees, and felt part of himself leave with it. He heard her boots trace the journey to the ladder, and listened to the sound of her clambering back down.

Once he could no longer hear her, he let out the breath he'd been holding since her foot first touched the topmost rung in a ragged exhalation. He covered his mouth with a loose fist, fighting like hell to suppress the jerks of his shoulders, and screwed his eyes shut. He allowed himself the briefest of seconds to grieve, letting the sadness and pain hold sway, before pulling his hand away from his mouth and holding his hip. He blinked back the tears, and cleared away the lump in his throat with a small cough, focusing on the snow-flecked roof.

He wasn't going to let her see him bleed. He didn't have to anymore, after all.

The last two times Elsa found herself staring at her reflection in the mirror, great changes had occurred. One involving a great many bruises, the fear of an unsalvageable sisterly relationship and the small matter of the Purge; the other being her newfound ability to create and manipulate ice. Had she been superstitious, she would have avoided looking in the mirror altogether.

Elsa Snowfield had little time for superstition - besides, tonight was no different. Change was coming… but change for herself.

Especially since, when she regarded her reflection in the mirror located in the bathroom connected to her quarters, Elsa didn't like what looked back at her. There were no issues of self-esteem or her body; as far as she was concerned, she was perfectly comfortable in her own skin. No, the issue lay with the growing and unshakeable sensation that the woman looking back at her was no longer Elsa Snowfield, but her past self. Someone who had reached the end of her journey, and was waiting for someone else to continue on. Someone new.

Sometimes change was a good thing - and Elsa knew exactly what it was she was going to change.

Her hand went up to her French braid, and stroked it, feeling an almost nostalgic warmth in her heart. That style had been with her for years, easily over a decade. It had seen her high school graduation, countless birthdays, awards ceremonies for her parents for services to Unity, the shaking off of her sociopathic Valkyrie self and the attempt to return to who she once was. It was also the style when Dylan abandoned her, remained with her when her room became her jail cell, when she was seduced by the call of vengeance. When she underwent the most painful experience of her life, and when she was put through the emotional wringer of four days ago.

It was more than a style, it was a roadmap. A memory trap, and a constant reminder of the woman she used to be. The woman who allowed others to choose for her, to direct her life. It was also the simplest thing to change, for Elsa was the master of her destiny, the captain of her ship, and no-one else. Of course, she had debated just changing her style, but it felt like a lateral move. Elsa felt a burning desire for the drastic, for the kind of change impossible to revert.

With her left hand, she tightly gripped her braid a few inches below where the strips of hair first began to weave into each other. Staring resolutely into her own eyes, she held the braid away from
her head, and her other hand drew her combat knife from its sheath on her belt, sharpened that very morning. She brought the blade up to her braid an inch or so above her hands, and hesitated. Last chance to reconsider. Was she doing the right thing? There was no going back.

But… that was the point, wasn’t it? Change began with a single step, but a step forward.

So, Elsa held the braid taut and began to slice upwards through it. Even though the blade had been sharpened in anticipation, the inherently tough nature of millions of strands of hair tightly woven together meant she encountered severe resistance. It was less a case of clean cutting, and more of rough sawing - but as the seconds and then minutes went by, she could feel the snap as each strand of her platinum blonde hair gave ground to the metal blade. Frowning with intent and quietly grunting with exertion, Elsa sliced through with the blade as hard as she could, wondering if the intrinsic biological toughness of an abnormal also extended to their hair.

For the briefest of seconds, she debated borrowing Inferno or Whisper, until she remembered two things; they had more than likely left with their owners two days ago… and burning hair did not smell pleasant.

Not to mention the slightest mistake could mean losing her head… literally.

Thankfully, to the relief of her arm and her growing impatience, the sensation of her hair being pulled out of her head and the vibrations of the knife along her strands abruptly ceased - hell, her entire head jerked sideways a little. Her heart raced, sending an odd sensation of nervousness through her being as she stared, faintly shocked, at her new reflection.

Rather than an elegant set of bangs growing from a smooth, sophisticated style of a French braid, her hair had become an uneven, jagged bob that ended just above her shoulders. Gone was the clean, dignified look, replaced by an edgy, messy style. It resembled Rapunzel's in a way, but with a far rougher fashion. Tossing the knife onto the bathroom counter below the mirror, she ducked her head and ran the fingers of her right hand through her hair, ruffling as much as she could before whipping her head back.

Upon catching her reflected image, Elsa smiled. It was awkward, unruly, with the ends of her hair no longer following a uniform line but a decidedly chaotic set of directions… but it was also hers.

She looked down at the braid in her left hand, a new relic of a past Elsa. The sheer weight of it took her by faint surprise; without it, her head felt lighter and free. Maybe it was not just the physical weight she had cast off, but the emotional, spiritual weight.

"Cast off the shackles, and rise," she murmured, gazing at the braid. She wondered if Pitch meant that in the literal sense.

The sound of the door to her quarters opening and closing filled the bathroom, and Elsa felt her heart leap into her throat. She whirled around and faced the open bathroom doorway, frozen in fright…

"Hey, Elsa? I just wanted to check on you—"

...just as Rapunzel appeared, framed by the doorway, and caught sight of Elsa. The brunette halted in step, her face rendered blank, her eyes the only sign of movement as she blinked over and over. Elsa stared back, words failing her and choosing instead to hide whence they came, and an awkward silence hung in the air.

Quick as a flash, Elsa hid the braid behind her back.

"Rapunzel?"
The response was faint, bewildered. "Yeah?"

"Just turn around—"

"Yeah?"

"—and walk away."

"No?"

"Rapunzel…"

Rapunzel's hand went up to point a stunned finger at her head. "You cut your hair."

Elsa had no idea where the feeling of being deeply self-conscious came from. One minute she was gazing with pride at the reward for her decision; the next, she was hiding the manifestation of that same decision behind her back like it was incriminatory evidence.

"No, I didn't."

Elsa's inner self covered her metaphorical face with her figurative palm.

"Yes, you did."

"Did not."

"You're hiding the braid behind your back."

"You're mistaken."

"You're hiding the braid, but I can see you've cut your hair."

"Trick of the light."

"No it's not."

"Yes, it is."

"Why are you so embarrassed—it looks cool."

"I don't know why—wait, what?"

Elsa stared, dumbfounded. Rapunzel's lips curled into a smile, her face lighting up a little. "It looks cool. Suits you."

Her mouth opening and closing, bereft of the ability to speak coherently, Elsa managed what speech she could. "I… uh… thanks?"

Rapunzel stepped into the room, just as Elsa glanced at the open door. Much to Elsa's relief, the brunette sensed her anxiety and closed the door behind her. "Why did you look so embarrassed about it?"

Elsa let the hand holding the braid hang at her side, and shrugged. "I don't really know. I suppose… it was one thing for me to see it, but quite another for someone else—especially before I was prepared to show everyone."

Rapunzel's eyebrows lifted as she looked off to the side, and she tilted her head in acknowledgement.
"That's a good point. Sorry for barging in like that."

Elsa held the braid in both of her hands, and gazed down upon it. "It's okay—I guess now is as good a time as any."

"What made you do it?" Rapunzel asked, holding her hands in front of her.

"Because it was my choice," Elsa said quietly. Dissatisfied with her response, she straightened up and drew her shoulders back. "All my life, I've let other people dictate what happens to me—make decisions for me. My parents. Aurora—she put me in a terrible position, because she knew I wouldn't refuse. Hans… even Jack."

"Technically he's your C.O., so…"

"That's different in a military context. This is a choice about me, for me. I've let people chart my life's course for too long—now I'm taking it back." Elsa lifted up the braid, and then let her hands fall again. "Cutting this off is a symbol of that. I can't undo it… I can only move forward."

Rapunzel beamed. "You go, girl. That's the Elsa I knew was in there somewhere."

For a few moments, a comfortable silence descended between them, until Elsa noticed the way Rapunzel's expression fell from a bright smile to a slight wince, lips twisted with consternation. She especially noticed how the brunette was staring at her hair.

"It looks awful," Elsa groaned, "doesn't it?"

Rapunzel shook her head, her eyes wide. "No! No-no-no."

"You can say it."

"It really doesn't—it suits you, really, but…"

Elsa sighed. "But what?"

"If you say no, I'll totally understand and—but would you mind if I—kind of… tidied it up a little?"

Elsa twisted her lips, thoroughly uncertain of how to proceed. "Um… I suppose so? Just… not too far from what it is now."

Rapunzel waved her hands as an attempt to reassure her. It half-worked. "Oh, don't worry. It'll still be your own sassy, edgy style… it just needs a little neatening up here and there."

"Alright. I don't have any scissors—"

"Not a problem. I always carry some with me," Rapunzel said proudly, going as far to reach for the back pocket of her pants and produce, indeed, a pair of scissors.

"...why do you carry scissors with you?"

Rapunzel shrugged with an air of nonchalance. "In case I need to cut a bitch."

Elsa blinked, and was not afraid to note the involuntary gulp. Rapunzel chuckled at the look of 'EEP' written upon Elsa's countenance, and shook her head. "I'm kidding," she said, before her smile fell to a serious line. "I use a scalpel for that."

Elsa let out a quiet squeak, causing Rapunzel to burst into laughter, and practically doubled over.
"Oh, man, you should see your face right now."

Huffing, Elsa folded her arms and gave her one of the best expressions she could of decidedly unimpressed. "You're a terrible person, do you know that?"

"I'm sorry! I couldn't resist!"

"I actually believed you."

"That was the best part!" Rapunzel cackled. "Though I guess it's true that you've gotta beware of the nice ones."

"You're not nice, and I hope your hairdressing skills are better than your sense of humour," Elsa drawled as he turned to face the mirror.

"Oh, yeah. I used to style Stacey Shimmershine's hair all the time," Rapunzel said in a breezy voice as she went off into Elsa's main quarters.

"Good, because—" Elsa froze, and whirled around, "—wait, the doll?!

"Excuse me," Rapunzel held up a finger as she returned to the bathroom, holding the top bar of Elsa's steel chair and her scissors with the other, "but I'll have you know Ms. Shimmershine is a lady."

"She's a doll. Your hairdressing experience is with a doll."

"Yep - a doll with regrowing hair you can style as many ways as you want." Rapunzel shrugged. "What—you never played with dolls as a kid?"

Elsa slowly shook her head, though couldn't dissuade the surreal incredulity within her. "Um, no. Dolls were Anna's favourite… books were my thing. Books and making stuff."

"Well, I can assure you you're in safe hands. Trust me—I'm a doctor."

"Not helping."

"Look—cards on the table, I get it. Totally understand if you don't want me to do it, but if you do, it'll still be the same wicked style you have now, just a little less…"

Elsa's response came out in a sardonic drawl. "...like I took a knife to my braid?"

Rapunzel's eyebrows rose, and she stuck out her lower lip as she tilted her head to the side and back again. "Your words, not mine."

Elsa considered it for a moment, her chin jutting out and moving an inch or so from side to side in thought. It couldn't hurt - and she was still choosing to allow Rapunzel to tidy up her hair a little. She could decline, and Rapunzel would respect that.

"Alright," Elsa said, "but on the proviso it doesn't look too different. This is still something I did for me."

Beaming, Rapunzel lifted up the chair as a silent suggestion - in response, Elsa stood aside to let her place the chair in front of the mirror. Rapunzel took up a towel from the rack at her right, and draped it over Elsa's shoulders once she had sat down. She would be lying if there was no small amount of apprehension settling in her gut… but she had chosen to trust Rapunzel. In and of itself, it was liberating.
Rapunzel spent a few moments ruffling and teasing her hair before setting to work. Elsa watched with interest as her colleague separated fingerfuls of hair, and heard the faint snips of the scissors as they went about their function.

"May I ask you a question?"

"Shoot," Rapunzel said as she tended to another section.

"What is your opinion of Jack?"

Rapunzel merely shrugged. "He seems well enough—physically, at least. Brooding a lot more, though."

"I meant…" Elsa closed her mouth, and inhaled a small breath so as to let it out in a sigh. "That evening, everyone made themselves clear on what they thought. Some more than others… but I haven't heard what you think about what he did."

Rapunzel hesitated, the scissors hovering just under the strip of hair trapped between her index and middle finger. Elsa caught the way her eyes went off to a distant place for a moment, her eyebrows dipping in thought.

"My father once said something that stuck with me for… well, ever since I bloomed."

"What was it?"

"That you are who you are on your worst day, but also the day after that, and the day after that. They could be your worst days, too. Every single day is important, even the one where you take your last breath. And when you have these days, you can get stuck there, worrying about it—and that's natural. The bad days? They stick with us more readily than the good."

Rapunzel resumed her snipping, though with a slower pace than before. "But eventually, you've got to make a choice: do you let yourself dwell on the worst days of your life, and worry about if you're going to have more… or do you take that pain and try to make something of it? Make something better… take your worst day and make it something that's beautiful?"

"Your father is a wise man," Elsa mused.

"Yeah, well, he was right. The day I bloomed was one of the worst days of my life… but I took that pain, I took that darkness and turned it into light. I am who I am because of that day, not in spite of it." Rapunzel took a long, quiet breath of air, and let it out in a thoughtful sigh. "Jack took what could have been the worst day of all of our lives, yours and his especially, and made something out of it. Something… a little like hope."

"I hadn't quite thought of it like that."

"And that's normal. Completely understandable. Jack had you labour under the illusion you were going to murder him for days. All the way until the moment Merida told you he was alive. He hid the truth from you, from Anna, from all of us. He put himself—and you—in a position where if it had gone wrong, everything would have fallen apart. He lied, he tricked, he rolled the dice with almost everything we have. We're supposed to be a team, yet he went all lone wolf on us."

Rapunzel moved onto the next set of strands, and Elsa found herself caring less about the end result, and more about Rapunzel's words. It was odd how, of the team, she seemed to be the wisest… next to Pitch. "I totally get why Anna's pissed—his actions put you through so much shit, any sister would be furious. Honestly? I'd be the same. That's probably what Red's missing—hell, I thought she'd be on Anna's side, considering she's the only other person apart from you or Anna that has siblings. If someone did
what Jack did to one of her brothers, she'd kick their ass so hard, they'd get a new pair of shoulders.”

The mental image was grotesque, Elsa discovered to her displeasure. "I get the feeling you're more on Jack's side, however."

Rapunzel shook her head, and as though that wasn't enough, drew back the scissors to waggle them. "Understanding something and agreeing with it are two completely different things," she said. "Just because I see why Jack did what he did, and why you and Anna feel the way you do, doesn't mean I'm on anyone's side. Unless they're my patient, of course. See, being a doctor, I'm trained to be dispassionate. Objective. Unless you get on my last nerve, like Anna and Merida did."

"So why do you sound like you are more sympathetic to Jack?"

"Because you can't have light without darkness. You can't have joy but no pain. Without one, the other is meaningless." Rapunzel continued on with her ministrations, working on the back of Elsa's head. "Jack put us all, himself included, through a crapton of pain—but because of that, we have a chance at a beautiful thing… hope."

"You know… this reminds me of when I called you that night," Elsa mused, smiling. "I needed a friendly voice, and you were there."

"Hah, yeah. When I tested out the holo-emitters." Rapunzel chuckled. "I know a lot about this stuff."

"How so, if you don't mind my asking?"

The gentle mirth in Rapunzel's face fell away, and her emerald eyes betrayed a hint of pain as she gazed down upon her fingerful of Elsa's platinum blonde hair. Elsa felt herself wince inside, and chastised her mouth and mind for speaking without thought. "I'm sorry, you don't have to—"

"It's fine," Rapunzel interrupted, faintly shaking her head. "Haven't really talked about it with anyone, so… yeah."

The cutting of her hair paused, and Elsa observed Rapunzel's reflection as she closed the scissors and held them with their blades in the palm of her hand. She then held onto the back of Elsa's chair, and gazed into the mirror image of Elsa's eyes. There was a serious, yet faraway look to her expression, like the face of someone walking down a particularly sombre part of Memory Lane.

"I fell in love," she announced quietly, but with a decisive tone.

"Eugene?"

"Yeah." Rapunzel nodded, and let out a quiet sniff. "Eugene 'Flynn Rider' Fitzherbert. I met him, and within a few hours, that was it. I was in love. It was like we connected on more than just the physical—we clicked on the emotional, the mental, the spiritual. My time with him was… it was the best twenty four hours of my life. It was like nothing else mattered, not the Valkyries, Unity, nothing. I found something incredible—and even after we found out who each other really was, it didn't change a thing. What we had transcended the sides we were on, the things we'd done."

"How do you know?" Elsa asked. "You can't fall in love with someone you just met."

"You can," Rapunzel replied. "It's rare—so, so rare—but you can. During the Purge, when you sent me to download their database… he found me. With everything going on around us, he found me. He pointed a gun at me, 'cause he was still heartbroken over what we did to his friends… what we were doing to them at that very moment… I told him we had no choice. He said there's always a choice, always... and then..."
Elsa found herself hanging on every word, her heart enraptured by Rapunzel's words. "What happened?"

"He lowered his gun. He saw through my armor, my—my everything. Saw me for who I was… and then he kissed me. For a few beautiful moments, it was just the two of us. No Unity, no Ghosts, nothing. That night was so dark, so painful… so terrible… but that moment was my one shining light. My rose in a barren field. We cast off our sides, our facades, until we were two souls completely bare to each other—and I know that if one of us had asked the other to run away with them, we would have done it without hesitation. We said we'd meet again… until we didn't."

Elsa's eyes fell, and a familiar twinge crossed her heart at the memory of that night. She knew what was coming next. She heard a small sniff, and the sound of swallowing.

"Few months ago, I found out the guy I loved was dead. Died in that very battle. I remember thinking… 'this isn't fair. Why should he die and I live?' We found something magical, something fairytale, and it was snatched away from us. I lived in those worst days, just existing. Wondering how life could get better… but… the saying that time heals is true, but not for the reason people think. Time gives us distance, space, for us to grieve and to think. At first I hated myself for allowing myself to fall so hard and fast for a guy I only spent about twenty four hours with, but… as the days went by, I realised I had that pain of loss… because I also had the joy of his companionship. I couldn't have one without the other, and that made the pain a little better, because even though my heart broke knowing I would never see him again, it… it healed, because it made the time we did spend together mean so much more." Rapunzel smiled, the small action causing Elsa to glance up at her reflection in the mirror. "Like I said - I am who I am because of those days—when I found him, and when I lost him. So I took that pain and that grief, and turned it into something: the will to make his death mean something. Take up the fight in his place, but in my own way. Heal, rather than kill. Support, instead of tear down."

"That's… that's beautiful," Elsa murmured.

"Even in the darkest days, you can find blinding light," Rapunzel said, winking. "You just need to know where to look."

"You really were the heart of the Valkyries." Elsa slowly shook her head. "I regret not seeing it sooner."

Rapunzel waved it off, and quickly resumed her ministrations, her words accompanied by the steady rhythm of her scissors snipping away. "What happened had to happen so we could be here. Everything we've lost or gained has led us to this moment—and it's up to us what we do from here."

Elsa narrowed her eyes. "Why do I get the feeling you're referring to something specific?"

Rapunzel gave her best shrug of nonchalance. "Hey, you inferred it."

"You implied it."

"I have no idea what you mean," Rapunzel retorted, though with as much innocence as she could muster.

Elsa curled a suspicious eyebrow when Rapunzel began to hum a pleasant-sounding tune as she moved to stand at her left side in order to access that part of her head. "Is that your opinion—accept what happened to me, like the ends justify the means? Do you think it was worth it?"

"No, because I can't answer that." Rapunzel looked up, pausing for a moment. "I'm saying… there's
going to be a moment in the near future, if everything goes right, of clarity that'll hit you like
a Hela to the face. You'll look around, and what you see will tell you if it was worth it or not."

"What makes you think that will—how do you know things won't go wrong?"

"I don't—but I'm an optimist, remember? And I'll tell you what I do know—"

Rapunzel ducked down to closely inspect the last few strips of hair as she cut off the ends. "—the
way Eugene looked at me is the same way Jack looks at you."

Elsa blinked, her face—and mind—turning blank. "You must be joking."

"Nope, but you probably hadn't noticed since Anna wouldn't leave you alone for the past couple of
days. Walking distraction, that woman. Anyway, since I've been observing Jack for medical
purposes, I've seen the way he looks at you when he thinks I don't notice. Looks at you a little
different, though, since what happened."

Elsa's heart didn't know what to make of it. Confusion was still the order of the day where Jack was
concerned, and if she was honest, Rapunzel wasn't helping. However, she felt curious enough to ask,
"In what way?"

"Like he's lost something precious."

"That could be because of his lost memories, though," Elsa pointed out.

"Good point. Anyway—what do you think?"

Rapunzel took two steps back from the chair, and watched with an expectant gaze as Elsa turned her
attention back to her own reflection…and found herself grinning. Sure enough, her hair was still a
sassy, edgy bob, but Rapunzel's efforts had led to tidier, smoother ends and a sharper style. It still
looked like hers, but better.

"It's perfect," Elsa breathed. "I love it."

"Great." Rapunzel carefully took the towel from her shoulders and shook the hair clippings onto the
floor. "Not bad for someone who used to cut a doll's hair, am I right?"

Elsa whirled around, and with her face lit up by her smile, closed the short distance and threw her
arms around Rapunzel in a tight, grateful hug. "Thank you for this and for your advice," she
murmured. "You gave me a lot to think about."

Rapunzel chuckled, and gently stroked Elsa's back with the return of her embrace. "My pleasure—
just make sure you do right by you, okay? Not Jack, not Anna, nor anyone else. You're in the driving
seat now. Whatever you do from this point on, it's you that has to look in the mirror."

There came a knock at her bathroom door, and Elsa pulled away from the hug just as Anna's voice
called through. "You in there, 'sis? Your door was open."

"I'm here, Anna," Elsa replied. "Come on in."

The click and turn of the handle signalled Anna's acknowledgement and obliging, and the door
slowly opened enough for her head to poke through - the first person she saw being the new camp
hairdresser.

"Hey, you got a minute to—oh, hey, Rapunzel."
"Right back at you, Chief Doc."

"Sorry, was I interrupting—" Anna's eyes flicked over to Elsa, "—holy shit!"

Anna pushed the door open further, her wide-eyed, open-mouthed gaze fixed firmly upon Elsa's hair. "You cut your hair!"

"Technically Rapunzel helped, but yes. Do you like it?"

"I love it!" Anna began to stammer. "It's so different—I mean, a good different—I mean, you look beautiful! Not that you haven't looked beautiful before—I mean, you look beautiful— wait, I don't mean you look fuller—"

Elsa exchanged an amused glance with Rapunzel, who mirrored her wry smirk to a tee. Anna, on the other hand, turned a shade of red as rich as her hair, before nervously clearing her throat. "You look fantastic," she finally managed. "Shorter hair really suits you."

"Thank you," Elsa said after a small giggle, and gestured with her eyes at the silently cackling brunette. "Though she deserves some of the credit."

Rapunzel waved it off. "Bah. Only, like, five percent. Rest of it?" she pointed at Elsa, and made a circle with the extended finger. "All you, sister. Anyway—getting a real sense there's some family talk coming, so I'll scoot. Still want me to double check your inventory?"

Anna nodded. "Please."

"Alright. See you both later." Rapunzel nodded at them in turn, before sidling past Anna to leave the room.

It wasn't until the door to her quarters clicked closed that Anna felt safe enough to speak - though she did peer past the bathroom door into Elsa's room just to make sure. "Sorry for barging in—I didn't know Rapunzel was here."

"It's alright, we had just finished… though I sense you're itching to ask what went on."

Anna opened her mouth, then cringed a little before closing it again. "H-oh yeah… but I won't. Sometimes there's stuff I'm not privy to. Progress, huh?"

Elsa gave her a warm, encouraging smile. "One step at a time. So, what can I do for you?"

"Well, I… uh… I just did a thing."

Elsa's heart sank - 'did a thing' was Anna's code for 'I think I fucked up and I'm not sure if I did and I need someone to tell me if I did and oh fuck—'. It usually preceded events like breaking into Papa's basement lab - off-limits to children - and accidentally knocking something over, or trying to help Mama by downloading onto a data tablet her speech for a function for high-level members of Unity, only to realise the Download icon on the tactile interface was two icons above the one she had pressed… Delete. To Elsa, 'did a thing' invariably meant bad news.

"Come, we'll sit on my bed," she sighed. Anna nodded, her head lowered and her arms cradling her sides, her expression deeply troubled. Elsa followed her sister into her main room, and took a seat on her bed once Anna had done the same.

"What happened?"
Anna took a breath through her nose, and pulled up her legs so she could cross them under her as she exhaled. In response, Elsa twisted slightly, with her left foot resting on the floor while her right leg curled in front of her, allowing her hands to sit on her right knee. "I went to talk with Jack."

"And?" Elsa leaned forward a little - Anna had expressed her intent to speak with him at some point, but did not know when.

"I think… I don't think we're friends anymore. I think… it's over."

Elsa's heart twinged with a dull ache during its descent to her stomach. Her face morphed to an expression of pure pity, of sympathy. "Oh, Anna."

She reached out to stroke Anna's right shoulder just as the younger sister sniffed, wiping away the evidence with her finger as she started distantly at the floor. Her skin, exposed by the tank top, felt hot enough to burn.

"I told him—I told him how his actions made you feel, made me feel. Told him I missed the person he used to be, that I didn't like the Jack he is now. I told him… that the old Jack was my best friend, but this one… this one I didn't feel close to at all. It's just that—I can't look at him without thinking about how he hurt you, hurt me, risked all of us. Scared he's going to do it again, and…"

Anna swallowed, her lower lip finding its way between her teeth as she clamped her eyes shut. Her hands fiddled together with deep agitation, prompting Elsa's free hand to slip between them and hold her fingers as tightly as she could.

"I told him we were still friends, and that he was still the godfather to my baby, but… I don't think it mattered."

Elsa let out a tut of pity, and stroked Anna's shoulder some more. Leaning into her touch, Anna ended up sliding into her comforting embrace. "I don't know," her sister continued, "it just… after all we've been through together. Saving his life. It just feels like… like I have to be guarded around him. He was my best friend, my heart was completely open to him, and now… it feels like leading—like this world, this war has taken my best friend away from me."

"You thought that about me, not so long ago."

"I know, and that's what's messing me up—that, and something he said before I left."

"What did he say?"

"He asked me: 'How far would you go to protect those you care about?' and I couldn't answer him, because I didn't know."

"I do," Elsa answered simply.

Anna looked up at her, and even though she strained her neck to do so, she still had to regard Elsa through her eyebrows. "You do?"

"Yes. You'd kill without hesitation. The woman I fought on the Star, was a woman who fought to kill if it meant protecting those she loved." Elsa tilted her head slightly. "If someone else was there instead of me, you would have ended them in a heartbeat to save a life. Maybe, in a way, you feel you've ended your friendship with Jack to protect me."

Anna's eyes fell, and her head lowered. Elsa took the opportunity to rest her chin on her sister's crown. "Maybe…"
"Here's the thing: you don't need to protect me, much less sever a bond you've created to do so. I'm sure, however, Jack will understand if you just talk to him."

"I think it's too late for that," Anna murmured. "I can't unsay the things I've said. I mean, half of me feels like I did the right thing, but the other half… feels I just destroyed something beautiful."

Anna's head shifted once again to look at her, causing Elsa to lift her head away. Her sister's sapphire eyes gazed up at her, hopeful and expectant. "Did I do the right thing?"

In her heart, Elsa knew the answer, and she suspected Anna did, too. She was looking for a specific answer, something that would alleviate the guilt Elsa could see all too well behind her eyes. She opened her mouth to tell her… but found the words never came. Blocked was her throat. Was it fear of what Anna would do, or say - or was it something else?

What did make an appearance, however, was the voice in her mind of someone wise, echoing in the halls of her recent memory something she had said.

"There will be a moment, Anna. A moment where you'll have everything you ever wanted, and in that moment you'll possess clarity so sharp, it'll knock you off your feet. When that happens… you'll have your answer."
A/N: Trigger warning: mentions of rape, descriptions of aftereffects, language, violent scenes, descriptions of gore and some scenes that may be distressing. If you experience flashbacks or symptoms of PTSD, please stop reading at "I didn't care" and resume at "She immediately began issuing quiet commands".

"Nightbringer"

The shrill cries tore through the cold night air, mingling with the yells and curses of the militia as Reaper upon Reaper threw themselves at Perdition's wall. In the fifteen minutes before the attack, the defenders had mobilised in an almost automatic, robotic manner, a classic sign of normalcy and regularity. They knew exactly what to do and where to go… but as time went on, an atmosphere of fear and anxiety had settled over Perdition.

From the snippets of words Kozmotis caught from his hiding place, a darkened alleyway between two small shacks across the street behind the Archon's office, he had an idea why - the ongoing attack was the largest Perdition had seen. More than a few militiamen and clones had been yanked off the wall - thanks to his enhanced eyesight, Kozmotis was grimly treated to the sight of a young man, no older than nineteen, turn to one of his friends a few yards away to triumphantly proclaim he was on his seventeenth kill, only for a Reaper to grab him by the leg, yank him to the floor and drag him off the wall.

He could still hear the terrified scream before it was brutally cut short… but while anyone would be chilled to the bone, Kozmotis simply regarded the attack as the ideal time for their mission. Reaper attacks were one hell of a distraction - besides, the nineteen year old had it coming.

Where Reapers were concerned, if you didn't respect them, you died. It was as simple as that.

Footsteps approached from his eight o'clock. Kozmotis pressed himself against the shack wall, and drew back his trench coat to rest his hand on his stun pistol. Eyes on the narrow view of the amber-lit street afforded him by the alleyway entrance, he watched as a long shadow slid across the dusty ground. People had been passing by that alley for hours, and none had noticed Kozmotis thanks to the protective concealment of the shadows, but it only took one glance.

It turned out he need not have been concerned, as the grim remark of, "That's nae goin' away anytime soon," uttered in an inimitable Scottish accent was a dead giveaway. Kozmotis let go of the pistol and drew his coat back over the holster just as Merida rounded the corner, and her face wore a heavy wince just before she too was welcomed by the dark.

"Are you alright?"

"Oh, yeah." Merida emitted a quiet bark of nervous laughter. "Just seen a guy get tackled off the wall an' have his throat ripped out by one o' those things. Totally peachy."

"Nightbringer"
"Believe it or not, it could have been worse."

Even in the dark, Kozmotis could sense the *are-you-fucking-kidding-me* look Merida gave him. "Yeah, right."

"I just saw a young man get pulled off the wall *into* the swarm."

Merida blinked twice, before clearing her throat and attempting to distance herself from the grotesqueries of it all by peering out into the street. "...yeah, okay. That's worse."

"Indeed. So, what are we looking at?"

"The front door's guarded by two militia guys, but the back door only has one guard. Biometric reader."

"Any cameras?"

"One, but I already disabled it." Merida produced a paperclip from the pocket of her khaki jacket. "Turns out cameras don't like it when ye throw one o' these charged babies at it."

"Good." Kozmotis drew his hood up over his head. "There's no telling when the Reapers will retreat, so let's move."

Merida nodded, and pocketed the clip only for her hand to pull out one of those old baseball caps and pull it over her head. Kozmotis followed as she led them out of the alleyway and to the left, both of them keeping to what little shadows were afforded under the overhead street lights, and made sure to check behind him every few seconds. The air was still torn asunder by battle cries and chilling shrieks, but it could change on a credit.

Merida led him to an upright, corrugated iron wall, and stood just near its end. "Guy's on the other side," she murmured, nodding to her right. Kozmotis' eyes were drawn to her posterior as her hands pulled up the back of her jacket to reveal her stun pistol tucked in the belt of her pants. "Mind if I lead the dance?"

"If you wish," Kozmotis shrugged.

Merida offered him a wry smirk, before leaning over to give him a quick peck on the cheek. Even the brief, fleeting contact sent a small storm through Kozmotis' entire face. "Yer a gentleman an' a scholar."

"And you're wasting time."

"Fine, fine." Merida moved around the wall with Kozmotis just at her six, her hand still laced around the handle of her pistol, a faint blue glow emanating from behind her belt.

The guard, an unshaven bear of a man instantly noticed their approach, snapping his head toward them. His hands tensed around his stun rifle, regarding them with a suspicious gaze. "Hey, shouldn't you be on the Wall?"

Merida responded with cheery brightness and geniality that couldn't sound more false if she tried, in Kozmotis' opinion. "Aye, laddie, we're just on our way. Can I ask ye a question, though?"

"Make it quick."

"Fair 'nough. That thingamajig on the wall—yer tha one who uses it?"
The man's eyes flicked to the biometric reader and back to Merida. Eyelids narrowing, he responded with a single slow, wary, ",...yeah?"

"Great!" Merida drew the pistol from her belt faster than Kozmotis had ever seen, and put a blue bolt square between the man's eyes. Rendered inert, the man gracelessly dropped to the floor like a discarded ragdoll, kicking dust into the air.

Sensing an opportunity, Kozmotis glided past Merida toward the body. He bent down to grasp the man's limp arm, and with his free hand, formed his characteristic foot-long blade over his knuckles.

"What are ye doin'?!" Merida hissed incredulously.

Kozmotis looked at her, mildly confused. "We need his hand for the reader."

"An' yer jus' gonna cut it off?!"

"Well, yes." Kozmotis shrugged. "We don't need the rest of him."

Merida slipped the pistol back from whence it came, before folding her arms and regarding him with a stern glare. "Pitch, put tha blade away."

"But—"

"Ah!"

"Hunter—"

Merida's eyebrows shot into her hairline, and her right finger waggled a reprimand. "Ah-ah!"

Kozmotis huffed, and sullenly let the hand drop to the ground. "Fine."

He grabbed the unconscious guard by the collar with one hand, and with a little more effort than he was accustomed to when it came to dragging bodies around - something that had happened with regularity alarming to anyone not named Kozmotis Pitchiner - he pulled the guard over to the biometric reader. Merida grasped his wrist and hefted it up, lifting his torso off the ground in the process, and pressed his hand against the reader.

"Identity confirmed: Mark Little."

"Little?" Merida mouthed in disbelief. Kozmotis offered a shrug.

The faint sound of a clunk reached their ears, and the door opened just enough for a crack of light to pass through. Merida dropped the man's hand like she was proving a point, regarding Kozmotis with raised eyebrows. "See? An' no dismemberment needed."

Kozmotis snorted, and crouched down to yank the man up by the arm. Pulling him over his shoulder like rolled carpet, he pushed himself to his feet. Even with superior strength, Kozmotis wondered if the guard's middle name was Featherlight. "Not as fun, though."

"We get outta this, someday I'll show you my idea of fun."

"Marksmanship competition?" Kozmotis scoffed. "That seems a little one-sided."

"Actually I was thinkin' somethin' a little more hands-on."

Kozmotis narrowed one eye at Merida as she passed him, headed toward the door. "Are you flirting
with me?"

"Is it working?"

"I refuse to answer that question."

Merida snickered as she opened the door and stood aside. "That's a yes, then."

Kozmotis grunted with the effort of carrying the guard with the tragic misnomer, and squeezed the both of them through the open doorway, paying no heed to the dull thud as the man's head bounced off the doorframe. "We're on a stealthy information-gathering mission in one of the most hostile settlements in the country, and you have sex on the brain."

"Hey, it's been a long time since I felt this way about anyone. The door clicked shut behind him. "So, if it's all tha same ta ye, I'll enjoy havin' these urges a little while."

"Suit yourself," Kozmotis replied. Catching sight of a door signed with Cleaning Supplies, he nodded toward it. "I'll hide the body. You find the security room. Last thing we need is some boy scout raising the alarm because he caught us on camera."

"Aye."

Merida took a moment to reach up and stroke the back of his head as she passed, causing a rush of blood to his cheeks and pleasant, faint tingles at the touch. As he watched her saunter down the right corridor of the L-shaped hallway, the back door situated in the corner behind them, checking each door whilst repeating the signs under her breath, Kozmotis wondered if that was what romance was supposed to feel like.

In another life, it was possession. Hair held in a tight grip, vice-like grasps on the wrist. Ownership veiled behind smiles of affection, eyes that said 'you are mine' that welled with tears and threats of self-harm if he contemplated departure. Sex filled with negativity when he was in the mood… and forced ingestion of certain pills when he was not - the latter occurring more than the former.

A cross-shaped scar, ever a reminder of the mockery made of love, and the insidious voice of a psychopath.

Then there was Merida, a vivacious, flame-haired vision of beauty and independence, of honesty and strength. Sky-blue eyes that regarded him with affection, and a voice that brought light to a dark heart.

Kozmotis mentally shook off the notion; dreams were for the dreamers, the ones in the gutter who looked up at the stars. Reality demanded his attention - and that reality was a bear of a man slung over his right shoulder, and muscles' growing cries for respite.

Making his way the few feet to the cleaning closet, Kozmotis pulled open the door and leaned forward, letting gravity do the rest. The man crumpled against the shelves adorning the the walls of the cramped closet, with bottles and cleaning implements cascading down on him like a waterfall of hygiene products, and Kozmotis had to suppress a chuckle when a bucket fell off the topmost shelf and landed over the guard's head.

Closing the door on the helpless man, Kozmotis turned and looked in the direction Merida had gone, just in time to observe her fire two stun bolts through an open doorway several yards down the corridor. Curious, he jogged toward her just as she entered the room. He peered around the doorframe and was treated to the sight of two security personnel slumped over the desk, their inert bodies illuminated by the faint blue light of several camera feeds in front of them. Impressed, he
watched as Merida leaned between them to place her hand upon a thick, rectangular, black box sat in the middle of the desk, and his eyebrows rose as small arcs of electricity curled in and out of the box like thread in a tapestry, causing sparks to fly every which way.

One second later, the feeds went blank and the room was bathed in darkness.

"Clever," Kozmotis remarked.

Merida looked at him over her shoulder and gave him a knowing wink. "Now we've got free rein. C'mon—" she nodded to her right, "I saw a sign. Archon's office is down the hall."

Kozmotis wordlessly headed in the assigned direction, drawing his trench coat back once more and pulling his pistol out of its holster, the blue glow in his peripherals denoting its setting. As he walked the short distance, with Merida at his six, it occurred to him how fancy the decoration seemed. Certainly, the floral wallpaper met halfway down the wall by worn mahogany panelling looked old and neglected, but against the ramshackle structures surrounding the Archon's building, it could be considered opulent. It was another reminder of Unity's hypocrisy; a society that claimed to be equal, yet the evidence showed anything but. Yet, its people were still blissfully ignorant.

With his arm mildly relaxed, Kozmotis held the pistol ahead of him as he reached the door, musing internally at just how calm his heart was. No adrenaline, no excited racing, just a slow and focused rhythm. He reached for the doorknob and gave it a twist, using the back of his hand to push it open the rest of the way.

The Archon's office was yet more proof of the inherent disparity; the decor was much the same as the hallway, with a Uni-Com in standby mode against the left wall and blinds in surprisingly good condition drawn over the window on the right. Ahead of him was a large, ornate oak desk with green leather panels facing him, and several administration-related accoutrements as well as a brass lamp resting on its surface.

Kozmotis heard the impact of a boot hitting the door followed by a heavy clunk behind him, and as it turned out, someone else did, too. Behind the desk popped up the head of Archon Damocles himself, a balding man with a faintly yellow complexion, wispy white hair and lecherous eyes that regarded them with clear surprise and indignant suspicion.

Not only that, but he was completely naked, at least from the waist up if the lack of clothing over his shoulders was any indication.

"What is the meaning of this?" Damocles barked in irritation, his bulbous eyes switching between Kozmotis and Merida. "This is a private meeting!"

"Oh, I'm sorry." Kozmotis took two steps forward. "I didn't care."

What rebuttal Damocles was about to offer was silenced by a blue bolt in his forehead courtesy of Kozmotis' pistol, and his face slammed into the desk before sliding off onto the floor. It didn't take a genius to guess that Damocles had been caught in flagrante given his lack of clothing, so as he tilted his pistol and upper body, he gestured at Merida with his head to the other side of the table. Merida nodded once, her pistol raised, and the two Ghosts circled around the desk like a pincer.

The first to speak, Merida's face went white as she breathed, "Oh, God…"

Sure enough, the portly Damocles was naked save for his faded brown pants around his ankles, but under him was a sight that made Kozmotis want to carve the bastard into cubes and feed the Reapers with him. Sprawled over the dirty mauve rug under the desk was a woman, who looked to
be in her early thirties. Her medium-length brunette hair was unkempt and dishevelled, with her greying blouse torn apart so her black bra was visible, and her tattered grey skirt had been yanked up to her belly.

If that was bad enough, the bruises made it worse. The woman's face sported two black eyes, and purplish swelling surrounded a split in her lower lip. Vicious red welts in the shape of a hand covered her neck, and her thighs were black and blue, with blood trickling from her beaten genitals.

Her eyes at first seemed vacant, but Kozmotis was used to seeing fear, and she radiated it as she stared at him.

"Help… me…" she croaked.

Merida was the first to leap into action. Tossing her pistol onto the desk, she hurriedly said to Kozmotis, "I saw a medpack on the wall in the security office. Go get it."

Kozmotis wordlessly strode off, practically wrenching the door off its hinges as he left. True to Merida's word, there was a red box with FIRST AID emblazoned on the cover just on the right as he entered the office, and when he ripped it from the wall in haste, small chunks of plaster and dust flew off with the violent force. Within three seconds he passed through the Archon's doorway, where Merida had lifted the woman in her arms like a wounded comrade, and gently lowered her down onto the newly cleared desk.

"Can ye tell me yer name, lassie?"

The woman's voice was hoarse, faint and cracking as she looked up at the redhead. "C-Candace. Candace Moore."

Merida smiled, and Kozmotis was struck with the gentle, caring warmth exuding from her eyes. "Hey, Candace. My name's Merida, and this is my friend Koz. We're not gonna hurt ye, okay?"

"You're safe with us," Kozmotis added, but it was clear Candace had long forgotten what safety felt like when, as Kozmotis moved closer to the desk to hand Merida the medpack, she shrank away from him with a whimper toward her female protector.

Merida quickly took the medpack and placed it on the desk near Candace's bruised legs. "She's probably scared o'—"

"I know," Kozmotis interrupted, holding up a hand. "I understand."

More acutely than most.

Seeing his presence as more detrimental than helpful, Kozmotis took a silent glide over to the Uni-Com just as he heard Merida open the first aid kit. He closed his eyes, clenching his right hand into a fist, his nails digging into his palms. Images of bruises and blood on pale white skin flashed through his mind, a beast of a man raining blows down on his sight. Malicious, feminine laughter, whispers of false affection, hair that grew beyond limits to lash and bind him, and a blade slicing into his skin. His raven-haired siren, his rapist, calling him to his doom, laid in a pool of her own blood.

...pain. So much pain.

Maybe he was wrong, and there were still demons yet to be confronted.

Focus, he willed himself. Focus on the present. Leave the past to die.
Forcing his eyes open, he relaxed his right hand and softly spoke, "Uni-Com, activate."

With its ever reliable obedience, the device hummed into life, filling the room with a pleasant blue glow. The centre of the screen played host to the software's speech line, which flickered and pulsed as it responded. "Welcome, Archon Damocles. Please state password."

"Shit," Kozmotis hissed.

"I'm sorry, but that is incorrect. Please try again."

"Oh, shut the fuck up."

"I'm sorry, but that is incorrect. Please try again."

Kozmotis clenched his jaw and gritted his teeth, seriously considering ripping the Uni-Com apart with his bare hands. Password protection was something he'd anticipated on the way to Perdition, yet... hoped... they would get lucky. Murphy's Law was still in irritating effect, it seemed.

"Somethin' wrong?"

Kozmotis head swivelled to the right, where Merida stood at his side, glancing between him and the infernal device. She was scrunching up what looked like a dull foil wrapper into a ball, with hands faintly touched with blood.

"Nothing a little tech-support won't fix," Kozmotis murmured, quiet enough so the Uni-Com wouldn't pick him up. "How is Ms. Moore?"

"Physically, she'll recover. She's got so many cuts, so many bruises in places she—" Merida cut herself off, scowling at an invisible spot on the floor. Kozmotis could hear faint crackling emanating from the wrapper in her hand. "Her body will heal, but..."

Merida turned to face the unconscious Archon, Kozmotis following her gaze. "That piece o' shit raped her every day fer a year an' a half, even when she was still hurtin' from tha last time. Her spirit's broken, Koz. He fuckin' beat it out of her. Reapers attackin' the town an' he's busy doin'... awful shit ta her."

"Who are you?"

Kozmotis and Merida both turned at the same time to the source of the question: Candace. She had pushed herself up on one side with trembling arms, and though Merida had done a sterling job cleaning her wounds, she still looked like hell.

"I'm Kozmotis," he began, "and she is—"

"No," Candace whispered, staring at him with wary eyes. "Who are you really?"

Merida threw him an anxious glance, mirrored by Kozmotis himself. They had already caused problems for the team twice before; a third time could be catastrophic. Not to mention, the last time Kozmotis aided someone in Perdition, he was chased out by thugs and labelled as the criminal.

Yet, something told him tonight might be different.

"I am Pitch Black," he finally answered.

"An' I'm Hunter," Merida added. "We're Ghosts."
Candace let out an abrupt, tremulous breath that sounded strangely like relief, one that caused her upper body to sag. "I thought so," she murmured as she looked down. "No-one else would help me like you both did. No-one else would care."

"We do, lassie," Merida said, her voice soft with reassurance. "We're just sorry we couldn't've been here fer ye sooner."

Candace looked up at them. "Why?"

"Well, we try ta help where—"

"No," she softly interrupted Merida. "I mean… why are you here?"

"This waste of oxygen's Uni-Com has information we need," Kozmotis said to her. "We're trying to access it."

Candace studied them for a few moments, her grey eyes at first penetrating his, and then Merida's, with a distant, thousand-yard stare. Heaving a breath, she struggled to lift herself into a seated position, and let out a whimper of pain as she did so.

"Lassie, what're ye doin'?"

Candace did not answer at first. She pushed herself forward to slide off the table, and were it not for Merida's quick reaction, would have crumpled to the floor rather than collapse against the redhead's outstretched arms. Under Kozmotis' watchful eye, she looked up at him, and then at Merida.

"I want to help."

"Lassie, ye can barely—"

"I need to help," Candace said, her voice dancing between stubborn assertion and a pleading whisper. "Please, let me help."

Merida glanced at Kozmotis. He knew she'd have agreed at any rate, but since he was the ranking officer, it was a sign of respect. He nodded, and quietly stood aside to give the young woman plenty of room… away from him. Merida carefully led the hobbling Candace over to stand before the Uni-Com, and it was testament to the redhead's enhanced biology that when Candace wobbled on her feet, Merida didn't sway an inch. She truly was the woman's rock.

"Damocles-one-seven-nine-bravo-delta," Candace spoke, strength slowly finding its way into her voice.

"Welcome, Archon Damocles. Please state command."

"Activate…" she sucked in a wincing breath, "activate user profile Candace-one-four."

"Profile activated. Please state command."

Candace swayed a little as she croaked, "What do you need?"

"Somewhere that cannot be found in Unity's records. As far as the powers-that-be are concerned, such a place does not exist," Kozmotis explained.

"But we think it does," Merida continued. "We're lookin' fer a clue, some sorta trail that'll point us in tha right direction."
"Place like that," Candace murmured, "it'd still need supplies, right? Something we can trace?"


Candace turned her gaze back to the Uni-Com, and as Kozmotis gave her a subtle glance, he noticed the beginnings of resolve etch itself on her bruised features. "I think I know how to look."

She immediately began issuing quiet commands to the Uni-Com, starting with the supply train network and listings of requisitions and schedules. Ever helpful, the Uni-Com presented her with several windows of information, which Candace sifted through with remarkable efficiency. However, with Candace herself leading the hunt for clues, and Merida acting as her physical support, Kozmotis felt increasingly superfluous to requirements, if not purposeless. Thoroughly disliking it, he turned his eye to the pair of legs poking out from behind the desk belonging to the Archon. He walked over to the unconscious man, contempt worn on his grey face like it was meant to be there. Men like Damocles were the types of people Kozmotis would happily and without hesitation butcher to the point there was nothing left to identify. Dozens of people had met their end at the edge of his blades in his time before becoming a Ghost. Dozens who deserved it. Damocles was no different - and he discovered to his odd concern, a familiar urge began to take hold of his heart.

Kill.

With more effort than was needed, Kozmotis kicked the Archon in the side so as to roll him over, intending to remember his face for when the day came to avenge Candace, and to put another piece of human trash in the ground. The sight that stalled his heart, though, and caused a disbelieving whisper of, "It can't be," hit him like a freight train.

Damocles had a cross-shaped scar over his chest.

Kozmotis unconsciously touched at his own scar as he kneeled down, feeling an echo of her razor-sharp nails piercing his skin. The memento of an abusive relationship, where her version of together forever was to scar him. Remind him that no matter where he went or who he became, she would always own him, control him, haunt him. Show him that he would always be her Nightbringer.

She was dead. He killed her.

"Eris..." he whispered.

What did it mean? Was she alive—how was Damocles connected to her, and by extension, him? Why were two people with no knowledge of each other sporting the same scar in the same place?

"Pitch?"

There was a reason, there had to be. The one thing, only thing Kozmotis shared with Eris was that they were both driven by purpose. Scarring Damocles had a point to it, a motive known only to her.

"Pitch!"

Kozmotis, jarred out of his grave introspection, looked up at the calling of his name. Facing him, with the newly inert Uni-Com behind them, stood Merida and Candace - both regarding him with puzzled curiosity.

"What're ye doin'?"

Kozmotis looked back down at Damocles as he rose to stand, scrutinizing the body with a thoughtful
"I'm debating options," he said. "Did you find anything?"

Merida's lips broke into a sly grin. "Oh aye, we did. We checked the settlement requisition listings, an' everything seemed pretty kosher. Every place is either gettin' what it needs, or less than that, in tha case o' this godforsaken place."

"That sounds normal so far."

"I'm gettin' ta the good part. Candace brought up tha records of supply convoy inventories, usin' the requisition listings as reference. Pretty much every convoy is carryin' exactly the right amount o' supplies fer the settlements they stop at… except fer one."

"There is a convoy that travels from the Hub in the centre of the country," Candace continued, "and travels to the north east. It stops at Settlement Nine in Zone Twelve."

"Most convoys stay half a day, to a day at most before movin' on ta the next one," Merida carried on. "This convoy stops at Settlement Nine… and then vanishes. Completely disappears off tha face o' tha earth, until a week later, when it tootles off to tha next place. Best part? It's carryin' triple what Nine actually needs."

"I presume when it resumes its journey, it then carries the correct amount of supplies?"

"Got it in one, laddie." Merida nodded to her right. "Candace here even downloaded all tha data onto a crystal, in case we can make use o' it somewhere down tha line."

"Fine." Kozmotis stroked at his thin beard, staring off in thought at the floor. "Viking and Fury can work with that. Take Candace to the jeep; I'll rendezvous with you shortly."

"Okay?" Merida looked at him with one eye narrowed. "Why not come with us now?"

Kozmotis looked at her, and in his golden gaze he endeavoured to convey his utmost resolve. "I need to send a message, and I don't want either of you to be here when I do. It will not be something you should see."

"Message ta who?"

"To anyone who thinks they can do what Damocles did to Candace and get away with it." Kozmotis' gaze hardened. "Now, go. I will meet you as soon as I can."

Merida glanced between him and Damocles, her face wrought with uncertainty. Kozmotis wordlessly reiterated himself by turning away and staring down at the Archon's body, and after a few moments of perceived hesitation, heard two pairs of footsteps move away to the door.

By instinct, he looked back over his shoulder just as Candace did the same. He gave her a slow nod, one she mirrored before turning away.

It wasn't until he heard the door close behind him that he felt safe to move.

"I wish you were awake for this," he murmured down at Damocles. "I wish you were awake to feel every cut, every slice as I take you apart piece by piece. I haven't revisited my old life in a long time, and you, you piece of rapist filth, won't even notice. This is my only regret, that you will not be awake to repent your sins for the rest of your life… all thirty seconds of it."

He kneeled down, like a predator over fallen prey. "But all is not lost, for you. I'm going to give your pathetic, disgusting life meaning. You're going to be my messenger. You'll be my sign, and when
Kozmotis extended a blade over his hand.

"She will know the Nightbringer is coming for her."

Kozmotis carefully, languidly took Damocles' right forearm, and held it up as high as it could go without dislocating it from his shoulder - not that he cared if it did. "But you? You will never lay a hand on anyone again."

The blade was swung. The arm was severed.

The Nightbringer's work had begun.

The Reaper attack was beginning to subside by the time Kozmotis arrived at the rendezvous in the eastern area of Perdition, where the jeep was parked inside a dilapidated and unused vehicle hut. The sky was no longer torn by a cacophony of shrieks and screams, curses and yells, but triumphant cheers of victory and relief. Leaving the message had taken less time than he'd anticipated, even with his detour to the Archon's bathroom in order to wash the blood from his hands, so his return had not come a moment too soon.

Heavy was his heart; eight years ago he had looked into the abyss and been claimed by it. He'd faced it once again that night.

"Fork!" came a hiss from within the hut as he neared the open entrance, to which Kozmotis responded with a single word.

"Spoon."

Merida stepped out from the shadows of the hut, her arms hanging loosely at her sides. Kozmotis gazed at her for a few moments; though the abyss was dark, there was the oddest feeling she was the guiding light.

"Are ye okay?" she asked quietly.

Kozmotis opened his mouth to answer, but in a rare occurrence, found no words would come. He elected to give her a simple nod, and turned his eyes to the hut entrance. "How is she?"

Merida followed his gaze, and slowly nodded as she cradled her elbows in her hands. "She's pretty out of it. Helpin' us gave her the distraction she needed, but now she's stuck in her own mind. Hasn't talked since we left the office."

Kozmotis tapped the pad of his right thumb against the fingertips of his right hand over and over. "Give me a moment with her."

"She'll nae talk."

"She doesn't have to. She's lost in a dark place, and she needs something to ground her." Kozmotis took a lingering glance at Merida. "Trust me. I know."

Merida seemed hesitant, but eventually nodded. Kozmotis glided into the hut, and saw her in the jeep's rear passenger seat, huddled up in a coarse blanket and staring distantly at the back of the driver's seat. She knew of his presence, of that he was sure, but gave no indication. He also knew where he needed to be. Opening the front passenger door, he climbed in and lowered himself onto
the seat - for Candace, personal space was paramount. She needed to feel safe, so if the back of his head was all she needed to engage with him on her terms, then so be it. Still, he tweaked the rear view mirror so, in case she was comfortable enough for eye contact, they could at least use that. Casting his gaze to the view outside the hut through the entrance, he watched as Merida put a finger to her ear and began to slowly pace.

"You don't have to fear him anymore. I dealt with him."

Silence was her reply.

"The place you are in... I've been there. I've seen the abyss. Felt the powerlessness, the futility. The feeling you are somehow to blame—if you had done something differently, it would never have happened. The fear, because someone didn't just invade your body, but your mind, your heart and your spirit. Questioned whether you are worth anything after what happened. Entertained thoughts that it did not truly occur—that it was someone else. That when the memories hit you in the face, it must be just a nightmare."

Kozmotis chanced a glance at the rear view mirror. Candace was looking right at his reflection - unblinking, focused, aware.

"I know the feeling that because it happened so often, it must be normal. It must be equally as normal to hide it from the world—if no-one knows, then did it really happen? I especially know the feeling that maybe, just maybe, I deserve it. That I was asking for it."

"It happened to you, too?" came a broken whisper from behind him.

"Yes." Kozmotis nodded. "Therefore, know that since I have walked the path you see before you now, you should listen very closely to what you are about to hear. May I face you?"

Candace's eyes widened half an inch, but after a few seconds of hesitation, she slowly nodded. Kozmotis twisted in his seat to face her; with her nose and lips obscured by the blanket, only her eyes were visible as they watched him with her undivided attention.

"What was done to you was monstrous. It was an act of evil. It was an act carried out by a man worth less than the shit left behind by a Reaper. Most importantly... it was not. Your. Fault. You never asked to be raped, you did not deserve it. You. Did. Nothing. Wrong. The responsibility lies not on your shoulders but his—and I have ensured justice has been carried out. Yesterday, you were a victim. Tonight, you are a survivor. In time, you will heal. You will strengthen. You will grow... because each day you move forward is a day you deny him control of you."

Kozmotis reached for the back of his belt, and slipped his fingers around the handle of his combat knife. Drawing it from its sheath, he flipped it over so the blade landed between his fingertips... and, handle first, offered it to her. Candace's eyes darted down to the knife and back, uncertainty and anxiety written in what was visible of her face.

"This will protect you. When you hold this, let it be your anchor. Your reminder of your growing strength, and a promise to the world that you will never let anyone touch you like that again."

"If they try?"

"Then your reckoning will be sharp, swift, true, and final."

Candace's eyes languidly lowered down to the blade, and after a few moments of consideration, a hand slowly slipped out from the blanket and gently held the handle. Kozmotis released the blade, and Candace brought it closer to her. Grey eyes traced over every inch of the metal weapon, her
"The best places to aim are here, with a strong thrust—" Kozmotis pointed directly at his throat, his finger mimicking the tip of a knife, "—or a sharp thrust here, between the fourth and fifth rib and straight up to the heart—" he animated the path of the imaginary blade, "—or if you want them to feel their death coming, strike into the femoral artery in the inner thigh. They will spend the last minutes of their life regretting their attempted crime as they bleed to death."

Candace nodded, gazing at the knife as she rotated it in her hand.

"Do you have family, or anyone to whom you can go for safety?"

Sniffs were heard from behind the protective blanket as she shook her head. "My dad and brother were killed on the Wall two years ago. My mom killed herself when her depression got too much after losing them."

"What about friends?"

Candace uttered the quietest and bitterest of scoffs. "They avoided me when they first figured out what was going on. I'm alone."

"It may seem that way, but you are not alone." Kozmotis looked away, and took a long breath. "Hunter and I will be leaving soon. In that case, you have two options. The first: there is a family living far to the south. Far from here. They are good people with good hearts. I'm certain that if I ask, they would shelter and care for you."

"And the other?"

"The other option… is that you come with us."

Candace abruptly sat bolt upright in her seat, and her eyes that had once been inspecting the knife fixed him with an imploring, almost begging gaze. "Take me with you!" she pleaded. "Please… take me with you. I'm safer that way."

"Candace…"

"Please," she repeated. "I-I have nowhere to go."

Kozmotis studied her for a few moments, yet her face, newly revealed by the falling of the blanket when she had sat up, returned nothing but hope.

"Very well." Kozmotis stroked at his chin. "I will have to talk with my commanding officer, Frost, since he will have the final say. However, he has a noble heart and a desire to do what is right—I see no reason he will disagree. Be aware, though—where we are going is extremely dangerous."

"I don't care," Candace shook her head. "As long as I'm with you and Hunter, I'm safe no matter where I am."

"Alright." Kozmotis nodded to the hut's entry-way. "I need to speak with Hunter—if you are hungry, there is a satchel in the trunk."

"Okay, and… thank you. Both of you… for everything."

Kozmotis slowly lowered his head and raised it again as a wordless reply, before opening the door and climbing out of the jeep. Closing it behind him with as much care as he could muster, he made
his way to the hut's entrance, where Merida stood leaning against the outside wall just around the corner of the large doorway, her hands in her pockets. He caught her gaze, and there was a look in her eyes he couldn't quite identify.

"So we've got a passenger, huh?"

Kozmotis nodded. "Evidently so." He took a step toward her. "Did you make contact?"

"Aye. Viking an' Fury are already on their way to Settlement Nine. Patched Frost and Snow Queen in on the call so they were in the loop.

Merida sniffed, and scratched at her nose. "I also made a private call to Streak."

Kozmotis frowned, tilting his head. "Why?"

"Ta apologise. I was outta line when we all had that big bust-up. Said some shit I shouldn't have said. I still think Frost was doin' th' right thing, an' that he got way too much shit fer it, but..." Merida looked down, and kicked at the dust under her feet. "Been thinkin' a lot about what happened, and I think I understand why Streak was the way she was. Someone did that to one of my brothers, even if their heart was in the right place, I'd lose me shit, too."

"Colour me surprised. I thought the only person more stubborn than Viking was you."

Merida tilted her head and back again. "Aye, well, I still side with Frost, though. I saw his heart. Just like I see yours."

Kozmotis frowned, and cocked his head in confusion he cared not to hide. "Excuse me?"

Merida took a step toward him, and the look he had pegged as 'undefinable' became a good measure more definable - sincerity. "Since the moment we left Bravo, I'd been wonderin' if I'd made the right call when I kissed ye in the forest. Ye were right—it changed things between us. On and off I'd been thinkin' about that moment, y'know, unsure if I should've done it... until now."

"And?"

"I've never been more sure of anythin' in my life." Merida took another step, close enough for her to reach for his hand without having to move her arm too far. "Ye're complicated, ye barely smile, ye've nae laughed that I know of, ye can be a condescending ass and ye're a mite bloodthirsty... but ye've got honor. Ye're honest. Reliable. If ye respect someone, ye'll fight, kill an' die to protect them."

Kozmotis slowly shook his head. "I'm not the man you think I am, Merida."

"Says who?"

"I do." Kozmotis looked away, his golden eyes finding the embrace of the cloudy sky. "There are things about me you don't know. Things that would drive you away."

He felt the touch of fingers on his chin, and felt his head be gently lowered so as to face hers once again, before the palm of her hand found his left cheek. Merida's eyes turned stern, impassioned, unrelenting. "I dinnae care about the person ye were. Pretty sure that was th' person I left in th' office—the person tellin' us ta go 'cause he dinnae want us ta see him hackin' the rapist shitbag ta pieces."

Kozmotis blinked. "How did you know I—"

Shaking her head, Merida laid a finger on his lips. "I may be stubborn an' hotheaded, but I ain't
stupid. Knew what ye were plannin' when ye were crouched over him."

"I didn't know I was so obvious," Kozmotis snorted.

"Only ta me. See, tha Koz I know took a hit fer me in a bar in this very town. Stood in front o' me ta get me ta shoot like I used ta, knowin' he could've been killed. Stood by me when Frost was chewin' me out—" Merida nodded toward the hut, "—an' I dinnae think we need ta go inta what just happened in there. That's all I need ta know."

Merida drew her finger away. "Besides—it'd be massively hypocritical of me ta judge ye on yer past, me bein' an ex-Valkyrie an' all."

"This might not go the way you think," Kozmotis murmured, his left hand reaching to hold hers against his cheek.

Merida let out a low chuckle as she moved even closer to him. "How about ye let me be tha judge o' that, huh? I can take whatever comes my way—or who—if the ending's worth it."

The strange flutter in his heart became an outright storm, and Kozmotis took that moment to lean down and place a gentle, tender kiss on Merida's lips. She responded with equal softness, simply enjoying the connection rather than willing it further.

"That was nice," she said upon pulling away. "But we should probably think about getting out o' here. Longer we stay, more danger we're in."

"Now?"

"Aye." Merida thumbed in the vague direction of the closest part of the Wall, the corners of her lips tugging into a sly smirk. "Heard 'em talk about sendin' search parties out in case anyone survived. We can go with 'em and sneak off when it's clear."

It had gone much like Merida said it would. She'd joined the three-strong car convoy as it exited Perdition's southern gate, bringing up the rear. Once far enough from the settlement, the convoy had circled around and begun its search, enabling their jeep to quietly slip away into the night and head north. Candace had barely spoken a word during the journey, something with which Kozmotis could easily identify, and the only communication had been a radio call to base informing them of their return and estimated arrival time.

Kozmotis welcomed such peace and silence on the journey home, for his mind had been dominated by thoughts of his past, memories of her and his acts as the Nightbringer. He'd carved a bloody swathe through the country as the man who punished the abusers, avenged the victims and established a reputation - harm an abnormal, abuse a child, and it was only a matter of time before he brought the eternal night to your door. Of course, even the Nightbringer couldn't take on the whole of Unity, so he became Pitch Black.

Still, those were demons he thought he'd conquered. Seeing the scar upon Damocles' chest was a reminder that they had been beaten, but not altogether defeated. Which was why, at the end of the radio transmission, Kozmotis requested Jack inform the team of his previous life.

Not to mention, he knew that after the silence came the storm; for when Jack would learn what he'd done, there would be fallout.

It turned out, as Kozmotis stood in the base's mess hall, with Candace sat huddled in her blanket at one end of the table between him and Merida, and Jack occupying the other end, flanked by Elsa -
sporting a curiously different hairstyle - he was fairly adept at prediction.

"So, let me get this straight," Jack said, his tone gruff and his expression deeply annoyed as he sat with his elbows on the table and his fingers crossed together. "I sent the two of you to get useful info for Viking and Fury to work with—"

"Which we did," Merida interjected, and was immediately silenced by a glare from Jack.

"—and you're telling me that not only did you do that, but you also carried out an unauthorised assassination of a goddamn Archon, trashed his Uni-Com and came back with a total stranger?" He glanced at Candace. "No offense."

"If it wasn't for this total stranger," Kozmotis retorted, "we would not even have the information in the first place. Bringing her here was the least we could do, especially after all she'd been through."

"And I'm grateful for that, Ms. Moore. Really, I am. You've helped us out immensely," Jack looked at her with compassionate eyes, which instantly switched back to a stern glare when his gaze returned to Kozmotis, "But right now, I'm getting this distinct notion you knew how this conversation would end, which is why you waited until you were through our fucking gates before telling us. I'm honestly feeling just a little like I'm being taken advantage of."

"It isn't pleasant, is it?"

It was like the temperature in the room plunged two degrees, both figuratively and literally, as Jack's eyes made the slowest of movements before coming to rest upon Elsa, his face deeply unimpressed. To her credit, Elsa held his gaze for a few moments, until she seemed to remember they were not the only occupants of the room, and awkwardly looked away.

"What was that about?" Candace whispered.

"Long story," Merida replied.

"Is that why you're angry?" Kozmotis said, bringing the topic back to the fore. "You feel we have manipulated you and taken advantage of you by bringing Candace here, where she would be most safe, knowing you'd agree?"

Jack's eyes travelled back to Kozmotis, before he abruptly pushed himself up so quickly it caused Candace to flinch. He did not miss the reaction, so when he threw her a glance, it conveyed a clear apology.

"No," he softly spoke after a short time, "because you're right. After all she's been through, she's safer here, with eight highly trained Ghosts surrounding her, than the Unifier's goddamn shell collection."

"He has a shell collection?" Candace whispered to Merida, who responded with little more than a shrug.

"After enduring shit no-one should ever," Jack practically shouted the word, "endure, maybe here you can heal. Make a new life for yourself."

Jack then leaned on the table, splaying his fingers across it, and fixed Kozmotis with an icy glare. "But I didn't nearly die, lose part of my memory, cause a rift in the team and lose my goddamn best friend to fix one massive fucking security risk, for you two to cause another. No offense," he added.

"Wait, what happened with ye and Streak?" Merida said in mild shock, her eyes dancing between
Jack and Elsa.

Shifting in her seat, and glancing down at her hands, Elsa was the one to respond. "Streak has felt it best, in light of what happened, to sever her friendship with Frost."

Merida's head recoiled, though it was less out of surprise and more out of seething pique. "Okay. Ye know that apology I made—can I take it back? Is that a thing I can do?"

"Captain Frost," Candace spoke, instantly silencing whatever was to leave Elsa's open mouth, "Can I say something?"

With an encouraging look, Jack nodded at her, and gestured for the floor to be hers as he said, "Go for it."

"If you're worried I'll rat you out, please don't be. I don't even know where I am." Candace's finger poked out of the blanket she had clutched around her, to wipe under her nose as she let out a sniff. "I can help. Anything you need—information, work, even cooking, I'll do it. Just… please give me a chance to show you I can be trusted."

Jack chuckled as he dipped his head, and as he rose it again, Kozmotis saw the most amused of smiles on his lips. "I believe you. Know why?"

Candace shook her head, so Jack lifted his left hand to rapidly point at Kozmotis and Merida over and over. "Because if these two knuckleheads thought for a second you were shady, we wouldn't be having this conversation. All I wanted was a little heads up, instead of 'oh, by the way'. Know what I mean?" He then quickly turned his head to Elsa just enough to say, "Not a word."

"I understand," Candace said, nodding.

Jack gave her a thumbs up as he straightened upright. "Good. I figure you won't want to be alone tonight, so, Hunter, she'll bunk with you. That okay?"

"Aye. I'll get one of the beds from the barracks. Girl's night in, eh?" Merida said, to which Candace responded with a faint smile.

"Fine. Candace, our medic Blondie is expecting you in the infirmary. She'll heal your wounds, and… help with the physical pain, at least. Tomorrow, we'll talk about basic training - if you're gonna be with us, we need to know you can handle yourself in a fight. My team can't focus on their job if they're constantly having to make sure you don't get hurt. After that, we'll find you something to do. That sound okay?"

Candace's smile widened half an inch, and she nodded with a little more vigor than Kozmotis had seen since the moment they met. "It sounds good. Thank you."

Jack winced slightly. "Don't thank me yet. Far as Unity's concerned, you are now officially an enemy of the state and are to be killed on sight, just for being in this room with us."

"Captain, after what was done to me for nearly two years, I'm not scared of anything, anymore." Candace stood up, and held herself as straight as she could. "And they can try—because I'm done letting people in power hurt me."

Jack curled out his lower lip, and made a fair enough face. "Not much I can say to that. Hunter, you mind escorting our newest recruit to the infirmary?"

"Aye, sir," Merida said with a wide smile, and promptly helped Candace move away from her seat
and out of the mess hall, Jack's lamentations of being called 'sir' drowned out by the door closing behind them.

"I need to talk with you, Jack," Kozmotis said, and added as his eyes flicked to Elsa, "privately."

Jack nodded, and scratched the back of his head before folding his arms. "You mind giving us the room?"

Elsa glanced between them, but the tense silence coupled with Jack's no-nonsense expression removed anything she might have said. She rose to her feet, and headed toward the door - before hesitating a moment and turning to face him.

"That was a noble thing you just did, Jack," she declared.

"Any other time, I'd appreciate that," Jack said flatly, his face the definition of poker, "but after what you just said to me, it means… almost nothing."

Elsa let out a loud, quick sigh. For a few seconds, she looked as though she was about to say something else, but the frown of resignation cutting across her face put paid to that, and she too left.

"One step forward, two steps back, I swear," Jack murmured.

"Do they know?"

Jack glanced at Kozmotis, and slowly nodded his head. "About your old life? Yeah. Patched Hiccup and Astrid in, too, even though Hic already knows."

"How did they take it?"

"What, that they've been living with a vigilante serial killer on the base for a few months and no-one told them? Not well." Jack quirked his lips and tilted his head. "You got Hiccup in your corner, though. Soon as the arguing started, he pretty much put an end to it. Said it was your secret to tell, and the only reason Anna, Hic and I know is 'cause you told us. That you only ever put people in the ground who deserved it, and you've not gone back to that since you became a Ghost. Then Elsa, of all people, said that they didn't really have a right to judge, being ex-Valkyries and all. They don't like it, but they understand."

Kozmotis uttered a hum, and held his hands behind his back. It was strange, the faint sense of relief hovering in his heart. The Kozmotis of two months ago would not have cared if they knew or not, but certainly would not have told them.

"So, what's to stop this coming back to bite us on the ass?" Jack said, regarding Kozmotis with a mild glare. "You did just put down an Archon."

"It won't," Kozmotis replied with cool confidence, "because it wasn't a Ghost that did it, but the Nightbringer. When they see the body, if they haven't already, that will be their conclusion."

Jack raised his eyebrows, and let out a long, faint whistle. "Ouch. Okay, seems pretty comprehensive."

"Indeed, but there is something else you should know." Kozmotis lifted his chin, and let out a breath through his nose. "Eris is alive."

Jack's mouth went agape, his eyes widening with shock as he slightly leaned toward him.

"Wait, what?! I thought you killed her?"
"As did I, but it appears I was wrong. Damocles had a scar on his chest, the same scar Eris gave to me."

"Shit," Jack whispered, and turned away as he wiped a hand over his mouth. "What does it mean? Can't be a coincidence that a goddamn Archon has the same scar as you."

"It means I will have to leave the team, soon."

Jack whirled around, and his prior mild shock became outright, palpable disbelief. "Wait, leave?! You can't leave—not when we're four days away from—"

"I told you I would be there for that," Kozmotis interjected, holding up a hand, "and I will. I will even stay a short while afterwards to make sure things go as they should—but after then, I will be leaving."

"Dude," Jack protested lamely.

"Jack, I need you to understand that I am being very serious." Kozmotis moved closer to him. "You have always quipped about my bloodthirsty ways, that I am quick to violence and that I have... 'issues'. Correct?"

Jack looked off to the side and back again, his left eye narrowing with a slight wince. "Yeah."

"Then I need you to comprehend that Eris makes me look like an innocent choirboy. Her sadism, her malevolence, her lust for blood, control and death—she would torture someone for her own amusement, and she would murder someone and their entire family for even the slightest mistake. Jack, she is one of the only people in this world I would consider to be pure evil."

"So? Why do you have to go?"

"Because marking Damocles as she did was done for a reason, and it cannot be good. Eris always talked of setting up an underground criminal network right under Unity's nose, for things like drugs, black market goods, weapons and... slaves. Abnormal slaves."

"I remember you telling me. You killed her to stop her—and 'cause of what she did to you."

"Precisely. If she is alive, then I'm certain Damocles' scarring is connected to that." Kozmotis folded his arms. "Jack, make no mistake. If Eris is not already aware of our existence, she will be now, and it won't be long until she finds out where they are. We hide here because Unity fears the Reapers, but I can assure you, Eris does not. If she decides we are a threat, not even the Reapers will stop her... and we will never see her coming. For the safety of the team, I need to finish what I started all those years ago. I will put her in the ground, and ensure she stays down."

Jack let out a long, resigned sigh, before scratching the side of his head with one hand and resting the other on his hip. "Why not let us help? She won't stand a chance if we're all gunning for her."

"That's why. If she learns the Ghosts are coming for her, she will disappear and we'll never find her again." Kozmotis began to lose patience, shifting his position while he rubbed at his forehead. "Jack, this is something I must do alone. I'll not risk anyone else's life but my own."

Jack raised an eyebrow, his response coming out in a drawl. "You mean, like Merida? You gonna tell her?"

Kozmotis nodded slowly. "Yes... after the operation. She doesn't need my departure on her mind when we all go into battle."
"Well, make sure I'm on the other side of the base when you do." Jack offered a hand. "She's gonna be pissed."

Kozmotis glanced down at the offered hand, studying it for a few seconds, before accepting the gesture by grasping Jack's forearm. "After what waits for me when I face Eris, I will gladly endure Merida's wrath."

"Yeah. Sure. I thought the same before I pulled the old Gandalf the Grey on Hans - look how that turned out."

"The difference being you didn't tell anyone your intentions until after it was too late for anyone to do or say anything." Kozmotis pointed out with a cocked eyebrow.

"Yeah, yeah." Jack released his arm. "Get some sleep. Tomorrow, you and Merida are doing Candace's orientation, and you'll be giving her hand-to-hand lessons."

Kozmotis blinked, his head recoiling slightly. "Excuse me?"

Jack lips, though they dropped into a thin line, wore the faintest hint of a mischievous smirk. "Oh, yeah. You didn't think you could drop this on me without there being some blowback, did you?"

The man held the data crystal close to his chest with a hirsute hand, as though its very presence would protect him from what was to come. He’d seen things over the years. People lined up against a wall and shot. Reapers tearing a full grown man to shreds. Scenes of bloody, violent deaths of entire families, crimson sprayed over the wall like a goddamn painting.

But the woman on the other side of the door, leading to the office overlooking the decades old steelworks? She freaked him the fuck out - mostly because she was the one responsible.

His hand trembling slightly, he knocked twice upon her door.

"Come in," came a voice from within. It was a sultry, seductive voice that hid unparalleled malice and attractive doom, like the sirens of old. The man sucked in a breath and prayed he would live through the next fifteen minutes, before pushing open the door.

Candles were lit upon every conceivable surface, their tiny flames flickering in the draught let in by the open door. In the very centre of the room stood an iron bath, nearly full to the brim with bubbly, frothy water… and in that bath?

Mistress Eris herself. Her slender legs breached the surface of the water, her right leg reaching up as she lovingly stroked her hands over the skin. Her floor-length hair cascaded over the bath's edge like a waterfall of black ink, its strands and rivers moving independently as vipers would in a nest. Hair that caressed, strangled, stroked, sliced. Hair that did things no kind of hair should.

Then again, she was one of them. Doing things no-one should was kind of a thing with them.

Her eyes found him as he entered, blood red irises surrounding black holes. Her lips cracked into a wide smile, but there was no joy in it. It was the smile a spider would make, if it could, when it sensed prey tangled in its web.

"Julius," she cooed. She moved within the water to rest her chin on her hands as they held the rim. "My closest friend. I hope you have good news for me."

Julius gulped, and gripped the crystal ever tighter against his chest. "No, Mistress."
Eris pouted, quietly huffing. "And I was so enjoying my bath. What do you have?"

Straightening up, Julius tried his damndest to hide the fear gripping his spine. "Archon Damocles is dead, Mistress."

The water violently splashed with the suddenness of Eris' reaction. Her eyes widened to their limits as her head recoiled in shock, and her hands gripped the rim of the bath. The part that sent a bolt of anxiety through Julius' heart, however, was the way her hair stood on end, tips pointed at him like a cobra preparing to kill. Her hair had a higher body count than Unity’s best Inquisitor.

"How?! Where?!"

"I-In his office, M-Mistress. He was found dead in his o-office."

Eris' hair began to slowly travel toward him, waves coalescing into razor sharp points that glimmered in the candlelight. "You mean the office watched over by a security guard who works for me?"

"Y-Yes, Mistress."

Eris' eyes flashed with murder. "Bring him to me. I will flay him—"

"Begging your pardon, Mistress, but he's already here."

Eris' hair paused on its deadly journey, as she blinked in surprise. "What?"

Julius nodded emphatically. "I, uh, took the liberty of capturing him and bringing him here, Mistress. I thought I'd save you the wait."

Red irises once again were quickly veiled by eyelids, before Eris' prior expression of building fury vanished, softening into a pleased, almost turned on smile. The way her hair immediately relaxed, though, was the most relieving part. "Oh, Julius. You've proven once again why you are my closest friend, my confidante… my right hand."

"Thank you, Mistress."

"You are most welcome," she cooed. Julius tried not to flinch when one of the strands of her hair stroked at his cheek. "Now, where is he?"

Julius nodded toward the office windows, covered by thin steel blinds to maintain the mood. "I chained him up over the Pit, Mistress. I figured you'd want to watch."

Eris let out a feminine, yet dark giggle, her hand stroking at her lips. Julius was uncertain whether the look in her eyes, like she wanted to devour him alive, turned him on or terrified him. "My, I love it when you take the initiative, Julius. You truly are completely trustworthy - and trust is so important in this day and age… don't you agree?"

"Yes, Mistress."

The sound of rippling and splashing echoed through the office as Eris unfurled herself from the bath's surface, rising like the deadliest of snakes, and Julius' cheeks went a searing red. Completely nude, her slender, nubile body shimmered in the candlelight captured by the water caressing her grey skin. His eyes widening, Julius found his gaze automatically gravitating to her breasts, thanks to the way her hair slowly floated down to frame them. Saw the vicious, six-inch long scar across her abdomen.
Sensing awkwardness, he cleared his throat and quickly looked away.

"Come now, Julius. You don't need to be embarrassed by my body," she said, her voice soothing his ears. "You are my consort; you've made love to me… vigorously, after all."

If by that she meant they had fucked, Julius thought, then sure - and if 'fucked' meant having his hands tied together whilst she rode him senseless, biting and scratching her way to an orgasm, then that was a certainty. "Yes, Mistress. I understand."

He slowly turned his gaze back to her body, and the predictable reaction hidden in his pants became all the more pronounced. Eris glanced down, and coyly giggled, her lower lip nibbled by her teeth. She gracefully lifted one leg out of the bath, touching down with clearly intended gentleness, before her other leg followed. Hips swaying like a sexual come-hither, she walked towards him, eyes never leaving his. "Would you be so kind as to bring me my bathrobe?" she murmured as she moved. "The air is a little… cold."

She wasn't wrong; proof of the inherent chill in the room came in two identical forms. Tearing his eyes away from her chest, Julius anxiously scanned the room, his head whirling left and right, before discovering the navy blue bathrobe hanging from a coat hook inside of the door. He quickly grasped it, and held it toward her.

Eris turned around, treating him to a glorious view of her rear. "Would you?"

Julius cleared his throat and licked his lips, forcing himself to keep his attention on his task, and not on the supremely gorgeous yet utterly psychopathic woman tempting him. With great care, he slipped the sleeves of her robe onto her arms, before gently lifting the collar to rest on her shoulders, Eris taking care of the rest. She turned to face him once again, her hair returning to its original, calm state.

"Now, show me."

Julius nodded, and went over to the blinds, where he pulled on the loop of string at one side. With an admittedly jarring clatter, the metal strips rose in stages until they reached the top, and Julius secured the string to keep them there. Overlooked by the office was a deep, wide hole they called the Pit, enough to hide two stacked Helas with room to spare, lined with exceptionally smooth rock and illuminated by a giant searchlight fixed to the catwalk on the opposite side of the steelworks. Inside the Pit was over a dozen hungry, shrieking, frantic Reapers, all clambering over each other and desperately trying to scurry up the walls to feed on the fifty-plus onlookers.

Suspended over the pit was the security guard, his bound hands attached to a hook, his upper body exposed, torso bearing the lash-like fruits of his mistakes. Blood seeped down his chest, the smell of which driving the trapped Reapers into a frenzy.

Eris' eyes flashed with satisfaction. "Oh, perfect. Let this be a message to anyone who fails me… even you."

Julius choked, and quickly attempted to regain composure. "Y-Yes, Mistress."

"Good - because while I approve of initiative… do be careful you don't overstep your bounds." Eris gave him a sideways look. "I'd hate to have to find another right hand man and consort. No-one quite knows how to satisfy me like you do."

If it was a compliment, the threat of death wrapped around it somewhat diminished its effect. Eris gave a single nod, prompting Julius to gesture through the window at the three men on the catwalk
opposite, stood a few feet from the searchlight. The man in the centre gave a thumbs up, and proceeded to rotate the crank in front of him, lowering the chain that suspended the guard over his imminent death.

"Slower, my dear. Slower," Eris gently chastised him. "I want him to feel every single bite, every punishment for his failure for as long as possible. Besides—my pets haven't eaten in so long. They need to pace themselves."

Julius shivered, yet nodded nonetheless. He held up his hands and made a slow-the-fuck-down gesture at the chain operator, who gave him another thumbs up and acted accordingly. The guard descended half as fast as before, causing him to yell out pleas for mercy, for forgiveness, for help. Cry out in terror, his eyes switching between the ravenous creatures below him and Eris herself.

"Does he have family?" she asked.

"Yes, Mistress." Julius felt a bout of nausea. He knew what was coming. "A wife and an eight year old son."

"Hmm." Eris held her hands behind her back. "Have them brought here, and put them in the warehouse with the Beast. I want his entire bloodline eradicated as punishment for allowing Damocles to die."

"It will be done, Mistress."

It was then that the guard screamed out in agony; one of the Reapers had managed to leap from the pile of its brethren, clamber up the guard's leg and sink its teeth into his shoulder. He thrashed about with the visible pain, driving the rest into a frenzy and prompting another to follow the first, taking a vicious bite from his upper arm.

"Now," she said, and a quick glance from Julius yielded a smile on her lips, "I want to know how he died, and who is responsible, so I can remove the skin from their worthless body myself."

"I have a data crystal, Mistress, given to me by our Hidden in Perdition's militia. She was the one that found the body."

"Show me."

Julius nodded, and gratefully tore his eyes away from the poor guard, whose legs were in the process of being torn apart. He strode over to the Uni-Com on the other side of the room, stolen from the nearby settlement and hacked into by Eris' personal technopath, and slotted the data crystal into the receptacle in its obsidian black surface. Instantaneously, the holographic emitter projected a blue hued grid of nine images into the air, close enough to force Julius to take a step back. Eris appeared beside him, her eyes tracing over each image with… admiration.

"It seems someone has a taste for the theatrical," she mused. "I take it you've already seen these?"

It took a few moments for Julius to answer, suddenly aware of the eerie silence in the main foundry. "Yes, Mistress. They found his left arm in the trash, his right arm in the destroyed remains of his Uni-Com, his left leg on the windowsill, his right leg under the desk, his torso on his chair and his head on top of his desk. They… uh… also found his genitals in his mouth." Julius was not ashamed to let the resulting shiver be so obvious. "He had been repeatedly raping his personal assistant for a long time, so at first the law thought she was responsible… until they saw this."

Julius tapped the intangible lower middle image, and used a pulling motion with his fingers to
enlarge it. What was shown was a picture taken of the wall behind his desk, and the words written upon it in what Julius had found out to be Damocles' blood.

**THE NIGHT IS COMING**

He wasn't sure, but it *sounded* like a shaky gasp had been taken between Eris' lips. He snuck a quick glance in her direction, a glance that became uncertain surprise when he caught her expression: a growing smile, with eyes that slowly widened, like she had just seen an old friend.

He also caught the way her hands unconsciously stroked the area of her bathrobe concealing her scar.

"After so long, you've come back to me," she murmured, her other hand reaching out to trace along the intangible letters, "I've missed you terribly, my love."

"Mistress?" Julius said.

"Before I created the Discordant," Eris began to explain, "I used to travel the country with a man named Kozmoitis Pitchiner. I fell in love with his rage, his brutality, his unbridled lust for death and violence. Together, we went from place to place, slaughtering when we could, and making love when we could not. Of course, he only killed those deserving of death—something I did try to change. It was his personal code. Stifling, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"Naturally I found his lack of vision and unwillingness to go further to be somewhat dull, but he more than made up for it with how… passionately he made love to me. He was my lover, my friend, my Prince Charming… my husband." Eris chuckled to herself as she pointed at her scar. "Our divorce was quite final. He was… he was my Nightbringer."

Julius' eyes widened, and his throat betrayed a gulp. "Do you mean the Nightbringer, Mistress?"

"Yes. Archon's Bane, some called him. Wrathbringer, others. To me, and the rest of the country, he was the Nightbringer."

"But…" Julius looked away, searching in his mind for an answer he would never have had anyway, "Unity said the Nightbringer was dead?"

Eris let out a soft giggle, one Julius had the distinct impression was mocking his ignorance. Not that he'd openly say it. "Oh, no. Unity claimed their Inquisitors killed the Nightbringer because they couldn't explain why he had suddenly vanished without a trace. I knew better, however - the Nightbringer had joined the Ghosts, and became Pitch Black. Of course, after the Purge, I thought he truly had died… until tonight."

"So he's back, then. The Nightbringer is back."

Eris nodded slowly. "Yes, my dear consort. The wolf is returning to the pack."

"What do we do?"

She tapped the image, sending it back into the grid which returned to its original position. "Send word to my Hidden around the country. Tell them if they see a man with grey skin and golden eyes, they are to capture him and bring him to me - without a scratch - so I can give him the gift he so generously gave me when we parted ways."
Julius bowed his head. "It will be done, Mistress."

Eris turned to face him, her red eyes gleaming with promise, like someone awaiting a pleasant surprise, and her lips curling into a wide smile. "Excellent. Now…"

Julius felt her hands reach for his pants, her fingers nimbly undoing the button. His heart leaping into his throat, he anxiously glanced left and right - but between the grisly images of murder to his left, and the bitten-off arms dangling from the chain at his right, he was trapped.

Exactly how Eris liked it - knowledge reinforced by how her hair wrapped itself around his wrists, forced his hands behind his back and bound them just before his pants dropped to his ankles.

"You turned what could have been a bad night into a good one. I think that deserves a reward, don't you?" she said, stroking him to her delight.

It was all he could do to nod. Letting slip a coy giggle, Eris sank to her knees and wrapped her lips around him, her tongue flicking the tip as she slowly bobbed her head. It was then that Julius gave in to the indescribable pleasure, and cast aside his resistance with a faint moan.

Serving Eris had its perks. Hot, wet perks.

Provided he didn't screw up.
Winter's Wrath, Winter's Grace

Chapter Notes

A/N: Elsa's theme in the latter half of this chapter - "Forge Ahead", Destiny 2 OST.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Winter's Wrath, Winter's Grace"

Jack could be forgiven for not being aware of Rapunzel's entry into the command centre. He'd heard his name called twice, but his mind had automatically sorted the customary response into his mental priority list - right at the bottom, under the category 'Names To Ignore' which included Steve, Bob and Morris. After all, his mind had been focused on other things, like trying to plan the Ghosts' war with Unity.


Tactician? Not a chance. He left that to people like Kristoff, Belle and Shrek for good damn reason. Of course, fate had other - fucking bullshit - ideas which meant he had to play the role of all three, so there he was.

Hence the ridiculous amount of sheets of paper, enough to make Kozmotis weep, frozen by their corners to the blank wall opposite the computers. Sheets of paper upon which were written various objectives, abstract ideas, concepts and stages, all connected by lines to one singular sheet in the centre of them all, which had three words written on it and encircled - Fall of Unity.

The problem was that the more Jack looked at it, the more the sheer scale of it became apparent. War was something conducted by nations or superpowers, not a bunch of eight abnormal black ops soldiers and one human, with limited supplies and the thinnest of margins for error. Take out one part of Unity's juggernaut, and by the time they were on the third objective, the first would be back up and running. Not to mention, the issues with Hans created a de facto new enemy, one independent of Unity. They would be fighting a war on two fronts. Put simply, he knew the Ghosts just weren't capable of doing it alone. They needed allies, numbers, help.

They needed Unity to go to war with the Alliance.

Factor that, and the song under which the iPod liked to define as 'metal', from his playlist entitled Broody McMoody - Hiccup's words, not his - blasting out at near maximum volume from the speakers on the table behind him, he could also be forgiven for not even hearing her.

Therefore, Rapunzel could equally be forgiven for throwing a pen at his head - not that he would have admitted it at that precise moment.

The pen bounced off the left side of his head and clattered to the floor. Massaging the brand new stinging sensation in his scalp - she had to hit him with the pointy end - he turned and threw a hearty scowl in her direction.

Her response? Hands spread out with a shrug, and an expression of how else was I gonna get your-
attention all over her face. Rolling his eyes, Jack went over to the iPod sat on the table and ran his thumb over it to begrudgingly reduce the song's volume.

"What?" he said a little more abruptly than intended.

"'Y'know, we in the civilized world also say 'hello'," Rapunzel said, her hands on her hips.


Rapunzel ignored the grumpy quality to his demeanour. "I need your help with an experiment. It's important."

Jack stared at her for a few seconds, before glancing and lamely gesturing at the door. "Can't you ask any of the others?"

"Nope." Rapunzel shook her head in a wide, slow motion. "Gotta be you."

Jack's eyes found a few places on the ceiling, before a resigned sigh was let slip. He closed his eyes, and stroked his forehead with his fingers as he said, "Fine. What's the experiment?"

Face lighting up, Rapunzel gave him an open-mouthed smile as she lifted up a finger. "We'll get to that. First... what is that?"

Following her rather pointed gaze, Jack's sight landed on his iPod, where his playlist was still dutifully filling the room with heavy drums and distorted guitars, along with vocals alternating between guttural howling and emphatic singing.

"It's called metal."

Rapunzel frowned in puzzlement, tilting her head. "What, like... metal metal?"

"No—yeah. I—" Jack blinked, his breath catching in an attempt to help someone else understand what he didn't fully understand. He shook away the confusion, and halfheartedly gestured at the iPod. "It's pre-war music. Old stuff. Unity didn't like it, I guess."

"Huh. " Rapunzel raised her eyebrows and jutted out her lower lip as she slowly nodded. "Merida said it was just noise. I kinda like it. Catchy. What's the song called?"

Jack cocked a single eyebrow. "It's called Throw Another Pen at My Head by I'll Snowball Your Face."

Rapunzel broke into a couple of seconds of forced laughter, before her face immediately went as deadpan as Jack's did. "No, really. What's it called?"

Jack motioned for her to have a look for herself so he could return to his self-appointed task of staring at a wall and waiting for an epiphany. In his peripheral vision, he saw Rapunzel approach and lean down to read the iPod's screen, before she straightened up.

"Hey, you okay?"

Jack turned at the concern in her voice, frowning. "Fine. Why?"

Rapunzel's expression perfectly accompanied the tone of her voice. "Oh, well, there's the whole grumpy thing—" she gestured to all of him with a lazy circle of her hand, "—you're staring at a wall and... you're listening to something called Slipknot by I'm assuming someone called Before I Forget."
Glancing at the wall and then back to Rapunzel, Jack opened and closed his mouth, blinking a few times in uncertainty of how to respond. "It's—it's the other way around. It's—uh—*Before I Forget* by Slipknot."

"Oh."

"Yeah." Jack made an awkward flipping motion with his fingers. "You had it the wrong—"

"Wrong way, yeah. It's just old tech, and—"

"Totally understand."

Jack shifted his feet, alternating between folding his arms over his chest, and pocketing his hands, rocking on his heels. Rapunzel let out a quiet, awkward cough, her right hand finding her hip whilst her left scratched at the side of her head.

"So…"

"So…"

"Can I borrow your thingy?"

Jack did a double take, before his expression cut a mildly indignant frown. "What? Uh, no?"

"Please?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because it's mine."

"Please?" Rapunzel gave him the best impression of puppy-dog eyes he had ever seen. If rated, it was up there with Antonio's starry-eyed look - the problem was, Anna had pretty much ruined him in terms of childlike pleading eyes. "I really like this 'metal' thing."

"Tough. Kinda cool, but tough." Jack shook his head. "Now, you mind telling me about this experiment? I've got a wall to stare at."

Rapunzel huffed, her shoulders theatrically sagging as she rolled her eyes. "Fine. It's just a theory I wanna explore about this connection you and Elsa seem to have. I remember Anna saying that was how you found her when she ran away, and how you knew she was on the other side of the door on the Star."

"It hasn't been like that for a while," Jack quietly replied. It was a half-truth; he still felt echoes of whatever it was, shadows of emotions and intent, but nowhere near as sharp.

"Yeah, I know—I wanted to ask if you'd be willing to explore it. I've got Elsa waiting for us—"

"Okay, I'll stop you right there." Jack held up a hand. "I appreciate you coming to ask me and what you're trying to do, but no, thanks."

"Why?"

"It's…" Jack looked down, but caught himself, and returned his attention to the wall. "I just don't think it's a good idea."
There was a beat of silence, before Rapunzel said, "This is about Elsa, isn't it?"

"Nothing to do with her."

"Jack, don't bullshit me, okay?" Rapunzel moved closer. "This is just like before you went to get the tardioxin. You're avoiding each other—like, other-side-of-the-base avoiding. Temperature drops if you're in the same room, and you two don't speak a word to each other. Just talk to her."

"We did that. We talked, we're on the same page. She needs time and space, and she's getting it. It's not that complicated."

"Yeah, well, aside from the fact the entire base can feel the atmosphere between the two of you," Rapunzel said, resting her weight on one hip whilst she folded her arms, "I need you both for the experiment. I already asked her, and she's on board—and she wasn't a pain in the ass to convince, unlike you."

Jack hesitated for a moment - was Rapunzel being truthful? Did Elsa not possess the same reluctance to be around him as he with her? Inhaling a breath, he let it out through his nose. "Guess I'll just have to disappoint you."

"Or we make a deal."

Jack's head turned like the laziest of owls, and his eyes narrowed whilst his lips thinned into a line. "You're doing that on purpose."

The left corner of Rapunzel's lips were tugging into a wicked smirk, her eyes radiating the kind of mischief to which even he used to aspire. "Help with this experiment. If nothing comes of it, then I don't ask to borrow your music thing again. Ever. 'Cause you know I'll bug you about it."


"But, if my theory pans out and we do discover something, then I get to borrow the iPod today. I wanna check out this metal thing."

Two things occurred to him. The first was the growing, unignorable suspicion Rapunzel knew exactly what she was doing and exactly what to say, leading him to once again feel like she was playing him like a fiddle. The second? Never mind Merida, he needed to keep an eye on Rapunzel.

Jack jutted out his jaw and let it move left and right as he considered his options; it seemed pretty clear cut, plus he could also flat-out refuse. Of course, he'd likely spend the rest of his natural life learning the countless ways of saying 'no', or keeping his iPod hidden at all times. That one seemed like it required way too much effort.

"Alright. Let's go."

Rapunzel led Jack to the empty space before the mechanics workshop and the command centre, figuring it would have ample room for the imminent test. She pulled her thick civilian coat closer around her; she had been adapting to the chilly Canadian climate quicker than she'd hoped, but for someone built for the warmer temperatures of New Corona, it was still mighty brisk. Under the light grey, overcast sky she walked, the sound of Jack's footsteps behind her reaching her ears.
Before her, a dozen yards away, stood Elsa in animated conversation with her sister. It warmed Rapunzel's heart that they were making great strides to work out how they would be as close as Elsa once said they used to be, but the warmth was edged with a hint of regret that it came at such a cost.

Which was something that became starkly apparent when Anna caught sight of their approach out of the corner of her eye, and her initial smile of greeting fell to an awkward line the moment she noticed who was behind Rapunzel. Similarly, Elsa couldn't avoid their eyes more obviously if she tried.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," Jack murmured behind her.

"Pull up your big boy pants, dude." Rapunzel shrugged. "They wanna make the atmosphere tense, that's on them. We're here to do a test."

"You still haven't told me what it is we're doing."

"All will be revealed," Rapunzel said with a mysterious air, which vanished behind a cautious, "Hopefully."

"Hey," Anna greeted them, once they were close enough for secret murmurs to be possible to hear. "Is it okay if I watch?"

"Sure, so long as you do what I do, and just observe," Rapunzel said, shrugging.

"What is your hypothesis, anyway?" Elsa asked. "You've been quite vague about it."

"Well, as we know, you two—" she alternated pointing between Jack and Elsa, "—have some sort of bond, some kind of connection between you that means you can sense each where each other is, sense their emotions and whatnot. Nothing like that, to my knowledge, has ever happened between two abbies before—I mean, you two were raised by the leading experts in abnormality. Correct me if I'm wrong, but… this is unheard of, right?"

"Right," Anna said, to which Elsa indicated her agreement with a nod.

"Exactly, which means this is a new frontier in how we understand our gifts." Rapunzel's hands began to animatedly gesture along with her explanation. "My hypothesis is that there's more to your connection than just a proximity sense or an empathic bond. I think it can be harnessed—maybe it could enhance your capabilities in the field."

"You mean weaponise it?" Jack drawled.

"I wouldn't put it like that, but… essentially? Yeah." Rapunzel's lips twisted in discomfort at the notion. "But right now, it's just a theory—which is where you two come in."

Elsa was the first - and quickest - to respond. "What do you need us to do?"

"I need you two to spar."

Jack choked behind her, a bark of incredulous laughter warping his reaction. Even Elsa seemed uncertain. "Come again? I thought you didn't like us fighting?"

"Yeah—fighting being the key word. I don't like it when you fight instead of talk—which, for the record—" Rapunzel gestured between them, "—you two really need to do. No, this is just some sparring, not a case of you two putting each other in the infirmary. Soon as one of you starts getting a little too into it, I call it off and kick both of your asses for screwing with my experiment. Kapische?"
Rapunzel didn't miss the awkward, uncertain glances sent to each other by her three teammates. Jack, oddly, seemed to be the first to act; Rapunzel heard the sound of velcro being pulled apart, and as she looked at him, he handed his bracer to her.

"Alright. For science."

Rapunzel gave him a grateful smile as she took the bracer, and as she looked for Elsa's response, she was greeted with a slow nod. "Okay," she said. "Anna and I will be over here—" she thumbed behind her, "—out of harm's way."

"But that's all you need us to do, right?" Jack said as he passed her to stand near Elsa, in the appropriate spot for friendly combat, his left arm across his chest as his right arm hooked over to stretch the muscles, "You just need us to spar?"

"Yep—but there's a catch."

"Of course there is," Elsa groaned.

Rapunzel dove her right hand into her pocket, and pulled out two long strips of material. "You'll be wearing these blindfolds."

Jack gaped, and his head swivelled between her and Elsa, who looked equally bemused. "You're joking. You want us to fight blind?"

"Yep. When we fight close quarters, we use our eyes; our opponent strikes, we see it and act accordingly. These—" she waved the blindfolds, "take your sight out of the equation."

Elsa rested her hands on her hips. "But we need to see to be able to fight, otherwise we'll be swinging at thin air."

"Yeah, but you don't just use your eyes, do you?" Rapunzel pointed out. "You use prediction, and instinct. That's what this is about—take away your sight, and seeing if your instincts, and your bond takes over."

Jack let out an unconvinced sigh, scratching the side of his head. He shrugged slowly, almost in resignation, before holding out his hand and beckoning with his fingers. "Alright. Don't see how this'll work, but… alright."

Elsa echoed his sentiment, so Rapunzel passed them a blindfold each. Jack kept checking the distance between him and Elsa, adjusting his position a few inches here and there, before turning to face her as she did the same. As he began to tie the blindfold over his eyes, he drawled, "If I lose a tooth 'cause Elsa actually manages to hit me, that's on you."

Elsa gave him an annoyed look behind her blindfold. "Excuse me?"

"Call it the hazards of scientific research," Rapunzel jumped in. "Now, Jack—I want you to try and hit Elsa."

Jack turned slightly toward Rapunzel, halfheartedly throwing up his hands. "Seriously? I'm not gonna hit—"

"Elsa?"

Almost instantly, Elsa wound back her right fist as she stepped forward with her left foot, and sent it flying toward Jack's face. What caught Rapunzel's breath in her throat, however, was how Jack's
right hand shot up within a split second - and caught her punch mid-flight like he knew it was coming.

Shock became the order of the day as far as atmosphere was concerned. Both Rapunzel and Anna froze, with the latter's jaw on the floor, and though their eyes were obscured, Rapunzel had the sneakiest suspicion Jack and Elsa's eyes were as wide as hers, Elsa's fist still enclosed by Jack's hand.

"Okay… what?!” Anna blurted.

Jack lifted up his blindfold to just above his eyes, followed by Elsa, and his gaze darted between her and the caught punch, his mouth parted in disbelief.

"Okay," he said, his voice incredulous, "one: that was awesome. Two—" he gave a slightly annoyed look at Elsa, "you didn't even hesitate."

It seemed all Elsa could do was shrug, given her expression was every bit as surprised as everyone else's. So much so, in fact, that neither she nor Jack had moved; her fist was still in his hand.


"Funny, coming from someone who can control fire," Elsa said, though the breathy quality to her voice did an admirable job of subduing the snark. "Our very existence defies impossibility."

"She's not wrong," Jack said. Slowly, he was the first to remove his hand from Elsa's, and stared at it like it was something he'd never seen before. "Question still stands—the hell just happened?"

"Exactly what I hoped," Rapunzel said, voice quiet with awe. "Jack—when Elsa tried to punch you, can you describe what you were feeling? Like, can you explain what was going on in your mind?"

Jack sucked in a breath, frowning with slightly widened eyes as he slowly shook his head, as though the idea of putting it into words was almost impossible. "I… dunno? It was weird—it was like I knew it was coming without seeing—like I could sense her fist coming, so I reacted to stop it. I just…"

"You didn't think about it, did you?" Rapunzel finished for him. "You acted out of instinct."

Jack's eyes found hers, understanding crossing the distance between them. "Yeah. Exactly. It was like something just took over and guided me."

"Fantastic." Rapunzel clapped once. "Now, would you mind trying to strike Elsa? I need to see if it works both ways."

Jack half smirked, and gave Elsa a sidelong look. "Gladly."

Elsa narrowed her eyes, and immediately transitioned back to a defensive stance, with her fists raised and her right foot drawn back - but Rapunzel noticed it wasn't until she had seen Jack lower his blindfold that she did the same.

Spicing things up, Jack swivelled on his left foot and delivered a roundhouse kick at her head, and to Rapunzel's ever-brightening glee, Elsa effortlessly ducked the strike and jumped over the sweeping kick with which Jack attempted to follow up. Anna immediately began clapping like she was watching a play, prompting both combatants to pause and lift their blindfolds.

"You felt that, too?" Jack said, sounding oddly breathless.
Elsa nodded, a wide grin curling her lips, her eyes glimmering. "Yeah! I can't explain it—it felt like I knew what you were going to do!"

"Wanna go again?"

"Fuck yes!"

And so they did. Under Rapunzel's watchful gaze, Jack and Elsa replaced their blindfolds and went at it for several minutes, their sparring increasing from short bursts to far more complicated manoeuvres. She was particularly impressed with how Elsa elegantly weaved to the side to evade Jack's butterfly kick, only for her counter flying punch to be parried aside. Occasionally Rapunzel would shake her head in disbelief that the experiment had gone better than she had hoped - a new frontier in understanding abnormality.

In fact, it had gone on for so long that Candace and Merida had finished their afternoon fitness training and had come to see what all the fuss was about. The newest addition to the team jogged up to stand near Rapunzel, before bending over with her hands on her camouflage pants-covered knees, panting and puffing her life away.

"Red working you hard?" Rapunzel said wryly.

Candace gave her a funny look. She seemed so different since the night she was brought to the base, with bruises and cuts littering her entire body. Under Rapunzel's care and gifts, Candace's external injuries had vanished, bringing out the woman she was supposed to look like.

The moment Candace looked in the mirror was one Rapunzel would never forget; upon seeing her bruise and cut-free countenance, the woman had wept, and thrown her arms around the medic, sobbing that she had grown so used to seeing her face in shades of black and blue, she had forgotten what she truly looked like.

"Hey, you should… try to keep up… with someone who can run… three times faster than you…" Candace said, before shaking her head. "What am I saying—you can."

Rapunzel threw back her head for a hearty guffaw. "That's a yes, then."

"Och, she's just whinin'," Merida said, waving it off. "She's faster than she gives herself credit fer."

"Merida, I had to run to keep up with your jogging." Candace straightened up, resting her hands on her hips. "Pretty sure you were holding back."

"She was," Rapunzel said. "If Merida wanted to, she could run two full circuits of the camp before you even got halfway."

Candace blinked, her face going blank. "Why do I completely believe that?"

"S'cause it's true," Merida chuckled. She nodded at Jack and Elsa, who were still going at it. "They fightin' again?"

Rapunzel shook her head, a wry, lopsided smile on her lips as she watched for Merida's reaction. "Nope. Look closer."

Merida leaned forward slightly, her brow furrowing whilst her eyes tried to keep track of the energetic, dance-like sparring, before she jerked her head back in surprise. "How tha fuck are they —"
"What's all the commotion?"

Rapunzel looked over her shoulder in time to see Pitch walking over to the group, his hands behind his back as he glanced at each of them. "Hey, Pitch."

"Good afternoon," he responded. "I came to see if Candace is ready for her first lesson in firearms."

"What, now?!" Candace gaped. "I'm still recovering from her!"

"You did go easy on her, didn't you?" Pitch looked at Merida. "She isn't built like we are."

"What tha—o' course I did!"

"Clearly." Pitch nodded at the two combatants, sighing in exasperation. "Are they using their fists to solve their problems again?"

"Is that a thing with them?" Candace asked.

"More often than I'd like," Rapunzel drawled, trying her best not to roll her eyes, "but not this time, Pitch. Look closer."

Pitch did much the same as Merida, craning his head forward whilst his eyes followed the action. Rapunzel watched him through the corner of her eye, and smirker when his eyebrows rose as his lower lip jutted out.

"Well, isn't that curious."

"I know, right?" Merida said. "Blindfolded. It's almost like—"

"Harmony."

Rapunzel turned her head to properly face Pitch at the same time as everyone else, including the once silent Anna, who said, "Come again?"

"Have you heard of yin and yang?"

"Uh, no? I didn't really know the names of everyone on the Star."

Pitch let out a pained groan, and wiped his hand down his face. "Not people. Yin and yang is an idea, a belief. It means balance. Two halves of a whole, two opposing forces that balance each other out, that complete each other."

"You think that applies to Jack and Elsa?"

"Yes." Pitch nodded. "Consider their personalities. Consider who is more likely to answer first when both are asked a question. Consider their combat styles; I know from experience that Jack fights defensively. He prefers to outlast his opponent, frustrate them, evade them, exhaust them. Tell me—in your tenure as Valkyries, how did Elsa fight?"

"She was aggressive," Rapunzel answered, which earned a nod of knowing agreement from Merida. "She was always on the attack, made sure her opponent never had room to breathe. She set the tone and rhythm of the fight."

"Precisely." Pitch gestured at the sparring session. "Watch how they fight each other—they both switch from attack to defense and back. Neither of them have the advantage, and so they are equal."
"They weren't when Elsa cut him open in the Depot," Anna pointed out. "Not to mention the bust-up a few months ago."

"That was because Jack was unprepared for Elsa's fighting capabilities the first time, nor was he prepared for the sheer rage she had repressed over the years, once he'd goaded it out of her." Pitch looked at Anna. "Once he adapted, they were evenly matched."

"Elsa trained specifically to take Jack down, though," Merida said. "An' Jack's got double the experience she has. Combat prowess ain't a sign o' balance."

"Perhaps not, but consider their powers. They both embody—represent—winter, but in different ways. Look at how they manifest." Pitch pointed at Elsa. "Her powers take on an elegant, curved, smooth stream when she fires at something, but—"

Pitch then pointed at Jack.

"—his are jagged, sharp, vicious. Not unlike a bolt of lightning. Jack has mostly used his powers to destroy and damage; Elsa, to create."

"Yeah, but Jack's entertained so many kids with his snow days," Anna said. "And Elsa didn't exactly make Coldheart for pruning roses. Pretty sure she's just as capable of wrecking stuff."

"That's a conscious use of their powers, but not the base form they take." Pitch scratched at his temple. "Don't tell Jack I told you this, but do you remember the freak storm in zone thirty-nine, five years ago?"

"Aye - screwed up me dad's synthohol deliveries to that zone fer a week," Merida grumbled. "He wasnae happy. Why?"

"That was Jack."

Pitch became the recipient of four incredulous gapes, and more than a few murmurs of disbelief.

"Ye're kiddin'."

"No," Pitch shook his head. "The supply convoy was too well guarded for our usual tactics to work. Air support, a few tanks, the works. It carried things we sorely needed, however, so the decision was made to attack regardless. Only, while a tactical plan was being formulated, Jack elected for the more direct approach and let loose with the full extent of his powers. He created a storm so powerful it derailed the convoy, froze the soldiers within minutes, crashed the fighters and ground the tanks to a standstill. Since it was a warm night, the sudden change in weather also caused a thunderstorm. It truly was a sight, watching the sky crack with thunder and lightning. Of course, it put him out of action for a few days."

"So if he can do that," Rapunzel murmured, "and Elsa's supposed to be his equal and opposite…"

"Her potential is unfathomable," Pitch said. "His capacity to destroy will be rivalled and equalled by her ability to create. He is winter's wrath, but she is winter's grace. Together… harmony."

"I like that," Candace said, smiling.

Anna spoke, her voice confused and almost lost. "How come Jack never told me any of this?"

"Because it's not something I like to talk about."
Mildly startled by the abrupt sound of his voice, Rapunzel cast an embarrassed look at Jack, whose face was busy conveying the dictionary definition of *unimpressed* as he glared at Pitch, his blindfold dangling from his hand. Elsa, however, watched Jack with an expression dancing between surprise and concern.

"You were—"

"Listening?" Jack said, his eyebrows high. "Yeah. Heard you the whole time. Pretty sure Elsa did, too. Abnormal hearing, remember?"

Pitch opened his mouth, but chose not to say anything, so closed it again as he looked away.

"I think it's time you told us what this experiment is all about," Elsa said, warily eyeing Pitch and Jack, seemingly attempting to avert the tension that had settled.

"Huh?" Rapunzel said blankly. "Oh. Yeah. When we were holed up in that room while you were blooming, Anna talked about how Jack was able to sense where Elsa was, kinda feel what she was feeling. She said it was how he found you when you ran away—and you've mentioned it a few times to me, as well."

"Indeed."

"I can't explain it, but you two have some sort of bond, some sort of connection." Rapunzel gestured at the blindfold in Jack's hand as she stood in the middle of them, but set a foot or so back. "I wanted to see if there was more to it than just echoes of feelings and proximity awareness."

"And?"

"I was right. When you two fought but couldn't see each other, your bond took over. You fought by instinct, by sense—maybe there's some sort of precognition involved, insofar as you're aware of each other's intent a split second before you act." Rapunzel gestured between them with hands clasped together. "If you can harness that and use it in the field, you wouldn't be fighting as two people—"

"We would be fighting as one," Elsa said, looking squarely at Jack.

"There's no way to know that for sure," Jack pointed out, his arms folding to nestle his hands in the crooks of his elbows. "Sparring with each other is one thing, but—we can't go into battle blindfolded. It'd get us killed."

"I agree," Elsa added. "As amazing as this bond seems to be, there's no way to know if it will enhance our combat ability outside of real battle."

"Maybe there is."

Rapunzel turned to look at Pitch, whose stance mirrored Jack's to a tee. His golden eyes flicked between each of them in turn, before landing on Merida. "It seems the good doctor needs more data—would you care to join me in providing it?"

Merida looked at him like he'd just grown a second head, resting her weight on her left hip for a sassy she too folded her arms. "Ye mean take on tha two best hand-to-hand folks in tha team? What are ye, nuts?"

"As 'nuts' as you are scared, it seems," Jack drawled, making a show of inspecting his fingernails. Rapunzel didn't miss the murmur of 'you just had to say that,' from Elsa, and could swear she heard the crackle of electricity behind her.
"Okay. Y'know what?" Merida snapped, her voice full of indignant pique, "Scratch that. Let's go, pretty boy. I'm gonna wipe that smirk off yer face."

"Money, mouth." Jack gave her a challenging look. "Show me whatcha got, Sparkles."

"Hey Elsa?" Rapunzel called, as Merida stalked over to stand opposite Jack, her fists clenched and her face radiating determination. "How many points do you think Jack just scored?"

Elsa glanced between them, her head shaking as a smile of 'I'm surrounded by clowns' lit up her face. "I'd say an easy ten, possibly twenty."

Pitch glided to stand over by Merida, flexing and clenching his hands over and over, and took position opposite Elsa. Due to her rising concern and wariness, Rapunzel caught the exchange of murmurs between Jack and Elsa, the latter warning that Merida was no slouch in hand-to-hand and was a fan of grapples and wrestles, whilst the former spoke of how Pitch fought like Elsa did when she was enraged, yet for him it was standard practice - she should guard her weak spots as he went for those without hesitation.

Something Anna reinforced with a quiet mutter close to Rapunzel's ear. "You might want to get those magic hands ready. Sparring means holding back - and that phrase has never been in Pitch's dictionary."

Pitch surged forward toward Elsa. Merida leaped at Jack.

Rapunzel gulped.

Pitch's right swing was dodged by a weaving Elsa, who slapped it further out of harm's way before following it up with a one-two and the thrust of a knee into his chest for a finish. Merida had more success - her immediate attempt to grapple Jack had been caught by his hands, so she wrenched them aside and slammed the bottom of her fist into his chest, before grabbing him in a headlock and tumbling backwards, causing him to flip head over heels and land on his back with a surprised grunt.

Not to be outdone, Jack pushed against the ground by the side of his head and kicked into the air to right himself, and faced Merida as he clicked his neck from side to side. Pitch and Elsa circled each other, the former moving like a predator, the latter's hands up like a boxer's in anticipation. Jack lunged forward and abruptly stopped several times, prompting Merida to back off each time, before she launched into a sequence of several graceful spinning kicks that Jack just barely evaded in time. He failed to anticipate her next move, however; she leaped into his arms and hooked her left arm around his neck, before rolling to her right and letting her weight tip him over - again, Jack landed flat on his back whilst Merida pushed herself to her feet.

"Call me 'sparkles', an' that's what happens."

Elsa fared less well. As Rapunzel figured, she was the one to initiate with a right jab to Pitch's jaw, prevented by him catching her wrist. She then hit him three times in the side of the head, each one having no discernible effect other than a slight snap of his head with each impact. Pitch countered with a brutal headbutt right into her forehead to daze her, before slamming his free hand down into the crook of her elbow, a knifehand to her right armpit as as she yelped in pain, a one-two to her solar plexus, and as she doubled over, wheezing from the force of the air being ripped from her lungs, slammed the base of his fist down on her spine to drive her to the ground.

Pitch walked away from her, shaking his head in disdain. He caught Rapunzel's look of consternation and disapproval, and spread his arms. "It seems your hypothesis is in danger of being disproved."
The medic's lips curled into a sneer - her experiment had become less important with each hit Jack and Elsa had taken. She watched as Jack rolled awkwardly over to rise to his feet, and moved to help the struggling Elsa to her knees.

"Maybe not," Anna murmured, and touched Rapunzel's elbow. "Come with me."

Rapunzel did as suggested, casting a glance at a thoroughly pleased-looking Merida as she walked the short distance to the downed ice-wielders. Anna crouched down in front of Elsa, whose eyes were closed as she sucked in breath after breath, sat with her legs forming an 'A' shape and her arms resting on her knees. Squatting beside her, Jack glanced up just as Rapunzel arrived. "She could use your help."

Rapunzel nodded once. Crouching, her hands radiating a faint golden glow, she reached toward Elsa, who allowed access by lifting up her tank top to just below her breasts, wincing as she did so. Rapunzel placed her hands on the angry red patches on her abdomen and back. "I'm calling this off. It's gone too far."

"It does seem your hypothesis isn't working out," Elsa said, breathlessness in her voice.

"Hate to say it after how cool it was earlier, but Elsa's right." Jack nodded at the two victors. "I didn't feel anything helping us."

"Neither did I," Elsa added. "I don't think this bond of ours can be trusted."

Heavy was the air in the immediate vicinity, following Elsa's solemn remark. No words were spoken, just a deflated atmosphere and the absence of excitement… until Anna opened her mouth.

"Maybe it can."

Rapunzel looked at her, as did Jack and Elsa. Anna gazed distantly at the grass between them all, her mind visibly turning over her thoughts.

"You weren't fighting them as one, you were fighting them as two individual people. You only focused on your opponent, you didn't think about each other. That might be why it didn't work."

"So… what, instead of fight as Jack and Elsa, fight as—" Jack did a lost-for-words shrug, "—fight as… Jelsa?"

Elsa gave him a withering look. "Never say that again."

"What? It's catchy."

"Jack's not wrong." Anna shifted on her feet in her squatting position. "You need to… trust… each other."

Rapunzel didn't miss the glower Jack shot at Anna.

"They don't have your bond. They're just two individuals—they don't know what the other is thinking. You do. Use it. Don't think of yourselves as two warriors independent of each other—think of yourselves as one single force. Trust each other. Believe in each other."

Jack and Elsa shared a meaningful look, and Rapunzel felt a blossom of hope in her heart - it wasn't a look of hurt, nor regret. Anger nor resentment. It was the look of solidarity, of understanding.

Jack pushed himself to his feet, and offered his arm. "Wanna give it another shot?"
"Yes." Elsa grasped his arm and used it to lift herself up. "I'm ready."

Anna walked off toward Pitch. Rapunzel threw them a glance, noticing how she grabbed him by the shirt and pulled his head down to whisper something in his ear. She didn't wait for the sneering retort or the exasperated shake of his head, nor the uncertain glance Merida shot at him, and walked away to stand near Candace.

Jack clapped Elsa on her shoulder, his hand still around her forearm. "How do you want to play this?"

Elsa took a calculated look at their opponents. "Back to back."

"Switch it up to keep 'em off guard, or tag-team one out of the fight so we can focus the other?"

Elsa shot him a wry smile. "How about both?"

"Both is good."

Jack clapped her on the upper arm, and walked over to stand between Pitch and Merida, facing the latter. Elsa followed, and took position with her back to Jack, facing Pitch.

"You know, you and lightning have something in common, Sparkles."

Merida glared at him, her jaw tensing and her hands balling into fists. "Would that be how yer ass gets fried by both?"

"Nah," Jack smirked. "You both like to hit the ground quick."

Merida yelled something unsafe for the ears of children before charging at him, aiming a fast jab for his face.

"Now!"

Jack and Elsa swivelled on a dime, switching positions, and Elsa took advantage of Merida's momentary confusion by parrying away the jab with her forearm and slamming her open palm into her chest. At the same time, Jack sidestepped Pitch's hammer kick, countering it with a backhand slap to his nose and a hard punch to below his ribs to wind him. He turned just in time to see Elsa grab a staggered Merida by the shirt and yank her toward him, and promptly clotheslined the redhead to the ground.

Rapunzel nearly yelled for them to watch out when she noticed the newly recovered Pitch charge forward in view of punching Jack in the back, but she need not have worried; Elsa had already seen him. She ran right at Jack, who immediately crouched, and used her foot on his back to launch herself into the air and fire a punch right at Pitch's face - one he blocked just in time. Not giving him a second to regroup, Elsa ducked to allow Jack's right swing kick to sail over her head and knock Pitch's blocking arms to the side. The impact dislodged his footing, so Elsa aimed a sweep kick at his calves while Jack leaped at him, slammed his arm into his chest and used the momentum of his legs and the opposing direction of Elsa's kick to send Pitch crashing on his back.

Anna burst into loud applause, before punching the air and shouting, "Now that's what I'm talking about!"

Rapunzel joined in the clapping, and chuckled when Jack managed to convince Elsa to join him in a rather theatrical bow, before they high-fived each other. "Pitch didn't seem as brutal as before," she said, low enough for only Anna to hear.
"Didn't he?" came the reply. "Huh. Maybe he didn't get the chance."

"Or maybe you whispered something in his ear." Rapunzel stopped clapping, cast Anna a sidelong look, and folded her arms whilst a sly smile crept across her face. "What did you say to him?"

"Only that if he crossed the line and pulled that shit on my sister again, whatever he did I would do back to him twice as hard." Anna pulled off an impressively unconcerned expression. "I guess he listened."

The midday sunlight filtered through the treetops, casting little rays of light that pooled on the forest floor. Some glittered like diamonds due to the leafy cover, others looked like spiderwebs of light thanks to the deciduous, bare branches.

Jack trudged behind Elsa as she led him through the forest, reflecting on the events of the day prior. Undeterred by the comprehensive beatdown they had received, Kozmotis and Merida challenged them to a second round; while they had adapted more to Jack and Elsa's coordinated fighting style, leading to a more even sparring session, they were not able to withstand the pressure of two warriors seamlessly and almost symbiotically fighting as one. The second round became a third, which then became a fourth, and when they noticed how Rapunzel was tending more to Kozmotis and Merida than Jack and Elsa, the medic called the session to a close and remarked that she had more than enough evidence.

Elsa did manage to get revenge for her brutal beatdown at the hands of Kozmotis, however. In the lull between the third and fourth round, she had found out about a threat made by Anna, countermanded that threat, weathered all he had and paid him back tenfold. Hence Kozmotis spending the night in the infirmary, with a remark from Rapunzel that 'karma's a bitch, ain't it?'.

All that had left Elsa in a rather jubilant, triumphant mood, something Jack hadn't seen before and thought was the most beautiful thing to witness. Hell, even his mood was uplifted both by their victory and the feeling of working so well together. Yet, the events of six days ago and the breaking of his friendship had cast a shadow over the buoyant air, and it wasn't long before the shared feeling of success between them was tinged with the heavy, awkward silences filled with unsaid words and averted eyes. Therefore, Elsa went back to spending time around her sister and honing her gifts, while Jack returned to his wall, and his isolation.

That was, until, Elsa had visited him in the command centre and requested his company for a three-mile long walk north that very morning. Jack had wondered if that had something to do with how she and Anna had disappeared at the break of dawn for a couple of hours, and upon their return, the younger sister enthusiastically chattering about the most amazing thing she had ever seen.

"So where are we going?" Jack asked. Since an hour had passed in absolute silence broken only by twigs underfoot, the calls of birds and the rustling of the midday breeze through the trees, it was starting to annoy him.

"I created something this morning. I want to show it to you," Elsa said over her shoulder.

Jack huffed and shook his head. "Real cryptic. I guess you know exactly where we're going?"

"Let's just say I'm following a feeling." Elsa turned around to walk backwards as the small incline levelled off, half a smile on her lips. "I do have a question for you, however."
"Shoot."

"Is it true you only participated in Rapunzel's experiment because she made a deal with you?"

Jack looked away, but figured there was no point being cagey about it. "Full disclosure? Yeah."

"What was the deal?"

"If I took part, and it worked out, she borrows my iPod. If it didn't, she wouldn't ask me about it again."

"And if you refused?"

"Then she bugs me about it for the rest of my life, and I sleep with one eye open in case she tries to steal it."

Jack sniffed offhandedly, and rubbed a finger across nose. "Pretty sure that was the devil in the details."

"Why?"

"She seems to be a fan of distorted guitars, fast drums and screaming, I guess."

Elsa turned back around. "No. I mean - why did she have to make a deal with you?"

"Because…" Jack sighed. "Because I was getting the feeling you didn't want me around you."

"I never said anything of the sort, Jack."

"You never said anything, Elsa." Jack said, unable to hide the mildly petulant tone. "In fact, up until yesterday the only thing you said to me since the infirmary was a dig, and then a compliment which that dig kinda made meaningless. Other than that, we haven't said a word."

Elsa made a quiet hum. "Well, perhaps I should take responsibility for half of that. I had been getting the feeling you wanted to be left alone. Maybe Rapunzel is right - we should talk more, rather than assume."

Jack scoffed. "Shyeah. Talking's fine and dandy until it involves your best friend telling you she doesn't want to be your friend anymore."

"Yes. I had heard about that. I'm sorry." Elsa, to his surprise, did sound apologetic. "My sister thinks that by severing the friendship now, she avoids destroying it with resentment and distrust later down the line out of a sense of obligation or duty to still be as close to you. Unfortunately, Anna only ever learned lessons the hard way."

Grunting, Jack took out his staff from his bracer and extended it, the base touching the ground every time his left foot did. It functioned more as a metronome, a way for him to focus on something regular and predictable, rather than a walking aid.

"I have another question for you—though I understand if you choose not to answer."

"Go for it."

"You mentioned how you don't like to talk about the storm you created. Why?"

"Because it made me see something about myself I didn't like." Jack frowned as his eyes went to the forest floor. "Someone I didn't want to become."
"In what way?"

Jack sighed, his lips quirking into an uneven line. "Everything Pitch said was right, but there's more to it. Six carriage convoy train. Three tanks; two in the front, one behind. Three fighters; low flying triangle formation. Two troop trucks flanking the convoy. We figured they'd got sick of us constantly raiding the trains."

"Sounds like a show of force."

"Shyeah. Plan was for Kristoff to hit the front tank while the Yeti - our old ship - hit the rear tank. Fury would distract the fighters and we'd hit the troops. Thing is, with those kinda numbers, the chances of us surviving was low—but, y'know, the Star being on her last fuel cells, food and medical supplies running low, we needed that shipment. Only… I didn't think it was worth all of our lives, so… I disobeyed protocol and acted without orders."

"You summoned the storm."

"Yeah. Poured everything I had into it. Every emotion, every memory, every bit of strength. Let loose just like I always wanted to… and then I passed out." Jack snorted in scorn. "Probably a good thing."

"Why?"

"When I came to, the Ghosts were already loading stuff into the Yeti. First thing that hit me was how quiet it was—not even the team was speaking. So I took a look around and…" Jack scrunched his eyes shut, stopping in his tracks. "The storm—my storm—had frozen the tanks. Train had hit them and derailed. The Einherjars were sticking out of the ground, on fire and the troop transports… everyone was dead. Every clone, every…"

Jack opened his eyes, frowning resolutely as he tapped the ground twice with his staff. Elsa, to his gratitude, finished for him.

"There were humans, too."

"Shyeah. I'd killed them, too. The pilots, the train driver—hell, the tank drivers had frozen to death just trying to get out of the tank, and that's not mentioning the troops with icicles stuck in their bodies 'cause of the wind. In less than twenty minutes, I'd slaughtered over four dozen soldiers, wrecked three tanks, took down three fighters and derailed a goddamn train. Me. Saved the lives of my team, though, but… lot of people didn't deserve to die that night. I took our sixth rule and broke its back."

"You were ensuring the lives of your team and the survival of your home."

"Yeah, but that night was a reality check. I nearly stopped being Jackson Overland the Ghost, and nearly became Jackson Overland the Weapon of Mass Destruction. That was my event horizon—I cross that line, there's no going back, because the thing about WMDs? They don't care who they kill. Men, women, kids… doesn't matter. I don't ever wanna be like that."

"And yet, it shows you how far you would go to protect those you care about." Elsa looked over her shoulder. "Anna told me what you said to her."

Jack snorted. "Figures."

"It is a fair question, though—when it comes to loved ones, what counts as off-limits?" Elsa's hand waved to the side as she turned back. "Do we sacrifice parts of ourselves so those we love can continue breathing, or do we cling to our personal morals and codes, even in the face of our loved
ones' deaths, so we can live with ourselves?"

"I'm not sure I'm clever enough for philosophical talk."

"Is survival at any cost worth it, or do we sacrifice who we are in the hope we can build a better tomorrow?"

"Yep. Not clever enough for this. My brain hurts." Jack sighed irritably, and squinted as he rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "Is this existential discussion going somewhere?"

"Yes." Elsa paused and turned to the side so Jack could pull up beside her. "When I cut my hair—"

"Which rocks, by the way. Really suits you."

"—thank you. It's nice to know you noticed." Jack opened his mouth to retort, but Elsa beat him to the punch. "As I was saying, Rapunzel helped neaten it up a little, and while she did that, we talked. She helped me to understand some things, put things into perspective - and because of that, and this morning, I am in a far better place to think and talk about past events."

"Okay." Jack gave her his full attention, staring at her. "Like what?"

Elsa's lips curled into a wry smile, and though her head turned to the left, her eyes remained fixed upon him. "Later. For now… we have arrived."

Her eyes then slowly travelled in the same direction as her head. Following her gaze, Jack looked to his right, and frowned as he noticed something between the trees, a few hundred yards ahead. It glimmered and shone in the daylight, like someone had taken a small part of the sun and placed it in the forest. Curious, Jack made his way through the trees, ducking low branches and nimbly avoiding roots like the most sure footed animal, keenly focused on the sight ahead… and when the trees parted into a wide clearing, his breath was stolen.

Before him stood majesty incarnate, a structure that almost reached the very tops of the trees. Ornate was the architecture, more reminiscent of the church in Des Moines yet with its own individual style. It looked like a palace - hell, with the entrance set a ways up from the ground, it even had a bridge.

What struck Jack the most, out of the sheer wonder and spectacle of the palace before him, was of what the palace was made.

Ice.

Pure, flawless, blue-hued ice.

"Holy shit…" he breathed, his eyes wide with awe as he took in the majestic beauty of the palace. It even had a fucking balcony.

Elsa's voice came from behind him. "What do you think?"

"It's… it's…" Jack's mouth opened and closed, searching for words that would never do it justice. "It's incredible."

"Thank you. I'm quite proud of it."

"You should be. This is… I've never seen anything like it." Jack's eyes traced over the seamless curves and lines of the palace. "When did you make this?"

"This morning."
Jack whirled around and gaped at her.

"Seriously?"

"Yes." Elsa smiled as she regarded her creation. "Anna and I left just after dawn—I was inspired by Pitch's story of your storm, and the idea of my power being equal yet different, so I wanted to see what would happen if I cut loose. Anna was kind enough to take me to this clearing."

"It must have taken a lot out of you."

Elsa let out a chuckle. "I was exhausted for a few hours after its creation, so I rested while Anna explored the inside. As I understand it, the interior is every bit as splendid as the exterior—and would serve as a functional home."

"Wait—" Jack blinked. "—you haven't been inside?"

"No, and I see no reason to do so."

Jack didn't know what to make of the unconcerned, almost devil-may-care expression on her countenance. "Why?"

"For the same reason I wanted you here as a witness." Elsa's eyes found his, rooting him to the spot. "I am going to tear it down."

Jack gave her his third gape of the half hour. "What?! You can't—"

"Why not? I built it. This palace is mine, to do with as I choose - and I choose to destroy it."

"But… why?" Jack turned and gestured behind him before facing her again. "You've just achieved something amazing!"

"Yes - but I don't need it to stand there to remind me." Elsa nodded at the palace. "That was in a painting hung in my room, and upon that balcony—" she pointed up, "—stood a woman with her arms spread wide as if to say, 'here I stand, and here I stay'. In my imprisonment I spent hours just staring at this woman, who challenged the world around her. Dared it to try and change her. I used to want to be like her—to feel that freedom, that strength. To have that confidence… but recently I began to wonder why this woman built a palace in the mountains in the first place. Why she made herself so difficult to reach… unless that was her intent. If you build a castle halfway up a mountain, you do it for only one reason: isolation."

Elsa gestured at the palace. "This is an icon, a symbol of that isolation. A reminder of the person I used to be, struggling to find who I was. I've found my place in the world. I know who I am."

Jack found he could not speak, that every iota of energy usually reserved for talking had been diverted to his ears to listen to every word she spoke, to commit every syllable, every sentence, every inflection to memory.

Elsa walked past him, her eyes regarding her creation. "I am the sum of everything that has happened to me. I am my worst days, and I am my best. I am my isolation, and my freedom. My rage and my serenity. My hope and my hopelessness. I am every dark experience and every shining memory. I am my past, my present and my future. I am Elsa Marie Snowfield. Daughter. Sister. Abnormal. Ghost."

Jack watched, enraptured, as Elsa held her hands away from her sides, spreading her fingers apart. "And my life is mine to guide."
Dull cracks could be heard from the palace's innards, muffled like the rending of the earth beneath the sea. His heart stalling, Jack watched in awe as a weblike pattern of wounds and lacerations appeared at the palace's base, travelling upwards like lightning in slow reverse, shattering the once flawless ice into millions of irregular shapes. The network of cracks relentlessly traced up the exterior until they reached the top - and in a moment of anxiety, Jack took a step back, expecting the shards to come crashing down to earth.

Only, he need not have bothered. Rather than crumble and collapse, the castle of ice began to slowly dissolve from the tip into hundreds of thousands of glittering snowflakes, carried away by the gentle wind. From one wondrous sight to another.

Elsa turned to face him, her expression expectant, yet a faint challenge lay behind her blue eyes, as though she was daring him. "Well, you certainly know how to put on a show," Jack quipped.

She let out a mildly amused hum. "There is one other thing I would like to add to that list - partner."

Jack gave her a funny look. "You're my teammate and my X.O. That's as 'partner' as it gets."

Elsa uttered a knowing chuckle. "I meant romantic partner."

He blinked, opened his mouth, blinked twice more, and closed it again. Though his heart felt like it would leap for joy, the reigning state of mind was sheer, dumbfounded confusion. Words jumbled and crashed together in his throat, save for a pitifully insufficient, "Oh."

Elsa's lips curved into a wide, teasing smile. "Well, well. For someone usually so talkative, you're remarkably easy to render speechless."

"I—well—I just—you—"

That time, Elsa let loose a full blown laugh. "The mighty Frost, Ghost leader, scourge of Unity's military and legendary warrior, laid low by an overture of romantic interest."

"No, it's just—well—really? After what happened a week ago?"

Fall did her smile, her eyes glazing over with thought and consideration as she looked aside. "It is true that I'm not okay with what happened. Though Anna and I are the closest we've been since we lost each other, I can't deny that… it hurts. More so that you didn't trust us—trust me—and so you operated as a lone wolf."

Jack sighed, and opened his mouth as he scratched his head, but was silenced by a hand.

"However, I have been listening to other opinions, doing some soul-searching. You did something bad to stave off something worse. You caused havoc to create hope—and let's face facts: you didn't have the time nor another option that wouldn't have ended in disaster. So, while I don't agree with what you did, I understand—because nearly seven years ago, I did much the same thing. Granted, it was forced on me, but I did not fight it for one reason alone: to protect my family. You and I… we really cornered the market on self-sacrifice. I lost three years of my life to a locked door, and you lost your closest friend and your memories. I believe we have both suffered enough."

Elsa looked over her shoulder at the dissolving palace. "Rapunzel told me there would be a moment of clarity where I would realise if it was worth it—and I have my answer. The painting I spoke of was given to me for my fifteenth birthday—Papa had managed to convince a disposal transport technician to give it to him. While I was recovering this morning, as I looked at the palace I remembered how happy Anna was when it was hung in my room. I remembered how beautiful it felt to have my family around me, in a place of peace and joy. That's when it hit me—in two days, I'm..."
going to experience that once again. After all that's happened, all I've done... I have been blessed with a second chance. So maybe... just maybe... it was worth it."

Elsa turned back to face him. "The Elsa before her imprisonment would have forgiven you but would not have allowed romance to grow beyond friendship. The Elsa trapped in her isolation would have found some way to blame herself and assume all responsibility... and the Elsa who came out of that room would have severed all ties with you, never have forgiven you and never wanted to see you again. She would have even tried to find a way to hurt you, to get back at you—and I already did that. Look what happened."

Elsa lifted up her forearm, showing him a thin, long scar not far from the inside of her wrist. "Beauty gave me this. My first battle, and in my hubris I chose to engage the leader of the Furies in a sword fight. She defeated me quite comprehensively, gave me this scar, and told me something that has stuck with me: I lacked experience. And she was right. None of those Elsa's were experienced on their own to contemplate, rationalise and be objective about what happened a week ago, but the Elsa who stands before you, right now, is. I am older, wiser, more experienced. I have seen and done things, and found myself in a place and among friends with whom I can grow, and from whom I can learn. The rules have changed. I have changed."

Jack noticed the movement of her right shoulder a second before a soft, gentle sensation touched at his fingers. Elsa had reached for his hand and was holding it with her very fingertips.

"I forgive you." She looked up at him, sincerity in her eyes. "You made a beautiful mess of things and caused no small amount of anguish, but you did it to create hope, and from a desire to protect who you love. I didn't truly see until you told me about your storm, heard how it affected you, and remembered what it cost you to open this window of opportunity to save my parents... and to give Hans a bloody nose."

Her hand slowly took more of his. "Do you have feelings for me?"

"Yes," was all Jack could manage.

"Likewise," Elsa said, smiling widely. "My first idea of boyfriend material abandoned me when I needed him, but you knowingly sacrificed your memories, your closest friendship and—as you put it in the infirmary—your self-respect for a chance at happiness for me. If that doesn't scream 'boyfriend material', as high school as it sounds, then I don't know what does."

"You... you want us to be..."

Elsa's face turned serious. Her eyes grew stern, her lips became a line, and though her voice retained its gentle tone, there was a commanding edge to it. "But let me be clear - if you and I are to be together, some things need to stop."

"Like?"

"No more of this 'lone wolf' business. If a problem arises that affects the team, then we should know about it so we can all tackle it. We're a team for a reason - not a group of nine, all with their own agendas."

"Okay."

"Similarly, if there is another threat or situation that directly affects myself, my sister, or both, I want to know about it and I want to be involved. No more being kept in the dark. We solve it together—especially since you and I are bonded. Agreed?"
Jack let slip half a smirk. "Agreed."

"Good. No more secrets."

Secrets. The word punctured his growing enthusiasm and uplifted pleasure like a pin in a balloon. After all, there was one secret he was keeping. Elsa noticed the deflation, the way his shoulders sagged and his eyes fell, and the long breath from his nose.

"You don't agree?"

"No—" Jack looked up and hastily amended once he caught the stung look crossing her features. "I mean, I agree, it's just—there is one thing I haven't told you."

"Okay. Tell me."

"I can't."

Elsa sighed, disappointment clouding her eyes like a rainy day. She looked away, shaking her head as she let go of his hand. "We just talked—"

"I know." Jack said, holding up his hands as a gesture of reassurance. "And if it was anything else, I'd tell you. But I've been sworn to secrecy—hell, the entire team has—as the last order of a dying leader."

"Even Anna?"

"Even Anna."

"I suppose that shows just how important the secret is, if even my sister is obeying that order," Elsa said, though she did not sound convinced. "Why?"

"Because it's bigger than you, or me. It's about the survival of a way of life. " Jack took the hand that had once held his, and grasped it with all of his fingers. "I want to tell you, but I need to run it by Hiccup, Anna and Pitch, first. Like you said—no more lone wolf."

"Will they agree?"

"Don't see why they wouldn't—but this is something that they need to be involved in. I need their input." Jack stroked at the knuckles of her right hand. "If they agree, and if we survive what's coming… remind me to tell you all about a little something called Sanctuary."

Elsa frowned at him. "This is an issue of trust, isn't it?"

"To us?" Jack shook his head. "No. To the sheer gravity of this secret—as in, life and death? Yeah. This kind of secret—it demands proof of absolute trust, and the only way is for us all to show we're willing to put our lives on the line for each other. Because—and I'm not exaggerating—Hiccup, Anna, Pitch and I would die without hesitation to keep it secret."

Elsa's face slackened as her eyebrows rose into her hairline, her mouth parting. "Wow. It really is that imperative?"

"Put it this way: even with a kid on the way, Anna would rather put a gun to her head than risk being captured—because if the wrong people found out? We lose everything."

Elsa looked away, her eyes widening for a moment. "Well—to think we were having a tender, romantic moment. Now I just feel saddened," she said, her voice betraying self-deprecating sarcasm.
"Though I do feel gratified you feel we're almost ready to know."

"I'm sorry, Elsa." Jack teased a section of her hair behind her left ear. "I totally understand if you wanna take 'partner' off your list because of it."

Eyes finding his, they flashed with teasing amusement in the sidelong look, and the left side of her lips tugged into a smirk. "You think that makes me feel any differently about you?"

"Well… yeah? You said—"

Elsa pulled him by the hands, and rose a few inches by her tiptoes to plant a delicate, gentle, but lingering kiss on his lips. Jack felt his stomach burst and his heart soar, and as the palace behind Elsa completed its dissolution into millions of snowflakes, it was a moment free of hurt, pain and heartache. Elsa pulled back, just enough for her breath to ghost over his jaw, and whispered.

"Then you are a fool."

Jack smiled widely, and lifted a hand to caress her cheek. "Guess so."

"And you are my fool."

Jack lowered his forehead to rest against hers, and closed his eyes. "You sure about this? With what we do… what happened a few days ago—-one of us losing the other… it could be for real."

"I talked with Anna about that," Elsa murmured. "I asked her if she ever regretted falling in love with her husband, after losing him. If she wished she had never met him, so she wouldn't be in so much pain."

"What did she say?"

"She told me that it hurts every single day. That she misses him deeply, that she wakes up every morning and stretches her hand over the bed, hoping to feel him but finding only empty space. That not a day goes by where she doesn't grieve his absence, nor where she doesn't worry about raising her child without him, or does not talk to him even though he will never answer. But she told me that, even with all that pain, grief and mourning, not for one single second does she regret their love."


"Indeed." Elsa's eyes went off to the side in recollection. "She quoted something, I think? 'Tis better to have loved and lost—"

"—than never to have loved at all'. Tennyson." Jack smiled, but when Elsa gave him a bemused look, he added, "Anna and I stopped by one of Beauty's lessons. Once she found out it was about poetry, she wanted to stay."

"Anna always was the incurable romantic," Elsa laughed gently. "In any case - I would rather us have known, loved and lost each other, than spend the rest of our lives regretting missed chances."

"You just said 'loved'."

Elsa caressed his cheek. "Well, we're not there yet - but given how we are falling for each other, I suspect it will be inevitable."

"Looking forward to it."

"As am I."
Jack smiled wider, and leaned down. Reciprocating, Elsa craned up for a longer, lingering kiss, tracing her thumb over his cheekbone as the tips of her fingers found the nape of his neck. He closed his eyes, revelling in the sensations, the feeling of being lighter than air.

"Fury to Frost, Fury to Snow Queen. Come in."

Jack parted their kiss, and let out a disapproving huff. Judging by the frown on Elsa's countenance, she wasn't impressed, either. "Frost here."

"Snow Queen here."

"Viking and I are en route home, E.T.A eight hours. We found something."

---

**Oh, hang on. Post credits scene.**

---

With a spring in his step, Jack sauntered along the barracks corridor with no particular destination in mind. Permanent was the smile etched on his lips, and shining were his eyes. Hell, he was practically skipping.

At least, until he heard it.

"Step inside, see the devil in I!"

Frowning with curiosity, he followed his ear. Followed the heavy riffs of the distorted guitar, the thunderous beats of the drums and the impassioned roaring of the vocals. It seemed to be coming from the only open door in the arrangement of officer's quarters.

"Too many times we've let it come to this…"

His curiosity deepening, Jack approached the open door and peered inside, just as the neighbouring door opened and Merida stepped out, scowling with her hands over her ears. She mouthed something he had no chance of hearing. Jack looked back into the room - and surprise was the order of the day.

"Step inside, see the devil in I!"

Inside her room sat Rapunzel on her chair, her head resting in her left hand. Her eyes were closed, her head bobbing to the beat as her mouth moved to the lyrics, the music blasting out from his iPod speakers. A piece of paper sat on the desk before her, with words scribbled upon it Jack could not discern, and in her right hand, the pencil grasped between her finger and thumb moved to and fro with the rhythm guitar.

"You'll realise I'm not your devil anymore!"

Jack glanced at Merida with his mouth open, then closed it once he quickly looked back at Rapunzel. He shrugged, head tilting in a what-can-you-do way, before continuing his wanderings.

Rapunzel was a fan of metal. Who would have thought?
You know the look Loki gives Thor when Jeff Goldblum's Grandmaster talks about "on any other world I'd be millions of years old, but on Sakaara", and gives Loki a flirty look? Loki's reaction was Jack's.
"Don't ye touch it—"
"C'mon, Red! You've had your music on for ages, it's my turn!"
"Yer music's been nothin' but noise and screamin'!"
"It's called metal—"
"Noise."
"—and I'll have you know it's better than this folk stuff!"

Elsa shook her head in exasperation, tossing a look over her shoulder. Merida and Rapunzel had been arguing the finer points of turn-taking of Jack's iPod for the past five minutes, with more than a few acerbic jabs thrown at each other's taste. Merida had apparently grown fond of something Jack called folk music, in particular an artist called the Levellers, and given Unity's rather limited musical repertoire, pre-war music was like a drug to them. Exchanging a knowing, almost weary glance with her new partner, she returned her attention to the tactical plan Jack had fixed to the wall.

"It's hard to reconcile those two with the knowledge they're trained soldiers," she drawled to him.

"Kids, am I right?" Jack chuckled, before calling out over his shoulder. "Mind keeping it down? We're adulting over here."

"Flower-Girl's trying ta hog tha music thingie!" Merida called back as Elsa turned to watch the proceedings with rising amusement.

"C'mon, Rapunzel." Jack waved it off. "You had it all day yesterday; it's Red's turn, now."

"But Ja-a-ack—"

"No buts. Share."

Rapunzel's shoulders sagged as she huffed, and sulked away at the table. Merida lightly pumped a fist, and to add to Rapunzel's despair, turned up the volume a notch. "Thanks, Jack!"

"No problem, Sparkles," Jack called back, and promptly ducked to avoid the canteen the infuriated Merida flung at his head.

"You deserved that," Elsa said, as the canteen clanged against the wall and bounced off onto the
"You know she hates that nickname."


"You seem to have a list of targets and ideas," Elsa said, tracing a circle in the air over each piece of paper with her finger, "but no real plan."

"Pretty sure past events have proven I'm no real planner," Jack pointed out with a drawl. "In any case, way I see it is we just don't have the numbers."

"I agree." Elsa pointed at the paper, upon which was scribbled Cloning Facilities. "Our victory conditions largely depend on these - but there are dozens of them, producing countless clones every three weeks."

"We'd need to hit them all at roughly the same time to cripple the military." Jack folded his arms, and stroked at his chin with his thumb and forefinger. "Even then, Unity's standing forces still have more than enough to survive until the facilities are repaired."

"We would have dealt them a blow," Elsa sighed, "but nothing they couldn't recover from."

"Can't hit the food production plants, 'cause the civilians rely on them too." Jack's voice was becoming more deflated by the syllable. "Starve the military, starve the population. That's not something I'll allow."

"Agreed. I had wondered about destroying the weapons manufacturing facilities, but just like the cloning facilities, there are more than we can handle." Elsa folded her arms. "We'd spread ourselves too thin trying to hit them all, and that only increases the risks of us dying in the process."

"Yeah." Jack turned and looked over his shoulder. "Unity's got the numbers to afford losing people. We haven't."

"Which leaves us with only one option."

Elsa unfolded her arms and drew her combat knife, before skilfully reversing the grip in one hand and slamming the blade through the piece of paper that had Unifier written upon it. Only, the blade snapped with a metallic tink, and bounced harmlessly to the ground.

Jack, his expression deadpan, followed the broken blade's fall with his eyes, before tossing her a bemused, slightly unimpressed look. "That was a perfectly good knife."

"That…" Elsa stared at the useless handle in her hand. "...that played out differently in my head."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "You just tried to stab solid concrete. What did you think would happen?"

"Something a lot more dramatic." Elsa turned her head left and right, searching for something to do with the bladeless handle, before shrugging and tossing it onto the table in the middle of the room. Jack, however, crouched down to gingerly pick up the broken blade between his finger and thumb, and went to place it by its former ally.

"Now you're down a knife," he said as he returned to her side. "Meh." Elsa tilted her head to the left and back. "I can make my own. In any case - failed emphasis and ammunition for your future teasing aside - it seems our best chance at toppling Unity is to go straight to the top."
"Assassinate the Unifier…"

"Yes." Elsa nodded, and cast him a sidelong look. "Cut off the head of the snake, and of those who would take his place."

"You mean kill them."

Elsa's sidelong look became a full gaze. Jack's eyes were serious, his brow knitted and his lips set. Elsa opened her mouth to take and let out a deep, long breath, and her hands went behind her back. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"One, you don't need to ask. Two, easy on the sir."

"Do you know why the Valkyries were created?"

Jack gave her a funny look, as though perplexed as to why she would ask such an obvious question. "Because Unity needed to take us and our sister teams down."

"Not just that," Elsa said, shaking her head. "Prior to what happened with my parents, you were little more than an annoyance. Unity was perfectly content to ignore you when all you were doing was rescuing abnormals, raiding supply convoys and hitting small military targets, coupled with your refusal to take lives—believe me, they noticed. So, they regarded you like they would a mosquito."

"Okay? I'm a little insulted, but, okay."

"All that changed when Hans tricked Unity into believing you had killed my parents. For the first time, to them, you had taken lives—and not only that, but the lives you'd taken belonged to two very prominent, very respected, very well-protected members of the higher echelons. You'd done the unthinkable. You became more than an annoyance, you became a credible threat. If you could get into one of their best-protected cities and assassinate two of their own, they were no longer safe. They had grown complacent…and you punished them for it. You scared them into creating us."

"But we never did that."

"I know that. We all do…but Unity doesn't. So, if you caused such upheaval taking down my parents…imagine what we could do by assassinating the Unifier and anyone who would take his place?"

"Chaos." Jack shifted his feet, and pocketed his hands. "Without leadership, the system would fall. We'd be the spark that lights the fire that burns the whole system down…"

"...and from the ashes, people better qualified than us can build something better."

"Who says we can't?" Jack gestured at her. "You can create amazing things. You could create a better way of life."

"In another life, perhaps." Elsa cocked a wry smile. "In this life, I'm a soldier. Point me at something and I'll tear it down…but building a government is something completely out of my league."

"We'll agree to disagree on that, but I think we're getting ahead of ourselves." Jack nodded at the stabbed paper. "Dropping Archons is one thing, but this is the top dog we're talking about. Top-level security, Honor Guard…"

Elsa frowned. "I had heard rumours about the Guardsmen, but have never actually seen one."
"Same." Jack shrugged. "Never actually fought one, but we heard things."

"Like?"

"Actually—the Spirits did fight a few of them, once. Gave them hell. Said they were as strong, as fast and as tough as any abnormal. Highly disciplined, well trained. Never saw them again after that." Jack scratched at his nose. "Heard rumours of their bodies being enhanced by nanites, but other than that, zip."

"Well, they haven't fought us," Elsa said, casting him a knowing smile. His own lips forming a wry curve, he shook his head a little.

"No, they haven't."

The sound of the command centre door opening drew their attention, and Elsa turned just in time to see Astrid walk into the room, closely followed by a toolkit-toting Hiccup. They looked a little the worse for wear; their E.T.A the night before had put them three hours after nightfall, so Jack ordered them to find a cozy, safe place to wait until morning - which was fortuitous, since a small Reaper swarm had passed through the camp that very night. It was clear to Elsa what the effect of four nights sleeping rough had on the two riders; Astrid looked sullen, with shadows under her eyes and a stiff posture, and Hiccup looked *wrecked*. Sleeplessness seemed a common theme of late, what with Merida in more of a cantankerous mood than normal due to Candace's nightmares.

"Finally," Anna said from the table, where a small bowl of steaming rice sat before her. It was her second bowl.

Elsa was mildly surprised to see Hiccup shoot her a glare, though Astrid seemed more composed. Whether that was by intent, or that she was simply too tired to retort, Elsa could only guess.

"Yeah, sorry," Astrid said in a weary voice. "Flyboy here's a visual learner. He wanted to stop by the workshop for a few things for his demonstration."

"No biggie. Ignore her," Jack said with reassurance as he headed toward the table. "Once we're done, you two can grab all the sleep you need. You both earned it."

"God, that sounds so good," Astrid groaned, closing her eyes as she cast her face to the ceiling and theatrically dropped her shoulders.

"So, what did you find?"

Astrid made a waving gesture at Hiccup to begin whatever he was planning. As he placed the toolkit on the table and began pulling out various tools and other objects, she began to speak.

"We followed the heading Red gave us. Went to the settlement, and we got lucky - one of the convoys was just pulling out. So, we shadowed it."

Elsa watched as Hiccup arranged four wrenches in a square pattern. "Okay. Headed where?"

"North." Astrid shifted on her feet, but when she swayed a little, elected to lower herself down on the nearest chair. Her face morphed from a tired expression to something altogether more grave. "Jack… where the convoy was headed… wasn't in Unity territory."

"Okay, whe—" Jack began, but as Elsa glanced at him, she felt her heart sink at how his shoulders sagged as dark understanding dawned on him. "Canada."
"Yep. We thought Unity was too scared to set up shop right in Reaper-land. We were wrong."
Astrid leaned back into the chair with a sigh. "They've been here all along."

The collective state of quiet anxiety in the room was conveyed well in the long breath exhaled by Jack. He leaned down on the table with his fingers splayed out, his brow furrowed in concern. "How bad is it?"

"That's the good part - it doesn't look like it's a military base or stronghold. Where the convoy stopped was more like an internment camp, seemingly only accessible by rail."

"So we don't need to worry about Unity coming at us sideways and steamrolling Bravo?"
Astrid winced. "I wouldn't say that." She nodded at Hiccup. "Wanna take it from here?"

Hiccup gestured to the wrenches, and then to four bolts at the corners. "Four electrified fences. Watchtowers at each corner, each manned by two guards and a dual rotary cannon with three-sixty degree swivel rotation. Maybe seventy to a hundred military personnel, and the camp is surrounded by a quarter, maybe half a mile of open space."

Jack uttered a quiet hum. "Sounds pretty by-the-numbers so far."

"Two auto-targeting single-rotary cannons on each fence, outward facing, one-sixty degree horizontal rotation, seventy-five vertical." Hiccup placed eight nuts on top of the wrenches.

"That's a little less common," Elsa said slowly, her brow furrowing. "It sounds like they're not trying to keep the prisoners in—"

"—but keep something else out." Pitch folded his arms, his golden eyes fixed upon Hiccup's improvised display. "I assume we're all on the same page as to what."

"Reapers," Jack said, his voice low.

"Yep." Hiccup scratched at the back of his head, exhaustion weaving into his breathy voice. "Only reason for that kind of firepower."

Elsa took a long, sweeping look around the room, starkly aware of the instant change in atmosphere. Disturbed were the defining expressions, and as her eyes finally rested on Jack, she saw a flicker of doubt cross his features. "Anything else?"

Hiccup glanced at him on hearing the almost stony tone to his voice. "Comms tower in the northeast corner—" he placed a small, hollow metal rod a few inches from the bolt closest to him, "—and a power supply and relay station here—" he placed an empty pistol magazine roughly three inches below it, "—in the eastern side."

"Aside from the heat those fences are packing," Anna said, frowning, her left cheek bulging with a mouthful of rice, "I'm not seeing anything different from the usual camps we've hit."

"Well, here's the interesting part." Hiccup pulled out two empty power cells from the toolkit. "These are the barracks—" he placed them below the empty magazine, "—and these are the buildings where they keep the inmates."

"Okay."

"Right here, about three hundred yards from the barracks—" he pulled out a fresh, glowing power cell from his pocket, and placed it not far from the two cells representing the barracks, "—is a
munitions bunker."

"Three of the people here," Astrid said with a wry smile, "should know exactly what's wrong with this picture."

Elsa stiffened almost instantly, and shared a knowing look with Merida and Rapunzel. She caught Jack's puzzled glance, and briefly pointed a finger at the amber power cell. "Unity military regulations state munitions are not to be stored within five hundred yards of any other building."

"Either some wanker goofed up," Merida said with an air of faintly amused cynicism, "or that's nae a munitions bunker."

"The best part?" Hiccup's lips curled at the left corner into a sly smirk, and he picked up a pencil on the table and placed it a fair distance from his creation. "Look east, you get a nice view of a little natural wonder we like to call the Appalachian mountains."

"That's it," Elsa declared without missing a beat, her eyes zeroing in on the bunker's representation, staring at it like it was the answer to all of her questions. "That's where we'll find them."

Jack straightened up and folded his arms. "This place got a name, or do I get to make one up?"

"Yep." Astrid nodded at the improvised camp. "It's called Camp Serenity. Sounds like a real vacation spot, huh?"

"Hoo, yeah." Jack couldn't glare at the display with any more sarcasm if she tried. "Camp Serenity. Come for the brutal mistreatment, stay for the starvation. Alright. Thanks, both of you. Good work."

He nodded at the entrance to the command centre. "Now, go get some sleep. Rest of you, go check your kit and make sure you've got everything you need for tomorrow."

Murmurs of agreement and acknowledgement filled the room, mixed with the sudden sound of activity as all occupants began filing out. Astrid and Hiccup couldn't have left faster if they tried.

Jack walked to the wall and yanked off one of the pieces of paper, before leaning over the table and grabbing the Appalachian mountains. He immediately began to scrawl an approximation of Hiccup's show-and-tell presentation.

"I'm gonna take this," he spoke slowly, seemingly focused on going about his drawing, "and do some thinking about how we're gonna assault this place."

"Do you need help?" Elsa asked him.

Jack straightened up and hesitated, poised somewhat amusingly like he'd been caught in the act, paper in one half-extended hand and pencil in the other. He opened his mouth, but cast a tell-tale glance at Anna. "I'm good," he said, with a mildly unconvincing air. "Swing by my quarters later on and we can go through it, if you want."

"Copy," Elsa said. "I look forward to it."

"Yeah." Jack gestured at the iPod on the far wall. "Feel free to check it out. Anna knows how it works."

He left after two respectful nods, though Elsa didn't miss how he hurried out rather than adopting his usual casual walk. Blinking as she stared after him, she eventually shrugged and chose to take the closest seat, and proceeded to thoughtfully gaze at 'Camp Serenity'.

"So we're really doing this, huh?"
Elsa looked at Anna. Her sister regarded her with anxious yet hopeful aquamarine eyes, as though anticipating a miracle yet wary of it.

"It seems that way, yes." Elsa rested her hand on the table, and slowly slid it over to her sister. "We're about to have our family back together."

"I don't know what's going to happen," Anna said, her voice quiet and small. She reached out and held Elsa's hand. "I've dreamed about it for years, but… now it might become a reality and…"

Elsa squeezed her fingers. "You're scared."

Anna let out a nervous laugh. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm scared. So much has changed since we were last together as a family. We've changed. We're both soldiers—trained killers. We're not the same people we used to be. I'm not the clumsy, happy-go-lucky kid and you're not the model straight-A student they remember. Will they even recognise us?"

It was a thought that had played on Elsa's mind over the past few days. The last time her parents saw either of them was the day of their 'deaths', and that was six years ago. For Elsa and her sister, it was likely to be reuniting with the same people who raised them, but for her parents? Would it be akin to meeting someone for the first time, only that someone happened to be their flesh and blood?

"I suppose that will be a bridge we will cross when we come to it," Elsa mused. "There is an advantage, however."

"What's that?"

Elsa cocked a smirk. "Since they'll be grandparents, it will solve any childcare problems."

If she had expected a reaction, it would have been a giggle, or at the very least, a smile. What she received, however, was a skeptical snort that bordered on the realm of disdainful.

"Yeah. Leave my baby in the responsibility of the two people who locked their own daughter away for three years and caused untold psychological problems." Anna stabbed her fork into her rice. "You'll forgive me if I don't jump at the chance."

"It was hard for them too, you know," Elsa gently chided her.

"Oh, no doubt." Anna stuffed a forkful of rice in her mouth. "Doing what they did had to have been horrible for them—but I know, in a few months, I'm going to be a parent as well… and I would never put my child through that."

"You can't let that go, can you?" Elsa asked softly, without a trace of accusation.

"Nope, and I don't know if I ever will." Anna stabbed her rice once again, the sharp sound of metal impacting ceramic causing Elsa to fear for the bowl's integrity. "But I do know I'm a complete softy, and when we get the first safe moment, I'm probably going to throw myself into their arms and break down."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

Anna looked at her, brows knitted but peaking, a strange kind of confusion in her eyes - as though even she wasn't certain. "It's not, really, is it? I just… after what they did to you, and…"

"Anna." Elsa shifted in her stool so she could sit a little closer. "Is it that you feel if you were to try and be as close to Mama and Papa as you used to be, knowing what they did, then you would in
some way be betraying me?"

"I...I think so?"

Elsa let out a sigh through her nose, and smiled a lopsided, *you-silly-billy* smile. She pushed herself to her feet, and walked to stand behind Anna, and bent down to hug her from behind. She rested her chin on Anna's left shoulder, and squeezed as she felt her sister's free hand grip her right fingers.

"Don't let our relationship dictate the one you have with Mama and Papa." Elsa's left hand stroked Anna's upper right arm. "You have every right to have them in your life as little or as much as you see fit, provided you are happy with it. Your life is yours to guide, and your relationships are yours to cultivate—or end—as much as you like."

"Thanks 'sis," Anna murmured. "But what about you?"

"I don't know, Anna." Elsa straightened up, but made sure to rest her hands on Anna's shoulders, and lightly stroked with her thumbs. "Like I said, I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. Until then, we must focus on actually getting them out."

"Mmyeah." Anna tilted her head back and forth. "None of this'll matter if the mission fails. Which it won't."

"Realistic and idealistic." Elsa chuckled. "Who are you, and what have you done with my sister?"

"She started growing up!" Anna said, her voice broken by a pleasant laugh, but Elsa could feel the good humour and cheer quickly vanish even before Anna added, "She grew up a little too fast."

Elsa quirked her lips in a slight wince, feeling the heavy, cold weight of reality pulling down on her heart and stifling the buoyant sense of optimism. They all had to grow up in record time, in a sense. Expose themselves to truths and sights reserved for later in life, or never at all. It was only Anna that had the added weight of a new life wholly dependent on her. She squeezed her thumbs and fingers into Anna's shoulder blades and clavicle as an attempt to massage the tangibly stiff muscles underneath her skin.

"You ever..." Anna began, but hesitated. "You ever wonder what our lives would have been like if... if we weren't what we were?"

"Do you mean if we weren't abnormals?"

"Yeah. If we were just two normal kids growing up. Not being divided by a door. Just... normal."

Elsa looked up at the ceiling as she considered the question. It had been a thought occasionally presenting itself in her mind, and the prevailing ponderance when she was isolated. If her genetics hadn't predisposed her to abnormality, how different could her path have been? High school to higher education was a certainty, and following the footsteps of Mama and Papa, extremely likely. Continuing her relationship with Dylan and submitting themselves to the *Compatibility Index?* Probable.

"I will admit there have been times I wondered the direction my life could have gone," Elsa mused, "but... I have a suspicion it'd be a lot less eventful."

"If I had a drink, I'd drink to that." Anna ended up settling for a toast with her bowl of rice. "I look back on all I've done, the things I've seen, the people I've met, the person I *am...* and I just think... 'whoa'."
"Tell me about it."

Anna twisted in her seat as far as she could to look Elsa in the eye. "Hey—do you still like opera?"

"I haven't listened to it for a few years. Why?"

"Unity stuff, right? What did you think of it?"

The left part of Elsa's upper lip tugged up as she shrugged. "I found it adequate for my tastes, if a little heavy-handed on the propaganda. Why?"

Anna grinned, her eyes twinkling. "I'm about to blow your mind."

She jerked back her chair so abruptly that Elsa barely moved backwards in time, and hurried over to the music device sat on the unit against the wall. Elsa ended up taking Anna's chair - still warm to the touch - and as she watched Anna lean down to fiddle with the device, surreptitiously popped a forkful of rice in her mouth, forgetting how it had been a fair few hours since breakfast.

"What *is* that thing, anyway?"

"It plays music," Anna answered offhandedly.

"Well, I know *that.*"

"It's called an iPod. Pre-war tech." Anna paused to mutter something about playlists under her breath. "Jack figures whoever owned it before stuffed all the music genres they could on it, so if anyone found it in the future, they could learn what music was like before the world went to hell in a handbasket. S'why there's all kinds of tunes on this here beauty."

Elsa stuffed a rather large forkful in her mouth, causing her to wait until she swallowed before remarking, "That's very forward thinking of them."

"Yeah, well, with Unity pretty much erasing any and all forms of culture before them, this is probably the last source of pre-war music in the country, and the only proof it ever existed." Anna uttered a triumphant 'aha!' before adding, "History's something from which we should learn, not something we erase."

Elsa let out a wry chuckle, her left cheek bulging slightly. "Is that you talking, or Pitch?"

"Meh. Both." Anna stood, and turned her head to regard Elsa with a knowing, almost cheeky sidelong look. "Ready to hear what music actually sounds like?"

"Certainly."

Anna tapped on a spot on the iPod's surface, and stroked a small semicircle. As she straightened up, the speakers filled the room with a clear, beautiful melody of violins and violas. Light, yet slow, it immediately set Elsa's mild trepidation at ease - until the female soprano's voice joined the music.

What followed was one of the most memorable musical experiences of Elsa's life, up there with her first discovery of opera and her first visit to the holo-performance of Lady Sonora. Elsa closed her eyes, letting the notes and melodies wash over her. If it truly was pre-Unity opera, then modern society was the poorer for its loss.

Like all good things, however, the song came to an end a lot sooner than Elsa liked. Her eyes greeted the world once again and found her sister, who was leaning on the table supporting the iPod with
one hand, her other hand resting on her hip, and her legs crossed at the ankles as she regarded Elsa with a knowing, borderline smug smirk.

"It's beautiful." Elsa tilted her head. "What language is the soprano singing?"

"Italian." Anna tapped the iPod once, silencing it, and moved to sit on the closest chair. "It's called *O Mio Babbino Caro.*"

Elsa suspected Anna had mispronounced some of the words, but wasn't about to point it out. "Alliance side," she mused. "This was pre-war music?"

"Hoo yeah." Anna laced her fingers together and leaned with her elbow on the table, crossing one leg over the other. "Everything on that there device is pre-war. They don't make 'em like they used to, which is kinda funny in a real sad way."

"How so?"

"Well, you spend enough time in Pitch's lessons, you learn just how different the world was. So much art, so much *culture.* Japanese, Chinese, Italian, African… all of it. One big melting pot and… boom. Unity wipes it all clean. No more culture, no more expression, *imagination.* Nothing but government-approved art, music, and style." Anna made a small shrug. "Guess they really achieved unity."

"Lack of individuality is not unity, but conformity," Elsa said as she turned over the rice with the fork. "I suppose, when Unity offered security and peace, people considered freedom a small price to pay."

"Instead of respecting what made us different," Anna added, eyebrows high in a nod of agreement, "we let them wipe the slate clean and make us all the same. One nation in Unity."

"Well, not *completely* clean." Elsa looked up just as Anna frowned and tilted her head. "What you said about erasing history… do you remember what Papa once said, something his father told him?"

Anna shook her head.

"You can wipe the words from a chalkboard, but there will always be something left behind." Elsa let the fork rest on the rim of the bowl, and sat back. "I never really understood that until now—nor do I know what a chalkboard is—but I think I understand the meaning."

"Which is?"

"You can't erase the past. You can't wipe way history; you can only cherish it or learn from it." Elsa thumbed at her nose to dissuade an itch, and then leaned her elbows on the table and entwined her fingers. "Everything that happens now is a natural progression of what came before."

"Yeah, well, mankind is pretty shit at learning from history," Anna chuckled with a sardonic, almost bitter humour. "You'd think we'd've learned from the Second World War—turns out we did, in a way. We learned how to kill more people. Humanity almost wiped itself out because someone wanted to start a fight."

"I must admit, I'm keen to learn more of the real history of the world."

Anna snapped her fingers and pointed at Elsa. "If we survive all this, remind me to sign you up for Pitch's history lectures. The stuff you'll learn will blow your mind, especially since it hasn't been warped by Unity's *government-approved*—" she air quoted the words, "—curriculum. The two
World Wars, slavery, racism, the Civil War, women's rights… whole nine yards. History of the world's pretty rough—and it's usually written by the victors."

"Hopefully we abnormals will write our own history."

Anna nodded slowly, eyebrows raised as she lost herself in the grey, black-flecked table. "And what history it'll be. Written in fire, blood, strife and death."

"Don't forget new life." Elsa nodded pointedly at Anna's abdomen. Her sister caught her eye, and a warm, motherly smile crossed her lips as she stroked her belly.

"And new life."

"How's the little one?"

"Seems they're doing well. Flutters are getting a little stronger, and I'm getting this weird compulsion to eat sprouts—"

"You hate sprouts."

Anna let out a bark of laughter. "Ha! Yeah. Plus the smell of cordite from everyone doing shooting practice is making me feel queasy, but we're doing good. Little fighter, this one."

Elsa curled her lips into a smile in lieu of a response, but it fell as quickly as her gaze. Her thumbs commenced fiddling with each other, and her eyebrows knitted together in a frown as her mouth opened and closed.

"Anna… in light of our imminent military operation… I feel it's best if you—"

Anna made a small movement, causing Elsa's hesitance to override her speech, and as she looked up she noticed her sister's hand was held up.

"If you're going to say what I think you're going to say, then don't worry." Anna's hand returned to the table. "I'll stay out of the fighting."

Elsa blinked, her mouth haplessly opening and closing as she struggled to respond. "Oh! Well, yes. Good. I mean—I'm sorry that it has to be—I thought you'd—"

Anna let out a quiet chuckle, but it was tinged with a hint of resignation. "Ever since Jack said we'd be going to war, I'd been doing a lot of thinking, and it took me a while to realise... the more this little spudge grows, the more I have to do what's right for them. It's not about me anymore."

Elsa let out a relieved breath through her nose. "I honestly thought we'd argue, then I'd have to pull rank on you. Especially after how your husband kept you out of danger."

Anna snorted. "Yeah, well, difference there is I'm sidelining myself by my own choice. I'm totally okay with it that way. But, even though I'm not gonna be on the ground fighting, I'm also not gonna be the one left at home, twiddling my thumbs while I worry."

"Anna…" Elsa began in exasperation.

"Look, the way I see it, I can still take part. I'll pilot the Fairy—hell, Candace can be my co-pilot."

"She hasn't set foot in a Hela in her life."

"No, but she can still shoot. I'll fly, she shoots what and when I tell her to." Anna leaned forward
slightly, her eyes radiating resolve. "I am not missing out on a single second of us busting our parents out of there."

Elsa's expression stood between jaded resignation and unimpressed. "I can't change your mind, can I?"

"Nope." Anna had the good sense to forego her customary grin of triumph, and kept a resolute line on her lips. Anything other than solemn acknowledgement of the risks, and Elsa would have banned her from the mission on principle. "Way I see it, anyone who is combat capable is gonna be on the ground, so you'll need someone in the Fairy for exfil. I'm the only one who can do that. I'll drop you all off, then stay out of range of those turrets until it's safe."

Elsa chewed at her lip whilst she closely studied her sister. Anna accompanying them into battle was an uncomfortable but acceptable notion, given she was trained for and skilled in exactly that kind of thing. Yet, it wasn't just her entering the fray, but Elsa's unborn relative. Anna seemed to take that firmly into account, and short of tying her to her bed, piloting the Fairy was the safest place to be - and she was right. Everyone else would be on the ground, and she was the only one able to facilitate exfiltration.

It wasn't ideal, but it was the best option.

"Okay. I'll talk to Jack."

"It's happening with or without his say-so, 'sis—"

It was Elsa's turn to hold up her hand, and her trademark Try Me glare cowed even the stubborn Anna. "Whether or not that may be the case, this is about respect, both for him and for the chain of command. Yours might be selective, mine is not—and I cannot demand involvement and transparency from him if I am not willing to return the same courtesy."

"Right." Anna outwardly cringed, and averted her gaze. "Sorry."

Elsa tilted her head to the side and back again. "Granted, he will have likely come to the same conclusion regardless of your decision, and factored that into the tactical plan—speaking of which, I'm going to see if I can be of assistance."

"Alright." Anna pushed herself up from the table. "We've got, what, thirty-six hours until showtime?"

"I'd say so," Elsa agreed as she, too, rose to stand.

"Right. Better go round and make sure everyone's got their kit and masks—I still haven't painted some of them." Anna scoffed. "Rapunzel's doing hers, but Astrid wants a likeness of Stormfly and Red wants some crosshairs, and all I have is white paint. Hard to play Michelangelo with just one colour."

"Who?"

Anna shook her head, and chuckled as she set off. "Remind me to add Art History to your student schedule."

_time: 07:30_
"You're nervous."

Stood at the head of the command centre's middle table, his hands gripping his staff as it was planted in the ground before him, Jack looked up from the hole his eyes had been boring into the table, and glanced at Elsa as she regarded him closely. She wore a smile of mild amusement, yet her gaze was of concern. He let out a quick titter, and rocked from side to side on his feet. "I am?"

Her hands held together before her, she gestured with her left thumb. "You're fidgeting in place, and your fingers keep tapping a rhythm on your staff."

"Huh." Jack extended out his arms and tried to nonchalantly appraise the grip he had as he loosened it. "Hadn't noticed."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"Not really. Other than we're less than twenty hours from our first mission together, with almost zero prep, against a force seven times bigger than us, and if we fuck up too bad, we're boned." Jack scoffed, the corner of his lips turning up into a dark smirk. "Oh, and did I mention the possibility of a shit-ton of Reapers?"

"Ever the optimist," Elsa drawled. "And to think your speeches were quite rousing."

Jack gave her a funny look out of the corner of his eye. "Who told you that?"

"One or two people." Elsa looked away with a casual air.

"Yeah, well, that was a long time ago." Jack shifted in place. He'd sent out the call for the briefing ten minutes ago, and the team was taking its sweet time to arrive. "My team and I, we had a rhythm. We fought as one, kinda like you and I did, but only because we'd fought together so often."

"And now we're here, your rhythm is no longer regular."

"No—it's louder. Stronger. There're more instruments." Jack extended a single finger toward the main doors, as though the Ghosts themselves were there. "We've actually got a sniper watching over us, one I think I can rely on. We've got two dragons, now, one ridden by someone I'm pretty sure could bring down a building if she wanted. We've got someone who can patch us up and get us back in the fight in seconds, and I have someone who is every bit as powerful and skilled as I am watching my back. I'm... not used to feeling like this."

"Nervous?"

"Confident." Jack shrugged. "This upcoming operation... we're outnumbered and outgunned—"

"When are you ever not?" Elsa added quietly.

"—and there's a chance we'll be the main course for a Reaper dinner party, but... I think we can pull this off."

"We can," Elsa said, reaching out to him with her left hand, "and we will. Together."

Jack looked down at her hand, and his face lifted up with a warm, appreciative smile. He let go of the staff with his right and entwined his fingers with hers, revelling in the soft yet cold touch of her skin. "I'm glad you literally fell out of the sky."

Elsa let out a burst of laughter, and Jack felt his heart leap at the way her blue eyes curved into
mirthful semicircles, and how her face lit up the room. "How romantic!" She attempted to speak, though giggles broke her voice. "Most would say 'glad to have met you,' or, 'happy to have you in my life,' but not you. It's original, I'll give you that."

Jack's own chuckles brought forth by her infectious laughter joined in, and as the seconds passed, the upbeat atmosphere dwindled to a pleasant air. "For what it's worth," she said, smiling at a space on the table, "I'm glad I fell out of the sky, too."

"Don't forget literally."

"Technically I glided."

"You were falling like a stone."

"Excuse me, I think the phrase you're looking for is: falling with style."

"Only because you had dragonwing parachutes—*and* my wind."

Elsa said nothing, but her lips cocked a wry smirk as her eyebrows rose. Jack's face went blank. "That came out wrong."

"No, I think your phrasing was perfect. Jackson Overland, first to guide a crippled *Hela* to the ground with his own flatulence."

"You might laugh," came a voice from the main doors, "but you feed Jack broccoli, and his farts will clear a room."

Elsa cringed and groaned out loud, and Jack shot a dirty look at the first arrival, Hiccup, who wiggled his eyebrows in return as he walked in. "Yes, thank you, Fish-breath."

"You're welcome, Gas Master." Hiccup pocketed his hands. "Jack once thought it'd be a good idea to eat a plate of it before a ship meeting—Neve told him to get the hell out 'cause the stink got so bad."

"Remind me why you have to change your pants when you wake up?"

"Hey!" Hiccup jabbed a finger at him. "That is a legitimate biological probl—"

Jack's expression must have betrayed some sort of clue, for Hiccup's frown turned into dawning comprehension, and then into an indignant scowl. "You son of a bitch."

"What's the matter?"

Astrid walked into the room, with Kozmotis and Anna behind her, glancing between them with curious eyes. Jack didn't miss the faint giggles coming from Elsa's direction. "Nothing," Hiccup said.

"Jack's just realising I'm gonna kill him."

"Take a number and get in line," Jack snarked. "Bring supplies—it might be a while."

"I take it Hiccup finally discovered why his trousers were always damp in the morning?" Kozmotis drawled with vague disinterest.

Anna added as she strolled in, "Only took him—what—four years?"

Astrid cast Hiccup a curious eye, yet her lips curled a teasing smile. "Was that why you made a point of checking your pants this morning?"
"Oh my God, does he still do th—hold the phone," Jack stopped, and held up a hand, "How do you know what he did when he woke up?"

Both Astrid and Hiccup flushed a deep red, with the latter scratching at the back of his head, and the former looking everywhere she could that didn't involve eye contact.

"Oh my God, you did the horizontal tango," Anna gasped. "You two slept together."

"No, we didn't!" Hiccup blurted, shaking his head. "Well, yeah, we did, but—not in that way—"

"Wouldn't complain if we did," came a mutter from Astrid.

"—I just walked Astrid to her room, and she asked if I wanted to sleep in her bed!"

"Uh-huh." Elsa chuckled. "Because the distance from her room to yours is oh so far."

"When you're practically dead on your feet… yeah, it really is," Hiccup grumbled. "Nothing happened, you perverts."

"Say," Astrid thumbed behind her, "if you've called us here for some kind of teasing session, we'll just—"

Chuckling, Jack shook his head. "Nah. We're just waiting on—" the sound of the doors punctuated his words, "—two people with cosmic timing."

Merida and Candace walked in, both looking fairly upbeat and cheery. It had been remarkable watching their newest recruit transition from the shell of a woman she was when she arrived, to the upright, engaging woman she had become. Jack didn't miss the irony of how the most dangerous place in the country was the safest place for Candace to truly flourish, and flourish she did.

Candace threw him a smile, and took a spot nearby Merida and Kozmotis, as the redhead affectionately touched Kozmotis' shoulder.

"Right, now we're all here, let's get to it."

Jack gave a single nod to Elsa. Unfurling a hand, Elsa flicked her wrist, and elegant patterns of filigree darted out from her fingertips toward the centre of the table. Murmurs of admiration and impressed surprise - sans Kozmotis, predictably - filtered through the room as the ice coalesced into an intricate but hardy-looking replica model of an internment camp, each building, fence and tower rendered with painstaking detail according to Hiccup's description the day before, and Elsa's imagination filled the blanks.

"Now that's something you don't see every day," Hiccup whispered in awe.

Elsa gave him a smile of appreciation.

Jack moved to stand closer to the table's edge. "I think we can all agree: this camp is a toughie. Between the auto-targeting turrets, and the sentry cannons on the towers, there's no freaking way we can assault this place by ground. We don't know the range of their defenses—and even if we weren't torn to shreds just getting to the fences, I'm pretty sure Unity didn't bulldoze all the trees around the camp for no reason."

"We find it a near-certainty the surrounding open ground is riddled with anti-personnel mines." Elsa drew a vague circle around the model camp with a finger. "Ordnance like that needs support."
"Which leaves us with only one option," Jack continued, "and that is an insertion by air."

The occupants of the room shared uneasy looks. "You mean we skydive in?"

Jack looked at Merida. "That's exactly what I mean."

"Forgive me for stating the obvious," Kozmotis said, "but skydiving requires parachutes, and we possess none."

"I'll get to that." Jack nodded at Elsa. "Elsa tells me told you four have about one hundred-twenty hours of jump experience between you, right?"

"Something like that," said Rapunzel.

"Good. What we'll be doing is a bit different. As Koz so astutely observed, we have no parachutes, so I improvised."

Hiccup uttered his second instance of colourful language. "The wingsuits. That's why you had me make them."

"Yep. I'm guessing Unity never gave you all wingsuit training, so after this briefing, we're gonna do a few jumps so you have an idea of what to expect."

"Sounds excitin'," Merida grinned.

"Closest you'll ever get to actually flying," Anna said.

Jack began pointing at critical spots on the model. "So, here's the plan: Anna will pilot the Fairy, Candace will ride shotgun. Rapunzel, Elsa, Koz and I will jump when we're over the camp. At the time, Hiccup will take out the comms tower and the power rely station, while Astrid will destroy the sentry towers."

"And me?"

Jack looked at Merida. "You'll be riding shotgun with Astrid. Once she's taken out the towers, she drops you here—" Jack pointed at the tallest structure, "—on top of the command building. From there, you'll be on overwatch. Eyes on everything. Call out movements and flanks, drop anyone you can."

"Got it."

Astrid smirked at Merida. "You'd best hold on tight, Red. Stormfly and I'll be pulling some tight moves out there."

Merida scoffed, and threw her a dismissive wave.

"Once we're inside, we clean up the base troops, then move into the bunker and rescue Mr and Mrs Snowfield. Anna will then exfiltrate us from the base. Get in, wreak havoc, get out."

The room was filled with a thoughtful silence, with all eyes on the model, before Rapunzel uttered the age-old cliché. "It sounds a little too easy."

"Yeah. In terms of our skills, it sounds like a walk in the park. The problem is our hearts." Jack let out a grave breath. "Unity wouldn't build a place deep in Reaper territory only to station it with clones. That's just asking for trouble."
Rapunzel nodded. "Right, on account of dead clones having a funny reaction to Reaper bites."

"Yes," Elsa said, nodding, "so it stands to reason the stationed personnel are all human."

Jack folded his arms. "For that reason, I'm making the executive decision to suspend Rule Six for the duration of this mission."

Jack's declaration was met with deathly silence. Anna and Hiccup shared uneasy looks; Kozmotis gave a single nod of acknowledgement. Astrid and Merida exchanged a single glance and shrugged, Candace looked blankly around the room and Elsa merely lifted her chin in acceptance. Rapunzel, however, looked deeply disturbed.

"You mean to kill them."

Jack nodded slowly and gravely. "Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because if we engage the enemy with single shot rifles while they're using automatic pulse carbines, if they're shooting to kill and we're not, we'd be handicapping ourselves." Jack nodded at the model. "This mission is too important. Every one of you is worth ten of them to me, so if I have to kill ten of them to make sure one of you gets home safe, then I won't hesitate. This isn't play fighting. This isn't ideology, and this is beyond a game. This is war."

Anna shifted uncomfortably on her feet. "Yeah, but... what about their families? Rule Six was made so they wouldn't know how it felt to lose someone they loved."

"Do you think those soldiers joined the military thinking it would be a safe career, Streak?"

Kozmotis gave her a cold look. "Rule Six has been a pair of moral shackles from the moment it was conceived. We put the feelings of people who would just as likely see us dead ahead of our own kind—and we have paid dearly for that."

"I haven't made the decision lightly, Anna," said Jack in an attempt to dissuade Anna from turning her dirty look at Kozmotis into an argument, "and after this, we can talk about whether we move forward without the rule, or go back to the way things were. Far as I'm concerned, though, there's no way we can pull this off without lethal force. Rule Six would slow us down... and the moment Hiccup takes out the comms tower, time will be against us."

"Why?"

Elsa took that moment to answer. "We'll be attacking at night."

There was a collective intake of breath, and all eyes save Kozmotis' relayed the same worry.

"Once that tower goes down, every Reaper for miles around is gonna hear it. We'll be on the clock, so we'll need to be precise, ruthless, and above all: fast. Make the nine of us feel like nine hundred." Jack unscrewed the lid from the canteen on his belt.

"I don't like it," Hiccup said slowly, "but it makes sense—especially since they have two Titans in the camp."

Anna, who had been taking a gulp from her canteen, very nearly spat out her mouthful of water. Jack, on the other hand, choked on his. "I'm sorry—what?"

"Did I not mention that?" Hiccup looked between the eight pairs of eyes staring back at him. Some
were confused, others shocked… and one deeply irritated. "I feel like I should've mentioned that."

Jack massaged his temples with his thumb and forefinger. "No. You didn't. Yes, you should have."

"I've heard that name before." Elsa looked at Jack. "When we were searching the database for the truth about our parents. What is a Titan?"

"Bad news." Jack rested a hand on his hip and leaned on his staff. "Titans are genetically engineered, nanite-infused clones. They've got the strength of Harvester, but they're two feet taller and a foot wider."

"One Titan can comfortably duel a trained abnormal and win," Anna added. "An abnormal's gotta hit a Titan several times to bring it down; a Titan only needs to hit you once."

"Yikes," Astrid breathed. "How come we never saw these when we were Valkyries?"

"I can answer that." Kozmotis held one arm across his chest, supporting the elbow of his other arm. "The strength of a Titan is rivalled only by its sheer stupidity, and capacity for indiscriminate destruction. You were created and designed for surgical, precise combat, but a Titan is a spiked club. Your methodologies are incompatible."

Anna gave him a single nod of agreement. "You want to quietly take out key targets and structures, you send in the Valkyries. You just wanna bust up the joint and cause chaos? Tell a Titan to smash, and it'll only stop if it's told to, or if there's nothing left."

"And they have two o' them," Merida said, her voice wavering.

Astrid frowned. "You said clones, right? They're souped up clones… so what's to stop them getting Reaper-fied?"

"Titans have a killswitch, an explosive charge implanted in their necks. If one starts going rogue or whatever, someone with the detonator pushes a button, and boom. Takes their head clean off." Jack glanced at all of the funny look sent his way, and added, wincing, "I've seen it happen. Put me off synth-Jell-O for a week."

"Does this change anything?" Elsa asked.

Jack shook his head. "No. Red, if you see one, call it out and Toothless will take care of it. Or you can put an arrow between its eyes if you're feeling frisky."

"Gotcha."

"There's one more thing, and this is gonna be the hardest of all—and by that, I mean this is the thing that'll keep you up at night, asking questions and wondering if you can live with yourself."

Jack's eyes rested on Rapunzel the longest.

"Yeah, 'cause that doesn't sound ominous at all," Candace drawled.

"For all its firepower and manpower," Jack said, resting the staff on the table's edge so he could lean down on it with his hands, "this place is still an internment camp. And that means prisoners. We don't know how many there are, what state they're in."

"Okay," Anna said, "so how do we bust them out?"

Jack took a long look at her, before his gaze fell to the table. He took a long breath in and out of his
nose, preparing himself for the inevitable.

"The answer is: we don't."

Once more a silence fell, though it was heavy with disbelief and shock. No-one knew how to respond, save for looks of hope that Jack was joking. Even Kozmotis looked faintly taken aback.

"S-sorry?" Anna stammered. "We… we don't?"

Jack slowly shook his head.

"Chief," Hiccup said, "we can't…. we can't just leave them there. These people, they're our kind. They've been starved, abused—they need—"

"We have to, Hiccup." Jack pushed himself straight. "There's no other way."

"I'm with him on this, Cap." Astrid folded her arms. "We can't abandon them."

"We can and we will, Astrid, or we scrub the mission and walk away."

Rapunzel threw her hands into the air. "Seriously?" she sourly hissed. "You're holding the rescue to ransom unless we agree to leave them behind?!"

"I'm not holding anything to—"

Jack's voice was immediately drowned out by a cacophony of arguing. Female and male voices crying out to be heard, all melting together into one senseless noise. He took a long look at Elsa, and she returned his gaze with silence, with grave understanding in her eyes, and a single nod. Tensing his jaw and readying his spirit, Jack grasped his staff and slammed it down on the floor.

The room fell silent.

"I get it." Jack gave a solemn look around the room. "Few years ago, I'd be saying the same thing. Only reason I didn't speak out when Kristoff sacrificed Scout Team Red for us was 'cause he already did it. So, yeah. I hear you all."

He set off, and slowly made a wide circle of the occupants of the room. "But this is the reality of it: as soon as we fire the first shot, no matter what happens, those prisoners are gonna die. We scrub the mission and leave the Snowfields there, then Unity kills them. We go ahead and save the Snowfields, and the Reapers will do it, since us knocking out the power also knocks out the turrets. Whichever way I look at it—and believe me, I looked—the end result is the same."

"We kill our own kind," Kozmotis said distantly. "Whomever wins… they lose."

"I don't accept that," Rapunzel declared vehemently. "We can still save them. Somehow. We have to."

"How, Rapunzel?" Jack, from the other side of the table, looked her in the eye. "A camp like that has maybe a hundred to two hundred inmates. The Fairy can only carry twelve people. Fourteen if people don't mind standing. There's no space."

"We can lead them out—"

"Reapers would be on us before we even got two miles out." Jack slowly shrugged. "We could outrun them, sure, but can two hundred sick, malnourished prisoners? That's a goddamn death march—no, it's worse, because every one of them will be thinking they're gonna make it out
alive right up until the moment a thousand or more Reapers start tearing them apart."

"Yer askin' us ta put two people ahead o' two hundred," Merida said quietly and with disbelief.

"No. I'm not asking you to do a thing. I'm putting two people and ending whatever plans Hans has for them ahead of two hundred people, 'cause if we don't stop it, then two hundred dead abnormals will be just the beginning."

"Of what?"

"I don't know—but Hans wants them for something, wants them badly enough that it's worth tricking the whole goddamn nation into thinking they're dead, causing the deaths of three hundred and blackmailing Elsa into assassinating me for that 'something'." Jack completed his circle and ended up at the head of the table again. "And I'm pretty sure that something involves the complete and utter extinction of our kind… because why else would you kidnap and force the pioneers of the goddamn abnormality suppression serum to work for you?"

Jack once again leaned on the table. "It sucks. It utterly sucks that this is our reality—but it is our reality. However, I'm giving you all a chance to walk away. If you don't want to go any further, knowing what has been said, now is the time to stand up and say something. No-one will think less of you for it, but I need to know now."

Jack took care to engage each and every member of the team; most looked him in the eye, the rest held it for a few seconds before nodding and looking away in reluctant acceptance.

"Alright. We move out in fifteen hours, so I want everyone to do one final inventory and systems check—"

"I won't kill anyone."

Jack gave Rapunzel a long, thoughtful look. She lifted her chin and stared resolutely back at him. "I hear ya. We'll go ahead with the mission—"

"No, you don't get it. I'll be there. You need me, so I'll be there… but I won't kill anyone."

Jack studied her for a moment, before quickly nodding. "Alright. Take a stun pistol—but also take your MP5 and spare ammo just in case the Reapers are quicker off the mark than we think, plus Titans need a little more oomph to take them down."

"Deal," Rapunzel nodded, then looked away.

"If that's everything," Jack turned to the team, "we're done here. Do what you need to do to prepare yourselves, 'cause when I give the word, I want everyone suited up and waiting by the Fairy. Got it?"

Murmurs of assent and acknowledgement reached his ears before several pairs of feet filed out of the room. Whether he was mistaking it or not, he didn't know, but he felt like their steps were weighted with the terrible knowledge of the mission's cost. When Anna, the last of the group, left the room, all the tension holding Jack's muscles taut left him. He flopped down onto the nearest stool with a loud exhalation of breath, and rested his temples in his palms with his elbows on the table.

"Are you alright?"

Jack knew Elsa hadn't left… and he was grateful for that.
"Not really."

His shoulder became the relieved recipient of a comforting hand. "Would you like to talk about it?"

Jack repeated himself in a quiet voice, but added, "I'm trying to convince myself it's the right thing to do."

"Is it working?"

Jack shook his head, a bitter smile on his lips. "Not really."

The hand on his right shoulder vanished, but the absence was not mourned for long as Elsa then rested both of her hands on his shoulders. "I don't think there is a right thing in this situation—just varying degrees of the wrong thing."

"No matter what I do, those people are going to die."

Elsa squeezed his shoulders. "It's a terrible position to be in… but for what it's worth… you won't face this alone. I'm with you."

Jack smiled, and his left hand moved up to hold her right. It was small comfort… but he loved her for it.

---

Time: 22:44

Time was many things to many people. It was the fire in which they burned, or the friend who reminded them to cherish the moment, to appreciate life, for it would never come again. Time was each and every breath, ticking, until the final gasp; or it was the precious gift either squandered or savoured.

For Jack, as he sat cross-legged in his room, his staff held across his lap and his eyes closed while the air gently weaved around him, time was the inexorable march to a beginning. It was the slow journey to a defining moment in his life of defining moments, where fate and happenstance met with action and control.

For the soldiers in Camp Serenity, and the prisoners under their boots, time was their enemy, the unrelenting journey to their end. The chime of the clock and the tolling bell - for when they would hear the roaring engines of the Fairy, the chilling shrieks of Toothless and the rat-at-at of the guns, they would not know the truth.

The Ghosts were not just bringing their fury, but the wrath of time itself.

On one of the Star's movie nights, where archaic devices played two-dimensional movies from flat discs, there had been one movie. One that had more meaning now than it did then, when Jack didn't believe such a concept existed. He didn't recall the title, but he did remember one particular part - the simulated no-win scenario in which the innocent souls of a defenseless vessel would perish no matter the actions of the valiant, heroic captain and the idealistic crew. The doomed vessel had a name, and that name held more weight now than it ever did.

Camp Serenity would be their Kobayashi Maru.

Yet, as he meditated, with three snowflakes hovering before him in perfect stillness, he found he still
didn't accept that. Rapunzel was right—there had to be a way. Kirk did cheat the simulation after all, and the crew of the Kobayashi Maru was saved.

The iPod on his bed let out a shrill beeping, its alarm clock reminding him of the here and now. Jack opened his eyes, and spoke out loud.

"Frost to all Ghosts. Suit up. It's time."
"Camp Serenity, Part I"

"There it is again…"

In the darkness of the pilot cabin, Jack glanced over at Anna upon hearing her puzzled voice over the *Fairy's* intercom. He habitually adjusted the position of the headset over his ears. "What?"

Faintly illuminated by the cabin's blue light, she manipulated the small holo-interface with the fingers of her right hand as she guided the humming *Fairy* with the other. "The computer keeps registering a power fluctuation in the engines, but every time I run a basic diagnostic, it goes away."

"Should we be worried?"

Anna closed and jutted out her lower lip as she shook her head, but her frown remained. "Only minor fluctuations, like one percent."

"Alright." Jack looked out the window at the clouds racing below them, and the full moon turning them into a bed of white down. "Carry on as normal, but keep an eye on it. Hiccup can take a look once the mission's over."

"Copy." Anna returned her right hand to the control stick, but every now and then her eyes flicked over to the translucent image of the *Fairy's* systems. "Hopefully she won't give out on us later on."

"Throttle back on the speed. Maybe that'll help."

"Alright."

Jack felt the *Fairy's* velocity slow down, even if only a little. "Did it work?"

Anna fiddled with the holo-interface once again, and stared at it for a few moments. "Seems to. Power looks pretty steady."

"Alright. Stay on this speed for now, and let me know if anything changes."

"Copy that."

Anna returned to her steady guidance of the *Fairy's* flight, and Jack gazed at a shadowed spot of the co-pilot's dash, as the atmosphere quickly became one of silent thought. Ordinarily he would have asked her what she was thinking, or vice versa, but in that moment he scarcely cared. His body had been host to a taut tension, a kind of laser-focused awareness in which his mind was totally and wholly alert, and his thoughts fixed on the approaching mission. Leading was never Jack's strong suit and he was the first to admit it, but it forced him to *think* like one. The live-by-the-moment guy became the planner, the prankster became the adult, and it all constituted such a change within him he wondered if, should the inmates be anyone he knew, they would recognise the Frost before them.

"So…"

Anna had evidently become aware of the thick silence.

"You and my sister, huh—"

"I have no comment on the matter."
There was a pang inside him of surprise that he spoke more like Elsa than himself, but the meaning would have been the same. Anna was probably making polite conversation, he knew that, but the faint resentment he had ever since the talk on the roof was still there. Besides, it wasn't the time for small talk.

"Mmkay."

Jack quickly shut down further needless chit-chat. "Candace," he spoke over the intercom, "you picked a callsign, yet?"

"Um, yeah? Maybe?"

"What is it?"

"I was thinking Phoenix."

Jack smiled. As far as it went, the callsign wasn't appropriate; rather, it nailed it. "Alright, Phoenix. You mind if I come sit by you?"

"Uh… sure?"

Jack half-smiled to himself and indicated he would be right there. He pulled off the headset, and disconnected the safety harness so he could stand. As he entered the cabin proper, Rapunzel stood at the back, flapping her arms up and down so the thin fabric wings rippled in the air. She was probably smiling, had her personal Ghost mask not been obscuring her face. It was that moment that reality struck him; the ex-Valkyries becoming Ghosts was a concept, a sort of idea that became acutely real when he saw both Rapunzel and Elsa wearing their masks. Kozmotis, however, remained as still as a tree, likely losing himself in the moment, while Elsa played at summoning and dissolving Coldheart over and over.

Candace, on the other hand, sat in the corner just inside of the dividing wall between the cabins, staring at an invisible spot on the floor. Noting with amusement and sympathy the mildly terrified look on her face - though she did look the part in a hand-me-down Ghost uniform - Jack held onto the rigging just above his head, and leaned down slightly so she would catch his eye. She abruptly looked up, and blinked a few times before remembering something.

"Oh! Right. Sorry. I was miles away."

"You looked it. Am I still okay to sit by you?"

"Yeah! Yeah. Sorry. I—" she shuffled herself further into the corner, and made a point of dusting off the space beside her. "Here."

Jack thanked her as he chuckled, then gently sat alongside her - though remembered to give her a good foot or so of space. He leaned down, resting his elbows on his knees whilst he gazed at the opposite wall, and his hands slowly rubbed with each other - though more out of something to occupy them rather than anxiety.

"How're you feeling, Phoenix?"

She gave a rapid chuckle, though it wasn't mirthful. "Did you want a list?"

"Sure." Jack caught her glancing at him in mild surprise, and shrugged. "If you want to, that is."

Candace looked away, her eyebrows high, and shrugged too. "Mmkay. Um… nervous. Scared.
Worried I'm not going to live up to your expectations, thinking I'm out of my depth. I feel safe, but at the same time, I feel like I'm in so much danger. I feel... a little out of place. Like I'm not meant to be here... and because of that, I keep worrying I'm going to drag you all down."

Jack smiled to himself, and dipped his head briefly before looking around the cabin. Elsa kept throwing them a glance, judging by the way her head would subtly incline toward them and back. He considered his words.

"Look around this cabin. When you look at the people... what do you see?"

Candace took a moment, ostensibly doing so. "I see soldiers. Warriors. Confident people. Ready and capable people."

"So, would you say they—yours truly included—are veterans of combat?"

Candace looked at him and quickly nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, easily."

"Well, I'm gonna blow your mind. Every one of them is scared."

She gave him a funny look, and then shook her head. "Bullshit."

"I'm absolutely serious. It doesn't matter how many battles we've fought, whether it's our first or our hundredth, in the moments before every fight, we're all scared. Worried. Nervous. Anxious. We're all looking at the soldier next to us and praying that when the shooting starts, we won't be a liability. We're all hoping that when it's all over, we'll still be standing. Everyone feels that fear, Phoenix, and anyone who says different is either a liar or a psychopath."

Candace looked at Elsa, who by that point had abandoned all pretense of overhearing and had simply elected to join the conversation. "Even you?"

Elsa let out a quiet chuckle as she disconnected the straps of her mask. "Especially me. When I was a Valkyrie, on the outside I was calm, confident and... well, a total bitch."

Jack rose his eyebrows and blinked in surprise.

"Inside was another story. Inside, I was a terrified little girl, afraid that when I stepped out onto the battlefield, I would die there."

Candace looked between them. "How did you two meet, anyhow?"

Jack gave Elsa a knowing glance, and she smiled as she dipped her head. "She tried to kill me."

There was a feminine bark of laughter that broke the air of the cabin. Jack shot an amused look at Candace, her mirth of nervousness, before she clocked his expression. "Wait... really?"

"Yes. Romantic, isn't it?" Elsa rolled her eyes as she smiled wider, and looked away as she began to act out a conversation. "So how did you two meet? Well, it was attraction at first sight, really. I tried to kill him, he tried to kill me in return, I nearly died twice during the Purge, almost killed him and destroyed his home. It was a romance worthy of song."

"I can't tell if you're joking."

"We're not," Jack said, "but that's pretty much how it went. In any case, there's a certain strength to be gained from knowing other people are counting on you."

"So how do you do it, then? How do you beat that fear?"
"Everyone has their own ways, I guess. Pitch likes to recite particular passages from something called the Bible—"

"That is my secret," Kozmotis called out, still in exactly the same posture as before, "and if you must know, it is a passage. Ezekiel, twenty five, verse seventeen."

Jack nodded at him. "What he said. Anna sings to herself, but quiet enough so only she can hear it."

"And you?"

"Me? Well… for me it's about finding my centre, and using it to… well, center myself. I like to think back on all the fun I had with my friends, all the practical jokes and the snowball fights, looking after my kids. For me, it's not about beating fear—it's about creating something else to focus on. Something worth fighting for."

Candace's eyes distantly rested on the floor of the cabin. "I don't know how to do any of that. I… can't remember being happy until I came to Bravo."

"Well, we've had experience and time to find out what works for us. Just remember that it's absolutely natural to be scared. Want advice from an old soldier?"

"You're not old, but please."

"Breathe. Just… breathe. Focus on your breathing, and while you do that, just think about your next step. That's all you need to. Then when you've reached that step, think about your next one, and so on. It's easy to get lost in the rabbit hole, but if you just take it one step at a time, then you won't lose your way."

"We're about five minutes out, Cap," Anna called. "If you're gonna do a speech, now's the time."

Jack smiled at Candace, before lightly clapping his hands together and rising to his feet. "Frost to all Ghosts," he announced. "Sound off for comms check."

Eight voices came back one by one, some exclusively over the radio channel, and others creating the odd aural sensation of hearing them in stereo since they were less than ten feet away from him.

"Alright, listen up." Jack reached up to hold the cargo rigging fixed to the ceiling. "We're less than ten minutes from showtime, so I'm gonna keep this brief."

"We getting a speech? Sounds like we're getting a speech."

"Zip it, flyboy. I wanna hear this."

"Why don't you come over here and make me?"

Jack chuckled, shaking his head. "You kids done?"

"Sorry, chief."

Jack adjusted his grip on the rigging when minor turbulence rocked the Fairy. "If someone had told me, six months ago, that I'd be flying into battle with the very people who'd been trying to kill us all, I'd have laughed in their face and whacked them upside the head."

"Now you're here, about to fight alongside us, and I realise… how I can't think of what life would be like without you all. You were everything we'd been missing and we didn't even know it, and if you weren't here, we'd be lost. You're more than just soldiers, more than Ghosts. You're brothers,
Jack failed to stop his eyes from resting upon Elsa's newly masked visage.

"You're family. You gave us something we never thought we'd have again. You gave us hope. You gave us a fighting chance—and together, we'll take the next chance, and the next, and the next, until we're the last ones standing... or all our chances run out. And I'll tell you this: if the day comes that I do fall, then I'll do so knowing I had the honor of fighting beside you all. Abnormal and human."

What followed was a few seconds of silence, broken by Astrid's excellent timing. "Y'know, I'm getting all choked up. Honestly. There might be tears."

Laughter broke out within the Fairy and over the comms. "Well, as far as speeches go," said Hiccup, "I rate that four stars out of five. Would listen again."

"Yeah, wasn't bad at—" Astrid suddenly broke off, and a pang of worry settled in Jack's stomach... at least, until she spoke again.

"Hunter... are you crying?"

"No."

"You sure? 'Cause I can—"

"Finish that sentence and I'll make yer hair stand on end fer a month."

Jack was just about to either preemptively end the squabbling, or poke further fun at the poor Hunter, when Anna's voice rang out over the comms. In an instant, the good humour and levity vanished in place of steely resolve and focus.

"Coming up over the drop zone, Cap."

Jack unclasped the mask from his belt, and fixed it over his face albeit with some minor adjustments. He took the staff from his bracer and extended it, and used his newly free hand to whack the button on the inner hull separating the passenger cabin from the pilot's. With a metallic groan, the Fairy opened her innards to the outside air, and the cabin was filled with a deafening roar as the wind rushed to fill the space inside, carrying with it the fury of the Fairy's engines.

"For the three of you in here," he yelled to make his voice heard over the noise, "keep your arms and legs apart, and let me guide you down. Rest of you know what you have to do."

He walked past the standing Ghosts, sensing them take position behind him as he stood at the hinges of the ramp, and began walking backwards. "If they're not wearing Ghost uniforms, or if they don't look like prisoners, they're in our way. So, there's only one rule - tear them apart. You get hurt, hurt 'em back. You get killed—"

"WALK IT OFF!"

The chorus, three words yelled in unison filled his ears like the battle horns of old, and as he allowed gravity to pull him off the edge of the ramp into the night air, he felt the briefest surge of confidence. Righting himself, he spread out his arms and legs, staff in hand, feeling the inertia shove his insides into his back and send the blood rushing through his ears. Cold air blasted upwards, chilling his fingers and violently whipping his hair as the invisible downward force pulled him inexorably to earth - and the feeling not only of freedom but of a meteor of righteous abnormal vengeance was incomparable.
Set like diamonds in the velvet black fabric of night, the miniature lights of the camp rushed to meet him, growing in size with every foot his fall claimed. He called upon the wind, his protector and ally, to guide not only him but his friends… and his love, safely to earth.

The wind answered, and just as a black shadow veiled the camp’s lights for the briefest of moments, the vicious updraught of air changed to a controlled, almost *sentient* force. Rather than fall, he was cradled, gliding like a leaf rather than plummet with all the grace of a misshapen hailstone.

Toothless' battle shriek cut through the night air even over the roar of the wind in his ears, and the dark earth below him became host to a sudden brilliant burst of amber light and then a second. Wheezing out a command to zoom in, Jack managed to pick out Stormfly, illuminated by the bright flames. Bathing one watchtower in her spitting fury, she nimbly evaded the bolts of red before latching onto the second with her claws, darting her head inside and yanking the sentry guard out with her teeth before tossing him outside the camp - where a tiny explosion meant the poor bastard landed on a mine.

Jack zoomed back out in time to recognise impending landfall, and with his usual grace he righted himself and landed a little too heavily on his feet on the side of the inmates building between the wall and the fence. He could hear the agitated yells and barked orders of the camp personnel mingling with the bestial roars of Stormfly and Toothless; taking advantage of the chaos, he turned around and pointed his staff high behind him. Three black shadows floated down like leaves in a strong breeze, illuminated by the torch-like burning of the southern watchtowers.

Elsa touched down first with elegant grace, whereas Kozmotis elected for a more abrupt three-point landing, and finally Rapunzel met the ground with an ill-hidden stumble.

"Ditch the suits," Jack hissed as he collapsed his staff and shoved it into his bracer, before taking *Pippa* in his hands. "We won't need them now."

He moved to the corner of the building whilst the other three unfastened their wingsuits, and peered around for a look at the chaos. Silhouettes framed against the flames of what used to be the comms tower yelled and gestured at each other, with some taking shots at the two dragons before darting off for cover. Every now and then they would throw themselves to the ground to avoid a swooping Toothless, though two of the soldiers were unlucky and found themselves in the grip of Stormfly’s claws moments before they were flung with sickening force against the barracks wall.

There came a pat on his shoulder. Jack didn't even need to look to know it was Elsa. "What's the view?"

"Fury and Viking are doing a great job of distracting them, but it won't stay like that for long."

"And Hunter?"

Jack glanced up at the command building’s roof, where a small shape was crouched near the edge. "She's in position, but as soon as they click where the arrows're coming from, they'll pin her down."

"Then I suggest we join the fray," Kozmotis said.

"Pitch and Blondie, you go on the other side of this building." Jack gestured at the inmate structure running parallel to the one from which he was peering behind. "Snow Queen and I will move up here. We'll need cover."

"I can provide that," Elsa said.

"Right." Jack made two flicks with his index and middle fingers, a silent direction Kozmotis and
Rapunzel took as they scurried past and out of sight around the corner. Jack and Elsa darted up the long space between the two buildings, and crouched in the shadows.

"Fury," Jack murmured over the comms, "there's a lot of space in the northwest of the camp. Why?"

"No idea!" Hiccup yelled back. "We watched, but nothing happened there!"

"Alright, well, keep an eye out. Blondie, Pitch—you ready?"

"In position."

"Hunter?"

"Ready."

"Alright." Jack shouldered his rifle. "Raise hell on my mark. Three… two… one… mark."

Bullets sang from Pippa just as a jet of ice whizzed past his face, chilling the winter air even further for a moment, and impact the grassy ground twenty feet ahead. From the corner of his eye as he crept forward, he saw the muzzle flash of Emily Jane begin her deadly verse, just as the icy patch became a long line before shooting up to create a thick wall of hardened ice.

The first of the unsuspecting guards fell immediately to the hail of gunfire, but humans always had a quicker reaction time compared to clones, and it wasn't long before rapid bolts of orange were the answers to Pippa, Emily Jane and Hailstorm's roars.

"Move to cover!"

The four advanced to the wall, with Jack and Kozmotis applying covering fire whilst Elsa and Rapunzel darted forward, and vice versa. Bolts of blue rained down from the pitch black sky, ripping the ground below the soldiers apart, but the incoming fire was still too intense for the Ghosts to fire more than three rounds before ducking for cover again.

"We're wasting time," Jack hissed. "Longer we wait—"

"TITAN!"

Jack peeked over the wall at Merida's yell, in time to see a hulking monstrosity of muscle barrelling toward them, its black silhouette framed by the flames. Jack roared an order to bring it down, and three assault rifles peppered it with a blistering volley. Howling in rage, it threw itself at them whilst covering its face with its right arm, before slamming full force into the wall and smashing through it, scattering the Ghosts and causing Jack, his heart in his mouth, to lunge away.

Elsa subjected it to a hail of bullets, but she did little more than enrage the beast further; with a blind swing and a pained grunt she was sent flying back and rolled haphazardly across the grass. Roaring, the Titan brought a huge fist down upon Jack, who narrowly dodged it by parting his legs and then kicking against its fist to push him away.

The Titan screamed in fury. Scrambling to his feet, Jack aimed a burst at the Titan's face, forcing it to howl and throw an arm up to protect itself as it advanced upon him, and as it brought up its fists to bring them down upon him, Jack crouched and prepared to roll aside. Yet, two vines of black sand lashed around its wrists and tensed, yanking its arms back to either side of it. As it struggled and growled, Jack glanced behind it; his arms bulging with exertion, Kozmotis pulled back on the vines with all his might, aided by Rapunzel and Elsa as they too held onto the tendrils. Even so, the sheer strength of the beast was pulling them along the ground despite their efforts.
"Fury!" he yelled. "Blow it—"

Cutting his words in two, the head of an arrow punched out from the Titan's forehead. The beast's face went blank, and it swayed a little on its feet as its arms dropped, and one hand went to pitifully touch the arrow head before it crashed face first into the ground, narrowly missing Jack.

"...never mind."

"Yer welcome."

"That only counts as one!" Kozmotis hollered as he dropped down behind the wall.

"Yeah, yeah. Ye're still laggin' behind by three."

Jack ducked low and scurried over to Elsa, whose right hand gingerly rested upon her utility vest-covered chest. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she winced slightly. "It was only a glancing blow."

"You went back, like, fifteen feet," Rapunzel drawled.

"Trust me - my own sister has hit me harder than that."

"I don't know if I should be proud or ashamed of that," came Anna's voice over the comms.

"Sorry tae interrupt yer chinwag," Merida chimed in, "but tha big guys are just there ta distract ye."

"She's not wrong!" Astrid added. "Soon as that thing went for you, they started a fighting retreat to the northwest!"

Jack peeked over the ruined wall enough to take a glimpse before a hail of bolts forced him to duck again. Dozens of the camp guards were indeed in the process of running to the empty space in the northwest, with some occasionally stopping to suppress them with covering fire. Classic tactical withdrawal. "Can you see where they're going, Hunter?"

"They're goin' through some kinda entrance hidden in tha ground! I cannae see—Titan comin' at ye, twelve o' clock!"

Jack peeked over just as the second Titan burst through the barracks wall, sending bricks and dust flying into the air and charged toward them, howling pure fury into the night. Eyes widening, Jack yelled out a command to open fire.

"I got this," Astrid called out. "Fury, on my six!"

Stormfly swooped down from the sky like a predator, and embedded her claws into the Titan's shoulders. Screeching in agony, it futilely swiped and scratched at her as, with moderate difficulty, she lifted off with her prey and took it well away from from the ground.

"He's all yours, flyboy!"

Stormfly let go of the hapless beast, who spent all of one second in the air before Toothless zoomed by and blasted it with a blue torpedo, causing an explosion of flesh and blood, organs and bones that rained down on the battlefield.

"Oh, that's just nasty," Rapunzel groaned.
Jack turned his attention from the admittedly disgusting sight to the retreating guards, of whom only five remained. None of it felt right; he'd expected intense pressure and a furious firefight, not an enemy that took great pains and sacrificed two Titans to retreat. "Snow Queen, Pitch, on me! Blondie, try and open the doors to the inmates!"

Jack sprang out from cover and unleashed Pippa's fury, in concert with Elsa and Kozmotis. Bullets zipped through the air and slammed into the first two guards, yielding screams of agony as they spun with the force of the impact - but then the damndest thing happened that stayed Jack's trigger finger.

The middle soldier, wearing a cap, threw down his assault rifle and shot his hands up into the air. The other two hesitated, tossing glances at each other, before doing the same. "Don't shoot!" the cap-wearing man yelled. "We surrender!"

"The hell…" Jack muttered, before holding a clenched fist up into the air. "Hold fire."

"I must say, this is turning out to be somewhat disappointing," Kozmotis slowly murmured in a silky voice.

"Whatever. Just keep your guns on them." He called over to the guards. "Keep your hands in the air, and walk slowly over to us. Any sudden moves, we drop you like a bad habit."

With a robotic air, the three guards turned and walked over to them, eyes firmly fixed upon the ground.

"I got 'em dead ta rights, Cap," Merida declared.

"So have I," Kozmotis said. "They'll be dead before you fire an arrow."

"Wanna bet?"

"Enough." Jack nodded at them as they drew up to the team. "Snow Queen, relieve them of their sidearms."

Elsa glided past him, and while Jack and Kozmotis' weapons were trained upon their heads, she moved behind them, pulled out their EP-4 pistols and tossed them aside. Jack moved to the side and gestured with his head toward the inmates building - yet, the way the man with the cap kept his eyes fixed upon Jack until he moved past set a knot of consternation in his gut.

It grew to a full-on churning when the first of the inmates emerged from the darkness of their prison walls, shielding their eyes from the cleansing flames of the power relay station. Dressed in uniformly grey rags, their emaciated bodies stumbled out like near skeletons, sunken eyes in shaven heads gazing with confusion at their surroundings. Some looked healthier than others, but all were in dire need of help, and all wore strange steel collars around their necks.

"Oh, my God..." he whispered.

Rapunzel walked over to them from the closest building, her gait slow and stumbling. Her mask in her right hand, she stared at Jack with blank, uncomprehending eyes, like she dare not believe what she had seen.

"I… I opened the doors… heard them say a switch in the security hut... and they…"

Jack lowered his rifle and immediately rested his left hand on her right shoulder, whilst he unclasped his mask with his other hand. "Blondie," he murmured, stooping a little so their eyes were level. "Are you with me?"
"I…"

His hand moved up to her face. "Are you with me?"

She stared at him for a few more seconds, before her lips closed. Air was sucked in through her nose. "Yes."

"Come here," Elsa said in a calm, motherly voice, and moved to embrace Rapunzel - who responded by melting herself into the hug. Jack watched them for a few seconds, as Elsa stroked Rapunzel's back, and then donned his mask once again.

"Frost…"

Jack turned to glance at Kozmotis, whose head was darting every which way, arms raised to shoulder height, as several of the more emaciated prisoners reached out to touch him as though he was a mirage, a figment of their imagination. It occurred to Jack, then, that they could very well be fearing a hallucination.

He turned back to the guards. "I have questions. Answer them. I don't like them, I shoot you. First up - we're looking for a man and a woman. Scientists. The man has a moustache, the woman has brown hair." He pointed at the so-called munitions bunker. "Are they in there?"

The man with the cap, watching him with piercing eyes, answered in a gravelly voice. "Yes."

The guard to his right hissed, "Sir? Should we be—"

"It doesn't matter," the cap-man snapped. "None of it matters. They'll all be dead soon."

"Guess that answers my next question of who's in charge of this house of horrors."

Cap-Man nodded again, yet his eyes never left Jack's. It was as though he was watching him, scrutinising him. "I am. Commander Derrickson, at your temporary service."

A small flurry of movement in the corner of Jack's eye drew his attention. Rapunzel pulled herself from Elsa's embrace, and stared at Derrickson with widened eyes. "You? All of this… under you?"

Derrickson's eyes did leave Jack for a moment, if only to widen in fear when Rapunzel lunged at him and wrapped a hand around his neck. He gurgled and wheezed as, her face contorted with pure rage and vengeance, Rapunzel lifted him off the ground solely by her grip. For a few seconds, Jack was struck with awe that such a comparatively smaller person - Derrickson was, like Jack, just over a head taller than Rapunzel - she had him dangling six inches off the grass.


Derrickson clawed and scratched at her grip, his eyes beginning to roll back into his head. "Hey," Jack called. "That's enough."

"No." Rapunzel's face grew darker. "He deserves this."

"That's enough, Blondie," came a male voice that danced at the edges of Jack's recognition. "This isn't you. Not my Rapunzel."

"How do you know?" she snarled, and shot a withering scowl at the man whose hand gently rested on her forearm. "And how do you know my—"

It was then Derrickson dropped to the ground in a crumpled heap, his hoarse coughs and pained
gasps for air falling on deaf ears. Jack stared at the man, the puzzle pieces fitting into place. His warm hazel eyes, rugged jaw and impish twinkle—despite the signs of malnutrition and shaven head.

"Eugene…" Rapunzel breathed. The hand which choked the life out of Derrickson trembled as it moved to touch his face, as though scarcely able to believe her eyes. He smiled down at her with cracked lips, as the shaking fingers found his cheeks.

"One and only," he murmured. "Told you we'd meet again."

Rapunzel let out a whimper, before throwing herself into his arms. Jack gaped in complete shock, barely registering the sound of Rapunzel's sobs into Eugene's shoulder. "Holy shit," was all he could manage.

"Yo, dude." Eugene grinned at him as he stroked the back of Rapunzel's head.

She pulled back and held his face. "I thought I'd lost you!"

"You look terrible," Kozmotis drawled. If he was surprised, he hid it well.

"It's the new diet. Daily abuse and borderline starvation." Eugene sneered at him. "You're no oil painting, either."

"How did you—you're alive—"

"Not just me," Eugene winked, before calling over his shoulder. "Hey, big guy. Wanna come remind me I was wrong?"

One of the other inmates who had up until then been tending to his fellow prisoners, checking them over for injuries or helping them walk, looked up upon hearing Eugene's voice. Clapping another inmate on the shoulder, he made his way over to them, wiping his hands on his pitiful excuse for a tunic.

"Well, now," Kozmotis said, tangible surprise in his voice. "It appears Frost is not the only one with a penchant for coming back from the dead."

"Motherfucker." Jack raised both his hands behind his head in complete shock. "No fucking way."

"Good to see you too, Frost." Kristoff grinned at him. Like Eugene, Kristoff showed signs of physical abuse, hunger and a head void of hair, but he had lost none of his imposing size. Jack let go of his head to clap him several times on the upper arms, before grasping him by the shoulders and giving him a light shake. Kristoff's mouth cut into a wince before he pushed Jack's arms away.

"Easy there, buddy. For once, you've got the strength advantage."

"But you died!"

Kristoff merely shrugged. "Long story. Speaking of which—" he looked around, lips curled into half an impressed smile, "—you seem to have added a few more names to the team."

"Right, yeah." Jack felt a strong bolt of anxiety in his chest - he was about to introduce the very people who had crippled their network for years. "This is my X.O, Snow Queen."

Kristoff's smile dropped like a rock. His brow furrowed, and with it, an air of tension descended over the group. Elsa herself shifted awkwardly in place as Kristoff's eyes followed Jack's gesture at her, settling into a sidelong look. "Snow Queen? As in, leader of the Valkyries, slicer of your back, no
more Furies and Spirits *Snow Queen*?"

Jack stiffened, rolling his shoulders back and lifting his chin. It felt odd to be squaring up to Kristoff, even if it was indirect and instinctive. "Yeah. That's in the past. She's one of us."

"I can see that."

"No, I mean… *one of us."

On cue, Elsa drew her hand away from the stock of *Hailstorm* and conjured a delicate snowflake over her palm. Kristoff's eyebrows rose as he took in the small elegance of the object—and even Eugene blinked in surprise.

"Well, ain't this a turn up for the books."

"You're not kidding, Flynn." Kristoff looked at Rapunzel. "So if she's Snow Queen, you must be Goldilocks."

"Blondie," Rapunzel corrected him, hesitantly offering her hand. "Ghost medic. Goldilocks died with the Valkyries."

"Huh." Kristoff slowly accepted the handshake, though it was clear he wasn't sure how to proceed.

"Viking is up there," Jack pointed upwards, just as Stormfly soared over them, and then nodded at the figure approaching them from the command building, "and over there is—"

"Bear." Kristoff turned, and something in his tone caused Kozmotis to push past the inmates circling him and take up a protective position near Merida.

"Name's Hunter, now," Merida said, her voice firm, almost challenging.

"I remember our last meeting." Kristoff watched her closely. "I remember how much your arrows hurt."

"An' I remember shittin' meself, thinkin' ye were about ta cut me in half with a door," Merida retorted. Jack watched with anxious eyes the staring contest between the two, before Merida seemingly relaxed and offered her hand. "No hard feelings?"

Kristoff studied her for a moment, before he did something that didn't take Jack aback so much as nearly floored him - he shook her hand. "Well, if anyone was to hold a grudge against you, it'd be Pitch - and you all seem to have gained Frost's trust, so… we'll call it even."

"I really wanna know how four Valkyries wound up on our side," Eugene grinned, "but I'm pretty sure I know what Frost's gonna say next."

Kozmotis got there before Jack. "It is a long story—"

"Or Pitch."

"—but time is not on our side."

"Yeah." Kristoff folded his arms, and jerked his head away. "Frost, a word?"

"Yeah, no. Kind of on the clock, here. Already wasted time with the ol' introductions, so whatever it is, tell me when we get out of this mess." Jack made to walk off, before stopping and adding over his shoulder, "Good to see you again, buddy."
Jack turned away before Kristoff could protest, though the expression of his erstwhile C.O. suggested acceptance rather than argument. He strode over to the three guards; by then, Derrickson had recovered from his impromptu choking. "Next question: are there any vehicles in this hellhole?"

Derrickson smiled at him, a malicious, wicked curve that alternately chilled Jack's spine and filled him with the urge to punch him in the face. "Yes. In fact, that was where we were going before you shot at us."

"Right. Eugene, you up for a little scouting?"

Eugene let go of Rapunzel to offer him a salute. "Gimme a ration bar and I'm good to go, boss."

"Good. You and Blondie, go—"

"It won't matter."

Jack glared at Derrickson, and the urge to punch him became a desire to knock him the fuck out. His wicked grin hadn't changed in the slightest.

"My men will already have taken the trucks, and whatever's left will not be enough for you to save your kind." Derrickson let out a vicious chuckle. "You're all going to die here."

"We're hard to kill." Jack pulled a ration bar from the lower pocket of his utility vest and tossed it to Eugene before he looked back at Rapunzel. "Go anyway. He's probably blowing hot air."

Rapunzel nodded. She took Eugene by the hand, and the two of them raced off in the direction the camp personnel had taken, with Eugene stopping halfway to pick up one of the pulse carbines discarded by the surrendered guards.

"Snow Queen and I will—"

It was then that a piercing, banshee-like shrieking tore the heavens apart, distant yet still able to send a bolt of fear down Jack's spine. Each Ghost looked at each other in worry, and the inmates let out a wail of terror in chorus.

Derrickson let out a low, malevolent, guttural chuckle, the left side of his mouth curling into a vicious smirk.

"Time's up."

Jack looked up at the sky. "Streak, you reading me?"

"Loud and clear, Cap. What's the sitch?"

"Reapers inbound. I need you to locate where they are and how long we've got."

"Copy."

Jack saw the blue discharge from the Fairy's thrusters burst into life, and watched her head off to the north. He turned his attention to Kozmotis, who was already closely watching him. "Snow Queen and I'll—"

Kozmotis held up a hand. "We will buy you the time you need, but do hurry. As pleased as I am to see our old friends, valuable time has been wasted exchanging words. Go."

"Right." Jack made to head off toward the bunker. "All Ghosts, Pitch Black is in charge until I get
The word 'copy' was returned in several different voices as Jack, with Elsa beside him, sprinted off toward the munitions bunker. It was only a short distance by human standards, so they reached the open entrance in less than four seconds, but each slam of his foot into the ground felt like an eternity.

The munitions storage bunker was a large semi-circle in design, a wide rectangle denoting the open entrance which Jack surmised featured a verticular descending door. As they passed into the bunker proper, they were greeted with twenty square feet of open concrete flooring, with shallow steps and two ramps connecting it to another twenty square feet of floor. Dimly lit by two overhead strip lights, it housed several crates of the new pulse assault rifles and their accompanying power cells, which Elsa quickly mentioned to Kozmotis over the radio. Shelving units on the parallel, olive-painted walls had various combat accoutrements sat upon them, from stun grenades to electro-batons, and fixed to the leftmost wall upon entry were a pair of thick black cables that sprouted from the ceiling near the doorway, travelled a good twenty feet before burrowing into the ground where the slope began.

It was the rear wall that held Jack's attention, however. The rear wall that sent a trickle of worry through his gut, exchange a look with Elsa and caused him to utter a quiet, "Oh."

It was completely blank.

"Copy," Kozmotis said, barely bothering to quell the irritation in his voice. Seeing his old teammates alive and as well as could be, given their circumstances? A surprise, but a badly timed one. Precious minutes had been wasted on a reunion, and now Reapers were inbound.

"What's up?"

Kozmotis glanced at Kristoff. "According to Snow Queen, the so-called munitions bunker does indeed contain munitions."

"I could have told you that."

"Perhaps, but you can answer something else. How many of your fellow inmates would be able to hold a weapon?"

"I'm not sure, but I know someone who can answer that." Kristoff looked over Kozmotis' shoulder and whistled between his fingers. "Yo! Puss!"

His goggles hiding the confusion in his eyes, Kozmotis turned to look behind him just as a shorter, stockier man with olive skin left the group of freed inmates and walked toward them.

"Antonio."

The man smiled widely, which did little to offset the signs of starvation and weakness on his face. He offered his hand. "It is good to see you, old friend. The shadows have watched over you."

"And may they continue to do so," Kozmotis said, shaking his hand. "You look awful."

Antonio let out a hoarse bark of laughter just as Kristoff said, "Pitch wants to know if any of us can hold a weapon."

"Other than you and I, out of the forty-six of us still alive in this despicable place, I would say eight."

Antonio's mirth left him faster than a breath as he looked back at the remaining inmates. "The rest
can barely stand."

"Good. Arm yourselves, and then standby near the bunker. Have those too frail for combat take refuge inside. We'll make our stand there."

Antonio nodded and turned away, just as Kozmotis added, "Are you all that remains of the Spirits?"

Green eyes met gold, and Kozmotis saw the weight of fear and despair in Antonio's eyes. "Si. My friends... they were taken to that same place your friend and Eugene went. I never saw them again."

"I am sorry."

Antonio did a light shrug. "I am not. Wherever they are, they are no longer here. That is a blessing."

He turned away, and headed off back to the group. Kozmotis watched him talk to several of the healthier-looking inmates, before he made his way toward the bunker. "Pitch Black to Blondie. Do you have anything?"

"Yes and no. We found a wide ramp that leads to an underground parking lot, but that jerkoff was right; there were supposed to be four troop trucks here, but it looks like the camp staff took 'em when they split. There's a tunnel heading west - they probably took that."

Kozmotis snorted. "Of course they did."

"How're we gonna get the prisoners out, without the trucks?"

"Clearly we will have to find another method of egress. Is there anything else we can use?"

"Well, there are three hover jeeps here."

"Ordnance?"

"Heavy pulse turrets mounted on the back."

Good news, at least. The jeeps would provide cover as well as heavy fire support. "Bring them up, and position them in a semicircle perimeter around the entrance to the bunker. Hunter will help."

Kozmotis looked at Merida, whose masked face was pointed directly at Antonio's back. He didn't need to see her expression to know she was troubled.

"What's the matter?"

"He dinnae even notice I was here."

"Should he?"

"Probably not." Merida rolled her shoulders back, and started off the same way Rapunzel and Eugene went. "After all—it was my arrows that put him in this place."

She launched into a run before Kozmotis could say anything, his gaze resting on her back. It occurred to him that Merida, and the other three, had come face to face with the realisation of possibly where their quarries had been taken once captured. Responsibility was a big thing for her, he had learned, and seeing Antonio had revealed to her where his journey, and that of everyone else the Valkyries had captured, ended.

Brushing away the thought, he turned and strode up to Derrickson and the two guards, and
shouldered Emily Jane with all the purpose in the world.

"You three currently have two choices. The first is that you arm yourselves and assist with the defense of this bunker, and in doing so, create for yourselves the chance of surviving the next hour."

The left guard, a young man in his early twenties with hazel eyes was the first to ask. "And the other?"

Kozmotis moved Emily Jane just enough to grab their attention. "The alternative is I shoot you where you stand. I do so despise dead weight."

"You're trusting us with guns?" The other guard, glanced between Kozmotis and his colleague with a skeptical face. "Who says we won't shoot you first?"

"If you do, I suggest you kill me with the first shot." Kozmotis bent over just enough to look the guard in the eye. "Because you will not live long enough to take a second."

"Frost to Pitch."

Kozmotis straightened up, though watched the newly anxious guard with a close eye. "Pitch here."

"Bring that assclown Derrickson to the bunker. We need his hand."

"And what of the rest of him, or shall I remove his hand and bring it to you?"

Kozmotis took distinct pleasure in the expressions of anxiety on the faces of the two guards. Derrickson, sadly, still looked as smug as he had done so far.

"All of him. Much as I wouldn't blink if you carved him up."

"Understood." Kozmotis addressed the three. "To the bunker, if you would be so kind. Attempt to run and I'll shoot you in the femoral artery, then walk over you as you bleed to death."

As ordered, the three quickly jogged to the bunker's north-facing entrance, with Kozmotis following closely behind, his finger resting near the trigger, eyes watching them with a hawk's focus and muscles ready to snap into action in an instant. Upon entering, he noted how the two younger guards immediately went to the rifle racks and began arming themselves.

Derrickson, however, did no such thing.

Kozmotis sought Jack and Elsa, and found them at the far wall, either side of a small open panel in the middle-right. Elsa's masked gaze was turned at the guards, Hailstorm at the ready. Jack nodded his head at him.

"Thought we'd been given the runaround, until Snow Queen had the idea of covering the wall in frost. Turns out there's a secret panel with—you guessed it—a biometric reader. Reckon Mr. Charisma over here has the access."

"Snow Queen?" Derrickson snarled. "The Valkyrie traitor?"

Elsa's head turned toward him, and in a flash she strode over and gripped Derrickson by the wrist and yanked him over to the biometric reader, practically slamming his hand on the screen.

"Snow Queen the Ghost," she said with firm purpose.

The reader beeped with affirmative satisfaction, however, when a speech line replaced the image of a
hand, Kozmotis felt a mild surge of annoyance.

"Voice identification required."

Derrickson made a point of looking each of them in the eye, adding a smirk at the inmates Antonio had selected as they began filing into the bunker, and theatrically drew a zip across his lips.

Jack, however, winked at him, his lips cocked in a smug smirk that rivalled the commander's. He walked over to Derrickson and took his other arm, drew his sleeve back and slipped his communication bracelet from his wrist.

"What are you—"

Jack held up a finger and turned away, then fiddled with the device to bring up the small holo-display. Kozmotis took a moment to appraise himself of his surroundings; Elsa watched Derrickson like a hawk, Hailstorm at the ready. The two guards stood on the opposite side to the newly-armed inmates, eyeing the weapons in their hands with anxiety. One of the hover-jeeps pulled up outside to the right of the entrance, and Rapunzel hopped out to guide the second into position.

Kozmotis turned back just in time for Jack to hold the bracelet to the reader. It loudly repeated an audio playback of Derrickson's voice via its out-of-contact functionality, and he found himself mildly amused yet annoyed the biometric reader was so easily satisfied.

"Please be a secret door. Please be a secret door," Jack chanted.

In the centre of the wall a large vertical rectangle recessed an inch before sliding aside, revealing an elevator wide enough for five, by Kozmotis' estimation.

"Yay!" Jack cheered quietly. "I'm the best."

Derrickson sputtered and gaped. "How did you know to do that?"

"I'm the best, is how." Jack roughly tossed the bracelet back at Derrickson, who barely caught it before it hit his dumbfounded face. Kozmotis could practically sense Jack's false smile, when he added in a sweet voice, "Thank you for your cooperation."

Jack then went into the elevator, and Elsa followed behind him, and said to Kozmotis as she turned, "We'll be as expedient as we can."

"See that you are," Kozmotis said. "It is likely we'll run out of bullets before they run out of Reapers."

Elsa gave him a slow nod, and gently hit the only button in the elevator with a loose fist. The green panel slid across to banish them from Kozmotis' sight, leaving him with an alien sense of concern: the two most powerful Ghosts, possibly abnormals, would be absent from the fight of their lives.

"Shame we cannot use them," Antonio remarked. "A winter storm would come in handy soon."

"Sure, if you wanna bat our only sources of air support out of the sky," Kristoff drawled. "Not to mention, y'know, hypothermia."

"So, mi amigo," Antonio called to him, prompting Kozmotis to turn around. "What's the first order of business?"

"It's simple." Kozmotis walked toward and past him, making for the newly-created jeep barricade.
"If it walks on more than two legs, kill it."

"Reapers inbound. I need you to locate where they are and how long we've got."

"Copy," Anna replied into her headset, and swung the Fairy onto a northerly heading before pushing the accelerator lever forward. The Fairy's engines roared with power, filling the interior with a growling she'd not often heard through the speakers covering her ears.

"What do I do?"

Her eyes on the sky ahead, Anna answered Candace with a firm tone. "Keep your finger on the trigger, but don't shoot until I say."

"Right."

"Computer, get me a topographical scan, include heat and movement signatures. Two mile radius."

"Working."

As the Fairy raced on, the holo-emitters embedded in the centre console blinked into life and conjured a translucent image of the surrounding area, with the Fairy herself represented as a white dot in the centre. The holographic ground rushed under the dot, a real time image of the real ground below them.

And so far, as Anna glanced repeatedly down to the moving display, relievedly empty.

She completed a wide circle of the base at a respectable speed, and came to a hovering stop over the point she'd begun the search, and still nothing appeared on the sensors. Dissatisfied and unable to shake the clenching of her gut, Anna took the Fairy on another circle of the camp, once more coming to a hover over her point of initiation.

"Maybe they were just calling, and they're not actually inbound?"

Anna twisted her lips, unconvinced. She liked Candace's optimism, but time and experience had beaten that out of Anna long ago, as far as Reapers were concerned. "If they're coming, they're coming. Just need to—"

Beep.

Anna's eyes shot down to the display… where a tiny red dot had appeared at the very edge of the sensor range. Slowly, it made its way toward them, and toward the camp. Her gut twisted with unease, so with a voice taut with tension, she ordered the Fairy's computer to expand the sensor radius to five miles.

"Maybe… m-maybe there's just the one?"

Anna slowly shook her head, feeling her heart sinking to her feet. "Not just one," she whispered. "There's never just one."

The pilot's cabin was filled with so many pips they became one solid tone, and the entire northern arc of the sensor circle was swarming with countless tiny dots, all moving in the same direction, of only one colour.

Red.
Anna hissed out a curse as she watched the red dots flood the holographic image, and ordered the computer to tell her precisely how many there were. It replied only an estimation was possible, which Anna accepted.

Two thousand and rising.

"Streak to Pitch!" she yanked back on the stick, forcing the Fairy to lurch backwards in a straight line. "You've got a whole lotta incoming!"

"How many?"

"Looks like you pissed off every Reaper in Canada! That many!"

"Acknowledged." Anna snorted at how calm he sounded. "How long do we have?"

"Fifteen minutes, maybe less!"

"Thin the herd."

"Copy." The grumbling Ghost flew the ship back a little more. "Thin the herd, he says. As if we'll have better luck shooting a swarm of locusts with a machine gun."

"What do I do?"

Anna jerked the stick forward, and the Fairy came to a stomach-lurching halt, her nose dipping slightly toward the floor. "See the forest ahead?"

"Yeah?"

"Right now, about twenty-five hundred—" Anna checked the scan, "—nope, three thousand skittery Reaper bastards are running through it."

Candace's hand tightened around the co-pilot stick. "So this is the part where I shoot?"

"Shoot?" Anna gave her a look. "This is the part where you level the fucking trees."

In the distance, Kozmotis picked out the dazzling red barrage of pulse cannon fire from the Fairy's guns as they pounded the distant treeline. Merida pulled up beside him, her eyes finding the same sight.

"If I didnae know where all that was going," she said, "it'd seem almost pretty."

Kozmotis said nothing. He could hear the frenzied shrieks from those Reapers hit by the withering fire, hear the pained calls of the fallen. Words were redundant.

"How long until showtime?"

Kozmotis harrumphed. "Less than I'd like." He turned, and made his way back to the other side of the jeep barricade. "Is everyone ready?"
"Aye."

"Good." He looked up at the sky, and sought out the easier of the two dragons to spot. "Viking and Night Fury, come in, please."

"We're here," answered Astrid. "What's the plan?"

"When the Reapers pass the minefield, they need to come at us head on. I want the two of you to ensure they do."

"Right. Nuke any of 'em that try to flank."

"Correct. Make every other part of the camp exceptionally hostile to them. Burn the place down if you have to."

"Copy."

Kozmotis took centre position, kneeling on the safe side of the middle jeep's bonnet. "Ghosts, use Unity's rifles. If they get too close, switch to projectiles. Reapers have enhanced hearing, so that will disorient them."

Eugene chuckled. "Should we yell a lot?"

"If you feel the need to." Kozmotis took the pulse carbine Merida brought him. "Fury and Viking - when they are in the kill box, have Toothless and Stormfly make as much noise as possible."

"Copy."

"Everyone else, here—" He caught sight of Derrickson whilst making a visual check of the defenses, and noted something expected yet irritating.

"You don't have a weapon."

Derrickson smirked at him, and folded his arms. "I see no reason to prolong the inevitable."

Kozmotis paused for a moment.

"Neither do I."

He drew his sidearm, and in one swift, fluid motion, shot Derrickson in the head. The loud crack burst through the air as the commander's head snapped back with the impact, and his lifeless body flopped to the ground.

Kozmotis holstered the pistol, and caught Merida's shocked eyes. "What?"

"Ye just shot him."

"Yes."

"I mean, he was a bastard and deserved worse, but—ye just shot him."

Kozmotis shrugged, noting with peculiarity the equally surprised looks he was getting from everyone else. "Shooting him seemed more efficient than throwing him to the Reapers. Which, I might add, was my original plan."

He walked over, and bent down to grab the body by the leg. Dragging it behind him, he passed
between two of the jeeps and added, "Now he'll serve a purpose, for once. He'll distract the Reapers for a few seconds."

With no small amount of effort, and the aid of two of his sand-tendrils, Kozmotis flung the body a ways from the perimeter. Dusting off his hand to rid it of the filth, he made his way back behind the barricade and addressed the group.

"Make no mistake, in less than ten minutes, Death itself will come through that fence like a raging river. It will show you no mercy, and if it senses your fear it will tear you apart. Give it nothing but your bullets and your wrath. Hold this line, and the oncoming storm will break like water on rock. Tonight, we will not fear Death. Tonight, we will teach Death to fear us."

Antonio chuckled lowly. "You started off a little too dark, mi amigo, but you pulled it back at the end."

"Three out of five." Rapunzel flicked the setting from semi to auto and back again for the tenth time. "Sometimes, you gotta hold back on the—"

Explosions burst in dull drumming in the distance, and the atmosphere of the perimeter fell silent, taut with anticipation. Each warrior, Ghost and prisoner alike, knelt behind the safety of the jeep, with the two remaining camp staff and Antonio manning the cannons. All eyes rested on the white flashes ahead of them, all ears perceiving the enraged, abrupt shrieks of monsters crossing the mines.

All weapons brought to bear.

Silent enough was it that Kozmotis heard the whisper Kristoff sent to Merida, questioning the use of her bow and arrow against such overwhelming numbers.

"Laddie," Merida said with a self-assured air, "I can do things with a bow that'll make ye shiver."

Guns up, Jack and Elsa crept along the dimly lit concrete corridor leading away from the elevator. The cold air danced on the exposed skin of his face, revelling in the freedom from his mask.

Thus far, all had been quiet. They'd expected a shootout as soon as the elevator doors opened, but reasoned the subsequent silence was down to the prior firefight being inaudible far below. Still, to assume the underground network was not fraught with danger was unwise, hence the vigilance of the two Ghosts.

The corridor turned left, and Jack scurried over to the corner for a quick peek. Signalling the coast was clear, he silently swung around the corner and continued on toward where the next corridor split into a T, fully aware and safe in the knowledge Elsa was watching his six.

The moment a figure emerged from the right, however, sent a jolt of anxiety through his chest and brought a sincere wish to rewind time a few seconds. It was a fair-haired man clad in a white lab coat, engrossed in whatever data the glass tablet in his hand was showing him. Jack held up a fist and halted, feeling his heart thump in his chest, and sensed Elsa come to a silent stop behind him.

The man paused for a moment, and Jack watched as he looked up in exasperation… and then glanced their way.

Time stopped when their eyes locked. Neither of them dared move, both caught like deers in headlights, and all Jack could hear was the thumping of his pulse in his ears, and could see was the situation rapidly heading south.
The man's eyes flicked to the wall around the corner, out of sight. Jack slowly shook his head.

*Don't do it,* he willed him. *Don't do it.*

The scientist lunged for the corner. Jack squeezed the trigger, and *Pippa's* rebuke slammed into the man's left shoulder, spinning him away… but it was too late. Red light filled the corridors, prompted by the alarm he must have pulled. Cursing out loud, Jack darted forward to the fallen scientist, who, uttering a series of pained grunts and whimpers, was attempting to crawl to the furthest wall.

Jack let go of *Pippa* and helped him rest against the wall. Even under the lights of the alarm, his colour was pale, his eyes in shock. "Sorry about that," he said.

The man looked up at him, a strange state of confusion written upon his face. "You *shot* me."

"You were gonna pull the alarm."

"Yeah, but…" he looked down at the small patch of wet fabric blossoming under his coat. "You *shot* me."

"You—" Jack paused, and then shook his head as he waved a hand. "It's a flesh wound. You'll live."

"Am I gonna die?"

"What part of—" Jack closed his eyes, clamped his mouth shut and exhaled a breath through his nose. "You'll be fine. Now, we're looking for two people, a male and a female. The male has auburn hair and a mustache, the female is a brunette. They would have come together."

The man frowned, his eyes vaguely unfocused. "You're looking for the Snowfields?"

Jack's face lit up. "Yes!" he clapped. "That's them. Where are they?"

The man nodded to the corridor at Jack's left. "That way, take a right then a left, then all the way to the end. But…"

"But?"

"The security staff armory is that way, too. There'll be thirty of them waiting for you."

"So?" Jack shrugged, then smirked as he gently tapped his hand against the side of the scientist's face. "Get ten more, then it'll be an even fight."

Shuffling from Jack's right caught his attention, but just as he brought *Pippa* to bear against the newcomer, a woman emerged from the shadows, followed by two others. Clad in the same lab coats, they strode toward them, but screeched to a halt once they caught sight of the two Ghosts and the injured man.

The woman's eyes, wide as plates, locked in on their colleague. "Brian?"

"Hey, Karen. I've been shot."

"I'll take this," Elsa muttered. Jack felt her sweep past him, and walk over to Karen, who was too paralysed by fear to respond. "Hey. Karen, is it?"

"Uh… yes?"

Elsa smiled, and spoke in a calm, sweet voice. "Hi, Karen. I'm Snow Queen. Don't worry, you're not
in danger. Tell me… do you have a medical room in this place?"

"Um… yeah? We just came from there."

The two men behind her coughed awkwardly and looked away, one rubbing the back of his neck. Even Jack blushed in sympathy. He looked at Brian, and murmured, "Were they…?"

"Yep."

"Great. What I need you three to do is help your friend to that room and get him some medical attention, and stay in that room. Can you do that?"

"Um… I guess…"

"Fantastic." Elsa stood aside, and allowed Karen and her colleagues to move over toward Brian. Backing away, Jack gave them space to lift him up, noting with bewilderment the almost drunk smile Brian gave Karen as she looped his arm over her shoulders.

"Hey, Karen. I got shot."

Jack blinked, shaking his head in complete incredulity, watching the four scientists retreat the way they came - Brian even looked over his shoulder, grinning at him as he gave a thumbs up with his good hand.

"You know, I've heard many reactions when I've shot someone. 'Oh God', or 'son of a bitch, that hurts', or 'what the hell, Jack, you almost hit me'. That guy… that's a first."

"Clearly he was in shock," Elsa mused. "We should press on."

"Right." Jack readied Pippa in his arms, and set off as Brian directed him, the demand for attention to the matter at hand warring with the sheer surreality of what had just happened. He took a right, but when they approached the left turn, he flattened himself against the corner. He held up a finger as a silent instruction for Elsa to wait, and carefully peered for a better look - and jerked his head back just in time to avoid a volley of orange bolts.

"Looks like the welcoming party's here," he muttered.

Elsa moved closer to him. "How many?"

"Well, for a guy in shock, dear Brian's math is on point." Jack looked at her. "Thirty guns, all pointed at us. They're taking cover in the doorways."

"We neither have the time nor the ammunition for a shootout," Elsa pointed out. "They have the advantage of distance, so… I say we break that advantage. Take the fight to them."

Jack gave her a wry smirk. "I like this bond. That was exactly what I was gonna say."

Elsa gave him a quick half-smile, before her expression returned to its prior all-business. "Cover me."

Jack nodded, and turned. Readying Pippa, he whispered a three second countdown before peeking out just enough to spray the security staff with fire, forcing them to seek cover. Judging by a pained yelp, he'd managed to clip one of them.

Elsa darted to the other corner and flattened herself against the wall, and Jack pulled back just as a new volley of orange bolts whizzed past him. "Not on your best day, bucko," he said, snorting.
Crouching down, Elsa relieved herself of *Hailstorm* and placed the rifle on the floor, tucking it out of sight, before straightening back up. In the blink of an eye, *Coldheart* was in her hand. Following suit, Jack disconnected *Pippa* from the long clip on his vest and rested it against the wall, and then extended his staff. They would retrieve their weapons on the way back, but for now, the rifles would only have gotten in the way.

Jack unclipped a cylindrical object from his vest. "Flashbang," he mouthed to Elsa, who nodded her acknowledgement. Pulling the pin, he held the safety catch tight against the grenade body. She watched him and he her, a thousand words and thoughts crossing the distance between their eyes. Purpose, will and determination, a silent plan of action and an unspoken promise to meet each other at the end, all passing across a shining bond. He knew, in that moment, they would stand together against the darkness… and *win*.

Jack let the safety clip fly off and tossed the grenade around the corner, listening for the dull tapping of it bouncing over the floor. Their enemy must have been too used to the spherical stun grenades, for no call to cover was yelled.

Light burst and thunder cracked.

The wielders of winter's fury threw themselves into the fray.

In a way, Kozmotis appreciated the beauty of the sight, terrible as it was. Hundreds of Reapers, the tip of a spear thousands-long, crashing down on the defensive fencing like it was but paper. It was a singular wave of arms and legs, claws and teeth, funneled by the walls of flames created by the two dragons soaring overhead, all bearing down on the perimeter.

"Concentrate your fire on the front. Fury and Viking, hammer them in the middle. Streak, strafe their rear. Stagger their assault; the more off-balance they are, the better our odds. Above all - *deafen* them." Kozmotis raised his hand. "On my signal, open fire."

The wave thundered toward them, death in its wake, shrieking and howling. Heads bobbed up and down, baring teeth intent on rending flesh from bone. They passed the halfway mark, designated by Derrickson's body - some even pounced upon it for a quick snack.

"Fire."

The perimeter unleashed hell. Bolts of orange numbering in the hundreds whizzed away, slamming into the wave ahead. Reaper upon Reaper fell, screeching, laid low by the dazzling barrage of gold, disoriented and terrified by Toothless' roars. Some were even ripped apart by the jeep's cannons, others burned attempting to escape the onslaught by moving through the walls of flame. Kozmotis glimpsed an arrow zip past him to embed itself in a Reaper's skull, and then saw bolts of electricity arc from its body into its brethren nearby. Some were cast into the air like ragdolls by Toothless' bombardment; others incinerated by Stormfly's breath.

"Told ye," came a smug yell.

"Come get some!"

"Oh, you like this? Want some more?"

Kozmotis cast an exasperated glance at the two soldiers of Unity as he merged his fire with the rest, unimpressed with the cackling and the cheerful pleasure they seemed to be taking. Perhaps they felt hope came with the sheer firepower they possessed… but with every second that passed, hope would only dwindle.
The barrage continued on. The Reapers fell in their dozens; those behind attempted to clamber over the macabre pile of the dead in front, only to join them in death. It reached a point where a wall of lifeless Reapers had taken form, bricks made of bodies and mortar of blood.

Kristoff shouted to him. "Pitch!"

"What?"

"We need to blast that pile of Reapers!"

"Why?" Eugene laughed. "They've plugged the only way in - let 'em burn behind it!"

"Because it's not a plug, it's a dam," Kristoff retorted, "and if we don't bust it down, they'll push it down, and we'll have a ton of Reapers right on our heads!"

"Fury, that pile of Reapers is a problem," Kozmotis yelled above the chaos. "Clear us a path for the guns!"

"Copy! Incoming, danger close!"

Merida yelled, "Take cover, shut yer mouths and try not tae throw up!"

Darkness swooped overhead, and a bright blue light punched into the grotesque organic wall. With a muffled explosion, the pile of bodies disintegrated into a cloud of red mist, sending limbs, limbless torsos and heads into the air and in every direction. Kozmotis heard the clunks of organic matter bouncing off the jeeps, and was grateful for the scant protection they afforded, but they did little to shield them from the blood raining down.

"Oh, man," groaned one of the soldiers. Kozmotis threw him a glance; spots of crimson adorned his uniform, face and hair. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Pretty sure some went in my mouth," said the other, moments before he began to dry heave.

Kozmotis peeked out from cover. Sure enough, the wave of Reapers had only been slowed by the pseudo-dam, and were already revving up for another rush. Some had even sprawled over the walls of flames en mass, thereby extinguishing parts of the fire. They were dangerously close to being flanked.

"Continue firing!" Kozmotis yelled. "Viking, they're about to try and surround us - discourage them!"

"Gotcha."

Kozmotis emptied the last of his magazine into the horde, before shoving another glowing cell into the pulse carbine. "Fury, assist Viking if necessary, and—"

Dull explosions occurred in the distance at their ten and two o'clock. Kozmotis snarled; evidently they were more intelligent - and suicidal - than he thought.

"They're trying to circle the camp fences, looking for another route in," Streak warned him. "They're triggering the mines to do it - I don't have the firepower to stop them!"

"That's crazy," Rapunzel gaped. "They're literally sweeping the mines with their own bodies!"

"Yeah, well, they've got the numbers to spare."
"How many?"

"Just passed ten thousand. Like I said - y'all pissed off every Reaper in Canada!"

Rapunzel blanched. "Ten thousand…"

Kozmotis' response was predictably blunt. "Nothing has changed. Keep firing. Streak, do what you can to force them back; fly low and use the sound of your engines if you have to. Fury will assist you."

Both Anna and Hiccup responded their acknowledgement.

The battle raged on. Reaper upon Reaper fell to the might of their combined firepower, with the Fairy strafing threats unseen in the distance, and Toothless roaring his wrath between merciless bombardments. For a short while, Kozmotis entertained the thought of victory.

Until he didn't.

Elsa had never seen the aftermath of a flashbang grenade before. They were archaic and brutal. To cause pain and extreme discomfort, blind and deafen for several seconds seemed barbaric in when compared to the humane efficiency in the way stun grenades simply switched off their opponents. They took them out of the fight for hours, but flashbangs incapacitated for less than a minute, which meant you had to kill them. To be powerless against your impending doom was…

Elsa pitied them, for they would not see nor hear her coming.

She swept past the first two as they writhed and groaned, their ears covered by their hands. Coldheart in her reverse grip found the neck of one, slicing deep as she spun with the motion, and was then plunged into the ribs of the other at his side. Two shots rang out through the corridor signaling the end of the two she'd ignored, and as she revolved to face the rest, a black shape flew past her right and impaled itself into the closest man's chest.

Jack had tipped his staff with ice, thereby redefining its use and purpose into a spear. Clever.

She crouched as she tossed Coldheart into the air, and felt his weight on her upper back a split second before it left. He soared over her, sword in his hand, and drove it into the chest of the nearest guard who - by then - had begun to shake off the flashbang's effects. Elsa darted to the guard impaled by Jack's spear and wrenched it free, before ramming the blunt end into the stomach of the one directly to her left, then into his face, before whirling the spear around and shoving it into his chest.

She looked up. It was an odd sight, watching Jack wield Coldheart. He was making a beautiful mess of things, with none of the grace with which she confidently wielded a blade, having as much experience with a sword as she had with a staff. Still, she couldn't deny he got the job done - and using a guard he'd impaled with it as a shield against the inaccurate, fear-governed aim of his squad as Jack moved forward was cunning.

Wrenching the spear from the unfortunate man's chest, Elsa tossed and caught it, before throwing it with all her might over Jack's right shoulder. It hit another guard with such force, he flew back and slammed against the corner of a doorway. She heard a yell of "Thank you!" just as she sprinted away, conjuring another blade in her right hand as easily as one cracked a whip. Sensing her approach, Jack tossed aside his shield and turned to grasp her outstretched left arm, and used her momentum and his position as a fulcrum, allowing her to deftly run past him a few steps along the right wall and bring the blade down on a guard's head, nearly cleaving it in two.
One by one, the rest of the guards fell, and in the fleeting moments of thought between raging adrenaline and ironclad instinct, Elsa noticed that their greatest foe was complacency. Jack had, admittedly impressive, though it was, hammered his fist into one of the final five guard's chest, only to grab the doubled-over man by the back of his jacket and yank him upwards with such force he hit the ceiling, and crashed down to the floor. He'd then darted to engage the next, leaving Elsa to administer the killing blow, and it had occurred to her, in a heartening way his level of trust in her, but also how easy it would be for them to just assume the presence of the other. To be ignorant to, despite the strength afforded by standing together, the ever-present danger and fact that should one of them fall or be separated, the bond would be severed.

And if they relied too much on their connection, they would be in trouble.

Elsa made a mental note to talk to Jack about it later, if they survived the night.

Pulling her sword from the guard's body, she then quickly caught up with Jack. She glimpsed him drop the staff to his feet only to kick it up at two of the remaining four guards, knocking them back a step with the impact, and as she dropped to the ground and slid between his parted legs, she conjured a second Coldheart, fluidly righted herself onto her feet and drove them into both men at the same time.

Groaning, they keeled over, and Elsa left both blades in their guts as she rose like an unfurling flower. Two were left - clearly the youngest, both barely over eighteen. Their eyes were wide and fearful, guns trembling in their hands, as their gazes flicked between her and their two fallen comrades. Slowly, Elsa walked toward them, steely focus in her eyes, like a personified force of nature.

The one on the left rose his rifle. Elsa grabbed the barrel and yanked it aside, letting the orange bolt fly harmlessly into the ceiling. She slowly wagged a finger and tutted at him, before wrenching it from his grasp and tossing it aside. Fear, however, governed his next action; winding his right fist back, he struck Elsa across the cheek with a panicked punch. There was barely any strength in it, and his wild aim forced her head but an inch to the right, leaving only the faintest stinging sensation.

In fact, judging by the yelp of pain, he'd hurt himself more than her.

Letting out a quiet growl as she turned her face back to him, like the slowest of owls, she fixed him with the definition of unimpressed. She grasped him by the shirt and lifted him six inches from the ground, staring unblinking rebuke into his eyes.

"That was a mistake, wasn't it?"

The young man nodded frantically.

"I should punish such an error, should I not?"

He nodded, then realised what he was doing, then quickly shook his head.

"You're going to hide now, aren't you?"

His answer was predictable. Elsa let him drop to his feet, and he raced off with a whimper into the nearest room, slamming the door shut. Elsa's gaze travelled to his friend, who dropped his rifle and threw his hands into the air faster than she'd ever thought a human could before he too raced to the same door.

It took several bangs and pleas to be let in before the door slammed shut once again - and was locked for good measure.
"You know," Jack sauntered to her side, "I don't know whether what you just did terrifies me or turns me on."

"Your standards of sexual arousal are peculiar," Elsa said, and took two steps on before she stopped and turned. "Wait—you find witnessing a woman dominate a man to be hot?"

"No." Jack dissolved the bloodstained tip of his spear, reverting its purpose to that of a staff so he could lean on it, and fix her with a smouldering gaze and half a smirk. "I find witnessing a woman with full confidence in herself and her capabilities to be fucking hot."

Even the soldier in her didn't know how to take the compliment, so she elected to fiercely blush and look away.

"All this time, as the strongest of us, I thought... I am Jackson "Frost" Overland, most dangerous abnormal on the planet. I have no equal." He gestured to her. "Now I do, and I'm over the moon."

"That's a little arrogant, don't you think, to presume you are the apex of abnormal power?"

"Probably, but I'd say since we are the apex, we've got a little room for arrogance."

"Possibly, but please remember," Elsa walked up to him and rested her hand on his chest. "Pride goeth before the fall. As strong as we are, we are still mortal, still vulnerable, and there is always someone stronger. If we are to fall, it will be of old age or in battle - not as victims of our arrogance."

Jack's smirk fell, his expression becoming altogether deflated. Like he was sulking. "Way to kill the mood... but okay."

"Thank you." Elsa leaned up to peck him on the lips. "Now, we should make a move."

Her eyes travelled to the door at the end of the corridor.

"My parents are in there. I'm afraid... I'm afraid the soldier in me has had her day, and now it is time for the little girl to take centre stage... and she is terrified."

Elsa went to the door, but just as she reached a hand to the handle, she saw how it trembled. Noted how her breaths were short and shallow. Between her and her parents was but a thin barrier, and she remarked how it had always been that way. Now, for the first time in forever... she was about to take down that wall. Open the door of her own volition, a stronger, altogether different Elsa to the one who cowered behind it.

She inhaled a deep breath, closed her eyes, and let it out in one long exhalation, before carefully opening the door...

...and then weaving to the side as something flew past her face, past Jack, and smashed on the floor, leaving behind a hissing, steaming patch of liquid.

"What the hell?!" Jack exclaimed, spreading his arms wide.

"It appears my parents are... tense."

"Yeah but that was—" Jack glanced behind him. "That was—they threw acid! Who does that?!"

The voice of a man came from the other side of the door. "Who's there? I have hydrochloric acid and I'm not afraid to use it!"
Leaving Jack to quietly grumble about 'potentially ruining his boyish good looks', Elsa gently opened the door, and said, "Someone who thought she'd never see you again."

The room was much like any other science lab. Tables and work surfaces were dotted around the surprisingly large space, with Erlenmeyer flasks and test tubes rigged to frames and inactive Bunsen burners resting upon them.

Behind the furthest table, however, popped up the faces of the very people she'd gone through hell to find. Their eyes were wide, their mouths hanging, and they were still as beautiful as she remembered.

"Elsa?" they both said at once.

Elsa's mouth curved into a wide smile, and she felt the line of a hot tear tracing down her left cheek. "Mama," she croaked, her voice giving way. "Papa…"

Agdar and Idun couldn't round the table faster if they tried. Elsa's own legs took over, propelling her on toward them, her arms outstretched as theirs were. She threw herself into their embrace, her mind, her heart, her soul singing at the feeling of being wrapped up in their arms once again. She sobbed into her mother's shoulder, her own bearing witness to Idun's joyful cries and the faint jerking of her father's emotion as they sank to the floor.

"My baby," Idun said as she pulled back to cup her daughter's face in her hands. "You've grown so much—you—I missed you so much! I hoped and prayed we'd see you again! You… you…"

Idun then frowned, her smile falling. Elsa felt her heart waver a little.

"You're so cold…"

Elsa swallowed, and sniffed. "I bloomed, Mama. I'm an abnormal."

She felt her father's hand on her shoulder, and looked into his eyes. He was smiling, a genuine curve of his mouth. "Good."

Elsa's breath hitched. She'd been expecting a different reaction, if she had to be honest. Disappointment, definitely. Maybe something along the lines of, 'that's okay, we still love you', as though being an abnormal was something the family wouldn't talk about. She whipped around, sharing her surprise with Jack.

To his credit, the smile he'd forced onto his lips was genuine, honesty in his happiness for her, but she'd caught the expression a split second before he'd tried to hide it… and his eyes betrayed everything. It had been a palpable look of loss, of grieving resignation, the heavy acceptance and reminder of what was, and would always be, missing to him. She knew he would never feel what she was feeling - and her heart broke for him.

She unfurled herself from her parents and walked over to him, cupping his face in her hands.

He began to speak, ostensibly sensing her emotion. "Sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Thank you," she whispered. "Without you, this would not have happened. This moment… it is as much yours as it is mine."

She knew he wouldn't accept it. It was, she supposed, his flaw - he would give for others until he had nothing for himself. She hoped in some way, as a subtle invitation into the family, it would lessen the ache.
His answer came in the form of taking one of her hands, and shaking his head. "No. This is all yours."

Agdar and Idun moved to stand beside her. "I've seen enough images to recognise that head of hair," her father said. "You must be Frost of the Ghosts."

"Yes, sir." Elsa blinked at the sudden tone of respect in her boyfriend's voice. "I'm the leader. Elsa's my X.O."

Idun engaged him in a hug, which sent Elsa into quiet giggles once she saw his startled expression. "You brought our daughter to us. Thank you."

"Actually, she brought herself, ma'am." Jack pulled himself out of the hug, gently enough to avoid appearing rude. "I was just along for the ride."

"Still, her father began, "this is truly—"

"With all due respect," Jack cut him off, "We need to get moving. There'll be time to talk later. Right now, my team is holding back hell on earth, but it won't stay that way."

"Yes, certainly." Idun waved her arms somewhat uselessly. "Well, we have no possessions to speak of, so, we're ready to go."

Jack nodded, and moved to open the door, only to slam it shut. Elsa immediately noticed the paling of his skin, and the deep anxiety in his face.

"What?"

Jack blinked, and said in a slightly high voice, "How many Titans did Fury say this base had?"

"Um… two?"

Jack opened the door, and then promptly closed it again. "Nope. That's definitely a…"

"TITAN!"

Kozmotis' heart leapt into his throat, and were it possible, his senses went on higher alert. He scanned the battlezone, attempting to discern any sight of the beasts through the haze of fire, smoke and chaos.

"Where?!

Anna yelled back. "They just came out of the forest, and they're coming right at you!"

"They? Repeat last—"

"There are four of them, Pitch. You've got four Titan Reapers inbound fast at your twelve o'clock!"

Rapunzel gave Pitch an incredulous look. "I guess they didn't use the neck-splosives then?"

"Clearly not." Kozmotis let out a quick burst, felling two. "Viking, Fury. Can you engage?"

"We can either stop them surrounding you or nuke the big guys, but it's one or the other! Oh, no you don't—not that way—" Hiccup threw out a few choice words, "—these little fuckers aren't getting the message!"
"Copy," Kozmotis responded. "We'll have to deal with them."

"That's great an' all," Merida yelled over the chaos of battle, "but I'm out of arrows, we're runnin' low on glowy cells, and one o' the jeeps just ran dry!"

"I can strafe them," Anna said, "but I'll probably only get one pass—they're fast!"

Kozmotis barely let her finish. "Do it!"

Through the distorted field of flames and smoke, four huge figures came barreling toward them, knocking aside Reapers like they were naught but holo-pins at a bowling alley. He saw the cannons of the _Fairy_ light up pure red fury, ripping apart the rearmost two. The first two weaved to the side to avoid the deadly strafe, and the _Fairy_ rushed overhead, her engines causing the smaller creatures to shriek and cower.

"Focus fire!"

The perimeter guns unleashed their assault, peppering the lead Titan. Kozmotis managed to get a good look; like its comparatively diminutive brethren, the Titan Reaper's skin possessed an unhealthy yellow pallor. Its lips were absent, revealing horrific teeth… but it was the eyes that drew Kozmotis' attention. Specifically, the pupils.

Titan Reapers could _see_.

The lead juggernaut staggered and howled under the painful barrage, throwing its arms up to protect its face as it struggled to continue. The one behind it, however, with a thick stump in place of right arm, did not care for being slowed down. With a complete lack of respect and empathy for its kin befitting a Reaper, it drove its left shoulder into the lead Titan's back and charged.

Without the protection of its arms, the lead Titan experienced the full ferocity of the barrage and was extinguished, but the second was undeterred. It punched into the lead's back so hard, its fist erupted from its chest with a spray of bone and blood, and marched toward them, the impaled body a shield.

Kozmotis roared, "FALL BACK!"

He wrapped a tendril around Antonio's waist and yanked him off the jeep just in time for the Titan Reaper to heft its pseudo-shield into the air and slam it down, crushing the jeep to its hover-emitters.

"_Gracias!_" yelled Antonio.

The two Unity soldiers, however, had ignored Kozmotis' order. The jeep on the right opened fire, spraying the beast with a hail of orange. Roaring in rage, it advanced upon the jeep and swung upwards with all its might.

With an almighty crunch, the jeep flipped backwards into the air, and crashed on its roof, crushing the soldier beneath its weight.

The second soldier screamed his friend's name and attempted to open fire, but several Reapers chose that moment to leap upon him. Shrieking in pain as claw and tooth sank into skin, the young man struggled and thrashed, the cannon spinning wildly, his finger still squeezing the trigger in his terror. Kozmotis and the rest of the defenders ducked to avoid the deadly, indiscriminate spray of cannon fire, and in an uncharacteristic act of mercy, drew his sidearm and put a bullet into the young man's head.

"Ghosts! Use your projectile guns!"
The air cracked open with the staccato snaps of gunfire, those without bullets retreating behind those with them. The Reapers still advanced, though more cautiously, held back by the rain of metal and barrier of sound.

"The door's closing!"

Kozmotis glanced over his shoulder as Emily Jane ended two creatures. The bunker door was indeed slowly descending, a thick metal wall their doom or their salvation. "Get inside! Fighting retreat!"

Antonio yelled back, sounding downright scared. "My friend, if those doors close, they can only be opened from outside!"

"It's either that or die out here!" Kristoff roared.

Kozmotis had enough. "MOVE!"

One by one the defenders slowly retreated, sending a hail of bullets to any Reaper who dared to advance, but their bullets could ill afford other targets.

The Titan Reaper took advantage.

Kozmotis looked up just in time to see the beast attempt to grab his head, and with inhuman speed, grasped and held the huge hand a full arm's length from him. The Titan Reaper was strong, so very strong, having tossed a jeep and its own brethren like nothing. Adrenaline flowed through Kozmotis' veins like a river, his eyes locking onto the beast's, his teeth bared and jaw clenched, barely hearing the fearful calls of his name. Two tendrils leashed out and drove themselves into the ground behind him, an attempt at reinforcing his position. His mouth opened in a long, defiant, furious roar, both to strike fear in his enemy and to clad his own shuddering and trembling muscles in iron, for the Titan Reaper was slowly winning.

He became vaguely aware of gunfire at his left and right, orange bolts and amber flashes holding back the swarm advancing on him. Hiccup called something over the comms he had no hope of discerning. Something about, 'hold on'.

A rush of black across his vision.

A streak of red.

The unimaginable force bearing down on him vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Staggering back, each breath an exhausted pant, Kozmotis slowly blinked.

Bisecting the Titan Reaper's head from misshapen ear to missing ear was a solid line of burning embers. Its eyes, once full of rage and hunger, were as void and lifeless as stone. Its arm flopped down to its side as it swayed for a moment, before gravity claimed its prize and sent it crashing backwards to earth, its smaller kin voraciously swarming it.

He felt a hand grasp the collar of his vest, and heard the impatient voice of a Scottish angel. "Thanks fer the eye candy, ye were really impressive, now will ye please fuckin' move yer arse!"

He didn't argue. Emily Jane in weakened hands, he turned and allowed Merida to practically drag his exhausted body step by step toward the safety of the bunker. One of the last to duck under the half-closed door, he thanked whichever deity it was for watching over him, and not for the inmate who was yanked by his feet to the ground, and dragged outside, screaming in terror.

The bunker doors met the earth with a loud clunk, drowning the armory in darkness, the only sounds
heard being the gasps for breath and blind feet.

"Well, that went south fast," drawled Eugene. "Anyone got a light?"

With an almighty impact that nearly winded her, Elsa felt Jack tackle the three of them to the ground just before the doorway exploded into chunks of concrete and dust, heralding the destructive arrival of a ten foot unwelcome guest.

"Remind me to sign Hiccup up for math classes," Jack quipped amid coughs. He quickly darted to his feet, and faced the Titan. "Hey, you big ape!"

"Jack, what are you doing?!

"Get your folks to safety! I'll run interference!

Jack drew his sidearm and began shooting for the Titan's head, causing it to roar in pain and throw up its arms as a shield. Cursing under her breath, Elsa helped her parents to their feet. "Find somewhere to hide, and stay there!"

Her mother's eyes widened. "What about you?"

"Frost needs me. I'll be fine—now go!"

Her father took her mother by the arm and quickly guided her away from the battle, through a small door in the far corner. Satisfied they were safe, Elsa drew Coldheart and turned to join the fray.

Jack was doing what he did best: frustrate. He ducked, dodged, weaved away from or outright jumped over all of the swings directed at him, even managing to fire off a shot or two at the Titan's face. He seemed to be doing little more than antagonising his foe, however.

Elsa ducked a wild swing and slashed at the exposed side of the Titan's chest, cutting open both its jumpsuit and its skin. It howled in pain, jerking away from her, before attempting to swing for her. Elsa jumped back just in time, but it gave space for Jack to extend his staff and fix another vicious-looking spear tip to it.

Jack struck again, driving the spear under the Titan's shoulder, and they took turns attacking it over and over. Elsa would strike and retreat once she had the Titan's attention, enabling Jack to do the same. Hit after hit yielded roar after roar, the Titan spewing feral howls when swings hit nothing but air, and its body became a bloody patchwork of cuts and slashes.

Elsa surged forward, aiming her blade for the beast's wrist. It shrieked and recoiled; however, when Jack lunged his spear for its face, the Titan reacted quicker by grasping his staff and yanking it out of his hands. Elsa watched, stunned, as Jack spent all of two seconds glancing down to his empty hands before the Titan sent him flying with his own staff, the Ghost impacting the wall with a heavy thud.

"JACK!"

The Titan turned and looked at her, eyes wide and teeth gnashed with rage, rivulets of blood seeping from cuts all over its face. Elsa's eyes went to the spear in its hand, and felt a quake of fear in her gut.

The Titan took a single step toward her, when a sudden explosion of liquid crashed upon its face. Elsa's head whipped to the source; Agdar and Idun were tossing flasks of random liquid at the beast, with varying degrees of accuracy. Her mother then struck true, spreading clear fluid over its eyes. Shrieking in agony, it clawed and struggled to wipe the liquid away as steam and hissing filled the
When it released its face to let out a booming, chilling cry, Elsa saw the melting of its skin and the angry red caves where its eyes should have been.

Acid.

"Mama, Papa!" she yelled, launching toward them. "Get away from—"

The Titan spun, thrashing and flailing in its agony. Elsa's attention went to it for a moment, just as one of its wild swings connected with the edge of the nearby table…

...and sent it hurtling toward her parents.

Elsa let out a shrieking "NO!", and sprang with inhuman speed toward her parents. She shoved them out of the way and braced herself, just before the surface of the table slammed with violent force into her side and propelled her at stomach-churning speed into the wall.

She bounced off and hit the ground with a thump, wind knocked out of her, pain blossoming over her entire body, her bones shaking with the latent force of impact. Coughs and wheezes escaped her throat as she struggled onto all fours, trying to shake off the ringing in her brain and the haze from her vision.

"Alright. Now I'm pissed," she groaned.

Her parents scrambled to their knees beside her. "Elsa! Are you—"

"I'm fine," she waved them off, slowly shaking her head whilst still on all fours, feeling decidedly not fine. "But that… that was definitely an Anna-level hit."

"Elsa, you're hurt—"

"I'm tougher than I look—"

"—but you're bleeding!"

It was then Elsa became acutely aware of a throbbing inside her cheek and a coppery taste in her mouth. She wiped across her bottom lip with her hand - sure enough, a thin streak of crimson adorned her forefinger.

She stared at it for a few moments.

She smiled.

"Stay behind cover, please," she said in a low, firm voice, before spitting the blood from her mouth onto the floor. She looked up, where Jack had recovered from his impromptu flight. "I'm going to end this."

Though he fought with skill and speed, nimbly avoiding the Titan's blind flails, none of Jack's strikes were doing serious damage. Sure, the Titan was a patchwork personification of the term death by a thousand cuts, but the sheer pain it was experiencing coupled with the terror of its abrupt blindness had created a mindless, instinctual beast. Jack was spending most of his time and energy avoiding hits rather than causing them. An opening was needed.

She called out his name. He stepped back out of harm's way and looked at her, and that was all it took. Elsa conjured and tossed a fresh Coldheart to him, taking a second's worth of pride at how it
continued to materialise mid-flight, fully-formed once he caught it. In return, Jack threw his spear to her as she ran, the cool metal of its midsection finding her grip. She twirled it to point the tip downwards, and banked for the nearest workbench, whilst Jack manoeuvred to the Titan’s six.

Her right foot pushed off the ground, launching her up onto the workbench. She took all of two steps before leaping at the Titan, vengeance in her eyes, her mouth letting out a cry of fury, and the spear held with both above her head.

Jack slashed at the Titan's back, and it spread its arms wide with a howl of pain.

The spear struck true, and pierced the Titan's chest with all the momentum and strength Elsa could muster. Inertia sent it crashing backwards, Elsa's feet firmly planted on its abdomen and her hands gripping the spear with knuckles of white. With an almighty grunt, she forced the deadly weapon further inside, yielding a crunch of bone, and wrenched it to the left.

"Pretty sure it's dead," said Jack, panting.

Elsa wrestled the spear to the right, before yanking it from the body and tossing it to him. "Do you want this thing pulling a Frost?"

Jack caught the staff, and pulled a face at the sight of the Titan's blood seeping and dripping from the tip. "Not really—and eew."

"Well, then."

"Fair enough." Jack gestured with Coldheart. "Want your blade back?"

Elsa smirked at him, and snapped her right thumb and middle finger. "What blade?"

Jack looked at the sword just as it dissolved into a puff of twinkling dust, and gave an expression akin to a disappointed child. "Aww. I liked that sword…"

Elsa laughed as she made her way to the rearmost workbench in a quick jog. "I'll make another one for you… when you're old enough."

She gave her parents the all-clear, and waited as they emerged from their cover. Her mother held her arms protectively across her chest, whilst her father rested a comforting arm over her shoulders and held her close. Her mother glanced between Elsa and the monstrous body of the fallen Titan, her skin pale and eyes wide. It occurred to the Ghost, then, the adrenaline and fear that had been coursing through her mother's veins was receding, leaving her with the stark reality of what had happened.

"Is it over?"

Elsa stepped forward to embrace her mother in a quick but reassuring hug. "Yes, Mama, but we should really leave."

Idun nodded quickly, and shrunk a little closer into Agdar's arms. Elsa led them to Jack, who was busy wiping off the remnants of blood from his staff with a piece of fabric torn from the Titan's boiler suit. She noticed the suddenly queasy look on her mother's face, and pointedly cleared her throat.

Jack looked up at her, then at her mother, and quickly hid the rag behind his back. "So… we, uh, ready to go?"

Elsa indicated they were, but just as Jack opened the door, he froze once again as though a thought hit him.
"Please don't tell me there's another Titan," Elsa groaned.

Jack quickly looked at her, then at her mother again, before forcing possibly the worst attempt at a reassuring smile in the history of the world. "No! No… just—uh—don't look down. Keep—um—keep looking straight ahead. Like, erm, the back of my head."

"Before we go," Agdar said, "there's something I need to do."

"But honey, we have nothing," Idun pleaded. "Please, can we just—"

"It's our research, my love. I need to destroy it."

Idun's gaze lingered upon him for a moment, before her face dawned with understanding. Agdar took her hand and briefly kissed it before rushing off to a Uni-Com nestled in the far right corner, hidden behind a vertical protrusion. Elsa watched, puzzled, as he plucked a data crystal from the surface, dropped it to the floor and promptly smashed it under his boot, before taking one of the miraculously still-intact flasks of clear liquid and emptying it over the Uni-Com's weaker points.

"What is he doing?"

"Ensuring the wrong hands remain empty," her mother said, an odd tone of finality in her voice. "We will explain later."

"Fine. At the risk of sounding like a broken record: let's go now."

And so they left the room, much to Elsa's hidden and Jack's less-than-subtle relief. As they made their way through the corridor, however, making sure to retrieve Pippa and Hailstorm, Elsa heard a quiet whimper and looked over her shoulder in worry - judging by her expression, her mother had momentarily ignored Jack's advice and looked down. It was one thing, Elsa realised with a churning of her gut, to witness and assist with the death of a Titan, but another to see twenty-eight dead bodies around her, and know her daughter was responsible.

It struck Elsa that getting them out of Camp Serenity was the easy part; the hard part was the conversations that would come after. Their darling daughter had turned from a locked-away princess to a balanced, confident yet utterly deadly warrior - and they didn't even know about the vengeful, murderous Valkyrie.

Though, she suspected they had a few difficult conversations ahead of their own.

Jack thumbed the elevator button, and waited for a few moments. Silence, however, was the only response - no metallic clunking could be heard, not even the sliding open of the elevator door. Frowning, Jack thumbed it again, then fifteen more times for good measure.

"Well, this is awkward."

"What's wrong?"

Jack glanced at her over his shoulder before returning his frown to the button. "Dunno. Elevator won't respond. I mean—"

He wrenched the door open with an almighty pull.

"—it's right here, but… one second."

He stepped inside and thumbed the button to go up, but as before, nothing happened. Frustrated, he
pressed all of them over and over.

"Yeah, nope."

"It's a security measure," Agdar said. "Something must have happened."

Elsa took one look at Jack, their immediate anxiety shared. He looked up and fiddled with a small latch on the ceiling of the elevator booth, causing a wide panel to drop down on its hinges.

"What are you doing?" her mother asked.

Elsa watched Jack crouch into a respectably high jump, easily passing through the hatch and out of sight. "There's an access ladder built into the shaft. We noticed it on the way down. We'll use that."

Jack called down that it was clear and the ladder was sturdy enough, so Elsa encouraged her parents to enter the lift. Once inside, she first gave her mother a boost up through the hatch, with Jack ready to grasp her hand and lift her to safety. Her father followed in much the same way, and once there was space, Jack poked his head into view and offered his hand down into the elevator.

"Milady?"

Elsa smiled at him. "Thank you, kind sir, but I've got this."

She made a shooing motion. Jack retreated from sight, and once she'd lined herself up, Elsa crouched and jumped up through the hatch with moderate effort, inwardly thanking her abnormal physiology. Jack remarked she had, indeed, 'got this'.

So began the fairly long ascent, with Jack at the lead, followed by Agdar, Idun, and Elsa bringing up the rear. The lift shaft was filled with the sounds of footwear meeting metal, the occasional puffs of exertion, and the echoes of those sounds combined. In fact, Elsa had to ask Jack to repeat himself.

"I said: it just hit me. Unity is vegetarian."

"Technically," Elsa said, a slight breathlessness in her voice, "Unity society is vegan. Since the food is synthesized, no animals are needed. We are pescatarian."

"Pesky-what?"

"Pescatarian. We eat fish."

"Oh. Right."

Idun sounded aghast. "Just fish? No vegetables?"

"We..." Elsa took a few moments to catch her breath. "We eat what we have stored, or can scavenge. However, fish is our primary non-vegetable food."

"Pitch keeps suggesting he should go out and hunt something, though," Jack said, his own breathlessness audible. "Maybe I should let him. I miss real steak."

"You've never had real steak."

"Exactly."

"Right," Idun said, "remind me to write up a proper dietary intake list. No daughter of mine will live on anything less than a balanced diet, is that clear?"
"Yes, Mama."

"No more scavenged food. We'll have proper meals at proper times, otherwise it's not good for your health, is it?"

"No, Mama," Elsa said, letting out a groan. There she was, a twenty-five year old soldier, lectured like a twelve year old. Jack seemed to find it amusing, however.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, Mama."

Jack could barely contain his laughter, and were she able to, Elsa would have thrown something hard at his head. Grumbling under her breath, she chose instead to continue the climb, until the moment it ceased.

"Override panel here. One second."

Elsa looked up, and watched as Jack forced open a small hatch in the wall and yanked down on a lever. She could hear a quiet clunk reverberate throughout the shaft, and issued thanks to whatever was watching out for them.

Jack's reaction, once he'd pushed open the door, however, was a little more vocal.

"You know, all those guns pointed at me is making me feel real unpopular."

Slowly, Elsa reached for her sidearm, her heart stalling with anxiety in her chest. She needn't have bothered; vivid red hair emerged a full second before the rest of Merida's head appeared in the elevator shaft doorway. "Aye, well, next time ye can hold tha fort while we go gallivantin' off down a secret bunker."

"It hasn't been easy riding down there, you know," Jack retorted as she helped him up. "Thirty soldiers, plus a Titan that Hiccup missed."

Elsa didn't miss the sarcastically-impressed look Merida gave him, even as she helped up her parents. "Oh, poor wee lad. I'll see yer thirty an' a Titan, an' I'll raise ye ten thousand Reapers an' four Reaper-Titans."

"Holy shit…"

"Aye." Merida offered her hand to Elsa, who gratefully accepted. Exhaustion was setting up shop right where her adrenaline had left. Her arms and legs were beginning to feel like lead. "We barely got out alive. Few of us weren't so lucky. Suffice ta say: we lost the camp."

Once Elsa made it out of the shaft, assisted by Merida and Jack's hands under her arm, she realised precisely what her friend meant; the munitions room was bathed in darkness save for four flashlight beams moving from person to person, and the occasional glow stick here and there. The weaker inmates huddled into a corner for warmth, whilst the Ghosts sat against the walls, clutching their rifles. Rapunzel, to her credit, had not switched off from her duty as a medic, however; she bustled from person to person, checking them over for injury.

"What happened?"

"We were holding 'em back pretty well, but then once tha Reaper Titans came… well, one of 'em bust through our line like it was nothin'. They started tae swarm us, so we fell back inta here before
"Tha door came down."

"Managed to raise Fury, Viking or Streak?"

"Nope. Been tryin', but guessing the thickness o' the bunker's blocking our comms. They're in the dark figuratively as much as we are literally."

Jack frowned, his eyes darting left and right in thought. "Knowing Fury, he'll have clocked why we're in here and be waiting for us to figure out how to escape." He nodded at the door. "Can we get it open?"

Merida shook her head, and her flashlight moved to a point on the wall to the right of the door. Elsa remembered the presence of thick cables there, but not the curved line of blast marks pockmarking the wall, severing the cables in two places.

"Yikes. That's comprehensive."

"Yep. Thanks tae a bunch o' Reapers an' a jeep cannon, we're goin' nowhere." Merida jerked her head at the elevator. "Guessin' there's no way out down below?"

Agdar shook his head. "The door and the elevator are the only methods of entry and exit."

"When the cables were severed—" Idun nodded at the wall, "—it cut the power to the main door. The security protocol kicked in, closing the door until such time as a rescue operation can be conducted. Until then, that door will remain closed."

"How do ye know about all this?"

"The base staff are all human," Agdar said, "and humans talk."

Jack snorted bitterly. "So we're basically stuck here until Unity turn up, at which point, we're fucked."

Idun glared at him.

Jack cringed. "Sorry - I mean, 'in trouble'."

"Better."

"It's probably a countermeasure against intruders in that standard operating procedure for assaulting an enemy structure is to cut the power." Elsa looked back at the lift. "Even though the facility below us still has power, the system thinks it's an attack."

She didn't see Merida move away from the group.

"So what do we do?" Agdar asked.

"Way I see it, we've got two options. Find a way to reconnect the supply, or wait until the Reapers move on and hope Fury can jury-rig something to get us—"

The way Jack stopped in his tracks snapped Elsa from her thoughts, and she turned her head to face him, and then followed his frowning gaze.

"Hunter, what are you doing?"

Merida didn't look at him as she hovered her hand a couple of inches from the rightmost exposed
wires. "These cables, they're probably still live, right?"

"Um, I think so? Red, move back before—"

"So if we can get power ta the door, it'll open, right?"

"It should, but we have no—"

It was then that Merida turned, and Elsa's heart stalled in her chest. She gave them a sad but resolute smile, and kept it as she turned her back to the wall, and looked straight into the eyes of Kozmotis.

"Remember me."

Merida held her hands either side of her.

She took one step back.

She went rigid.
Camp Serenity, Part III

Chapter Summary

Chapter themes: "Dominus Ghaul", Destiny 2 OST, (2:45 onwards), "Iron Tomb" Destiny Rise of Iron OST, (5:00 onwards). Both songs are great in their entirety, but you'll know the scene they go with as soon as you read it. As for another scene, "Dive Bombers" from the Iron Man 3 OST.

"Camp Serenity, Part III"

She didn't scream.

That was the most unnerving part, aside from watching her friend shudder and jerk as an entire bunker's power supply raged through her body. Elsa had heard many screams, many cries of agony, countless wails of pain… but Merida didn't make a sound. She couldn't.

She didn't need to. Her popping eyes and contracted muscles spoke volumes.

The screaming that overwhelmed her senses came from everyone else. Rapunzel screaming her friend's name. Jack yelling at someone to pull her away. Elsa herself was paralysed, rooted to the floor by the terrifying sight. The small voice inside her justified her inaction; to even touch Merida would be to die. The rest of her begged for someone, anyone, to save her.

In the end, it was Pitch.

He raced toward her, roaring her name, and leashed two tendrils of black sand around her chest. One almighty pull, and Merida was torn from the deadly current. She collapsed in his arms as he fell to his knees, her limp body thrashing and jerking with the violent convulsions.

Rapunzel was there in a flash, her hands already seeking Merida's pulse and her right ear to her mouth. Pitch gave her one look, and his face would etch itself into Elsa's memory forever.

"Save her," she heard him say, in a voice once smooth, now broken and scared.

She became conscious of a rush of cold air past her, and the frantic jabbing of Puss' finger in the same direction. His eyes were wide, but panicked, and Elsa only knew that by the amber light bathing his face.

The light from the open door. Merida had done it.

The gap was only two feet, but it was enough to fill half of the bunker with the flickering light of the flames of the burning camp, carrying with it an oddly pleasant warmth. Yet, without the power, the door was slowly descending, and despite Jack's best efforts to lift it, he was losing the battle. Geared into action, Elsa charged forth, past her fallen comrade and gripped the bottom of the door, before putting all her strength into her arms.
Jack counted down from three, and the two of them attempted to lift together, but the overwhelming force pushing the door down was greater than their combined strength. Weakened by battle, their reserves of adrenaline dry, even the power of winter faltered.

They simply weren't strong enough.

Astrid soared over the camp on Stormfly, feeling the muscles of her friend shift and flow beneath her. Below them, the ground moved with hundreds of Reapers, and thousands more swarming the outside of the camp.

The last she heard, Kozmotis had given the order to fall back into the bunker, which was when the transmissions ceased. Anna had repeatedly tried to raise the ground unit on the comms, despite Hiccup's insistence the structure was blocking the radio connection.

"So what's our next move?"

"I'm thinking," came Hiccup's response.

"Well, think faster," Anna said.

"Way I see it, we've got good and bad news. Good news is that they're alive in there and safe. Bad news is they're trapped."

"Not to mention the shit-ton of Reapers outside."

"That, too. Gotta assume the doors can't be opened from the inside, else they would have figured out a way to do it by now. Which means it can only be done outside."

"Which means one of us is going to have to go down there," Astrid said, "and try to find a way to get those doors open."

Anna said, "Did I not mention the shit-ton of Reapers? I feel like I mentioned that."

"No, it's never come up," Astrid drawled as her eyes travelled down to the door… and spotted something. Muttering a command to zoom, the image in her goggles grew - and the something jolted her heart in her chest.

"Hey! Look at the door—it's opening!"

It was then that the comms were filled with yelling. Anguished and fearful calls to 'get her away from there', panicked utterances of Merida's name, and one murmur of 'Save her'. Astrid's gut churned; what had happened down there?

"I see it!" Hiccup announced with excitement. "They got it—"

"Can't… hold it…" came Jack's voice.

"Too heavy… it's pushing down too hard," Elsa chimed in, sounding like she was struggling.

"Keep trying… if we lose this… we're stuck…"

Astrid felt a burst of adrenaline and resolve. She could do something. She had to do something. She was strong enough.

"Fury," she said firmly, leaving no room to protest, "I need some space in front of the door. I'm
going down there."

"What?!" he attempted. "You can't—"

"Do me a favour and plow the road, or get out of my way and I'll do it myself. Either way, I'm getting this done."

"Copy that," Hiccup said, his voice decidedly unsure. "Clearing the road."

Astrid swung Stormfly on a long circle of the bunker to give Hiccup enough time to do his work. Bolts of blue flashed from the darkness and slammed into the ground directly in front of the door, sending the Reapers unharmed scrambling for safety, and catapulting those not quick enough into the air. Anna flew the *Fairy* into a hover above the bunker, and let fly with a barrage in view of maintaining the space Hiccup had created.

Satisfied, Stormfly went into a dive, and roughly touched down a few yards from the door. Astrid could feel the intense heat from the burning camp, her ears filled with the cacophony of Reaper shrieks.

"Gonna need you to watch my back, girl," she said loudly to her scaled friend. "I'm counting on you."

Stormfly rawked and chirruped in response, taking position directly behind Astrid as she walked to the door. She could see the shadow of Stormfly's wings as she spread them wide, heard the deafening roar of her battle cry. They would come, and Stormfly would end them.

"Alright, Astrid," she murmured to herself once at the door, where she saw Jack and Elsa's fingertips poking out from under it. "You found out you're worth something. Time to show the world what Astrid Hofferson is made of."

"I'm losing it," Jack groaned, voice broken and straining. "Can't hold it much longer…"

"Pitch!" Elsa tried to yell, "We need—"

The intense pressure bearing down on her hands suddenly ceased, her palms crying out in relief at the metal no longer biting into her skin. Groaning and clunking could be heard above her as the mechanisms struggled against the equalising force.

"It stopped!" Jack yelled in triumph. "Did you—"

"It's not me!" Elsa took a step back to check it definitely wasn't her. "I thought it was you!"

The moaning of the mechanisms grew as, to Elsa's surprise, the door slowly began to rise. Amber light chased away the darkness of the bunker, punctuated by the heavy booms and blue flashes of Toothless' blasts. Inch by inch, the door gave ground to the opposing force, until finally Elsa was treated to the sight of exactly *who* was conquering it.

Silhouetted by the wall of flames bent to Stormfly's will, the dragon's wide, unfurled wings heralding her presence like they were a natural part of her body, Astrid rose from her knees, the weight of the door firmly on her shoulders. Lips taut, jaw trembling and muscles pronounced with exertion, Astrid slowly forced the door upwards, the mechanism above her groaning and straining against the superior force. Stormfly let out a terrifying howl and incinerated the Reaper host as Astrid switched the weight to her hands, not giving a single inch to Unity's artificial barrier, her own roars behind gritted teeth mixing with those of her friend.
"That's impossible!" Antonio gaped, scarcely audible over the noise. "No-one can do that!"

"She can," Jack said in awe. Elsa could only nod in admiration.

Astrid lifted the door to her full reach, sweat glistening on her forehead, cheeks and arms, her face twisted with exertion, and from her lips came one, booming word.

"MOVE!"

Jack sprung into action, and grasped Pippa. "Alright, people, it's time to go! Pitch, carry Red; Mr and Mrs. Snowfield, stay close to them. Ghosts, make a protective circle around them. Three-sixty field of fire. Do not stop moving until we're safe. Streak, you there?"

"Right here, Cap!"

"Gonna need an exfil—LZ hot!"

"Copy that. Move to the area where the garage was, I'll pick you up there!"

Elsa watched Jack as he shouldered Pippa, and did the same with Hailstorm. He turned and called to the group, who by then were arming themselves. "Stay together. Don't stray. Last one out taps Viking on the shoulder. Snow Queen, gonna need you to clear a path through the flames when we get there."

"I'll see it done," she declared.

"Alright. On three. One… two…"

He called the third number, and rushed forth, Elsa moving at his four o'clock, Eugene at his eight, with she presumed to be Kristoff and Rapunzel at his five and seven o'clock respectively. The five formed a pentagon around her parents, Pitch and Merida as they moved into the fray. Songs were sung from Pippa, Hailstorm, Rapunzel's weapon Daybreaker, Emily Jane in Kristoff's hands and a pulse carbine in Eugene's, their deadly verses slamming into Reaper upon Reaper. She had given herself wholly to instinct, her aim switching from target to target, nary a second between release of her trigger to the next squeeze. True were her shots, not a single bullet wasted, each one extinguishing a deadly predator.

She thought she heard the sound of two carbines, but in all the noise and chaos, deemed it irrelevant.

Stormfly soared overhead as Astrid declared her successful escape, and she carved a line of flame alongside them. Toothless obliterated the mass of Reapers ahead, attempting to clear space for Anna, who did her best to strafe any foes at their left. The night was ablaze with flame and light, their deafening offense a testament to their will.

"Snow Queen!"

Without a second thought, Elsa let go of her rifle and sent out a huge blast of snow and ice that barely missed Jack. It rushed forth and ploughed into the intense flames, diminishing them under the onslaught of harnessed winter. Elsa persisted until a clear path had been made.

A shadow roared overhead, dwarfing them in darkness for a brief second, before the heartening sight of the Fairy coming in for an active landing greeted Elsa's eyes, her embarkation ramp already open. Candace emerged from the passenger hold, a rifle in her hands spitting fury at any Reaper near them. Jack took position to the left of the ramp, Elsa at its right, and commenced covering fire while Candace helped the rest aboard.
It was then that Elsa realised who the sixth weapon belonged to.

"Antonio!" Jack yelled, before firing a burst until Pippa clicked empty, and switched to his sidearm. "What are you—!"

"Your six o'clock was wide open, so I filled it! Do not fret; Jane is looking after the others!"

"Get on board then!"

"No, my friend!" he called back, laughing as he sprayed any Reaper in sight, "We all knew you weren't coming to save us—that's why the rest of us are taking our chances in the bunker!"

"Yeah, but we can still save—"

Antonio marched up to him, and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Your story has many chapters left, but I always knew mine would end in this place. Thank you, for you have given me the chance to write my own ending on my terms. Your team has given me the greatest gift: to choose."

Jack looked like he was going to protest, but instead shouted for someone to take a bandolier from the rack above the starboard seats. Eugene poked a hand out with the bandolier in question, and Elsa caught a glimpse of several grenades dangling from it. Jack passed it to Antonio, who grinned wickedly as he accepted it. "Should make one hell of a full stop for your story."

"Gracias," Antonio said. "It will certainly end with a bang. Live well, my friend. Live free."

Jack nodded, and clapped him once on the shoulder before retreating into the Fairy. Inspired, Elsa conjured a fresh Coldheart just as Antonio slung the bandolier over his shoulder, and offered it to him.

He glanced down at the blade, and back up. "When last we met, I remember you pointing the other end at me."

"When we last met, I was a monster," Elsa said. "Like you, I'm writing my own story."

Antonio gave her a smile as he accepted the blade, and winced at the chilly touch as he drove it into the ground at his side. "Watch over him. If his eyes are on you, he will be blind to all else."

"I will."

Antonio inclined his head toward the Fairy, a silent prompt. Elsa gave him a nod of respect, before darting up the ramp into the safety of the cargo hold, where she grasped the overhead rigging, standing at Jack's side. She glanced at him, noticing his solemn gaze firmly fixed on Antonio's back. The Fairy's engines roared in her ears and vibrated through her boots, lifting the battle-scarred vessel away from the ground, and still Jack did not look away.

Neither would she. Antonio deserved nothing less than someone to tell his tale.

Laughs broke out from the Spaniard's mouth as he sprayed the horde with his carbine, orange bolts dropping one after another. Battle for no reason was not to his liking, but glorious combat for a just cause?

Oh, that suited him just fine. Honor and sacrifice for noble ends. Perfect for the hero in his tale, and there was nothing more noble in his eyes than holding off the forces of hell itself, saying, "This far. No further."
The carbine clicked empty. Scoffing, he threw it at a bold Reaper's head, taking cruel satisfaction at the crunch it made when the metal impacted its skull. He pulled the sword up from the ground, and yelled out a challenge.

They leaped at him, but their bodies were fragile and soft, easily rent apart by the blade. Wide swings were all it took, Reaper after Reaper falling at his feet. They surrounded him, but each one brave enough to attack was laid low, and before long, they knew fear. They knew death at the edge of a sword, knew those who went before were ended by it. They circled him, gnashing and shrieking, ululating into the air, aware of him yet scared to attack.

Antonio barked a mocking laugh. One man, one malnourished, exhausted, abused prisoner was holding at bay the forces of hell with nothing but a sword and sheer will. For a few seconds, he entertained the possibility he might survive by virtue of the horde leaving him alone.

That was until he saw it a dozen yards away, a rippling in the sea of creatures around him. A rippling that became a wave as it travelled, a wave that became a crashing tide of arms, teeth and legs. Reapers relentlessly climbing over each other, driven by purpose, like one terrible entity born of hundreds of smaller beasts. The wave built up speed and rage as it circled, before responding to the calls of its kin and bearing down upon him. Antonio smiled, watching the mass approach, and drove the sword into the ground.

"I'm coming home, Maria," he murmured, and began pulling the pins out of each grenade in the bandolier. Two at a time, eight in all. More than enough. Pulling the sword from the ground once more, he gripped it tightly with both hands, and with a defiant roar and the joy of his final act, he aimed his body at the crashing mass of Reapers, and charged.

Even when their distance from the ground reduced the Reapers to small, indiscernible shapes in a shifting tapestry, Elsa could clearly see the explosion. She knew it was coming, and yet, the abrupt end still caught her breath and filled her heart with a sombre weight. She looked at Jack, who, with his eyes still fixed on the scene below as the Fairy climbed, straightened up and held a fist across his chest.

The Ghost sign of respect. She wondered if she should do the same; after all, she did personally consign Antonio to that place. In a way, she felt as responsible for his end as much as those Reapers. And yet, she was a Ghost. Recruited and accepted. She was one of them, even if it would take a long time to truly feel like it - and so, she drew a clenched fist over her chest.

"Thank you," she heard Jack say over the roar of the engines. Flinching slightly, she glanced at him. His eyes were still fixed on the scene below as the Fairy climbed, straightened up and held a fist across his chest.

"He was a hero," Elsa said. "He deserved nothing less."

"He deserved better than what they gave him." Jack's voice had taken on a slightly acidic edge. "They all did."

Elsa's breath caught once again, taken aback by his words and the tone with which they were delivered. "I'm sor—"

"So did you." Jack turned to face her. His eyes were resolute. Tired, but full of conviction. "You deserved better."

Her mouth closing, Elsa gave him a weak smile. He rested his hand on her shoulder a moment, enough for her to mourn its departure when he moved further into the passenger hold to hit the
button, closing the embarkation ramp. The roar of the engines and howling of the air in the *Fairy's* wake grew in pitch, before the ramp fully clamped shut and separated them from the world outside.

Elsa parked herself on the rearmost right starboard seat and took a moment, waiting for her hearing to adjust to the quiet hum of the propulsion system, letting herself acclimatise. Three minutes ago she was bathed in danger, in the sound of shrieking and gunfire, yells and explosions. From that, to a place of relative safety and quiet, with her friends and family nearby - a paradigm shift in environment, emotion and awareness.

"Um... can—c-can someone take the—t-take the stick for me?" came Anna's voice over the comms and through the hold, each word high pitched and broken. "I think—I think I'm about to have an em-m-motional breakdown, pretty bad if you're piloting—"

"I got it," said Eugene. "I had my happy reunion. 'Bout time you got yours."

Elsa looked up as Anna thanked him, though embraced him in a quick hug after a double take, when he'd sat down in the pilot's chair. She took a few seconds to thank Unity's aircraft manufacturing plants for having the presence of mind to install an autopilot system.

A smile curved her lips as she watched Anna tentatively approach Kristoff, like Rapunzel did with Eugene, before hearing her younger sister break into sobs and throw herself into her husband's arms the moment he rose from the starboard seat closest to the pilot cabin. They held each other for some time, long enough for Elsa to experience the voyeuristic awkwardness of watching Anna cry into Kristoff's shoulder.

She looked down at her hands, at how they trembled like leaves in a gust of wind. Frowning, she clenched and flexed her fingers over and over, willing the stability that had guided and protected her over the last few hours to return, which was when she perceived her heart. It beat a hard, fast rhythm, the percussion symphony of heightened emotion and hyper-awareness. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on her breathing; one slow inhalation through her nose, and one long breath out of her mouth. It was time for peace to reign, yet the storm inside would not abate so easily.

"C'mon, Pitch, I can't check her properly while you're holding her like that."

Elsa opened her eyes and sought the source; Rapunzel, kneeling down in front of Merida's motionless body, still wrapped up in Pitch's protective arms.

"Then I suggest you learn."

Pitch's eyes did not move a single inch from Rapunzel's as he looked down at her, his gaze radiating immovable conviction.

"Pitch, please—"

"No."

She even saw his arms tighten around her. Even with the chaos of post-adrenaline-fuelled combat and the feeling of being a little overwhelmed, Elsa managed a smile; he would rather face forcible removal from active duty and possible punishment than let Merida out of the safety of his embrace. Far more practical to acquiesce to Rapunzel, however, but still. She admired his resolve and his care for her. He'd more than likely not let her go until she was safely in the infirmary, and cradle her for hours until then.

Jack, having made a point to check on each passenger, kneeled down at Rapunzel's side for a few
moments. The two of them shared a brief conversation; she couldn't see Jack's face, but Rapunzel's looked grave - and a little annoyed. Pitch's eyes danced between them, but the fierce expression of scowling remained etched on his features.

Reapers. That was it, the reason she felt so shaken and jittery, like a prey animal. She'd heard stories, read reports, seen the occasional image. She'd built up a picture in her mind of one, of its size and speed, voracious appetite and vicious purpose. Little more than concepts in her mind, so when she saw them in their true, terrifying, numerous form, it had both confirmed and shattered those concepts at once. They were a force of nature, of hunger made form, merciless and amoral, existing only to kill, consume, and grow their numbers. They could not be reasoned with, understood, predicted or empathized with, and they didn't stop. Even though she was running on instinct as they fled to the Fairy, her subconscious had still immortalised them in her memory.

And there were so many of them.

That was without the inability to shake the image of her friend shuddering and jerking with the power ravaging her body from her mind. That wasn't going to leave any time soon, if ever.

Elsa leaned forward with her elbows on her knees, her right thumb kneading into the groove between her left thumb and forefinger. Jack chose that moment to stand, and made his way over to sit beside her, letting out a loud, tired sigh as he did so. The two shared a minute of silence, grateful for each other's company yet sensitive to the need for space.

The holding of hands was a given, though. Elsa wanted to have her cake and eat it.

"You okay?"

Elsa's lips tugged into a smile, though it was joyless, and a bitter snort escaped her.

"Likewise." Jack shuffled in his seat. "Thought you'd be talking to your folks."

"Not yet." Elsa's smile twitched into a thin line and back. "It's all… it's all a little much for me at the moment."

"I hear you. It's been a long, long day."

"How… how is Merida?"

Jack looked over at their motionless comrade, before extending his staff and letting it rest at an angle on his shoulder. He quietly rapped each finger upon it, a quick rhythm from his little to his index. "She's still with us. Beyond that, no idea. Rapunzel's gonna do her healing thing - all that power going through her would've cooked her internal organs. Figure if she can reverse the damage, might prevent something worse."

"Like?"

"Cascade organ failure." Jack leaned his head back against the hull and stared off into space. "Heart attack. Rapunzel was pretty explicit."

"She will survive. She has to. She's a hero."

"No, she isn't."

Elsa gave him a shocked frown. "She put her life at risk to give us a chance to escape. How is that not heroic?"
"Because heroes die." Jack didn't look away from the distant spot in which he'd lost himself. "Buried enough of 'em to know. I refuse to bury another."

"And you think that if you call her a hero—"

"The moment I do that is the moment I'll have given up on her." Jack looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "None of us are heroes. We're not villains, either. We're people. Extraordinary people, exercising our right to live. We deserve that. Red deserves that. Antonio… he deserved that."

Elsa couldn't help but look away. The name stung like an ethereal needle in her heart. Jack noticed, and shuffled in his seat so he could better look at her.

"Don't blame yourself."

"But I do." Elsa gave him a bitter smile. "I put him there. I put who knows how many people there. They suffered—died—because of that."

"No." Jack squeezed her hand. "You were ordered to take us down and capture us. That was it. You didn't drive them to the camp, didn't shave their heads, didn't beat them, starve them. What happened was out of your knowledge and your hands, because Unity made sure that happened, and I think I know why."

"Why?"

"Because as much of a monster as you were, even then, you had limits. You found out where they were going, you'd've been horrified. Refused or disobeyed orders to carry on. Rebelled. They knew that, so they kept you in the dark. Kinda like…"

Jack let the sentence drift off, though Elsa didn't need to hear the rest to know what he was about to say. She gave him a small squeeze of his hand.

"Point is: own what you did, but don't own what you didn't. Blame for that's not to be laid at your feet, but Unity's."

"All the same," Elsa said in a quiet voice as she stroked a long path up her forearm, "I used to wonder what happened to them after they were taken away. Now I don't. I've seen the end of the road I started them on. Reality… is a harsh mistress. So, no." She slowly shook her head. "I'm not okay."

"For what it's worth, Antonio forgave you."

Elsa looked at him, blinking, her mouth parted in surprise. "How do you know?"

Jack gave her a knowing smile, his eyes glimmering with reassurance. "He took your sword."

Elsa wasn't certain how to respond, or even if she could. Was it true? Was the last act of a hero, one even defined as such by Jack's grave logic, in his final moments to forgive the very person who sent him there?

She opened her mouth to ask, but a voice called from the pilot's cabin, sounding concerned enough to warrant a small jolt of anxiety in her chest.

"Yo, chief. Need your eyes on something."

"Coming, darling," Jack called over to Eugene. Her hand received one last squeeze before he used
the staff to pull himself upright, and carefully made his way up to the pilot cabin. Elsa watched him
lean over Eugene's shoulder, and saw the ex-inmate point to a holographic display on the main
console.

It wasn't long before the comms system flicked into into quiet life, when Hiccup responded to Jack's
call.

"Tech support. Night Fury speaking. How may I direct your call?"

Elsa chuckled to herself as Jack faced the passenger cabin, leaning with his arms head-height on the
dividing wall. "Cute. Got a problem for you; the Fairy's having power whoopsies again, but they're
not intermittent. Rear engines are losing thrust, so we're losing speed."

"Power whoopsies. Now who's being cute." Hiccup was unable to hide the teasing quality to his
voice. "Have you tried turning it off and on?"

"Can I do that?"

Hiccup's response was predictably sarcastic, yet shocked Jack would ever ask such a thing. "Can
you—yeah, sure. Switch the systems off mid-flight. Give my regards to Mother Earth when you hit
her in the face. Of course you can!"

"Then drop the snark and help me out," Jack snapped, his patience thoroughly gone. Even Elsa had
to admit Hiccup had overdone it. "because if we crash, it's on you."

"Fine, fine. Easy, chief. Gonna try doing a soft reboot of the power distribution system, but it has to
be done manually. Panel on the ceiling of the passenger hold. Press the blue button to open it."

Jack looked up, as did Elsa. Indeed, she could see a small blue light behind the rigging; Jack
immediately went over and began disconnecting the rigging on one side from the ceiling. Once
finished, he tapped the button, and a small panel slid away.

"Alright. What next?"

"Press the red button."

Jack shook his head, throwing his hands in the air. "They're all red!"

"Then press all of them!"

Jack harrumphed, and began haphazardly and rapidly pressing buttons in a random order. "Done."

"Blue line. Slide your finger across it."

Jack did as told. The quiet humming inside the Fairy reduced to a whisper, before returning to its
prior, pleasant tone. "It worked." Jack rested his fists on his hips in an adorable attempt at a heroic
pose. "I am amazing at this."

"Sorry, chief, but you're patting yourself on the back a little early," Eugene called. "No change.
Power's still falling; we're at seventy-six percent."

Elsa felt a jolt of worry; her experience as a Hela pilot reminded her that if the power went below
sixty percent, the Fairy would struggle to remain at its altitude. Fifty percent meant a slow descent.

Forty? They freefall.

There came a shuffle of fabric and movement as the collective group did as ordered, with Pitch begrudgingly complying by carefully lowering Merida into the empty seat next to him, and with almost painstaking care, ensuring she was safe and restrained before seeing to himself.

"Right. Go."

"Okay, now there's two ways. One is to pull the lever to shunt the power distribution priority pathways from the primary to the auxiliary network, but first, we—"

Jack, in his impatience, cranked a lever back and forth. "Okay. Now what?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I just did what you said and pulled the lever."

There was a pause, only a second long, before Hiccup practically shouted down the comms system. "You did what?!!"

"Should I not have—"

"No! You were supposed to turn the third row of buttons red before pulling the lever! That means the power's gonna skip the secondary relays and go straight to the auxiliary!"

"And that's bad?"

Elsa became acutely aware of how the humming built up to a loud whirring, and cast an anxious eye around the cabin.

"Yes! The secondary relays throttle the power before transferring it to the auxiliary, so the power can't surge and—"

The whirring intensified, vibrating the hull. Elsa gripped her harness.

"Did you just… say 'power surge'?"

Jack ducked as a few sparks burst from inside the panel interface with a loud crack.

"Did you just break my ship?" Kristoff gaped at him.

Jack was about to answer when a harsh buzzing emanated throughout the cabin, reaching a pitch that nearly forced Elsa to cover her ears, before it abruptly ceased. Every member of the group glanced worriedly at each other, and then at Jack, who looked equally unnerved at the sudden return to a nominal environment.

"I… think we're okay," he murmured. "Eugene?"

"A-ok up here. Power's returning to normal."

"Thank God. Never thought I'd say this, but hurrah for Unity's energy couplings absorbing the surge. You guys would be freefalling otherwise."

"Remind me to toast them. What happens now?"

"Look, the auxiliary network's a stopgap. Unity designed it only for emergencies; it can't handle the
power flow long term like the primary and secondary can. It'll do until we get home. Until then, take it steady, 'cause while the auxiliary relays are adapting to the new flow—y'know, on account of you skipping the sequence like you did—you're gonna feel some quirks like—"

The radio transmission suddenly ceased. Jack raised a finger to his ear. "Fury? Fury—you reading me?"

"Comms are down, Chief," Eugene called. "Sensors are emitting a low-level E.M. field, probably messing with our radio."


The *Fairy* rocked and shuddered around them, hard enough to jostle the restrained group. Jack struggled to stay upright, the dangling rigging proving to be less than useful. "Report!"

Eugene yelled back, "Power's pinging off all the systems like a ball! We've got random activations of—yep, the guns just fired on their own!"

"They what?"

"Systems are overloading, so the AI's shutting them off for a couple of seconds to reboot! You might wanna—"

Cutting him off was the deafening roar of the outside wind as the embarkation ramp opened on its own. With the sudden change in pressure, the air inside the cabin rushed out into the world, forcing Jack to hold tighter to the rigging. Further jolts to the ship caused his staff to tumble from his grasp and fly out toward the open air, though Elsa's quick reflexes shot her hand out, and the staff hit her grip with a stinging impact.

"Thanks!" Jack yelled. "Dunno what I'd—"

His sentence was left unfinished; the *Fairy*’s aft sharply dipped as the tail thrusters cut out. The inertia slammed Jack into the ceiling like a ragdoll, causing him to lose his grip on the rigging.

In less than a second, he had been sucked out of the passenger hold into the night air.

"JACK!" Elsa heard herself scream.

The aft thrusters fired again, enabling the *Fairy* to level off, but Elsa barely noticed. She was already fumbling with her safety harness.

"What happened?!" called Eugene.

"Jack just got yanked out of the ship!" Anna yelled back.

"He's got his staff, he can fly back, right?"

"He lost it when the doors opened!"

The claps disconnected, and Elsa shot to her feet. Clutching the staff in the crook of her arm, she clumsily fixed her mask over her face. "Keep the *Fairy* steady!" she ordered. "I'm giving him his staff back!"

"What are you—"

Elsa hadn't waited for her sister to finish. She had already sprinted off the ramp and dived out of the
Gravity took immediate hold, and her stomach fled to her back. The mask protected her ears from the sonic assault of the wind roaring past her, but it remained loud enough to compete with the newly restored communications. Elsa mentally thanked her stars as she fell, for the ground below was cloaked in shadow, and the sky around her a royal blue. Finding Jack would be impossible.

"What the hell—did you just jump without a chute?!"

If she could speak over the sensation of her lungs trying to vacate the premises through her spine, she would have chided Anna for being most unhelpful. Eugene did that for her.

"Not a great time, Streak, so how about we help 'em out?"

"Okay! Okay, Elsa, Jack, if you can both hear me, I need you to tap the right rim of your goggles three times. That'll activate our emergency transponders so we can guide you."

Elsa did as requested, though the force of the updraught made it a far more difficult endeavour than she thought.

"That's one... okay, we have two! Great! Okay, Elsa, you're at six thousand metres. Jack's at your twelve o'clock, forty-five degrees and fifteen hundred metres below you. Jack, Elsa's coming to get you with your staff; try and slow yourself down."

Elsa turned her body into a javelin and aimed herself in a rough attempt at half a right angle ahead of her.

"Can't we get 'em?" asked Hiccup.

"It's too late; by the time we guided you two with how far you are—okay, you're closing in, but you need to slow down a little or you'll undershoot him."

Elsa flattened her body slightly, and felt the jostling of the wind once again.

"Four thousand metres," said Eugene. "Jack's at three twenty-five—you're gonna have to hustle!"

Hiccup called out, "Elsa, use your infra-red!"

She wheezed out a command to her mask software, praying the voice recognition would work. Relief blossomed through her raging heart, however, when the once black and royal blue world shifted into shades of grey.

Including the white shape far below her.

"Elsa's at three-fifty, Jack's at two-seven five! Haul ass! Jack, you better slow yourself down somehow or Elsa's not gonna make it!"

Elsa wasn't sure, but she could swear she felt the updraught of air intensify. Maybe it was the wind reacting to the sheer fear he was clearly feeling, if the faint sensation of terror other than Elsa's own was anything to go by.

I'm coming, she willed her words to him as the white shape grew much closer. Hold on.

"Two thousand metres! Elsa, you're five hundred behind him!"

Her body flattened into a javelin once more.
"Fifteen hundred metres! You're almost there! Twelve!"

He was close, so close it was as though could almost touch him. Just a little further.

"One thousand metres! You're right on top of him!"


"Eight hundred!"

She lunged forward, but in her haste misjudged her speed. Their bodies clashed, and they began to uncontrollably spin in the air.

"Six hundred!"

She instinctively entwined herself around him, her legs locking themselves around his right and her arms around his chest. She felt his arm lash across her back.

"Five hundred!"

His staff was pulled from her grasp.

"Four!"

Elsa felt the air slam into her body like a punch from nature itself. She heard a roar of defiant exertion from behind gritted teeth.

"Three!"

She could almost feel like she was being slowed down, yet her stomach had not left her spine. Was it her fear-addled imagination, or were they levelling off?

"Two-fifty metres!"

Elsa closed her eyes and prepared for the end. If she was to die, at least she would do so having done some good.

Judging by the sheer fury in Jack's open-mouthed roar, he was not so ready to die.

"Two hundred—one fifty—"

It felt like someone had reached inside her and shoved all of her internal organs to her feet. Blood tried and failed to reach her head, though in a moment of morbid curiosity in amongst the haze of semi-consciousness, she opened her eyes.

Land was below her, but she wasn't falling.

She was flying.

Except for the part where the ground was still rushing up even as it swept under her. Her heart, near her ankles and soaring as it was, felt a jolt of horror. Instinct thrust her hand out, and her powers burst forth in a thick blizzard that charged ahead into the ground.

Hopefully a twenty feet-deep pile of snow would prove an adequate cushion. She was about to find out, so she clamped herself around Jack once again, and prayed.
Hitting the snowdrift at such a speed caused her internal organs to high-five her throat, and the caress of cold winter air became the chilly bite of snow. Pain blossomed in her head as her blood rushed through veins unprepared for such momentum, causing even the world made dark by her closed eyes to feel like it was in a chaotic spin.

Voices could be heard in her ears, words of panic and fearful calls of her name. At least, that was what she thought; it wasn't easy to discern voices from muffled noise. She tried to gasp a breath, but found no air would come.

Summoning as much of her spiralling consciousness as she could, Elsa clicked the fingers of her right hand. Dematerialising a sword was one thing; making a twenty-foot pile of snow whilst slowly suffocating was quite another. To her relief, however, there came a loud rustling that drowned out all other sounds, and it wasn't long before Elsa took a grateful gasp of life-giving air, going as far as to nearly rip the mask off her face in haste.

It was even less time for the snow under her to vanish, and the two of them fell a further five feet onto the unforgiving ground. Land bit into her butt and spine, forcing her to gulp another lungful of air to compensate being winded, but it didn't matter.

She wasn't falling, wasn't gliding, wasn't moving. She was alive.

"Elsa! Elsa! Come in—are you reading—please say you're reading—tell me you're alive!"

"I'm… okay, Streak," she managed, utterly breathless. "We're—"

Struck by a moment of worry, Elsa turned her head to the right, finding Jack on his back, eyes wide open, staring vacantly at the sky. Her right hand sought his, creeping across the hard ground until it met soft skin, and she entwined her fingers with his. He blinked once, then twice, before his head slowly turned to the left. Their eyes met. They stared at each other.

Jack's lips curved, and quiet chuckles left his throat. Whether it was her own hyper-tense state or the way his mirth was so infectious, but she found herself bursting into giggles along with him. Giggles that became full-blown, loud laughter, which chased away the shock, soothed the fear and calmed the soul.

It had been a long time since she laughed so hard, enough to antagonise the parts of her body most sore with her mirthful jiggles.

"Why are we laughing! What's so funny—will someone please—"

"We're okay, Streak," Elsa managed between hearty laughs. "We're fine."

"Oh, thank God! Y'know, next time you feel the urge to jump out of a dropship without a parachute, please don't!"

Elsa knew she should not have done it. She knew it was inappropriate, but all the same, her laughter renewed and grew. She had no clue why the situation was so hilarious, perhaps the shock and hypertension needing to leave her body somehow.

"Will you stop laughing!" Anna sounded wholly indignant, which only made it impossible to do so. "This is serious!"

Elsa's sides hurt. Her cheeks hurt. Her throat hurt, but she scarcely cared.

It felt fantastic to laugh.
"Hate to break up Open Mic at the Comedy Club," Eugene said, though his customary drawl was undone by his own audible mirth, "but Snow Queen's old lady wants to say something. Sounds—"

"Hello? Hello? Is this thing on—can you hear me—"

"Guess it's real important—"

"Testing, testing, one, two—"

"Y'know what, I'm just gonna fly the ship and not talk. Everything's green up here, Chief, by the way. Just in case you were curious."

Elsa's attempt to keep a straight face was thoroughly undermined by a renewed snort of laughter. Even Jack was having issues; despite the biting of his lips, his body jerked with silent giggles, his cheeks meeting his eyes.

"Go… go ahead Mrs. Snowfield," he managed. Elsa clasped a hand over her mouth in an attempt to stifle her mirth.

"Mr, um—"

"Oh, were you talking to me?"

"Yes."

"Rider. Flynn."

"Mr. Rider Flynn—"

"Oh, my God…"

Jack slapped his hand across his mouth and started punching his leg in an effort to cease the violent laughter wracking his body, but Elsa had no such luck, and curled up on the ground in silent giggles. If it kept up, she'd have survived a free fall only to die laughing.

"—has informed me we are on a westerly heading. Is that correct?"

"He did, huh?" Jack looked Elsa's way, and there was a glimmer in his eye she did not like. She rapidly shook her head as a plea.

"Sounds like I'll have to spank him when we get back."

Elsa nearly died right there and then.

"Yes, well—wait, what? Anyway, if my mental calculations are correct, half an hour ago we flew over a pre-war automobile manufacturing plant? Is that right?"

"Probably." Jack's mirth had quickly dwindled; perhaps it was the urgent tone to her mother's voice, but Elsa found her own high spirits fading. "Wasn't really paying attention."

"Well, a few years ago, I overheard a conversation between two moderately inebriated-by-contraband security staff about that plant and how the 'harvest isn't meeting expectations'. I think you should check it out as soon as you can."

Jack huffed out a long sigh and wiped his hand down his face. "Look, I don't know if you know, but Snow Queen and I just fell over four thousand metres. I'm gonna need a minute."
"Of course, but I have a feeling time may be of the essence."

Jack let out another huff, muttering how it was good while it lasted. "Fine. We'll do some recon."

"Want us to swing back, Chief?"

"No," Jack answered. "Getting Red to the infirmary is our top priority; nothing else matters. Maintain course at best possible speed. Could use some air support, though."

"I'll come," Astrid said over the radio. "Fury's better served with the Fairy in case someone else tries to break her."

"Ha-ha," Jack sneered. "You sure? You did hold up a freaking security door by yourself."

"My arms feel like lead and I don't wanna look at weights for another month, but I can do it."

"Copy that. Frost out." Jack, with no small amount of wincing, hefted himself up and pulled himself to his feet with his staff. He offered his hand to Elsa, who accepted both the gesture and the help, but when he slunk his arms around her waist and prepared to take off, Elsa squeaked and backed away.

Jack looked at her in concern and confusion. "What's wrong… are you hurt?"

"No!" She shook her head and denied the idea with her hands. "No, it's just… would you mind if I rode with Astrid? It's just that, well, so soon after what happened, I—"

Jack smiled, and bowed his head as he held up a hand. "Say no more."

He then raised Astrid on the radio and asked her to swing by in order to pick Elsa up, something to which Astrid happily obliged and for which Elsa was immensely grateful. She would be there in five minutes, which gave Jack plenty of time to jab his staff into the ground, walk up to her, and embrace her in a tight but comfortable hug.

Elsa felt herself sinking into his arms, and buried her face into his neck. "Not that I mind, but… what's this for?"

"Don't think I forgot about what you just did." His fingers curled around the sleeve holes of her utility vest. "You saved my life."

Elsa smiled, and nuzzled into his skin. "I think you're overstating things a little."

Jack pulled back enough to cup her face in his hands, and though there was a hint of chiding in his eyes, his smile was every bit as genuine as it should have been. "You risked your life to save mine. Twice, if you count the trick with the snowdrift. I don't think I'm overstating a thing."

Elsa let out a faint breath through her nose, and rested her hands on his waist. "Thank you," he murmured, a second before his lips found hers. Elsa melted into the kiss, revelling in the sensation of her worries washing away.

"Try not to make a habit of it," she murmured, once they parted. "Next time, we might not be so fortunate."

A few minutes had passed after their kiss before Astrid had arrived, and thirty minutes later the three Ghosts plus Stormfly had hidden behind an overturned, rusted and burnt-out heavy goods vehicle, observing the manufacturing plant her mother was so adamant they visit. By that point the sky was
host to a watercolour array of red, pink and gold, and Elsa soon realised it had been roughly twenty-four hours since she slept. Tiredness was clawing at her eyes, and the Battle of Camp Hellmouth - Jack's words, not hers - had taken a heavy toll on her body, and she had aches and pains in places she was unaware could hurt.

Jack didn't look in the best of shape, either. His usual lithe movements were sluggish and labored, and he was quieter than normal. Astrid seemed the fittest of the three, but even she showed signs of the need for sleep.

The plant itself was deserted, with the ravages of time and the elements scarring the structure with rust and moss. Nature had laid claim to the open area around it, and whichever company owned the plant had been forgotten when only a few letters remained fixed to the wall. Elsa would have been forgiven for thinking they had been sent on a fool's errand, were it not for one singular betrayal of activity.

The lights were on.

Jack had suggested the two of them catch whatever sleep they could whilst he observed the camp, something Elsa put up a half-hearted fight about before giving up and grabbing a nap.

As it turned out, sleeping against a sitting Stormfly was surprisingly comfortable. Astrid was dozing within seconds, Elsa not soon after. Such slumber was so needed that, when Jack woke them up, Elsa felt mildly irritated at having to return to the waking world.

Astrid was the first to ask, rubbing her eyes, "How long have we been asleep?"

Jack squatted down beside them. Elsa felt faintly horrified at the sheer volume of her yawn. "Half hour."

"Half a—" she blinked at him. "Felt like five minutes."

"Half hour. Trust me."

"I don't believe you. I think it was five minutes."

Jack opened his mouth, but there was a twinkle in his eye suggesting he was just out to wind Astrid up, so Elsa interceded with a mildly grouchy, "Was there any sign of activity in the plant?"

"Nada. Place is a ghost town. Went down to do a little recon—"

Astrid looked aghast. "Wait—you left us asleep and alone?!"

"No, I left you asleep and guarded by one of the most dangerous creatures on the planet."

Stormfly chose that moment to let out a cavernous yawn, stretch her wings, and then roll over onto her side with her hind leg in the air, thereby causing Elsa and Astrid to nearly fall backwards, their weight having been resting on her belly. So much for 'dangerous'.

Jack gave her a deeply unimpressed look. "You had one job, lizard-brain."

Stormfly huffed and yowled, clearly unfazed. Astrid gingerly rose to her feet, dusting off her hands as she gave Jack a chiding glare, "Nobody calls her a lizard-brain but me—" before casting her head over her shoulder and adding, "He's right, though. You had one job and you blew it."

Elsa's patience was running thin. "Did you scout inside?"
"Nope." Jack shook his head. "Perimeter only. No-one's gone in or out, and I didn't hear anything going on. Whatever this place is, it's deserted."

"All the same, I suggest we proceed with caution." Elsa pulled out her sidearm, ejected the magazine, and sighed. Half a clip. "We don't want any surprises."

"Agreed, but you two lovely ladies will have to defend my honor," Jack chuckled, smirking. "I'm all out of bullets."

Astrid had none of it. She took her sidearm out, twirled it around in her hand and held it to Jack, handgrip first. "Full clip. Defend your own honour."

Elsa stifled a giggle at the mildly deflated look on Jack's face as he took the sidearm and mumbled his thanks before he started off toward the plant. Astrid gave her a cheeky smirk before donning her mask, something Elsa did too, and Stormfly hefted herself up to follow them as they set off.

"You know," Astrid said in an oddly loud voice, "I kinda feel sorry for Frost right now."

Elsa gave her a sidelong look, then remembered she wouldn't have seen it for the mask. "Why are you talking like that?"

Astrid hissed for her to play along. "I mean, here he is in the same place with two women he's been or is involved with in some way."

Elsa felt a twinge of jealousy, until she saw him duck his head slightly into his shoulders and noticed the blossom of pink on the back of his neck. Of course Astrid was winding him up.

"Oh, the things I could tell you about him."

"One," Elsa chided, "that's inappropriate. Two… what things?"

"Well, is he a two minute wonder, or can he go the distance? Is he a big boy or a little tickle? I mean, if you two are gonna do-the-do at some point, I feel obliged as your friend and comrade to give you a little intel on your target."

Jack suddenly stopped, holding his hand in the air. "Shhh. You hear that?"

Elsa's hand went to her sidearm. "What?"

"The sound of Viking on latrine duty for a week."

She rolled her eyes, and the hand that had been gripping her pistol in anticipation of hostile attackers went to rest on her hips. "That's not funny."

Astrid let out a dirty snigger. "I thought it was."

"You would," Jack said, before starting off again. "No more teasing the C.O., especially about that."

"Oh, I don't know, I'm rather intrigued as to whether the great Frost's sexual prowess is matched by his skill in combat," Elsa said with a smirk. "I wouldn't want to be… disappointed."

"Y'know, you can say you want to bang me without embarrassing me."

"Who said I want that?"

Jack turned, and gave her a funny look, but closed his mouth and stalked off. Once he was out of
earshot, however, Elsa leaned toward Astrid and muttered, "But seriously… what things?"

"You really wanna know?"

"No." Elsa made to walk off, but stopped before the first step, and turned back. "Yes."

Astrid looked around the area, and watched Jack for a few moments before leaning in. "This can't get back to Hiccup. He's sweet, kind and funny, and I think the world of him, but he's got a bit of a complex around Pitch and Jack. I don't wanna have to play 'soothe the ego' if this gets out and the comparisons start, and I really don't want it to affect our relationship."

"I understand," Elsa said.

"Cool. Okay, let me put it two ways. One—stay hydrated. You'll need it. Trust me."

Elsa felt her cheeks flare up, along with a tickling sensation at the back of her neck. She swallowed through a dry mouth. "And the other?"

Astrid took a moment to consider her words. "Don't get out of bed for at least an hour."

"Why?"

"Let's just say you won't be able to walk."

Elsa's eyes widened, her cheeks turned a violent red, and heat blossomed in her chest, neck, behind her ears, and in one place most embarrassing. She quickly turned away and strode off, practically shouting, "Yesthankyouthat'squiteenoughnowIneedacoldshower!"

It didn't help that Astrid's dirty chuckling followed her into the plant, and she was struck with the mild regret she asked in the first place. Hopefully, the thought of his other 'weapon' would stay in the back of her mind.

She pulled open the door Jack went through, content in the knowledge he would have called out any contacts or possible threats. Fixed to the wall across from her were various motivational posters, intended to inspire but gave Elsa a moderate sensation of being patronised. Under them was a pair of couches set against the walls adjacent to each other, with a potted plant nestled in the corner. At least, she presumed it used to be a potted plant; time and lack of care and water had left just the soil.

The air carried with it, however, something she would not associate with a derelict and abandoned manufacturing plant. Where she expected stale air, the smell of dust and oil, she caught the scent of cleaning chemicals, and even the hint of perfume.

The plant had been occupied, and recently, at that.

Elsa looked down the corridor at her left, and spotted Jack just in front of some double doors, both wide open, with frosted glass windows constituting half of the wall at either side. She jogged down to him, calling, "Did you find anything?"

Jack didn't respond. He didn't even move. He simply stared at something the other side of the doors.

"Frost?"

No acknowledgement. The silence unnerved her, so she rested her hand on her sidearm as she approached with caution. "Jack? Talk to me. What's going on?"

Jack's head turned toward her, slowly. He looked at her like he wasn't quite seeing her, and his
expression was vacant, yet frightened, like he had seen something too terrifying to comprehend.

He lifted a finger and pointed through the doorway.

"Those are… people," he said, his voice high, faint. "What… what are they doing to them?"
Elsa thought she knew *deja vu*. She thought she knew the odd sensation of familiarity to a place to which she had never been, the faint buzz of history repeating itself. Yet, it was always faint, like a thought-image dancing at the edges of her mindscape, the mental equivalent of trying to grab hold of vapour.

What she saw, when she moved to look where Jack was pointing, brought not a wispish feeling but a brutal punch of familiarity. She *had* been here, before. She *had* immersed herself in the darkness, cruelty and horror Unity bestowed upon those it deemed lesser life. It was only once, and that was enough to haunt her dreams for the rest of her life, and to feel like time had punched her in the gut.

Faintly lightheaded from the stalling of her lungs, she saw them, illuminated by the harsh, bright, artificial lights beating down. Dozens. Hundreds, maybe.

Each person was naked, their heads shaved, bound to vertical panels by clamps. Wires protruded from a device screwed into their chests, and tubes pierced the skin of their forearms. Their mouths were filled by thicker tubes, and their heads were fixed against the panel by a metal band, with wires sprouting out, all connected to a large, rectangular device on the floor, fixed to the panel's edge. At the side of the device was a small spout, and from it a golden liquid that seemed to shimmer in the light dripped to the floor into a small, similarly coloured puddle.

If that wasn't disturbing enough, each person was covered by a plastic sheet so tight against their skin, it was as though the air had been sucked out from underneath.

It was like Sleeping Beauty, only Unity had gone one step further. Inhumanity through efficient mass production.

Jack walked past her, gliding, like his feet operated independently of his mind. Snapped from her horrified daze, Elsa quickly caught up; his eyes were fixed on the person straight ahead of him. Female, judging by the physical proportions. She could hear the faint humming of the device next to the panel, and peered behind the woman, trying to contain the nausea churning her gut.

They stretched to the furthest wall, and by Elsa's estimation, twenty rows deep. A quick glance at the device before her yielded the number '25'; from that, she counted in her mind the rest of the panels to the rightmost wall.

Fifty per row, ten rows deep.

There were five *hundred* of them.

"What are… they doing to them?" Jack repeated.

"I don't know," Elsa murmured, "but this… this is just like her. What they did to her."

Jack looked at her. "Who?"

Elsa avoided his gaze, her eyes falling to the floor. "Aurora."

"Sleeping Beauty," Jack whispered. He moved closer to the woman, his eyes tracing over the myriad wires and tubes. "Is that what they're doing to them?"
"I don't know." Elsa crouched down to the device, inspecting it. "This feels different, though."

Jack moved down the row, away from her. "How?"

Elsa opened her mouth, but no words came out. It seemed to simple to say; Unity purpose-built an entire room around Aurora specifically to harness her gift and to keep her alive, but asleep, for the rest of her life. The way those people ahead of her were treated felt less like they were people, but crops.

"Harvest..." she whispered.

"Hey guys, I've got Stormfly circling the plant, so we'll know if—"

Her voice preceding her entrance, Astrid rounded the corner just as Elsa looked over her shoulder, and was treated to the sheer shock written upon the taller woman's face. Astrid covered her mouth with her hands, her eyes seeing, but not truly registering, the disturbing sight.

"—what the fuck..." she breathed. "What the everloving fuck is going on here?"

"They are all like this," Elsa said, trying, willing, her training and control to guide her through the mire of emotion and mental horror. "Every one of these people—"

"They're not just people."

The sudden hardness to Jack's voice stopped Elsa in her tracks, like she herself was scolded. She looked to him, and his face was dark, eyes cold, jaw set as he stared at a panel two columns away.

"They're abnormals."

"What?!" Astrid gaped. Elsa felt her lungs stall.

"Yeah," Jack said bitterly, contempt and disgust etched firmly into his voice. "They've got our people rigged up in these things."

Elsa asked quietly, "How do you know?"

Jack turned his head to look at her, and what Elsa saw nearly shattered her heart. His eyes were not cold; they were reddened, wet, filled with rage and grief, hopelessness and pain. When he spoke, it was not hard as stone but broken like gravel.

"Because I'm looking at a Spirit."

If Jack were to describe his heart in that moment, he would say it was a ball of pulsing, sharp pain that released rivulets of burning rage and heavy sorrow. Questions answered and mysteries solved in the worst way, from missing-in-action to killed-in-action.

Because there was only one person he knew who had green skin and large ears.

Jack had joked with him. Teased him. Antagonised him. Fought with him. He could remember Shrek's face when Jack tricked him into eating a raw onion, and his own surprise at the Spirit leader's complete lack of reaction. He could recall the sheer strength he possessed when he faced eight Alphas, and how Jack permanently ceased all remarks about Shrek's noxious flatulence when he realised how deadly it was. He was a stubborn, proud man, but with a gentle heart and a vulnerable
soul. He was a Spirit through and through, and loved Fiona whilst she loved him in return.

Unity cared little. They'd stripped him of his clothes, his dignity, his *humanity*. Strapped him to a panel and violated his body with metal and rubber, for a purpose most depraved yet unknown.

Elsa came over to him, but the way her shoulders sank, and the breath that escaped her lips told him everything he already knew. Camp Serenity wasn't the end of the Spirits' and Furies' journey, like they'd thought, but the halfway house. There, in that plant, was the end of the road.

He felt her fingers ask a tentative request for his hand. Uncertain, unsure, hope for comfort but anxious of rejection. *I'm sorry*, maybe. *Please don't hate me.* Words she wanted to say but couldn't.

He looked inside himself for clarity, and found he couldn't hate her, not even a little. He wasn't even angry at her. Everything he'd said to her on the *Fairy* before the freefall was the truth; what had happened to Shrek was not her fault, not when she hadn't the faintest idea what happened when Unity rolled in to take them away.

Pain and anger, however, had a funny way of pointing themselves at those loved. Anna proved that, months ago. So, with reluctance, he pulled away.

"I need a few minutes," he said quietly.

"Oh. O-of course."

The stung tone to her voice added a further ache to his heart. He avoided her eyes; he didn't need to see her face to feel the flinch.

"Find the control room or office or whatever. This place has to have one. I want to know exactly what they're doing to these people, and I want to know why." Jack turned his head up to the ceiling and closed his eyes. "Let me know when you find it."

Jack turned away, and prepared to head further into the plant. Astrid called after him, "Where are you going?"

He stopped, and turned his head just enough to see her through the corner of his eye. "Five hundred of these people here, and no personnel to keep an eye on 'em. I'm gonna take a look around, find out why."

"You need backup?"

"No." Jack turned away. "Go with Elsa."

He knew it was against protocol. He knew it broke a Ghost rule. The worst place for anyone to be was near him, though. Astrid had saved them all in the camp, and Elsa had saved his life less than an hour ago. There was no way in hell he was rewarding that with hurt.

If he found any Unity personnel?

All bets were off.

Elsa watched him leave with a heavy, aching heart. She understood his pain, understood his reaction. Hell, she'd have been more disturbed and concerned if he *hadn't* reacted in such a manner. Still, the way he pulled his hand from her fingers, the way his voice became cold and firm like all the fun had
been beaten out of him, and how he couldn't look at her almost physically hurt. Did he blame her? Were the things he said on the *Fairy* a lie, or the truth at the time corrupted by the horrible truth before them?

"Wanna go after him?"

Elsa glanced at Astrid, then back at Jack just in time to see him round the end of the row and disappear from sight. Part of her went with him. "No. We have our orders."

"You sure? I mean—"

"I said no." Upon noticing the taller blonde flinch at the snap, Elsa closed her eyes and sighed. "He wants to be alone, and I will respect that."

"Alright." Astrid stood beside her. "I've never seen anything like this. You have any idea?"

Elsa rounded on her, glaring. "What makes you think I know?"

Astrid threw her hands up and turned to leave. "Y'know what? I'm gonna go stick my head in Stormfly's mouth and then make her sneeze, if today is *Bite Astrid's Head Off* day."

Elsa cursed, and rubbed her forehead with her left hand as she rested her right on her hip. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap like that."

"But you did snap. Twice." Astrid's gaze softened, and she rested a hand on Elsa's arm. "Don't do what he's doing. Talk to me."

Elsa looked at her, lips twisting in discomfort. "I don't quite know how to deal with this. I can feel his anger, his grief and his sorrow, as though it is my own."

"That's the bond, right?"

Elsa nodded, licking her lips. Talking was hard. "Yes. Before, it was just an echo, but now… maybe the more raw the emotion, the more the other feels it."

"But what about you? How do you feel?"

Elsa looked at her, and then at Shrek. "I did this. He is here… Antonio was in Camp Serenity because of me."

She felt Astrid's hand squeeze her shoulder. "You didn't know."

"But I had an inkling, didn't I? A small voice in the corner of our minds. I knew the system, knew what the Inquisitors would do to them when we handed them over." Elsa's eyes fell. "Whether or not I was aware of what happened after that is irrelevant—I am just as responsible as though I transported them to Serenity myself. I started them on the road that ended here, strapped to these panels by whatever… *thing* this is."

Elsa looked back at Astrid, whose face wore solemn, grave understanding, and said, "And for that, I will never forgive myself."

"Yeah, well, you're kinda doing the same thing as Jack."

Elsa frowned at her. "I don't think I am."

"You are, just in a different way. You're taking all the responsibility for it, when you shouldn't."
"But I—"

"We, Elsa. We. Last I checked, the Valkyries were a team of four. Yeah, you were our leader, but we all pulled our triggers. You, me, Rapunzel, Red. We were in it together, so we all have to shoulder the blame—so if it all comes back on us, then we'll face it together."

Eyes falling, Elsa tilted her head as a silent acknowledgement. Although she was willing to bear the responsibility herself, the idea that Astrid would take some of the weight was… encouraging. "Rapunzel once told me we are our good days and our bad. I told Jack the same. As a Valkyrie, I acted without thought of the consequences. I thought, when I found out what happened to my brother-in-law, that was the reaction to my action. Now, I look at Shrek, remember Antonio, and I realise that those consequences were deeper than I ever thought… and to deny what I did would be wrong."

She rested her hand on Astrid's, before setting off. "If I am to redeem myself for my past, I cannot pick and choose my redemption, just as I cannot pick and choose the events that shaped me. I am all my rights and wrongs, or I am nothing."

Elsa had taken but a few steps before Astrid spoke again.

"Night and day."

Elsa turned and looked over her shoulder. "Hmm?"

Astrid wore a wide, lipped smile. Was that… pride in her blue eyes? "The difference between you now, and you back then. Night and day. Her, I hated. Couldn't stand to be in the same room, and that day in the bathroom—"

Elsa winced. Regret stabbed at her heart, adding to the ache. "Oh."

"—water, bridge. I hated her, but you?" Astrid paused. "I'd follow you to the end, just like I would him."

Elsa didn't quite know how to respond to that, such was the surge of solidarity she felt toward Astrid, so she smiled a respectful smile and bowed her head once.

"Well, I think we've yapped about ourselves long enough," Astrid loudly declared, clapping her hands, "and given where we are, I'm starting to feel a little selfish. How's about we solve this mystery, eh?"

Elsa gave her a nod of agreement and turned away to follow her order, but a strange chill surged through her body. It was a peculiar sensation, the wave of ice freezing the turbulent storm of emotion to a standstill, to the point all she felt was…

...silence.

"Something's wrong…"

It was rare for Jack to describe an emotion as indescribable, even a chaotic maelstrom. Each had a definable trait that was attributed to the emotion, defining that emotion. Anger and grief as he thought of all those people rigged up like cattle. A sense of frustration, yet the satisfaction of a puzzle piece falling into place when he picked up a cap from the floor of the corridor leading away from the main plant room - a cap identical to the one Derrickson wore.
The sinking realisation that the hovertrucks escaping from Serenity fled there, and would have exfiltrated the plant personnel along with anything else of value, avoiding retribution for their crime.

The churning and twisting of nausea and dread in his gut, at the faint but acrid smell of ash and smoke, and burnt flesh.

All of which swirled and fought within his soul, vying for dominance yet unable to claim sole place. A battle that forced him to cling to his training, to focus on the steady aim of his pistol, compartmentalisation of his errant thoughts and attention to his senses.

When he pushed through the double swing doors at the corridor's end, however, and whipped his pistol at every conceivable ambush point in the large room, he saw them.

Three large, grey, heavy duty metal hatches fixed to the wall by hinges. The smell of ash was stronger in that room, and though the physical odour was not present, Jack caught the scent of death. He knew, as soon as he saw the hatches, the purpose of that room.

The purpose of the plant.

His eyes wanted to well with tears, but none would come. His heart beat a heavy, yet slow rhythm, and the world fell away from him as he saw it before his very eyes, like a supernatural observer. Beginning, middle… end.

And then, the war of emotion ceased, leaving nothing but stillness. Cold.

Silence.

"Frost? Are you there?"

The voice that left his mouth was undoubtedly his, but the monotone, emotionless notes felt alien. Dead. "I'm here."

Elsa came back full of relief. "Oh, good. I was concerned. Is everything okay?"

"Fine. Status on the control room?"

"Um… we're still looking."

"Call when you've found it. Frost out."

Elsa flinched slightly when Jack cut off contact. He didn't snap, nor did he rebuke them. He sounded… absent. Empty, as though someone had ripped out everything that made him who he was, and left a void that possessed a voice. She'd heard anger, sadness, grief, rage, joy and humour… but not that.

"Yo!" Astrid called from a set of metal stairs in the far right corner of the plant. "This office up here's got a Uni-Com."

"That must be it," Elsa called back, jarring herself out of her thoughts. She jogged on to the stairs and followed Astrid up into a comparatively bijou room overlooking the plant interior. Moderately well lit, and featuring an archaic desk and chair in the far corner, it carried the environment of function and control - especially with the Uni-Com sat flush against the wall to Elsa's immediate left as she entered.

Astrid set about activating it, and the Uni-Com's characteristic pleasant blue glow emanates from the
screen as Elsa reported the successful locating of the control room to Jack, who - in the same manner as before - indicated he was on his way.

"So," Astrid murmured, her fingers dancing in the air whilst small windows and interactive panels appeared and whizzed away, "let's find out what's going on so we can shut it the fuck down."

Elsa felt a surge of horror, and rushed over to clamp her hand over Astrid's mouth. Needless to say, the taller blonde reacted most negatively and wrenched her head from Elsa's grasp.

"The hell?"

Elsa hissed through gritted teeth, "Don't talk in front of it!"

"Why?"

"Because it might pick up your voice, too!"

"...and I care because—"

Elsa's eyebrows rose as she gave her a pointed look.

"Oh." Astrid let out a quiet snort. "You're thinking Hans'll pull the same shit on me."

Elsa nodded to say, 'gee, you think?"

There was a brief moment, a dark flicker in Astrid's eyes, before she snorted with derision and returned to her work. "There's only one problem; you can't threaten to take away something with no meaning nor value to me."

Elsa felt her breath catch; that was the most Astrid ever spoke about her parents in... ever. "You really don't like them."

Astrid inhaled a deep breath, letting it out in one long blow through her nose. "Liking or not liking something implies an emotional connection or attachment to that something."

"But you must—"

"Okay." Astrid nearly rounded on her, but the look in her eyes pleaded with Elsa to drop it. "You wanna understand? Let me put it like this: You still have your parents. Jack lost his twice. I never had mine in the first place."

Elsa didn't—couldn't—respond. The very idea of absent parents wasn't new to her, but she always knew they were there, so the idea of absence in place of parental love was wholly alien. Astrid looked away for a second, before returning her gaze to Elsa.

"Only way Hans could ever hurt me is on the battlefield, and I guarantee you if he tried, I would rip off his arms, then shove one down his throat and the other up his ass so he can high five himself in his own stomach."

Elsa cringed at the charming mental image. "I thought Stormfly would have eaten him?"

Astrid's lips quirked into a half-smile, and she let out a quiet titter. "My girl has specific culinary tastes, thank you. Bland meat isn't one of them."

Elsa covered her mouth to stifle a snort of mirth, since turning her lips inward was doomed to fail. "I shouldn't laugh," she managed.
"Yeah, you should. Know why? You, Jack, Hiccup, even Pitch as the scary brother—you're like family to me. And the idea of Hans trying to hurt my family… well, the jokes write themselves."

"Found anything?"

Both Elsa and Astrid gave a start, and looked at the doorway, where Jack was stood with his arms folded, and expressionless written on his features as he glanced between them.

"No, we were just, ah—"

"Not looking?"

Elsa stiffened; there was an accusatory tone to his voice that raised her hackles somewhat. Astrid, however, quickly returned to the Uni-Com. "I was concerned that Hans' program may still be active, and could be used to pinpoint our location."

Jack's eyes veiled themselves in a slow blink. He was still as unreadable as before. "Wouldn't matter if it did."

"What makes you say that?"

"Two reasons. One, we already have your parents. He lost his leverage."

"And the other?"

"We just burned Camp Serenity to the ground. The ones who escaped?" Jack unfolded his arms and tossed something to her. Catching it, Elsa looked down at the fabric item in her hand - a cap, bearing Serenity's insignia.

"They came here."

Elsa traced her thumb over the tight stitching of the insignia. "They evacuated the personnel, and left."

"They'll be headed to Perdition. Soon as they make contact, Hans'll know - and when he finds out, so will the Unifier."

Elsa lifted her head slightly in understanding. "Hans will be too busy trying to explain why he lost a camp to us, when we're supposed to be dead."

"Yeah. He lost his leverage, a part of his grand scheme, and he's gonna have to answer to the top dog. Like I said, it doesn't matter." Jack unfolded his arms and walked past her into the room, before leaning with his butt on the table behind Astrid, and crossing his feet at the ankles.

"What does matter to me is what the fuck Unity is doing to these people, and why."

From that moment, Jack didn't utter a word, nor did he move a single part of his body as he stared at the floor in deep thought. In fact, in a reversal of personality unsettling to her, Elsa found herself to be the one with the inability to remain still. She paced, she wrung her hands, glanced at Jack over and over, opening her mouth to say something yet closing it again.

A quip. A joke. Hell, a terse request for her to stop. She'd take anything, even an angry order, just something other than the silent, unreadable Jack nearby. She mentally scolded herself; battle-scarred, trained soldier and ex-monster, and there she was, anxious and worried like a nervous wreck just because someone didn't feel like talking.
But she was still Elsa. She cared deeply for her friends, and those closer than friends. If there was a threat, she could fight it. An enemy she could defend against. Maybe it was the soldier who was so anxious; Jack had seen something that had put him in such turmoil, he had shut down.

What was it he saw?

"I think I found something," Astrid said quietly.

Both Elsa and Jack looked up at the screen, and though she went to stand behind Astrid and to her left, Jack didn't move.

"What?"

"Remember when Rapunzel told Red and Pitch to look for… what was that stuff you dosed yourself with, Jack?"

"Tardioxin," Jack answered in a flat voice.

"That's it. Well, I'm looking at an inventory of equipment and stuff they've been requisitioning. There's a helluva lot of that stuff, but also intubators, tubing, electro-stimulators… replacement pumps, nanites, cellular regeneration films…"

"Harvest…" Elsa murmured again. She felt Jack's gaze migrate to the back of her head, and answered the question before it was asked. "That equipment must be for keeping those people alive for… some kind of harvest."

"Harvesting what?"

"I don't know." Elsa turned slightly to glance at him, then returned her attention to the display. "I saw some golden fluid dripping out of the machines. Whatever that is… that's what they want."

Jack let out a quiet hum. "We'll download the data onto one of the crystals in the Uni-Com. Rapunzel can take a look later. For now, bring up a manifest of everyone they've got rigged up."

"Alright." Astrid's fingers once more navigated through the blue windows, shrinking and enlarging them to her will. "Found something."

"Show me."

Astrid formed both thumbs and forefingers into the shape of an L, and took two steps back as the display grew accordingly. Populating the display was a five-by-ten grid; fifty numbers in numerical order, with names by the side in smaller print. Some of whom bore the word 'TERMINATED' in red lettering.

"Fuck," Astrid breathed. "There are a thousand people here. One second—"

She tapped a small icon, and the names ordered themselves into those with the red word and those without.

"—yeah. One thousand names. Five hundred of them have been… terminated…"

Elsa looked at Jack, her heart sinking. "That would mean…"

"Killed." Jack's eyes found the floor, and there was a hollow sadness, a kind of empty sorrow behind them as he quietly spoke. "Unity harvests us for what they want, then when we're no longer useful, they throw us in the crematorium back there."
Even Astrid turned and gave him a shocked look. "Holy shit—you serious?"

Jack slowly nodded. "Yes."

Elsa, her mouth partly covered by her hand, murmured, "How do you know?"

"Because I saw where they do it." Jack shifted his position, straightening slightly before slumping again. "Capture us, imprison us, harvest us, kill us, then turn us to ash. I know because I've seen pictures of the last time a small group of racist psychopaths decided to put millions of innocent people to death. They called it the final solution."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Astrid croaked.

"When we get back, ask Pitch to tell you about a lovely vacation retreat called Auschwitz." Jack unfolded his arms and gestured at the names. "I want those names downloaded too. Should be some glass tablets around—"

Jack bolted up, eyes narrowing slightly. Elsa watched him slowly walk toward the display, leaning in as though perceiving something. Eyes widening, he gasped.

"Bottom right—non-terminated, bring that one up!"

Astrid gave a small start, but nonetheless quickly obliged. The name in the bottom right corner was enlarged, revealing a prisoner number: CS-6069. By that number was a photograph of a gaunt, pale, shaven-headed woman, her eyes closed, and by that picture, a name.

Vratanski, J.

Jack stared at the name for a few more seconds, before racing off out of the room and down the stairs, ignoring Elsa's calls after him. She quickly followed; he was already on the plant floor and making his way down the columns, eyes scanning each panel, until he rushed down a row. Elsa vaulted over the safety rail and touched down with a wince, before darting after him, past dozens of the rigged-up people, and caught up to him just as he found who he was looking for.

"No..." he whispered, staggering back a step as he gazed up, hopeless, at the woman before him. "Clarity..."

The voice that left Elsa's mouth was quiet. The name was familiar. "Did you know her?"

"Yeah." Jack blinked a few times, as though the act would reveal the sight before him as naught but a dream. "She was a Fury."

Elsa straightened up, a breath leaving her lips in a sigh of solemn recognition, and felt her heart sink an inch. That was why the name pricked at her memory. Clarity, wielder of water. Member of the sister team to the Ghosts.

The Fury that made three clones drown by filling their throats with the water from their own bodies, and nearly knocked Astrid's left canine out. Of course, Elsa herself was two miles away, waiting to ambush anyone who managed to escape, but the debriefing was detailed.

"Were you..." she found her voice soft, but tentative. "...close?"

Jack quietly snorted his bitter, humourless mirth. "To Jules? No. No, we understood and kind of respected each other, but... we just wound each other up too much to be in the same room for long."
His eyes fell, and he paused for a few seconds as he sniffed, and rubbed at his nose with his thumb. "When Belle found her, she was... angry. Damaged. Belle gave her a second chance at life. She found friends, family, love... of all of us? She deserved that second shot the most. Sad thing is, she lashed out 'cause she never thought she was worthy of it... and now she never will."

"I'm sorry," Elsa murmured.

Jack let out a quiet breath through his nose, and shrugged. "What's done is done. Can't save them now."

Elsa looked at Clarity's chest, watching it rise and fall the smallest amount, before staring at Jack with urgency and concern. "You don't know that. Maybe they—"

"Look around you, Elsa. They've got devices implanted—they've got fucking metal drilled into their brains!" There was a kind of grieving mania in Jack's eyes as he looked at her. "They're only as alive as Unity wants them to be. We get harvested, we run dry, Unity cremates us. That kind of stone cold, compassionless, apathetic view they have of us? We're not people to them. We're not even on the level of animals, or even plants. We're nothing but batteries to them... and you don't need your batteries to be alive."

Elsa flinched, bereft of a response, staring at him in shock. Jack abruptly turned away, wiping a hand down his face. A few moments of silence followed, before, with his back to her, Jack spoke in a softer, yet still rough voice. "I know what you're trying to say, Elsa, and what you're trying to do, and why."

"Do you?" Elsa said quietly. "Do you have any idea what it's like to know the people you captured were dead the moment you arrived, but you didn't know it?"

"Elsa—"

"No, Jack. Don't you dare try and mitigate this. Shrek. Puss. Donkey. Gingy. Bad Wolf. White Cat. Blink. Shriek. Fade. Zap. Clarity. You once asked me if I even remember them, and I do. I remember them all, and they wouldn't be here if the Valkyries hadn't changed the course of their lives. That is my responsibility. I sold my soul to become the monster I was, and I can't buy back just a few pieces of it and consider myself atoned. It's all or nothing."

Elsa took his hand, and gently turned him. As before, his expression was nigh unreadable, save for the reluctant resignation in his eyes. Was he finally accepting her stance, or had he just lost hope?

"I took your friends from you. I owe it to you, and to all of the victims of Unity in this room to at least see if they can be saved."

Jack's eyes drifted away, before he veiled them. "Viking?"

"Here."

"Is there a monitoring program for the people rigged up?"

"I'll... uh... I'll look."

She knew it was a long shot. Jack was right; as much as she wanted to hope, the brutal reality of it was that if Unity didn't need their 'crops' to be alive, they didn't need to invest time and equipment beyond the absolute barest minimum to get what they desired. When a person was seen as nothing more than a battery, then no importance was placed on the sanctity of their body, mind and spirit. They could be violated and desecrated with no more compunction than the basic everyday task.
Maybe that, she wondered, was why Jack had emotionally shut down. After all, he had come face to face with their people being reduced to things.

Truth be told… Elsa's heart and mind struggled with that, too. More so that she knew, had she achieved her vengeance, eventually she would be on one of those panels. She had seen an alternate future… and she was never so relieved to have been wrong.

A minute of silence passed, before Astrid piped up again on the comms. Just as before, it was like her strength and confidence had been stripped from her voice. Elsa wished it was merely the exhaustion.

"I think I've found it."

Elsa was the first to ask, "What do you see?"

"You're asking a weapons specialist to make sense of… this. I need someone better qualified—Viking to Blondie, you there?"

"Um… yeah?"

"How's Hunter?"

"No change, which is a good thing, I guess. We're a couple of hours out, so I'll know for sure when I get her to the infirmary."

"Cool. Listen—I'm gonna need your help. I'm looking at some real-time medical scans on a Uni-Com and I can't make heads or tails of them."

"Alright, well, I'll ask some questions, you give me the answers, and I'll tell you whether that's good or bad. First off - heart rate. What are the top and bottom numbers?"

"Seventy."

"Okay, pretty standard so far. Blood oxygen? Should be just below the heart rate monitor."

"Ninety-seven."

"That's… also pretty textbook. Ninety-four to ninety-nine percent is ideal. Alright, so… onto the brain activity I guess. This person you're looking at, are they asleep or awake?"

There was a long pause of hesitation, before Astrid answered, "I guess you could say asleep."

"You guess?"

"They're on life support, Blondie."

"Oh." It was Rapunzel's turn to pause. "That explains the textbook heart rate and blood oxygen. Right… well… even then, there should be some form of brain activity. There should be a status line below the blood oxygen readout. Have a look for about a minute, then tell me what you see."

Astrid obliged, and the comms fell silent. Elsa found herself counting down under her breath, but in the corner of her eyes, Jack hadn't moved a muscle.

"Blondie?"

"Still here. What did you see?"
"I saw a solid line."

Rapunzel hesitated. "Did you just say you saw a solid line?"

"That's what I said."

"But… that doesn't make sense. Heart rate is normal, blood-ox is normal, but no brain activity? Why would you keep someone on life support if… if…"

"If what?"

"If they're braindead, Viking. It doesn't matter if they're on life support—the second you take them off it, they're gone. There's no coming back from brain death—why do you think I was freaking out when I found out how long Frost had tardioxin in his system?"

Jack interjected. "Thank you, Blondie. We have our answer."

"To what? Frost, I don't under—"

"I'll brief everyone when we return to base. Keep me updated on Hunter's status. Frost out."

Elsa looked him in the eyes. It was a straw at which she was grasping, the idea Unity would allow any way for their 'crops' to recover. She knew as well as Jack did that those people couldn't be saved. But—

"We at least tried," she said quietly. "They deserved that much."

"They're not there anymore, now." Jack rose his eyes to look at her. "Their souls, their minds… they're long gone from their bodies."

He abruptly turned away. Elsa called after him, "Where are you going?"

Jack called over his shoulder as he walked. "Unity stripped them of their dignity and denied them an honorable death. I'm making it right."

He had already rounded the end of the row and was out of sight before she could say anything. Elsa let out a sigh, and scratched at her upper right arm as she looked around. With Astrid still holed up in the control office, she was alone.

Alone with five hundred closed, lifeless eyes staring down at her.

The scratching became a pair of comforting arms across her chest, and she found her feet carrying her in the same direction Jack had followed, away from the room of suspended death, away from the empty shells of human beings that once housed souls, personalities, memories, lives. She passed through the double swing doors into a long, brightly lit corridor where golden beams shone through frosted windows to her right… and that was when it happened.

Her legs, overcome by weakness, struggled to carry her. Her body, subject to a sudden, terrible weight on her shoulders and heart, pulled her down. She slowed her pace. Finding the strength of the wall, she slid down and slumped against it, buried her grimacing face in her hands, and wept. A brief moment of mid-sob panic had her check over her shoulder in case of being seen, and every now and then she tried to force a straight face and control the grief behind a cough and a gulp.

Yet, with eyes reddened and cheeks streaming with tears, her sorrow would not be contained, and as footsteps coming to an abrupt stop could be heard ahead, before quickening into a scramble, she
burst into silent tears anew. She felt a pair of arms encircle themselves around her, pulling her into someone's chest. She heard murmurs of comfort and reassurance in a tenor voice, felt the soft touch of a kiss to her forehead, and clawed at clothing that belonged not to her.

She knew it was Jack, just by his touch. She could feel his sympathy and pity, his care in the embrace - even some guilt - trying to soothe the chaos of her grief and sorrow. It was still cold in his heart, but she would take what she could of his warmth.

_________________________________________________________

She didn't cry for long.

It was less than a minute from the moment Jack felt an explosion of overwhelming sadness and scrambled to Elsa's side, to when the sobbing abruptly ceased and she pulled herself from him. She'd given him a smile and assured him she was okay, even though they both knew it was a lie.

"So where were you going?"

Jack, stirred from his thoughts, rubbed his jaw as he set off again. "Those chambers have incinitol stored somewhere. I'm gonna use it to give this people a proper funeral."

"Burning them?"

Elsa's uncertainty was ill-hidden, so Jack tried to recollect what he could of Kozmotis' lectures. The ones vaguely interesting, anyway. "Sounds worse than it is. Ever heard of a Viking funeral?"

Elsa shook her head.

"Weird. You'd think, with the Unifier's obsession with Norse names, people would know more." Jack shrugged. "In history, one of the ways the Vikings conducted funeral rites was to burn their dead on pyres or in longboats."

"And that's what you're going to do?"

"Yeah. Left my longboat in my other utility vest, though." Jack rubbed at his nose. "Unity turned it into some kind of bastardized waste disposal thing but… for me, I'm doing it for the same reason the Vikings did. Honour and respect."

"But… you said their souls have already passed on, and all that is left behind is... I'm not sure I understand."

"You will," Jack said as he pushed open the second set of double doors leading into the crematorium. "Besides - nothing stopping Unity from waltzing back here and relocating those people to desecrate them all over again. Like hell am I gonna let that happen."

"So you're going to burn the bodies—the whole plant—to the ground?"

Jack paused, and turned. "I'm going to see those people off the way the Vikings did. I'm going to make sure they never—" he jabbed a finger to the floor, "—use us like that again, and I'm going to let them know we are aware, that we do not forgive, and we will never forget."

"Does that include me?"

Jack blinked. "What?"

Elsa looked him straight in the eye, but Jack easily perceived a wounded vulnerability behind those sky blues. Doubt reigned in the windows to her soul. "I told you how I consider myself responsible
for the fate of your friends. When you say you do not forgive and will never forget… after all you've seen and learned, does that include me?"

"Elsa, I already told you—"

Elsa turned away, and rested a hand on her hip whilst the other buried itself in her bob. "Forget I said anything. I was… it was a moment of weakness."

His eyes resting on the back of her head, Jack tucked in his lower lip whilst jutting out his jaw as he considered his words. She was scared, he figured that much, but scared of what? He had forgiven her months ago. Told her as much - so why was it so important to her now?

So, his mind brought an old quote, another gem from history class.

"A few people laughed. A few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita; Vishnu is trying to persuade the prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says, 'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds'. I suppose we all felt like that, one way or another."

Elsa gave him a funny look, like he'd lost his mind. "...what?"

"It's a quote. See, one hundred and thirty odd years ago, a guy called Oppenheimer helped create the first instance of atomic fusion. Changed the world—in fact, all our fuel cells, power cells, enhanced unidium can be traced all the way back to that moment. It helped create nuclear power, all sorts of stuff… but the first thing it was used to make?"

Elsa shook her head and shrugged.

"Bombs. Two of 'em. They levelled two Japanese cities: Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Wiped 'em off the face of the earth. Vaporized anyone at ground zero. Turned 'em into dust, or scorch marks on walls. Blinded and burned anyone in the outer radius. Total devastation… two bombs. Civilian casualties were countless."

"Are you saying I'm the bomb?"

"Yeah."

Elsa flinched.

"Elsa, if you wanna lay the blame at your feet for how it ended for the Spirits and Furies, then fine. I'll respect that, so long as it's your call to make. The thing is, I don't consider you responsible for what happened to them any more than those bombs were for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Who I do hold responsible is the person who created you."

"Hans," Elsa finished.

"Yeah. He took an intelligent, well-meaning but vulnerable woman, turned her into a weapon of destruction and set her loose on me and mine. You think all of this can be traced back to when you took down my friends? I'd argue all of that can be traced back to him. You were the puppet. You were the patsy. And when you were done, he'd set you up to take the fall, either by blowing you out of the sky—"

Jack pointed in the direction of the plant room.

"—or by putting you in there. You found out what happened to them, you were horrified. So, no. It
doesn't include you. I said I forgave you, and I didn't make a mistake. Does that answer your question?"

Elsa tucked in her lips, and glanced at the floor as she nodded. "I just needed to be sure."

It occurred to Jack how unlike himself he had sounded. His usual easy-going and casual self had vanished behind no-nonsense, blunt firmness. Apathy, almost.

"Why?"

But it wasn't apathy, was it? The inability to empathise did not carry with it an intangible, almost spiritual maelstrom of pain and grief, rage and sorrow. A swirling tempest of raw emotion locked behind walls of ice and stone. Maybe it wasn't apathy, but self-protection. Maybe it, as Rapunzel would say, was a form of shock.

"Because ever since we walked into this… this place, you've been different. Cold." Elsa quirked her lips as her shoulders slowly rose and fell. "I am… concerned for you."

It then occurred to him in a slow epiphany. He had forgiven her when the harvesting plant was unknown to them. When the fate of his friends was still a mystery. Today, he had witnessed the truth, learned the horrific reality of what awaited his kind when Unity came for them. She was scared it changed things between them.

"Let's just say… I'd give anything to go back ninety minutes to when we were laughing for no reason." Jack turned and moved to the door tucked into the furthest corner from the chambers, signed FLAMMABLE.

How considerate it was of Unity's adherence to safety standards.

Jack pulled open the door and perused inside: the 'closet' was more spacious than he'd thought, with shelving units fixed to the wall under a moderately bright light. Various medical cleaning items sat upon the shelves, from cloths to transparent sheets, in addition to dozens of rubber tubes and the same implants he saw on the chests of the harvested. Everything Unity used on those people came from that room; it gave Jack faint satisfaction to know it would all be ash.

In the corner of the room, sat on a steel trolley, was exactly what he was looking for: six blue jerry-cans labelled INCINITOL, Unity's go-to substance for tasks involving incendiaries since the replacement of fossil fuels decades ago. Chambers like the ones behind him, and for funerals for those electing for cremation required a flammable substance as fuel, therefore came about the invention of incinitol.

"Viking," he said over the comms, "there should be some data tablets in that office. Transfer the names of the people onto them, and find me the program that deactivates the life support, then wait outside. I'll take care of the rest."

Astrid's answer was a quiet, "Copy."

Jack walked over to the trolley and pushed it out of the store room, wincing slightly at the squeaking of the wheels. Elsa stood aside to let him pass, her face still fraught with solemn thought. She fell in behind him, and neither of them spoke as they made their way back into the main plant. Astrid was already descending the stairs, clutching three data tablets in her hands, her head low. She quickly walked over to them and thrust the tablets into Elsa's hands, mumbling that the program was ready, and hurried away toward the entrance to the plant room. Jack listened to her receding bootsteps as he turned to Elsa.
"Go."

"What about you?"

"This is something I have to do on my own."

Elsa tilted her head and frowned, her lips parting, eyes radiating concern. "I should help you."

Jack shook his head. "No. You told me—taught me—about taking responsibility. I'm doing just that. As Ghost leader, this is my responsibility, and only mine."

Elsa raised an eyebrow, thinning her lips into a line. "Did you forget what I told you about no more 'lone wolf' activities?"

"This isn't that. You asked me to respect your choice about the people you captured, now I'm asking you to respect mine about this. Besides—"

He nodded at the tablets.

"—when we leave here, no-one will ever know this place existed. It'll be stricken from the records, if there even are any. You're not just carrying names. You're carrying the way they live on and be remembered. You're carrying the truth."

Elsa looked down at the tablets, and held them a little tighter to her chest. "Alright. I don't like it, but… I'll respect your decision. However…"

"What?"

Elsa closed her eyes, her brow knitting together. Jack's insides churned at the struggling clear on her face. "We would not have found this place had it not been for my parents alerting us. They knew about this place."

Jack remained silent. It was a conclusion he'd been trying to avoid reaching himself. Elsa then opened her eyes, and as she looked at him, a palpable fear crossed the distance between them.

"What if they knew what was being done to these people—what if… what if they were part of it?"

Jack gazed at her for a few moments, chewing the inside of his lip as though the act would formulate a sentence. He looked away, oddly bereft of words.

"We…” he paused, considering his wording with great care, "we won't know for sure until we ask them. I don't think they were part of this but… I suggest they are confined in the mess hall. At least… until we get back."

Elsa snorted bitterly. "My parents, the security risk."

"Maybe, maybe not. I'll radio Flynn—"

"If it's all the same to you," Elsa straightened up, "The order should come from me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Anna will not understand, and she will… be Anna if she finds out you gave the order. If I do it… there is less likely to be an argument I don't think I can deal with right now."

Jack hesitated for a moment, and then nodded. "Alright. Dismissed."
Dipping her head once, Elsa left almost as quickly as Astrid did. Jack tried to watch her leave, but the life support panels hid her movement after a few seconds. He let out a sigh and looked distantly at the nearby wall, catching sight of a small control box with wires travelling to the floor, feeding into the support arms holding up the nearest panel. He followed them with his eyes, noticing how they connected with each panel all the way to the endmost one. Curious, he walked over to the control box, upon which was a dial with the words ROTATION and BED NUMBER INPUT. To the right of the labels was a keypad, and below that were three buttons labelled CANCEL, ENTER, and ALL.

Jack checked the number of the closest bed behind him, typed in 201 and then ENTER, before twisting the dial.

Metallic whirring reached his ears as he turned with a mild start - indeed, the bed behind him was rotating backwards until it reached a horizontal position. Jack let out a ’hunh’; it made sense that the beds could rotate. Easier to get the people on or off them.

Encouraged by his discovery, he pressed ALL, ENTER, and twisted the dial. The plant was immediately filled with the loud, metallic whirring and scraping sound of four hundred and ninety nine beds all rotating to a horizontal position. Jack allowed himself a half smile; it felt more like a respectful funeral pyre than burning at the stake.

Of course, it was still to be a funeral, and the hardest part was to come.

Walking into the control office, Jack felt his shoulders sag with an unseen weight, a heavy burden that made it difficult to breathe. Just as Astrid said, the Uni-Com was projecting a window, with a query visible inside it.

DEACTIVATE LIFE SUPPORT SYSTEM - ALL?

Below the query were two options, CONFIRM in red and CANCEL in blue.

Jack stared at the colour-defined words for a while, feeling the weight pull down on him a little more. Five hundred people, two or more of whom, his friends, had their last breaths hanging on his decision. Five hundred heartbeats, five hundred empty minds.

Did Elsa feel like that, when Sleeping Beauty asked her for the sweet embrace of death long denied her? The sensation of iron shackles keeping her in the realm of inaction? Did she ask herself the same question he was asking himself: who was she to determine life and death for the innocent before her?

But they weren't really alive, were they? They were dead the moment they were administered tardioxin, the moment Unity's scientists strapped them to those beds. Rapunzel said as much. Every one of those five hundred were corpses kept breathing and bleeding by metal, arrogance and hate. Pressing the button would just be confirming the inevitable long past its rightful time.

Elsa was stronger than he was, he decided. Sleeping Beauty was still alive when Elsa granted her request. Yet, she already had the weight of the dead on her shoulders, her cross to bear by her own choice.

All Jack needed to do was push a button.

And push it he did.

There was no sound of something powering down, no piercing calls of an alarm. No sound to herald the final forced breaths of the five hundred, just pure, crushing silence. Jack let out a shaky breath,
and swallowed down the constriction of his throat. He tried to take a step backwards, but sudden weakness in his legs turned it into a stagger, and the edge of the table bit into his rear. Barely noticing, Jack covered his eyes and then his mouth with his hand, staring distantly and soberly at the floor. Grief bubbled up, and he clamped his eyes shut to force it back down.

Not yet. He still had work to do. There would be time to break, time to falter... but not yet.

Sharply inhaling a breath, he strode out of the office and descended the steps, making a beeline for the trolley of incinitol - stopping only once to make sure there was no rising and falling of chests - and set to work.

When Jack emerged from the plant forty five minutes later, the last jerry-can of incinitol trailing its contents at his side as he walked, he glimpsed Elsa and Astrid waiting for him a ways from the door. The glass tablets still remained safe in Elsa's clutches, but her expression was unreadable. Astrid wore a face of uncertainty, her arms hanging at her sides, and even Stormfly seemed a little unsure of the situation.

"So you're really doing it, huh?"

"Yeah." Jack glanced at Astrid as he closed in. "I'm doing it."

Astrid sighed, and cradled her chest with her arms as she shifted her feet. "What if... what if you're wrong about this? What if they're still alive?"

Jack carried on tipping the incinitol onto the ground, and then put down the can so he could procure his staff and extend it. "Do you think Rapunzel is wrong?"

"No... I just... don't want to find out we could've saved them."

Jack poured the last of the incinitol over the tip of his staff. "I trust Rapunzel. If she says they're gone... they're gone."

Astrid sucked in a breath to protest further, but just as Jack looked up, Elsa gave her a slow shake of the head.

"But," he said, offering the tip of the staff to Stormfly, "Neither of you have to be here for this. You can head home if you want."

Stormfly looked warily at the staff, and then at Astrid, who responded with a single nod. Yowling quietly, Stormfly opened her mouth, revealing her razor-sharp teeth, and puffed out the smallest of flames. The incinitol on the tip of his staff ignited, a diminutive ball of fire dancing its amber dance.

"With all due respect, sir," Elsa said, "I'll see this to the end."

"Me too," echoed Astrid.

Jack nodded, and lowered the staff tip so it hovered above the shimmering trail of liquid on the ground.

"May you find the peace in death that was taken from you in life," he murmured, and brought the tip down.

Bright, dancing flames burst forth, ignited by the incinitol and Jack's makeshift torch, and shot along the path he'd carefully laid. It consumed and burned the fuel with a hunger only Anna could master, hurtling into the plant. Jack channeled his powers through his staff as he waited, snuffing out the
small flames, and watched with a heavy heart the line of fire travel through the door, seeking the artificial pyre he'd created.

Incinitol had a particular aspect to it: once ignited, the flames burned intensely hot and lingered for some time. So, it wasn't long before smoke billowed out from every conceivable exit into the morning air, a sign that the work was done.

Jack clenched a fist and held it across his chest as he bowed his head. To his relief and honour, Elsa and Astrid did the same, with some hesitation.

Relaxing his arm, he turned away from the flames.

"Let's go home."

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!